A Story of Love, Ray Bradbury

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That was the week Ann Taylor came to teach summer school at Green Town Central. It was the summer of her twenty-fourth birthday, and it was the summer when Bob Spaulding was just fourteen.

Everyone remembered Ann Taylor, for she was that teacher for whom all the children wanted to bring huge oranges or pink flowers, and for whom they rolled up the rustling green and yellow maps of the world without being asked.

She was that woman who always seemed to be passing by on days when the shade was green under the tunnels of oaks and elms in the old town, her face shifting with the bright shadows as she walked, until it was all things to all people.

She was the fine peaches of summer in the snow of winter, and she was cool milk for cereal on a hot early-June morning. Whenever you needed an opposite, Ann Taylor was there.

And those rare few days in the world when the climate was balanced as fine as a maple leaf between winds that blew just right, those were the days like Ann Taylor, and should have been so named on the calendar.

As for Bob Spaulding, he was the cousin who walked alone through town on any October evening with a pack of leaves after him like a horde of Hallowe'en mice, or you would see him, like a slow white fish in spring in the tart waters of the Fox Hill Creek, baking brown with the shine of a chestnut to his face by autumn.

Or you might hear his voice in those treetops where the wind entertained; dropping down hand by hand, there would come Bob Spaulding to sit alone and look at the world, and later you might see him on the lawn with the ants crawling over his books as he read

through the long afternoons alone, or played himself a game of chess on Grandmother's porch, or picked out a solitary tune upon the black piano in the bay window. You never saw him with any other child.

That first morning, Miss Ann Taylor entered through the side door of the schoolroom and all of the children sat still in their seats as they saw her write her name on the board in a nice round lettering.

'My name is Ann Taylor,' she said, quietly. 'And I'm your new teacher.'

The room seemed suddenly flooded with illumination, as if the roof had moved back; and the trees were full of singing birds. Bob Spaulding sat with a spitball he had just made, hidden in his hand. After a half hour of listening to Miss Taylor, he quietly let the spitball drop to the floor.

That day, after class, he brought in a bucket of water and a rag and began to wash the boards.
'What's this?' She turned to him from her desk, where she had been correcting spelling papers.

'The boards are kind of dirty,' said Bob, at work.
'Yes, I know. Are you sure you want to clean them?'
'I suppose I should have asked permission,' he said, halting uneasily.

'I think we can pretend you did,' she replied, smiling, and at this smile he finished the boards in an amazing burst of speed and pounded the erasers so furiously that the air was full of snow, it seemed, outside the open window.

'Let's see,' said Miss Taylor. 'You're Bob Spaulding, aren't you?'
'Yes'm.'
'Well, thank you, Bob.'
'Could I do them every day?' he asked.

'Don't you think you should let the others try?'
'I'd like to do them,' he said. 'Every day.'
'We'll try it for a while and see,' she said.

He lingered.

‘I think you’d better run on home,’ she said, finally.
‘Good night.’ He walked slowly and was gone.

The next morning he happened by the place where she took board and room just as she was coming out to walk to school.
‘Well, here I am,’ he said.

‘And do you know,’ she said. ‘I’m not surprised.’
They walked together.
‘May I carry your books?’ he asked.
‘Why, thank you, Bob.’
‘It’s nothing,’ he said, taking them.

They walked for a few minutes and he did not say a word. She glanced over and slightly down at him and saw how at ease he was and how happy he seemed, and she decided to let him break the silence, but he never did. When they reached the edge of the school ground he gave the books back to her. ‘I guess I better leave you here,’ he said. ‘The other kids wouldn’t understand.’
‘I’m not sure I do, either, Bob,’ said Miss Taylor.

‘Why we’re friends,’ said Bob earnestly and with a great natural honesty.
‘Bob—’ she started to say.
‘Yes’m?’
‘Never mind.’ She walked away.
‘I’ll be in class,’ he said.

