**An excerpt from a senior comp: *Band Kids***

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The second bell heralded the start of first period. Nora Butler stood at her open locker, surveying its contents and contemplating how late she could be to band before the new director noticed she wasn’t there. Stealing a look towards the school office, she gingerly lifted her giant physics textbook from a shelf and closed it as softly and quickly as she could. She winced as the rusting door grated obnoxiously as it latched shut. If she didn’t hurry up and get to class soon the colossal school principal, Mr. Studenhammer, would catch her as he began his morning patrol of the hallways.

Hoisting her backpack onto her shoulder, she began to make her way down the carpeted hallway as the metallic sound of the bell still rang off the walls. She passed open classrooms and familiar faces as the other teachers began their typical first day of school speeches, welcoming back the students and expressing their excitement over the beginning of another wonderful year at Luther High School. Nora rolled her eyes as she softly padded on towards the band room. It was the same speech she had heard on this day for the past three years. *Nothing at this school ever changes*, she thought to herself as she passed a classroom full of freshmen, their nervous, eager faces looking much younger than Nora expected. Surely she hadn’t looked that young when she had first come to Luther.

Thank goodness she wasn’t a freshman anymore. Nora was one of the few Catholics at the fiercely Lutheran school, and as such had been something of an exotic novelty when she arrived. The awkwardness of coming to new school from a different system of elementary schools, the sudden avalanche of schoolwork, and the khaki-centered dress code had all proved difficult to adapt to. But now Nora was a senior, and she was in charge, and she planned on riding the wave of seniority and all the perks it carried straight through ‘till graduation.

Still ambling down the hallway, Nora watched as teachers started to close the doors to their classrooms as they began their first classes of the new school year. She was now the only person left in the hallway, and everything was pleasantly quiet in the absence of the hordes of other students milling around and lounging at their lockers. All that could be heard was the muffled voices coming from behind the heavy oak doors.

The abandoned hallway reminded Nora that she was still running late, something that should have made her feel at least marginally guilty. But it was the first day of school and she was a senior. Quite frankly, she didn’t really care about being a few minutes late. She had all year to be on time for band. Besides, everyone involved in band at Luther knew that as long as you were inside the door sometime within the first five minutes of the period your lateness wouldn’t even be noticed. And, she thought to herself with a slight smirk, there was another new band director this year. She could have stopped for breakfast on the way to school and still been marked present by whichever budding young band director Studenhammer had found to replace Mr. Cotter, last year’s notoriously easygoing director.

It was always the same story with the Luther band directors: the school would put out a call for a new director to replace the previous one, searching in vain for someone experienced but inevitably settling on a nervous, fresh-faced college graduate eager to transform Luther’s small concert band into the next London Philharmonic. The directors lasted no more than a year or two before moving onto some other more exotic location like Milwaukee or Ashwaubenon, where the schools were shiny and new and the paychecks were considerably fatter. Luther went through directors with astonishing, or perhaps troubling, speed. This school year saw the fourth director in four years. Nora was sympathetic to their plight. She wouldn’t want to spend the rest of her life in high school, either.

As she rounded the corner into the band hallway, she noticed a distinct lack of the rhythmic laughter and chatter that usually hummed behind doors during the first five minutes or so of band when students collected their instruments and music, chatting with their friends and sectionmates as they prepared for the usual warm-up exercises. Wondering vaguely is she had missed a memo to meet somewhere else for class, she quickened her pace to find herself facing the heavy closed door. There was no note on the door, and she thought she heard a singular voice coming from behind it. Now sufficiently confused, she hesitated for a moment before opening the door and stepped into an astonishingly quiet room full of students sitting rigidly at attention.

Nora stopped mid-stride, still awkwardly holding the door open behind her. At first nothing seemed different in the room, but as her eyes scanned over the familiar faces of her friends she stared back at them with confusion. What the heck was going on? Then she watched their eyes grow wide and look back towards the front of the room. Nora followed their gaze as she took another step in and allowed the door to slide shut. Standing at the sleek grand piano was a rather mousy-looking young woman no taller than any of the sophomores and appearing barely older, her dirty blonde hair pulled back in a tight bun and a clipboard in her hands. She was dressed in khakis and a plain black shirt like any other student, and Nora tried to remember if there were any new transfer students at LHS for that year.

“You must be Nora Butler,” the woman said from behind thin wire-rimmed glasses, her eyes leaving a list of names and fixing their piercing stare on Nora’s face. She sounded young, hardly older than Nora, who could only stare back dumbly.

“Um, yeah, that’d be me,” she replied hesitantly. Who the hell was this and where was the new teacher?“And who are you?” The words spilled out from Nora’s thoughts before she could stop them, and a poorly stifled giggle came from somewhere in the depths of the percussion section. The strange young woman head snapped back towards the students, searching through slitted eyes for the source of the unholy disruption. Finding nothing, she turned back to Nora and crossed her arms, looking her up and down critically as if filing her away in a mental folder.

