

Paula

The creature howled into the darkness. The pain was spreading to its chest. It needed to feed soon. Its eyes locked on to a small animal of some sort approaching the alley. Its body trembled in excitement. Soon it would feed ... soon.

It was no use. I couldn't take the story any farther ... my heart wasn't in it. I wasn't into it this kind of story at all, and I had no idea what to write next.

I explained my frustration to Jane, who had been reading my other stories.

"You should stick to writing what you know about. I liked your teacher stories the best."

She had read them all, even the very violent 'post-apocalyptic' adventure story 'Choices', which was my longest, and I thought, my best so far. The main character there had been a teacher.

"Maybe you're right." She usually was.

"Why don't you write about how you helped Paula", she suggested.

"Well, I suppose. I'd have to change the names ... let me think about it."

Paula was the shyest person I'd ever met, with the possible exception of myself. She was in grade eleven, and she'd been in my classes since the beginning of Jr. High. She wasn't a strong student, but she worked hard, and usually got things right.

But she never said anything.

OK, I'm exaggerating. She would answer a question if I asked her one ... but with as few words as possible. She never volunteered answers, and when she did talk to me, she never made eye contact.

When she got to grade ten, her problem grew worse. She would walk from class to class without saying a word to anyone. In fact, she would look away when she met people in the hallway, for fear of having to start a conversation and not knowing what to say. She never joined in noon activities, preferring to stand on the sidelines and watch. Sometimes she just sat in the hallway and read a book.

I recognized this behaviour very well. It's the way I had been, before I had decided to do something about it a few years ago.

Shyness is a curse.

In Paula's case, it might become her undoing. She wanted to attend university to become a Social Worker, so she could help others less fortunate than herself. I knew this because I had made an effort to talk with her this year. I wanted to find out more about her, because I had realized that in all the years she had been my student, I knew almost nothing about her. This is not a good thing to admit if you're a teacher.

My shyness had been something I'd been forced to deal with a few years ago. I'd come to the conclusion that I needed to become a better teacher to some of my students ... mostly the ones who didn't care. But my shyness was getting in the way. One day I walked from one end of the school to the other during lunch break. The hallways were filled with staff and students.

Not a single person said anything to me. It was like I was invisible.

I knew it was because I was shy; for years I had been avoiding greeting others for want of anything to say. I was terrible at small talk. So people didn't say anything to me.

I did something about it. One student in particular had helped; she had greeted me every morning for a whole year, with a simple 'Good morning, Mr. Willis'. Not a big deal. But nobody else did it. And it made me feel good. And along the way, the same girl helped me to become a Christian. But that's another story.

So I started trying to break down the wall I'd thrown up around myself. I practiced making eye contact and greeting people, and having conversations with students.

Paula was doing the same things I had always done. Her aloofness, the fact that she never instigated a conversation, and avoided eye contact, and looked away when she passed people in the hallway; all these things were sending an unconscious but clear message to those around her: 'Leave me alone. I don't want to talk to you. You bore me.'

Of course, she didn't want to send those messages, and probably didn't even know she was. People in school here knew she was shy, and mostly didn't take offence, but they did leave her alone.

But when she got to college, making a first impression like that would leave her with no friends at all.

I didn't think she had any now.

So I resolved to talk to her. Maybe I could help her to do the things that I'd done, to make people realize that she was a nice person, to make herself appear less aloof.

I sat down with her during lunch one day, and talked about myself, and how I recognized that she was doing the same things that I had. I talked about the

unconscious messages she was sending. I told her how her shyness would cause her problems in college, and what I had done about it to help myself.

It's not easy confronting something like this about yourself. It hadn't been easy for me. But I think I got through to her. There were a few tears. But she said she would like it if I helped her.

"Are you sure, Paula? Some of the things I'm going to ask you to do will be uncomfortable."

"But you did them, right?"