And he was in class, and he was there after school every night for the next two weeks, never saying a word, quietly washing the boards and cleaning the erasers and rolling up the maps while she worked at her papers, and there was that clock silence of four o’clock, the silence of the sun going down in the slow sky, the silence with the catlike sound of erasers patted together, and the drip of water from a moving sponge, and the rustle and turn of papers and the scratch of a pen, and

perhaps the buzz of a fly banging with a tiny high anger against the tallest clear pane of window in the room. Sometimes the silence would go on this way until almost five, when Miss Taylor would find Bob Spaulding in the last seat of the room, sitting and looking at her silently, waiting for further orders.

'Well, it's time to go home,' Miss Taylor would say, getting up.
'Yes'm.'

And he would run to fetch her hat and coat. He would also lock the schoolroom door for her unless the janitor was coming in later. Then they would walk out of the school and across the yard, which was empty, the janitor taking down the chain swings slowly on his stepladder, the sun behind the umbrella trees. They talked of all sorts of things.

'And what are you going to be, Bob, when you grow up?'
'A writer,' he said.
'Oh, that's a big ambition; it takes a lot of work.'

'I know, but I'm going to try,' he said. 'I've read a lot.'
'Bob, haven't you anything to do after school?'
'How do you mean?'
'I mean, I hate to see you kept in so much, washing the boards.'

'I like it,' he said. 'I never do what I don't like.'
'But nevertheless.'
'No, I've got to do that,' he said. He thought for a while and said. 'Do me a favor, Miss Taylor?'

'It all depends.'
'I walk every Saturday from out around Buetrick Street along the creek to Lake Michigan. There're a lot of butterflies and crayfish and birds. Maybe you'd like to walk, too.'

'Thank you,' she said.
'Then you'll come?'

‘I’m afraid not.’
‘Don’t you think it’d be fun?’
‘Yes, I’m sure of that, but I’m going to be busy.’
He started to ask doing what, but stopped.

‘I take along sandwiches,’ he said. ‘Ham-and-pickle ones. And orange pop and just walk along, taking my time. I get down to the lake about noon and walk back and get home about three o’clock. It makes a real fine day, and I wish you’d come. Do you collect butterflies? I have a big collection. We could start one for you.’

‘Thanks. Bob, but no, perhaps some other time.’
He looked at her and said. ‘I shouldn’t have asked you, should I?’
‘You have every right to ask anything you want to,’ she said.

A few days later she found an old copy of Great Expectations, which she no longer wanted, and gave it to Bob. He was very grateful and took it home and stayed up that night and read it through and talked about it the next morning.

Each day now he met her just beyond sight of her boarding house and many days she would start to say, ‘Bob—’ and tell him not to come to meet her any more, but she never finished saying it, and he talked with her about Dickens and Kipling and Poe and others, coming and going to school.

She found a butterfly on her desk on Friday morning. She almost waved it away before she found it was dead and had been placed there while she was out of the room. She glanced at Bob over the heads of her other students, but he was looking at his book; not reading, just looking at it.

It was about this time that she found it impossible to call on Bob to recite in class. She would hover her pencil about his name and then call the next person up or down the list. Nor would she look at him while they were walking to or from school. But on several late afternoons as he moved his arm high on the blackboard, sponging away the

arithmetic symbols, she found herself glancing over at him for seconds at a time before she returned to her papers.

And then on Saturday morning he was standing in the middle of the creek with his overalls rolled up to his knees, kneeling down to catch a crayfish under a rock, when he looked up and there on the edge of the running stream was Miss Ann Taylor.

'Well, here I am,' she said, laughing.
'And do you know,' he said, 'I'm not surprised.'
'Show me the crayfish and the butterflies,' she said.

They walked down to the lake and sat on the sand with a warm wind blowing softly about them, fluttering her hair and the ruffle on her blouse, and he sat a few yards back from her and they ate the ham-and-pickle sandwiches and drank the orange pop solemnly.

'Gee, this is swell,' he said. 'This is the swellest time ever in my life.'
'I didn't think I would ever come on a picnic like this,' she said.
'With some kid,' he said.

'I'm comfortable, however,' she said.
'That's good news.'
They said little else during the afternoon.

