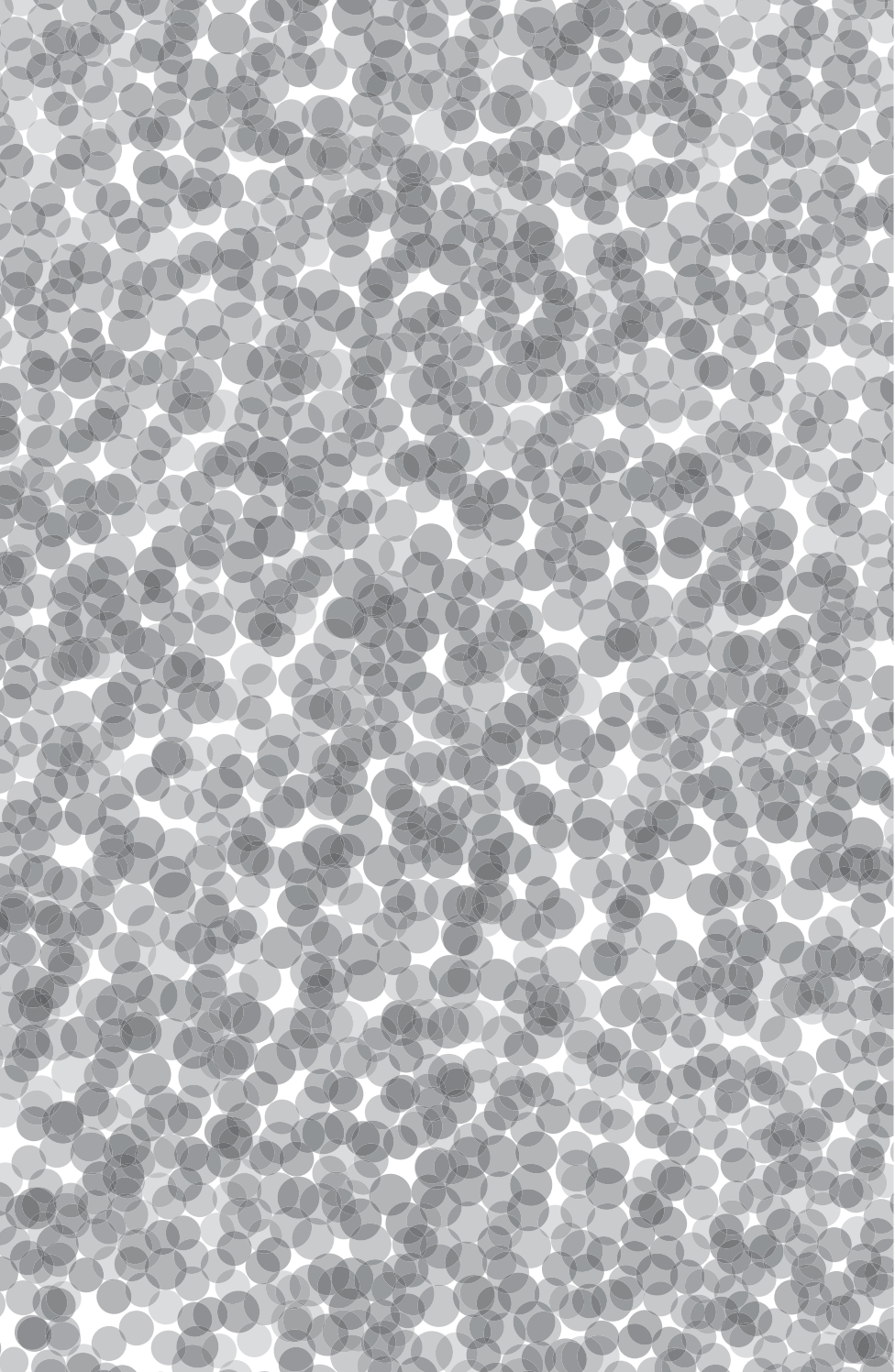


***THE
FIRST
THING
ABOUT
YOU***



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CHAZ HAYDEN

WALKER
BOOKS

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First published 2022 by Walker Books Ltd
87 Vauxhall Walk, London SE11 5HJ

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

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This book has been typeset in Palatino and Prachar

Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data:
a catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-5295-1094-2

www.walker.co.uk



For my mom, who is the most selfless person I know.

Thank you for putting up with me. I love you.



FAR

NEW JERSEY PIZZA

THE DAY BEFORE I MOVED to New Jersey, I told my only friend that I was okay with never seeing him again. *Friend* is a pretty generous word to describe us, but I wanted to feel like I was leaving something behind.

I'd always had a knack for burning bridges. This, I believed, was a trait I inherited from my mom, who knows how to get on with life.

