

**THE KNOWING SMILE**  
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04 January 2019

Ms. Tricker was known far and wide outside the tiny town of Spruce in northern Minnesota for the original shows her 5<sup>th</sup> grade class put on every year. Ms. Tricker always wrote the script, sometimes based on famous plays but often based loosely on ideas that her pupils provided. Every year, Ms. Tricker began by teaching the students the elements of playwriting. By Thanksgiving, each kid had to submit a simple plot outline and a scene with some dialog. If one plot outline stood out, Ms. Tricker would create a play loosely based on it. If several outlines showed promise Ms. Tricker would weave them together if it were possible. In years no plot outline showed promise, Ms. Tricker choose a famous play and wrote her own dialog for it.

In each case, she would work on the script and have it finished by Presidents Day. The kids then began preparing the sets and the performance. By the end of May, everyone and everything was ready. Four performances were given in the school auditorium – one on Friday night and one each day of the Memorial Day weekend.

This was much more than a local school event. The town spruced up for it. It was declared Carnival week with rides, local and exotic food, booths, all sorts of goods for sale, and contests. People came from several hundred miles around. The weekend was a favorite among Canadians from three neighboring Provinces, who crossed the border in droves.

It was by chance that the Falcon family passed near Spruce during Carnival Weekend. Earlier that year, Mr. and Mrs. Falcon tired of the rat race in the high-tech world of California's Peninsula. They quit their jobs and sold their house for a fortune. "That ought to give us enough time to think about what we will do for the next phase of our lives." They bought a trailer and pickup truck and, as soon as 4<sup>th</sup> grade was over for Ruby, took to the road for a long trip across the country with no particular destination in mind. Ruby was miserable about leaving her friends and her cushy life in San Dinero but she had no choice.

As the Falcon family passed through northern Minnesota they were attracted by the unexpected hoopla in an otherwise dead area. Ruby insisted on spending the weekend at the Carnival and the parents knew that she needed a break from the road and the interminable, odious hikes.

Ruby was a voracious reader and when she saw the posted signs that 5<sup>th</sup> graders in the local school were putting on a play, she insisted that her parents get tickets. For Ruby the play was the highlight of the trip. The student actors were fantastic. Even better, after the show was over, she got to meet them and was introduced to the eloquent, charismatic, and triumphant Ms. Tricker. Ruby was swept off her feet.

"Mom, Dad, what luck! This is where I want to go to school next year."

“You’re nuts, Ruby! Just watch how this pathetic little town dies the moment their Carnival is over. And, do you know how cold the winters are here? If you stay out here long on the coldest days your eyeballs will freeze.”

But even after staying and watching the town quiet down after Carnival was over, Ruby remained convinced that this was the only place in the world for her to go to 5<sup>th</sup> grade.

“We’ll see,” said her parents, who had no intention at all of spending an entire school year locked up in the frozen wastelands.

Ruby continued her relentless lobbying as the family summured their way across the country. Finally, with no better plans, the still deliberately unemployed parents relented and turned their way back to Spruce in time for the new school year.

Ruby’s new classmates, led by one obnoxious boy, terrorized her during free time in the playground. He would lead his gang over to where she was reading (because she had no friends to play with) just to torment her. Ruby was so miserable she begged her parents to pick up and move somewhere else, anywhere else. “There is one horrid boy who always teases me and scares me in the playground. He’s such a stupid jerk, yet the other kids follow him like sheep. And he’s so stupid he cheats all the time.”

Ruby’s father keyed in on the last sentence. “Can you prove it?”

“Everyone knows that he’s a bully.”

“No! I mean, can you prove that he cheats?”

Ruby realized that she had a powerful weapon – blackmail – and it wedged a broad smile across her tear-wet face. “Yeah, sure! I sit in the back of math class and can video him doing it, it’s so obvious.”

The next time the boy led his gang over to where Ruby was reading, she faced him with such a confident smile that it unsettled him. He made one foolish comment and then backed off and let her be.

After they left a girl approached Ruby, sat down next to her and said, “I’ve been watching them pick on you for weeks. Today you just smiled at him and that really scared him. Your smile has great power.”

Ruby smiled at the girl, but it didn’t scare her at all. The girl had features that Ruby could not place. In California, Ruby’s school had children from almost everywhere – the Middle East, East Asia, India, Africa, the South Pacific, and, of course, Mexico and Central and South America. So, Ruby was intrigued and asked her in such a candid manner that the girl opened up.

“I am Red Lake Ojibwe. I live on the Red Lake Reservation. My real name is Bawaajige. It means dream. But here I call myself Barbara.”

Barbara looked about Ruby's age but wasn't in her class. "What class are you in?"

Barbara looked very sad. "This is my first year here. I'm in First Grade because I can't read. Now the kids call me retarded. The Reservation school is so terrible I never went at all, so I begged my parents to let me come here. I want to learn to read. Reading makes you strong. It's because you read that your smile has great power."

"No! My smile has power because I have a powerful secret that only he and I know."

"What is your secret?"

"Promise you won't tell anyone!"

"I'll take an oath."

So Ruby took out her phone and showed Barbara.

From that time the two girls always sat or played together during recess. Ruby helped Barbara to read and she learned fast. But that wasn't what made the girls fast friends. What did seal their friendship happened a few days after they met. The bully came over to them, followed by his gang, and began insulting Barbara and telling her to go back to her people.

Ruby looked at him with that same knowing smile and said, "She is the only one of us who really belongs here. Tomorrow you are going to apologize to her in front of the whole school." And turning to his followers she said, "And as for you sheep, keep on following this fool and you'll be ashamed of yourselves for the rest of your lives."