

Don't Blame the Children

by
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HAWKER BROWNLOW
E D U C A T I O N

1 EVERY DAY IN Ms Elizabeth Finch's English 3 class, the same thing happened. Kathy Benedict liked English, especially now that they were reading works by modern authors. But Alex Ross always managed to mess up the class. He ruined it for everybody.

Kathy sat in her usual place and smiled at Todd Macon, her old friend. She looked at Todd again and she felt sad. As usual he had turned his burn scar to the wall. Kathy couldn't help wishing Todd didn't feel so ashamed of the scar.

Alex wasn't in class yet. That was unusual. 'Wouldn't it be great if he didn't come today,' Todd said.

Kathy nodded. Alex always came early. He wanted to begin causing trouble right away. He liked the class to be in an uproar as Ms Finch came in.

But today when Ms Finch came in, the class was quiet. She looked around in surprise. She seemed pleased when she realised Alex was not there.

The class went very well. Kathy couldn't remember the last time they had had such a good class. It was all because Alex wasn't there—laughing at people and making as much trouble as he could.

When the bell rang, Kathy and Todd walked out together. 'I wonder where Alex is?' Kathy said. 'He never misses a class.'

'Maybe he fell in South River,' Todd said with a nasty grin.

'Don't say that,' Kathy said. She was worried about Todd. He

seemed to be growing more and more bitter. And he was still very self-conscious about the scar. He kept it turned away from view when he could. It was hard to tell if he was embarrassed about it or angry. There were days when he seemed mad at the world.

Kathy glanced over into the parking lot. 'Hey, look, it's Alex's motorbike. He must be here.'

Todd frowned. 'Well, there goes Vickers' history class.'

Mr Russell Vickers didn't let Alex cause as much trouble as Ms Finch did. But Alex managed to spoil the class somewhat. He always waited for somebody to make a mistake. Then he would try his best to humiliate the person who had made it.

Kathy and Todd sat down in their usual places in history class. The day was growing cloudy and dark. By nightfall it probably would rain. Kathy watched the door, waiting for Alex to come in. He usually kicked over a rubbish bin to get the class laughing.

But Alex did not come and Mr Vickers had started his discussion of Charles Sturt. 'Charles Sturt was an explorer. His last expedition was to try and reach the centre of Australia. Some said that he was insane to do this,' Mr Vickers said. 'What do you think?' He looked at the class.

Kathy liked Mr Vickers. He had a fine voice and thick black hair. He looked like an actor and he was a very good teacher. He had come to Tyler High a year ago from Lancaster. He was a bachelor and he lived in the old Remington house. When Kathy looked at the old house with its twisted trees, she thought about Wuthering Heights and dark mystery.

'I think he was insane,' Dee Loring said. 'He belonged in a nuthouse for sure.' Dee was a pretty but unpopular girl. She liked herself enough for ten people. That made it hard for anyone else to like her.

Mr Vickers looked annoyed. 'We don't use words like 'nuthouse' in this class.'

Dee laughed. She seemed to miss Alex and his pranks. She didn't like school much. She liked anything that upset things at school.

'Charles Sturt had something he believed in,' Todd said, 'and he

did something about it. That isn't crazy.'

'So you approve of what he did?' Mr Vickers asked Todd.

'Maybe,' Todd said. 'Sometimes you have to take risks. Sometimes there isn't any other way.'

The class discussion went on. Kathy kept thinking about Alex. Why wasn't he here? His motorbike was. She had a strange feeling that something had happened to Alex.

Alex was missing from Mr Sonderville's chemistry class, too. Mr Sonderville was a war veteran. He was somewhat deaf and Alex loved to make fun of him.

When Mr Sonderville saw Alex's empty desk he smiled. 'Good. Now we'll have a wonderful class.'

Most of the students laughed.

At noon, a large group of students gathered around Alex's motorbike. Nobody had seen him since the day before.

'Maybe he didn't go home last night.' somebody said.

'But where could he be?' a girl asked.

'Who cares?' Todd said. 'Good riddance to him.'

'I'm going to see what I can find out in the office,' Kathy said.

'They won't tell you anything,' Dee said. 'They don't know anything. I phoned Alex's house. Nobody knows where Alex is.'

There was a long silence. Kathy looked at Todd. She knew that Todd disliked Alex. He disliked all the kids like Alex, the trouble-makers and hoods. Sometimes it scared her how much he disliked them. She thought it had something to do with his scar.

'It seems like a hole opened up and swallowed Alex,' Kathy said.

Just then another of Alex's friends, Mike Perth, came up. 'I hear Alex is missing. We've got football practice this afternoon. I can't see him missing that.'

'He's probably just playing a joke on everybody,' Kathy said. 'You know how he likes to worry people.' She didn't know if she really believed that.

'What's everybody so worried about?' Todd asked. 'He's gone. So what?'

Mike looked at Todd. 'He's a friend of mine, scarface.'

Todd turned and looked at Mike. 'Nobody calls me that.'

Kathy was frightened by the look on Todd's face.

'Please, Todd, don't let him get you angry! What difference does it make what he says?'

Mike grinned. 'Want to take me on, scarface?' He was taunting Todd on purpose. Mike was about nine kilos heavier than Todd. He was sure he could beat Todd in a fight.

Everybody stepped back to make room for the excitement as Todd lunged at Mike. Kathy couldn't believe her eyes. Todd knocked Mike off his feet and the big senior fell flat on his face. Then Todd jumped on Mike's back. He jerked Mike's arm behind his back.

Kathy could almost hear Mike's bone crack.

'Want to say you're sorry? Or you want a busted arm?' Todd said.

'I'm sorry!' Mike almost screamed in pain.

'I don't hear you,' Todd said, twisting Mike's arm even harder.

Kathy stared at Todd. She had never known how much hate Todd had in him.

'I'm sorry!' Mike cried.

Todd let him up then. He looked at Mike and said, 'Next time, I'll kill you.'

Kathy felt numb. What was wrong with him? She had known Todd since they were in year three. For the past two years, they'd been dating one another. They told each other everything.

There was only one secret between them. Todd had never told her how his accident happened. He had gone away one summer and had come back a changed person. He had always been fun. Now he was cruel and angry. Kathy feared that the real scars were not on the outside. They were in his heart.

Kathy looked at Todd with disbelief. 'Don't start with me,' he snapped at her. He turned and walked away.

'That guy is crazy!' Dee exclaimed. 'A total maniac!'

Mike was rubbing his arm. 'He ought to be locked up.'

Tears filled Kathy's eyes. She stared at Alex's bike again and she wondered.