

Snip

by Gabriella Brand

I cut them off with a pair of nail scissors. It was not easy work. First the left. Then the right. And I placed them carefully in a shoebox lined with shiny silver paper from *Baraccini Chocolates*. I thought the two braids looked almost edible. They were the color of licorice, glossy and smooth, each about ten inches long.

All year my teacher, Mr. Anders, had been tugging on the neatly plaited braids, which dangled below my shoulders. He was always telling me that he wanted one. “For my collection,” he’d say.

I felt like the teacher’s pet that year, but I think Mr. Anders had a way of making each of us feel special. Giving us nicknames or remembering something personal about us or our families. Who had a Golden Retriever. Whose grandparents had taken them to Radio City Music Hall. Who had memorized Mickey Mantle’s RBI.

Right from the first day of class I had fallen for Mr. Anders’s charms. I was petite, so I sat in the front row, right in front of the teacher’s desk, very well placed to flash a smile at my first male teacher ever. Mr. Anders was young. He had an accent I had never heard before. “I’m from North Carolina,” he told us on the first day, “The Tar Heel State.”

I had no idea what a tar heel was. All I knew was that Mr. Anders had a laugh that could melt sugar. What a contrast to my teacher from the previous year, an old biddy with a downturned mouth and a scary way of sucking in air between her teeth before she went into a rage. She had once told the class that she disliked children, but her other career choice had been nursing. “And I like the sight of blood even less than I like the sight of you,” she confessed.

Mr. Anders adored kids. Plus, he never sucked air between his perfectly shaped white incisors and he never went into a rage, even when we spilled rubber cement on the desks or failed to come in from recess on time. On my first report card, Mr. A. wrote that I was a “delight”. In fact, he said, that I pretty much represented his “ideal” student, except maybe in math, but that was a mere detail. He was sure I would make extraordinary progress this year. He talked about how much he appreciated my study skills, my good manners, my sense of humor, and my active class leadership.

Although he didn’t mention how much he appreciated my braids, I knew, somewhere, deep inside me, that my braids were the glue that kept Mr. Anderson attached to me. And the rest of the class knew it too. The banter between Mr. A and me over my braids became part of class culture, just like the games of *Stormy Weather* that we played on the playground or the way we all looked forward to Friday afternoons when Mr. Anders would bring in store-bought cookies, sometimes coconut macaroons, and read us *White Fang* or *Black Beauty*, letting us rest our heads on our desks at the end of a long and tiring week.

“I could use one of your braids as an eraser,” Mr. Anders would say. “Or I could keep a braid in a cage and teach it tricks.”

Everyone would laugh because Mr. Anders was the kind of guy whose jokes were silly, but tender. He didn’t try too hard to make anybody laugh. He’d just lope around the classroom with his size twelve shoes, his dazzling smile, his wrinkled blue suit that he had told us was a gift from his Mama, on the occasion of his college graduation.

“But then she cried when I took a job here,” he confessed. “So far away from the Tar Heel State.”

Sometimes he read us letters that his Mama wrote to him. *How cold is it up North? Are the people friendly? When are you getting married?* At the word married, some of the boys whistled and cat called, but I held my breath. I felt myself blushing. I secretly

hoped he didn't already have a girlfriend and that marriage was not in his immediate future.

At Christmastime, I gave him a necktie and a card that I had made out of construction paper. He wrote me a thank-you note, on monogrammed stationary...Herbert Anders, Wills Farm, North Carolina. He loved the necktie, he said, and told me he wore it for Christmas dinner with his family, and his Mama admired the tie too. I tried to picture him showing off his new tie.

Yet somehow, I felt that he was disappointed in such a common gift.

I knew what he really wanted from me.

The year seemed to fly by. I did a report on Scottish tartans, which Mr. Anders called "fascinating." I learned the names of the emperors of Rome and the difference between butterflies and moths. In the spring we all made lamps out of cypress knees as a class project. Mr. Anders had brought the wood back from a trip to North Carolina. Eighteen knees, hollowed out, so we could each thread one with wire and a socket.

