



callie feyen

ROMEO & JULIET

theteacher**diaries**

“made me remember why I love to read”

—Lauren Winner

T*he teacher diaries series*

*“...we will soon return to our tomorrow, behind us,
where we were young in love’s beginning,
playing Romeo and Juliet
and learning Shakespeare’s language...”*

—mahmoud darwish

The Teacher Diaries

romeo & juliet

callie feyen

T. S. Poetry Press
Ossining, New York
Tspoeetry.com

© 2018, Callie Feyen.

All rights reserved. Please do not reprint more than one chapter without permission.

Some names in this text have been changed to preserve privacy.

Cover image by Sonia Joie
<http://soniajoie.com>

ISBN 978-1-943120-21-5

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data:
Feyen, Callie

[Nonfiction/Education/Memoir.]

The Teacher Diaries: Romeo & Juliet/Callie Feyen

ISBN 978-1-943120-21-5

Library of Congress Control Number: 2018931161

*To the 8th graders who were “both/ and,” and to the 8th graders
who were my grizzly bears. I love you.*

—callie feyen

Contents

Prelude to a Kiss

An introductory note from author L.L. Barkat	9
1. Kissing a Dragon in His Fair Cave	11
2. Dancing With Frankenstein	19
3. Pernicious Rage	24
4. Walking in the Sycamore Grove	29
5. “Where’s My Daughter? Call Her Forth”	34
6. Wild Mercutio	39
7. Tragic Give & Take	50
8. Hooked	56
9. Tricks	63
10. Polka-Dotted Sneakers	69
11. At the Door	75
12. Meeting in the Dark	83

13. Set to Music	88
14. Juliet Moment	93
15. Go Hence	98
Activities	111
Acknowledgements	116
Notes	118
Bibliography	119

Prelude to a Kiss

Do you remember what it was like? To read *Romeo & Juliet* in school for the first time? I do. Painfully so.

There was the question of who would read Juliet. There was the equally tenuous question of who would read Romeo. This kind of thing could mark the rise or fall of the teens in the room. God forbid that the teacher should pair the cute girl with the geeky boy, or vice versa.

Did that teacher have any idea about the power he held, in this seemingly simple casting choice?

I'm not sure if he did, because I was just one of the teens in the room, keeping my head down in the hopes of preserving my dignity.

Still, now, the years stretching between that first teen reading and my grown-up sensibilities, I imagine the awkwardness might not have belonged only to we-the-teens. Maybe the teacher could feel it too. If he kept a diary, I could know once and for all. His secret thoughts might be almost as intriguing as the play itself. Perhaps more so.

What *do* teachers feel when facing William Shakespeare, tales of family feud, breathless kissing scenes—all in front of a class of teens who are keeping their heads down (and threatening to fall asleep or plot their next prank in the process)?

I will never know what my 8th-grade teacher felt. He left me no diary. Educator Callie Feyen, however, has done me a favor. She has written *The Teacher Diaries: Romeo & Juliet*. It begins with a kiss. Then, page by page, it reveals her generous, hopeful, and humorous heart.

The best teachers have one—a heart, that is. It helps them use their power well.

—L.L. Barkat, author of *Rumors of Water: Thoughts on Creativity & Writing*

1

Kissing a Dragon in His Fair Cave

My first kiss happened on the porch of my best friend Celena's house. It was a Saturday night in April. I was fifteen.

Before the kiss happened, I was watching Eddie Murphy's *Delirious* with Celena and her brother Andres. *Delirious* is raunchy and hilarious, and the three of us knew almost every line of Murphy's stand-up routine. We were laughing so hard I wasn't sure we'd breathe again.

The night Neal kissed me, he was no longer with Celena. But they had dated. For a while. Like, they were in love. I knew this. Most of Oak Park, Illinois knew this. And since I'm already walking into awkward territory, I may as well be completely honest and explain that I saw Andres just about every day, and he was quiet and funny and I didn't mind watching him play basketball with his friends. I don't think he minded that I was watching, either.

So the three of us are listening to Eddie Murphy tell a story about running after an ice-cream truck, and the stage lights are reflecting off his red leather pants when Neal knocks on the door looking for me, and the next thing I know I'm standing outside, my back to the little Episcopalian church kitty-corner to Celena's house, looking into Neal's eyes and inhaling all the Drakkar he'd put on. You know what happens next.

