

Good Year, Arizona

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Arizona State Department of Corrections.

Goodyear, Arizona.

Spring, anytime now or in the future.

The lights rise on a dingy recreation room in the Arizona State Women's Correctional Facility. The set is plain with a few foldable chairs and a wooden table. On top of the table sits stacks of files, folders, and a few books. To the right is a teacher's easel and, center stage, is a pile of books arranged in a circle. The lighting is harsh and fluorescent. There is a loud buzz and the sound of iron doors sliding open. PENELOPE, a Latinx woman of 60 with glowing white hair enters wearing a bright orange jumpsuit and handcuffs. She trudges in dramatically, scowling at the audience.

PENELOPE slowly makes her way to the chair then sits down. She looks both ways to check that the coast is clear, winks to the audience, and produces a hairpin from under her tongue. Holding up the handcuffs, she fiddles with the pin in her mouth until with a light click the lock opens. PENELOPE gives a maniacal laugh of victory then tosses the handcuffs on the table. She addresses the audience.

PENELOPE

Aha, you see, I knew that signing up for the boy scouts would come in handy. (a pause) Oh, not me, my nephew. I caught him using a hairpin to break into the Elementary School's donation box during parent teacher conferences last year, and told him that I wouldn't tell his mother if he showed me how to do it. Then I made him split the score with me, but of course those K-through-five ass-hats only carry ones and fives. There's no need to feel bad for them though, they're all a bunch of little fascists. But I'll get to that in a bit.

PENELOPE reaches underneath the desk and pulls out a warm bottle of beer that is taped to one of the legs.

She places the neck of the bottle up against the desk and slams her fist down, popping off the cap with swift accuracy. She kicks her feet back, then lets out a sigh of relief. She once again addresses the audience.

PENELOPE

Who else is drinking, anyone? Just me? Salut.

She takes a swig.

PENELOPE

You're probably wondering how I ended up here. You must think I'm some sort of bank robber, or jewel thief, or woman of the night. Sadly, no, I'm a public school teacher. Thirty-five years. Sixth and seventh grade English. I joined the noble profession in nineteen eighty nine, here in the Maricopa County school district, and have been here ever since, hopping around from Phoenix, to Sun City West, finally settling down here in Goodyear.

PENELOPE holds up a copy of the New York Times. On the front cover is a picture of PENELOPE's mugshot. In the photo she wears a comical snarl with the caption *Public School Teacher Publicly Teaches Public* above it.

PENELOPE

This is from two days ago. The media has been saying a lot about me. That muppet looking twat on Fox News, what's his name, Tucker Carlson, has been having a field day on everything from what I wear to who I dated in undergrad.

I didn't expect the media blitz, the talk shows, the conservative think tanks running background checks and combing through my cooch looking for any loose thread to unravel my credibility. But let me tell you, it's not my fists they fear, it's my brain. The warden was nice enough to lend me this room while I prepare my defense. Hence the books, and files, and piles of evidence.

PENELOPE picks up a handful of the books and papers on the desk and drops them back down with a slam.

PENELOPE

I grew up just outside of Phoenix to a Mexican father and a Puerto Rican mother. Daddy was a doctor, and Mother was addicted to her daily dose of valium and port, so for the most part I was left by myself to read while she chain-smoked in the bedroom. I would walk into daddy's study each week and pick out a new book from his shelves and shelves full of leather-bound titles.

I would curl up into his chair and take in the old pages, the water-stains, the thin yellowing paper, and the warm scent of cherry tobacco.

Becoming a teacher felt natural to me, and since I liked kids well enough, I thought that middle school was where I belonged. Maybe I should have put myself first, collecting a fat check from whoever could pay their way through some fancy Charter school in Maricopa. But I didn't want to be surrounded by *yes men* and privileged trust-fund babies, I wanted to engage with the kids in my community.

