

“Broken Crayons”

Short Story—Kappa Tau

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Word Count: 1,200

“Beware! A broken crayon equals a broken heart.” This inscription is stitched into a decorative pillow on Stephanie Martin’s couch. For Stephanie, this saying evokes memories of a powerful lesson.

“Arthur! I have to cook dinner; you’re in my way!” Stephanie snapped. She jerked the crayon from his deformed hand and angrily gathered the other crayons. Reaching to snatch the boy’s paper, she halted as she observed his joyful countenance. “Wipe that smile off, boy! Mama Stephe is *not* happy! Ah, I’m so tired of trying to love you!” she cried. Eight-year-old Arthur did not notice. Instead, he began to mumble, gazing at his picture.

“Home. Home—see? —home.” He bounced his twisted fingers on the page, attempting to point at scribbles that appeared more like a spider’s web than a house. “I live—love—home—”

“Love? No, you don’t live at Love Children’s Home anymore! You live here. I wish you still lived at Love, though!” Stephanie glanced discontentedly around the cluttered apartment, stopping to glare at her husband Orvill’s picture. This foster-parent thing was his Aunt Hope’s idea, and he had been swept into the idealized dream of being a hero to a hurting kid. Stephanie had barely agreed to it. Now three months into fostering, Stephanie regretted ever having given in.

“Home, hope—I love—hope, hope—you love—” Arthur’s high, fuzzy voice interrupted her thoughts. He was now pointing at two figures (one tall, one short) that were indiscernible except for wobbly circles for the heads. “Hope—love you—hope—”

“Yeah, *Aunt Hope* loves you,” Stephanie growled. “Why doesn’t *she* foster you? If she can tolerate a retarded kid, she may take you away; I won’t miss you.” She grabbed Arthur’s bony arm and dragged him from the kitchen counter. Dreamily staring at his drawing, Arthur ignored Stephanie’s hateful complaints. Then, he handed her the picture timidly.

“For you,” he squeaked. Stephanie took it and threw it away. Arthur swallowed and stared gravely at the trashcan, until the incident gradually faded from his mind and he smiled unsteadily at Stephanie again.

Every day, it was the same. Arthur scribbled a picture with a house and two people and gave it to Stephanie, and she never failed to throw it away. Yet Arthur was relentless: each day, he gave her a new drawing.

*Snap!*

Arthur’s gaze darted to the floor beneath Stephanie’s uplifted foot. There lay one of his crayons, broken. The smile vanished from his face. Two tears spilled down his cheeks.

“Ugh! This day couldn’t get any worse!” Stephanie groaned. “It’s just a crayon, Arthur. I didn’t see it.” She tossed the pieces into the trash.

Arthur crumpled down on the floor, sobbing hysterically. Unable to console him, Stephanie tugged him down the hall and left him to cry in his room alone.

Orvill came home late that night.

“Why are you late?” Stephanie whined the minute he entered. “Arthur cried all evening, wouldn’t eat, and is now squealing in his sleep; it’s so annoying! Aunt Hope should’ve never forced us to take him—”

“Steph, calm down. We chose to take him. She didn’t force us—”

“She made it seem heartless if we didn’t take him—”

“She did no such thing! I pitied him, Auntie helped us get him, and that’s all. You know that.”

“Who made you feel sorry for him? It was your pushy aunt, saying, ‘Nobody appreciates him,’ and—”

“Steph—”

“I don’t want him, Orvill! I’m tired of being patient and trying to understand him! He’s only here because *you* pitied him and begged me to agree to take him—”

“And you agreed—”

“Because you made me feel guilty if I didn’t!”

“So first, you blame Aunt Hope, and now you blame me!”

*Squeal! Grunt!*

Stephanie exploded, “Oh! That boy! I could just—”

Orvill snapped, “Enough! I’ll quiet him.” He marched into Arthur’s bedroom, tripped over a toy, and slammed his head into the tall dresser. “*Ow!*” he roared. “This room is a mess!” An instant later, as a few muffled sobs came from the startled boy, Orvill felt a pang of remorse and gently stroked Arthur’s forehead.

“It’s okay, Arthur. Daddy’s sorry. I didn’t mean to startle you; I was mad I ran into the dresser. Now try to be quiet so Mama can sleep.” When he saw that Arthur was asleep again, he bent down and whispered, “Mama loves you. Deep down, I’m sure she must. Please don’t give up hope.”

The next morning, Aunt Hope was coming to visit. When Stephanie went to wake Arthur and dress him, he was not in his bedroom. Stephanie swiftly searched the apartment and found him underneath the kitchen table.

“Arthur! What are you doing?”

Arthur lay on the floor with a tear-streaked face in a huge mound of broken crayons.

Just then, Aunt Hope arrived. Stephanie immediately complained to her about Arthur’s odd behavior with the crayons.

Hope hurried to the table and peeked underneath.

“Hi, honey! Come give Great-Aunt Hope a hug!”

Expressionless, Arthur did not reply. Hope tried every tactic she could to elicit a response—offering candy, promising to play, suggesting a walk—but Arthur remained impassive.

“What’s wrong with him?” Stephanie surprised herself by feeling worried.

Hope hesitated. “Arthur’s biological father used to break Arthur’s crayons maliciously to make him cry. It traumatized Arthur’s autistic mind so that now he associates broken crayons with grief. At the children’s home, Arthur would sometimes break a crayon purposefully to communicate that something had upset him. Basically, the snap of a crayon is like the snap of one of his heartstrings.” Pointing to the pile under the table, she added, “That’s a lot of broken crayons—”

Stephanie listened pensively, ashamed to admit she had a decent guess concerning who had broken Arthur’s heart. Suddenly, a paper under the table caught her eye. She retrieved it, thankful for the diversion. It was a new drawing of the house that looked like a spider’s web with two people beside it.

“Today’s picture,” she murmured. “He’s so persistent! He must’ve drawn this before he broke all the crayons!”

“Today’s picture?”

“Yes, he draws me the same picture every day. Yesterday, he pointed to it and spoke words like *love*, *home*, and *hope*. I think this scribble-scrabble part is Love Children’s Home, and these two people are you and Arthur. He wants to return to the Home with you.”

Hope guffawed. “He drew me too skinny! Plus, why that extremely long hair? No, I think it’s *you*. Maybe he ‘hoped’ you would ‘love’ him here, in your ‘home.’ Maybe he means he loves you.”

Stephanie was stunned. Was that possible? After the way she treated him, he loved her!

Hope smiled. “Arthur doesn’t need me today; he needs *you*. It may take several days before he becomes responsive again. It’s your turn to be relentless. Show him you love him; don’t give up. It’ll be worth it!”

Stephanie began to treat Arthur more gently. With time, he softened to her again. She discovered enjoyable qualities she had never noticed in him before. Ultimately, she realized she loved him. Now, a couch pillow with an inscription that Stephanie stitched reminds her to love everyone—even those who seem hard to love—relentlessly.