

# Twenty Minutes

by William Mason

As a young girl Sue was almost always one step ahead of everyone, including her mother. Like most young folk, Sue was constantly thinking, probing her expanding world, and the fact that she was exceptionally bright only added to her capacity to “think outside the box” — an admirable trait unless you’re one of the parents who must anticipate what’s coming.

But even with all her wit, Sue had been unable to convince her mother that she needed some new school clothes. All of Sue’s friends seemed always to be wearing the latest fashions, and she didn’t like being one of the few kids whose wardrobe looked as if it mirrored another, older era.

And it wasn’t like Sue wanted to be a super model: She just wanted to fit in with the other eighth-grade students. Having come from a middle-class family, it was sometimes difficult to feel like she was part of the school, even if her father was a personal friend of the school’s director. After all, most of the other students were from wealthy families. It was only her father’s connection to the director and his promise to help the director with some construction problems on a new campus cafeteria that had allowed Sue to attend one of the finest private schools in the state.

In any case, Sue’s mother, who could be as stubborn as a mule, was not going to budge. “There’s nothing wrong with your clothes,” she would say, “and besides, it’s what’s on the inside that counts. You don’t need to keep up with every new fashion. It’s a waste of time and money.”

Many her age would have been angry with such a response, but not Sue. Money was tight, and she knew it. And that maturity was likewise reflected in everything else she did: Homework was completed correctly and always on time, chores were rarely missed, and respect and politeness were an ever-present part of her character. Even so, sometime shortly after her thirteenth birthday, Sue began to be a little more disorganized than usual.

On one particular occasion when her mother entered Sue’s bedroom, she was greeted immediately with a rather large mess: Sue had left many of her toys, CDs, books, pictures, art supplies, and other hobby and recreational items on the floor where she had last used them, and in considerable disarray. And even though Sue was at her desk diligently pursuing her schoolwork, her mother was not pleased; not only was the room a total disaster, but this making-a-mess routine was fast becoming a pattern for Sue — one her mother knew had to be broken.

After considering her parental options, Sue’s mother gently, yet firmly warned, “I will return in twenty minutes. By the time I come back you had better have this room cleaned up. I expect all of your things to be put away, and that means putting them in the correct drawers and on the correct shelves.” But there was still more to be said — pointing to the items on the floor, and in an

ominous tone, she added, “If, when I return, I find you have not followed my instructions, all of these things will be placed in the trash or given away.”

Sue’s mother left. After a brief survey of what needed to be done, Sue began the task of reorganizing her things ... with a displeasure that was obvious. And she was about two minutes into her clean-up project when, for no apparent reason, she paused for just a moment. Almost instantaneously the look of sudden realization and imminent triumph flashed across her deep blue eyes, accompanied by a subdued smile — after which she returned to her work ... briskly, as though she had some grand idea or plan that could not wait.

As promised, Sue’s mother returned 20 minutes later. But she was not prepared for what she saw: Sue had carefully placed each of her things in its appropriate place — however, she had also cleaned out every single dresser drawer, as well as the closet, removing every single article of clothing. Nothing had been spared — not even the cowboy hat that she had not worn for more than three years or the soiled sock that had lain in the corner of the closet for three weeks. Each item had been carelessly thrown onto the floor with the obvious intent of creating the largest, most disorganized mess possible. The result was far worse than any mess created by the toys, CDs, books, and other items having been strewn about the floor.

Mom looked toward Sue. She was sitting quietly on her neatly-made bed ... confident, gleefully anticipating the moment to come. As their eyes met, Sue’s expression said it all: “Okay. Go ahead, Mom. Throw ‘em out.”

There wasn’t much Mom could do — She had been outwitted by a kid. For one brief, intense moment, Sue’s mother was thrown back deep into her childhood, there to be met by the bittersweet memories of her own confrontations with her mother. Then she remembered her mother’s smile in the midst of such experiences, the way it crept out, slowly revealing itself, beginning at the corners of her mouth as they barely ticked upward while she tried to hold her made-up anger ... soon thereafter showing a glimmer of white that quickly broke out into a broad, open smile, ultimately betraying her kindness.

Mom suddenly broke out into a loud, long, lively laugh.

And as both of them — together — picked up Sue’s clothes, laughter continued to accent their conversation. Among other things, they reviewed Sue’s day at school and the family’s plans for the coming weekend.

Later that evening Sue and her mother picked out some new school clothes at the local Target store. Their eyes, however, revealed an undeniable, subtle truth: It wasn’t about the clothes — and it never had been.