

TOTO, I DON'T THINK WE'RE IN MEADOWBROOK ANYMORE

We followed Mrs. Brattain through the maze of the school (my dreams about that were true) to reach our Homeroom. When I saw our classroom I was delighted. Instead of big round tables, there were rows of individual desks, just like what I'd seen in TV shows. I wandered over to the carpet, remembering the routine from Meadowbrook, which was to gather on the carpet first, then find our assigned tables. Surely these tables would be assigned as well, so I would just wait for direction from the teacher. I sat cross-legged on the floor. I'll show them that I might be a new kid, but I'm not stupid. I know just what to do.

Suddenly a voice behind me hollered, "Hey, what are you doing on the floor?"

My face flushed with embarrassment. Stupid! I thought. From now on, just watch the other kids and do whatever they are doing. You have no idea what the routine is here. Observe and learn.

I looked around at the desks. Some kids were already sitting down, and it was then that I noticed there were names on every desk. I was so relieved. Assigned desks, I sighed. Thank goodness. I didn't like the idea of trying to figure out which would be the best desk for me. Not knowing a soul in the room, my tendency would have been to find the seat closest to the back of the room. I searched for my name, avoiding communication with the other kids. At this point, avoiding saying anything stupid was my number one goal. There was really no use to pretend to blend in. Let's face it, a dark voice inside me said, you've never fit in anywhere. Look at these sociable kids around you. You'll never fit in with them.

I found my name, finally, and settled into my desk, setting my backpack down under my desk by my feet, not wanting to block the aisle and trip anyone. I finally looked up and scanned the group of kids around me. For the first time I realized not all the kids were chatting with each other. There was one boy with glasses who sat quietly, and opened his desk to transport some of his backpack items into his desk.

My face lit up. Wow, I thought, looking back at my own desk. I carefully lifted the flat top of my desk. The words escaped my mouth in excitement, "That's so neat! It opens up!" I looked inside at the compartments. It was easy to see where everything was supposed to go. There was one large area (for my binder, I realized), and a smaller compartment to the side (for my pencils, erasers and stuff) I thought. I smiled at this surprising discovery.

Suddenly I caught a feeling that I was being watched. In the corner of my eye, I noticed there was a girl seated in the desk to my right, looking at me. I cautiously looked over at her, worried to see if she was laughing at me. Luckily she wasn't. She had straight, long black hair and light olive brown skin. She looked Native American to me in a way. "Hey," she said, in a friendly southern accent. She gave a nod.

"Hi," I answered. I realized she had overheard me talking to myself about the desk, but she wasn't looking at me like I was crazy or weird. She seemed amused, so I decided to go with that.

I pointed to my open desk. "This is so cool," I said. "We didn't have desks like this in my old school."

"Really." She answered. She paused, debating in her mind whether to make this into a conversation. "I thought you were new." She paused again. "So where are you from?"

I jumped on the chance. I might be a total dweeb, I thought, but people will surely be interested in the fact that I'm from another country. "I'm from Canada, actually."

Her eyebrows raised in surprise. "Wow, really?" she said, "Neat."

There was an awkward silence for a moment, and I drew my attention back to my desk. “Do you know if we’re supposed to put our things away in the desk right now or later?”

“You can start doing it now,” she said. She brought her backpack onto her lap and started her own process.

Mrs. Brattain stepped up to the center of the room, but nobody quieted down until she began to speak. “Attention, please!” She made herself hear above the chatter. Slowly the voices quieted down to a mumble and students settled at their desks. Mrs. Brattain began handing out red booklets to everyone and immediately began explaining the rules of the school. Since this was grade seven, and most kids (except me) had experienced one year at Piedmont Middle already, she went over the material quickly. Too quickly for me.

She spoke of demerits, fees, periods... I was lost. Desperate for enlightenment, I opened the booklet and started reading on my own, only paying half attention to the teacher. What did it matter, I thought. I couldn’t understand a word she was saying anyway.

It was a very unusual day. Back in my old school, all our classes took place in the same general area. Only the French class was walled-up as a separate room. In this school, I really had to be on my toes. We had lockers (I guess I was going to need a lock), and almost every class was in a completely different building! I was amazed to see that the kids around me all seemed so cool and collected. I wondered how people remained so sane in such a crazy environment. I’m just a kid! I thought. How can they expect me to remember all this stuff! The only consolation was knowing that all I had to do was remember the faces of the other kids in my class and keep visual track of them. That way I will always be able to know where I’m supposed to go. My stress level skyrocketed with every class we visited. Each room had its own list of rules and handed out it’s own books. I had to admit, getting my very own textbook was pretty cool. Wow, I thought. I get to sit at a desk, and I get to bring textbooks home with me? I felt so grown up.

It was pretty obvious that every desk and book had been used over and over through the years. Some books we received were brand new, which was cool, but others had notes scribbled by past students – which was helpful, because I would see underlined passages and notes in margins. And then there were the notes and doodles you would find engraved into your desk. Lots of notes like “DM + RD” encased by a big heart, dried gobs of ancient gum under the desk, and of course the occasional swear word engraved boldly into the top of the desk. Boy, I thought, if anyone had tried that back in my school, they would have gotten paddled! The words, “only in America” came to mind again.

