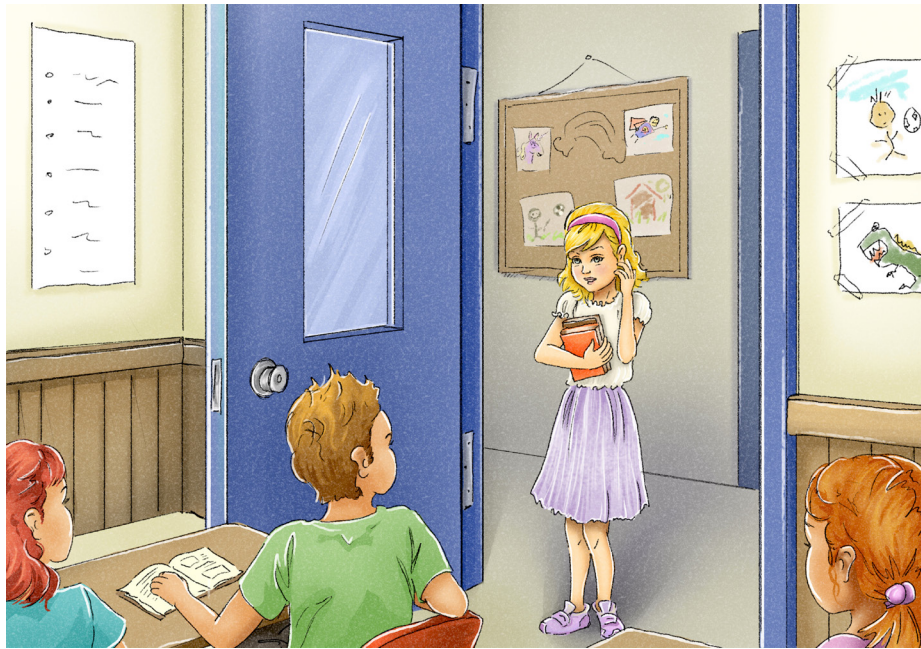


NOT FISTS

Amanda fumed and knit her brow. How could Mr. Anderson have the gall to assign her and Mike to clean the classroom windows together? Certainly he could have designed a more humane punishment for their recent argument during class. He knew that they had been warring against each other from the first day of fifth grade. Amanda sighed as she recalled that fateful day when their battle against each other ensued.



She had rushed into the classroom late, flustered, and not as properly prepared as she would have liked. As thirty curious and impatient pairs of eyes stared at her, she felt a rosy flush creep up her neck and cheeks. She instinctively smoothed her dress and ran her fingers through her wind-tossed hair.

"Ooh, look at the princess trying to impress us with her pretty clothes! How nice!" sneered a voice behind her.

Amanda froze momentarily, stunned and embarrassed. It was Mike, of course. Her girlish concern over her usually perfect appearance somehow stirred the bully in him.

Her face reddened with rage, and she swung her fist at him. Mr. Anderson rushed in to stop the fight....

In the months that followed, Amanda's sensitive and self-conscious personality amused the loud and brazen Mike, who expressed his amusement with snickers and stinging comments. Amanda's damaged ego lashed out in angry fits—which contradicted her usual ladylike demeanor.

Amanda winced at the memory of Mike's loud, ridiculously high-pitched tone on that awful day six months ago. She hurried to collect the rags and cleaning supplies for her dreaded task, eager to get it over with.

Mike, who was already wiping a window, paused in his work. "What an honor! Window wiping with sweet Amanda."

Amanda would have slugged him in the ribs if she had not been so determined to finish the unsavory task as quickly as she could. For now, she shot back, "Shut up, you bothersome boy!"



After that brief exchange, they worked in tense silence for some time, enviously watching their friends dashing out to enjoy the breezy summer afternoon. Amanda's anger cooled slightly in the glow of satisfaction that she felt from seeing the dirty, smudged windows become like clean, shining mirrors.

For a moment she forgot her agitation as she glanced over at Mike. He was industriously rubbing a smear off a window, totally absorbed in his task and showing no sign of scripting another sharp remark to shoot at her. Amanda felt a twinge of admiration for his dogged diligence. She also became vaguely aware of a strange harmony between their emotions: they were both trying to get an unpleasant yet mandatory task finished as quickly as possible, both annoyed, and both longing to go hang out with their friends.

But then she caught a whiff of Mike's dirty, sweaty shirt, which contrasted sharply with her immaculately clean dress and meticulously arranged blond locks. As her face darkened into a scowl and her dislike resurfaced, a brown crayon smear that Mike had overlooked near the bottom of one of the windows suddenly caught her eye.

"You didn't do a very good job on that window! Look at that smudge over there!" Amanda waved her finger haughtily at the spot.

A flicker of hurt crossed Mike's face, but then he quickly shot back: "Yeah? Well, you have some window cleaner on your silly little dress. What a nice brown smudge you have there!"

