

TODAY WAS THE most physically demanding day of this chunk of school gigs. Three shows in three different towns, plus solo driving.

First thing this morning a teacher whispered to me, just before I performed for 400 kids, that one of his grade tens' dads had just called the school and pulled his son out of my show because "it might promote a message I don't agree with."

My show is tame. The message is pretty much to get the kids to think about the consequences of cruelty and bullying. Sometimes parents google me, though, and make assumptions about my school material, I think because I am trans.

The principal was a good guy, it seemed, and he walked me out to my truck after the show. He said he wanted to follow up with that parent and tell him what a valuable opportunity his kid had missed, and how if his son had been allowed to attend and ask questions, it might have spurred valuable conversation about important issues.

I told the principal I sure hoped the kid wasn't queer or trans, because then they might really be struggling, with no support at home.

His eyes filled with tears. "God," he said. "I didn't even think about that. I couldn't even let myself go there."

I said, "Next time I come, if anything like that happens again, invite the parent and the kid to come together, and tell them they are free to leave at any time without judgment from me if the parent disagrees with my message."

"Let's do that," he said, and hugged me really hard. He made me a really good coffee, too, for the road.

TODAY AFTER MY school gig, I had a special meeting arranged by the vice-principal with a trans kid in grade eight. A healthy, happy, articulate, smart, and handsome trans kid. He said his mom was supportive, and his stepdad treated him like his own son. He said the school was doing a good job of supporting him. He said grade seven was the worst year of his life, but things were better now. We took some pictures together: he is cute as hell, and smiling.

TODAY AT MY school show, I met a tall and handsome, very gentle and sweet young man who told me he had just come out to his mom a couple of days ago and it went okay, but he did not feel he could come out to his father, maybe ever. He said he was the oldest male in his generation of his conservative Indian family, and there was a lot of pressure on him to get married and have kids.

“That could still happen,” he told his mother. “It might just look different than you thought it would.”

He said he had been in his school’s gay-straight alliance club for several years and it had made his school life much better. “I just told my mom it was an anti-bullying club.” He laughed.

“Yeah,” I said. “I’m just here for my anti-bullying show.”

We both cracked up.

After the show, he gave me three hugs. Three.

“Keep in touch,” I told him, and I meant it. I hope he does. He was a beautiful gem, and I could see the heart in him sparkle from a mile away. I can still feel his heart, out there in the margins of Toronto somewhere, beating right alongside mine.

HIGH-SCHOOL GIG, FIRST thing in in the morning. Kid comes up to me at the break. Tells me the other kids get a cheap laugh from kicking her crutches out from under her. Tells me this is her first year in public school, that she was home-schooled before this. Because her parents didn't like the teachers. Because her parents didn't want the teachers and social services asking all those stupid questions.

“Like what questions?” I ask her.

“Oh, you know,” she tells me. “All the usual questions.”

I AM TEACHING a writing workshop to thirty grade twelve kids. We are doing a character-building exercise. They have created a character together: a twenty-nine-year-old virgin. I ask the kids to imagine what his secrets are and call them out, and I will write them on the board.

One kid yells out that our character is secretly a porn star.

“Okay,” I say. “Except I thought we had already decided he was a virgin?”

The kid smiles a little, then answers me back totally deadpan: “Yeah,” she says. “He’s a soloist.”

I nearly fell down laughing. Smart kids.

TODAY THE KID that broke my heart was sixteen. He waited to talk to me after the show and immediately started telling me about his physically abusive father, how he would hit him and spit in his face. There were other kids standing behind him, and they could hear him. I asked him to please pause so I could speak to the other kids first and make time after to speak to him alone.

After the other students left, he told me he was grateful for the privacy. “I don’t talk about my life to anyone here,” he said.

We sat and talked for about thirty minutes. He didn’t want advice, he said. He didn’t need to cry to a stranger, he said. I asked him if he thought tears were a sign of weakness. He admitted that he did.

“Who taught you that?” I asked him.

“My father,” he said.

“Your father who you have already told me is not a good man? He forced you to control your tears as a little boy, yet he cannot control his own violence as a man? Is violence not a sign of weakness then, too? An inability to control oneself?”

I asked him if he had heard the term “toxic masculinity.” He said no, but he could guess what it was and would look it up. He told me he felt angry nearly all the time but had learned to control it. He told me that he was okay with what his father did to him, that it made him strong. I told him I had a feeling that he was strong already.

“Do we really have to suffer to be strong?” I asked him.

He looked at his watch and apologized because he was late for class and had to go. “I hope you’re not into hugging me now,” he said, smiling a little.

I told him I felt like hugging him, but I could control it.

“Me too,” he said, and put his backpack on and left.

I don't know what he wanted, and I don't know if I delivered. I don't know if I said any of the right things. Maybe it wasn't about what I said. Maybe it was more important for him to just tell someone. Just to talk and have somebody listen.