

## Serena

“Miss Barbara, I like your hair!”

“Why thank you, Serena. I like your hair too!”

As a first year teacher in my very own classroom, getting ready for the first day of classes had been a nightmare. There had been Unit plans to get ready, seating plans to finalize, endless staff meetings, and somewhere in there I'd had to prepare my room. But here I was in front of my new students, trying desperately to learn their names before we got down to work.

Serena had introduced herself the moment she walked in the door.

“Hi, my name is Serena. That means ‘calm’. Are you Miss Barbara?”

“Yes I am, Serena. I'm happy to meet you. I'm not sure what my name means!”

“I'll look it up for you when I get home. My mom lets me use the computer. I like your hair!”

“Why thank you, Serena. I like your hair too!”

Serena's desk was right at the front, and she sat down and put away her school supplies. I introduced myself to the other students, and we spent the day getting to know one another. It looked like this was going to be a fun year.

During the first two weeks, I got to know a lot about Serena. She had two brothers older than her, and a kitten named Rags. Serena was small for a grade three student, but she had beautiful features, and the most gorgeous blonde hair I had ever seen. It was long and flowing, and I could see that she and her mother enjoyed making it look nice every morning.

“Miss Barbara, I like your hair this morning!”

“Why thank you, Serena. I like your hair this morning too!”

It became our morning ritual.

Serena was a good student. She always finished her work early, and I let her read books from the shelf I had stocked at the back of the room. She was invariably drawn to the books about princesses and fairy godmothers.

Most of the kids in my class enjoyed recess; they were always full of energy that needed to be burned off. But I'd noticed that Serena didn't participate much in the running and jumping games. I asked her why.

“My Mom says I’m sick, and I shouldn’t exert myself.”

I talked to Serena’s mother about that, and she confirmed it. “Serena is having health problems” she told me, “and until the doctors diagnose the problem they’d like her to avoid too much physical activity.”

Often Serena would stay in the room with me during recess times. We would talk about how she wanted to become a firefighter when she grew up. Her father had been a firefighter.

Sometimes we talked about me. I told her how I had worked hard in college because I had always wanted to be a teacher. She told me I was beautiful. I told her she was too.

She had discovered that my name Barbara meant ‘foreign woman’. We both giggled about that.

“Miss Barbara, I like your hair this morning!”

“Why thank you, Serena. I like your hair this morning too!”

I’d always loved my hair. I thought it was my best feature. Most mornings I spent about twenty minutes brushing it so it shone. I usually added a ribbon or a clip to hold it back. Now I often found myself doing something special with it in the morning, just to please Serena.

“Miss Barbara, these problems are easy. Can I have some harder ones?”

Serena’s progress was amazing. She had a natural aptitude for numbers, and would often help her classmates when we were working on arithmetic. She liked to make up stories, and I would help her to write them down. All the kids enjoyed doing that, but Serena’s stories always seemed to be magical. She had a vivid imagination.

“Miss Barbara, I may be missing school for a few days next week. The doctors want to check me out some more.”

“That’s OK, Serena. I’ll help you catch up when you get back.” I was a little worried. Serena had been quite pale the last few days, and her long golden hair had lost some of its lustre. I hoped she wasn’t seriously ill.

After Serena’s return, I noticed the change immediately. She was losing weight, she was definitely pale, and her hair was stringy. At the end of her first day back, her mother stopped in at the end of the day. I asked her about Serena.

“That’s why I came in. Serena has ...” She had to stop for a moment to compose herself. There were tears in her eyes. “Serena has a tumour in her chest. The doctors

are treating it with chemotherapy, and they are quite hopeful that she'll recover completely. But the next few months will be difficult."

I didn't know what to say. Serena?

"It's going to be hard for her. She won't be feeling well, and, well ... we're pretty sure that her hair will fall out while she's being treated. I'm worried that the other kids will tease her."

I assured Serena's mother that I would talk to the class, and that my students would be kind to her. But I was having trouble accepting what I was hearing.

Serena was gone for another week. On her first day back, I didn't have any choice but to accept it. Serena's long golden hair was mostly gone. There were only a few wisps showing from under the head scarf she was wearing. But she seemed to be taking it in stride.

"Do you like my scarf, Miss Barbara? My mother bought it for me."

"It's lovely, Barbara!" But I had trouble holding back the tears.

At recess we talked. She took off her scarf and showed me her mostly bald head. "Mom thinks I should wear the scarf so the other kids won't make fun of me. What do you think, Miss Barbara?"

I hadn't noticed any teasing yet. My kids were pretty good. But I was sure she would get some from the other kids in the hallway.

I think right then I knew what I had to do.

The woman at the hair salon understood. Her mother had had cancer. When I left the salon I was completely bald.

I hadn't realized my ears were so large!

My boyfriend didn't understand. We met for dinner, and we argued. He thought I was overreacting. We argued some more.

We hadn't been getting along that well anyway. Some things are more important than boyfriends.

The next morning, Serena walked into the classroom, and when she looked at me, a huge smile appeared on her face.

"Miss Barbara, I like your hair!"

“Why thank you, Serena. I like your hair too!”

We both giggled.