

Rebecca Hubbard

During my first year of teaching, every day was a ten to twelve hour day. Many long nights were spent grading papers and planning lessons. Most evenings of this tiresome routine were lonely, with only the custodian Andy to sometimes break up the monotony. It was during one extended afternoon in the spring that I learned why everyone loved Brooke Bates so much.

Brooke was a sophomore the year I came to Frankfort. Enormously popular even then, Brooke was an entertainer and practical joker. She brought laughter with her wherever she went, but she was also very kind. Her humor was not at the expense of another. In fact, she went out of her way to include outsiders in her group; she talked to students who were shy or ignored by others.

It was easy to look at Brooke and think she was a spoiled child. She wore trendy clothes and hung out with the most popular kids in school. She had one of everything and the best of everything. It always seemed like Brooke had something new and shiny. Other kids were probably envious, but Brooke liked to share. One day Brooke came to me with a gorgeous new pair of hiking boots. "These don't fit me. You should have them."

"Take them back, silly."

"No. My dad will buy me new ones."

"Brooke, that's a waste. I can't take shoes from you. You should go through the trouble to take them back. If you're not going to do that, give them to a friend."

"Mrs. Hubbarrrrrrrrrd, just take them. My dad told me to give them away and they don't fit any of my friends." She peered at me, trying to look annoyed, but unable to pull it off.

I took the shoes and loved them. I wore them out and then wore them to mow the lawn, always thinking of Brooke when I put them on.

Brooke used to visit me during my lonely working nights. She asked a lot of questions about my family and hobbies. She told me about some of her own history, and of one of her brothers who had died in an accident. Brooke always seemed happy, but she was a person of depth, and we all knew she suffered privately over some of the adversity she faced.

One spring afternoon around dinnertime, Brooke knocked on my classroom window. Surprised, I jumped and screamed and glared at her as she grinned sheepishly through the window. "What?!" I said, exasperated. I needed to get through a pile of work.

"I got a new bike! Come and see it!"

"I can't. I have to get this work done."

Brooke looked at me for a long minute. “Come on, Mrs. Hubbard. You work too hard. Take a break and come look at this. It only weighs 12 pounds!”

It was the first of the ultra-lite bikes. I’d never heard of such a thing. Eventually, I relented. The bike really did weigh only twelve pounds. Even I could lift it with one hand. I was incredulous. Brooke gave me her happy puppy look.

“My dad got it for my birthday. Try it out!”

“No way! It’s too big.” Brooke was tall and the bike was sized to her proportions. It also had a boy bar and I, not being so coordinated, had visions of a painful spill. Nevertheless, she wanted me on that bike and she would not give up. Riding it around the parking lot, I felt weightless and cloud-like. It was hard to steer and I was miles in the air, but Brooke shouted, “Go Miss! Go Miss!”

Afterward, we sat in the grass and talked about birthdays. Back at work, I wondered at how Brooke made me feel by bringing that bike down to share it with me. It is one of my earliest memories of feeling that I made a difference in someone’s life. Later I would ask myself who really made the difference in the relationship.

Brooke was a basketball and softball wizard. She had amazing talent and her father especially reveled in this. He showed up for every game and pushed Brooke to be her best. Everyone in the gym—even the opposing team—went wild the night Brooke scored her 1000th point. I bought her a bracelet with gold basketballs and nets on it. Later on, when I knew her better, I realized this was not a good gift. Brooke was not a girly-girl and she never wore jewelry. Gracious as ever, she had opened the gift, grinned, and thanked me.

Three years passed and many memories were shared. Brooke was one of the original Spanish Dancers. The first time they performed, everyone giggled about her ponytail and skirt. None of the students who had attended school with her for 12 years had seen her with a ponytail before...or wearing a skirt. Ever.

I chaperoned Brooke’s first homecoming and my jaw dropped on the floor along with everyone else’s when Brooke walked in with her hair up, wearing make-up and a vampy black dress. She was drop dead beautiful.

One day Brooke brought her red-haired brother Jordan into the Bookstore where I worked summers. She introduced him proudly and we became friends by association.

In the spring of her senior year, Brooke was crowned Prom Queen and so many pictures were taken of the gorgeous, sophisticated, tomboy knockout who had won our hearts through sheer charm. One week later, she was dead in a senseless and shocking car accident.

The days that followed were filled with unbearable tears and pain. The community was in a state of shock and left reeling by the possibility—the reality—of Brooke’s loss. There were flowers and ribbons and messages to Brooke left at her locker and at the scene of the accident. I could write a lot about those days, but there is not point in trying to put a grief that large into words. Most of us have known this unbearable grief that cannot be described. In some ways, all grief is the same. In other ways, every loss is unique.

Much later in my career, Brooke still inspires me. Sometimes I put on the shoes she gave me and wear them outside to rake leaves or hike in the bluffs. I imagine Brooke putting her foot into the same shoe I am wearing now. Her living, healthy skin and bones—the foot that joined the other that joined the legs to the body that fought competitively on the basketball court, that hugged her friends, that brought her big, gangly personality into my classroom and made everyone smile. I imagine Brooke now in a casket in an unmarked grave I have never been able to find. It is dark and silent and that heavy blackness that envelopes Brooke is so, so wrong.

Once a month for the last few years, I come into the school at night in the dark. I wander down to the memorial that held her softball jersey and her basketball jersey and pictures of her in her prom queen crown and pictures of her with her team and pictures of her doing this and that. I clean the glass and dust off the pictures. I wonder if anyone else ever stops there to remember Brooke. I feel sad that none of my current students ever knew her. I know when they walk by this place, her face means nothing. She was just some kid who died in this town.

If Brooke was alive today, the same kids would look at her and think that she was about as old as me. They probably would think she was just some friend of mine from college or something. She would be done with college and she’d have a real job. Maybe she’d be married; maybe not. Maybe she’d be married with two kids like me. Maybe we would meet in the park and watch our kids play and we would talk about the old days and Brooke would still make me laugh. Or maybe she would travel around the world for her job and she would send me postcards from faraway places and tell me how she was using her Spanish. Maybe Brooke and I would never talk—maybe we would be grown apart, but always still love each other; that would be okay if Brooke was still alive. She’d still get the life she deserved to live.

I might have been the kind of teacher who thought that because my students were young, nothing could really hurt them physically. I might have taken some kid for granted. But because of Brooke, I don’t. I don’t take a single one for granted. Because of Brooke, I value the living and breathing of every student who walks in my room and I know they can be lost in a

heartbeat. I know that I can be lost in a heartbeat. I try to live every day of my life because Brooke didn't get to live every day of hers.