In Mrs. Lake’s Eyes

A soft-spoken woman, with a firm touch, Mrs. Lake taught sixth grade. From my first moment in her class, I loved her. Though I was a good student, I was shy about speaking up in front of my classmates and could easily be overlooked. Not with Mrs. Lake.

That year had been a hard one at home. My father’s alcoholism had grown worse. At night as I lay in bed I listened with dread to the pop of beer cans opening or the clink of ice cubes in a glass as whiskey was poured. Then came the loud slurred voice from the kitchen, my mother’s tears, the slamming of doors. Before falling asleep I prayed, “Dear God, help me make him stop.”

Dad was an attorney, and meticulous about polishing his wing tips every morning before work. So for Christmas I took the baby-sitting money I had saved and bought the best shoe-shine kit I could find. I was so excited on Christmas Eve when he opened the heavy box. But I watched in stunned silence while Dad – in an incomprehensible rage – threw it across the living room, breaking it into pieces. Somehow I thought I was to blame.

How much safer I felt in Mrs. Lake’s class. This was my sanctuary, the place I felt appreciated, my papers coming back with her distinctive scrawl, my tests decorated with stars and smiley faces. When I gave oral reports, standing in front of the class, my knees shaking, I looked into her encouraging blue eyes and my fears subsided.

At the end of the year came the day for parent-teacher conferences, each student meeting with her parents and Mrs. Lake for a final evaluation and progress report. It didn’t matter. My parents would not be coming. When I brought home papers with Mrs. Lake’s glowing remarks, they ended up in the trash, unnoticed. Letters reminding them about the school conference were ignored.

All day I tried to stay busy with our assigned projects while the room mother escorted my classmates to the doorway at the back of the class. Finally, Mrs. Lake opened the door and motioned for me to join her.

Moving her chair next to mine, Mrs. Lake lifted my chin. “First of all,” she said, “I want you to know how much I love you.” I saw all the warmth and compassion in those beautiful blue eyes that I had observed all year long. “Secondly,” she continued, “you need to know it is not your fault that your parents are not here today.”

It was the first time someone has said such a thing to me. For a moment I was scared. She knows our secret. But then I realized she had understood all along. “You deserve a conference whether your parents are here or not.” She said. “You deserve to know how well I think you’re doing.” She took out a stack of my papers and congratulated me on my good grades, pointing out my strengths. She showed my diagnostic test scores and explained how high I had ranked nationally. She had even saved a stack of my watercolors – those things my mother usually consigned to the trash.
During the meeting my perspective changed. I was allowed to see myself objectively, and because I knew Mrs. Lake cared for me, I believed what she told me. My home situation was the same, but I was a different person.

For a long moment, Mrs. Lake and I looked at each other in silence. Then she gave me a hug. Afterward she gathered her papers and we returned to the class. None of my friends ever asked me what she said, and if they had, I don’t know what I would have told them. *It was too precious, too private, too wonderful.*

The growing-up years that followed were often difficult, but my teacher had given me an extraordinary gift. *For the first time I knew I was worthy of being loved.* That made all the difference.

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by Laurie B.
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*Read text in bolded italics slowly with emphasis.*

Reflection:
1. We all have had hurt in our lives.
2. We all deserve to have someone lift our chin and let us know how precious we are.
3. Each of us has an opportunity to be Mrs. Lake to those we are called to love.