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I'm trying to teach my creative writing students the difference between past and present tense. "A flashback scene," I tell them, "shows something that already happened, so it's in past tense." They nod. "It needs to be clear when things happen in relation to other things," I say, and they nod again. "Like, you graduated from high school, and now you're currently in college. Get it?" They nod. "The current action of your story can be in past tense, too," I say. "But the past is always the past. Does that make sense? Is that clear?" They say it is most definitely clear and they have no questions at all.

But then a little girl with braids shows up on Thursday and takes Ashley's seat.

"Ashley," I say. "How old are you?"

"I'm twelve," she says. "When I'm twelve, I went to the beach with my family and my father has an affair with a boy lifeguard. It kind of messes things up for a while, but we got over it."

"We will get over it," I correct. "Also, you're switching tenses in the same sentence!"

"My mother marries a fireman," she says.

"She will marry a fireman," I say. "Or she married a fireman. Depending on if you're talking about what will happen in your future, or what already happened to the college-aged Ashley who usually sits here."

"I'm twelve," says Ashley.

The other students are grumbling. I can't blame them. I was ready to move on from tenses and talk about the importance of concrete detail. But I see we have more work to do.

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Maybe it's because we live in Mississippi, and the seasons are slippery: fall and spring, who can tell the difference? Summer oozes into autumn, and then it's winter for a week, and then it's spring again, then summer, and the years keep going by like this. Also, the past is everywhere. There are old-timey cars toodling around town, some lower to the ground than modern cars and some higher. There are brick buildings on Main Street that have been there for decades. There are people with Confederate flag bumper stickers, people who believe the dumb things their dumb relatives say about people different from themselves. But also, there are people who disagree with these people, and they all stand up in alderman meetings and yell at each other. It's like a wrestling match between the past and the future. I saw a drone the other day, hovering through the neighborhood with a package. You can have a drone deliver your Confederate flag. It's very confusing.

"How long have we been married?" I ask my husband, because I really don't know.

"It seems like just yesterday," he says. "But it also seems like a million years."

That's not very helpful. I try to do the math. I try to think of what we'd planned to do and what we did do, and what we didn't, and what we will do later. We didn't have children, so we don't have any. "I'd like to go to Ireland," I tell my husband, and he says, "That sounds like something we would do." "Will do," I correct, and he says, "That's what I meant."

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On Tuesday, a douchy frat boy with sporadic attendance shows up looking about thirty five, wearing a football jersey. His neck is twice the size it was on Thursday. "I'm ready to retire after a stellar career," he announces. "And just do commercials and date models."

I try to make this a teaching moment. "So the Josh who is usually here will become a football player," I say. "And will become famous."

He nods.

"Except you won't," I can't stop myself from saying. "Not with your grades. And you don't even play football! You're not giving yourself a believable trajectory, and so why should we trust you as a character?"

Josh just grins. The other students are lining up for autographs, which is disappointing.

"He's not a well-rounded character," I say, but they don't care.

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On Thursday, most of the class is children, so I give them paper and pencils to draw their houses and families. Josh has withdrawn from the course, the only one to venture into future tense. The other students sketch quietly, concentrating so hard their little tongues are sticking out of their little mouths.

"I live with my dog and my mommy," says a boy whose first poem was about a boy who shoots a deer and cries and is slapped by his father. Or no, his poem will be about that, and I'll compliment his simile comparing the antlers to barren trees—or rather, I did compliment it, and I gave him (or will give him?) an A-. I check my grade book to be sure.

The sorority girl who got an F for not having any imagery is actually a pretty smart child. Or she was. She comes up to me shyly with her paper and I see that she's written a poem about her grandma, and there's a strange and wonderful image of her grandmother with moons on her fingers. "How lovely!" I say. "You're a much better writer now than you will be later." She blushes and runs back to her seat.

But I feel like a failure. Why can't I get through to them? My literature classes are better, but they keep writing about Jane Eyre in the past tense and when I tell them to write about her in present tense they just frown. She's not real, I explain. You're writing about a book, not about history. "Rochester was a jerk," says someone, and the other students agree.

But it's the creative writing students I worry about most. "Also," I tell my husband, "I didn't sign up to teach elementary school. One girl peed her pants the other day! But it's my fault. I made them write flashback scenes and use their own lives for inspiration, and now they're stuck."

My husband is a baker. His customers swoon over his pastries, because they bring back fond memories of childhood. But they always say, I ate this when I was a child. I loved these when I was little.

They don't say: I eat this when I was a child, because that makes no sense. "Lighten up," my husband says. "Take them some brownies."

The children love the brownies! "Did you eat these when you were little?" I ask. "Littler? Is this something you liked to eat? In the past? Liked?"

A little girl who came to the first class with a badly concealed black eye (or will come to the first class . . .) looks up at me. Her mouth is smeared with chocolate. "But we're eating them now," she says.

By midterm, there's only one student who isn't stuck in the past. She's writing in present tense and refuses to try a flashback scene at all. She types on her laptop while the children draw and squirm. One day, I ask her to read some of her story out loud, and she agrees. The story is about a girl who moves to Ireland and works in a tea towel shop and enjoys her work and marries a handsome and well-adjusted Irishman. There's no conflict at all. The children seem to enjoy it.

Ashley raises her hand and says, "Do they live happily ever after?"

"Yes," says the girl. "I think that's exactly what happens."

This student will graduate in two months and spend the summer in Dublin, where she'll meet an ugly Irishman with some mental issues (depression, anxiety) and get a job in a pub, even though it's illegal for her to be paid in cash under the table. She and the Irishman will marry and live in a small, dank flat, but then she'll land a pretty great job doing web design work for an American company that produces contemporary furniture that looks like old-timey furniture. They will have two children, a boy who will run away at thirteen and spend some time in a hospital, a girl who will be the lead singer of a band that will make a big splash in Ireland and Europe, but no one will ever hear of them in America, which is fine.

One day, twenty-six years after she was a student in my creative writing class, this girl—now a middle-aged woman—will see someone on Grafton Street who reminds her of me, and she'll find me on social media, and we will correspond for several months and start to feel like friends. She'll invite me and my husband to visit her and her husband in Dublin, and one rainy March afternoon the four of us will sit at a small wooden table at the Brazen Head and drink Guinness in front of a fireplace. I'll ask her if she remembers her present tense story, and I'll tell her the truth: that it was terrible. I only gave her an A because she didn't screw up her tenses.

And then she'll tell me a flashback scene where she sits (sat) in the back of the classroom, watching the children draw, watching me stare out the window. The sky was bright and the drill field was full of Frisbees. That traveling preacher was out there, yelling about everyone going to hell. But I, her professor, wasn't thinking about the preacher or the Frisbees as I stared out the window; I was remembering a moment in my Tucson childhood, my mother standing in a shadow by the porch, coaxing the dog from a patch of cholla cactus, the way he whined, how we took him inside and pulled the spines from his paws with tweezers. Why was I thinking that? The past was just the past.

When she's finished, I'll remind her that she can't go into my point of view and know what I was thinking. And she will say, "Yes, I can. I just did. And I know my story was terrible."

"Oh, it wasn't so bad," I will say.

I order another round of beer.

We toast to the future.