



I am impressed at the kind emotions and love that permeated the stories in the earlier textbook readers of America, and the high character of both students and teachers of those days. Where has the youthful innocence and tenderness gone in our young people. There is no time these days for them to be quiet and alone to consider the deep thoughts of life. This story is by Mary Louise Kitsen of Plainsville, New Jersey.

– Jerry Ogles

a touching story from my old elementary school reader

Anyone can be Beautiful

When I was 10 years old and in the fifth grade, Miss Mary Aborn was the most popular teacher in the entire Linden Street School in Plainville, Connecticut. In June, at the end of my fourth grade year, when the envelopes were passed out with next year's assignments, I could hardly open mine. I closed my eyes, afraid to look. Finally, I opened my eyes. I got her! Miss Aborn was going to be my teacher!

At that point everything should have been perfect. But something happened to spoil the day. A classmate handed me an invitation to a "class picnic." But the three black students didn't get invitations.

I didn't go. Seeing one of my black girlfriends cry was enough for me to make up my mind about that. I'm not sure anyone went.

When school started in September I happened to be talking with the black girl who had cried. "I don't think I will ever feel as comfortable in school again," she told my girlfriend Gracie and me. Gracie and I decided we'd better do something about that. But what? "Maybe we'd better confide in Miss Aborn," Gracie suggested. And that is what we did.

One day, after break, it was time for our history lesson. "Instead of starting our regular lessons today, I think it would be interesting if we discussed the different climates around the world," Miss Aborn told us. We talked about places that become extremely hot, such as Africa, and nations like Norway that have cold weather much of the year.

"In thinking about Africa," Miss Aborn said, "if you lived there, do you think you'd get a bad sunburn? Did any of you get sunburns over the summer?"

Well, more than one of the students had to say they did get sunburned. "God planned wisely, didn't He?" teacher said. We looked at her, curious. "He gave the people in nations where it gets extremely hot dark skins that protect them from the sun's sometime cruel rays. In nations that have a good amount of hot weather but not to the degree that Africa does, we find people with brown skins. But look at Shirley Olsen sitting here in the front row. Her ancestors came from a cold nation, Norway. See how fair she is? Her family did not need the protection other peoples needed."

Our classmate who had cried stood beside her desk. "Miss Aborn, I'm black because my ancestors came from a very hot country?" She smiled, "Otherwise, I am the same?"

"That's correct," Miss Aborn said. The girl's smile turned to a grin.

The weeks flew by and Thanksgiving approached. These were depression years. Our little town was more fortunate than many, but of course we still had our fair share of problems. In my class there was one boy whose father had lost his job, and the family had very little money, even for food.

"My father says we'll have to have a charity basket if we're to have much of a Thanksgiving dinner," this classmate told us. "But he says he won't ask for charity."

The next day Miss Aborn pulled one of her surprises. "A lady living alone often has a lonely holiday," she told us. "This year I hope I can get a family to come to my house and share Thanksgiving with me. In my little home, I can have only one family, of course, and though I would like to ask all of my students and their families, I can't. So, I wonder if you would help me. I have a basket here with slips in it. One of you will draw a slip and the child whose name is on that slip is the one I hope will do me the favor of coming to my home for Thanksgiving dinner."

We all decided it was nothing short of a wonderful miracle that the name drawn was that of the boy whose father so hated to accept charity. All these years later, I realize that no matter which slip had been drawn, that boy's name would have appeared!

That year went by quickly and by springtime I was worried. Gracie was worried. The world was coming to an end . . . because of the letters.

Since I passed the post office on my way home each day, Miss Aborn often gave me letters to mail. Gracie walked almost that far with me, and we worried about those letters addressed to a gentleman in Virginia.

Was teacher in love? How could she be . . . after all, she must be 40 . . . You don't fall in love and get married when you're that old, do you? What if she married and went to live in Virginia? What would the children of our school do? Miss Aborn had been there forever and she was needed. Loved.

Miss Aborn went around humming and smiling. We worried still more. Then I got up my courage one day and I stayed a few minutes after school. I told Miss Aborn all about my worries. She kissed me and said she'd tell us all about it the following day.

The next day Miss Aborn put a chair for herself in the front of the room and had us sit on the floor all around her. And she told us about falling in love (at any age). She explained why it was good and why it was right to wait for the one you marry. In something like maybe fifteen minutes, Miss Aborn told us things that would help us make many future decisions. I know that many times her words came to my mind at just the right time. Told simply and honestly, the joy of love and marriage can become a matter of respect for yourself and the one you will someday love enough to marry.

Then she took out a photograph of the gentleman she loved, and she told us all about him. His likes and dislikes. His work. His religious convictions. We came to know him well. And to feel willing to let him marry our beloved teacher.

Fifth grade came to an end. I opened my card and saw that I was passed on to grade six. My time with Miss Aborn was over. As we left her room, she kissed each girl, and shook hands with each boy. We kept looking back as we left. Gracie and I even walked backward for a way in the hall. Until she left that day, we could still call her teacher.

Later that day one of my granny Lyman's dressmaking customers was in our home for a fitting. She looked out the window and saw Miss Aborn across the street. "Mary Aborn is such a nice person, it's too bad that she is so homely," the customer said.

"Miss Aborn isn't homely," I said, "She's beautiful!"

And suddenly, right at that moment, I learned the most important lesson of all from Miss Aborn. I learned how to be really beautiful!