

SETTING: A classroom in an urban public school.

AT RISE: New Teacher, a middle-aged African American woman, is sitting at her desk, holding her ears. The dismissal bell has just rung. A fellow teacher enters looking for her.

NEW TEACHER

Yes; right here! (*Relieved to see it is a fellow teacher.*) Oh, hello! Please, come in.

(*Beat.*)

What was that?

(*Beat.*)

I'm sorry, the students just left. My ears—the noise level is deafening sometimes. Did you need something?

(*Beat.*)

Oh, come to check on the new teacher, huh? I see. Well, I appreciate that. What grade is it that you teach again?

(*Beat.*)

I'll have your students for drama next year then. I teach sixth, seventh and eighth grade.

(*Beat.*)

How's it going? Great! (*Laughs.*) I mean, I don't remember school being like this when I was young. The way the kids talk to each other; the way they talk to me; *the way they don't stop talking period!* Everything is "niggah this" or "niggah that"—even with the white kids. I mean, how many niggahs do you have to be before the bell rings?

Can I ask you a question? What does it mean, "What are those?!" The students think it's so funny and I just don't get it. This kid, Julio, comes up to the front of the class today while I'm teaching and says, "Hey, I got one question for you..." And then he points at my shoes and asks in this crazy voice, "*What are those?!!*" And the whole class bursts out laughing—even the good kids. And Julio's got an audience now so he keeps it up, pointing at my shoes and asking, "*What are those?!!*"

(*Beat.*)

Well, I just stood there like a deer in the headlights, not knowing what to do! It's that "fright, fight or flight" thing. And suddenly I'm thirteen years old, and in middle school—kids following me home, threatening to beat me up because of where I live or the color of my skin or my hair or the way I talk or the way I dress. It's the same laughing; the same taunting; the same mocking—only now, I'm a grown woman. I am the teacher.

How am I supposed to respond to that—"*What are those?!*" I want to say I have to wear sensible shoes because I stand on my feet all day; that my knees are killing me; that I can barely make it up the four flights of stairs to my classroom. But I don't. I just stand there. And I take it. I tell myself, it's not as bad as when Rosa called me a bitch and repeatedly threatened to punch me in my face or when Aaron threw a chair and nearly hit me or when Jamila told me to suck her dick. I mean, she doesn't even have a dick... does she? Wait. I can't believe I just said the word "dick"...again! What is happening?! School has only been open a couple of weeks!

(Beat.)

Yea, that's what everybody says—"the first year is the hardest". At this point, I hope I make it to my second year—to Christmas even! *(Beat.)* How many years have you been teaching?

(Beat.)

That long, huh. Any advice?

(Beat.)

Medication?! Is that... what, are you joking?

(Beat.)

(Not quite believing her.) Oh, OK. Well, when things get tough for me, I like to imagine that President Obama would be happy that I am teaching; that he would want me in our schools doing my part as an artist and educator to ensure a bright future filled with creativity for our most vulnerable population, public school children. These are the kids who need the arts the most.

I've seen the signs posted around school reminding everyone that October is National Bullying Prevention Awareness Month. I've decided to seize this opportunity to introduce a unit on writing monologues either as the bully, the bystander, or the one who is being bullied—to walk in another person's shoes, as it were.

(Beat.)

Having a reading of student work at assembly is a great idea—if I can get them to agree to do it. But, middle schoolers? No one wants to be different or to stand out, much less be up in front of

the class or on stage—except Julio. (*Laughs. Thinks.*) They’re probably afraid of being made fun of. (*As if she is JULIO.*) Hey, I got one question for you... do you feel bullied?

(*Beat.*)

No? (*Considers this.*) Huh...

(*Beat.*)

Me? Yes, I do. I feel bullied. I know we’re teachers, but we’re human beings too, you know? We have feelings too... Feelings? (*As if she is JULIO.*) “*What are those?*”



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Note from the Playwright

The *Urban Dictionary* defines “What are Those?!” as “an exclamation shouted by social media users everywhere when referring to someone without ‘shoe game’; originated as a vine, and can sometimes be funny, but lots of lame people don’t say it with enough force and end up looking extremely awkward.” Another definition says, “A rhetorical question used on someone with ugly or old shoes. This may be an insult, or someone is just asking literally, ‘What are those?’ because they want to know.” Additionally, you can look for examples of usage by clicking on this link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2NSK15ZjPYQ>.