“I’m Ms. Steinke, your new band director. And you’re late, in case you hadn’t noticed.”

Nora simply stood there and gawked. Every eye in the room was focused unwaveringly on the interaction going on at the front of the classroom. This was definitely unexpected. For a brief second, Nora wondered if she was still asleep in her bed back home. “I’m… sorry?”

“I would surely hope so. To be perfectly honest, I don’t think I should have to remind you why it’s a good idea to be on time for class. The normal class rules would give you a detention for being late, but I don’t want to start the school year off that way.” Still aware that everyone in the room was looking at her, Nora stole a cautious glance at the clock. She was barely three minutes late. The only noise in the classroom was the sound of the other students’ eyes sliding from Ms. Steinke back to Nora, who, for a rare moment in her life, was at a complete loss for words.

Ms. Steinke seemed to take note of this with pleasure. “Please go take a seat, Nora,” she said with a nod towards the other students still sitting in silent trepidation. Scanning the rows, Nora took note of an empty seat in the back beside her tow-headed friend Lucas, a trumpet player. He offered her a feeble smile and Nora began to make her way around the rows of seats toward him when Ms. Steinke cleared her throat behind her.

“Nora, front row. We don’t want to waste any more time.” There was something in her tone that sounded deadly. Ms. Steinke gestured to an empty seat in the first row next to a pair of freshman girls who looked positively terrified to be on the receiving end of her attention.

Nora felt her cheeks growing hot as she turned back around and sank into the seat, resenting her sudden embarrassment. None of this was normal. She threw a glance back at Lucas, who shrugged helplessly and shook his head. With a growing sense of resentment, she turned back around and joined the rest of the class in focusing their attention on Ms. Steinke.

“As I was just explaining before we were interrupted,” Ms. Steinke said in that strangely severe voice, “I have heard that discipline has been rather lacking in this band since I was a student here. Now, I know you’ve had several different directors over the past few years and as would be expected, certain rules and procedures have appeared to have taken back seat in the name of having a good time.”

Nora almost laughed involuntarily as the sudden memory of the seniors last year flashed in her mind. They had locked Mr. Cotter in the band supply room and then left him there all period. She snorted a bit as the laughter got caught in the back of her throat and Ms. Steinke glared at her. Nora hastily rearranged the features on her face so that she was looking back at her with blank attentiveness, and after a moment Ms. Steinke went on:

“I hope this goes without saying, but I want to remind you all that I’m not Mr. Cotter. I have high expectations for each one of you. This is one of the best bands in the conference, and this class isn’t here as a good excuse to go to Disney on the band tour or get an easy A or visit with your friends. And as this is the beginning of the school year, may I remind you that this is *not*”—she looked pointedly over to the percussion section—“a glorified study hall.”

There were a few more snickers from the other sections as Nora stole a quick glance back towards the percussion section. She grinned when she saw her best friend Kelly standing beside a snare drum with a visibly annoyed look on her pale face. Kelly was infamous for spending rehearsal time in band tucked away behind the bass drum, catching up on homework and studying. She was a talented percussionist and an even more talented procrastinator, and for those reasons band was a necessity in her schedule. Turning back to the front of the room, Nora saw Ms. Steinke standing with her hands on her hips, looking mildly annoyed that there were other noises in the room besides her own voice and the blinking of one hundred pairs of eyes.

“I’m not sure why you all think that’s funny. Band is for music, not for homework. Mr. Cotter told me that he would turn a blind eye to whatever other work you did in class as long as you were still ready to play on cue. I’ll let you know right now that I won’t put up with such behavior in this room.” Ms. Steinke paused for a moment as if for dramatic effect, and looked out across the rows of students with a no-nonsense expression.

*Well shit*, Nora thought as she looked around at her fellow students, noting that their disappointed, sheepish expressions closely mirrored her own. She suspected that if Ms. Steinke hadn’t commanded such quiet attentiveness, there would have been a miserable chorus of groans and muttered complaints at such a proclamation. She credited in-class study halls in band as one of the only reasons she was able to pull off an A in chemistry last year—she would prop her textbook and notes up on the stand next to her music and cram for quizzes and tests whenever she had the opportunity. Such a shakeup in her study routine was sure to derail her plans for the upcoming year, seeing as she was planning on doing the same thing with physics. And based on the looks everyone was now giving Ms. Steinke, she wasn’t the only one was going to lose out on precious study time.

“This is such bullcrap,” a hushed, low voice muttered bitterly behind her, coming from a cluster of trombones. Nora couldn’t agree more.

