

French for Rachel

By Doreen Tamminga

“I want to have French class! I want to do project too!” Rachel stopped in the doorway of the sixth grade classroom, refusing to budge.

“Come along, Rachel,” Mrs. Hilton said kindly. “We need this time for your writing lessons.”

“Come on! I want to *stay*,” Rachel said defiantly even as her feet reluctantly trailed Mrs. Hilton’s down to their own small study room.

During library period, Rachel slipped back into the classroom to speak with the French teacher.

“Can I have French book?” she asked, leaning her round tummy against the teacher’s desk.

Miss Catan smiled at the request and got up. “Let me see if we have an extra copy. Hmm, no, I’m sorry. I don’t have any extra textbooks this year, Rachel.”

“All right,” Rachel answered, looking down at the desk. “I ask lib - - librarian.”

In the library she approached the librarian for a French book. “I hafta learn French,” she explained eagerly, bouncing on the heels of her feet. “The - - the kids are doing a project on Monday,” she continued, wrinkling her small nose to push up her glasses. “I do a project too.”

Rachel waited impatiently for the librarian’s response. “Oohhh!” she moaned in frustration as the librarian explained that the only picture dictionary had been checked out. Head down, she trudged on short legs back to class.

Passing her locker, Rachel saw two of her classmates. One of them, Kristen, was holding a picture dictionary. It had the word FRENCH written across the cover in large letters.

“You have French book?” Rachel approached the new girl a little hesitantly.

“Yeah, I’m getting it out for my little sister.”

“Can I have it, bring it home? I bring back tomorrow,” Rachel said hopefully.

Kristen giggled. “Why? You like French?” she asked with a smirk. “You want to learn to talk French?”

“Yeah!” A smile lit Rachel’s face, almost closing her almond-shaped eyes. “I be French teacher when I grow up.”



© 2017 DOREEN TAMMINGA

At that, Kristen laughed out loud, then covered her mouth. "Here. You better study hard."

Rachel giggled along with her. "I will," she promised readily and hopped up and down hugging the book to her chest. "Sank-you, Kristen."

Kristen turned to Caitlin and rolled her eyes. "I don't think she has a clue what goes on at school. Why do her parents even send her here?"

"She's actually very smart," Caitlin answered, grabbing her science book from her locker. "Just because she has Down's Syndrome doesn't mean she can't learn anything. It just takes her a little longer."

That afternoon, Rachel hurried off the school bus to get started on her project. With a pad of paper and pencil in hand, she began choosing objects to trace from the picture dictionary.

"I do this one and this one," she decided aloud. "I make good project. I love projects. I love French."

After supper, Rachel got out her markers and carefully outlined each object in bright colours. Holding up a girl with pink hair, she giggled. "I like that one. Is my favourite."

Saturday morning Mom asked Rachel if she would like to go sledding with the neighbour kids.

"No, I hafta finish my French project," Rachel told her as she climbed up on the chair at her desk. "Mon — Monday is the projects."

Using a pencil, Rachel carefully copied letter by letter, the name of each object onto the back of its page. Then stacking the papers together loosely, she stapled them into a booklet.

"All right, Mom!" she called. "I'm done my project now." And she tucked the booklet into her schoolbag for Monday. "There. Now don't forget project," she told herself.

Monday morning, Rachel hurried into school. "See my project?" she showed the kindergarten teacher.

"I made a project," she told the principal.

At her hook, she waved her project in the air to show the other kids.

"Oh boy," Kristen said and nudged Caitlin. "Rachel's made a French project too! Colouring pages, no doubt."

Rachel caught Kristen's eye and smiled happily. Carefully she placed her project on the shelf and hung her coat below. Just then the boy next to her tossed his lunch bag on the shelf, knocking her project off. It landed on the hall floor in a puddle of melted snow.

"Oops," he said, and picking up the dripping booklet, put it back on the shelf. "Sorry about that."

Kristen watched silently from her own hook.

"My project!" Rachel cried out. "Is all wet! You wrecked it. Oohhh!" and with a cry of frustration she buried her face in the jackets among the hooks.

Kristen stopped at Rachel's hook on her way into class.

“Don’t worry, Rachel,” she said with a half sympathetic smile. “The teacher won’t be mad; you didn’t really have to do a project for French.”

Rachel raised a tear-stained face and picked up her soggy booklet. “My project!” she wailed again. “Is all wrecked.”

The look on Rachel’s face wiped the smile from Kristen’s. She paused, hesitating. “You can make another one,” she finally suggested.

“No-o-o,” Rachel cried and stamped her foot. “Projects are today! I hafta do it.”

Kristen stared for one more moment at the determined face, then held out her hand.

“Here,” she said. “I’ll put your project on the heat register. It should dry in no time.”

“Dry on the register?” Rachel repeated peering up at Kristen over her glasses. “Sank-you.” And in a moment her tears had gone as she handed over the

project and bent double to peel off her boots.

~~~~~

French class came at last. Rachel clutched a dry and somewhat wrinkly booklet tightly in both hands as she waited for her turn to present.

“Rachel?” came Miss Catan’s voice from the front of the room.

Slowly Rachel stood up. A gap-toothed smile lit her face as she walked slowly up the aisle. Her smile widened as she passed Kristen’s desk, and she patted the booklet to show her it was really dry.

But as Rachel passed two boys, they began to giggle. Immediately her face fell and she stopped in her tracks. *Why they laugh at me?* she wondered. Her shoulders drew up in discomfort, and she appeared nervous for the first time.

“It’s all right. Come on up, Rachel,” Miss Catan encouraged from the front. The giggling stopped as the boys looked up to see what was going on.

“Come on, Rachel,” Kristen encouraged from her seat. “No one’s laughing at you. Go teach us some French.”

“No!” Rachel giggled shyly. “I not a teacher.”

“Sure you are!”

Kristen said. “You are for today.”

Again Rachel looked over the class. Rows of expectant faces smiled back at her. For a moment she turned and peered over her shoulder at Mrs. Hilton. Another nod and smile urged her on.

Rachel took a deep breath. *I go do project,*



she told herself. *I teach the kids French.* And holding her booklet out in front of her with two hands, she continued up the aisle to the front of the classroom. All trace of a smile disappeared from her face as she stood behind the lectern.

“Okay, class,” she pronounced with authority. “Time for French. Say your words.” And page by page, she held up the French vocabulary pictures as the students recited them in unison.

And for one glorious, shining moment, Rachel was living her dream. She was the French teacher.