

The Girl Who Wanted to Be Good

A short story by Kara Kreter

Once upon a time there was a girl who wanted to be good...

Theodora was a child of opposing tempers. She wanted to be industrious, but found her chores tiresome. She wanted to be tidy and punctual but was drawn to wandering in the woods, tangling her hair in the brush and losing track of time. She desired to be a good daughter, but often butted heads with her parents. She longed to be kind, but was often irritable. She yearned to be brave but was often too afraid of what other people thought.

Theodora— who was called Thea by everyone who knew her— had a friend named Mabel and Mabel was everything that Thea was not. Graceful and neat, calm and responsible, Mabel was the darling of parents and teachers alike. When Thea went to church, it was Mabel that was held up as the example for the others in Sunday school. Thea, on the other hand, was generally met with grimaces and lectures for her questions that the teachers found impertinent, whereas Thea thought them to be quite sensible.

One day, after having been spanked for forgetting to do her chores by her mother, chided for turning in her homework late by her teacher, and made fun of for having dirty knees by the school bully, Thea was feeling very low indeed. She threw down her bag and ran straight into the woods to sit by the small pond that had become her special place for crying. As her tears leaked into the water, she cried, “oh if only I were more like Mabel. If only I could just be good!”

A tiny voice sparkled through the clearing by the pond. “Which would you rather be? Like Mabel? Or good?”

Thea looked around for the voice, confused for several reasons, not the least of which was her inability to see where the voice had come from. "Hello? Who are you?" she called out uncertainly.

The voice came again, rather impatiently this time, "Well, which would you prefer? To be like Mabel or to be good?"

Now Theodora was really confused, "isn't that the same thing?"

A tiny ball of sparkling white light appeared before her face, and Thea was struck mute for a moment in fascinated wonder.

The ball allowed her to stare for a moment then sighed, "I see you have no idea what I'm asking you. It's going to be hard to get a true choice out of you this way. I'll tell you what, though it rather inconveniences me, I will help you. No, stop doing that, do you want to burn your finger?!" The voice broke off and sped backwards several feet.

Theodora sheepishly pulled back the pointer finger she'd been using to try to poke at the light. "Uh, sorry, it's just that you're so pretty!"

The voice sighed again, "Master help me but you're a difficult one..." here he broke off, because Theodora had burst into tears again.

"Child, why are you crying now?!" The light fluttered anxiously in front of her.

"You think I'm bad, too," the girl sobbed, overcome by the day's events.

The light slowed, and gentled. "Dear child, I have been sent by the Master. He's heard you and desires to give you a gift to answer your tears, but you must make a choice, a choice that I now see you are too confused to make with any accuracy."

"So this is what I will do: I will give you one day of being like Mabel, then we will meet back here at the pond and you will tell me your decision."

Theodora's heart was near to burst. She could be like her friend? Tidy, confident, graceful? She could make all her teachers and classmates love her, and make her parents

proud? “Oh thank you, thank you kind light!” she whirled in happiness but when she stopped, the light was gone.

The next day dawned with clear-skied anticipation. Theodora knew very quickly that the Light’s words had come to pass. Instead of waking up muddle-headed and tired, she immediately sat up and quietly made her bed, washed up, and got dressed without once getting sidetracked by the cuteness of her kitten Mr. Fuzzypants, or being distracted by an interesting object that made her think of a new story, or rendered frozen by indecision about which shirt really suited her last clean skirt.

Her Mother’s admiring glance when she found her daughter seated at the table munching on cereal and fruit, her hair and clothing smooth and neat warmed Thea’s heart. She was pleasantly surprised that every step of her morning was smooth and frictionless, that everything she tried to do just worked and so she was able to keep on schedule easily.

She was doing so well on time, Thea was able to do another edit on last night’s homework, making it neater and more complete. Her Teacher’s response when she turned her assignment in was surprised and pleased, and so Thea’s excitement grew as the day went on.

In fact, her day was going so well that the first snag she hit took her quite by surprise. “Come play pretend with us,” Mabel snagged her hand and dragged her out to the playground where the girls and boys they normally played with waited at recess.

“Well?” Jamal rubbed his nose and looked at Thea impatiently, “what’s it going to be today?”

Theodora opened her mouth and then shut it again, her mind furiously churning, trying to come up with a good idea for a game and finding nothing. “Uhh...”

A girl named Lydia sniffed in impatience and Thea panicked, “pirates! Pirates vs. vikings,” she blurted out.

“We just played that game yesterday,” Lydia sniffed again.

“Bor-ing.” Jamal said and grabbed the ball at his side, “forget this, I’m going to play toeball. Who’s with me?”

