

Fourth Grade
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I'm standing on the playground, waiting for the bell to ring. Clutching my brand new Big Chief tablet, a wooden 12-inch ruler, and Number 2 pencils, I make my way toward the main door of the elementary school. This will be a big year for me, a year of many firsts, but the very first one will be meeting my new teacher.

My parents have told me she is newly hired, but no one they've talked to knows her name. I am happy to be getting a new teacher, especially after 3rd grade with Miss Peak. I didn't like Miss Peak very much, and I was pretty sure she didn't like me. She treated me unfairly, I thought, but it wasn't too hard to outsmart her. Several times I succeeded, like when she made me stand in front of the class, holding out my hands for her to see, while she drilled me on addition and subtraction. She wanted to be sure I wasn't counting on my fingers. What she couldn't see was my mind counting on my fingers anyway, a trick I'd learned to do with my imagination. I simply visualized my fingers tapping out the numbers and easily counted them in my inner vision, never moving a muscle while she glared at me in disdain.

Another great success was being excused from class every week to join Jimmy Cleaver in speech practice. Jimmy was supposed to be my partner in our regular science lesson, but he had to go to speech class to help him overcome his stutter. The first time he left after being summoned by the therapist, I raised my hand and lisped my question, "What am I thupposed to do thince my partner ithn't here?" I was immediately sent to follow the therapist and Jimmy up to the second floor, where we had a great time reading aloud and talking to each other.

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But now it is time to start fourth grade. I wait eagerly for the bell, wondering what she will be like, this nameless new teacher. *Will she like me? Will she like my new purple pinafore as much as I do?* I knew it wasn't a real pinafore, but I thought it was beautiful. Its full skirt had a sweet white apron sewn to the waistband, with eyelet lace around the edges and a big white sash in the back. There was even a little pocket for me to hide treasures in. The front top of the apron was attached to the bodice. More eyelet decorated the sides and the straps as they went up over the shoulders. But the back of the dress showed no hint of the apron. The straps ended at the shoulder seams; the only white on the dress back was the sash. It was an odd little number, but it was the closest thing to a pinafore I'd ever had. It delighted me so much, I wore it the day we had our annual class pictures taken.

It was one of the few dresses I truly treasured from the box which arrived annually from Kansas City. My grandmother had a friend with two girls a couple of years older than me. At Grammy's request, her friend shipped their outgrown clothes to us at the end of every summer. I liked to think the box was just for me, since my sister was still too small to wear the cast-offs from this richer-than-we-were family. Along with the many firsts that school year, I had experienced the joy of the dress box for the last time. By the following summer I had grown too large for the castoff dresses, which now went straight to my sister instead of me getting to wear them first.

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The bell rings at last, and we file into the school, where several ladies with clipboards await. I am sent to stand in a group on the west side of the big foyer, and eventually a very pretty lady comes to get us. She gathers us into a line, and we follow her down the hall to our classroom. She directs us to quickly choose a desk and put our supplies inside. I rush to the middle of the room, taking a desk near the front, one that is not marred by initials carved into its writing surface. I lift the lid and put my supplies inside, noting that although it is marred by ink splotches, it was recently washed clean and still has a slight odor of Pine Sol®.

As I sit with my hands folded in front of me, I look up at the blackboard and read everything written there. WELCOME TO 4TH GRADE, it says at the top. On the lefthand side it reads SUPPLIES TO BRING, with a list of items underneath it. I read the list, excited by the prospect of getting to use pens and curious about what a protractor might be. Then on the right side of the board, in large cursive, I see our teacher's name.

Carefully, I sound it out in my head: "Miss" is easy, since every teacher is "Miss" or "Mrs," except for Mr. Andrews, who teaches sixth grade. I look carefully at the name following "Miss." It is the longest name I have ever seen. Having been drilled by my father, I sound it out carefully. BAV - AWE - RESS - KO. Bavaresco. I don't say it out loud. I have already learned that my reading ability makes many of my classmates angry, although I don't understand why.

As soon as everyone was seated, our new teacher stood next to her name at the blackboard. I was struck by how pretty she was: tall and slender, with a great mass of dark curly hair dancing down across her shoulders. She reminded me of the nameless fashion doll I had received for Christmas when I'd expressly asked for a Barbie. She was so different from Miss Peak, who had also been tall and slim, but Miss Peak had a helmet of blonde hair, and her stick-thin frame and stern face made her seem far different from pretty Miss Bavaresco. When I think about it now, I realize all of my elementary school teachers seemed unusually tall. In fact, as a first grader, I remember thinking the sixth graders were actually adults. This troubled me until I went to seventh grade, after the summer in which I grew six inches; I suddenly found myself taller than everyone in the school and ceased to be mystified by the height of adults.

"Good morning, class," our pretty new teacher said brightly. "My name is Miss Bavaresco." She pointed to her name on the blackboard and showed us each of the syllables as she sounded it out for us, just as I had already done. She asked us to repeat her name back to her several times, and then singled us out individually. "Please tell me your names, one at a time, and I will mark you off my attendance sheet. But be sure to use my name, Miss Bavaresco, in your introduction."

She pointed to each of us one at a time, row after row, gently correcting those who had trouble saying her name, coaching them through the pronunciation until they could say the strange word. When it was my turn, I stood up and said, "Good morning, Miss Bavaresco. My name is Mary Anne Burnham."

