Teacher guilt

Teacher guilt can make a no feel like a moral event, because the alarm has fused you with the building. If you step back, a child goes without. That is the story. It is not always the fact.

Next time the yes starts forming, at the closet or the email or the sign-up sheet, stop for one breath before you answer.

If you already said yes, a no in writing tomorrow still counts. 'I can't after all' is a full sentence.

You wake up sick and spend the first hour writing sub plans longer than the lesson they replace. You apologize to the sub, to the team, to the students in your head. You check email from the couch to prove you are still a teacher, which means you are not, in fact, home.

You are asked to cover a class during the only minutes that were yours. You say yes before the ask has finished. Your own class will be fine, you tell yourself, which means you will make it fine later, at the table, with the tote.

A child comes in cold. Your closet already has coats you bought. You are calculating the twelfth before you have said good morning. The calculation feels like care. It is also a private budget doing a public job.

You turn down a duty and then do three smaller ones so nobody can say you are not a team player. The three smaller ones add up to the duty, plus the shame, plus the email where you explain yourself.

You say no to a colleague's ask and feel it in your shoulders for a day. They rise. They stay up. You call that posture. It is a brace.

You buy the supplies, the snacks, the pencils that walk away, and you are angry in the checkout line and generous at the classroom door, and you cannot find a way to be only one of those.

You have probably paid a bill that was not yours because the unpaid version made you feel like you were abandoning someone smaller. The feeling is old. The child is real. Those two facts do not make your wallet, or your sick day, or your evening, the right tool.

Why does the twelfth coat feel like the job?

Penny teaches second grade. She is 52. Her shoulders are the tell. They rise, and they stay up, and she calls the brace posture. When the alarm runs her, she copes the Provider way: fawn, the peace kept by spending her. On the first cold morning a boy arrives at 7:50 without a coat. Her closet holds 11 she has bought. The twelfth is already a picture in her head. She has covered a class during her own planning. She has skipped lunch. She answered a parent at 8:40 the night before. The coat is not a surprise. It is the next yes in a day made of yeses.

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She runs one breath on the reading-rug stool, in for four, hold for seven, out for eight. The surge is the urge to fix the cold with her own money before anyone else can see it. The gap does not make the boy warm by magic. It is long enough that she can do a different next thing. She gives him a coat. There are 11. He should not be cold while she sorts her philosophy. And this time, instead of buying a twelfth, she emails the social worker.

That is one teacher on one cold morning, not a rule. The twelfth coat is your money, spent to quiet the building's gap. It works once. It trains the alarm to shop. The boy needed a coat today. He also needed a building that does not depend on Penny's Saturday errand. Both can be honored without pretending they are the same action.

The email is influence, aimed at the person who can do the job again on the next cold morning.

Why does every no feel like failing the kids?

The building has a job here too. Your debit card is not the school's coat closet.

The nightmare under that way of coping is a child who needed her and met her absence. So every no pre-writes that nightmare. A sick day becomes abandonment. A declined duty becomes a moral hole. A lunch becomes selfish, which is why Penny's lunch, eaten sitting down, is a plot point and not a lifestyle tip. She has not been sitting. The body was the closet too.

The table, later, has a line for the overcorrection she falls into. She turns down a real ask from Raquel, the one ask that was a person and not an extra duty. The line is: no to the extra isn't no to the people. A boundary that cannot tell a person from a task will either say yes to everything or no to the colleague who needed you in the room. The practice is the distinction. Extra duty, extra purchase, extra hour: those can be no. The person in front of you, the one real ask, might still be yes, and the yes is chosen, not ripped out of you by guilt.

Her finish is a no in writing, with no sorry in front of it. The sorry is how the way she copes buys back the right to have said no. It keeps the relationship, and it keeps the next ask easy, which means the no was a draft. A clean no is shorter than you think you are allowed to be. It does not include your medical history, your guilt, or a promise to make up the hour you declined. You did not decline an hour you owe. You declined an extra. If you owe the hour, this page is not a trick for getting out of the job. It is a way to stop paying extra on top of the job and calling the extra your goodness.

When is the generous reading not generosity?

The kids don't have anyone else. Sometimes that is close to true for an hour. It is almost never true as a permanent structure, and the alarm prefers the permanent version because it justifies the closet. If they have no one else, that is a building failure, and an email to the person whose job it is. Your permanent private fund is not a solution. It is a secret budget the building will not see, and therefore will not fix.