As all her classmates filed away and left her standing alone with Mabel, her friend shook her head. “Something is weird about you today. You haven’t cracked a single joke, you can’t even come up with a good game to play at recess– and you ALWAYS have a fun new game! You didn’t even smile at me this morning when I said hi. What’s with you, Thea?”

Thea stammered and stuttered but couldn’t think of anything to say. How could she possibly tell Mabel about her strange encounter in the woods, and what the light had told her. Her friend would think she’d lost her socks!

Mabel shook her head, “fine, don’t tell me, I’m going to go watch the game then.”

At lunch, Thea was quiet and ate her mashed potatoes without a single attempt to turn them into an alpine slope for her sausage to ski down. In music class, instead of belting out a rousing version of “The Old Oak Tree,” she whispered quietly from the back row, not wanting to make a spectacle of herself. Mrs. Abernathy was so concerned that she took Theodora aside and asked if her stomach hurt, if she needed to go to the nurse, to which Thea said no.

By the last period of her schoolday, Thea was feeling miserable. Everything she normally enjoyed about school, her friends, and being alive felt like it was caged up inside of her with no way to get out. She hadn’t gotten yelled at once, but she’d also hadn’t enjoyed herself at all. Now her stomach really was feeling upset and she had a headache, too.

By the time she strode her way into the clearing by her pond later that afternoon– having dutifully (and compulsively) finished her homework and chores– she was well and truly irritated. When Theodora went to hurl a rock into the water to blow off steam, she found herself unable to do something so immature, and even the cry of frustration that welled up against that restriction came out as a well-mannered squeak.

“I see you’ve made quite a day of it,” the Light shimmered over the water then came to hover in front of her face.

“Oh Light, it’s been terrible, I thought everything was going so well but now I’m tangled up inside like Mr. Fuzzy’s yarn!”

The light twinkled in front of her, “excellent, the Master will be pleased,” and Theodora felt a release in her belly that loosened her whole body. Her emotions came rushing back to the surface.

“Excellent? How? I just wanted to be good, and now I see I will never manage it. I just wasn’t made to be good,” Thea sat down and sobbed by the water’s edge.

Thea was so overwhelmed by sadness and frustration that she didn’t notice the light had gotten brighter and brighter, until it filled the whole clearing.

“Theadora. Thea.” A man’s voice, deep and sonorous, penetrated the air like a french horn, and Thea immediately stopped crying and scooted back in shock.

A man stood on the water dressed in white and smiling with a radiance that chased her sorrow straight out of the clearing.

“The...Master? Master?!” Thea’s voice was breathless and she flung herself at the feet of the Divine being whose unmistakable presence filled the air with peace.

“Rise, dear Thea.”

Thea’s legs were trembling beneath her so much that she wasn’t sure that she would be able to get up, but the kindness in the Master’s voice steadied her, and she stood up.

“Tell me Thea, what is good?” The Master’s voice was soft now, and gentle.

“Well...” Thea stammered, “it’s to be polite and well-mannered, to be clean and orderly, to be obedient and helpful, and to not cause trouble for people.” The words jumbled out of Thea’s mouth like racehorses jockeying for position.

The Master smiled, his lips twitching in amusement, “those things *can* come from good, certainly,” he said. “But that’s not what I asked you. Thea, what IS good.” Now his voice was commanding, though still kind, and his light became so bright that Thea shaded her eyes.

“Oh...OHH! Now I get it. You’re good, Master.”

“And who created you, Thea?”

“You did, Master.” Thea bowed her head and closed her eyes, focusing on the sound of his voice.

“You have said rightly. I Am your Creator, and I Am Good. Your friend Mabel does much good in her own way, and I bless her for it. And there are areas where you can stand to make better choices, this you know well.” Thea flushed and nodded, but where shame had filled her heart before, the light of his presence now showed her hope instead.

“I am not so limited in my own Good as to only have a few gifts to give my Children. I have chosen you for other gifts, dear one. To smile your beautiful smile, to sing your cheerful songs, think with your inquisitive mind, to brighten the world with your colorful imagination and your infectious joy, that is the good I put in *you*.” She felt a gentle caress on her head, and when she opened her eyes again, the pond was back to normal save the ball of light, which hovered in front of her again.

“Excellent,” the Light said again, “now please make your choice.”

Thea blinked in confusion and the Light tsked, “Like Mabel, or good? Which one do you want to be?”

Her mouth widened in a bright smile, and you may easily imagine which choice our little Thea made that day. I imagine it’s the same choice you or I would make if we were in her shoes! But becoming good is a journey, and I haven’t time to tell you of the grand quest her desire sent her on, or of the Light who became her steadfast companion along the way. Those are stories for another day.