

First Grade

Marilyn Bullock

Course: ENGL 101

Instructor: Ms. Amy Acosta

Essay Type: Personal Narrative

My mother took me to school on my first day. Mother had been telling me for weeks prior to the big day how wonderful school was going to be, so I was dutifully excited. She failed to mention that she was going to leave me with seventeen little strangers and one large lady. The large lady seemed to think that she was in control. I later learned that she was the teacher. She was trying to explain to Mother that I was not eligible to attend first grade because I would not be six until November of the following year. My mother was having none of that. She wanted me out of the house and into school and she did not care what the rules were.

We had just moved from New Orleans to the woods of St. Helena Parish, where school had started two weeks before we arrived. Although it was 1945 in the rest of the world, it was still 1920 in St. Helena. Our home in New Orleans had had indoor plumbing, a gas stove, and electric heaters. In the country, however, we had an outhouse. Every drop of water we used was pumped and carried inside. We chopped wood for our stove and heaters. The back breaking, never ending labor did not bother me as much as having to live in such a degrading manner. I hated the woods. I missed the comforts of the city and I hated the primitive conditions of our new country life. I missed my good-natured little playmates who had treated me so kindly for the first five years of my life. I missed the gentle accents spoken in soft voices by my friends and neighbors, and the endless hours of playtime that we enjoyed.

But now I was going to have to go to school! For a while, I thought the rule that a child had to be six before entering the first grade would rescue me. School rules back then, like all

rules in St. Helena, were flexible. For example, driving regulations were not strictly enforced. Few residents even possessed driver's licenses, and the ones who did only carried them when they planned to cross the parish line. In fact, my uncle's sons started driving when they were only twelve and thirteen. Their father needed them to drive his crops to market, and the sheriff needed my uncle's vote. It was a good *quid pro quo* situation. The sheriff looked the other way when residents committed minor infractions, and they looked the other way when the sheriff did the same. In other instances, residents who were sentenced to do jail time for major crimes sometimes did their hard time on the sheriff's farm. He had the most productive farm and the emptiest jail in the state.

Standing there with Mother in that schoolroom that morning, it began to dawn on me that if Mother could argue this large lady down, then she was, indeed, going to leave me there. That is when I started crying, because I knew no one would win an argument with Mother. When I started crying, the seventeen little strangers started laughing. The more they laughed, the more I cried, creating a vicious cycle that spiraled out of control like a giant Frisbee. Mother brought us all back down to earth with a Frisbee shattering scream: "Shut up," she bellowed! I knew she meant me, so I did. The children thought she meant them, so they did. The teacher stopped wringing her hands and muttered, "Well, maybe she is brighter than she looks. Maybe she will hit a growth spurt."

Mother handed the teacher a paper bag containing my lunch and directions for the bus driver, and left. The teacher gave me a pencil and some paper and told me to start copying my ABC's. I had no idea what she was talking about. I just sat there sniveling and hoping it would all become clear to me. The teacher had been working with the children on this lesson for two weeks, but I did not realize that that was the reason they knew what to do and I did not. I did

understand that they had two weeks to form tight groups that would exclude a stupid little girl who spoke with a New Orleans accent. The big boy sitting on my right was printing like mad on his paper. He was already up to the P's. I whispered to him, "You must be very smart". He immediately started showing me what to do. At recess, he declared to everyone that I was his girlfriend and no one should laugh at me again.

At lunchtime, I offered to share my cookies with a very angry girl. She had been staring at them ever since I had taken them out of their wax paper wrapping. They were only vanilla wafers, and certainly were not my favorite. She told me that she had never tasted store bought cookies, and pronounced them fit for a king. She became my lifetime friend and protector. She remained an angry person, but seldom got angry with me. The big boy dumped me in the fifth grade for a girl who had matured very early.

The first day of school, I learned these valuable lessons. Accents only sound strange to people who have different accents. Never bother arguing with my mother. Crying does not help, but sometime you just have to do it anyway. A little sweetness can make an angry person nicer. Flattery goes a long way with a guy; sometimes it can even go as far as the fifth grade.

Marilyn Bullock is a History major. Amy Acosta was her instructor.

Ms. Acosta's Comments: *Marilyn is both a natural story-teller and master of the writing process: all of her papers were worthy of The Pick; "First Grade" is one of several that I suggested she submit. In this piece, she responded to a narrative prompt which asked students to relate a time in their lives when they had to overcome a fear. Her response included simple but endearing lessons learned couched in neat, satisfying prose.*