"They'll make great Mother's Day presents," said Mr. Anders.

I think my own mother thought the lamp was an eyesore because she relegated it to the game room in our basement, but I liked to smell the varnish and admire the smooth wood. A piece of North Carolina right there in my house. A piece of Mr. Anders.

By the time the school year came to a close, I had made up my mind what I would give him as a farewell present.

I waited until the day after "promotion day." I didn't want anyone else to be around when I presented such a private gift. I knew that all the teachers would be alone in the building, cleaning up, writing reports. Mr. Anders had told us that it would take him until

the end of the week to get everything back in order, and then he was returning to Mama and the other Tar heels.

Somehow, I had the sense to wrap the top end of each braid with rubber bands before I cut, so the loose hair wouldn't come undone. Then I took the nail scissors, held my breath and snipped away. Each braid stayed intact, like a mummy, preserved in plaited form.

I prepared the braid mausoleum ahead of time, folding a pink scarf on the bottom of the box. Then I placed ribbons on the ends of each braid, covering the ugly plain elastics which held the hair together. The silver paper added some sparkle.

I had cut my hair at home, in the bathroom upstairs, and I didn't even look in the mirror after I was done. I just wanted to rush over to the school and give my present to Mr. Anders. I knew I could sneak down the stairs and get on my bike without anyone seeing me. I tucked the shoebox into the wire basket on my bike and pedaled away.

Mr. Anders' classroom was in end-of-year disarray, with chairs resting on the tops of desks. Papers and chalk dust covered the floor. Mr. Anders was wearing a white t-shirt and khaki pants. He was bent over a cabinet. "Here," I said, creeping up behind him and thrusting out the shoebox.



"Oh, oh my, oh my goodness," drawled Mr. Anders after opening the present.

He glanced from the box of braids to my recently shorn hair, lopsided on one side, jagged and coarse on the other.

I smiled at him.

“Sit down, Little Miss G,” he said, clearing a few papers and turning over one of the desk chairs.

I sat down. Perhaps he was going to talk to me about our future lives together.

“I can’t accept your braids,” said Mr. Anders. “You need to keep them.”

“But they’re for you, you...you...always said you wanted them.”

Mr. Anders looked at me. A twinge of sorrow seemed to cross his face.

“I’ll never forget you, Miss G. I don’t need your braids to remember you by. But I want you to keep them. And when you are grown up, please show them to your own children...they’ll be a great souvenir...a way to remember this school year, and...and me.”

I could feel myself on the verge of tears. I don’t remember if I said anything or not.

Mr. Anders handed me back the shoebox. I stuffed it into my bike basket and rode home.

My mother took one look at me and made an appointment for a proper haircut at Diane Coiffures on Nassau Street.

I kept those cut braids and I have them still, carefully preserved in the decorated shoe box. And, eventually, I did show them to my children, who shrugged their shoulders, completely unimpressed.

But for years when I worked as a school head, I'd bring the shoebox to the first faculty meeting in September. I'd open the box ceremoniously. Then I'd pass it around and tell the story of Mr. Anders. I'd talk about the vulnerability of children and how a teacher's words have weight. Some of the teachers would laugh, but the good ones understood my message. They'd handle the shoebox respectfully and tenderly, aware that a little girl's feelings were still inside.



Gabriella Brand's creative non-fiction, poetry, and short stories have appeared in over fifty literary publications. Her travel essays can be found in *The Christian Science Monitor*, *The Globe and Mail* and in several anthologies. Her most recent work appears in *Herontree*, *Adventures in Ideas*, and *Still Point Arts Quarterly*. She is a Pushcart Prize nominee. A hiker and a kayaker, Gabriella lives near New Haven, Connecticut. She teaches languages and writing in the OLLI program at the University of Connecticut.