After letting her announcement sink in for a few moments, Ms. Steinke adjusted her glasses and continued. “That being said, if I see anyone with other work out, it’ll be an automatic detention.”

“Seriously?” The exasperated voice came from somewhere among the trumpets, but it was quickly hushed after Ms. Steinke’s expression turned to a steely-eyed scowl.

“Yes, seriously,” she replied with a measured firmness that instantly silenced the lingering whispers of agreement coming from the other sections. “I hate to make such rules in a high school group such as this, but it needs to be done. Are there any other questions?” No one made a sound, and Nora slouched down in her seat, disgruntled and wishing desperately that class would end soon so she could seek out Kelly and Lucas.

“Excellent,” Ms. Steinke said, this time marginally more pleasant as she walked briskly over to the piano, where she picked up an ominously thick stack of papers and began passing them out to the class. “Here’s the syllabus and a list of the classroom rules and expectations. I know you can all read so I won’t go through it word for word, but if you would all flip for a moment to the third page…”

One of the freshman piccolos passed a portion of the stack to Nora, who grabbed one and passed it on without much thought. She began flipping through the surprisingly severe-looking syllabus, reading it over with a growing sense of dismay at every word she read. There were rules for everything.

*No food in the band room…*

*No gum…*

In the previous years, the only rules had been to show up to class, play when you were supposed to, and do not throw drumsticks across the room (needless to say, Mr. Cotter had put an end to percussion section’s brainchild, Flying Drumsticks Friday, very quickly).

*No doing other homework during band…*

*No talking during music rehearsal…*

Clearly, those days were now far behind Nora and the others.

*No talking when the director is talking…*

*Stay in your assigned seat…*

This was nothing like the band she was used to.

*Be prepared for written tests and playing tests and the director’s discretion…*

Nora was just scanning the words with wide eyes when she heard a hesitant female voice from the back, which interrupted a moment of transitional silence from Ms. Steinke as she flipped to another page of the syllabus.

“Er, excuse me? Ms. Steinke?”

Nora tore her eyes away from the paper in her lap to observe Ms. Steinke’s reaction to the unsolicited question. Ms. Steinke stood still at the front of the class, halfway through turning the page. She fixed her eyes on the girl, a French horn player, as if she couldn’t believe any of the information she had just presented them warranted a question. “Yes? Is there a problem?”

“I’m sorry to interrupt, but I just read something here about the grading system, and it says a quarter of our grade is based on tests.” She ended the statement questioningly, as if afraid of what answer Ms. Steinke would give.

She simply nodded in response. “Yes, that is correct.”

Instantly, the classroom became filled with the incredulous whisperings of students and a flourish of flipping papers as everyone else tried to find where such horrific information could have been found. Nora found it on page three, right there in bold on the front of the page. She groaned softly in despair. And to think that she gave up her last chance at a study hall for this. At the front of the room, Nora followed Ms. Steinke’s gaze as she watched the distraught students lean across to their friends, whispering in concerned tones and throwing her thinly veiled dirty looks. After a few moments, she cleared her throat.

“I honestly don’t know why you’re all surprised at this seeing as you have tests in all your other classes.”

“But, this is *band*.” The statement came from a nearby saxophone, and Ms. Steinke returned it with a hard look on her face and her arms crossed.

“So you don’t think this is a class that shouldn’t be taken seriously?” she asked with an unsympathetic tone as she scanned the classroom, her eyes stopping on Nora for a second before she continued. “I know this band can do better. Playing tests will be a way for you to prove to me that you belong in your chair. And the normal tests will let me know whether or not you’ve been paying attention and treating this class with the respect that it deserves.”

The same voice from the trumpet section spoke up again, clearly not about to let the topic go without a fight. Nora listened intently, for once grateful that the trumpets never shut up when they were supposed to. “But Mr. Cotter and Mr. Thomas never made us do any of that, and we still sounded fine.” There were murmurs of agreement as a pale pink color began to show in Ms. Steinke’s cheeks.

“I am perfectly aware of how the previous directors handled this band. Remember that I was once a student here as well.” Her voice gained its prior strength, and the red began to ease out of her cheeks as she continued. “Some things have been handled well, and others have been handled very poorly.” Silence had resumed among the students, and Nora watched Ms. Steinke with intrigue. She hoped this woman knew what she was getting herself into. “It is my job is not to make sure we sound ‘fine,’ it’s to make this band the best it can be. That’s going to require discipline and seriousness. If that’s something you don’t want to deal with, then you might want to leave now and switch into another class.”

There was absolute silence as the students looked around the room, waiting to see if anyone would make a move. No one did. Nora figured that Ms. Steinke was trying to garner respect from the students, but the looks on the faces of the other students reflected resentment and frustration, a dangerous combination for a high school teacher.

