

The Best Thing I Ever Gave Anybody

Abigail Wright

Her nose whistles when she breathes. Wheeezhoo. Wheeezhoo. It would have been totally fine if it wasn't the most annoying sound in the world. But it is. The other kids' faces turned red from trying to hold in their laughter. You would think a whistling nose would have disqualified her from teaching fourth grade. Just picture it: a bunch of army officers putting Ms. Green to the test. First, they would weigh her. Then, she'd have to do fifty sit-ups. Can you imagine Ms. Green doing sit-ups? Ha! But, just when they are about to give her the teaching certificate, wheeezhoo. *What in the blazes was that?* one of them would say. *I think it was her nose*, another would remark, trembling. And then they would kick her out of the office and she would become one of those homeless ladies at the corner of South Main and Pinterberry Street. But she sits at her desk every day, whistling away, and I am happy because she is my teacher and not some old homeless person.

Ms. Green reminds me of winter. She can be cold and scary, but most of the time she makes you want to curl up on the couch with a cup of hot cocoa. Most people only see the cold and scary side of her. I think it's because they don't really take the time to get to know her. Most people think she is the storm, but I know she is the calm afterwards. One time, I fell and ripped my jeans. Ms. Green laughed, which made my face blush all the way back to my ears and caused the other teachers to shake their heads with scorn. But, then Ms. Green took me back to the classroom and sang silly songs while she bandaged up my leg. I even think her whistling nose is silly in a good way. Ms. Green doesn't have a lot of friends at school, but I always consider myself one. I think the other teachers don't like how pretty she is or how Mom says her dark hair makes her look like a Kardashian (whoever that is) or how you can hear her nose whistle while you're talking to her. I think those things make her pretty and fun, but my favorite thing is that I

know she cares about me. I wouldn't say we are in love, but I wouldn't say we aren't. I'm not actually sure what it means to be in love. But I do love Ms. Green.

Ms. Green doesn't know there is another girl in my life. I've been trying to keep it a secret so I don't hurt her feelings. Mom and Dad say I've been having growing pains lately, and, boy, are they right! I didn't have half as many problems back when I was in third grade. Each day at school, I have to split my time between my two girlfriends. Recess is the only time when I get to be around Anna Beth. Anna Beth Stockmire is the most beautiful girl at Hunter Elementary. Even though I love them both, she looks the opposite of Ms. Green. Anna Beth has short blond hair and she's always wearing shorts. I think her legs are longer than mine, but I'm definitely taller than her. Her smile reminds me of the sun itself. She hangs out with me on the playground, even though I'm sure she could hang out with any boy she wanted. My heart does somersaults when she looks at me. Sometimes, when she smiles, I think I might actually fall over.

All schools have a bully, I suppose. My school sure does. His name is Jesse Montgomery and he is bound to be the meanest kid in Holden County. His face is pimply like some older kids I know. Jesse prides himself on being a total suck-up to the teachers, but when no one is looking, he is a total jerk. I just try to stay out of his way, but, unfortunately, he has a crush on Anna Beth. I've heard Mom say that all's fair in love and war, and I don't really know what it means. I take it to mean that even though Jesse shoves me around on the playground, it's okay because we're fighting over a girl. Jesse acts like Anna Beth is his, even though she never plays with him. I get this shaky feeling in the pit of my stomach when I see Jesse move toward me. I suppose it's like what David felt when he saw Goliath, except I don't have any stones or a sling shot. He's only a head taller than me, but Jesse looks like a giant. Anna Beth and I try to avoid Jesse as much as

possible. The playground supervisors have no idea Jesse is a bully, but I know that if Ms. Green were his teacher, she would see right through Jesse's stupid, "Mr. Nice Guy" act.

"How was school today, hun?" Mom asked me as I slid into the backseat. The air was crisp and crackly and I had been waiting in the carpool line for at least four minutes.

"Oh, you know, the usual," I shrugged. "I made a 100 on my spelling quiz," I added as a second thought.

"Wow! That's my favorite kiddo!" Mom exclaimed as she reached into the backseat and ruffled my hair. She was always saying I was her favorite kiddo. I think it's silly since Mom only has one kiddo. But, still, I like it.

