

Anna Claire, Banana Hair

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Albert was a good Dad. Not because he did everything right, but because he loved his children and tried hard to be a good Dad. That meant that he tried to be fair, firm and fun. He made sure they knew he and God loved them no matter what. When he made a mistake he apologized. He thought being a Dad was the greatest thing in the world.

Albert had been a good husband too when his wife was alive. Probably he was still a good husband but no one could tell now. So he was just a good Dad. His three children certainly agreed. He had twin boys, six, and a beautiful daughter, nine and three quarters. The boys were named Edward and Frederick, or Ed and Fred for short. They were like peddles on a bicycle, always together and always pushing each other into something; mostly into trouble. Albert spent a lot of time keeping them out of mischief and fixing things they broke. He was like that when he was young and so everything they did seemed familiar, just a lot more of it. Shopping for their clothes or toys was easy.

His daughter was named Anna Claire. She was every bit as much work as the two boys because she was a girl. Even though she was also a lot like Albert, he could never quite figure out the “girl” part of her. It always threw a little mystery into things. She could draw for hours by herself, or wrestle both her brothers at the same time. Sometimes if her drawing didn’t turn out the way she wanted, or she accidentally hurt Ed or Fred wrestling, she would cry. When her hamster died she had a somber funeral, then begged for a replacement, which she has already decided to name Pecan the Second. And almost always on Friday nights, she insisted on cooking dinner, which always meant Ramen noodles and tuna melt sandwiches. Saturdays were laundry and shopping; Sundays were

church and sports on TV. Anna Claire would make popcorn while Albert flipped channels. Then Anna Claire would root for the team with the prettiest colors.

Albert was a good Dad, but sometimes he was very tired. Taking care of his children and working was not easy. One Monday, Albert overslept. That meant a wild morning. Everyone rushing around, eating toast while looking for shoes, and yelling about lost homework or car keys. Teeth went un-brushed and lunches were forgotten, but off to school and work they went.

When they all arrived home that evening, things were scattered just where they had been that morning. So while kids cleaned up, Albert ordered a pizza. Over dinner the twins fought, Anna Claire sang a made up Italian song about pizza, and Albert just ate in silence. Before bed Albert announced that he had to be at work early the rest of the week for special meetings. So the rest of the week the morning rush got worse.

When Friday night came around, Albert was exhausted. He expected Anna Claire would want to make dinner. But she just sat at the kitchen table quietly drawing. Albert sat down beside her while the boys watched TV. He tried to make conversation but Anna Claire was not interested. He was so tired he couldn't think of anything much to say, so for a few minutes he just watched her draw. It was a picture of a little girl with funny, wild yellow hair clumped around her head like bananas.

“Who’s she?” asked Albert trying to sound interested.

“Me,” said Anna Claire.

“That’s pretty good,” Albert responded, complimenting her drawing.

Anna Claire was quiet, then began to cry. Albert was irritated and confused. What on earth could she be crying about?

“What’s the matter?” he blurted out, a little sharper than he had intended. It really did bother him to see her cry, but he wasn’t sure he had the energy to figure her out on an empty stomach.

“Do you think I have... *banana hair* too?” Her brown eyes sparkled with warm tears.

Albert sat back and looked at his beautiful daughter. She looked like her mother, but her hair was thick curls of yellow down to her shoulders; his wife’s hair had been brown and straight. He gently reached out to run his fingers through it but found that he couldn’t – the tangles had knotted in places and made it impossible. Albert hadn’t realized that every day that week he had forgotten to brush Anna Claire’s hair before school. She had done the best she could, but couldn’t get all the tangles out. Albert felt a lump in his throat so big that he thought Anna Claire might see it. He hugged her to himself and whispered, “I’m so sorry baby girl. Daddy thinks you’re beautiful. I’m sorry I didn’t take the time to brush your hair.” He held her tightly for a long time. Albert was a good Dad even though he didn’t feel like one at the moment.

Finally Albert pulled back to look into Anna Claire’s face. He was surprised to see that her face was dry and smiling while his was still wet with tears. She reached out and patted him on the chest where her tears had left a small spot. It was the only sign she had been crying at all.

“Ready for dinner?” she asked as though the last several minutes were days ago. All Albert could do was nod. After dinner and a video, the kids brushed their teeth while Albert cleaned up. It was a long time after prayers and goodnight kisses that Albert was sure everyone was asleep. The twins were sprawled at opposite ends of their twin beds,

toys littering the floor between them like a toy factory had exploded. Anna Claire was snug in her covers, her thick golden hair spread like a blanket around her neck. Albert silently knelt beside her and pinched one of her tangles. He fiddled with it till he realized it wasn't going to budge. He tiptoed to his own room and lay awake for a long time before falling asleep in his clothes.

Albert woke up early for a Saturday and the twins were already watching cartoons. He made coffee and sipped it while he thumbed through the phone book. By the time Albert woke Anna Claire up the twins were dressed, had their shoes tied and wore matching backpacks.

"Come on Sweet Pea," he said rubbing her head. "I have a surprise for you today."

They were all in the car before Anna Claire was fully awake. Albert dropped Ed and Fred off at Aunt Betty's house. She had been an army nurse and was hard of hearing. The boys liked her because she never told them to use their "inside voice". Then Albert took Anna Claire to have waffles. They laughed and filled in every square with syrup while the mall across the street slowly came to life.

When they were done, Albert said, "Let's go. We've got something to do." They walked into the middle of the mall to a place that smelled funny. It was a salon. Anna Claire looked at her Dad with big eyes. He smiled and pulled her inside. The woman at the counter smiled too and took Anna Claire straight to a big chair.

"We want a new look," announced Albert and Anna Claire agreed. The lady nodded and carefully examined the tangles in Anna Claire's hair. "Some of these won't wash out," she said in a professional voice.

She snipped out three tough knots and left the rest. Then she walked Anna Claire over to the shampoo sink. She felt funny lying back with here eyes closed, but the water was warm. Someone began gently shampooing here hair and she squeezed her eyes tightly to keep the suds out. Then the warm water again followed by a wonderful smelling conditioner. Strong fingers rubbed her head and she wondered why some dogs didn't like baths.

When her hair was rinsed again and a warm towel was wrapped around her head, she sat up to see her Dad standing beside her with his sleeves rolled up and a big wet spot with some bubbles on his shirt. Anna Claire grinned.

“Dad, that was great!”

“I'm learning,” Albert shrugged. The lady came and took her back to the big chair and combed her hair out. After a several minutes of clipping and drying she was done. Anna Claire's hair was soft and beautiful. Albert insisted they walk around the mall so people could see. He carried a bag with expensive, fancy-smelling salon shampoo and conditioner in pink bottles Albert knew the twins would never touch. It was for girls.