

As far as I was concerned, they could drag Carlotta Jenkins to the pound. Of course, I didn't say that to Mr. Hillcrest's acne-cratered face, to be honest I tried my best not to even look at him cause all I kept thinking was *Moonpie...Moonpie...* and I for sure didn't want to slip up and say that. I didn't know how to answer, it seemed like a trick question: What should your punishment be?

I wanted to say nothing and bolt out of his office like an Olympic track star but instead I shrugged my shoulders and watched Carlotta, slouched in her seat across the table, do the same.

Mr. Hillcrest's office walls were covered, floor to ceiling with maps of African countries. He tilted his head toward the ceiling and made the same scrunched up face my daddy makes when he's thinking, as I outlined Botswana about five times in my mind. I looped around for trip number six when he finally announced it: Instead of recess, we would go help Mrs. Pettaway, the school librarian, for a week. Carlotta huffed and folded her arms in a way that made her elbows melt into her stomach and I rolled my eyes. She was the one who started it. But of course she wanted to all of a sudden play the victim.

"This will give both of you ladies a chance to think about your actions," he said as he snapped his suspenders against his shirt.

I didn't need a week of missing recess to think about what I did, I knew what I did and I didn't feel bad about doing it.

I was minding my business talking to my friends, Deja and Brielle, when a dodge ball flew from across the gym and slapped me on the side of my head like a hot brick. The hit was more embarrassing than painful and of course when I turned to see where it came from, Carlotta was standing by the blue mats, hunched over, laughter rushing out from behind those chicklet teeth.

She yelled that she was actually trying to hit Bao, the foreign exchange student, but that wasn't the point, the moment that ball cracked on my head it was all about the principle. The last thing I wanted to do was make Carlotta think she could jump stupid and nothing happen. Nope, she had a long list of kids who let her do that and I wasn't about to be one of them.

I waited until Coach Phillips was busy untying some jump ropes to throw the ball back at her then I charged in her direction. Thank God Deja held me back because I didn't know how to fight and by the look of that foam around her mouth, Carlotta was intent on knocking me clean out. Coach Phillips didn't even bother asking what happened, just blew his whistle like a wannabe referee, wagged his hotdog finger toward the office and told us to go.

Sitting there, staring at Botswana, I seriously considered telling Mr. Hillcrest what actually happened but he was already back to typing and I figured he might have made it two weeks if it looked like I wasn't trying to take "Personal Responsibility". Besides "Walk like you're going somewhere" it was his favorite phrase to say into his bull horn during class change.

He wrote us passes to lunch, the sign that we were dismissed, and we both stood up to leave. Carlotta ran ahead of me and I didn't even bother trying to beat her to the hall like I normally would. I honestly wanted to stay as far away from her as possible because wherever she was, trouble was waiting. Once in the hall, she stopped mid stride, turned back toward me and started to say something I couldn't hear. I kept my eyes on the row of lockers like they were the most interesting thing in the world and listened to loud racket pour from the cafeteria. When Carlotta realized I was ignoring her, she said my hair looked like a stale piece of lint, which was funny because besides being shaped like a Y, (wide on the top, skinny on the bottom) her hair was the nappiest in 6th grade. That's what I wanted to say but didn't because I knew it would

probably turn into another situation and I really wasn't trying to get into more trouble so I just kept moving and hoped she didn't sit anywhere close to me in the lunchroom.

Lunch time was really when you could see what was up and what was down. I mean it really told you so much about the mysteries of middle school. Little Mike constantly flipping his eyelids and chanting old school DMX lyrics at the top of his lungs would confuse anyone until they looked in his plastic lunch bag and realized the only thing he ate was sugar: Twix, Twinkies and two Capri Suns, every single day. Or the mystery of why Raina Twain's arms and legs were skinnier than tree branches. It only took me a few days of watching her pull out a celery stick, a piece of bread and a bottle of water to make sense of it all. Years of questions answered by a little waiting and watching during lunch hour.

The same thing could be said about the kids who got free lunch. That line was a looking glass, an aquarium where everyone could see all the gunk on the rocks, the scum, the algae in the corners, the one fish fluttering fast to keep up with the others. A whole life struggle on full display for everyone to see. Off rip, if we didn't know nothing else, once you stepped in that free lunch line we knew your family was on the front row of the struggle bus. The crazy part was the free lunch food was the same as ours, except theirs had a red dot sticker on their milk, fruit cup and tray.

I remember one day last year Daniel Davidson got fed up with his scarlet letter and instead of eating he used the whole lunch period to get the red stickers off his food, he scraped and scraped and scraped until red was under his nails and tiny flecks of sticker were on and around his tray. As soon as he got the last little bit off the bell rang and the lunch aide limped

over to his table and tossed the untouched food in the trash because it was time to go. He looked like he was going to cry which I understood completely because the fajitas were good that day.

Carlotta could say and do whatever she wanted until the 4th hour rolled around cause as soon as she got in that free lunch line she was humbled, immediately. Especially because I made sure to walk by slow and wave at her. Most times she saw me coming out of the corner of her eye and turned her head to the lunch lady. Sometimes though, like the day we left Mr. Hillcrest's office, I'd catch her off guard and the only thing she could do was roll her eyes as I waved with the fakest smile plastered on my face.

As for me, I begged my mama to stop making my lunch at the beginning of the year and just let me buy a school lunch. Most days the food was decent but if it's something nasty like meatloaf I survived on a bag of chips.

"So what did Crater Face say?" Deja asked while pulling open a bag of Cheetos.

"Nothing," I said, suddenly embarrassed I would be spending a week in the library with Carlotta.

"Really? He's so detention happy, I thought we wouldn't see you for the rest of the day," her fingers were capped in orange chip dust.

"No just library duty,"

"Dang!" Brielle said, "Carlotta too?"

I nodded.

"That's messed up," Deja said. "You would've been better off getting suspended,"

"I know," I said, putting my head in my hands.

After lunch, everybody ran outside for recess like it was on sale while me and Carlotta ducked around the trashcans waiting for Mrs. Pettaway, the school librarian, to come get us. Mrs.

Pettiway always smelled like flowers and coffee, hardly spoke and never said hi, just flashed her super white smile like an invitation and we glummed behind like two shadows accepting it with open arms. Mr. Hillcrest told us we were supposed to help her organize books but instead once we arrived at the library she told us to find an empty table and read. She was too nice to just tell it to us straight: she ain't want us messing up her stuff. But it was fine with me because it gave me more time to go over my words for the spelling bee. Carlotta sat two tables away and looked around as if she had stumbled into a foreign country; probably because she couldn't read a lick. I almost felt sorry for her but no one looking at me could tell that because I laughed as soon as she put her head down.