

My Beloved Mrs. Haskins

Colleen Drobot

The other day I had a bit of a shock when I realized Mrs. Haskins, my beloved grade 2 and 3 teacher, would now be close to 100 years old. Mrs. Haskins was one of my favourite teachers because she had a wonderful blend of alpha qualities; she was kind yet firm. She was definitely in charge but in such a compassionate way that we could rest, secure in the knowledge that she would look after all of us.

I remember her as being kind to everyone. She was even kind to awful Kevin R. who occasionally peed under the steps. She was kind to Darren P. who smelled and sometimes swore.

One day when we had a substitute teacher, Richard M. wrote a nasty note about how he was going to murder the woman. She was distressed by the written attack and so she shamed him in front of the class. With disgust on her face and harsh scorn in her tone, she tried to pull a moral conscience out of him right there and then. As she demanded he apologize to her in front of the class, we all sat horrified, as this was not common practice in our classroom. When she couldn't extract an apology from him, she sent him to the Silly Chair (a place in the office reserved for wayward students). When Mrs. Haskins returned from her absence, I overheard as she took Richard aside and simply said, "Richard, it's hard when I'm away isn't it? I missed you and I'm glad to be back." She never mentioned the violent note he had written to the substitute. He settled back down to his usual self. She understood that Richard didn't function very well when she was away. Although at eight years old I had my judgments about Richard, knowing that Mrs. Haskins would protect even kids who got in trouble made me feel safe in her care.

When it was her duty day at recess, she had a huge following of primary students who wanted to be with her. Every few minutes, she jogged a little before returning to her normal stroll. This game drew big crowds, and also gave us the impression that she enjoyed our company and shared our sense of fun. While the other teachers just wandered around watching us from afar, she created a predictable game that we loved and invited us to join her circle.

Mrs. Haskins didn't come across as some stony teacher-figure who lived at school but revealed herself as a real human being. She brought artifacts from the Queen Charlotte Islands into our class, and showed us photographs of herself, leading an adventurous life there. She treated us as though we were her children. She delighted in us.

I had a sneaking but very strong suspicion that I was her favourite. But years later, when I shared my belief with a friend, she laughed saying, "I always thought I was her favourite!" I think Mrs. Haskins made everyone feel this way. For her, each of us was significant and all were worthy of special consideration. She invited us to exist in her presence.

She never once raised her voice or humiliated us (I was very sensitive to this as a child). But she could be firm too. When Ian R. kissed me by the locker and I didn't want to sit by him anymore, she took me aside and told me she was confident that I would be okay. She said she wasn't going to move me, but she'd make sure I was fine. I trusted her and found my courage. She could be the agent of futility but always the angel of comfort at the same time.

I doubt Mrs. Haskins is alive today. I'm sad to think she is no longer on this earth. As I write about her, I realize that she is still with me in my heart – attachments are forever – and I see that she played a huge part in my career choice as an educator. The feeling she gave me when I was with her is exactly what I aspire to offer my own students. She collected and protected us; she loved learning, and because we loved her, we loved learning too. She respected our dignity, treated us fairly, and always, always conveyed to us, "I am exactly where I want to be – teaching you!"

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