

1440

By

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Life Can Change In Minutes

EXT. ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Signs hang on the front of the worn down elementary school. One says: "Eighth grade graduation June 1st." One says: "Happy retirement Mrs. Nickel." One says: "Turn in all library books by end of the week." Kids are running to their after school activities, laughing and playing. It is the second to last day of school. It is an ethnically diverse school. Principal PATRICIA JONES, African American, 40's, walks down the hallway toward the staff parking lot with MRS. DEBRA NICKEL, 60's. Mrs. Nickel holds a large moving box of supplies, books, frames, etc.

PRINCIPAL JONES

One day left.

MRS. NICKEL

I'm done counting days. I'm counting minutes now. 1440 left.

PRINCIPAL JONES

I am so jealous.

The bell rings and three kids rush by. One slightly knocks into Mrs. Nickel.

MRS. NICKEL

Slow down! It's the last week of school, relax!

They barely slow down but respond over their shoulders.

KID 1

Sorry Mrs. Nickel.

MRS. NICKEL

No offense, Patty, but I will not miss this. I *might* miss you, but I will not miss your staff meetings, underfunded programs, and I definitely won't miss detention duty.

Mrs. Nickel laughs and rolls her eyes to Principal Jones.

PRINCIPAL JONES

1439 minutes.

MRS. NICKEL

And counting.

(CONTINUED)

PRINCIPAL JONES

The PTO owes you a life-time  
Caribbean cruise.

MRS. NICKEL

So I shouldn't get my hopes up for  
the party tomorrow night?

PRINCIPAL JONES

Will you be disappointed if you  
only get a box of chocolate?

MRS. NICKEL

Just no embroidered apple clothing  
or macaroni jewelry, or I will stab  
each and every person with a  
Popsicle stick.

PRINCIPAL JONES

Enjoy your last school night, ever!

MRS. NICKEL

I will. And I'm not coming in early  
tomorrow!

Principal Jones laughs.

PRINCIPAL JONES

You're not retired yet. A lot can  
happen in 1400 minutes.

They say their goodbyes. Mrs. Nickel opens her trunk and  
drops her box of supplies inside. Two students run by.

KID 2 & 3

Bye, Mrs. Nickel!

MRS. NICKEL

See you tomorrow. Last day of  
fourth grade.

The students smile and walk away.

MRS. NICKEL

(Whispers to herself)

First day of the rest of my life.

She smiles to herself. She puts her key in the front door.  
But it is already unlocked. She wonders if she forgot to  
lock the doors when she arrived in the morning. She shrugs  
it off and opens it.

INT. CAR. 4 DOOR SEDAN.

She plops herself in the front seat of her car. She places her purse in the seat next to her. She lets out a big sigh. She is tired, weathered, ready to be done. She takes a good look at the campus, the kids, and the signs. She buckles her seat belt, starts the car, and begins to drive away.

After a few seconds, a figure emerges from the backseat.

JOSE

Turn right down the next street.

Mrs. Nickel begins to scream, and hyperventilate. She looks at the man through the rear view mirror and sees JOSE SANCHEZ, late 20's, Hispanic.

JOSE

Shut up, or I will use this.

He shows her a handgun and puts his hand over her mouth. She tries to control her breathing.

JOSE

Turn, now!! Here.

Mrs. Nickel hastily turns the car screeching the tires.

JOSE

Park in this lot.

He points to a church building. She pulls in and stops the car. She tries to talk from under his hand.

MRS. NICKEL

What do you want? I have money.

JOSE

Just shut up. I don't want your money. I need your help.

Jose removes his hand.

MRS. NICKEL

Help? You?

JOSE

You don't recognize me, do you?

MRS. NICKEL

How would I know you?

(CONTINUED)

JOSE  
You're Mrs. Nickel.

She turns around to get a look at him.

JOSE  
Don't.

He taps her shoulder with the gun, keeping her facing forward.

JOSE  
I was one of your students. A long time ago. Jose Sanchez. Jesse's father.

Mrs. Nickel is silent. She looks in the mirror. She realizes who he is. Her emotions well up, she becomes angry.

MRS. NICKEL  
You're supposed to be in jail?!

JOSE  
I'm out..and I need your help.

She loses all self-control. She unbuckles her seat belt and turns around toward him despite that he's holding a gun.

MRS. NICKEL  
Why would I help you? How dare you. You're a criminal, gangbanger, drug dealer, deadbeat dad. Do you know what you put your child through?

She tries to slap him. Jose grabs her by the wrist. His face is tight-lipped.

JOSE  
Stop it!

MRS. NICKEL  
You ruined his life, and you made my class, my life, a living hell...

JOSE  
Cut it out! Sit down.

MRS. NICKEL  
Get out of my car! Get out..

He yells at the top of his lungs.

(CONTINUED)

JOSE

Shut up!

