

LEARNING LESSONS

(A Short Story)



KATLYN GRACE

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“**D**ealing with children can't be hard. I'll prove it to you. Let me be the teacher for a day. You just sit back and relax.”

Anne huffed. They'd been discussing the difficulties of their jobs last night when those words had spewed off her husband's lips. Rob was a carpenter. Anne was a first-grade teacher.

Rob didn't know anything about children.

Golden sunlight flitted across her Pine-Sol fresh desktop and bounced off the creamy white walls. She squeezed the apple-shaped stress ball in her palm, and it melted like hot butter between her fingers. Then, she glanced down at the Rolex on her wrist. Ten after eight. The knot in her neck was as tight as the bun on top of her head.

She'd managed to take record of attendance and straighten the bookshelf that lined the left wall by the door. Through the thin walls, she could hear other classes already starting their day. Kindergarteners were reciting the alphabet. Her own class sat at their desks in straight rows. Zach doodled on his wooden desktop, but this morning, Anne didn't correct him.

Bobby Parker raised his short, chubby hand that barely reached the top of his head.

“Yes, Bobby?” With the tips of her fingers, she slid her glasses off her nose.

“Why ain’t you doin’ nuthin’, Mrs. Reynolds?”

“I’m waiting on a special guest. He’s running late. Until then, all of you silently read chapter one in the book I assigned yesterday.”

Anne snatched a pen and her spiral-bound agenda. Pushed her glasses up the bridge of her nose. Inhaled the lavender scent emanating from her diffuser, but it wasn’t at all pleasant because the ladies in the lunchroom were already preparing lunch. Something oniony mingled with what was supposed to calm her. She tried to plan lessons for next week.

Twenty minutes passed. The *click-clank* of the clock above the door made her grit her teeth.

She scanned the room. All twenty kids except Cameron had finished reading. Cameron had always been slow. Patience was a virtue. “A tip for you children: never be late. It doesn’t look professional.”

As if on cue, the door whooshed open with a puff of cool air. Her husband. On his muscular, rectangle-like body, he wore an orange tie and a brown, cream, and orange flannel tucked in khakis. Anne bit her lip and glanced down at *her* clothes—green sweater, white scarf with four leaf clovers on it. Rob would get pinched today by twenty little kids.

It was St. Patrick’s Day.

“Mrs. Reynolds says bein’ late ain’t ‘fessional, mister,” Bobby’s hick voice accused Rob.

Rob shifted the box in his hands. Raised an eyebrow. “I guess I’ll take these powdered, jelly-filled donuts elsewhere, then,” his southern drawl aimed for the door.

“No!” the class shrieked like hyenas.

Anne leapt to her feet. Yanked Rob to the side. Lowered

her voice to a whisper. "We're not allowed to feed the children sweets."

He didn't listen. Instead, his musky aftershave trailed away. He propped the cardboard box of donuts on her desk top. Lifted the lid and passed them out to the kids. "What the board of education doesn't know won't kill them." He looked back at Anne and winked his fifty-cent piece azure eyeballs. Rob finished and grabbed a donut for himself, licking jelly and powdered sugar off his fingers as he did so.

"Try to teach them now. I dare you." Anne folded her arms across her chest.

"Watch me." Rob's eyes twinkled with amusement as he plopped down in Anne's rolling chair and kicked his legs up on her desk.

"Are you our teacher for the day?" Kassie Langford's almond-shaped eyes widened with concern.

"Yes."

"Why?" She scrunched her bushy eyebrows.

"Because I am."

"What's wrong with Mrs. Reynolds?"

"Nothing. I'm the teacher today. That's that. Go eat your donut."

Anne couldn't stop her mouth from gaping. *Rude*, she mouthed Rob's way.

Rob ignored her. He was going to fail, and honest-to-goodness, she might relish in victory when he did.

"What's your name?" Katrina shouted from the back.

"Call me Mr. Bunyan." He rose to write the name on the board. Chalk dust fell like mozzarella cheese being grated because of how hard he pressed the chalk against the board. The chalk squealed and the children covered their ears.

Anne shoved her face in her hands when Rob puffed his chest. He'd always had a weird obsession with Paul Bunyan when he was younger. Probably because he'd thought he was a

larger-than-life hero that could tackle the frontier and everything in between.

“According to Mrs. Reynolds, you are working on adding and subtracting. Because I’m a visual person, I’ll give you a demonstration. I have one donut and Mrs. Reynolds has three. How many do we have altogether?”