But lots of people come and go with little regard for the people they're leaving. My nurses almost never look back. And I can't let that bother me, because (a) most of them don't think two thoughts about me in the first place and (b) I need to keep the revolving door turning to avoid a lapse in my care.

That's not to say my parents aren't capable of taking care of me; I wouldn't have been alive and starting my sophomore year of high school without them. But they can't do it every second of every day, so we hire nurses who are reliable enough to attend school with me and make sure I don't die on their watch.

On the first day in our new house, I sat watching a preseason football game with my brother, Ollie, who was wearing a sweatshirt from the University of Virginia – his future college and the lacrosse team he'd be playing for the following year. He was sitting next to a stack of boxes on the couch we'd dragged across the country.

Our parents walked in, each looking more exhausted than the other. Mom's hands were placed firmly on her hips, which actually wasn't a sign of her being mad. She was about to ask us a question or tell us to do something.

"We're ordering pizza for dinner, okay?" she said. "I'm tired, and there's nothing in the house to cook anyway."

"I hate pizza," I said. "It's gross."

"Too bad, Harris. I'm not running to the grocery store at ten o'clock just to buy you chicken nuggets. You can deal with pizza for one night." She walked away, leaving no opportunity for a rebuttal. To argue with my mom, I had to be faster.

"Dude, we're in New Jersey. Some of the best pizza in the country is right here," Ollie told me.

I ignored him.

Dad lingered behind. "Ollie, can you get up and help a little? Pick up those boxes and bring them into your room?"

"Why didn't the movers unpack everything?"

"It doesn't matter. I asked you to do something."

Ollie dragged his body off the couch, picked up two boxes, and stomped down the hall toward our connecting bedrooms. Dad followed with the rest of the boxes.

I sat alone in an unfamiliar place.

Our house back in San Diego hadn't been big enough for my family, the several nurses who are always coming and

going – not to mention the four hundred pounds of metal strapped to my ass. Someone always seemed to be in the way.

The new place seemed pretty good so far. Ollie and I had our own mini wing on the main level. Next to our bedrooms was a huge bathroom with a roll-in shower large enough for me to do donuts in with my wheelchair. Trust me, I'd tried.

You wouldn't believe how difficult it is for real-estate agents to understand what *wheelchair accessible* means. My parents probably spent more time explaining that than driving cross-country. Like, no, the house can't have stairs.

The kitchen filled up with the sounds of my parents arguing and ceramic plates clanking, until it was decided we'd use paper instead. Tensions between everyone were higher than usual. Turned out moving was pretty stressful.

I pulled up to my end of the table, which we'd brought from back home. Thank God for something familiar. My mom picked up the slice of pizza in front of me and shoved it into my mouth. My disability makes it difficult for me to lift my arms and feed myself. Even small things like a piece of cereal or a plastic spoon pose a challenge. I used to have the muscles to eat independently, but over time I've lost them.

But to be honest, having someone feed you is pretty cool. Despite the occasional mess in my lap from people dropping food, I usually feel like a king being fed by servants. Except those servants are my parents, my brother, or a nurse.

"Are you excited to start at your new schools?" Mom asked.

"We're not five years old," Ollie responded. "We're in high school. No one's excited."

I swallowed my first bite of pizza. (I'm a very slow eater.)

"I'm pretty excited. New people means no one knows me. I can reinvent myself. Maybe they won't notice my wheelchair."

"They're strangers, not blind," Ollie said.

"Either way, I'm glad we left California. I never want to think about that place again."

"Hey, don't be like that," Dad said.

"Be like what?" I asked. "I was miserable there. I had no friends, it was always hot, and it's not like I could go to the beach. Besides, I had at most three good nurses in the last fifteen years."

"What about you, Ollie?" Mom asked, clearly giving up on me. "Your new lacrosse team is way better than the one in San Diego."

"I don't know. Coach introduced me to some of the guys on the team during my tour yesterday. They seemed like jerks."

"Maybe they think you're a jerk," I added.

"Shut up."

"Guys, stop," our mom ordered. "What makes you think they're jerks?"

Ollie shrugged. "None of them would talk to me."

"Why not?"

"Probably because they know I'm better than them. They're pissed off I'm on the team."

"Well, the season doesn't start for a few months. You have time to make friends."

"I don't need to be friends with them. I'm not there to make friends. I'm there to win a championship and then leave for Virginia."

While my brother vented about whether he needed friends to play a team sport, Mom pivoted back to me. "I got a call

from the nursing agency here. They have a few people who are interested in going to school with you, Harris."

"Are they young?" I asked.

"I told them you prefer younger nurses. We'll see."

"I prefer young and beautiful, but I'll settle for young."

