

The Conquering of an Ancient Foe

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Exasperated and furious, I groaned at the impossibilities of the world and slammed my head down on the table. Pain, choking, swelling, angry pain, twisted a wrench in my already-knotted throat. My face burned, and my mama's voice was far away, angry back at me, asking *Why-Why was I acting like this?* But I could only claw at the table and release my agonies into the abyss, tears coming at my eyes.

I don't know. I suck at this. Just leave me alone. I'm incapable.

The last word resonated in my mind the longest. Incapable. The word that described how I felt, day in and day out, from the evil hatchings of Monday dragging through to a tearful Friday. It left me stripped of hope on the weekend, for I knew it would all resume again the next week. And the next. A living torture, worse to me than if I had been forced to forge irons until sweat dampened my back and made my hair clump in thick masses. At least, in a forge, I could learn, I could comprehend the labor and complete it to my best ability. But this, this grueling torture was such a one as I could not even force my mind to rationalize.

It was a torture thousands, probably millions, utilized each and every day.

A torture every school kid had thoroughly endured.

A torture known to modern society as Algebra 1.

I had been doing Life of Fred math since I learned that $3 + 4$ was 7. I had gone all the way with it; grown up with it. It was a special course, with not only math but logic mixed in and a story before each practice. I'd always loved it... until Algebra 1.

Things started getting rough halfway through the intimidatingly thick book. Suddenly, I felt as though I had been plunged into the middle of an ocean with a cannonball chained to my ankle. I couldn't keep my head above water, each day swamping me with resent and confusion. The logic addled my brain. A single lesson would take hours because I simply couldn't grasp the material. It was like someone had handed me a piece of paper and told me to write an essay in Martian without even a language guide. I couldn't do it. I had given up—on the book, one every number out there, on myself. If it was hopeless, why should I even try? Each day I just sat and dawdled, letting my mind wander, trying when I felt like it and flicking my pencil forward and back when I didn't.

It only made it worse when Mama tried to help. I felt stupid in front of her, and often expressed it in loud, tearful exclamations. She yelled back at me, which only made me cower and twist further down into my anger. It began to happen every day, and my grade and temperament dropped drastically.

My parents decided something should be done. They knew we couldn't go on like that. So they began to hunt for other options. I was despondent at first. I had done Life of Fred for my entire life, and, for someone overly sentimental such as I, it was a grave loss. But I knew I needed something else.

And, one day, my parents found it.

I watched the 20-minute preview clip with Mama. It was called Denison Algebra, named for the instructor. It was made specifically for people like me who had previous struggles with math from other sources. As I watched in awe, I couldn't believe it—it felt like he was speaking directly to me.

My parents bought the new course, and I had everything I needed for it in two weeks: a chunky textbook, a solutions manual, and a parents guide. There was a study sheet at the beginning of the textbook, as well as lists of study and focus tips.

That Monday, I scooted in at the desk, clicked the link on the computer, and found the first lesson, titled *1-1 Adding and Subtracting Integers*. I opened it. Little did I realize the wonder that had been opened to me, like an inverse Pandora's Box.

The first lesson taught negatives, and adding and subtracting them. The way Mr. Denison taught it, it was easy, almost too easy.

So I continued. Day by day, I began to understand.

And, strangest of all, I began to like math.

It made sense. I could work the problems and get all of them right. It was all so new to me, so strange, but wonderful. Sometimes, if I was bored, I would even write myself problems and see if I could solve them. Often, I got them right.

Fast forward half a year, and you would see a very different household around midmorning. I was almost a different girl entirely. I had learned how to solve systems of equations and inequalities. I had learned the quadratic equation by heart. I was ready for the last trial.

I took my Final Algebra Exam with anxious hopes and got a 96%.

After maintaining a failing, less than 50 grade all the past year, I was told my overall year grade was a 97. I couldn't believe it— could it be true? Had the nightmare I had been walking daily honestly transformed into this euphoria?

Yes. It had.