

THE PETITION

A Short Story by Katherine Palubinskas

The poor thing bounced at her desk with every hiccup that ruptured from her petite frame. Stifling the involuntary outbursts only converted muffled squeals into uncomfortable fights for breath. If she could just concentrate on her fractions, her hiccups would abandon her. Or would they? What about that world record about that man who had had hiccups for years? She pictured her first kiss accompanied by the hiccups. She stole a left ways glance at Jeremy and noticed the copper peach fuzz that framed his upper lip. She began counting Mississippis between hiccups. How long would her first kiss last uninterrupted?

“Hold your breath Hanna.” Jeremy suggested while erasing pencil marks off his desk. She did. She’d probably do anything for Jeremy. She wondered all the sudden if he was annoyed at these patterned squeals. Michael surely wouldn’t have minded them a bit. Should she go back to liking Michael? She had liked sitting next to him up until last week when Mrs. Bales changed the class seating pattern. Would she change it again this term? She knew she dare not ask Mrs. Bales anything, especially anything academically irrelevant.

While holding in her last seconds of oxygen she thought maybe Jeremy was just trying to be helpful. Maybe he liked her too. After all, out of all the students, he kept asking for *her* ruler. Just then her inflated cheeks caved in letting out a rush of air. Jeremy had his full attention fixed on her and she hoped her sudden blushing would be camouflaged by the effort of the mini experiment. She tried to look as natural as possible, cocking her head this way and that as he observed attentively. They almost celebrated their victory when an energetic squeal poured out.

Callie volunteered her home remedy “You’re supposed to hold your breath while you plug your nose and then....”

Bobby interrupted “No, uh-uh. You’re supposed to drink water and then hold your breath.”

“What’s all that stirring back there? I can assume you’re ready to write your math problems up on the board for correction?” Mrs. Bales’ bluffless warning put the momentous debate on hold.

Jerk-squeal. One Mississippi, two Mississippi, three Mississippi, four Mississippi, five Mississippi. Jerk –squeal. One Mississippi, two Mississippi, three Mississippi, ...

Jeremy slid Hanna a note folded into an irregular, tiny square. She asked for divine intervention before unfolding it. It just might state how nice her hair looked today in ponytails. Her hand flung up to her head to make sure she was properly groomed after a full recess of tetherball and then it swiftly recoiled back. Her sister's *Teen Power Magazine* had stated to never be obvious in making an effort to look pretty. Boys didn't appreciate that. She unfolded the note amidst two agitating spasms. The note read: *Ask Mrs. Bales to let you go drink water.* She was still considering whether to respond in print or handwriting when Bobby yanked the note out of her hand. Her heart swelled as Jeremy tried, although unsuccessfully, to recover the note. After all, it was a private issue. Some boys could be so immature! That's why she had stopped liking Bobby last month. Plus his permanent teeth were taking forever to grow in. Bobby's tongue worked the corner of his mouth while he underlined Jeremy's words with three aggressive lines and then added a row of exclamation marks. Then, Callie stole the note from Bobby to add in pink capital letters: WE CAN'T CONCENTRATE WITH YOUR HICCUPS HANNA!!!!

Holding the note back in her hands, Hanna shook her head with an emphatic air. Approaching Mrs. Bales was out of the question. They could forget about that. All broad-eyed and wobbling her head about, Callie silently urged Hanna on. Hanna let out an exasperated sigh and shook her head so assertively that the end of her ponytails actually whipped her cheeks.

The three of them, Jeremy, Callie and Bobby were determined to claim their right to a hiccup free environment while Hanna was fixed on banning any notion that involved face-to-face interaction with Mrs. Bales. Scribbled messages with oversized interjections and senseless doodling began to zigzag across desks. At first, Hanna enjoyed her prominent popularity but it wasn't long before the messages no longer advanced towards her. The threesome had seemed to turn against her. Their written exchanges became more and more accelerated, their grins more spiteful. They muffled nasty giggles every time Hanna's torso jolted and sounded.

Hanna's gut churned. Jeremy Barker could drop dead for all she cared! Her teeth clenched, her hands coiled into two compact fists. She wanted to sock them hard and good, Jeremy Barker first. Wondering the weight of the consequences, she caught

sight of Mrs. Bales who sat at her desk, one eyebrow arched as she scanned the classroom for mischievous behaviour. Before Hanna could look away, Mrs. Bales had met her glaring brown eyes. They sustained eye contact as Hanna inadvertently stood up, slowly but steadily despite her trembling legs. Her chair pushed back behind her knees and she took a step forward and then another and another leaving behind her bewildered peers. Mrs. Bales, who had sensed something in Hanna's disposition, remained callous in her expression and would not emit a single sound. Once before Mrs. Bales, Hanna squared her shoulders and took a deep breath. She opened her mouth to speak when a paramount discovery flooded her. Her tongue orbited her mouth as it waited for the mass of emotion she was processing to voice itself into something, anything. Nothing She pivoted, and rushed back to her desk.

Nobody said anything upon Hanna's return. The four acted as if nothing had happened. They busied themselves silently and motionless in their scholastic activities- that is until Jeremy finally spoke. "Hanna, can I use your ruler?" His finger traced around her hand that rested on her desk.

"Yes, of course Jeremy." What would peach fuzz feel like during a first kiss?