

## Doris

Teachers aren't supposed to have favourite students. We're supposed to treat everyone equally, and teach each according to their needs. But we all do. It's inevitable. Some kids just capture your heart.

Doris was not my favourite student. Sometimes you can tell what a student will be like just from a name. Doris was exactly what you would expect from someone with a name like 'Doris'. She was rather plain looking, and didn't do well in school. She was the kind of kid whose report card comments always read 'She works very hard and tries her best'. Doris wasn't very smart.

Doris Woodman was in my grade nine class, and she hated every minute of it. She couldn't do any of the work that her classmates were doing, even with my constant help. The remedial work I gave her was just as hard for her, and I think she resented the fact that she had to do something different from the other kids in the class. In fact, everything about her made it clear she didn't want to be in school. She was sullen and moody. Oh, she would work hard at whatever I gave her to do, and listen when I helped, but she wasn't happy to be there. She made that pretty obvious.

Doris didn't participate in anything. She wasn't at all athletic, and she stayed far away from anything that might have been considered 'fun'. As far as I knew, she had no friends.

Doris was the kind of student that everyone in the class ignored. She dressed sloppily, as if she didn't care about her appearance at all. No-one talked to her, and she seemed happy to ignore everyone else.

On the few occasions when she did say something, it was just a few mumbled words. During the first half of that year, I don't remember Doris smiling. Not even once.

I tried to talk to Doris on more than one occasion, usually at the end of class. I can't say that I learned much. She was always polite, but it was obvious that Doris didn't like to talk. Mostly what I got was 'school sucks'. No surprise there.

At Parent-Teacher interviews I met Doris' mother. She was a rather unkempt woman, thin, tired-looking, and with stringy washed-out hair. She seemed to be someone who worked hard for a living but didn't make much money.

I asked her about Doris.

"Mrs. Woodman, Doris seems to be having a lot of trouble in class, and she isn't very happy. I want to help her, but nothing I've tried seems to work."

Mrs. Woodman was a single parent, and while she was at work a lot, I got the impression that she was trying her best to be a good mother.

“Oh, Mr. Jackson, I know exactly what you mean. Doris has always struggled. She’s always had a hard time in school, and never liked it much, at least since her father walked out on us. But I do the best I can. And Doris does try, doesn’t she?”

“Yes, she certainly does”. I didn’t mention the sullenness. “How is Doris doing in her other classes?”

“It’s about the same. She tries, but she just can’t learn things the way other kids can. I try to help her, but, well, you know ...”

“Doris doesn’t seem very happy. At least, in my class.”

“I know that. She doesn’t like school. Except for Music class. Doris really loves to sing.”

“Really? I didn’t know that.”

I was having trouble picturing Doris singing. In fact, I was having trouble picturing Doris being enthusiastic about anything.

“Mr. Jackson, why don’t you come to church with us on Sunday. Doris sings there. I think you might see another side of her.”

“Well ... I’m not sure ...”

Actually, I was very sure. I didn’t go to church. I wasn’t really the religious type. The last time I could remember being in a church, I was getting yelled at by father for fidgeting during the sermon. My father was the only person I knew who could yell at you in a whisper.

“Why don’t you come? Doris would love it if you did.”

Since Doris hadn’t spoken more than three sentences to me in the last month, I wasn’t sure I was ready to believe that. But I’ve always had a hard time saying no.

“O.K., Mrs. Woodman, I’ll come. Which church do you go to?”

“It’s the United Church just down the block from here. The service starts at ten on Sunday morning. Doris will be so pleased you’re coming.”

Somehow I doubted that. But I resolved to show up, mostly because I had said I would.

On the following Sunday I showed up at the United Church, a little apprehensive about what to expect. My memories of church as a child were mostly somber ones ... lots of very solemn hymns that I didn't know the words to, and a lot of serious-looking people talking about stuff I didn't understand. I really didn't want to be there.

I took a seat near the back. I didn't see Mrs. Woodman or Doris anywhere, but I was content to sit by myself. At least I could tell them I'd come.

When the service started, I was amazed at how different it seemed from what I remembered. People here seemed to smile a lot. And the first two hymns ... well, maybe 'hymn' is the wrong word. They were just songs. But very joyful ones. Not at all solemn.

And then a group of young people made their way to the front. Apparently they were going to sing for us. One of them had a guitar.

When they began to sing, it seemed to me that the girl in the middle looked familiar. She was wearing a lovely dress, and as she sang, she had the most wonderful smile on her face, and the sweetest voice.

Good heavens! It was Doris!

She sang. And the joy in her voice was impossible to ignore. Her smile made it seem like she was happy to share the song with everyone in the whole world. But at the same time it seemed like she was singing just for herself. She seemed so happy ... could this really be Doris?

When the song ended, Doris and the other two girls made their way to the back of the church, collecting little kids along the way. As she passed me, Doris stopped.

"Mr. Jackson, you came! I'm going downstairs to help teach Sunday school. Would you like to come with me and help?"

Doris was actually smiling at me when she said this. She had never smiled before when talking to me. Despite my uneasiness at helping with Sunday school, how could I say no? I accepted graciously.

"Of course, Doris. You lead the way!"

So I followed her into the basement, along with all the other noisy, exuberant kids. Doris led me into the room where she taught her class. Her students sat around a small table, with Doris at the head. I stood at the side and watched.

Doris read them a story from a book, and then they talked about some verses in the Bible that related to the story. I don't remember a word of it. All I remember is watching Doris relate to those kids.

Doris was *alive*. She lived the story for those kids, and her excitement about what she was doing was in her eyes and her smile. She laughed. She had fun with the kids and they had fun with her. And she talked.

I couldn't put his Doris together with the Doris I knew from school. Was this laughing, smiling girl who loved to sing really the same sullen, unhappy Doris from my classroom?

Apparently so. I talked to her after church was over.

"Doris, you really seemed to be having a good time today. You sing beautifully, and you were really good with those kids. How come you're not like that in school?"

Doris had to think for a minute or two. But she did have an answer for me.

"Well, Mr. Jackson ... I really don't like school much. I'm not very happy there. I'm not very good at anything, you know that. And nobody likes me. I guess because I don't say much.

"But here in church I get to sing, and I'm good at that. I love to sing more than anything. And I love helping little kids ... and they like me. It makes me happy."

"But Doris ... now that you've told me all this ..."

"I know, Mr. Jackson. I probably won't smile much in class tomorrow. But when you're helping me with those dumb math problems ... maybe if you smile at me, I'll try to smile too. Just a little bit."

So that's how Doris became my favourite student. Teachers aren't supposed to have favourite students. We're supposed to treat everyone equally, and teach each according to their needs.

But Doris was special. When she struggled and looked unhappy, I made an extra effort to be cheerful and smile. When I talked to her, I asked her about things she enjoyed ... her favourite songs, the kids she was teaching on Sundays. And she talked to me. When I looked at her, I no longer saw the plain, sullen uncommunicative student I'd known; instead, I pictured the vibrant, beautiful talented girl who loved to share her gifts with others on Sundays.