"Yes I did, and they worked." I told her how, now, I could walk from one end of the school to the other, and all kinds of people would say hello, or stop for a visit, or just smile at me. Because I was doing those things too. Little kids, teenagers, staff members ... it was as if I'd somehow become visible again.

"So ... how do we start?"

"We'll start easy, Paula. For the next week, every time you see me in the hallway, once a day, you have to make eye contact with me, smile, and say something."

She smiled. "OK. I think I can manage that." We'd been doing it all semester already, in our morning class. At least, I had. She had always replied ... but didn't always make eye contact. That would be hard for her.

Shy people have the mistaken impression that eye contact somehow implies unwanted intimacy. They see the act of looking into someone's eyes when talking to them as an intimate gesture. They don't realize that it just means 'I'm interested in what you have to say'.

People who aren't shy would never understand.

So for that week, Paula and I exchanged greetings. She managed to make eye contact every time ... although the first few times I thought I saw her blush.

Shyness is a curse.

The next week I gave her a more challenging assignment.

"Paula, I want you to pick five people. They can't all be staff members, and none of them can be elementary students. I want you do the same thing with them next week, in the hallways, at lunch."

She blanched. "Mr. Willis, I could never do that!"

So we rehearsed some things she could say, and together we picked out five people she thought she might be able to say hello to.

I still have to rehearse in my head what I'm going to say to someone approaching me in the hallway, if it's someone I don't get to talk to a lot. People who aren't shy would find this pretty funny.

"And remember," I reminded her, "Eye contact!"

Paula did that all the next week. Occasionally at lunchtime I would catch her in the act of greeting someone. She didn't say much ... 'Hi, Val' ... but she did make eye contact and smile. I winked at her once after I saw her greeting someone. She blushed.

Shyness is a curse.

In the third week, I asked her to continue what she was doing, but this time, to add five more people to her list. We picked out those names together too.

The fourth week held some interesting challenges for Paula. First, she had to continue her greetings with the same ten people. But I asked her to meet me in the gym at noon on Monday.

"Do you see Dave and Amber sitting on the stage over there, with the space between them?"

She didn't say anything.

"I want you to go over there and sit down between them. I want you to say hello to one of them ... I don't care which one. Then I want you to ask that person two questions. Any two questions you want. When you're done, meet me in my room and tell me what your questions were, and their answers."

Paula didn't look too happy with her assignment. "Rehearse the questions in your head first, if you want. I still have to do that too, for some people."

I left her alone to contemplate what she had to do.

She joined me in my room five minutes later. I asked her what she had said.

"I talked to Amber." I figured she would. Dave is one of the most popular boys in school. "I asked her if she minded if I sat here. She said no. Then I asked her if she knew what time it was. She told me."

I laughed. "Paula, that was too easy. I want you to go back and talk to Dave this time. Find out two things about him that you didn't know before, and then come back and tell me."

Paula looked at me as if I was crazy. "There's no way I could ..."

I gave her a little help. I suggested a few things she could ask, and she reluctantly made her way to the gym. She wasn't moving very quickly. Maybe she hoped Dave would be gone by the time she got there.

This was way beyond Paula's comfort level. She had never done anything like this before. I didn't really expect she would be able to do it.

Ten minutes later she returned. There was a smile on her face. She told me, "Dave is going to basketball camp this summer. He really likes basketball. And PhysEd."

Wow! Now we were getting somewhere!

Over the next few weeks, I had Paula do the same thing at noon. Sometimes I had her sit with someone in the lunchroom.

At the same time she continued to practice her greetings in the hallway.

One lunch hour I asked her to do something strange. "Paula, I'd like you to start way down at the end of the elementary hallway, and walk slowly down all the halls. Greet people the way you've been practicing. But I want you to do it all with your hands in your pockets. And take your time."

Paula looked at me like I was off my rocker. I said "I'll explain later". She didn't look reassured. But she left to do it.