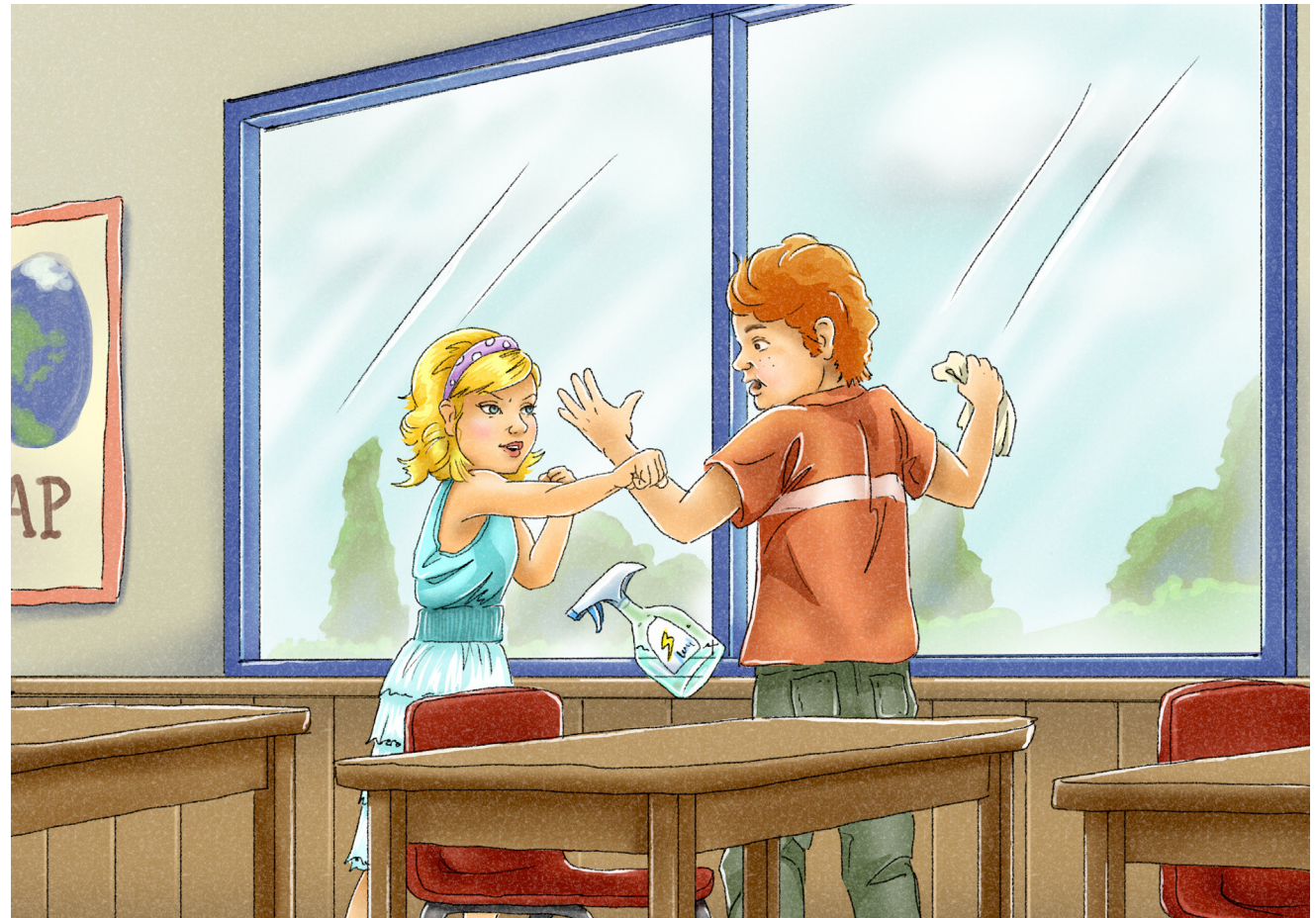
"Aack!" Amanda yelped as she spied the ugly spot on her favorite blue dress. "You didn't have to be so mean about it!" she retorted, feeling more humiliated that her attempt to annoy Mike had failed than hurt by his derisive remark. She hurriedly finished the last window and stomped

away, furious that their exchange had ended with Mike successfully embarrassing her.

As she rushed by Mike—who had just finished wiping off the crayon smudge and was now equally irritated—he smirked and threw a laugh her way. Amanda could not contain herself and punched his arm, knocking the bottle of window cleaner to the floor, knocking the top of the bottle off.

"Look what you did!" they both yelled at each other. Just then Mr. Anderson walked into the classroom.

"What happened here?" he asked.



Amanda was temporarily speechless, but Mike was never at a loss for words. "She punched my arm, making the bottle fall on the floor," he declared, pointing at Amanda.

Mr. Anderson turned to Amanda. "Why did you punch him?"

"W-well, he laughed at me because ... I got a spot of cleaner on my dress. He makes me so mad!" Amanda hadn't intended to add the last part, but it had burst out of her mouth before she could stop it.

"I see. So you punched him because you were angry, and you wanted to get back at him. He hurt you, so you wanted to hurt him. But, you see, you ended up hurting no one but yourself. Now you have a mess to clean up. I hope that this will help you to learn that your fists and temper will never help you out of a problem.

