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Surveys show that the average American believes he or she will live a longer-than-average life. They can't all be right. In fact — let's think this through — approximately half will eventually be proven wrong.

In short, the average American wrongly believes that he or she will do better than most. Hence the brisk sales of lottery tickets.

“C is an average grade,” I tell my students. “C means you’re doing just fine. B is a *good* grade, a better-than-average grade, and an A is an outstanding grade reserved for truly outstanding work.” I’m lying of course, and I suppose they know it. University-wide, the average grade is a B-minus. Higher for some subjects.

Grading can be heart-wrenching in any class, but writing

classes are the worst. It's not that the grading process is too subjective. It's that I feel in advance the shock and disbelief of the students whose very thoughts and attempts at expressing them have rated below average. And so Ds inevitably creep up and become courtesy Cs for all but the most flagrant failures. Then, like a conga line, the other grades crowd each other forward. Still, the students don't consider their grades inflated.

Tonya is one of the worst writers I've ever known. She's also been absent seven times out of twenty-four, and she postponed her presentation three times. Finally, on the very last available date, with no possibility of further rescheduling, she left a message with the department head saying she'd had car trouble and wouldn't be able to make it to class.

Tonya comes to my office the day before finals. "So I'm probably getting a C?" she says.

"At best," I say. I will let Tonya resubmit her half-complete reading log one more time. I will let her make last-minute additions to her writing portfolio. Theoretically, she could improve those two grades enough to offset everything else. Still, I fully anticipate that a D or even an F will be clearly justified

My father used to phone me once a week. Now I call him about three times a month, and our conversations tend to become strained. I knew he'd have a hard time accepting it when I moved in with a woman, and I promised myself I'd never rub his face in it. But it's difficult to say much of anything about my life without mentioning Helen. Dad won't admit it, but I'm sure the reason he doesn't call me is fear that Helen will answer the phone.

The second Kim is Helen's best friend and, from my perspective, an occasional nuisance. For years this Kim has been telling Helen that writing is her true vocation. When I first came into the picture, Kim expected I'd share her vision. "Helen's problem is that she tends to talk herself out of what she really wants most, don't you think?" Kim says to me. Helen's life has followed a pattern similar to mine: Drawn to many subjects, she postponed deciding on a career and entertained a variety of dreams. And then suddenly she was in her thirties.

"The odds against success as a writer are pretty high," I say to Kim.

"But she has so much talent!" Kim says. "Would you want

Three Kims

JEAN BRAITHWAITE

in her case. She will, of course, complain. So will a handful of other students, saying, "But, Ms. Braithwaite, I thought I had a B *at least*."

Am I like them? My life, like a homemade sweater, seems to have turned out significantly smaller than I once planned, though not uncomfortably so. It's been a long time since I believed myself destined for great things. But even now I'm not immune to feeling that I am worthy of something better.

Here's an interesting coincidence: three Kims are central to my life. The first Kim is my father. (My grandmother wanted unique names for her babies.) Speaking to him in person or on the phone, I call him "Dad." Speaking to my mother, who hasn't seen him since my brother's wedding, I refer to him as "Kim."

her to settle for anything less than her full potential?"

I wonder if Kim sees me as an obstacle to Helen's success. "To tell you the truth," I say, "what I want most for Helen right now is health insurance" — something that I, not being a man, cannot provide for her, even though I have a good job with full benefits.

The third Kim is my student. Independent study. She's the most promising writer I've seen this year.

My Kim — as I think of her — trusts that the universe operates by design, progressing mysteriously but nonrandomly toward its goals. Never before have I met someone who believes in reincarnation and is also so dry, ironic, and sensible. It just goes to show you, no patterns are preordained. Anything can wind up combined with anything else.

My Kim has her own artistic doubts.

“Do you have a word of wisdom for me?” she asks.

“All I can tell you is I think you’re talented,” I say. “To me you seem to have as good a shot as anyone.”

Years ago, desperate for any kind of work after getting my BA, I answered an ad — a flyer, actually — for a sales job. “You sound like the kind of person we’re looking for,” said the man who called me.

“I do?” I said.

“Can you come for an interview on Friday?”

We had been talking for less than two minutes. I had expected it to take a little longer to establish my desirability. “Uh . . . I mean, yes, certainly, I’d be delighted.”

“Let me explain a bit more about the interview situation,” he said. “You’ll be one of a hundred people coming in to talk with us.”

“A hundred?” I said. No wonder this guy could afford to rush through the phone conversation. One job, divided by a hundred applicants, equals a 1 percent chance of success, assuming the candidates are equally qualified. And I had zero sales experience.

“Now, are you already thinking you can’t get the job?”

“Uh . . . no, but . . .” Logistically, how could they possibly talk to a hundred candidates? They would have to have teams of screeners, whittling down the pool. I imagined a hundred people arranging transportation and perhaps time off from current jobs, getting groomed and dressed in their best. It was indecent for this one employer to waste the time and hopes of so many people. I thought of the other ninety-nine candidates and wondered how many considered themselves strong contenders.

“But . . . ?” the man on the phone prompted.

“Well, I wonder if it’s really a good idea for me to spend a day on something with such low odds of success.”

“Thank you, I think I’ll give the interview to someone with a more positive attitude,” he said. He had already hung up before I understood that I had just flunked his screening process; the precise quality he was looking for in a salesperson was an unwavering faith in being plucked up from among the multitudes.

To my surprise, Tonya does a lot more work during finals week. She supplements her writing portfolio with three new essays — all awful, but still. And her reading log contains three new pages of notes covering six chapters — not exactly the readings I assigned, but, oh well; reading is reading, isn’t it?

“I’m going to go ahead and give Tonya the C she wants,” I tell Helen over dinner, though I know she will be annoyed.

“You can’t do that!” Helen says.

“I feel I have to recognize all the labor she put in over the last week.”

“What about recognizing the students who have been working hard all semester to learn?”

“Everyone who fits that description is getting a B at least. C is plenty bad enough in today’s context. Students look at a

C as a severe punishment, I promise you.”

If I sound unhappy, I’m not. I’ve been very lucky. Sixty percent or more of all PhD’s in English never even get a chance at the university careers for which they’ve spent years preparing (upwards of eight years, on average). This time last year I wasn’t sure I would even be able to support myself, and now here I am providing for both me and Helen. By local standards I am well-off, with a salary above the median for this impoverished Southern county. There’s the tenure hurdle to clear yet, but I’ve already cleared an even bigger hurdle by getting a tenure-track job.

Both Kims think I’m too negative — mine and Helen’s. Who knows what Kim, my father, thinks of me? Personally, I think I’m a realistic person who seems negative only to unrealistic people.

“Sometimes things happen for a reason,” says Helen’s Kim.

“Everything happens for a reason,” says my Kim. She doesn’t believe in coincidences.

I do. Aren’t the three Kims an excellent example? It can be shown mathematically that the number of potential coincidences is so great that it would be almost impossible for none of them to happen. Take birthdays, for instance: By the time you have gathered twenty-four people together, the odds that at least two will have the same birthday are better than 50 percent. And by the time forty-five or more people get together, the probability rises to over 90 percent. And “Kim” is scarcely an uncommon name.

(end of excerpt)