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Four Little Words

by Patricia Emerson

When he opens the classroom door, I am surprised. He has told me that mornings aren't his time of day, and for most adolescents that is an understatement. "Maybe I'll see you tomorrow before school, but probably not," he admitted yesterday after I'd suggested we could review for today's test then. But here he is, and he quickly hands me a small red bag, tagged with a note I read at a glance, "Ms. Emerson, with appreciation..."

Then it's down to business. The vagaries of verbs has my eighth graders reeling, and as much I tell them that those participial phrases will add dramatic detail to their writing, skepticism remains. He's game though, and I hope he leaves more confident than when he arrived. I quickly stash the bag in my closet--- I always feel bad for those kids who have no gifts to bring---and try to strike the right balance between gratefulness and "gifts-don't matter."

I only remember the bag when I open the closet at lunch. There is a crumple of green tissue inside, and as I carefully find my way to its heart, I discover four pieces of seaglass. Each piece bears a handwritten word: intellect; inspiration; dedication; justice. Four little words.

Seeing myself in his eyes? The perfect gift.



Patricia Emerson teaches eighth graders the joy of reading and writing at Brielle Elementary School, New Jersey, by day and college freshman at Ocean County College by night. A quote from Emile Zola captures her best: "If you asked me what I came into this life to do, I will tell you: I came to live out loud." Emerson also took this photo of her gift.