

THE CONTESTANT

Short Story

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“I’ve been accepted as a contestant on ‘Wheel of Fortune’!! Mummy, now what am I going to do? How will I get from North Carolina to California for the taping of the show?”

“Don’t worry, Pooky Dear. Mummy will go with you and handle everything.”

“What would I do without you, Mummy? -- the flight, the hotel, the transfers from one to the other, and the show itself--so overwhelming without your help.”

Cassandra Higgenbothum, a 28-year-old tiny woman with a tiny voice, was attractive enough, intelligent enough, and educated enough to be a teacher.

However, Mummy and Daddy influenced Pooky into becoming the permanent substitute in the school where Daddy was the principal.

On a spring day warm enough for open windows, Ms. Higgenbothum was assigned to Mrs. Neilson’s second floor classroom where she taught freshman English.

Today’s lesson was on Shakespeare’s ‘Romeo and Juliet’. Some students acted the character parts while others just read along.

In the back of the room, one Mark Wilson did not have a part, but he did have a penchant for acting—acting out, that is. While Ms. H was focused on reading the play aloud, he quietly fashioned one long rope made of the belts of fellow students. Mark then used the rope to ease out the window and lower himself to the ground—without drawing Ms. H’s attention. All went well, until he reached the end of his

rope about 10 feet from his destination. A loud “RAAAAATTTZZZ” and then a reverberating ‘thud’ drew the attention of Mr. Gardner, attempting to teach social studies in the first-floor classroom below.

Simultaneously, Mr. Gardner called the principal, students quietly giggled, and Ms. H stayed focused on the reading of ‘Romeo and Juliet’. Ms. H was shocked when the principal, her father, summoned her into the hallway to ask, “Cassandra – I mean, Ms. Higginbothum -- what just happened in your classroom?”

“We were reading ‘Romeo and Juliet’ aloud in class.”

“Young Mark Wilson just told me that you asked him to play the part of Romeo where he exits by using a rope to drop from the balcony to the ground. Is this true, Cassandra – I mean, Ms. Higginbothum?”

“N-n-n-no,” she stammered, unaware of Mark’s impromptu act.

“Well, then, you’re fired!” he replied. “Mark’s actions were your responsibility during the time he was under your supervision.”

“But, Daddy – I mean, Mr. Higginbothum!!”...she sobbed as she collapsed into a heap on the hallway floor.

From the plane’s loudspeaker came: “Please prepare for landing. Fold up your tray tables and return your seats to the upright and locked position”, as Cassandra

slowly awakened. What a catharsis It had been, she thought, winning \$100,000 on Wheel of Fortune! Now I have money enough and self-confidence enough to become my own independent person. I know I looked a bit weird on the show. I always seemed like I was asking a question as I gave my answers. Then my heavy breathing and shaky hands in front of my face didn't make me look like I knew what I was doing. My squinty eyes and apparent attempts to squeeze myself into a little unnoticeable ball whenever Pat Sajak would come over to me didn't make me look very enthusiastic to be there.

But I WAS; I was very enthusiastic to be there. Mummy's appendicitis attack gave me the opportunity to discover that I didn't need her; I could make the flights, the hotel, the transfers on my own terms. When I arrived at the studio, seeing all the people, the equipment, and the set made me nervous. Getting my first right answer was when I started to believe I could do this thing. It was then that I promised myself that I will continue my education, to be who I want to be. No longer would I allow any Mark Wilsons to take advantage of my good nature or fathers to bully me into agreeing to something I didn't really want to do.

As I exited the plane and turned my face to the Carolina Blue Sky, I knew I would never again be the "Pooky" who needed to be protected and guided and told what to do next. I was the new and unadulterated *Cassandra Higginbothum*.