My first few years on the job weren't all bad though. My students did well, their test scores were above the state average and I took home teacher of the year twice, once in 1997, and again in 2002, and no, neither of those came with a raise. The most the district could manage was a \$15 Dunkin Donuts gift card taken out of the pool of yearly bonuses.

PENELOPE pulls out a Dunkin Donuts gift card in a plastic frame.

PENELOPE

Now even if you spend your whole life smelling roses, after long enough they too start to smell like shit. In the early 2000's good ole' 43 waged a holy war on public schools in an effort to weed out all of the lazy, *overpaid* educators. As a result teacher evaluations were now tied to students test scores. Teaching was no longer about enriching minds and critical thinking, it was about just getting them through. No Child Left Behind? Yeah, right. You try teaching a room full of 28 pre-teens how to beat a single exam when everything, their success, school funding, and your job is on the line - you let me know how that works out for you. So no, no child was left behind. We were all just left behind with them. It was then that I made the move to Goodyear. And in 2005, I started teaching at Barry Goldwater Elementary. A place of learning, smiles, and the reason why my court-appointed psycho-analyst remains gainfully employed.

Barry Goldwater Elementary has the legacy of being one of the oldest and largest public schools in Maricopa County. I had been scouted by the Principal, Roberto Rivera, an eccentric man who was known for always dressing in brown and green plaid with the same ratty pair of corduroy pants. He had a sash that he wore around his waist with a bunch of little golden bells attached, sort of like a belly dancer. When he would saunter down the halls he would be followed by a chorus of tinkling so that everyone knew when he was close. Principal Rivera held a masters in education, a PHD in English, and was the national adult hopscotch champion of 1987. He was legendary in the school district, so for the good reputation and a small bump in pay, I couldn't really say no.

Goldwater Elementary is divided into two main buildings, the lower school which houses grades K through five, and the upper school, which holds grades six through eight. I insisted on remaining in the upper school.

My first few years at Goldwater were mostly pleasant, but were marred by a slew of budget cuts. Then, two years ago, everything changed. It was the second half of August and we were reporting back to school at the end of the summer holiday. Principal Rivera had gathered all of us in the auditorium and announced with panic in his eyes that State Senator John Peter Bishop and his wife Patricia would be enrolling their children at Barry Goldwater Elementary that year. They had four children, each more piggy looking than the last, and they were abandoning their private Christian education in an effort to appear more sympathetic to the common voter. I'll admit, my first reaction to this news was *so what*, but then I went ahead and googled this State Senator.

He had these large dead blue eyes, a plastic toothy grin, and wore ill fitting designer suits. The overall effect was one that could have made him the national mascot for trafficking teenage girls. His wife was skeletal, pony-faced, and her two silicone trophies sat up there with impressive precision I might add. Each outfit was perfectly fitted, each smile calculated to include just the right amount of lip, like this, (*PENELOPE makes a face*) and hanging from her arm was the most enticing assortment of designer handbags that I've ever seen.

I know my current predicament doesn't necessarily scream expensive tastes, but a little known secret of mine is that I love fashion. A few months ago I assigned the longest chapter of *The Giver* for the kids to read during first period so that I could google the release of John Galliano's Spring/Summer collection and imagine myself prancing past the main office wearing the full catalogue of retro-revivals! For a schoolteacher, it's just a fantasy, but for Patricia Bishop, it was her waking reality. In those photos I saw a black leather Chanel clutch, the 2020 Hermès Kelly Sellier with 24 karat gold hardware finishings, and finally, the 2018 Brown Stella McCartney saddle bag.

Did I resent her because she owned what appeared to be upwards of half a million dollars of luxury-labeled accessories? Was it because she could slip her hips into any size 0 backless dress that her stylist gave her? Or was it the fact that even without ever hearing her voice, I could so clearly picture her pursing her lips and saying *then let them eat cake*. Either way, the Bishops were coming to Barry Goldwater Elementary and I had just marked my enemy from afar.