How could I do this to Celena? She was crushed when she and Neal broke up. You know those phrases, “together through thick and thin” or “two peas in a pod”? That was Celena and me. Plus, there was something unsaid with Andres, and I go and kiss his sister’s ex-boyfriend outside his house in the middle of one of the greatest stand-up comedy shows of all time. How could I let this happen?

I’ll tell you how. Neal had a haircut like no other boy I knew. It was spikey and shaggy and messy and I used to stare at it in Mr. Brocks’ 8th-grade English class. I’d wonder how Neal got it like that and why the other boys wouldn’t do the same with their hair. (We girls were all curling our bangs so it looked like we had giant caterpillars sleeping on our foreheads. Somebody cool and beautiful obviously started that trend, and we followed suit just as fast as we could kick off our jelly shoes and buy some Aqua Net®.)

Neal was an artist. He drew on everything. His homework, his shoes, his textbooks. When he wrote me notes, he always included cartoon guys—silly and scary—in the margins. My first crush was Wil Wheaton’s character in the movie *Stand By Me*. All my friends were into Cory Feldman and River Pheonix. Not me. I liked the storyteller, the quiet artist. Neal told stories with his cartoons and I liked that.

Finally, there was the Howard Jones t-shirt. That’s right, Howard Jones. The one whose songs you probably hear when you’re getting a cavity filled. Sometimes, Neal wore a Howard Jones concert tour shirt to school and I lost my mind. It was black with white print and a thick, light blue stripe that was off-center. I could think of nothing else the days he wore his Howard Jones t-shirt.

But I didn't pine for Neal. At least, not while he was dating Celena. He and I were in a lot of the same classes together, though, and we were buddies. When they broke up, and I found out he was interested in me, it was hard for me to resist those blue eyes, that reckless hair, and that Howard Jones t-shirt.

Still, I was a good kid, and I knew better. What I did makes no sense. Also, Celena knew all this. I told her how I felt about Neal, and she was the one who told me he liked me. She opened the door that Saturday night and pushed me outside with a smile on her face. After, she celebrated my first kiss like only a best friend could.

Two years later, I was at Celena's, sitting at her dining room table, sobbing over a different boy. When he broke up with me he told me I was monotonous—a word I had to look up in the dictionary. In those days, I wrote the date next to all the words I looked up and 12.5.92 is next to *monotonous*: “tedious, boring, dull, uninteresting, unexciting.” You get the picture. I learned the definition one day before my 17th birthday.

That boy immediately started dating someone else—a girl I knew who seemed nice. Celena was in the kitchen with the refrigerator door open when I asked, “Is this how you felt when I did this to you?” She looked at me, shocked. I held her stare for a moment and then said, “I'm sorry.”

I don't remember what she said. I know she didn't say, “That's okay,” or, “I'm your best friend no matter what.” That was never Celena's style. What I do remember is this: Celena wordlessly walking over to the table where I was and putting a tub of Cool Whip between us. She handed me a candy cane, and she opened up a bag of Chex Mix™ and sat down, and to-

gether we ruined our dinner.

I cannot justify or explain one bit of my behavior on that porch, but I can remember, very clearly, all the feelings: how hard I was laughing at Eddie Murphy, that mellow, sweet emotion of hanging out with friends that are as close as family, the way my stomach flipped when Neal knocked on the door, the heavy feeling I had standing with him in the dark, the way my eyes stung and my stomach hollowed out when I said I'm sorry to Celena.

I suppose someone could argue what I felt wasn't really love, but I did feel something. Perhaps it was a sort of love. No matter. It was colorful, and vivid, and electric, and I relished whatever it was. I think being a teenager is like tasting cinnamon gum for the first time and realizing what taste buds are. We know sour and sweet, spicy and salty, but not like this.

In the introduction to *Romeo and Juliet*, the Oxford University Press explains that when we first meet Juliet she's talking with her father about marriage. A young man named Paris is asking for Juliet's hand, and her father wants to know what she thinks. The last sentence in this paragraph reads: "She hasn't given much thought to the subject, but she's an obedient child, and she promises to give serious consideration to the man her parents have found for her."

