

This is a slice of a novel that I'm writing but is not yet complete. It belongs to me, Laura Randazzo, so don't go and steal it and publish it and make me sad. Go write something yourself. It's fun. Sort of.

Finally, it was time for English, London's favorite class and least favorite teacher. She'd always loved language arts – a fresh sheet of paper was full of potential and she could always start a new page whenever she inevitably messed up. Mr. Smith marched toward the classroom, a pinkish tan portable near the baseball field's third-base line. He was tall, lean, every part of his face was long – forehead, nose, drooping chin. In the evenings, he volunteered as an actor at a downtown community theater and London knew that twice a year he offered extra credit to any student willing to sit through one of his performances. She'd never gone, but Catherine did three years ago and warned her sister that five measly points weren't worth three hours of misery. Mr. Smith, unaware he'd ruined live theater for an entire generation of Kennedy Middle School students, unlocked the classroom door and students poured in.

"Alright, everyone, that's enough. Take your seats," he said, dropping his lunch bag and thermos on his desk. "Grab last night's grammar work and pass it up. You know what to do." He turned to write on the board. When he turned back to face the class, the words "Poetry Recitation" filled the board and London felt her heart race.

"As part of our continuing work in understanding the form, function, and power of poetry, you will choose a poem from the texts I provide, commit it to memory, and then perform the work for the...let's say, enjoyment of your classmates."

London heard a slight groan from Billy next to her. She couldn't stop herself from smiling.

"You'll have today and tomorrow in class to find a poem, memorize the lines, and prepare your recitation. Presentations begin Monday and will be worth 100 points."

Mr. Smith turned to the cabinets and began to unload thick anthologies. London already knew which poem she would perform – Lewis Carroll's "Jabberwocky," a poem that reminded her of grandfather, her mom's dad who'd died two years ago. He used to mutter lines from the poem that London didn't understand but suspected held the meaning of the universe. She found "C – Carroll,

Lewis" in the index of one of Mr. Smith's tomes and then slowly copied the nonsensical words into her spiral notebook:

'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:
All mimsy were the borogoves,
And the mome raths outgrabe.

"Beware the Jabberwock, my son!
The jaws that bite, the claws that catch!
Beware the Jubjub bird, and shun
The frumious Bandersnatch!"...

When she was done, she stared at the seven stacked stanzas in her loopy handwriting. It would take a while to memorize the lines.

Over the next few days, London spent every free moment reading and re-reading the poem, burning the words into her brain. Many seemed invented by Carroll - "vorpal," "manxome," and "frumious" weren't even in the dictionary - so London made up her own pronunciations. By Sunday night, the poem felt 95 percent set, and she hoped the rest would settle into her gray matter as she slept.

Monday morning was a blur. She was so nervous she decided to skip the lunch line to sit alone on the baseball bleachers and run through the poem. Finally, the sixth-period bell rang and she made her way to the portables. Mr. Smith led the cluster of students up the noisy metal ramp that led to the metal door on the metal classroom and let everyone in. London slid into her desk and noticed Billy gripping two white index cards. They were limp and graying with moisture.

"Alright then, settle down," Mr. Smith said. "We have a lot of poems to hear today and we need to get started. First, before I start calling on my victims, are there any volunteers?"

Eyes darted to the floor, the back wall, anywhere but Mr. Smith's face. The class that normally bubbled with post-lunch chatter was now a collection of human statues. Billy was suddenly fascinated by the pencil on his desk.

London, surprising herself, felt her hand lift into the air. *What was she doing?* "Yes, London. Very good. You'll get us started. Up you go."

Astonished, London slowly walked to the front of the room as Mr. Smith folded his lanky body into an empty student desk in the back row, setting his clipboard and thermos on the faux wood desktop. "Begin."

London stood before six rows of grateful classmates.

"My poem is 'Jabberwocky' by Lewis Carroll," she said softly before taking a breath. "'Twas brillig and the slithy toves didgyreandgimbleinthewabe allmimsyweretheborogoves andthemomerathsoutgrabe."

"STOP!" Mr. Smith stood. "We can barely hear you and you are speaking much too quickly. Slow down and continue." He remained standing in the back of the room.

Red blotches crept up London's neck and overtook her face. For the first time, she looked directly at her classmates' faces and saw cringing as Mr. Smith stood above them like a watchtower. London's mind went blank. "And the... And the..." She felt the sting of tears on the outer edge of her eyes and she swallowed hard. She would not cry. She would *not* cry. "And the... I'm sorry, can I start over? I know it better from the beginning."

"No. We have a lot of other poems to hear today. Keep going. 'And the mome raths outgrabe.' Your next line is 'Beware the Jabberwock, my son,'" he said. The poem was not in front of him. *Great*, London thought, *he knows this poem by heart*. "Go on, 'Beware the Jabberwock, my son.'"

"Beware the Jabberwock, my son...the jaws that bite...the clawsthatcatch! BewaretheJubjubbird, andshunthefrumiousBandersnatch..." London rattled through the remainder of the poem. She wanted to run from the room, but her feet stayed planted and she finished. It was ugly, but she finished.

Silence swallowed the room. After a long beat, Mr. Smith sighed. "We could barely understand what you just said, London. Did anyone understand any of that?" Students held their statue poses. "You need to s-l-o-w d-o-w-n. Articulate your words. Your mispronunciations were numerous and you've left your audience confused rather than entertained. I mean, it's 'frum-ee-ous' not 'frumous.' You needed to work on that." He rubbed his large forehead.

"Your recitation was not enough to earn credit for this assignment, so here's what's going to happen. If you want these points, you'll need to learn a different poem and be ready to present it to the class this Friday. Be seated. Who's next?"

London didn't know how she ended up back at her desk. Apparently, her legs, much like her arm a few moments before, were able to act without her brain being involved. She sat for 45 minutes pretending to listen to poem after poem, but she didn't hear a word; instead, all she could hear was the pounding of her heart and all she could think about was revenge.