

CHAPTER 9

Bag Full of Nothing

Today, we're each supposed to bring in something that represents us and tell the class about it. I thought of a few things I could bring, like a can full of dirt or a bag full of nothing.

Mr. Daniels asks for volunteers to go first. Shock of the century when Shay raises her hand.

She gets up there with a picture of her horse, Diamond. She goes on about how she loves him and goes riding several times a week but how it's a lot of work to take care of him. She shows us her riding helmet and fancy riding jacket, too. I guess there really isn't anything that she doesn't have.

Jessica brings a picture of Shay and talks about what

good friends they are, which I think is funny since we're supposed to talk about ourselves.

Oliver bounces to the front of the room. His feet are never on the floor at the same time. He takes out a light-bulb. "I. Am. The giver of LIGHT!"

"Really?" Mr. Daniels asks.

"Well, my dad is. He sells lamps. And when I grow up I'm going to be a salesman, too. I'm going to sell hangers."

"Hangers?" Mr. Daniels asks.

"Yeah! Because I was thinking that it should be something that everyone has, because you'd want to sell stuff that most people need, because if you sold stuff that nobody wanted, then you wouldn't sell anything, right? And everybody needs hangers."

Mr. Daniels smiles and puts his hand on Oliver's shoulder. "Oliver, you are one clever boy. You know that?"

I haven't been in this school that long, but I'm going to guess that Oliver hasn't heard that said much. He falls into his chair, which tips back, but he grabs his desk, rights himself, and cheers for his own victory.

Albert gets up next. As always, he wears the shirt with *Flint* on it and his bruises. He reaches into a brown paper lunch bag and pulls out a jar of clear liquid.

He clears his throat. "This is a mixture of two parts hydrogen and one part oxygen molecules."

"Will it explode?" yells Oliver.

Albert does not answer. Instead, he unscrews the metal lid and drinks whatever it is. I'm silently freaked out, but Oliver goes nuts. "He drank it! Did you see that? He drank molecules! Gross!"

"It is merely water," Albert reports.

While Mr. Daniels speaks to Albert, Shay whispers to Jessica, "Water? Really? That's all he's got?"

Shay has gotten even better at being mean. Ever since Mr. Daniels kept her in for recess for making fun of Oliver, she saves her comments for when Mr. Daniels is busy or talking to someone else.

"This water was taken from a giant underground lake that goes on for miles and miles," Albert announces. "It's the same water that the dinosaurs walked through a hundred million years ago and the cavemen drank. It's the same water that polar bears swam in just last year and medieval knights guzzled after battle."

Oliver and most of the other boys stand, trying to get a better look.

"That's cool, Albert!" Max says. "Where did you get it?"

Jessica and Shay smile and lean forward to look at Max. Shay calls out, "Yeah, Albert. Where did you get it?"

"I got it from my kitchen faucet."

Huh?

"The same water has been here and been reused since the Earth began. It is important to me because, as a

scientist and historian, I know that we are but a blip on the Earth's timeline. A grain of sand on an entire beach of time."

Kids are starting to groan. "Here goes the professor again," Max says.

"Yeah. Such a showoff," Jessica says, turning to Max.

"Now, knock that off," Mr. Daniels says. "I think Albert's idea is fascinating. How Earth has recycled its water over and over. Extraordinary, Albert!"

Next, he calls on Keisha. She carries a small box and holds it like whatever is inside will break easily. When she takes out a cupcake, the boys argue about who'll get to eat it.

"This is a cupcake that I made. It isn't from a box mix; it's homemade."

"And why is it important to you?" Mr. Daniels asks.

"I like to bake. I told my mom I want to start a business when I get older, and she said there's no time like the present. So this is the first one I'll show to anyone outside my family."

"My God," Shay whispers. "She acts like she's the first to make a cupcake. It's not even decorated or anything."

"Shay. Please keep your comments constructive," Mr. Daniels says.

"Yes, it is plain on the outside," Keisha says, half smiling at Shay, "but it's the inside that matters."

Keisha takes a knife out of her box and cuts the cupcake in half and shows us the inside. "As you can see, it says 'yum' on the inside."

"How did you do that?" Suki asks, and I'm surprised to hear her talk. She hardly ever says anything.

"I've been experimenting with making letters out of different kinds of dough. I stand the letters up in the cupcake batter and carefully cover them with more batter."

"Do you lick the spoon when you're done?" Oliver asks. "I like to lick the spoon, but my mom says too much sugar isn't good for me, so she doesn't bake much because—"

"Oliver," Mr. Daniels says, pulling on his own ear. Oliver stops right away.

Then Mr. Daniels looks at the cupcake. "Wow, Keisha. That is pretty impressive!"

"I'm going to call my baking business 'Hidden Messages'—the *batter* way to send a note."

"That's fantastic, Keisha," Mr. Daniels says. "The possibilities are infinite."

Albert raises his hand and Mr. Daniels points to him. "The possibilities are not, in fact, infinite, as she would eventually run out of appropriate letter combinations, and the number of letters to be used in each cake would be limited as well. Also, you imply that the possibilities are all positive when it is probable that the possibilities would be equal in positive and negative outcomes."