Ten minutes or so she returned. She said "OK, Mr. Willis. I did what you asked. Now can you explain why?"

I told her about how she walked in the hallway. She wasn't turning away from people as much any more, but she was always walking purposefully, as if she had to get somewhere and didn't have time for anyone else. I figured that was probably not helping. I wanted people to start seeing her in a different way. As far as I could remember, I had *never* seen her with her hands in her pockets.

"Well, I guess that makes sense. I suppose I should do that more often. And I did have some nice conversations with people."

I couldn't believe she was saying that in such an offhand way. This was not the Paula I remembered.

Other people were noticing a change too. Several staff members had commented about how friendly Paula was now. I asked Paula if she'd noticed any differences in how people were treating her.

"Oh, yes. When I walk down the hall, people are actually saying hello to me and smiling. They *never* did that before. "She thought for a moment. "I don't feel so alone any more." I thought I detected a tear in her eye. But maybe not.

Over the next few months Paula continued to practice the things she'd been working on. She expanded her list of people from ten to over thirty.

Then we had a talk. I'd been watching her carefully for about a week, and just about all traces of the shy Paula had disappeared. She was smiling and greeting people in the hallway, and they were doing the same to her. She still didn't participate much in things at lunch time, but she always sat with people and talked with them. On more than one occasion I had seen students purposely choose to sit beside her and start up a conversation.

I decided it was time for Paula's 'final exam'.

"Paula, here's what I think you should do." I outlined my plan.

"Mr. Willis ... no! I couldn't. I wouldn't know what to say. I'd make a fool of myself."

I'd asked her to lead the cheers for our upcoming pep rally.

"Listen to me, Paula ... it will be easy. Almost all the high school students will be outside the gym." Most of them were on the teams, waiting to be introduced. "You'll be doing it mostly for the elementary kids. And you can write out everything, and read it if you have to. You need to do this."

She thought carefully. "I can use a microphone?" She had a quiet voice.

"Of course!"

"OK ... but will you help me write out everything?"

I said I would. Paula prepared carefully for the event, and I even let her rehearse it for me after school one day. She was a little self-conscious doing it for an audience of one, but she did fine.

On pep rally day, after everything had been set up and the students called to the gym, I stuck my head in to see if they were ready to start. Paula was waiting in my room.

Oh oh. I noticed that the whole school was there, including all the grade seven to twelve students! I asked Mindy what was going on.

“We decided to change the format this year. We wanted all the teams here to do the cheers.”

I went back to my room and told Paula about the change.

“I’m not sure ..” She looked apprehensive.

“Listen, Paula. The elementary kids are all in the front rows. Do it for them. Call a few of them up to stand beside you to do the cheers with you. Ignore everybody else. You can do this. I know you can.”

Apparently I had persuaded her. She left to go to the gym. I went to the back to watch with the other teachers.

From the moment she picked up the microphone, it was like I was watching someone else. Paula was enthusiastic. She was excited. She led everyone in the cheers in a loud, confident voice, and hardly had to look at her notes.

Colleen was standing beside me. “Bill ... is that ... Paula? I can’t believe it! She’s really, really good!” There were tears in her eyes. Colleen is like that. And Paula was special.

Paula turned the microphone over to Mindy, who was going to introduce the teams. And then something incredible happened. Our junior and senior high students started to chant: “Paul-a Paul-a Paul-a”. They were telling her she’d done an amazing job!

Paula fled the gym. I think she was overwhelmed.

Watching her perform, I knew I had done a good thing. Paula was ready for anything college could throw at her. Shyness wouldn’t be a problem any more, as long as she kept practicing her greetings. I still had to do that myself. Shyness doesn’t go away ... but you can hide it.

Back in my room, Paula was wearing a big smile. “I did it! I don’t believe it, but I did it!” She hugged me. “So, do I pass?”

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Everything in this story is true, except for Paula. Paula is completely fictional. There is no Paula. And I never did anything like that. But it made for a good story.