A school bell rings. The lights shift.

PENELOPE

Hello sweetheart, you have the cutest dimples I've ever seen. You must be the eldest, Angelica. Oh, excuse me, it's pronounced Angelique. You're in... 5th grade? Mrs. Applebaum is so lucky to have you. And that means I'll be your English teacher next year, isn't that just... wonderful!

It was an awful interaction. But I needed to keep my eye on the eldest Bishop child.

A few months into the year I went to go see Principal Rivera to tell him that Applebaum couldn't hack it. I had found her sobbing into a tub of egg salad during lunch after getting an angry note from a parent. When I found him the lights were off. He was wrapped head to toe in an eight foot scarf and camomile tea bags were placed over both his eyes. After a long pause he dramatically removed them.

It's Patricia Bishop. She's concerned about the reading lists, she says that we're teaching fake history. The other parents aren't happy at all. I'm getting emails by the hour. The Bishops are threatening to pull the donation for the library!

Upon enrolling, The Bishops had committed a one-hundred-thousand-dollar donation to completely rebuild the library. Mrs. Bishop had used this as an excuse to drop in whenever she liked and wander the halls at will, sitting in on classes and interrogating faculty and administrative staff wherever possible.

I decided to attend the very next PTA meeting to get a sense of how bad things were myself. When I arrived the room was packed and buzzing with anxious chatter. At the podium stood a pale Principal Rivera dabbing beads of sweat with his pocket square. Behind him sat the Assistant Principals and to my surprise, the Superintendent, Mr. Walker. The room erupted into jeers and hissing. There were cries of:

Resign! Resign you coward!

A young mom with long dark hair took to her feet and exclaimed

What kind of school are you running here, Rivera!? You expect my child to sit through history class being told that she should be ashamed of her heritage?

Another mom with yellowing teeth launched an empty tub of Pringles at the podium and through trembling rage called out:

This is all a bunch of Marxist bullshit and you know it!

A third parent, a beefy guy with a thin goatee shook his fists and said:

Go back to Guatemala, you racist!

Principal Rivera let out a gasp, the parents laughed. Then from the third row came a sobering cry of:

Enough!

The room went silent. A woman slowly got to her feet and every eye was on her.

From the sleek blond hair, the pointy nose, and the look of smug confidence I knew who this was.

Thank you, everyone, for your passion.

Her voice oozed with condescension.

I know that tensions are high. However, you cannot deny that the Christian values that brought us western culture and the Declaration of Independence are under attack in our public schools. Radical literature like Frederick Douglass is federally sanctioned propaganda! The fact that our ancestors were supposedly bad people now means that we are too? Let me make something clear - instilling shame and teaching our children to disrespect authority will not be tolerated.

There was an erupt of applause. Superintendent Walker got to his feet. Shooing Principal Rivera aside he made his way to the podium, pulled off his ten gallon hat and twirled his bushy mustache.

Thank you, Mrs. Bishop. I give you my word ma'am, and you can tell your husband this, that I will personally evaluate the curriculum here at Goldwater Elementary going forward so that no child will be made to feel shame or discomfort. As the great Dr. King said everyone shall be judged not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

And with that, the meeting was adjourned.

The following Tuesday, Principal Rivera's desk had been emptied. Patricia Bishop had made quite the impression on the other parents, and clips of her speech were making rounds on Tik-Tok and Twitter. She was received with such gusto that the PTA president immediately resigned and by unanimous vote she has put in the top spot.

That summer there were plenty of dark looks and anxious whispers. It felt like Poland in 1939. The armies were at the gates and we knew that any day, Patricia Bishop would once again march her righteous army of right-wing housewives straight through the Brandenburg gate of Goldwater Elementary. Only this time, it would be through our building in the upper school and little Angelica Bishop was the Trojan Horse.

A school bell rings. PENELOPE scrambles to her desk.

