

Kenny

“May I go to the bathroom?”

“Yes, Kenny, of course you can!”

I watched him leave the room. Kenny was my problem student. It was only the end of September, and already I knew there was something wrong.

As a first year grade one teacher in a small school, I'd begun the year hoping to have fun teaching my first ever class. I'd expected my students to be joyful, full of life and energy, and I'd looked forward to learning all about them as I taught them to read and write.

Kenny was none of these things. He spoke only when I asked him a question, or when he had to go to the bathroom. He didn't play with the other kids at recess. I'd never seen him smile. Mostly he was just ... sad.

When Kenny returned to my classroom, I asked him if he'd finished his work.

“Yes, Miss Aitch.”

He always called me that. None of the other kids did. He was so sweet ... but he definitely had problems, poor kid!

I'd tried to do a little research. Our school has wireless internet, and I'd used my laptop right here at my desk to try to find out what might be wrong with him. I'd first got the laptop early in college, and it was my lifeline. I'd used it to make lesson plans, to record my study notes, and to research ideas for Unit plans. I'd used it to look for whatever might be wrong with Kenny. Asperger's, maybe, or some form of autism.

But no, that wasn't the problem. He interacted with others when spoken to. He did his work. He just never volunteered anything. And he never had fun. Or smiled. If he wasn't just a kid, I would have described him as depressed. Can kids be depressed?

And then on the first day of October, Kenny changed.

“Miss Aitch, did you know I have a dog? His name is Rufus!”

Kenny had come up to my desk to talk to me. He never did that. And he had never before volunteered any information about his home life. I knew he lived alone with his mother, and that she wasn't very well. But that's all I knew.

“That's great, Kenny! Is he a big dog?”

“No, he’s just little. But he loves me a lot. He meets me when I get off the bus when school’s over, and we play.”

I was amazed. Kenny was talking to me! Maybe it had just taken him a month to get used to school, and now he was going to be all right. I certainly hoped so.

October was a busy month. We were doing sounds and letters, and the class was learning to recognize words and write them. I was enjoying every moment of my new career, and having fun learning all about my students. And I learned more about Kenny.

A lot more.

“Miss Aitch, did you know that my mother and me are going shopping this weekend? She wants to buy me some new clothes!”

“Miss Aitch, my mother really loves me. We’re going to watch a rodeo tomorrow”

Every morning Kenny would tell me about himself, or his mother. But I’d noticed that, while he seemed to be opening up to me, he still wasn’t having much fun in the playground. He kept to himself. When he was alone, he still looked pretty sad.

But not in the classroom. “Miss Aitch, did you know that my mom is going to get married?”

This was news to me. But as a twenty-three year old new teacher in the community, I didn’t get much chance to get in on all the latest gossip. Besides, I was drowning in work. I’d been told how much there was to do as a first-year teacher, and they were right ... I never seemed to be able to catch up. But I was enjoying every minute of it!

During October, Kenny kept me up-to-date. His mother had found someone. They were going to get married. Kenny really liked the man. But with all the news he was telling me, Kenny still didn’t smile.

“Miss Aitch, I’m going to have a new daddy!”

Kenny told me about the wedding plans.

“Mommy and my new daddy are going to be married in a big church. You can come if you want. And then we’re going to move to the country, and live in a big ranch with lots of horses and everything.”

Kenny seemed to grow more excited as the days passed. He told me all about his mother, and how she loved him. He told me about the plans they had for after she got married. It seemed wonderful. I was happy for Kenny.

“Miss Aitch, my mom really loves me!”

And then Kenny missed a day of school. That had never happened before. Kenny had always had perfect attendance.

After the second and third day went by with no Kenny, I began to wonder if there was a problem. I sat down with the school's Office Manager and asked her about him.

I told her, "Things were going so well for Kenny. He was so excited about the wedding; he and his mother seemed to be so happy. But he hasn't been here for three days. I'm a little worried. Have you heard anything, Val?"

Val looked at me, and there were tears in her eyes.

"Melanie, I don't know what Kenny has been telling you. But his mother was diagnosed with cancer right at the beginning of October. There was no man in her life. She's been very ill these past three weeks, and the day before yesterday she died. Kenny has gone to live with his grandmother down south. I'm sorry."

I had never seen Kenny smile.