

Livin' in Reseda
First Day of School

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She has smoky gray hair that swirls into pin curls all around her face and she's round like a Weeble, but I bet she would fall down if someone pushed her really hard. Her dress is gray too, a chalky shade. It's made of one giant piece of stiff felt with a big collar and dark gray buttons down the front. Even her skin has a gray tint. It's like someone sprinkled ashes all over her, except for her teeth. When she smiles her teeth are clean and bright white. I don't plan on pushing her down because she's nice and even if I wanted to, I don't think I could push that hard.

There are three rooms for the kindergarteners. In the front room, there's a chalk board with a banner of the alphabet that swoops down over the top. I already know the alphabet so I can't wait until she asks what sounds all the letters make. I'll be the first one to raise my hand, I bet.

She tells my mother that the parents are allowed to stay for the morning, but my mother says, "Oh no, Char is ready to take a break from being with her mother." She smiles and I see her give the teacher a sideways chuckle, like she's sharing a joke. My mother's teeth are the same color as my teacher's dress. When my mother smiles it looks like she's been eating ashes instead of having them sprinkled over her. I look out the big windows that make up the back wall of the classroom and I can see a playground with a green grassy area, shade trees, metal benches and lots and lots of toys. When I turn back around to point it out to her, my mother is already on her way out the door.

The gray teacher smiles again, takes my hand and shows me around. She points out all the different colors of construction paper in the crafts room and then takes me to the reading room in the back. She tells me that every Thursday someone reads a whole book to us out loud while we all sit on mats. I'm so excited because it'll be like listening to one of my records, only in real life. Then she asks me if I'd like to go outside to the playground and I would.

From the playground I can see a girl clutching onto her mother's sleeves at the back gate. She's all dolled up with curly pig tails like Cindy from the Brady Bunch and a dress with bright red flowers on it. She turns to grab her mother and I see there is a straight line down the back of her head separating her blonde pigtails. At our house we don't care what we look like from the back, just from the front. My hair is blonde too, but strawberry, not yellow-blonde like hers. My friend Dawn tries to tell me that my hair is red, but my mother says, "Oh God, no," then, "Thank God you don't have freckles."

The pig-tailed girl is screaming bloody murder as her mother tries to drag her inside. The mother picks her up by the arms and tries to make her stand, but she falls right back down like a little rag doll. She's acting like her arms and legs don't work, but I know that they do. I wonder why she wouldn't be happy to get out of the house for a while and learn about things that aren't all soap operas.

We get settled in the front classroom and I look around. I've never been around so many kids that are the same age as me. They are sitting cross legged on the floor, most them with swollen eyes from crying. Some of them are in their mother's laps. The leftover parents are lined up along the wall in the back and I try to figure out which parents go with which kids. For all the kids know, my mother standing against that wall. I smile at a woman with strawberry hair like mine.

The pigtailed girl is still crying and throwing a fit. They are both sitting on the floor and her mother has to hug her from behind in order to keep her in the classroom. I can see the other parents looking at each other and shaking their heads because she's making it hard for the rest of us to hear what the teacher is saying. I already know that I don't like her. It doesn't matter how much she cries, she

can't get out of going to school and why would she want to? It's stupid for her to keep acting like that. Every time she wriggles around in her mother's arms her hair gets more messed up. Her pig tails are loose and crooked now and I'm glad. As soon as her mother is gone, I'm going to tell her what a stupid baby she is.

That's what I am thinking when the pigtailed girl stops crying. I look her way and see that she has her arm around her mother's neck and is whispering something to her. As she pulls back from her mother's ear both of their heads turn slowly in the same direction, mine. I can feel my face getting hot and my nose is running so I wipe it with the palm of my hand.

The pigtailed girl is moving in slow motion now. She raises her arm. Her wrist. Then her finger, until it's pointed straight at me. She's doing it that way on purpose. She wants to give everyone enough time to notice that she's quiet now so they turn to look her way. Then it's like a silent gust of wind blows through the room as every head drifts in her direction, then mine.

The gray teacher is wobbling up to me saying, "Oh my, oh my, let's get you outside." She takes me by the shoulders, turns me around and pushes me toward the door. One of the mothers rushes alongside of us and tries to hand me a tissue out of her purse.

"Here," she says, and I take it but I don't know why.

"For your nose," she whispers, as the gray teacher scoots me outside from behind. The mother motions to her own nose with her finger. I look down at the tissue in my hand and I see a smear of bright red blood across my palm.

"Oh," I say looking up at her, "That's no big deal. It bleeds all the time." Then I stuff the entire tissue up the bleeding nostril, leaving a little handle at the end, like I do at home.

When we get outside the mother pinches the top of my nose and tilts my head back, holding my neck in her palm. She's not the strawberry-haired one, but I bet the kids inside still think she's my mother. Kids don't always match up with their parents.

My gray teacher says, “Honey, you just hold your head back. Don’t you worry.” She uses my shoulders to balance as she bends down on one knee, then the other, in front of me. She takes the tissue out of my nose by the handle I made, then bends her neck sideways to look up, inside my nostril.

The mother is still holding my head back. I hope her real kid doesn’t say anything.

My teacher’s cheeks are rosy now and she seems a little out of breath. The rest of her is still gray. Then I notice it. One bright red dot on her chalky grey collar.

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