PENELOPE

That first day of class it was hot, and I mean *public school* hot. The bell for sixth period rang directly after recess, and in cascaded a flood of thirty-two eleven year olds, reeking of handball sweat and lunch meat.

And then in she pranced, all in pink, cutting through the chaos smelling like bubble gum. Her light blond hair was delicately put up into two perfect little pig tails. With rosy cheeks she give me the sweetest smile and placed a ruby red delicious apple on my desk. In case any of you here have kids, don't send them to school with an apple, nobody wants an apple. If you really want to be kind, send a Xanax.

I went about my lesson as usual, introducing the students to their monthly reading logs and assigning our first book of the marking period. All the while I could see little miss goody two shoes frowning her brow, making careful notes in her sticker coordinated planner, raising her hand to ask if the summer homework would be collected. Yes, by all standards she was a good student.

On the night of parent teacher conferences, I spent the majority of the earlier hours zoning out and distant. I mixed up Tiffany C. with Tiffany F. and I told the Markham's that their little girl was as cute as a button to which they responded that their *son* was being bullied by his peers for his medically incurable acne.

Then, at 8:40 to the minute, there was an assertive knock on my door. In walked Patricia Bishop, graceful and elegant as ever, dressed in a backless black dinner dress and matching narrow heels that were made for stepping on throats. She gave me a broad plastic smile that her publicist had no doubt coached her on and she sauntered over to the chair opposite from me.

Ms. Perez, it's a pleasure. How is Angelique doing in your class?

I told her the truth, that she was doing well. Her reading level was quite advanced, her work was above par, and she could take the state exam today and pass with flying colors. Patricia daintily placed her hand over her heart, threw back her chest and gave a feigned sigh of relief. Being so close, I felt as though I had seen the two eyes of God.

I do have one quick concern, she added. It's my understanding that Mrs. Dance is going to be starting a unit on the holocaust next week. I just want to be sure that the students are receiving both perspectives.

Both perspectives? What does that mean, both perspectives? You mean you want us to teach your kids what the Nazis believed? Or by both perspectives do you mean the one that says the Holocaust never happened? And so I thought, okay, what book can I assign that shows both perspectives? And then it came to me. *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*. A heartbreaking classic that tells the story of an unlikely friendship between two boys, one the son of a German officer on the outskirts of a concentration camp, and the other a Jewish boy trapped behind the barbed wire. I couldn't think of another book for young adults that showed both sides quite like this one.

And as luck will have it, it had somehow slipped through Superintendent Walker's new evaluation process and was well within my rights to assign. So I did.

It was two weeks later, after the second night of assigned reading. My door burst open and like an angry bull Patricia stormed in, red-faced, foaming at the mouth.

How dare you assign the Boy in the Striped Pajamas, have you any idea how damaging and offensive that material is? You're going to sit there and give that book to a child? What is wrong with you?

I stood up to my fullest height and I said:

This book has been on the approved reading list for years. If other people's children are old enough to be starved and gassed to death in a work camp, then your precious little children are old enough to learn about it!

She looked at me as though I had just slapped her in the face.

You have no right to defy me, I'm PTA President and I say that this book is not approved!

And it was then that I made the greatest mistake of my career. I pursed my lips, threw back my chest, and with every ounce of tit that I could muster I said:

Ma'am, your guidelines mean nothing to me. If you want to control the reading list, you're just going to have to run for school board yourself.

And then I saw that glint in her eye, that smirk of rebellious smugness that I hadn't seen since Brett Appleton class of 2006 when I'd wag my finger at him for farting on the girls at recess. I had dug my foot in the sand, and this country-club bible-thumping Barbie-doll saw that as a direct challenge, a *double dog dare* as my students would say.

Three days later the posters were up, a campaign office opened on the corner of Birch and Maine, and her army of progeny were standing on every populated street like the children of the corn handing out leaflets.