"You'll settle for what they send," my dad said.

"Yeah, why do they have to be young?" Ollie asked.

"They're there to take care of you. You don't have to date them."

Mom raised a cup of water to my mouth. I took a sip from the straw and then another bite of pizza.

"Harris needs a contemporary with him," Mom said.

"How would you feel if an old fuck followed you around school all day?"

Ollie shrugged. "Honestly, I wouldn't care." Then he secretly flipped me the finger from across the table.

Our dad rejoined the conversation. "Clare, don't let Harris be too picky. Otherwise you'll end up at school with him every day."

"I don't mind. Harris and I have a great time together, and either way, I'm going with him for the first few days."

The discussion ended with no counterarguments. Of course, it wasn't ideal for my mom to be with me at school, but it wasn't the worst. She was pretty cool for a mom, and not having to worry about a new person following me in a new school was comforting.

After a few bites of New Jersey pizza, I didn't see what all the fuss was about. If that claim to fame was crap, what were the odds Jersey's nurses would be any better?

THIS PLACE COULD BE DIFFERENT

THE FIRST DAY STARTED OFF like any other, even though we were in a strange house. My mom woke me up, turned off the breathing machine I use while sleeping, and started my nebulizer treatment. The only difference between waking up in New Jersey and in San Diego was that my dad wasn't around to help. He was already out the door to catch his train to the city. Mom was on her own.

Mornings are hectic when Mom has to go to school with me, since we both need to shower and get dressed and none of it can be done simultaneously, considering that one of us requires assistance in all phases. So she left me lying in bed while she got ready first.

Another thing that hadn't changed: there's always a moment in the middle of the morning chaos when Ollie pops into my room, bagel in hand, and turns the TV on to *SportsCenter*.

"Why are you already dressed?" I asked.

"My school is almost an hour away. The bus picks me up in five minutes."

"Oh. Are you nervous?"

Ollie shrugged. His eyes were focused on the top ten plays from the previous week. "Not really. It's just a new school. Plus the lacrosse team is way better than the trash in California."

There were two reasons my family had moved to New Jersey. The primary reason was that our dad got a higher-paying job at some stuffy investment bank in Manhattan. And once high schools on the East Coast got wind of our potential move, they came calling. My brother was kind of a rising lacrosse star in San Diego, and promises of scholarships and exposure to the best colleges sealed the deal. We became Jersey people.

"Are you pissed Mom has to go to school with you?" Ollie asked.

"Not really. She's done it before, and Mom is actually pretty cool when she has to be."

"You're not going to make any friends with Mom following you around. That instantly makes you the weird kid."

"Maybe I want to be the weird kid. You're just jealous Mom isn't going to be with you."

Ollie was clearly getting impatient with me, although he was never fully disgusted with me. Instead, his contempt was more like amusement. I might have even heard a chuckle. He shoved the last bite of bagel in his mouth and stood up to leave. "Whatever. I gotta go. See you later."

"I love you!" I yelled as he walked away.

"Yeah, love you too," he mumbled from the hallway.

I was alone again, surrounded by the walls of my new

bedroom, which were freshly painted the shade of blue the sky takes during a cloudless rain. For as long as I can remember, blue has always been my favorite color. It's not a particularly emotional color, but it's dependable whenever I don't feel well.

I thought about colors a lot, actually. Especially when I was about to meet anyone new. It was always the first question I asked them. A person's favorite color says a lot about who they are.

No doubt Ollie would say that caring about people's favorite colors makes me weird. It's not that I *want* to be the weird kid, really. It's just that I've always been the weird kid and figure I always would be.

But then I thought about this move and how I kept telling myself that this was my chance to finally start living a real teenage life. From movies, I'd gathered that meant going to parties and breaking rules. But based on my brother, being a teen just meant playing a sport well and hanging out with your parents and younger brother. I wanted something in between those two lives. I thought maybe that'd be my sweet spot. Maybe what I really wanted was just a friend – a real one.

Since I'd spent most of my childhood in and out of the hospital, it had been difficult to form friendships with kids my age. Illnesses and surgeries would exile me for months, and I thought it was easier not to get too close to anyone in case I didn't come back. When I did return to school, everyone always seemed the same – innocent and carefree. Everyone except me.

Around the time I turned ten years old, the frequent bouts of pneumonia slowed, and I had the opportunity to actually connect with my classmates. But I never did. I couldn't start

fresh. Everyone already knew who I was – the kid in the wheelchair who got sick all the time – and they were unwilling to learn more, no matter how much effort I put in.

I wanted all of that to change. Moving to New Jersey meant I could actually start fresh, make friends, stay out late, go to parties, and feel what it's like to be a teenager. But for any of that to happen, I needed a way to assess the kids I would be meeting, to know who might be good friend material and who would be a jerk or a flake. I needed my colors.

