

THE STORY OF DES

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“Mr. Lee, I gotta go take a test that I missed yesterday.” It was third hour and Mr. Lee was my art teacher. Did I really have a test to take? No, but Mr. Lee, a gullible kind of guy, let me leave anyways. He was used to never really having me in class. I always made sure I went one day a week though, just to keep him happy. I did good work (when I was there), so he let me slide once in a while. He even laughed at some of my more creative excuses, ones like, “I have to go set mouse traps in my locker, Mr. Lee. The stupid things keep eating my homework.” He would always smile and send me on my way without a second thought. Today he was feeling especially nice. It was Valentine’s Day, after all, so everyone was in a good mood. Almost everyone, that is.

I ventured down the halls lined with grey lockers. I did feel a small amount of guilt for lying to Mr. Lee, but that feeling escaped my mind as I walked into Desirae’s classroom. I loved coming here ever since I first met Des. Well, maybe not at first...

Summer volleyball camp brought along with it our first meeting. She was hired as our assistant volleyball coach and was required to help with the camp. When our coach introduced her to us as Mrs. Kinderknecht, we were all very quiet. How was a new coach going to fit in with our close-knit group?

I told myself to give her a chance. Never did I believe in judging someone right away...until then. Not even ten minutes into practice, she yelled at me. I had unknowingly taken her spot on the bench. At the time, I had no idea that she was only joking and trying to get me to smile. I avoided her for the rest of the camp.

School started soon after all this. As it turned out, I was in her first class of the day, advanced math. I told myself I could just hide in the back of the room, but I found out that morning that my idea wouldn’t work, as there were only six kids in my class.

All through class, Mrs. Kinderknecht would make fun of me for all sorts of reasons. At one point during class, I raised my hand and asked her if I could get up to throw a piece of paper away.

“Why don’t you just throw yourself in there why you’re at it?” she said. I was shocked and

As the days wore on, math classes went the same as the first one did. I would sit silently throughout class while she made jokes about me. Other kids in the room defended me by asking her why she picked on me so much. She would only laugh and say she did that to everyone. That was not true.

In time I began to come out of my shell that I had always regarded as home. I gathered up the nerve to sling back some of the mud that she threw at me daily. She was as surprised as I was.

“So, you finally noticed I was only trying to get you to talk, huh?” she asked me after I had made a sarcastic remark while passing her in the hallway. It was something like “I tried to put myself in the trash, but you took up all the room.” I smiled at her and kept walking.

Her classroom soon turned into a battleground, each of us shooting strings of smart-aleck comments at one another. Math class was never boring and the other five kids were always entertained.

With talks about family, friends, jobs, and memories, our relationship quickly grew from more than just a student/teacher relationship to an actual friendship. I trusted her with everything that was going on in my life. I went to her for advice and opinions. She was the first one I came running to with the results of my most recent English test or the latest gossip of our small school. I asked her what to do each time a new boy popped into my life. On this matter, her advice was always the same, "Stay away. Crabs can jump six feet, you know." Most of her advice I took. If I ever did disregard it, I soon regretted my actions. She was always right, a fact that I'll never disclose to her...

When I entered her classroom, I found her alone, as I always did during this hour. She didn't even have to raise her head from the papers she was grading to know it was me. This was our routine, and she expected me during this hour everyday.

"What excuse did you pull off today?" she asked as she stuffed the papers and red pen into her desk.

"I didn't have anything to do today. I'm waiting for some paint to dry." Once again, it wasn't quite the truth, but as she was a teacher, I didn't think it the best idea to tell her I was simply skipping class. She grinned and rolled her eyes as if to say, "Yeah, right" as I pulled up a seat next to her. I knew she didn't believe me. But I also knew that inside, she didn't care. She enjoyed my company as much I enjoyed hers.

Her chair swiveled, and she leaned closer to me. "Can you keep a secret?" she asked me very quietly. I raised my eyebrows.

"How old are you, five?" I asked. "But yeah, of course. What's up?"

"Promise me you won't tell anyone," she said, "not a soul. I don't want everyone to know yet."

"Okay, okay," I said. "Tell me!" My excitement was showing through. Now I was the one who was reverting back to the language and actions of a five year old. But what could be so important that it had to be kept secret? I was excited to be the proud holder of something so important.

My enthusiasm was not shared, however. She looked at me with watering eyes. Her voice was shaking as she whispered, "I'm pregnant." Silence erupted in the small classroom. The silence could have been compared to a crowded lunchroom after someone drops their plate and it shatters on the floor. I looked at her as if she was the one who clumsily dropped the plate. "Was she serious?" I wondered. And then I saw a tear trickle down her cheek. This was no joke.

"That's awesome," I said uncertainly, but she shook her head and quietly sobbed. It hurt to watch her cry. It took all the strength I had not to join her.

"I'm not ready for a baby," she said. She went on to explain that she felt she was too young and there were so many things she still wanted to do. Plans she had for the summer were immediately canceled. The money she had saved for a jet ski and a trip to Alaska was now going to be used for the baby.

I tried to cheer her up, but nothing I did seemed to help. My usual jokes and sarcastic remarks were received with only a weak smile. I couldn't even pretend to laugh at my own jokes in the solemn environment.