"And Mike, if you hadn't made fun of Amanda, none of this would have happened. You have a bad habit of teasing and mocking others. Perhaps you feel that your friends think you're witty and cool, but you're only showing yourself to be a bully. Amanda and Mike, as you clean up this mess, I hope you will think about what I said," Mr. Anderson concluded sternly before going to his desk to gather some papers.

After Mike left to fetch a mop, Mr. Anderson returned to Amanda, who was sulkily awaiting Mike's return. "You know," he said quietly, "when you lash out at Mike, you are giving him just what he wants—an angry reaction. People who like to bully others love an angry or tearful response. Instead, if you'd use some self-control and stay cool, Mike will find that you're not so fun to tease

after all. Mike is at fault, but so are you. You see Mike as the enemy of your happiness, forgetting that he has his good points, too. Thinking of him as your enemy only makes you lose your reason and your temper."

Amanda nodded tearfully, and after Mike returned, silently helped Mike mop up the mess. Then they parted ways quickly and quietly.

Amanda knew that she would be home later than usual, but she was so occupied with her thoughts that she didn't even worry about what her mom would say. Mr. Anderson's words were ringing in her ears...



When you lash out at Mike, you are just giving him what he wants... She wrinkled her nose as she turned that strange notion over in her mind. Never saw it that way before! she mused. I've always thought that brandishing my fists would show Mike that I won't tolerate his bullying, that I'm not a sissy, since he always calls me a "prissy princess"! But ... come to think of it, whenever I start punching and shouting, he just laughs and seems awfully amused. That makes me even madder, and he gets even nastier!

Mr. Anderson's words made sense, but Amanda resented the idea of calmly ignoring Mike. *He doesn't deserve to just be ignored! She kicked a pebble on the path as she recalled Mike's mischievous grin. He deserves what he gets, but whenever I try to give him his due, I get myself in trouble. And the other kids always cheer me on, saying, "Yeah, sock him good!" I'll look like a total wimp if I do nothing. She groaned. Mr. Anderson is probably right about Mike having good points, but I can't think of any!*

Amanda paused in her ruminating as she looked up to see her Uncle Donald, who lived close by, walking just a few feet ahead of her. Due to her own father dying when she was much younger, Amanda confided in and respected Uncle Donald as the father figure in her life.

Speeding up, she called out to him, "Uncle Donald! How are you today?"

He turned, his eyes lighting up at the sight of her. "Very well! And how are you, Amanda dear?"

She sighed and dropped her eyes. "Not very well."

"Do you want to tell me about it?"

She did so, and ended with, "What do you think? Mike is a real pain! But maybe Mr. Anderson is right..."

Uncle Donald was silent for a few moments. "You'd do well to follow your teacher's advice, but you don't have to just accept Mike's hurtful comments and meanness. You can firmly and calmly say, 'Mike, I really don't like what you're saying. Please stop it.' As for the other kids, I think they're only cheering you on because they enjoy the scene. They don't actually care about you being 'vindicated' or Mike getting what he deserves. They just like an emotional scene."

"Oh, really?! I never thought..."



"They might try to make you feel that to have self-control is wimpy, because they miss the show that your temper tantrums create," Uncle Donald went on, "but don't listen to them. Always remember that self-control is the mark of true strength, not fists. And in your interactions with Mike, don't settle for a tense, ready-to-explode ceasefire. Try to find common ground. For example, if Mike loves Spiderman shows, try discussing that with him. You two may never become best friends, but you can at least be on friendly terms."

Amanda nodded slowly. "Thank you, Uncle Donald. I knew you would help me."

"Try it, and tell me how it goes, OK?"

That evening she was deep in thought, but the heaviness and frustration that had previously weighed on her was gone. She whispered, "Jesus, please help me tomorrow." Then she wrote her new motto on a card and taped it above her desk: NO ANGER, NO FISTS. *This will be very, very hard to live up to!*



"Hi, Amanda! Feeling better today?" Uncle Donald beamed and waved invitingly.

"Yes. Thank you, Uncle Donald." Amanda returned his smile as she fell in step with him. "Well, things didn't go perfectly. Mike has improved—he doesn't tease me quite as much, so that's a relief. But he still kind of despises me for being ... a girl, I suppose, and a very girlish girl at that. He still smirks and snickers and does whatever he can get away with! And I still hit him occasionally—oh, sometimes I can't help it!—but much less than before. As you predicted, my friends were disappointed by my new behavior, but I try not to care. I've also discovered that Mike absolutely loves soccer, so maybe I'll give him that soccer ball key-chain my older brother gave me a few years ago."

"That's improvement already! Don't expect yourself to change immediately. Just keep saying no to the urge to lose your temper. Do that every day and you'll see steady progress. Keep your mind open to opportunities to compliment Mike, to work together, or to include him in conversations."

After waving goodbye to Uncle Donald, Amanda turned her thoughts heavenward. *Jesus, I feel disappointed that I didn't fully live up to my motto, but I know that it takes time to break a bad habit.*

In her heart, Amanda determined to make progress and to think positively about Mike.