Anne tried her best to stifle her laugh. She’d always teased Rob of his manly Angelina Jolie lips, and now his fat lips were pursed together in concentration. Anne pressed her fingers to her mouth.

“Four,” the class resounded.

“If I take Johnny’s donut—” Rob stole Johnny’s donut from his sticky fingers, then shoved the whole donut in his mouth.

Anne gagged. Johnny’s chubby cheeks jiggled when his mouth fell open.

“How many does that leave Johnny?”

“None.”

“And how many does that make for me and Mrs. Reynolds?”

“Five.”

“But you ate it, so technically you still have four,” Kassie’s nasally voice pointed out.

Anne grinned. *First-graders.*

Rob’s dirty blond eyebrows rose on his wide forehead. “Touché, but—”

“Why aren’t you wearing green?” Gabe smirked from his chair. His desk was closest to Anne’s desk on the far-right for good reason. The kid was as mean as a snake.

At this point, Anne would clap her hands together and make the class focus.

Rob didn’t.

“Aren’t you supposed to raise your hand when you have a question?” Rob didn’t seem phased by the child’s antics, but it

was probably because Rob had been just as cantankerous as a kid.

“You’re not the *real* teacher. I don’t have to.” Gabe zig-zagged his head. “Why no green?”

“Kid, you can’t pinch me.” Rob wagged a finger in the air.

“Why?” Gabe’s long, triangular nose scrunched, and he slid from his seat.

It was like Anne was watching a western standoff.

“Because I’m wearing green underwear.”

Anne had really thought they were getting somewhere earlier.

Gabe’s dark eyes narrowed to slits. “Let me see.”

“No can do, cowboy. Go take a seat.”

The kid’s smile was deceptive. He turned on his heel like he was going back to his seat, then whipped around and bull rushed Rob. Rob’s frightened eyes searched Anne’s for help. Anne would have yelled at Gabe, but she wasn’t the teacher today. She flopped in her chair. Folded her arms across her chest. Grabbed a donut. Watched the ugly scene.

Four hours later after Rob had been pinched by twenty children, terrorized by high-pitched screams, and thrown up on by a girl who had been allergic to gluten, Anne sat on the same bench as Rob on the playground. Giggling and shrieking children climbed off jungle gyms and raced down slides.

He’d tried. Anne would give him that. Tried to read the Clifford books, but Warner was allergic to dogs, therefore they couldn’t read about Clifford the Big Red Dog. Tried to teach them an experiment with Mentos and Coke, and it had worked...until the cap off the Coke bottle scored him a red mark on the forehead. And history class, well, Callie had snored during it. Callie was one of Anne’s star pupils.

The harsh March South Carolina wind stirred the jagged, uneven ends of Rob’s thick hair. Anne ran her fingers through it, messing up what he’d combed this morning. With the

other hand, she shaded her eyes from the sun directly above them. She waited. Carolina wrens chirped. Rob didn't say anything, and normally he didn't. He rubbed his calloused hands from years of working hard in his carpentry shop.

Anne loved him. She really did, but sometimes he was stubborn.

"Anne?" He squinted his eyes in a way that had always attracted her.

"Hm?"

"I learned something today."

Wind stirred her hair. "Yeah? What's that?"

His v-cut jaw hardened. He looked funny with a bright red circle embedded between his eyes. "Here's the thing...I was wrong. *So* wrong. Children *are* hard. Your job *is* hard. Please be the teacher from now on, because Lord knows I'm not good with kids. Not good at saying I'm sorry, either, but I *am*." The Sahara Desert had nothing on his voice now.

She cleared her throat. Hadn't seen it coming.

Anne sighed. "Thank you." She grabbed his hand. Gave it a squeeze. This was sweeter than relishing in his failure. She nudged him in the side and grinned. "Hey, I'll bet dealing with wood can't be hard. I'll prove it to you. Let me be the carpenter for a day. You just sit back and relax."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Katlyn Grace resides in a small town in West Virginia and adores spending time with friends and family. She enjoys writing, photography, music, early mornings, and going on walks. Katlyn also runs a Christian advice blog, "Rosepetalsandfaith." She is the author of *The Lawson Series: Finding Hope, Finding Faith, and Finding Love* (coming soon). Katlyn writes with the intent to inspire others to discover the beauty in following Christ.