"Oh!" she said. "On the attendance sheet it says 'Mary.' Do you prefer to be called 'Mary Anne'?"

"Yes, please," I responded. "I don't like being called 'Mary,' because that's not my name."

She smiled and made a note on her page as she told me, "Well then, I shall call you 'Mary Anne.'"

“And your last name is Burn-um?” she asked, pronouncing it as I had done.

“Yes, ma’am. The ‘ham’ is pronounced ‘um’, like ‘hum’ but the ‘h’ is silent,” I told her, parroting what I’d heard my mother say several times. Plus, I was sick of being called “Mary Anne burned-up-ham-bone” by the other kids, so I wanted to make sure she got it right.

Miss Bavaresco smiled and thanked me, then said I could sit down. She went on to the next student and the next, until she arrived at Mary Beth, who also assured Miss Bavaresco that she also preferred her whole name to the abbreviated ‘Mary.’ Only in her case, her given name was Mary Elizabeth.

On a different day, standing at her desk, I would tell my teacher the story of my messed up name, how my mother wrote it as two words because she hadn’t given me a middle name. I didn’t tell her I was insanely jealous of Mary Beth’s elegantly beautiful name versus my own plain-Jane name. It did not matter to me that I was named after two of my great aunts, because one was already dead and the other was only pretty penmanship on the postcards she occasionally sent me from Ohio, which seemed like the other side of the world.

Having discovered that Miss Bavaresco would let me talk to her one-on-one, I began to tell her my troubles when I found her alone at her desk after school. The day I told her I had been restricted from playing in gym class, she wrapped her arms around me and held me while I cried. Later she would arrange for me to stay in the classroom with her during gym hour rather than being relegated to the sidelines to watch the others play. During those times alone with her, I gained a greater love for reading and mastered copying her beautiful cursive, the only task at which I could best my brilliant brother.

I felt so loved in fourth grade. I fell in love with both my teacher and my doll who looked like her. I was still designing gowns for that nameless doll long after I left elementary school and began taking city buses to the junior high two miles away. My doll remained nameless because in the 1950s, we never knew our teachers’ first names. It didn’t seem right to call my doll ‘Miss Bavaresco,’ especially after the real Miss Bavaresco changed her name.

Right before Easter, at St. John the Evangelist, the huge Episcopal cathedral just off Colfax Avenue, I sat with my mother in a pew three-quarters of the way back from the altar. From there I watched my beautiful teacher walk down the aisle on her father’s arm, wearing the most gorgeous wedding gown I could imagine. As she floated to the front of the church, I marveled at all the people who were there. I saw Miss Hill — my second grade teacher — Miss Peak, and all the other teachers from our school, including the frightening Mrs. Jackson, who would be called back from retirement the following year to teach my fifth grade class. I saw most of my classmates and their mothers, even some of their fathers, sprinkled throughout the big sanctuary. And up at the front, the minister, who I learned was called a priest, wore robes almost as elegant as the bride’s. The sanctuary, with its many columns, enormous stained glass windows and wooden carvings of Jesus and his disciples, put our plain Methodist sanctuary — large and elegant as it was — to shame.

When we went back to school after Easter break, Miss Bavaresco stood at the blackboard and wrote her new name in elegant cursive. We were now required to call her Mrs. Earley, which lacked all the charm of her exotic maiden name. It would have been a complete letdown were it not for the hugs I continued to receive as I burdened her with the numerous troubles of my childhood.

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Sixty years later, I am sitting at my computer, searching for any remnants of Miss Bavaresco. I hope to learn the origin of her lovely last name, or perhaps what happened to her after she failed to return to our elementary school the following year. There were rumors that she was pregnant when she and Mr. Earley were married, because under “normal” circumstances they would have waited until school was out in June. The grownups tried to keep these whispers from us, but, as my mother often said, “Little pitchers have big ears.”

Thanks to my husband’s obsession with genealogy and his numerous online subscriptions, I find tiny bits of evidence of Miss Bavaresco. There is a Mrs. Rita Bavaresco who taught Latin at one of the suburban high schools, and her many photographs in various annuals have a certain resemblance to my memory of my fourth grade teacher. But this woman is too old. She might have been my teacher’s mother. At last I locate street directories and census records which name a Rose Bavaresco whose occupation is teacher and whose married name is Earley. She is linked to three family trees on Ancestry, obviously through her husband, Thomas Kennedy Early, Jr. (1932-1986). There are no birth or death dates Rose, no address listings after 1995, and apparently no offspring. I wonder if there ever was a rumored baby.

At last I find a treasure: a copy of their Marriage License. And there in her beautiful cursive is my teacher’s signature of her equally beautiful full name: Rose Antoinette Bavaresco. Finally, my fashion doll has a name.

Resources:

https://www.ancestry.com/discoveryui-content/view/866191220:2469?tid=&pid=&queryId=6ae0f8b23edf8ade6f73eaa88732c19f&_phsrc=akZ42&_phstart=successSource
(contains link for directories post marriage)

https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/1030/?name=Rose+A_Bavaresco
(links to trees which mention Rose Antoinette Bavaresco and Thomas Kennedy Earley)