I left her room when the bell rang an hour later. My mind was searching for a way to help my friend. How could I explain to her what a wonderful thing this was? How could I make her understand that a baby would change her life in ways unimaginable to anyone else but a mother? How could I, a sixteen year old junior in high school, change the mind of someone much older and more mature than I was? What could I do? Then it hit me, a poem, something I regarded myself as somewhat good at. How could it have taken me so long to think of that?

My entire evening after school was spent working on my poem. I sat in the desk that my grandfather had made me not so long ago. Sitting there always made me feel more professional, more serious in what I was writing. With a small black lamp perched like a bird over my shoulder, I began writing. Page after page was ripped from my legal pad and banked off of my wall into the trashcan. At midnight, I ran my hands through my long hair and leaned back in my chair. The poem was finally complete.

I arrived at school at six o'clock the next morning after getting hardly any sleep to type my poem and add pictures. With some smooth talking, I convinced one of our janitors to unlock the computer lab for me. Being a good kid has its advantages, you know. Two hours of hard work and fighting with the computer paid off. I was proud of my poem and how it looked surrounded by baby footprints and key words like, "leadership," "courage," and "strength." It looked good.

As I snuck downstairs toward her room, I saw Des chatting with the other teachers in the office. The strong scent of coffee wafted from the room. I quietly crept into her room and was seen only by a picture of Albert Einstein, who was deep in thought about several letters, E, M, and C. And I thought this was math class. I laid my masterpiece on her desk with the feeling of crossing the finish line in first place. I was proud and confident in my writing, but since I wasn't sure how she would react, I hid in the library for most of the morning. I knew no one would find me there. The library in our school is like an old abandoned house that no one ever enters.

Third hour came around again and I creatively thought of another excuse to go see Des. "Um, I have to make corrections on the test I took yesterday, Mr. Lee."

I again found myself walking through the hallway lined with grey lockers. So many thoughts were running through my head. Would she like it? Would she even understand it? Would it curve her feelings? I was also nervous because this was the first time I had written anything to give to someone I knew. Writing for assignments was different. Assignments were only grades and didn't matter; they had no real purpose. This piece, however, had a purpose. I only hoped that it would show itself.

I paused before I reached Des' room and took a deep breath. When I walked in, she was reading my poem, crying...again. I tried to back out of the room before she heard me, but her head lifted and she told me to sit down. I sat next to her in the same chair as the day before. Trying to find a way to distract myself from the nerves that were jumping inside me, I rung my hands and popped my knuckles. I was waiting for her to tell me to, "Stop fidgeting," like she always did. She didn't speak a word however, and I continued to keep my head down, studying the small intricate creases in my palms. My mind raced back and flashed into another memory...

It was our regional championship basketball game against Lacrosse. If we won, we would proudly move on to sub-state. Tension was thick in the locker room. This could be our last game of the season, and for the seniors, the last game they may ever play. I was more nervous than anyone else and even threw up before warm-ups. I knew that my parents were in the stands, along with Des. This thought made it even harder to get rid of the butterflies that were furiously flapping their wings in my stomach.

My nerves are what shattered my focus. My focus is what ruined my game. I would call that Friday night worse than terrible. Nothing seemed to go my way during the game. Finally during the second quarter, my coach mercifully took me out.

With a towel draped over my shoulders, I sat on the bench and studied my shoes. My mind was dizzy with thoughts of how bad I was playing, and I couldn't believe I was letting my teammates down. I was a starter, and they counted on me and the other girls to lead them. And now here I was playing like I'd never played before, in front of everyone. I sat on the bench for the rest of the game with my head in my hands.

After the game, I tried to get to the locker room as fast as I could. Des would want to talk to me, but I didn't want to face her. I knew I had let her down.

"Dani!" she yelled as I walked through the hallway.

I stopped. It was obvious I had heard her. My chest rose as I sighed and turned around. When she caught up to me, she pulled me to a vacant spot at the end of the hallway. Her arms embraced me in a tight hug. My eyes refused to look into hers.

Great, another lecture, I thought, just what I need. "I know I played horrible," I said. "I don't need you to tell me that."

"I'm not disappointed because you didn't play your best. I'm disappointed because of the actions you took. You put yourself out of the game. The minute you put your head down, you were finished."

Later on I sat in the locker room with my shoes beside me on the bench. In big bold letters I wrote on each shoe, "KEEP YOUR HEAD UP." I only hoped I would never look at those words again...

And now, sitting in this chair next to Des, those words flashed across my mind. They echoed in my head and forced me to lift my head up. My eyes found her looking at me with tears still streaming down her face. Her eyes were red and her makeup was slightly smeared. But then she smiled. Her face radiated with the light that normally showed, and I realized that this time, the tears were those of happiness.

"Do you mind if I put this in the baby's book?" she asked. I smiled and nodded my head. From that moment on, Des was happy. She was glad to be having a baby. I was happy as well, happy for her, and happy that my writing could make a difference.

Throughout the whole year, she had been the one teaching me lessons, weather it was about math, boys, or life in general. But on this day, I became the teacher. This is the day I started to grow up and mature into something bigger, something worth being.