Nora decided that it was going to be a long year, and she looked back down at the syllabus with an uncomfortable sense of foreboding.

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Thirty long and increasingly distressing minutes later, the bell interrupted Ms. Steinke’s explanation of the year’s chair assignments. Nora, along with the other students, eagerly bent down to gather their things and make a hasty escape from the band room when Ms. Steinke interrupted them. They stopped halfway through the process of standing up and turned to her with dread and hesitation. Nora wondered what else she could possibly have to lay on them as she heard the muffled noises of the other students leaving class begin to seep under the doors.

“Excuse me, but I’m not done yet. Please stay seated and remember that I am that one that dismisses you, not the bell.”

Nora turned to the rest of the class and saw them begrudgingly lowering themselves back into the hard, posture-enhancing chairs that filled the band room. She joined them as Ms. Steinke surveyed the class, impatiently tapping her foot. This was not the kind of senior year she had signed up for, Nora thought as she tried unsuccessfully to find a comfortable sitting position again.

“As I was saying, I have on this sheet the chair assignments for the first part of the semester,” she said as she gathered up a stack of papers from her director’s stand. Nora quickly perked up and listened intently to Ms. Steinke, her eyes on the papers as Ms. Steinke continued. “Unfortunately, I didn’t have any personal knowledge and experience with you all to make my own decision with, so I had to base these off of last year’s placements and Mr. Cotter’s recommendations.” She passed the stack of papers around the room and continued talking as if she couldn’t hear the sounds from the hallway. “And remember, these placements are not set in stone. There will be points throughout the year when playing tests will determine whether your position changes or not, so I expect you all to be playing and practicing regularly and to your highest ability.”

As the papers made it to Nora, she quickly grabbed one and began reading it as she passed on the rest of the stack, skipping to the top of the list for the clarinet section.

First chair: Nora Butler.

A warm feeling of satisfaction briefly swept over her as she read the words, thankful that Mr. Cotter’s departure hadn’t meant the loss of the position that she, as the only remaining senior clarinet player, clearly deserved. Of course, she should have had the first chair last year as well. But Courtney Wells was a year above her and Mr. Cotter always rewarded seniority, even though he acknowledged that Nora was a more naturally talented player. Nora looked at the students listed in the chairs below her and knew that despite any ridiculous tests Ms. Steinke decided to burden them with, she wouldn’t have to worry about being usurped.

Reading through the lists of the other sections, she vaguely heard Ms. Steinke’s voice on the outskirts of her attention. It was immediately followed by the grating noise of the chair legs on the tiled floor, and she looked up to see the rest of the class swarming towards the doors in an attempt to get out of the band room and onto their next class as quickly as possible. Nora stuffed the paper in her backpack and swung it over her shoulder, narrowly missing the freshman girls behind her as she tried to squeeze through the exodus of students before Ms. Steinke had a chance to try to pull her aside and talk to her one-on-one about being late. Dealing with a new, overbearing teacher was the last thing she wanted to do on the first day of school.

Peering through the student traffic in the hallway, Nora tried to locate Lucas. After picking her way through some gossiping, heavily makeup-ed freshman girls, she finally spotted him making his way towards the German classroom. She caught up to him, grabbing his arm in exasperation.

“What the hell was that?” she asked as he greeted her with a smile.

“Well, it was certainly… unconventional,” he said thoughtfully. “Although you showing up running late, not so much.”

Nora scoffed, ignoring his last comment. Before today, Luther’s band program wasn’t one to strictly enforce being on time.

“If by ‘unconventional’ you mean positively ridiculous, then I think we’re on the same page here,” she replied. Lucas shook his head good-naturedly as he started back on his way to class. Nora followed next to him, unable to hold in her thoughts. “I mean, who does she think we are, the London Philharmonic or something? This is a high school band. In Wisconsin,” she added with extra emphasis as they turned the corner. Students were hurrying off to class as they left their lockers with the hollow *slam* of their doors. Lucas shrugged and looked back over at Nora as they arrived at the door to his class.

“Look Nora, I know this all seems a bit overwhelming, but try not to freak out over it. It’s just a new teacher and a few tests. It’s not the end of the world.”

Nora rolled her eyes but couldn’t help suppressing a small grin. Lucas was always the voice of reason in their friendship, something that Nora often found herself lacking. “Yeah, yeah, okay mom.”

“That’s more like it. Now don’t forget that we have our last coffee date after school. You can unload all your frustrations and angst on me then over some coffee, okay?”

“Sounds like a plan,” she replied as she set off again down the hallway. Noting that it had grown quiet and deserted, she looked at the clock. She had twenty seconds to get to Calculus. *Here we go again,* she thought as she hurried down the corridor.