PENELOPE flips the teacher's easel. A campaign poster is revealed which reads: *PATRICIA BISHOP for Maricopa County school board - for a better, safer, and more proud community for our children to flourish.*

Now you must be wondering, did every parent approve of the direction in which the school was suddenly taking? No.

But not everyone had the time to be as engaged as Patricia Bishop. Many of the parents work two, three jobs just to get by. So it was no surprise that Patricia Bishop out-fundraised her competition sixteen-to-one and was elected Chairwoman and Chief Czar of the Maricopa County School Board. Within days of her tenure a wave of changes and educational decrees swept the county.

PENELOPE picks up a book and adds it to the pile center stage. With each title that she lists, another book is added. The pile of banned books now looms tall.

The Chronicles of Narnia, banned. 1984, banned. Malcom X, Frederick Douglas, banned. *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*, banned. A state law was passed prohibiting the teaching of any material that caused trauma, sadness, or discomfort in any form. As a result we had to eliminate the holocaust unit entirely. A new anti-Marxism law was also passed banning the teaching or even the mention of the word in a classroom setting. *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, banned. *The Hunger Games*, banned.

Most of the other teachers feared for their jobs so they fell in line. And shamefully, I must admit that so did I. And then one day a young woman in my third period class, Bethany Spalding, approached me after the lesson. She had tight braids, a purple choker, and a consistently runny nose. She was also the only black girl in her class. She walked right up to me, confidently tugged on the straps of her overalls, and said:

Ms. Perez, I think you should add a black author to your syllabus.

I stared down into her deep soulful eyes. I didn't know what to say. I didn't know how to tell her that I used to always assign *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas, which tells the story of a young girl that witnesses her best friend being shot and killed by police. I had it on my syllabus for three years but the school board had it removed citing negative depictions of authority. Propaganda they called it. But how can something be propaganda when it happens again and again and again? I was worried. Worried for my job, my reputation, but most of all, I was worried that what we were taking from our children was much greater; the ability to fully see themselves reflected in history and literature. So I went home to my personal library and brought her a copy the next day. I told her that I couldn't add it to my syllabus, but that I wanted her to read it.

Was it always possible that Bethany would leave her book-bag open and unattended during recess? Yes. But I didn't expect that little narc Angelica- excuse me, *Angelique* to steal it right out of her knapsack and bring it straight to her mother.

A few days later...

A phone rings, the lights shift, and PENELOPE is lit center stage.

PENELOPE

Superintendent Walker. What do you mean Mrs. Bishop found an illegal book in her daughter's backpack? With my name in it? Let me go? Thirty five years in the same school district and you're going to fire me over a book? It wasn't even assigned, I wasn't forcing the whole class to read it.

But the latest educational decree had prohibited teachers from distributing *any* personal items, materials, or literature to *any* student for *any* reason without strict school board review. Patricia had me cornered good and proper.

So there I was, no job, my benefits slashed, and my entire classroom library which took me years to curate, straight in the trash. My period of doom and gloom ended when I received a flyer under my door advertising the public opening of the new library at Goldwater Elementary. Construction had finally finished and at 8pm on Thursday April 2nd, there would be a ceremony and the unveiling of the library's new mural. The main attraction however was for something called *The Freedom Purge*.

PENELOPE flips the easel to reveal a poster for the audience to see. She reads from it.

PENELOPE

Do you love your country? Are you concerned about the communist marxist literature that seeks to alienate your children? Sponsored by the Maricopa County School Board and the Goodyear Southern Baptist Congregation, the Freedom Purge will provide fun and inclusion for the whole family. We seek to identify, isolate, and purge our public school libraries of those books that put your children most at risk. Join us as we lead by example.

I knew I should have just thrown the flyer out, but I had unfinished business. So on the night of the 2nd I suited up. I put on all black, wrapped a bright red bandana around my head, and I put on my Che Guevara pin just to piss them off.