The steam from my breathing treatment billowed up in front of my face. I took a few deep breaths of the medicine, trying to clear the congestion that always accumulated in my chest overnight, while two talking heads on ESPN argued about LeBron James versus Michael Jordan.

ALL HIGH SCHOOLS ARE THE SAME

IMAGINE BEING A MONSTER TRUCK stuck in bumper-to-bumper traffic. You know you'd be tempted to drive over the other cars. Well, that's what it's like to maneuver my wheelchair through a crowded high school hallway. I could simply drive at full speed, running over feet and backpacks along the way, but that would mean spending the day feeling guilty. Politely asking people to move is out of the question – they wouldn't hear me. My horn sounds like a microwave attempting suicide, so that's a no. The only option is to weave through the gaps, hoping I don't get nailed in the head with a backpack or a butt.

Mom was behind me, acting as my caboose. An opening appeared on the right, and I took it. My wheelchair burst through the gap like a running back. I pretended the other students were my offensive line, setting up the perfect block so I could trailblaze into the end zone untouched. I shifted

to the left. In my head, I was making spectacular spin moves and juking defenders, but in reality, I was a fifteen-year-old recklessly driving a wheelchair down a hallway, followed by a neurotic mom who could barely keep up.

We reached my locker. "Do you have the combination?" I asked.

"Yeah, it's on your class schedule." Mom dropped my backpack on the floor and began digging through the compartments. She pulled out a folded piece of paper. "Seven, six, four." Her fingers spun the lock.

While she unloaded my crap into the locker, I watched the other kids rushing through the busy hall. I felt like I was in the way, and I kind of was. I was parked alongside my locker, but my wheelchair blocked the two in front of me as well. At any moment, the students those lockers belonged to could appear, and then we'd begin the awkward dance of shuffling back and forth while smiling apologetically.

My mom attached a plastic tray to my wheelchair, which allowed me to carry books and look at worksheets in class. "Homeroom starts in five minutes. After that, you have physics, trig, and English."

"Mom, I know how school works and how to read a schedule."

She ignored me and plopped a three-inch binder onto my tray. "This is your morning binder. We'll come back for your afternoon one before lunch."

A girl with brown hair held back by a green headband swooped in next to me and reached for her locker, bumping into the back of my wheelchair, which was barely in her way.

At my old school, there had been times when a student,

arms full of books, would see me in front of their locker. I would start to move, but they would say that it was all right and they could just come back later.

I would rather someone tell me to get out of their fucking space than pretend I'm not a burden. This girl did the next best thing and just went about her business.

I pulled away from the wall to make room. "Where are you going?" Mom asked. "Homeroom is the other way."

"I know. I'm just moving so this girl can reach her locker."

My mom looked up. "Oh, excuse us." She grabbed the joystick on my wheelchair and yanked it forward, driving me even farther away. My head jerked back from the sudden movement.

"No worries," I heard the girl say.

Then she was gone.

Homeroom felt the same as it had back in San Diego. I don't know why I'd expected it to be different from state to state, but I was hoping that maybe in New Jersey they handed out fresh bagels and schmear. If anything, it was the complete opposite. The room was sweltering and smelled like rancid cream cheese.

"Is it too hot for you in here?" my mom nervously asked. "I'm gonna ask the teacher to turn up the air."

"No, I'm fine. Don't make a big deal about it. We're in here for less than ten minutes. Let's just find somewhere to sit."

A commonly overlooked benefit of being able-bodied is choosing where to sit. If a seat is open, you take it. For me, it's more complicated and depends on the location of the door. If the door is in the front, I sit in the front. If the door is in the back, I sit in the back. If the door is on the side, then I block

everyone's entrance and exit and pray to God there won't be an emergency.

At the far end of this room, near the window, was an open desk. I could barely squeeze my wheelchair past the teacher's desk to reach the spot. One of the windows was cracked and letting in cool air, which I didn't point out to my mom, since that would just make her worry about drafts.

Mom sat at the actual desk, and I parked next to it. I always find it strange that whoever helps me sits where the students sit, while I'm kind of just there, observing. Either way, we never have to ask for an extra chair; my assistant uses the seat intended for me, and, well, I bring my own.

An older man sauntered in, holding a messenger bag that had seen better days.

"For those of you who don't know me, my name is Mr. Wormhole," he said with no enthusiasm whatsoever. Also, his last name was Wormhole. What the hell kind of name is Wormhole? "We'll be spending every morning together. Please attempt to be on time. I don't appreciate tardiness."