One thing I thought was pretty neat was that one of my teachers was actually a black man. In fact, there were quite a lot of black kids in our school compared to my old school. Back in Newmarket, I had only known one other kid who was black. I’ll never forget her name, Violet. Of course she was teased being a new kid, which made me gravitate to her. I could sense she felt a little awkward, and I always made sure to be nice to her. Unfortunately, she only stayed at Meadowbrook one year. I was sad to see her go. I thought it was neat to know someone like that. I thought of her not only as different, but special.

Now I had at least a few black kids in my class, and even a black teacher. He was our History teacher, Mr. Marshall. I hoped he didn’t notice me staring at him through the whole class session, and hardly heard a word he said through my dumbfounded fascination. I was very glad he didn’t call on me to answer any questions.

Lunch period was yet another brand new experience for me. It was my first time eating in a school cafeteria, and paying for my lunch. Back in Canada, I either brought a lunch in my

Snoopy lunchbox, or dashed home for some Chef Boy R Dee. I couldn't believe that every day I would get to have a hot meal for lunch. What a luxury. Unfortunately I would also have to make sure not to forget lunch money, and realized that with the multitude of other details I would need to keep straight, this was just one more thing to add to the list. Then, of course, was the unfortunate side effect of a cafeteria experience... wondering where the heck to sit. Especially as a new kid, not knowing a single soul. I scanned the room, hoping to find some familiar and friendly faces from my homeroom class.

"Hey, YOU!" I heard a girl's voice from a nearby table. I turned, and found a smiling face looking at me, summoning me to sit with her group. I smiled shyly back and found an empty spot to sit with them. As I dug into my mashed potatoes, the girls laughed and joked with each other, but in a private language I couldn't follow. I felt very out of place. From the conversation I was able to deduct they were talking about some kind of character on TV. Unfortunately not a show I was familiar with.

The rest of the day was equally awkward, and when we were released for afternoon recess, I found the loneliest bench I could find where I could sit and weep.

A wave of hopelessness washed over me. I'm stuck, I thought. I'm trapped. I have never felt this alone in my whole life. How can I ever fit in with these people? Most of the girls I met wore makeup, trendy clothes, and hairspray. What if I never find anyone to talk to? And how will I ever find a friend anyway? I'm so scared to talk to anyone. What if they laugh at me? New kids always get picked on, so the best thing to do is not talk to anyone? I HATE this place! I HATE it! Hunched over, face in my hands, I cried and cried. What did it matter, I thought, nobody is paying attention to me anyway.

A friendly voice proved me wrong.

"Hey!"

I shyly looked up from my hands and tried wiping my face, embarrassed that someone caught me. I hoped to God she wasn't there to make fun. "Hi," I said in the smallest voice.

When I looked up, there were two girls looking back at me. One was tall and thin with short, feathered hair, and the other was shorter and chubby with longest hair I'd ever seen. "Can we sit here?" The short-haired one asked.

Of course, I realized. No way these people actually want to talk to me. They just want a place to sit. I quietly moved over to the end of the bench, realizing I would need to get up soon. Surely they didn't want to talk to me.

"You all right?" The short-haired girl asked, settling herself on the bench.

"You know, no person should ever sit alone." The other girl said, grinning wide.

No person should ever sit alone, I repeated her words in my mind. My eyes looked into hers as she sat beside me, and I hoped dearly that this was my new friend. I tried to get the words "That's so true" out of my mouth, but realized the crying had left a frog in my throat. I nodded and smiled instead through my drying tears.

We sat together and I was able to share my story with them about moving from Canada to the States. I was happy to see their excited reaction and they asked question upon question about the country I came from. I was able to ask them some of the questions I was confused by after spending a day at this school. They cleared up quite a lot for me, and I was so grateful for their advice and input.

I learned also that the short-haired girl was named Marlene and the long-haired girl was Edie. I was terrible at remembering names and hoped so much I wouldn't forget them overnight.

The rest of the day was much easier to bear after my encounter with Edie and Marlene. I thanked God for sending those two angels to me. The final hurdle to jump was the bus ride home. Although it was the same crowd of kids I'd ridden to school with, the bus ride back home was totally different. Kids who were drowsy this morning were now not only very much awake, but downright hyper. And half the kids on the bus swore like crazy.

I remembered one time my dad allowed me to read some of the book, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. He had paper clipped the pages that had the worst swearing. I was naughty one day and opened the paperclip to see what I was missing. There was more foul language on one page than I had ever heard in my whole life.

Riding the schoolbus was a similar experience. The only problem was I couldn't simply shut the book in disgust and put it back on the shelf. Nope. I was stuck. Held captive, my sensitive ears taking a beating from some of the worst and most creative expletives I'd ever heard.

The cherry on top was watching a kid five seats ahead of me spit his tobacco out the bus window. To his surprise and delight, the wind shear painted a brown spit streak across the outside windows, all the way to the rear of the bus.

My dad was home when we arrived, excited to hear about our first day of school, but I felt too queasy to speak and went straight to my room to recover.

By dinner time I was in much better shape to share the events of the day with my parents. I was happy to report that I had actually made a couple new friends on the first day of school. I was so relieved, and they seemed equally so.

To my surprise I slept well that night. It had taken me a while to get used to sleeping in my new room, but it was starting already to feel a little like home. Before too long, the Barretts would be moving out of our backyard and it would be nice to have the property to ourselves for a change. Having a family live in our backyard did add a touch of extra weirdness to our lives.

And it was about to get even weirder.