When I arrived, the event was in full swing. Dozens of cars and pickup trucks lined the lot. Radios blared and burgers grilled. Directly in front of the school on a small grassy knoll in front of the new library was a tall ominous pile. Hundreds, thousands of books six feet high towered over the scene. Directly in front of it, seated serenely on a lawn chair was Patricia Bishop. In her hand was what appeared to be a Harry Potter book and she was tearing up each of the pages luxuriously, tossing them one by one onto the pile. Around her, a regiment of second and third graders danced happily. I ran out of my car and approached the group. A few of the students shouted my name. Angelica raised a bony finger and said:

Mommy, it's her.

Everyone seemed to stop what they were doing. Approaching Patricia I shook my fist and I said:

I'm here to claim these books!

We have something special planned for them, Ms Perez, said one of the tiniest students. I recognized him as the youngest of the Bishop children.

They need to be purged. Purged from the school and purged from the county, said Patricia.

One of the third grade dads stepped forward smoking a cigarette. It was then that my nose picked up on something distinct - gasoline.

No, you can't burn these books! I cried out.

Either we burn them or we burn you, giggled the little Bishop boy.

All the kids laughed and started a jubilant chorus of *Hey-hey, ho-ho, these Marxist books have got to go!*

PENELOPE dances around the pile of books center stage.

PENELOPE

See? I told you they were all a bunch of little fascists.

Before I could make another move there was a flash of embers and I saw in slow motion as the cigarette took a somersault through the air and landed directly onto the pile. There was a pull of oxygen and the entire pile burst into flames. Flames that spread, engulfing everything from *Percy Jackson* to *Stewart Little*. *The Book Thief*, *The Pigman*, I could even see the smoldering cover of *Flat Stanley* get sucked into the flames and turned to ash.

And so I tried to put it out. Everybody screamed, lawn chairs went flying, parents grabbed their children and carried them back to their cars. Meanwhile I was on top of the nearest pile of books desperately stamping at the flames with my foot.

The library!

I looked up and lo and behold, there was Goldwater Elementary up in smoke.

The windows to the new library were broken and the beautiful mural, a spiral of blue eyed children all holding hands around a banner of red white and blue was charred and peeling. Gone. Everything was completely gone.

PENELOPE picks up one final book from the desk and adds it to the pile.

PENELOPE

All that I managed to save was this. It's a copy of Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*. Kind of poetic, don't you think? The temperature that paper burns.

When the police arrived they grabbed me and threw me up against the hood of the cruiser. I had been identified as the instigator of the fire and was quickly cuffed and carted off to county jail.

The lights shift.

PENELOPE

Two counts of criminal conspiracy, four counts of reckless endangerment to a minor, two counts of child abuse, one count of first degree arson, and a hate crime? How does the defendant plead? The defendant pleads not guilty!

By that afternoon I was known from coast to coast as the teacher that burned books. Little *Angelique* told the federal investigators that I had tackled her to the ground, knelt on her arms and fed her pigtails to the flames. Patricia Bishop was all over the Sunday morning talk shows talking about how my liberal Marxist PC agenda had disrupted a peaceful gathering of prayer and community. Images of the burning mural were plastered across every newspaper as evidence of a hateful attack on the heart and soul of America. The entire country was up in arms and school boards everywhere were unilaterally eliminating books by the hundreds from their school libraries, citing them as a risk to national security. Senator Bishop announced his Presidential campaign and received millions of dollars in dark money over night.

Nobody believed me when I said I didn't do it. None of my colleagues had come to my defense. Even Principal Rivera was silent to the press. It seemed that everybody just wanted to be left out of it and nobody wanted to stand up for what was right. I'll be okay. But so many won't. With every book we burn we lose a piece of our literacy, a piece of our history. When you light a fire it does not discriminate, it burns up everything in it's path.

The lights shift. The scene dissolves and loud instrumental music begins to play. The prison breaks away and is reformed into the set of a talk show.

