



Chapter 17: Once in a Blue Moon

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I'm an elementary school teacher who teaches grades three to seven. I've been doing this for almost fifteen years, which is to say I am about half way through my career. Not a whole lot surprises me anymore. I have seen all kinds of students: happy, well-adjusted ones. Ones that are future candidates for the FBI's most wanted. Ones that are brilliant and inspiring. And ones that prove the apple really does not fall far from the tree. However, there are a few over the years that have tested my strength, perseverance, and faith in humanity. Annie was one of those.

Even though it was a few years ago, I recall her first day in my grade five classroom—she walked in, maybe four and a half feet tall, wearing a High School Musical t-shirt and these purple streaks in her auburn hair. Her hazel eyes were scoping the classroom and the other students, almost with a raptor-like quality. The first week of school is generally a honeymoon—students are on their best behaviour, wanting to make a good impression on their new teacher.

Annie sat down at a desk near some other girls, and began to work on the “Get To Know You” sheet I had left on all the desks. Everything had been quiet and calm, until just before recess, one of the boys bumped into her desk, knocking her marker across the page. She leapt out of her

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chair and started screaming at the boy. The whole class, including myself, was shocked at the anger she exhibited for such a minor transgression. I moved over to intervene and Annie turned her anger on me, snapping “You can’t tell me what to do!” Up until that point, I had never actually had a student scream at me. She continued glaring at me as the recess bell rang, and the rest of the class filed out.

I waited a couple of minutes, and walked over to her desk, ready to send her to the office. She looked up with a smile and said, “What do you think of my picture Ms. M?” as if nothing had happened. In the coming days and weeks, I would learn that this was Annie’s pattern: small incident, blow up, calm down, repeat *ad nauseum* multiple times a day.

No teacher or student was spared her wrath, and often it was unpredictable. Never a rhyme or a reason: however, an explanation would arrive, often at the end of the day via email: “Annie had a rough night, not enough sleep,” “She’s coming down with a cold,” or “Her mother dropped by drunk last night.” These emails would come from her aunt who was trying her best to parent Annie; however, she had four other kids of her own, and the household was always in some sort of chaos.

Annie’s father was living in Alberta, working on the rigs, and he only had five days off a month. He was well-intentioned, but after those five days he spent with Annie would come some of her worst outbursts. There would be days where she was incapable of being in the classroom for more than a few minutes at a time because of her anger. Annie’s mother, on the other hand, lived in the area, but she had surrendered custody years before because of her addictions and inability to parent. She would occasionally drop into Annie’s life, and that would wreak even more havoc.

Overtime, a routine was established between Annie and me: she would perceive a slight from a classmate; she would react, and I would intervene while trying to teach an entire class a lesson. Then came her inevitable explosion, and my escorting her to the principal’s office. Throughout that walk, she would scream at me what a horrible teacher I was, how she hated me, and how her dad was going to get me fired. Occasionally she would change it up, calling me a psycho or a stalker. The whole time, I would manage to stay calm until dropping her off at the office; I would then walk down the hallway and have to pause and breathe to find my sanity and centre.

One day, while she was in the middle of her usual venom-filled diatribe I said, “You know Annie, I still like you. Even when you mess up or make a mistake, I still like you.” She paused, took my words in and then started yelling and crying, “Liar! You are lying! I hate you!” From that moment on, every time she exploded or made a mistake, I would repeat, “I still like you. It’s okay. I still like you.”

It was the week before spring break when the school got word that Annie was moving and going to live with her father in Alberta. That week, her outbursts reached a fevered pitch unseen until then. It was one of the hardest weeks I’ve ever had as a teacher, and it was so hard to keep saying that I still liked her, even when she was spewing such anger at me.

On that Friday, after all the kids had left, I was sitting at my desk, exhausted, completely drained, spent, with nothing left in the tank. I was getting my things together, when I noticed a hand drawn picture, sitting on my desk. It was a picture of two people, one a tall brown-haired stick figure, standing beside a purple-haired smaller figure with a school in the background, and blue sky with the sun shining.

Across the top of the page, written in blue marker were the words, “Ms. M you are the best teacher ever. I will miss you. I wish you were my mom. Love Annie.”

Often as a teacher, you always wonder if anything you’ve said, done or taught made a difference. You don’t find out the impact you’ve had on a student, until 15–20 years later when a former student will come up to you. Once in a blue moon, it’s a little bit sooner.