

# Second Grade Revisited

She terrified me—this prematurely white-haired woman who had been principal of my elementary school. Why, then, was I standing on her doorstep now, at the age of 33—and why was my heart pounding with the ridiculous force of one heading for the guillotine? I was, after all, an adult and a university dean at that.

Why indeed? Unexpectedly, I had heard her speak at the school PTA meeting feting a retiring teacher. Former students had been invited, and I went, not knowing that Mrs. Thompson, the gravel-voiced terror of my seven-year-old existence, would also be present.

Sitting inconspicuously in the back of the room, I joined in singing "America the Beautiful," stood for the Pledge of Allegiance, and listened to the business banalities of a small town PTA meeting. Perspiration rolled down my back, plastering me to the folding chair, which was every bit as uncomfortable to me as it would have been on a similar south Florida evening 25 years earlier. But now there was considerably less room to squirm.

Suddenly the room came to attention, and my eyes at once riveted on the straightest back south of the Mason-Dixon line. Above the narrow shoulders was hair that had always reminded me of the soft decorative stuff we put on Christmas trees.

Mrs. Thompson turned to face her overheated audience and began to speak in what can best be described as southern nasal. The words at first didn't matter; it was that voice that reminded me of my somewhat less than successful second-grade year. I couldn't see the face really, but gradually I stopped straining and began to listen attentively. The intelligence of the woman was unmistakable. The sentences were crisp, well-phrased, devoid of unnecessary words and slang. The thoughts were not the usual PTA platitudes but logical,

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meaningful, well formulated ideas.

Delight swept over me as I listened to the woman who had directed the first six years of my education, for she was obviously still capable of doing the same for others—perhaps even of running the Pentagon. One somehow never doubted Mrs. Thompson's ability to do anything.

After the program, I looked for the former principal, hoping to have an opportunity to introduce myself. She had left early, however, so I resolved to call her.

Sitting at my desk the next morning with the tropical sun streaming through an east window, I dialed her number, and the familiar voice answered.

"Hello, Mrs. Thompson, this is Marsha Love."

"Well, hello, sweetheart," came the immediate reply. Through some miraculous mental process the woman had sifted through 20 years of school children to identify the voice on the other end of the telephone. We talked briefly.

"I'd like to see you, honeychile," came the nasal tone, the endearments somehow not quite congruent with my image of the ramrod back. We settled on Friday night at 7, several days hence.

Standing on the doorstep now, feeling silly, my throat constricted. We were going to meet—my childhood memory and I—now.

The door opened, and I looked across the years at a face that will forever be implanted in my memory. True, there were lines now where there had been none, and the skin was fair, thin, and lightly freckled—from yard work, I discovered later. But everything else was the same—

high cheekbones; slender straight nose; eyes large, blue, and veiled; and, of course, the curly angel hair.

"Come in, come in," came the crisp command.

We marched back to the family room where Mrs. Thompson proceeded to shoot questions at me about my life, career, and family with the precision of a drill sergeant, while recording my answers on a legal pad for future reference. Gradually we talked of other things—Europe, her education and career, people we both knew—while she stopped taking notes and I continued to feel a combination of bashful, intimidated, and admiring.

Before I realized, two hours had passed. I glanced at my watch in embarrassment, knowing I should beat a hasty retreat. I looked at the figure sitting beside me in the summer dusk and for a reason I shall never fathom I asked how tall she was. "Five four," came the astonishing reply. "You don't mean it," I gasped. "Stand up!"

The slender body with the snow-white cap rose with me, and I found myself looking down a full five inches into the face that was still every bit the principal's.

"I thought you were at least as tall as I am," I stammered.

"Adults always look tall to second-graders," she laughed, and the thin mouth curved upwards while the veil over the blue eyes lifted to reveal a twinkle.

We walked to the door. "I'm glad you're a teacher," she said forcefully. "Will you come back?" There were tears in the eyes now. I felt her cheek against mine. "I love you," said the gravel voice next to my ear. I was momentarily overcome with a feeling of gratitude for this woman who had made the lives of so many children better because of her devotion to them, their minds, and their futures.

"Of course I'll come back," I laughed, for at that moment I had discovered a truth: sometimes, on very rare and special occasions, one can indeed go home again. ■

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