A desk and a chair sit center stage, a couch sits stage right. The lights rise on JAVIER SAN DIEGO, a talk show host.

JAVIER

Good evening folks and welcome to the *10 AM Tonight Show*. My name is Javier San Diego and I'm your host. Tonight, we give you a continued update on the wave of teacher protests that have been gripping the nation. Public educators in fourteen states are now on strike over low wages and what many have been calling The Freedom Purge, a budding nationwide movement that has now sparked, pun intended, thirty-seven book burnings across the country. All eyes are once again on former English teacher Penelope Perez who was arrested last year following the destruction of Barry Goldwater Elementary in Goodyear, Arizona. Arizona State Senator and Presidential candidate John Peter Bishop who lies at the center of the Perez controversy, has made the issue the center of his campaign, promising a national overhaul of public school reading lists should he be elected. In a truly sensational turn of events, a federal judge has just recently thrown out the case against Ms. Perez after a series of redacted emails between Senator Bishop and his wife were introduced as evidence. Ms. Perez was astoundingly released from custody last week and you've guessed it right folks, she is our guest here tonight. Without further ado, please welcome to the stage Penelope Perez!

Applause and fanfare. Music plays as PENELOPE enters, wearing a black sparkling fitted dress, heels, and an elegant designer handbag. She saunters onto the stage, offers a coy wink to the audience and gives JAVIER a kiss on the cheek before sitting down on the couch.

JAVIER

Welcome, Penelope and thank you for joining us this evening on *The 10 AM Tonight Show*.

PENELOPE

Thank you for having me, Javier.

JAVIER

Freedom looks good on you.

PENELOPE

Oh, why thank you!

JAVIER

Now let's dive right into it. What exactly was in the body of those emails that motivated a federal judge to completely throw out the case against you?

PENELOPE

Oh, Javier. You know I can't say.

JAVIER

It's my job to press you my dear, otherwise I wouldn't be the third most watched prime time news anchor, isn't that right, folks?!

More fanfare.

But seriously, the temperature in the country right now is running quite hot. People want to know, do those redacted messages clear you of all charges?

PENELOPE

Well, I think the more important question to ask is *why is everyone so angry?* And believe me, I am angry. Not for myself, and the lies that were told to get me wrongfully imprisoned, but for the 52 million young people that currently attend public school in this country. Young people who want to know their history, not to see it through rose colored glasses.

JAVIER

Speaking of young people, several fourth graders now rallying under the banner of the National Young Interrogationists Movement came forward to testify against you. The claims ranged from encouraging students to burn copies of the constitution to physically holding a young girl's face to the fire that they claim you started. Did you commit these acts out of anger, or were you driven by a more succinct desire for fame and notoriety?

PENELOPE

Did I also burn down the Reichstag?

JAVIER

The what-?

PENELOPE

People have been blamed for setting fires for centuries. But it's ultimately a distraction from the harm that's really being done. In the last seven months 175 book titles have been banned from public schools under the guise of being-

JAVIER

So you're saying that you did not set the fire that caused one-point-three million dollars worth of damage to the facade of a public building?

PENELOPE

I didn't set any fire! Forget the building for a moment, literature was burned! 1200 books, up in flames just like that. And it's happening more and more. We're so quick to pursue justice over the loss of property but not not over the loss of ideas.

JAVIER

I see where you're coming from Penelope, ideas are important. But shouldn't parents on some level get to decide the subject material that their children are exposed to, especially when their tax dollars are being used to fund it?

PENELOPE

Of course, but public school doesn't exist to parrot what kids are hearing at home, either. The beauty of a public education is that students get to experience a perspective that may be fundamentally different from what they're used to. That exposure is a good thing. The world is full of multiple truths, multiple perspectives, and we have to engage with all of them.

JAVIER

All of them.

PENELOPE

Yes.

JAVIER

But isn't that also what you're against?

PENELOPE

Not at all.

