These Things Happen, Ray Bradbury

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IN THE SPRING of the year 1934, Miss Ann Taylor came to teach at the Central School. That was the year she was twenty-four years old and Bob Markham was fourteen. Everyone remembered Ann Taylor. She was the teacher for whom all the children wanted to bring fruit or flowers, and for whom they rolled up the pink and green maps of the world without being asked.

She was the woman who always seemed to be passing by on days when the shade was green under the oaks and elms, 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 summer morning. 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 Markham, he was the boy who walked alone through town on any October evening with a pack of leaves after him like a horde of Halloween mice. In spring he moved like a slow white fish in the tart waters of the Fox Hill Creek, baking brown with the shine of a chestnut by autumn.

Or you might see him on the lawn with the ants crawling over his books as he read through the long afternoons alone, or playing himself a game of chess on his grandmother’s porch. You never saw him with any other child.

That spring when Bob was in the ninth grade, Miss Ann Taylor came in through the door of the schoolroom and all the children sat still in their seats while she wrote her name on the board in a nice round lettering.

“My name is Ann Taylor,” she said quietly to them, “and I’m your new teacher.”
The room seemed suddenly flooded with illumination, as if the roof had moved back. Bob Markham sat with a spit ball hidden in his hand. After a half hour of listening to Miss Taylor, he quietly let the spit ball drop to the floor.

That afternoon after class, he brought in a bucket of water and a rag and began to wash the boards.
“What’s this?” She turned from her desk where she had been correcting spelling papers.
“The boards are kind of dirty,” said Bob.

“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 Markham, aren’t you?”

“Yes’m.”
“Well, thank you, Bob.”
“Could I do them every afternoon?” he asked.
“Don’t you think you should let the others try?”
“I’d like to do them,” he said. “Every afternoon.”
“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 happy he seemed, and she decided to let him break the silence, but he never did. When they reached the edge of the school grounds, 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.”
“Why, we’re friends,” he said earnestly.
“Bob—” she began.
“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 afternoon 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.

Between them there was that clock silence of four o’clock, the silence of the sun going down, the silence with the catlike sound of erasers patted together, 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 window in the room. Sometimes the silence would go on this way until almost five, when Miss Taylor would find Bob Markham in the last seat of the room, sitting and looking at her silently.

“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 empty yard. 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? I mean, I hate to see you indoors so much, washing the boards.”
“I like it,” he said. “I never do what I don’t like.”
“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’s 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 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. I get down to the lake about noon and walk back about three. 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 didn’t want, and gave it to Bob. He 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.

She found a butterfly on her desk on Friday morning. She almost waved it away before she found that 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. Her pencil would hover over his name and then she would 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.

And then one Saturday morning when he was standing in the middle of the creek with his overalls rolled up to his knees, 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. He sat a few yards back from her while 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 Markham. Two or three monarch butterflies, a copy of Dickens, a dozen crayfish, four sandwiches, and two bottles of orange pop. The next Monday, though he waited a long time, Bob did not see Miss Taylor come out to walk to school.

He discovered later she had left earlier and was already there. Also, Monday afternoon she left early and another teacher finished her last class. He walked by her boarding-house and did not see her anywhere, but he was afraid to ring the bell and inquire.

On Tuesday night after school they both were 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 court-house clock struck.

It was a block away and its great bronze boom shuddered one’s body, 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 looked up at it for a long time. Then she put down her pen.

“Bob,” she said.
He turned, startled. Neither of them had spoken in the peaceful 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 you should tell me first.”
“About us.” he said at last.
“How old are you, Bob?”
“Going on fifteen.”
“You’re fourteen 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,” he said.
“But unfortunately you’re not twenty-four now.”
“No, but sometimes I feel twenty-four.”
“Yes, and sometimes you act it.”
“Do I, really?”

“Now sit still there; we’ve a lot to discuss. It’s very important that we understand what is happening, isn’t it?”
“Yes, I guess so.”

“FIRST, LET’S admit we are the greatest and best friends in the world. Let’s admit that I have never had a student like you, nor have I had as much affection for any boy I’ve ever known. And let me speak for you,

you've found me to be the nicest 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 I to be considered. I've thought this over for a good many days, Bob.

Don't think I've 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 that I'm not sick, either mentally or physically, and that what I feel is a true regard for your character. But that is not what we consider in this world, Bob, except 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 that if I were ten years older, and about fifteen inches taller it'd make all the difference. And that's silly, to go by how tall a person is."
"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 that I have been too."

"You have," he said.
"Maybe someday people will judge the oldness of a person's mind accurately enough to say, 'This is a man, though his body is only fourteen. 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."
"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 strange even to try to talk about us."

“Yes’m.”

“But at least we know all about us and that we have been right and fair and good, and that there is nothing wrong with our knowing each other. But we both understand how impossible it is, don’t we?”

“Yes—but I can’t help it.”
“We must decide what to do about it,” she said. “Now only you and I know about this. Later others might know. I can transfer from this school to another one—”
“No!”

“Or I can have you transferred.”
“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 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 a while in the silent school room.
“How did all of this happen?” he said helplessly.

“I don’t know,” she said. “Nobody ever knows. They haven’t known for thousand 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 happy 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 the board.
“I’ll help you,” he said.

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

He left the room. Looking back, outside, he saw Miss Ann Taylor for the last time. She was standing at the board, slowly erasing it.

HE MOVED away from town the next week and he was gone for sixteen years. He never got down to Green Bluff again until he was thirty and married. And then one spring he and his wife were driving through on their way to Chicago and stopped off there.

Alone, he took a walk around town and finally asked about Miss Ann Taylor. No one remembered at first and then one of them did.
“Oh, yes, the pretty teacher. She died 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, Twenty-six years old. Why, I’m four years older than you are now, Miss Taylor.

Later in the day the people in the town saw Bob Markham’s wife strolling to meet him 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 Bob Markham’s wife.

The end