

My fifth-grade teacher would always savor a dedication page.

She was a short Puerto Rican woman with a sprawling collection of paperbacks, and actual horn-rimmed glasses. She read books aloud to us all the time, and she used a special, contemplative voice for the dedications. She said sometimes the best stories were between the lines.

We weren't so sure. We liked simple things. That first rainy morning, when she pulled a newspaper out of her bag and unrolled it, we smiled and whispered knowingly across our desks. We loved paper-maché. But it turned out that our teacher had other plans. She scanned the front page, and began to read aloud. We were shocked. Not a pencil moved.

Slowly, though, this became a ritual. As a class, we ploughed through local news, national news, world affairs, and columnists – our teacher loved Leonard Pitts and James Kilpatrick, we loved Dave Barry. We came to know frequent authors of letters to the editor by name, and some names would immediately cause us to drown out our teacher's calm reading voice with shrill prepubescent ridicule.

After a while, we so loved the newspaper that we would even demand that substitute teachers walk us through it, too. Our own teacher was gone more and more. She would disappear from school for weeks at a time, and return bearing strange foreign candies and newspapers that we couldn't understand – with names like Claridad, and El Nuevo Día. She said her mother was sick.

We considered ourselves enlightened. Nothing that happened in the world escaped our scrutiny. When Howard Dean's triumphant screaming after the Iowa

caucus doomed his candidacy, we munched our fruit snacks impassively. When Michael Jackson was accused of molestation, we nodded sagely and went to recess.

Of course, we didn't know anything. We didn't know what an Iowa caucus was, or why people had misgivings about an eccentric pop star. We didn't know why our teacher stayed inside during recess, reading the obituaries. But none of that mattered. What mattered was that there were newsprint stains all over our hearts.

You hear people say that a free and independent news media is important because it subverts tyranny. They'll explain that good journalism keeps the public informed, and corruption on the run. Clearly this is true. But it's not the whole truth.

A truly expressive news outlet is so much more than a glorified voter's pamphlet. It is the world, rolled up and dropped onto your porch – or, increasingly, your phone. It sings of our shared humanity – the world's stories. Stories of life. Our stories. Politics, war and greed might be the main targets of independent media. But sometimes it's the little stories that matter most, buried beneath the fold.

There was another rainy morning, towards the end of that year, when our teacher came in crying and wouldn't stop. None of us read the newspaper that day. We got up and hugged her. Sure, we didn't know everything – but we could read between the lines.