When I teach *Romeo and Juliet*, I use this edition, and it is the next one-sentence paragraph I make sure my students and I discuss:

"And then she meets Romeo."

I think this is a sentence that's felt before it's understood. Like the events leading up to a first kiss; perhaps the kiss itself. I also think it's a sentence that ought to be studied, though it

may not be as exciting as sitting cross-legged on the floor with your best friend as she asks, “Okay, what happened then? What’d he do then?” Still, I pursue it.

I tell my students that when I was in school, my teachers told me you don’t start a sentence with and, and paragraphs are made up of three to five sentences.

“I was also told,” I explain, “that if you are going to break a rule, you better know why you’re doing it.” Then I ask why the rules were broken for this pivotal five-word fragment.

“Something’s changed,” one student might say. “Something’s different.”

I tell the students this sentence is supposed to feel dramatic because what’s happened to Juliet is dramatic. “Here she is, following all the rules, happy to consider suggestions of her parents, and then something happens.” *Someone* happens.

“Has this ever happened to you?” I’ll ask. Nobody will answer, but several students will smile.

“It was 5th grade when it happened to me,” I’ll offer, “and I was in Sunday School.” This usually gets the class laughing and riled. Of all the places to meet Romeo, it probably shouldn’t be in church.

But that’s the thing about love. It shows up anywhere and there’s nothing you can do to stop it. I think we waste time arguing over whether what Romeo and Juliet felt was truly love. They felt something, and it was real and that’s where the story is.

My confession relaxes my classes. They’re entering an awkward, confusing, romantic story with someone who’s been there. If I had started the lesson stating that Romeo and Juliet were two melodramatic teenagers who made a giant mess of

things, I would've sent a message that if my students ever had (or have) an "And then she meets Romeo" moment, something is wrong with them. They're wrong for feeling what they're feeling. They can't possibly understand what love is and how to handle it.

When do we ever understand what love is and how to handle it? Can you help it when love strikes? Perhaps we're better suited to study what love does, rather than how it ought to be managed.

Love breaks rules. We learn this in the introduction, but also in understanding who Romeo and Juliet are: enemies. "My only love sprung from my only hate," Juliet wails when she learns Romeo is a Montague.

Love puts us at a loss for words: "It is my lady, O it is my love:" Romeo gasps at the sight of Juliet. But then, he cannot finish the couplet: "O that she knew she were!"

And in one of my favorite passages in the entire play, Juliet shows us how love messes with our thoughts:

O serpent heart, hid with a flow'ring face!
 Did ever dragon keep so fair a cave?
 Beautiful tyrant, fiend angelical!
 Dove-feather'd raven, wolvish-ravening lamb!
 Despised substance of divinest show!
 Just opposite to what thou justly seem'st,
 A damnèd saint, an honourable villain!
 O nature, what hadst thou to do in hell
 When thou didst bower the spirit of a fiend
 In mortal paradise of such sweet flesh?
 Was ever book containing such vile matter

So fairly bound? O that deceit should dwell
In such a gorgeous palace!

Indeed, I know all about serpent hearts with flow'ring faces. I'm certain I've danced with beautiful tyrants and probably gotten into the cars of a few honourable villains. The dragon might be handsome and keep a swanky cave, but he is still a dragon. We are playing with fire. I'm interested in the stories that come from the burns.

I like to teach *Romeo and Juliet* in February because love is on the brains (and hearts) of my students (even more so than normal). I pass out candy message hearts and red construction paper and tell them they have to create at least two couplets using the words on the hearts.

"These are so cheesy!" they'll complain. "Yes, they are," I'll say.

"Some of these messages are totally inappropriate!" they'll tell me, and I agree to that. "Use what you got," I encourage them.

Use the awkward. Use the inappropriate. Use the confusion and use the brand new spring air of an April Saturday night. Use the cheap cologne and the Episcopal church and use the blue eyes that shine in the night. Use the late apology and the bag of Chex Mix shared between friends.

I think that's what Shakespeare is doing with this play. He could have made Romeo and Juliet older. In fact, they were older in the original poem by Arthur Brooke. Instead, he gives two teen kids this love story, and we begin the play with two boys comparing their private parts and what they'd like to do to women with them. (*Delirious* had nothing on Shakespeare.)