The leaves were turning from green to yellow as the Odyssey pulled into Pumpernickel. Mom and Dad named our neighborhood Pumpernickel several years ago. The story goes that one time there was a loaf of brown bread in the middle of the road. "Don't run over the pumpernickel," 6-year-old me had instructed from the backseat. Dad started calling me his "little Shakespeare" after that because I like to use big words. I don't really think the story is funny, but both names stuck.

"Dad's going to be home from work soon," Mom reminded me as we pulled in the driveway. "Why don't you go play with Ollie and Roy in the backyard?"

Ollie and Roy were our dog and next-door neighbor, in that order. Mom is always getting them mixed up and calling Ollie "Roy" and Roy "Ollie." I never get them mixed up.

"Okie dokie, artichokie!" I hollered back over my shoulder, running over to Roy's house to see if he wanted to play. Roy's bedroom is on the first floor, which works out well because it's easy to tap on his window. We don't know Morse code, but we'd heard about it. Two loud taps followed by three quick little ones signaled: "DO YOU want-to-play?" Roy responded by

sprinting out the front door with a giant whoop and a holler. Upon receiving permission from both mothers, we decided to take Ollie for a walk.

Roy went to a different school, but it didn't matter. We discussed important things. Like why dogs' tails wag when they're happy and how many times you'd have to be hit in the face with a baseball before you die. I noticed that some leaves turned yellow and others orange. Roy said he thought it was because God wanted the trees to look like a rainbow from Heaven. I thought that made a lot of sense. Just as we turned back to head home, Ollie started barking at the bushes. A little scraggly dog crawled out.

"We should take it home," Roy proposed, and, of course, I agreed. The poor thing had a collar, but no tags. He looked real thirsty and hungry; that's probably why he was a little scrawny. I wondered if his brown and white fur was the kind that shed much – I could already picture Mom shaking her head. We were met in the driveway by my dad, who had just gotten home.

"What've you got there, fellas? Don't tell me it's another dog," he chuckled.

"It needs us, Dad," I whimpered. "I think he's lost and alone and he looks hungry. Pleeeeeease let us keep him!"

"What do you expect us to do? Your mother would have a cow if you brought that ragged thing inside."

"We need to help him," Roy insisted. "He just needs some love."

"Looks me to me like he needs a bath," Dad laughed again. "Just give him some water and let him go. He'll find his way home. Dogs are smart like that."

Roy, Ollie, and I said our goodbyes in the front yard. Ollie kept licking his new friend. We, the three musketeers, watched our four-legged pal wander down the sidewalk.

“I don’t think he has a home to find,” I whispered, more to myself than to anyone else.

I could hardly sleep that night. I couldn’t help but imagine that poor little pup alone in the world. Dad said he would find his way home, but it was pretty obvious that he didn’t have a home. Someone abandoned him. He needed help and I didn’t come through for him. On Wednesday morning, when I mentioned the dog again, Dad said, “Psh, you need to let that go, little Shakespeare. The dog was just having a bad day.” Maybe he was right. Maybe he would be fine after all. Or maybe not. I wondered if Shakespeare had a dog.

Wednesday was the same as Tuesday at school except everything was different because Ms. Green wasn’t there. It was weird because Ms. Green never missed. If anyone deserved the gold star for perfect attendance at the end of the year, it was her. I remember the one time she came to school late. Her eyes were puffy and I could tell she had been crying because her nose didn’t whistle. It must have gotten too stopped up. Or maybe she’d blown her nose so much that it went dry. I just remember thinking that her nose must stop whistling when she gets sad. (That’s the kind of thing you’re supposed to pay attention to when you’ve got a girlfriend.) She told us her car had a flat tire on the way over. I didn’t believe her. Why would you cry over a flat tire? Later, I heard her telling Mrs. North that her boyfriend had broken up with her over the phone. This time, I figured her boyfriend must have broken up with her in person. I guess since a phone breakup could make you tardy, a face-to-face must lead to an absent. I decided I better wait until I got a phone before ever breaking up with Anna Beth. I would hate to see her cry for a whole day.