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A good teacher stays late. Stay late when the work is the floor and the hour is the one you chose with your eyes open. Do not let the proverb decide. Proverbs are how guilt sounds like wisdom. The floor is the lesson you owe, the child in front of you, the note that meets the standard you can say out loud. Above the floor is the twelfth coat, the third club, the email at 8:40 that could have waited for the morning and a full night's sleep. You are allowed to be good and also done.

If I don't, it won't happen. Test it once, on something that is not safety and not the child standing in the cold this minute. Let one extra thing not happen. Watch who notices. Often the answer is nobody, which is humiliating and useful. Sometimes the answer is the person who should have been doing it, who could not start while you were already finishing it. Penny's email is that test, aimed at a real office, not at the void.

Whose job is the coat?

Circle 3 is the building's gap: the boy at 7:50 with no coat, the duty nobody else was assigned. You did not open the gap, and a Saturday errand will not close it. Circle 2 is the social worker's inbox, the office, the colleague with a real ask. Influence. Penny's email lands there. Circle 1 is the breath on the reading-rug stool, the coat from the closet that already exists, and a no in writing with no sorry in front of it. Worth lives in Circle 1. Nowhere else.

What does a sick day look like from the first minute?

The alarm does its best work before you are out of bed.

You wake up unable to teach. The alarm offers a bargain. Go in for half a day. Go in and "see." The bargain is how a sick day becomes a story you tell about your toughness, and how a room of children gets a teacher who should not be driving. The floor is the sub plans that keep the day from being chaos. Write the plans. Keep them shorter than your guilt wants. A sub can run a day from a page. Your usual three pages are the apology, formatted as instructions.

Send them. Do not add a paragraph about how sorry you are and how you know it is hard. The sub knows it is hard. The paragraph is for your standing in a courtroom that is not in session. If a child has a need the sub must know to keep everyone safe, that line goes in the plans, plain, at the top. That is the floor. The tour of apology emails to teammates is not. One message to the office, the plans, and then the phone leaves the bed.

The afternoon will try to reopen the case. You will imagine the room. You will want to check in. Checking in once, if something specific was left unfinished that only you know, is yours to choose. Checking in as a way to be present while absent is the yes, snuck back through a screen. Penny's pattern would spend the sick day helping from the couch and call it not abandoning them. It is abandoning the day off, which was the point, and it teaches the building that your sick day is a remote shift. Let the day be a day. The children are in a school, not in your absence. The school has a job. You are not the only adult it is allowed to use.

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If the guilt is about a child in the cold, come back to the morning on the rug. Coat from the closet that already exists, so he is not a lesson. Email to the person whose work continues on the next cold day, so you are not the system. No twelfth trip to the store to quiet the picture in your head. The picture is the alarm. The email is the practice. You can love the boy and still refuse to be the supply line the building does not have to acknowledge.

What do you do the next time the yes is already in your hands?

One breath before the purchase, or the reply, or the apology. At the closet, in the car, wherever the yes is forming. Then ask whose job the next action is. If it is yours, inside the day you already have, do it and be done. If it is the building's, write the one email or say the one sentence to the person who holds that job. If it is nobody's, and it is not a child's safety, you are allowed to let it be nobody's.

One no, in writing, with no sorry. A duty, a donation of hours, a request that is extra. Thank them if thanks is true. Do not pay for the no with a paragraph of self-prosecution. Penny's finish is that sentence. Yours can be one line. If you are sick, the sub plans that keep children safe are the floor. The apology tour is not. Send the plans. Leave the tour.

Notice the shoulders, or whatever your brace is. If they are up, you are already spending. Eat sitting down once this week, the way the book bothers to record it, because a skipped lunch is guilt's quietest invoice. You cannot sort a coat from a job while you are hungry and braced. The sort requires you to still be in your body.

The hours that come home in the tote are the same guilt in a different bag. That page is How to stop taking work home. The Sunday the guilt arrives early is on Teacher Sunday scaries.

The opening is on the teachers page.

The book is where Penny's no gets written down, with no sorry in front of it.

Be first to know when *Stop Grading Your Sundays* is out

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Teacher Sunday scaries

How to stop taking work home

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Should I quit teaching?

The angry parent email

I feel like a bad teacher

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Tonight's move

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What to do

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