If we're going to teach *Romeo and Juliet*, it's good to know about iambic pentameter and reverse metaphor. It's good to understand the motives of Tybalt and Paris. It's important to see the deep hatred the Montagues and Capulets have for one another. But it is equally important to understand what love does, and I only know how to do that by remembering what it's done to me.

Romeo and Juliet is a tragic story. The tragedy lies in the double suicide, of course, but it also lies in the fact that the two of them don't have a chance to see if anything can grow from their frantic love.

A student I once had wrote, "Nothing beautiful has no scars," and I think about the friendship I have with Celena. The two of us met when we were Juliet's age. We have shared so many laughs and secrets and big life events, including a first kiss. Neal has her first kiss, too. "It makes the story of our lives even better!" Celena told me when I brought this tidbit up recently.

I agree, even though I still can't explain why I did what I did (other than the fact that Neal was wearing that damn Howard Jones T-shirt that night). Sometimes there's nothing to explain except to sit across the table from one another, share a bag of Chex Mix, and dip candy canes into Cool Whip. Two burned, beautiful girls—marked by Romeo.

“Where’s My Daughter? Call Her Forth”

It’s a few nights before Christmas. My mom and I are in the kitchen in the house I grew up in on Gunderson, near Chicago. She’s moving about, pulling food from the fridge, lifting plates out of cupboards, setting out napkins and wine glasses.

I’m standing in the same place I’ve always stood since my parents re-did the kitchen when I was 14, at the counter that opens to the dining room. I can see the outside—the oak trees, the streetlights that flickered on well before the 6 o’clock rush of Oak Park residents walking home from the El. December in the Midwest grows dark early. You can feel it at 3:30; the heavy cold presses on your shoulders as the barely blue sky fades quickly to grey, and then a crystal black so cold it’s like walking into ice. The streetlights shine for those returning from the city, and the night glimmers.

I am a brand-new mama. My daughter, Hadley, is two months old and asleep upstairs. My mom is basking in first-time grandma-ness like a gal who’s just been asked for her hand in marriage. She is effervescent, and soon Hadley will be up and friends will be over, the wine will be poured, and the house will be pulsing with celebratory oohs and aahs as Hadley is passed around.

My mom puts hummus and olives, cheese and crackers on a wooden slab in front of me. The library lights next door

turn off for the evening, except for the security lights that would cast a glow on the books, like a blanket. I can see those lights and the books through my bedroom window. The Els rush by quickly now and I think they're cold, too. I wonder about checking on Hadley when the door opens. It is Mrs. Carlson.

"Are you ready to laugh your ass off?" she asks, removing her gloves ever so daintily.

"Always," my mom says, uncorking the wine and pouring a glass for her dear friend.

My mom and Mrs. Carlson have been friends since her daughter, Sarah, and I met our freshman year of high school. While Sarah and I had done our fair share of teenage girl mischief, my mom and Mrs. Carlson were known to get rowdy as well. And they did it in public.

The two of them used to rollerblade around town, with this ridiculous equipment on. They were known to blade all the way to the high school football field, where Sarah and I were frequently practicing our Drill Team routines. They'd yell hello as loud as they could. Neither of them knew how to stop so they'd roll and usually fall onto the grass, or crash into a fence, resulting in howls of laughter.

"Our moms are here," I'd tell Sarah between clenched teeth, not moving a muscle in their direction.

"Oh my gosh," Sarah would say, following suit. "Ignore them."

You couldn't ignore either of them, though. Nobody could. They were a force: a loud, incredibly witty, stunningly stylish force.

"Callie, sweetie," Mrs. Carlson says as she makes her way

towards where I'm standing. I smile and watch her expectantly. She puts her hands on either side of my face, and the smile she's giving me seems to lift her hair. "You're a mama!" The way she says it makes me feel like I've done something, like I *am* something.

She lifts her glass. "Cheers," she says, and my mom and I reciprocate, then Mrs. Carlson goes on to tell us a story that, indeed, has us laughing so hard, we could count it as cardio.