'This is all wrong,' he said, later. 'And I can't figure why it should be. Just walking along and catching old butterflies and crayfish and eating sandwiches. But Mom and Dad'd rib the heck out of me if they knew, and the kids would, too. And the other teachers, I suppose, would laugh at you, wouldn't they?'

'I'm afraid so.'
'I guess we better not do any more butterfly catching, then.'
'I don't exactly understand how I came here at all,' she said.
And the day was over.

That was about all there was to the meeting of Ann Taylor and Bob Spaulding, two or three monarch butterflies, a copy of Dickens, a dozen crayfish, four sandwiches, and two bottles of Orange Crush.

The next Monday, quite unexpectedly, though he waited a long time, Bob did not see Miss Taylor come out to walk to school, but discovered later that she had left earlier and was already at school. Also, Monday night, she left early, with a headache, and another teacher finished her last class. He walked by her boarding house but did not see her anywhere, and he was afraid to ring the bell and inquire.

On Tuesday night after school they were both in the silent room again, he sponging the board contentedly, as if this time might go on forever, and she seated, working on her papers as if she, too, would be in this room and this particular peace and happiness forever, when suddenly the courthouse clock struck.

It was a block away and its great bronze boom shuddered one's body and made the ash of time shake away off your bones and slide through your blood, making you seem older by the minute. Stunned by that clock, you could not but sense the crashing flow of time, and as the clock said five o'clock, Miss Taylor suddenly looked up at it for a long time, and then she put down her pen.

'Bob,' she said.
He turned, startled. Neither of them had spoken in the peaceful and good hour before.

'Will you come here?' she asked.
He put down the sponge slowly.
'Yes,' he said.
'Bob, I want you to sit down.'
'Yes'm.'
She looked at him intently for a moment until he looked away. 'Bob, I wonder if you know what I'm going to talk to you about. Do you know?'

'Yes.'

‘Maybe it’d be a good idea if you told me, first.’
‘About us,’ he said, at last.
‘How old are you, Bob?’
‘Going on fourteen.’
‘You’re thirteen years old.’

He winced. ‘Yes’m.’
‘And do you know how old I am?’
‘Yes’m. I heard. Twenty-four.’
‘Twenty-four.’
‘I’ll be twenty-four in ten years, almost,’ he said.

‘But unfortunately you’re not twenty-four now.’
‘No, but sometimes I feel twenty-four.’
‘Yes, and sometimes you almost act it.’
‘Do I, really!’

‘Now sit still there; don’t bound around, we’ve a lot of discuss. It’s very important that we understand what is happening, don’t you agree?’
‘Yes, I guess so.’

‘First, let’s admit we are the greatest and best friends in the world. Let’s admit I have never had a student like you, nor have I had as much affection for any boy I’ve ever known.’ He flushed at this. She went on. ‘And let me speak for you—you’ve found me to be the nicest teacher of all the teachers you’ve ever known.’

‘Oh, more than that,’ he said.
‘Perhaps more than that, but there are facts to be faced and an entire way of life to be examined, and a town and its people, and you and me to be considered. I’ve thought this over for a good many days, Bob.

Don’t think I’ve missed anything, or been unaware of my own feelings in the matter. Under some circumstances our friendship would be odd indeed. But then you are no ordinary boy.

I know myself pretty well, I think, and I know I'm not sick, either mentally or physically, and that whatever has evolved here has been a true regard for your character and goodness, Bob; but those are not the things we consider in this world, Bob, unless they occur in a man of a certain age. I don't know if I'm saying this right.'

'It's all right,' he said. 'It's just if I was ten years older and about fifteen inches taller it'd make all the difference, and that's silly,' he said, 'to go by how tall a person is.'
'The world hasn't found it so.'

'I'm not the world,' he protested.
'I know it seems foolish,' she said. 'When you feel very grown up and right and have nothing to be ashamed of. You have nothing at all to be ashamed of, Bob, remember that. You have been very honest and good, and I hope I have been, too.'

'You have,' he said.
'In an ideal climate, Bob, maybe someday they will be able to judge the oldness of a person's mind so accurately that they can say, "This is a man, though his body is only thirteen; by some miracle of circumstance and fortune, this is a man, with a man's recognition of responsibility and position and duty"; but until that day, Bob, I'm afraid we're going to have to go by ages and heights in the ordinary way in an ordinary world.'