If he talked any slower, he'd make us all tardy to our next class. He droned on about some additional homeroom rules, which I didn't hear, because as soon as he started, the brown-haired girl from the hall walked in.

Wormhole didn't look pleased that she was late.

"And who are you?" he asked.

"Nory Fischer."

"You're in the wrong room. This homeroom is for last names J through M."

"I was just in the guidance office, and they told me to come here. Something about the other classes being overfilled."

Old man Wormhole appeared to have a mini stroke and whispered a few expletives aimed at the school principal, Dr. Kenzing, most of which were louder than I think he intended. After he caught his breath, he instructed Nory to find a seat and not to blame him if there was a fire and she got trampled by his class, which was at capacity. Lucky for me, the only open desk was next to mine. Well, technically it was next to my mom's, but close enough.

"The school has implemented a new homework buddy program," Mr. Wormhole said. "I'm giving you all the rest of the period to find a classmate with a similar course schedule and swap phone numbers."

My mom whipped out my schedule and slapped it on my tray. "Go find someone."

"No, this is ridiculous. I don't need help with homework."

"You miss a lot of school when you get sick, and it would be nice to have someone to give you your work. Take this as an opportunity to make a friend."

"Oh my God. Can you stop being a mom for one second?" I whispered. "Besides, I can't even drive around this tiny room, and everyone is huddled in the back."

"So move up to the front, and someone will come over." She turned my chair on and gave me an unneeded shove on the back of my arm.

I faced the classroom and watched the students chatting and laughing at Instagram posts. I hated that I was frozen and couldn't seem to approach any of them. I could barely look in their direction. Traveling almost three thousand miles had not changed me.

Then I saw Nory, who looked like she was reorganizing critical documents in her bag, which was clearly empty. I thought that was funny. Our eyes met for half a second – long enough to acknowledge that we were both without a homework buddy.

“Should we exchange numbers?” I asked.

“I’m taking all honors.”

“Same. I may be in a wheelchair, but I’m actually pretty smart.”

Nory quickly looked down at her desk and then back at me, trying to find her words. “Oh, I didn’t mean it like that.”

“It’s fine. So what do you say? Can I get your number, and we can move on with our lives?”

“Sure.” Nory smiled. She scribbled her number on a torn piece of notebook paper, reached across the desk, and placed it on my tray.

Her outstretched hand didn’t hover in the air, waiting for me to grab the paper, which I couldn’t do without assistance. I didn’t have to tell her where to put the paper, or hate my mom for pushing me into an uncomfortable situation and myself for not being able to get a girl’s number without help. It was just me and Nory, no third party necessary.

Nory adjusted her headband. “Is green your favorite color?” I asked.

Nory made the expression everyone made when I asked the question: a furrowed brow and curled lips. “Does it matter?”

“Well, I mean...”

Then the bell rang, and everyone rushed out of homeroom. Nory pushed past my wheelchair instead of waiting for me to

move. Which was probably a good thing, since I wasn't sure I *could* move.

Most of my childhood memories link up to significant medical events that occurred around the same time. "When I was diagnosed" or "the year I had my back surgery" became a way to track time instead of typical milestones, like learning to crawl or taking a first step or catching a football for the first time.

On that day, I was supposed to have a typical milestone – my first day at a new school. But I don't remember it as just any first day. I remember it as the day I met Nory Fischer.

NOT ALL BATHROOMS ARE CREATED EQUAL

BEING IN A WHEELCHAIR HAS PERKS that include but are not limited to skipping lines, early entry to concerts and sporting events, free stuff, and access to people who can grant special privileges. At school, those people are the janitors and security guards – often ignored, but usually the ones who have the power to close down an entire bathroom.

Most handicap stalls in public bathrooms really aren't accessible at all. Sure, they might have a couple of grab bars on the wall or an elevated toilet, but try to fit a wheelchair in that space. Spoiler alert: it's impossible.

My preferred option is a single-use bathroom, but the only one in the entire school was in the nurse's office on the first floor, the complete opposite side of the building from where I needed to be. The school had not yet designated a bathroom for me to use, so the next logical step was for my mom to hunt down a janitor and have him lock a bathroom for ten minutes. He claimed it was one that was rarely used.

"That girl from homeroom seemed nice," my mom said once we were set up in the locked bathroom. "What was her name?"

"Nory."

"And I knew you'd be fine getting her number by yourself. You just need to stop being so afraid."

I ignored her and inhaled my breathing treatment. My wheelchair was parked outside the stalls, next to the sinks. I had just finished peeing.

"You should text her later and get to know her."

"I don't know. I think her favorite color is green."

"So what? You've known people who like green."

True, but none of them had been my friends. "Green and blue are too similar. We don't blend well."