She winces. He pushes down on her back with his left hand and presses the gun to the back of her head with his right. He cocks the trigger. She closes her eyes, tightens up her body, and holds her breath. He nudges the gun again to her head.

JOSE

Put the belt on, fo' I use this.

She slowly clips the belt and sinks back. Jose takes a breath and slouches back in the seat. He removes the gun. He sighs.

JOSE

I'm sorry. I messed up. You're right. I ruined a lot of lives. I hurt my son, and you. And...I'm sorry. I'm... sorry.

Her hand is slowly moving toward her purse to reach her cell phone.

MRS. NICKEL

You're sorry? You think that's going to change everything? You are a terrible person.

JOSE

I was. I changed. OK? I need you to believe that. God changed me.

MRS. NICKEL

Of course, everyone finds Jesus in jail. That doesn't make things better. You have nerve Mr. Sanchez. You could have given your son a good life, but no, you..

He interrupts her.

JOSE

Shut! Up! You don't know. I love my son.

He stops to think for a second.

JOSE

That's why I need your help. I want to make things better.

He puts his hand on her shoulder.

(CONTINUED)

JOSE

You're the only one I know who can help me do that.

Her fingers have slowly retrieved her phone from her purse, on the front seat and she's dialed 911.

911 OPERATOR (SPEAKER)

911 what's your emergency?

She begins to yell and scream.

MRS. NICKEL

Help! I'm being held hostage...

Jose grabs the phone, and struggles with her over it.

MRS. NICKEL

... in my car at...

He pries it loose and throws it against the window, breaking it. He grabs her neck from behind and puts the gun to her temple. He leans in close to her ear.

JOSE

Really? You can't hear me out?

She puts her hands up in surrender.

MRS. NICKEL

Please. Please!

She looks at him through the mirror, begging for her life.

JOSE

Start the car! Now!

He shakes her into action and puts the gun down. He lowers himself, trying to hide, in the seat, looking around. Mrs. Nickel starts up the car and backs up out of the lot.

JOSE

We gotta get outta here!

Jose becomes frustrated and confused. He needs to make a quick decision.

JOSE

Go left down the street. Hurry!

Mrs. Nickel's hands are tightly on the wheel. She breathes quickly trying not to cry and nervously looking for a way out.

(CONTINUED)

JOSE

I thought you were a good person. I came to you because of all the people in my life, you was the one I remembered who ever showed you really cared. I thought you could help Jesse.

Mrs. Nickel looks at him through the mirror. She's actually interested in hearing what he has to say.

MRS. NICKEL

What are you talking about?

JOSE

He's gettin' beat up.

MRS. NICKEL

What do you mean?

JOSE

The foster family.

MRS. NICKEL

He's being abused? How do you know that?

JOSE

He's had two visits with me in a year. The last time, I saw marks. I know.

MRS. NICKEL

Report it.

JOSE

Easier said than done, locked up.

MRS. NICKEL

You're out now.

JOSE

It's complicated.

She stops the car at the side of the road. She's fed up. She yells.

MRS. NICKEL

What in the world do you want from me?

Jose takes a moment.

(CONTINUED)

JOSE

Take him in.

MRS. NICKEL

What?

JOSE

Be his guardian. Take over his foster care.

MRS. NICKEL

You're his father. You take care of him.

JOSE

I'd give my life for him. I want to be his dad, I just can't. I can't take care of him, or protect him. But I know you can.

MRS. NICKEL

You have no idea what your asking.

JOSE

Mrs. Nickel. I saw my son only two times over the past year. Both times- all he did was talk about you and your class.

For the first time, she lets go. She sits back in the seat. She feels not only safe, but encouraged, hopeful, as if all her forty years of unappreciated teaching came down to those words.

JOSE

I know you know how loneliness feels. I remember when everything happened with your husband.

He has struck a cord in her.

JOSE

Look, I thought I was supposed to find you.

His eyes well up in tears.

JOSE

I even thought God wanted me to.. I had this crazy thought, that maybe, you needed...

He shakes his head. He wipes his eyes.

(CONTINUED)

JOSE

Y'know what? Forget it. I done a lot of stupid things in my life and I'm paying for it. I wanted better for Jesse. I don't want him gettin' beat or being alone. I thought you were the one to help. Sorry. I never meant to hurt nobody.

He opens the door and gets out. He shuts the door and runs a bit, then walks fast. He pulls his hoodie over his head. She watches him. As he turns the corner he stops and looks at her. They hold eye contact. Tears begin to roll down Mrs. Nickel's cheeks. Jose walks out of sight. She sits in silence.

Fade to black.

