

The New Student

Jordan Isbell

Second Place—Essay Competition

“I’m the champion! You both are rotten eggs now!”

I exclaimed my victory to my siblings as I barged in the living room eager to show off my new reputation as the fastest in the family. Throwing my backpack on the dusty chair, I leapt on the couch that greeted me with a suffocating hug and grabbed the T.V. remote from the cushions. My brother and sister lethargically entered the house seconds later and immediately collapsed on the edges of the furniture, bending over and grabbing at their chests to catch their breath.

“At—at least I’m—I’m second,” my brother declared, raising his fist in a false-victory manner.

“You cheated,” my sister accused, glaring at me as she regained her composure. “You just took off without telling anyone. You can’t do that.”

I turned up the volume to drown out their embarrassing excuses. “Always be prepared,” I advised. “Plus, we did this a week ago, so it’s not like it was the first time this happened. You’re just mad you were last.”

“That’s not fair. You didn’t even win the right way. You pushed me and Jeffery out the way and just took off.”

“I’m just glad I’m second,” my brother reiterated.

As they bickered over the race, I focused on catching up to the newest episodes of *Adventure Time*. Although it was enjoyable watching Finn slay another beast for the thousandth time, the sounds of demons falling were soon overshadowed by the sudden smell of grease infused in meat. It was too familiar, and I knew exactly who was in there and what was being served.

“Oh yeah, hamburgers and fries,” I exclaimed as I darted towards the kitchen grabbing my first plate. At the stove was where my mother always worked her magic, and today was no different; she had her grease-stained apron on, and her amber-colored bandana elegantly wrapped around her head to trap the sweat I’m sure she produced a gallon of. The patties sizzled and filled the air with a thick aroma that built a recipe for deliciousness.

“My day was fine, thank you so much for asking,” Mom joked, flipping a patty with her famous spatula.

“Oh, shoot, I’m sorry, Mom. How was your day?” I asked as I made my way towards the fridge.

“It was alright,” she replied. “Your dad just got out of work, and he should be in the back room somewhere. I’ve been here though getting all this food ready for y’all. What about you? How’s fourth grade treating you?”

“It was great,” I exclaimed. “I met some really cool teachers, and I think they like me. Ms. Cousins is my favorite already! She teaches English, and she said she knows me because her mom used to teach me in the third grade. I think I’m her favorite too.” I grabbed a slice of cheese and measured it to make sure it was the longest one before placing in on my plate.

“I wouldn’t say that you’re the *favorite*, but I’m glad you’re liking your teachers.” Mom heard the fridge door slam and briefly turned around. “You’re already fixing a plate? You can’t wait for your brother and sister to show up?”

“They’re in there arguing over who’s the bigger loser,” I retorted, examining the pickle jar to find the largest one. “They can smell it just how I did. If they want a burger, they would’ve shown up by now.”

Mom continued to treat the patties. “You better not be getting all the food either, Jordan. Leave some for them too. If you don’t want to wait on these burgers on the stove, there are some in the microwave that you can get.”

I raced to the microwave and opened it to grab the juiciest patty. “Nice,” I said.

“Anything else happen in school?”

“Not much really. It was really a quick day and—wait!” I slammed the microwave door shut and raised a finger. “I forgot. Kelsey got suspended already on the first day.”

Mom laughed. “Kelsey? The one who always come here every weekend? What did he do to get suspended?”

“Yeah, that’s him. And he got into a fight with the new student during the lunch period. It was right when it began and it went by so fast that I forgot it even happened. It was pretty funny, though. Kelsey slammed him over the table and dumped his lunch all over him. People had to grab him off of the person, and it took them a good three minutes.” I found the softest buns

and went to grab the ketchup.

“Jesus, what did he do to Kelsey?” my mom questioned, raising her eyebrows. “When he’s over here, he seems so nice and innocent. Who started the fight?”

“I know, right? I was surprised, too, but the other guy actually started it. It was over something pretty dumb. Me and Kelsey were sitting at the table with some other people, and the guy came over with his lunch, so we asked him if he wanted to sit with us. He ended up saying no, and Kelsey just jumped at him and started fighting him. It came out of nowhere, really.”

Mom, still fixing on the burgers, lowered her eyebrows. “So, he got in a fight with the new student because he said he didn’t want to sit with y’all?” Her voice changed from the light-hearted mother to the stern parent.

“Yeah, sounds crazy, doesn’t it?”

“Are you sure that’s how it happened? That’s not how a fight that violent starts.”

“Well, that what it looked like. He probably got mad at what he said.”

“And what did he say?”

“Well...am I allowed to say it?”

Mom stopped flipping the patties and turned to stare at me. “You know what? Sure.” She turned off the stove and folded her arms while leaning against it.

“Just to be clear, you said you’re okay with it.”

“That’s what I said.”

“Ok, he said, ‘I don’t want to sit with you n****s.’”

Mom took a moment to think, before stating, “So it sounds like Kelsey fought him because he called him the n-word.”

“Which is why I said it was a dumb fight,” I replied. I poured the ketchup on the top bun before smushing both pieces of bread between the meat. I made way to the oven to grab the fries, but Mom was still standing in front of it. “Excuse me, Mom.”

She didn’t move.

“Black or white?”

White or black, I thought. *What is she talking about?*

“I’m confused,” I answered back, trying to peek through the oven to make sure the fries were in there.

“Was he black?” my mom retorted, still guarding the wedges. “Or was he white?”

Does it really matter? I thought.

“White,” I finally responded. “He used to go to another school. He’s not even from around here, actually.” I tried to grab the oven’s ledge, but Mom kneeled down and stood face to face with me.

“Jordan,” she began, this time with a concern in her tone. “Do you know why he was mad at him?”

“Not really. I mean, maybe he was mad about him not wanting to sit with us.”

Before I could say anything else, Mom grabbed my head and spoke to me softly.

“Jordan. Are you telling me you didn’t find that to be racist?”

“Racist? No, it’s not like he said he hates black people. I mean it’s just a word, right?”

Mom stood up and took off her apron. I had never seen her act this way before. She left the kitchen and went into her room. She didn’t come back out.

My brother soon ran in the kitchen.

“Aha, I’m the first one now!” △



Heart in the Road

Icarus Riggle

Photography