"Seems like you've never blended with anyone, so I don't think that's a valid excuse."

"Either way, people who like green are very independent. She won't want to be slowed down by my disability. You saw the way she stormed out of homeroom."

My mom sighed. "And Nory confirmed that her favorite color is green?"

"Not exactly."

"Then I still think you should text her later. Maybe you'll find out that red is actually her favorite color."

I sighed, because my mom had never understood my favorite color theories. "I think this is done," I said, referring to the breathing treatment.

"No, it's not. Stop rushing. The janitor is outside watching. No one is coming in."

"I don't want to be late for lunch. All the tables will be filled, and I'll have to eat alone."

"We'll find a table. And lunch is an hour. You have plenty of time to finish your neb and eat."

"An hour's not long enough. I'm a slow eater. You know that."

"Fine." Mom reached into the backpack and turned off the oxygen tank running the nebulizer. "In other news, we're staying a little late today to go over your IEP with the accommodations team. Your old school sent the one from last year, and I already spoke with Ms. Maszak on the phone."

I rolled my eyes.

"Don't start, Harris. I just want to make sure everyone is on the same page."

"What page? I'm in a freaking wheelchair. They can see that."

Ms. Maszak was the accommodations manager at my new school. I'd had one in San Diego, Mr. Dely, a large, hairy older man who wore too much cologne and insisted on making my middle school years a living hell by taking every opportunity to single out the "special" kid. Needless to say, I hated him.

"These are the things I've done your whole life, Harris." Mom was annoyed. "I've met with teachers, filled out paperwork, gone over your accommodations. It's not fun, but someone has to do it, and before we moved, you said you wanted to take more control. That means advocating for yourself and going to boring meetings."

When we left the bathroom, there was a long line of students waiting to get in – all of them girls. Nory was one of them. She stared at me. I looked up at the bathroom sign and spotted the universal girl symbol. How had I not realized this before going in? It finally made sense why there weren't any urinals.

Of course, the janitor was nowhere in sight. He wasn't going to be much of a connection.

YELLOW

THE COMMOTION OF THE CAFETERIA hit me hard. For once, I was feeling social and eager to jump in and make new friends, but then I became overwhelmed by the thought of approaching a table and asking if a parent-looking person and I could join.

"Pick a table, Harris," my mom ordered.

"I see an empty one. Let's eat there, and I'll find a group tomorrow."

"No. You can't reinvent yourself and make friends if you act like you did in San Diego. I'm right behind you. Now, go."

Working up the courage to join a table was one problem. The other problem was *getting* to a table. The aisles between them were narrow, and there was no way my wheelchair would make it through without bumping people's chairs.

I was plotting my path to the empty table when a voice rang out. "We have seats over here." A guy waved at me a little too vigorously. No one should be that excited about a stranger.

Still, it beat spinning my wheels for the next forty minutes.

As expected, it was a tight squeeze. Some kids didn't move, and some scooped in to make room. All of them awkwardly smiled at me. Finally, I rolled up to the table occupied by the overly friendly student and two more male students who were playing a game with trading cards instead of eating. What I'm trying to say is that there weren't any girls.

"Thanks for letting me sit here. Kinda wild trying to find a spot," I said.

"No problem. The cafeteria is definitely tough to navigate on the first day, but I got you covered."

I looked at the two students playing cards.

"Don't worry about them. They're harmless nerds."

"What does that make you?" I asked.

"A nerd, but not like them. I like to think of this table as a refuge for the lost – an asylum from the madness that is high school."

"Oh, so this is your regular table?"

"I hope so. This is actually my first day. I'm a freshman."

I glanced at my mom, who was still unpacking my lunch. I wondered if she could sense my disappointment at sitting with a freshman.

"It's my first day too, but I'm not a freshman. I just moved here a couple of days ago."

"Where from?"

"San Diego. My dad got a new job."

"San Diego? That's so cool. Did you ever go surfing?" As soon as he finished the question, I knew he regretted it.

"Actually, yes. I crashed pretty hard once, and that's why I'm in this chair."

“Seriously?”

I laughed. “No, not seriously.”

“Oh, well, it’s a pretty awesome story. You should tell more people and let them believe it’s true.”

We both laughed. My mom smiled. If only it had been this easy to talk to people back in San Diego.

Mom raised my sandwich to my mouth, and I took a bite. My typical lunch was turkey, roast beef, ham, and pepperoni on a croissant with nothing else. No cheese or mayo or mustard, just meat.

“By the way, what’s your name?” he asked.

“Harris.”

“Nice to meet you, Harris. I’m Alexander Stein, but I go by Zander.” He looked at my mom, clearly unsure if he should ask her name or ignore her presence.

“I’m Clare, Harris’s executive assistant,” she said, reaching out to shake Zander’s hand.