EXT. ELEMENTARY SCHOOL. THE NEXT DAY

It's a bright and beautiful morning. Mrs. Nickel pulls into her same parking spot. There's something different about her. As she steps out of her car, she sees parents dropping off their children for the last day of school. Balloons decorate the campus. "Mrs. Nickel appreciation signs" have doubled. She gets many smiles and hellos from children and staff. She spots JESSE SANCHEZ, a small Hispanic boy, 9 years old, getting out of a car. He is recognizably upset. A MAN, 40's, comes around the car with him and sternly talks to him while kneeling down, face to face. The man firmly puts his hands on Jesse's shoulders. He squeezes very tightly. Jesse winces. Mrs. Nickel quickly walks over to the situation.

MRS. NICKEL

Everything OK, Jesse?

The man straightens himself up. The boy looks up at her with sad, distant eyes, trying to compose himself while shaking his head yes. The man dismisses the situation.

THE MAN (JESSE'S FOSTER FATHER)

Oh, he's fine.

He walks around to the front of his car. Mrs. Nickel watches him.

THE MAN

Congratulations on your last day, Mrs. Nickel. Hope you enjoy the rest of your life. You must be excited to be done with all this.

(CONTINUED)

Mrs. Nickel politely half-smiles. The man gets in his car and drives off. Mrs. Nickel notices bruises on Jesse's arms. Suddenly things begin to awaken in her even more. She puts her arm on Jesse's back.

MRS. NICKEL  
Come along Jesse.

She takes a breath and gently smiles down at the boy as they walk together to class. The first bell rings and they walk down the hall. Children are playfully running all around. A fellow TEACHER, 30'S walks by and whispers to Mrs. Nickel.

TEACHER  
How many minutes, Deb? See you tonight!

The Teacher doesn't wait for the answer. She keeps walking.

MRS. NICKEL  
What? Oh...

She's flustered for a moment but shakes her head to re-focus down the hallway to her classroom. She breathes deeply looking around, determining to enjoy her last day. She arrives at her room, fourteen, and sees students already gathered inside through the window. She takes a mental inventory of the scene: her name plaque on the door, the smiling faces, and the balloons and streamers that adorn the area inside her room. She ushers Jessie in, smiles, and side-hugs some of the children as they greet her and walk into the class. Some hand her gifts.

The bell rings. She waves in the remaining students and begins to walk inside the class after them, when she catches a glimpse of of Principal Jones. She is walking down the hallway toward her with a police officer and a man in shirt and tie.

PRINCIPAL JONES  
Debra, we have startling news.

POLICE OFFICER  
Ma'am. Three inmates managed to escape County during a routine transfer yesterday. One was caught, but two are still at large, including Jose Sanchez.

MRS. NICKEL  
Jose Sanchez? Jesse's Father? He broke out of prison?

(CONTINUED)

Her eyes widen as she shakes her head to make sense of it. She realizes the intensity of the situation. Jose escaped prison to make contact with her. Jose risked his life for his son. As the police officer talks, she looks through her window to see Jessie inside the classroom.

POLICE OFFICER

It's been seventeen hours since the escape. He may have crossed the border, but we can't take any chances. We have reason to believe he may try to abduct his son. The foster family also reported a death threat, which we're certain is gang related. CPS will need to relocate the boy today.

She is playing the conversation over in her mind from the previous day. It all begins to make sense.

MRS. NICKEL

I'll take him.

CPS WORKER

Excuse me?

MRS. NICKEL

I'll be his guardian.

CPS WORKER

It's not that easy. There's a lot of paperwork and...

MRS. NICKEL

I'll do it.

PRINCIPAL JONES

Debra?!

CPS WORKER

Um, OK. This is extremely unusual. But, actually in emergency situations, people with teaching credentials are highly esteemed by the courts. We just have to get proper permission from the state to release him into your custody. It could happen immediately in this circumstance, or take hours depending on the lawyers and caseworkers.

(CONTINUED)

MRS. NICKEL

Well, get it started. The best thing for him is to stay in class right now. I assume that's OK with the state? It's the last day for goodness sake.

PRINCIPAL JONES

Are you OK?

MRS. NICKEL

Fine.

The CPS worker pulls out his cell phone.

CPS WORKER

I will arrange everything. We'll just need you down at the courthouse as soon as possible today. I'll be in touch.

He walks away putting his ear to the phone.

POLICE OFFICER

Ma'am. I've been assigned to the campus until Jose Sanchez is back behind bars. I'm here to escort you if need be.

MRS. NICKEL

Well then, you can escort me down to the courthouse later. Looks like I have a lot of paperwork to sign. And then, you can escort me, and the boy, to my retirement party. I'll see you in...

She looks at her watch. Their eyes are on her.

MRS. NICKEL

420 minutes.

She takes a deep breath and looks at Principal Jones and the police officer. She smiles, opens the door, and enters the class. The door to room fourteen shuts behind her. Through the window we see Mrs. Nickel close in on Jesse as some other students lovingly swarm around her. She throws her arms up in celebration and waves everyone in as if to include all the students in one big group hug.

Fade to black.

Credits.