The substitute teacher had a mole on his nose and honestly that’s all I remember. I couldn’t get past the mole. Nonetheless, even though he looked like a vampire, I tried to be on my best behavior. If you act out in class, the sub’s favorite thing to do is punish you by taking

away time from recess. I couldn't let that happen. I made it through his boring lecture on fractions and dashed outside as soon as the bell rang. Anna Beth would be waiting for me at our usual meeting spot. Before I even got close, I could tell something was wrong. From a distance, I could see her talking to Jesse. Jesse looked like a middle schooler. Maybe he *was* older. He probably failed kindergarten a couple times. He always wore a baseball cap so you could never really see the look in his eyes. He wore Converse and jeans and just always looked like he was about to beat someone up. By the look on Anna Beth's face, I could tell she thought the same thing.

No one else was around; the other kids were blowing bubbles by the monkey bars. (Twice a month, the principle stopped by and chatted with the teachers on playground duty. The teachers gave us bubbles on those days so we'd have something to do while they talked to him. Even though the teachers switched who had to stay outside each time, he almost always came when it was Ms. Green's turn. Sadly, she wasn't there on Wednesday.) I stopped in my tracks. Jesse saw me. He was madder than usual. I turned like a sissy to head back inside. I'll never forget those five seconds. I'd seen the look in Jesse's eyes as he glared at me under his stupid hat. As I turned to walk away, I could hear him start running after me. I admit it. I was scared. I was more scared than I'd ever been. Jesse had hit me before, but it had never hurt too much. Somehow I knew this time it was going to really hurt.

He tackled me. We fell. The mulch was wet. We rolled around. Anna Beth cried out. His hand hit my eye. I panicked. I tried to get free. I tried to fight back. I could barely move. He hurt me. He yelled at me. He called me a "selfish piece of garbage." He said that Anna Beth "belonged to him." Two men. Fighting over a girl. But I couldn't stop him. He beat me. I wish I

hadn't cried. But I did. I didn't want anyone to even know I'd been beaten up. But Anna Beth had seen.

She ran to me once he walked off. He was covered with mud but I felt like I'd eaten it. Anna Beth fell on the ground next to me and wrapped me in a hug. She was just shorter than me and her head rested perfectly on my shoulder. I could have held her forever, but what was the use? Jesse had made a joke of me. We sat like that for at least five minutes. Neither of us talked. Finally, she dared to say something.

"I'll go with you, if you want," she said.

"Go where?" I asked.

"To tell the playground supervisor, silly," she added the 'silly' to get me to smile. It didn't work.

"Tell the supervisor? Are you kidding me? Did you see what just happened?" I yelled at her.

"You can't let him get away with it!"

"If I tell them what happened, the whole school will know that I got my butt whooped by that jerk. No way."

"If anyone deserves to get their butt whooped, it's him."

"If I tell on him, Anna Beth, he's going to hit me even harder next time."

She rolled her eyes. I rolled my eyes harder. We continued sitting at the crime scene. I had so many thoughts swimming in my head that I couldn't make sense of them all. I thought about the pain. I thought about what my parents would say when they saw my black eye. I thought about how Ollie would lick it, as he does everything. I thought about how I'd beat up anybody that hurt Ollie like Jesse hurt me. And then I thought about that little homeless dog I

found with Roy. Who's going to stand up for that poor dog? I think that's what did it. Thinking about that scraggly mutt with mud in his fur. I felt weird. It was almost like I cared more about the dog than myself. I stood up and dusted myself off. If the good guys let bad guys get away with bad things, what good are the good guys?

I watched the playground supervisor take Jesse into the principal's office.

Other boys gave me high-fives in the hallway and in the carpool line. I was a hero. Turns out I wasn't the only one who wanted to take Jesse down.

"How was school today, hun?" Mom asked me as I slid into the backseat. The air was crisper and cracklier than the day before and I had been waiting in the carpool line for at least ten minutes.

"Oh, you know, the usual," I shrugged. "Jesse punched me on the playground," I added as a second thought.

Mom turned around and stared at the black shadow growing around my left eye.

"Are you okay, sweetheart? What'd you do?" she asked.

"I'm fine, Mom. I turned him in," I announced.

"Wow. You're one brave kiddo, d'you know that?" She reached into the backseat and ruffled my hair. "You're my favorite. Oh, perfect timing," she added. "There's a surprise waiting for you at home."

Pumpnickel was the same as always and we bumped into the driveway for the millionth time, but I saw my home with fresh eyes. It's not every day you take down your arch enemy.

The surprise turned out to be the scraggly little mutt with sad eyes and a dry tongue.