“Sweet. I wish I had an executive assistant. Sometimes I forget what class I’m going to and bring the wrong notebook. An assistant would come in handy in those situations, and they could take notes for me in class.”

“I do all those things for Harris.”

“Sounds like a good deal for him. Will there be other executive assistants, or are you the only one?”

“She’s just here temporarily,” I interjected.

“That’s too bad. Coming to school seems like a pretty easy gig. Are you going to be able to find other work after Harris?”

Mom laughed. “Don’t worry: I’ll keep busy and still see Harris.”

I tried to change the subject before she slipped and told

him she was my mom. "So, what'd you do this summer, man?"

"Not much. Just prepared for high school."

"What did that involve?"

"Not a whole lot. I mostly just watched *Mean Girls* until I had it memorized."

I almost choked on my food. "Seriously? How is that going to help you?"

"Harris, that movie provides all the answers to our adolescent questions. How do I determine the cliques? What will it take to become popular? When do I wear pink? You see, it's not just a movie, but a guide for the weak and afraid. Not to mention a great resource for devastating comebacks."

Mom gave me a sip of water and popped a chip in my mouth. I tried to ignore the fact that I had just made friends with the actual weird kid.

Then I saw her again – a green headband bouncing past our table.

Zander followed my gaze. "Do you know Nory?" he asked.

"Sort of. Her locker is next to mine. And we're in homeroom together. Wait, Nory's a sophomore. How do *you* know her?"

"I told you I spent the summer studying."

"So you seriously learned about every single person at this school?"

Zander hedged. "Well, kinda. Not really. Nory is actually my neighbor."

"Is she dating anyone?"

"Um, I'm not sure. Hey, you want to sit here again tomorrow? This is a prime table, and I want to know who should get here early to secure it."

“Definitely you. And no offense, but you talk a lot. But you also have a lot of valuable information. What’s your favorite color?”

Zander didn’t flinch. “Yellow.”

“Me too,” my mom said.

“Your favorite color is yellow?” I asked her.

I’ve never known any of my family members’ favorite colors. I’ve never needed to.

Zander was unquestionably yellow, though: confident and outgoing. Only one other color separated us on the color wheel, but I didn’t tell him that. Then he would have known how well suited we were for each other, and I refused to admit that I needed a bright color in my life.

BEIGE

I ALMOST MADE IT THROUGH a full first day without a teacher singling me out as the new kid and prized possession of the class. In seventh-period history class, Mr. Bavroe forced me to come to the front of the room at the end of the period so I could introduce myself. First, let me say that ending the day with Ancient World History, which was possibly the most boring class, should be illegal. Second, this was one of those classrooms where the door was in the back, and getting to the front wasn't so easy. It was one of my more embarrassing moments.

But it didn't end there. After I covered the basics of moving from California, having an older brother, et cetera, that old fuck Mr. Bavroe asked me to tell the class about my disability. Or maybe "asked" isn't the right word, since it wasn't really optional. He said something about his classroom being inclusive and how he and the other students would be honored to hear what made me so unique.

I wish I could've told him that inclusivity was not making someone feel uncomfortable for the enrichment of others. I wish I could've told him that maybe he should teach instead of making me the subject of his show-and-tell. I wish I didn't have to look at my mom watching her son being tortured, but there was nothing she could do to intervene without blowing her cover.

I was about to provide the class with a quick rundown of my disability – at Mr. Bavroe's insistence – when the bell rang and put me out of my misery.

After that painful ending to the school day, I had my IEP meeting. The halls emptied as students bolted for the exits. Mom and I stopped at my locker to pick up my morning binder so I could complete my homework later.

Then Nory appeared again at her locker. I noticed a Dallas Cowboys sticker inside. Holy crap, she liked football. Without thinking, I asked, "You're a Cowboys fan?"

The half second it took her to recognize that it was me asking the question felt weird, and I hated myself for speaking. "What?"

My heart dropped. "You like the Cowboys?" I almost couldn't breathe. I almost drove away and pretended like I'd never said a word.

"Huh? Oh, my dad does," Nory responded.

"That's too bad. The Cowboys kind of suck."

"So then, who do you like?"

"The Giants. This means we're rivals." In my head it sounded playful, but coming out of my mouth it sounded kind of hostile.

Nory slammed her locker door shut and started walking

away. "Just don't light my locker on fire or something." That *definitely* sounded hostile.

My mom's eyes were on the back of my neck. "That was hard to watch," she said.

"Well, it's difficult to flirt with a girl in front of your mom."

"Like I made a difference."

"Thanks, Mom." I drove away toward the meeting room.