"Actually, you're correct, Albert," Mr. Daniels says. "But I am an optimist. What can I say?"

"So you agree that the possibilities aren't endless?"

"Well, I agree from a mathematical standpoint, Albert, but not from a human one. I believe that the things we put numbers on are not necessarily the things that count the most. You can't measure the stuff that makes us human. Like Keisha's creativity or how hard she'll work." Mr. Daniels shrugs. "Just my opinion."

"Well, it seems that the part that can be measured is most important," Albert says. "Because that's what can be proven."

"Well, my fine young fellow, I think we'll have to agree to disagree," Mr. Daniels says, walking by Albert and patting his shoulder.

Then Mr. Daniels calls on Suki. She pulls out tiny paper bags and begins to pass them out to everyone.

"I bring two foods to share. One is *hone-senbei*, my grandfather favorite. Other is wasabi peas. They are maybe spicy. Food in America tastes . . ." She turns to Mr. Daniels. "What is correct word?"

All of a sudden Max jumps up and runs to the sink, followed by Keisha and Jessica. "Too hot!" Max yells. The three push each other a bit, trying to scoop water into their mouths.

"Ah yes," Suki continues. "*Bland* is correct word. Food

here is *bland*." She seems to think that the three kids at the sink are both funny and odd.

I think how hard it would be to move to a different country and have to learn another language. I can't even handle one.

Mr. Daniels laughs, holding the little bumpy, bright green pea between his fingers. "They don't *look* that hot."

Most people in the class are too chicken to eat it now, pushing it away. Suki looks a little hurt.

Albert puts one in his mouth. He eats it but looks like he's in pain. His eyes even water. He says with a gasp, "I like it, Suki. Thank you."

That Albert is nice.

Oliver pops his in his mouth but has no reaction.

"Oliver?" Mr. Daniels asks. "You don't think it's hot?"

"Naw! I'm the only one in my family that can finish a fireball without taking it out of my mouth. My mother says I must have no taste buds at all, and my dad says—"

Mr. Daniels pulls on his earlobe again and says, "Thanks, Oliver."

Oliver's mouth is open. Ready to keep going. But he says, "Thanks, Mr. Daniels." Do they have some signal or something?

Suki continues. "These foods mean much to me because I share them with Grandfather. Many things about Japan I miss, but Grandfather I most miss. Also, I miss

wood carving with him. He make me wooden blocks and I carve gift for him and send."

So that's why she has those blocks.

"I eat these foods because they remind me of Japan. And my grandfather."

I feel sad for her.

"What are the crackers made of?" asks Albert.

Suki turns to him. "They are made of shrimp and fish bones."

It isn't just Oliver who goes wild over that one. Most everyone says "Yuck," and Suki looks up at Mr. Daniels, who turns to the class. "Now, now. Quiet down."

"Shrimp and fish bones?" Shay asks. "We prefer lobster in our family."

Albert raises his hand. "I would just like to point out that lobster is a very expensive meal now, but in the olden days, it was served only to peasants and slaves, who revolted and demanded that they only be served lobster twice a week. And"—he swallows—"I think fish bones would have some excellent nutritional properties."

Suki smiles for a second before she scurries back to her seat. Mr. Daniels gives Albert a solid nod.

Next, it's my turn. What I ended up bringing in means something to me, but now I'm not sure the class would be nice about it. I decide to play it safe and say I forgot.

I can tell Mr. Daniels is disappointed. "Well then, do you have a pet you can tell us about?" he asks.

"No. My mom is allergic." This reminds me of my dad crawling around the living room on all fours, pretending to be the puppy I begged for.

Oliver starts to bark like a dog.

Mr. Daniels says, "Too much of that, Oliver, and we'll have to give you dog biscuits. Better be careful."

Mr. Daniels squints at me. "Are you *sure* there's nothing you can show us? Because I have a feeling there's something."

I slide my hand down into my pocket and clutch my 1943 steel penny. The object I brought in for sharing today.

He watches my hand and I realize I've given myself away. So I stand and I take out the penny.

"My dad is in the army and he's deployed right now. On the day my dad left, he gave Travis and me these pennies." I look up at Mr. Daniels. "That's my big brother."

He nods.

"In 1943, pennies looked weird because they were silver in color like quarters. They were made of steel instead of copper because the government needed copper to make ammunition during World War Two. Then in 1944, pennies went back to the usual red copper color. Anyway, I think it's cool."

"I do, too," Mr. Daniels says. "And I think it's even more cool that you told us about it."

As I walk back to my seat, I think of how when Dad left, he said that when we look at the steel pennies, we need to remember that we are unique, too. And also, that things will go back to normal for us—that he'll be home before we know it.

I really miss him.

Mr. Daniels gives Oliver a thumbs-up, and I think how cool it is that they have the ear-pulling signal. That way he doesn't always have to tell Oliver that he's doing something wrong in front of everyone. I know what that feels like and I'm happy that Mr. Daniels cares so much. Most teachers seem to like their students to be all the same—perfect and quiet. Mr. Daniels actually seems to like that we're different.