JAVIER

So if I went around saying that the Holocaust didn't happen, you're saying that that's a perspective you'd teach?

PENELOPE

I didn't say teach, I said engage with. I have no issue engaging with anyone's perspective. If someone wants to tell me that the Holocaust didn't happen, let's talk about it. What's the evidence? Is your understanding of fact being influenced by an implicit bias-?

JAVIER

-But what about-?

PENELOPE

-Excuse me. What's happening in so many school systems across the country, is that we're shutting down conversations before we even have them.

We're so afraid of children drawing their own conclusions, which may be different from their parents, that people are doing everything that they can to stop those conversations from ever happening. By banning books and entire subjects from being taught, you're cutting off the opportunity for critical thinking to ever take place.

JAVIER

I'm with you Penelope, I really am. I understand the urge to make history and literature accessible. But it all comes back to the children, doesn't it. How young is too young to be having these conversations?

PENELOPE

The conversations are happening regardless! The rise of social media, changing demographics, they're demanding that we as a society talk about history. Not to feel pride, or shame, but to reflect and hopefully learn.

JAVIER

But don't you think we also deserve to take a step back and acknowledge how far we're already come? Nobody was talking about any of this even ten, fifteen years ago. Your cause has come a long way.

PENELOPE

That's true. But the fact that we weren't talking about it doesn't mean that we didn't need to, it means that the predominant narrative was so strong, that having the conversation was impossible.

JAVIER

Well, maybe there is something to be said there. But I feel like what a lot of people are saying is *yes, okay, some things need to change, and not everything is perfect, but a lot of these changes that we're seeing in our society, in our public schools, are happening just too quickly.*

PENELOPE

Define quickly. In 1989, when I first started teaching, Latina women like myself made on average 52 cents to the dollar that the average white man would make. Today that's 55 cents. That doesn't seem like change is happening too quickly to me.

JAVIER

Maybe quickly was the wrong word-

PENELOPE

-To say that we've moved on from racism, that we've overcome our systematic failures is simply not true. So to cover our eyes and ears and to say that the Holocaust didn't happen, or that things have radically improved since the civil rights movement is to spit on all of the data that tells us otherwise.

JAVIER

Now to switch gears just a little bit here, I'd like to quickly address State Senator John Peter Bishop and his unlikely catapult in the polls. He is now the presumptive nominee to challenge the President in the general and that's largely because of his anti-literature, anti-critical race theory stance. Do you believe that his campaign will be successful and do you see yourself as having played a role in that?

PENELOPE

I'd say that the State Senator has zero experience and has no right to be the Commander in Chief of his own family let alone the United States of America. He used his own campaign funds to finance the purchase of a Rolls Royce and his wife's non profit is under investigation for insurance fraud. As for my role in all that, perhaps I was the spark, but the fuel to the fire has been pouring out for decades.

JAVIER

Your story is unique and your passion is infectious - exactly what our viewers like to see! Your job is not easy, and you certainly held up to the scrutiny. Thank you, thank you from the bottom of my heart, interviewing you has been the pleasure of a lifetime.

PENELOPE

The pleasure is all mine.

JAVIER

Now before we let you go, I have to ask, who are you wearing tonight and can you tell us all a little bit more about that?

PENELOPE

Oh, yes! Tonight I am wearing Oscar de la Renta's Constellations cocktail dress with the black and gold vegan leather clutch. We've recently partnered together to form an entire new line called *Educate*. 10 % of all global sales will go towards improving literacy rates and I will be walking for them in Milan next May to raise support for public school teachers everywhere.

JAVIER

That's incredible, thank you for joining us tonight. Penelope Perez. Her new book *What My Teacher Taught Me*, written mostly from her prison cell, will be coming out this Friday. Make sure to pick up a copy of yours digitally or at a bookstore near you. We'll be back after the break.

More music and fanfare. The lights slowly fade to black.

END OF PLAY.