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A woman wearing a pantsuit was waiting for us in the guidance office. "So great to see you again, Mrs. Jacobus."

"Call me Clare. We try to keep it a secret that I'm Harris's mom."

"Of course. And let me say that we are very excited to welcome Harris to East Essex Central."

"Don't tell me. Talk to him about it."

Ms. Maszak blushed. You would think a person whose entire job was working with disabled students would know how to talk to one.

"Why are you so excited to have me as a student?" I asked. "I'm just like every other student, right?"

"Well, of course we're excited about all of our students. But we've never had a differently abled student as academically gifted as you."

"Harris hates that term, *differently abled*," my mom said. "Don't you think it sounds patronizing?"

Pantsuit had no answer. She fixed her hair and refocused her attention on me. "In the past, we've had students give presentations about their disabilities so classmates can feel comfortable asking questions. Is that something you would be interested in doing?"

"I was already forced into that unnecessary spotlight by Mr. Bavroe," I said.

"Oh, well, if you want to do something more planned and formal, I can arrange that."

"No, I don't understand why that would be something I'd want to do. When someone has a question, they should come up to me."

"Fair enough. I'm always around if you change your mind or have any problems."

"Okay," I said. I really wanted to tell her not to get all up in my business. Mr. Dely had struggled with boundaries, and it hadn't ended well for him.

Ms. Maszak led Mom and me into a meeting room where an older woman stood to greet us. "I'm Dr. Kenzing, the school principal. Fabulous to meet you both." She shook my mom's hand but didn't attempt to shake mine.

"We're just waiting for one of Harris's teachers to join us," Ms. Maszak said. "One of them has to be present at each meeting."

"I know. I've been doing this a long time," Mom told her.

"Right. Ah, there he is."

My back was to the door, so I didn't immediately see who came in, but then he sat right next to me.

"Hey, bud," Mr. Bavroe said. "Long time no see."

What a dick.

"Oh, good. You've already met." Dr. Kenzing could barely contain her smile.

"I mean, yeah. He is one of my teachers."

"Anyway, I don't think this should take long," Ms. Maszak announced. "Your mom and I already spoke on the

phone, and I reviewed your plan from last year.”

“There are just a few things I want to go over,” my mom said. “Harris needs to be as independent as possible with his schoolwork. All his books need to be in digital format, with homework completed and submitted on the computer.”

“Absolutely. I read all that in his previous IEP.”

“Well, it was in there, but his previous school did nothing to accommodate him. All we did was fight with them.”

Dr. Kenzing joined the conversation. “We already notified our IT department that Harris will require a laptop. One should be purchased by the end of the week.”

Mom nodded, and I could tell she was impressed.

“And we’ll contact the textbook publishers to see what can be done,” Ms. Maszak added. “In the meantime, we’ll have Harris’s teachers provide an extra book so you can keep one at home. Does that work for you, Mr. Bavroe?”

“Of course. Anything to make Harris feel comfortable and help him get his schoolwork done.”

“When we get the laptop, all worksheets should be scanned in so Harris can complete them electronically,” Mom said.

“We’ll make sure all his teachers are aware and trained to use the laptop.” Ms. Maszak read the papers in front of her, then continued, “It looks like some of his other accommodations include time and a half for testing and that he’ll be accompanied by a nurse.”

“Right now it’ll be me until we find and train someone. Harris and I are a buy-one-get-one package, and I’m always here to provide backup.”

“Not a problem. Is there anything else?”

Mom began to shake her head, but I caught her eye. "The bathroom," I whispered.

"Tell them," she ordered.

Everyone was staring at me. "We had a problem finding a bathroom to use. I need my own. I don't want to take away from the other students like I did today."

"Yes, we heard about what happened. Dr. Kenzing and I want to apologize for any embarrassment the situation may have caused. We've notified our entire janitorial staff, and they've come up with a solution. There's an unused faculty restroom on the second floor. Tomorrow they'll give you a key. It's all yours."

"You guys are definitely on the ball," my mom said.

"We're very excited to have Harris as a student and want to ensure that everything goes as smoothly as possible. Do you have any other questions?"

Ms. Maszak looked at me, which I appreciated, but I could see in her eyes that she didn't really care. I had seen that look countless times from doctors and other school administrators who would *yes* us to death but never do anything. I was pretty sure Ms. Maszak would be the same.

"What's your favorite color?" I asked.

Ms. Maszak acted like it wasn't a strange question. "Hmm, I really don't have one."

No favorite color meant no personality; I could easily walk (or roll) all over her. It also meant, like I suspected, that she wouldn't follow through on what we'd discussed.

"My favorite color is beige," Dr. Kenzing chimed in.

"Why beige?"

"It's professional and goes with everything."

I had no clue how to respond to that.