"He came back today. Your father and I agreed that, since he came back, he must need you. So you can keep him."

I scratched the little mutt behind the ears. I could tell he liked it.

Jesse avoided me the next day at school. Fine by me. Mom had offered to cover my black eye with makeup, but I was proud of it. I couldn't wait to show Ms. Green. She'd missed the whole thing since she had been gone the day before. When we first sat down, she gave us a blank piece of paper to write down anything we could remember from the substitute teacher. When Ms. Green handed me my paper, she didn't say anything about my black eye. I thought she would have felt real sorry for me. I was looking forward to her patting me on the head as I told her the whole thing. Oh well. The room grew quiet and I started writing down what I could remember. Hm... large nose, large mole... Oh, and fractions.... Wait. The room was dead silent.

Where was the whistle?

I glanced up at Ms. Green.. She didn't have a black eye like me, but her eyes were puffy and her nose wasn't whistling. She had been crying. I just knew it.

When the bell rang for recess, I hung back. I was normally the first kid out the door. Anna Beth would have to wait.

"Hi, Ms. Green," I stumbled over my words. "Um, we missed you yesterday."

"I missed you all, too," she didn't look at me when she said it. She was busy taking stuff in and out of drawers and rearranging things on her desk.

"Did you see my eye?" I questioned, though I knew there was no way she could have missed it.

"Oh my, whatever happened to you? Big day yesterday, huh?"

"Jesse socked me in the eye. It hurt really bad," I could tell she could tell I was talking about my insides. "Where were you?"

“I am so sorry that happened to you! But you are one tough muffin! I didn’t feel well so I couldn’t come in.” But she didn’t seem to have a cold or anything like that.

“Did you have an earache?” I asked. “I had one of those one time and it was terrible. Did they give you a shot? They gave me a shot. I didn’t like it one bit.”

“No,” she smiled. “It wasn’t an earache.”

“Was it strep throat? The doctor touched the back of my throat one time and I hated it.”

“No, honey. Sometimes you just feel bad even when you aren’t sick. Does that make sense?”

“Yeah. I didn’t feel good when Jesse beat me. Even though my eye didn’t hurt a lot, I still felt bad.”

“Thanks for understanding.”

I started to walk to the door. I knew Anna Beth would wonder what took me so long. I turned back around.

“Ms. Green, you’re going to be okay. I know sometimes other kids don’t like you so much, but I think you’re the best teacher in the world!”

She just stood there and looked at me. A tear rolled down her cheek.

“Oh, what am I going to do?” She flopped into a chair and her head fell into her hands.

“So... You *are* sick?”

“No, baby,” she took a deep breath. “Someone was very mean to me.”

“Is that why you didn’t come to school?”

“Yes. I am truly so sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry, Ms. Green. Someone was mean to me, too, and I didn’t want to come back to school.”

She smiled through the tears.

“Did you tell their mom?” I suggested.

“I’m afraid it doesn’t work like that,” she laughed and cried at the same time.

I told her about how I didn’t want to tattle on Jesse, and how I thought about that dog in my neighborhood, and how we have to stand up for ourselves. She just looked at me while I spoke.

“The grown-up world is a bit different,” she said.

“Still, Ms. Green, if someone was mean to you, you should tell the person in charge.”

“But,” she sighed. “I don’t want anyone to know about it.”

“Yeah, me too. At first I didn’t want people to know Jesse beat me up, but, it worked out okay. I got high-fived in the hall yesterday! Whoever-it-was has probably been mean to more people in the past, but they just haven’t been brave enough to speak up.”

She gave me a really long hug, and I left her sitting in that chair. The next day, Mom and I brought her a present. I’d given him a bath and combed his knotted hair. He even smelled good. He was wearing a red bow around his neck, but still had sad eyes and was desperate for love. Ms. Green named him Survivor. Vivi, for short. She cried again. She said I’d given her the best gift ever. Until then, I had never known Ms. Green liked dogs so much. I wasn’t surprised, though. Dogs are great.

The next day, someone told me that the principal wasn’t going to be around much anymore. I heard he got in trouble. Anyways, school went back to normal. Jesse avoided me. We saw the substitute teacher more often. I still love Ms. Green.

All I know is that it took a while, but her nose did eventually whistle again.