It's easy to wince when reading the Nurse's debut scene. In fewer than fifty lines, we learn of her daughter's death, and she shares the very palpable details of how she weaned Juliet, as well as her body's reaction to that weaning. We learn that her husband is also gone, and we hear a little anecdote about Juliet's toddler years. After my first reading of the Nurse's speech, I wrote in the margin, "Girlfriend could've started a blog."

Shakespeare's Nurse is off-color, and she gives far more information than she needs to. She is also the person Juliet trusts most. When I teach *Romeo and Juliet* and we get to this part in the play, before we read, I give my students a warning.

"She says way too much, and she might make you squirm a bit."

This, of course, makes them want to read on. Dangle any hint of something taboo in front of a middle school student, and they'll devour it.

I go on to explain, though, that I believe it is her stories, perhaps even the inappropriate and overloaded details of her stories, that make Juliet trust her and tell her things.

"She's kind of like me," I tell my students, and they look

at me, shocked at the comparison.

“C’mon,” I’ll say, “you know I have a story for everything.”

They laugh, thinking they are the ones who throw me off course, taking up class time, when I meticulously plan for it. I offer my stories—my vulnerable, awkward, growing-up stories—because I’m leveling the playing field. I want to bear some of what it is my students are going through so they will trust themselves to get at their stories. I’m attempting to pull something out of them, as the Nurse does for Juliet, as Mrs. Carlson has done for me.

The opening line in Act 1, Scene 3 is a question and a command. “Where’s my daughter?” Lady Capulet asks the Nurse. “Call her forth to me.” We can interpret that line literally. Mrs. Capulet doesn’t know where her kid is and is asking the Nurse to help find her.

I think this line can be interpreted figuratively as well. That is, we mothers don’t always understand what’s going on with our children—their experience is not our own. Recognizing this can be scary, when we see them on the brink of adolescence, marriage, motherhood. Where’s the daughter we once knew? Who is she now? How much of this experience do we help her navigate? How do we help her become who she’s going to be? Why not bring in our friends to call forth something in our children.

Before Lady Capulet tells Juliet to “Read o’er the volume of young Paris’ face,/And find delight writ there with beauty’s pen,” before Juliet falls for Romeo on the night she is to look at Paris, before the Nurse and the Friar take part in this star-crossed romance, let’s look at the Nurse in all her vibrant,

story-telling glory. Let's watch her and Juliet together, then nod along with Lady Capulet when she tells the Nurse to "come back again,/ I have remember'd me," because it can be our friends who not only call forth something in our children, but help us remember a part of our selves we've forgotten.

Mrs. Carlson, my mom, and I stand together in the kitchen for a few minutes before the rest of the company arrives—these two women sharing the space where I'd been listening to and wondering about the night, each of them with an arm on my shoulders, making me laugh.

Hadley wakes up, and I bring her downstairs to show her to friends who've watched me grow up. There's Mrs. Padour, who made pancakes in the shape of my initials while her daughters and I watched, sleepy-eyed from staying up too late, and happy from the sizzle of buttermilk and flour, eggs and vanilla shaping itself into a perfectly fluffy C. There's Mrs. Roldan, who, on a Saturday night when Celena and I were broken-hearted over a boy, sat with us on her bed and told us her own broken-hearted boy stories. Mrs. Todd is here, too. She gave me one of my first jobs, helping her sell tea in her tea store. I loved lifting the big glass jars, gently scooping up jasmine, Ceylon, or, my favorite, cinnamon spice tea leaves and spilling them into golden bags for customers. And at lunch time, Mrs. Todd and I would sip Diet Coke® and eat our sandwiches and giggle about one thing or another we found silly. Now Mrs. Carlson is smiling, her eyes twinkling, and I think she's coming up with her next story. Mom smiles, too.

All of them, like the Nurse, calling me forth.

6

Wild Mercutio

Before they met Mercutio, I taught my 8th graders how to play Pac-Man. It's basically tag on a basketball court, but you can only run along the lines. Whoever gets chomped by Pac-Man is out.

I wasn't planning this with my class, but a few things happened that week, and by the time Friday rolled around, I decided we all needed to participate in a little folly before we hung out with the ultimate fool, albeit a fool I knew would steal our hearts and then break them.

The first thing that happened was that I yelled at my students. In my defense, this particular group of 8th graders was

Get the whole book now,
on Amazon