'I don't like that,' he said.
'Perhaps I don't like it, either, but do you want to end up far unhappier than you are now? Do you want both of us to be unhappy? Which we would certainly be. There really is no way to do anything about us—it is so strange even to try to talk about us.'

'Yes'm.'
'But at least we know all about us and the fact that we have been right and fair and good and there is nothing wrong with our knowing each other, nor did we ever intend that it should be, for we both understand how impossible it is, don't we?'

‘Yes, I know. But I can’t help it.’
‘Now we must decide what to do about it,’ she said. ‘Now only you and I know about this. Later, others might know. I can secure a transfer from this school to another one—’
‘No!’

‘Or I can have you transferred to another school.’
‘You don’t have to do that,’ he said.
‘Why?’

‘We’re moving. My folks and I, we’re going to live in Madison. We’re leaving next week.’
‘It has nothing to do with all this, has it?’

‘No, no, everything’s all right. It’s just that my father has a new job there. It’s only fifty miles away. I can see you, can’t I, when I come to town?’
‘Do you think that would be a good idea?’

‘No, I guess not.’
They sat awhile in the silent schoolroom.
‘When did all of this happen?’ he said, helplessly.

‘I don’t know,’ she said. ‘Nobody ever knows. They haven’t known for thousands of years, and I don’t think they ever will. People either like each other or don’t, and sometimes two people like each other who shouldn’t. I can’t explain myself, and certainly you can’t explain you.’

‘I guess I’d better get home,’ he said.
‘You’re not mad at me, are you?’
‘Oh, gosh no, I could never be mad at you.’

‘There’s one more thing. I want you to remember, there are compensations in life. There always are, or we wouldn’t go on living. You don’t feel well, now; neither do I. But something will happen to fix that. Do you believe that?’

‘I’d like to.’
‘Well, it’s true.’
‘If only,’ he said.
‘What?’
‘If only you’d wait for me,’ he blurted.

‘Ten years?’
‘I’d be twenty-four then.’
‘But I’d be thirty-four and another person entirely, perhaps. No, I don’t think it can be done.’

‘Wouldn’t you like it to be done?’ he cried.
‘Yes,’ she said quietly. ‘It’s silly and it wouldn’t work, but I would like it very much.’

He sat there for a long time.
‘I’ll never forget you,’ he said.
‘It’s nice for you to say that, even though it can’t be true, because life isn’t that way. You’ll forget.’

‘I’ll never forget. I’ll find a way of never forgetting you,’ he said.

She got up and went to erase the boards.

‘I’ll help you,’ he said.

‘No, no,’ she said hastily. ‘You go on now, get home, and no more tending to the boards after school. I’ll assign Helen Stevens to do it.’

He left the school. Looking back, outside, he saw Miss Ann Taylor, for the last time, at the board, slowly washing out the chalked words, her hand moving up and down.

He moved away from the town the next week and was gone for sixteen years.

Though he was only fifty miles away, he never got down to Green Town again until he was almost thirty and married, and then one spring they were driving through on their way to Chicago and stopped off for a day.

Bob left his wife at the hotel and walked around town and finally asked about Miss Ann Taylor, but no one remembered at first, and then one of them remembered.

‘Oh, yes, the pretty teacher. She died in 1936, not long after you left.’

Had she ever married? No, come to think of it, she never had.

He walked out to the cemetery in the afternoon and found her stone, which said, ‘Ann Taylor, born 1910, died 1936.’

And he thought. Twentysix years old. Why, I’m three years older than you are now, Miss Taylor.

Later in the day the people in the town saw Bob Spaulding’s wife strolling to meet him under the elm trees and the oak trees, and they all turned to watch her pass, for her face shifted with bright shadows as she walked: she was the fine peaches of summer in the snow of winter, and she was cool milk for cereal on a hot early-summer morning.

And this was one of those rare few days in time when the climate was balanced like a maple leaf between winds that blow just right, one of those days that should have been named, everyone agreed, after Robert Spaulding’s wife.

The end