

ZERO TOLERANCE

By Shirlie Wright

NOTES

According to statistics, there are over 11 million unsupervised school-age children in America today, and approximately 4% of America’s youth have to step out of the role of “older sibling” and into their parents’ shoes and take on the role of “guardian.” In her critically acclaimed short story, author Shirlie Wright introduces us to a young teenager who is forced to take on the role of a surrogate parent—managing the household logistics, as well as caring for two younger siblings. Written with unflinching honesty, the performer should take every precaution to keep this character 100% realistic. This selection may be performed by a male or female and may be entered in either Prose Interpretation or Dramatic Interpretation. If used in Prose Interpretation, the drama mask icons are visible to simply show the performer when to turn the pages in the manuscript.

Today in English class, the teacher collected some random worksheets that she had assigned as homework, as we were walking out of the door yesterday. I asked if I could have until lunch to turn mine in, even if it meant that she took a few points off. Do you know what she told me? She told me that she has a zero-tolerance policy. If it’s not turned in on time, then it’s a zero. She went on to say that in life we have to learn responsibility, and that I needed to learn that there are deadlines that must be met; otherwise, there are consequences. She rambled on and on about how when the electric bill is due that it must be paid on time, or the electricity is turned off. She tried to tell me that I would be grateful to her someday for the lesson that she was teaching me. Really? If people like her had to live my life for a week—or for even one day—they would forget about their zero-tolerance policy.



I have a little brother and sister, Marcus and Tasha, and I’m all they’ve basically got. We each have a different dad, and they’re all gone. Mom? Well, she’s a whole other story. You see, Mom loves two things—liquor and men. She spends her time at the bars getting men to buy her drinks and seeing which ones will take her home. That leaves *me* to take care of Marcus and Tasha.



So, every morning, I get them up at 6:30 and make them brush their teeth and get dressed while I *try* to do any homework I have. The bus comes at 7:00, and I have to make sure that we get to school each day; otherwise, we won’t have any breakfast or lunch. On some mornings, one of them will ask me for money so that they can buy an extra milk or a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. I always give them whatever I have, if I have any money at all. Trust me. I understand what it’s like to be hungry, and I know those lunch ladies

have their *own* zero-tolerance rule.

One day, at the end of lunch, I saw that they had a tray full of extra peanut butter sandwiches, and they were all talking about how they had to throw them away. So, I went up and asked if I could have some, and do you know what they said? They told me that if I didn't have the money, then they couldn't give me any. Those were the *rules*—no money, no food. Can you believe that? They would rather throw food in the *trash* than give it to me.

I don't talk to a whole lot of people during the day. To be honest, I spend most of the day at school either trying to stay awake or getting as much homework done as possible, since I know that there won't be much time once I get home.



After school, I meet Marcus and Tasha at the bus stop, and we make our way back home. As soon as we get home, they get out their school work, and I spend the next couple of hours going back and forth helping Tasha with her second-grade math and reading and Marcus with his sixth-grade science, math, history, and English. I try to sneak in some of the work that I need to get done for *my* classes, but I usually don't have much time for that.



If we *do* have any food for supper, it usually comes out of a can that I scrounge up from behind the grocery stores. I found out, by accident one day, that some of the stores throw away cans that are banged up since no one wants to buy them. Sometimes the cans don't have any labels, but we don't care. We eat whatever we can get our hands on. Last night, we had peaches and creamed corn. It's not a great combination, but when you're hungry it tastes pretty good.



Once all of the homework is done, I let Marcus and Tasha watch an old worn-out DVD on the antique television and DVD player that I found sitting on the curb outside someone's house. All of the DVDs we have come from other people's trash. It's okay though. At least we have something to watch, as long as I can keep the electricity on.

You see, that was something that *Ms. English Teacher* was trying to tell me. She tried to tell me that if I didn't pay my electric bill on *time* that it would automatically be shut off. I didn't argue with her, but that's not true. And I'm someone who knows that first hand. Mom is basically useless when it comes