

There used to be an empty chair at the back of my classroom. In the first week of school, she helped us make musical instruments out of things we found in the school's recycling bin, and in the second week, she brought in a brand-new comic book to read to us that wasn't even in the school library yet. I had to think about it for a very long time, but in the end, I decided spending all my allowance at one time was worth it. Not just because everything had Tintin on it, but because if you press a button on the pencil case, Snowy barks and Captain Haddock's voice cries out, "Blistering barnacles!" I've already been yelled at for pressing it in the middle of math class this year, but if you can't press a barking dog button in math, then I don't see the point of it. I don't like math. Simple math is fine, but this year we're learning about long division and square numbers and all sorts of things that my brain doesn't like doing.

Sometimes I ask for help, but it's embarrassing putting your hand up too many times to ask the same question. I'm lucky because Tom and Josie and Michael always help me with the things I get stuck with. They're my best friends and we do everything together. Tom's got short spiky hair and a side-smile and a big Adam's apple that looks like a Ping-Pong ball got stuck in his throat. He's the smallest in our group but he's also the funniest. He only joined our class last year after his parents moved here from America, but we became friends instantly. He has three older brothers who all tease and bully him. Not seriously—only as a joke. But I think they steal his food, too, which is why he's so skinny and always super hungry. I once saw him eat a whole pizza with extra toppings and a double cheeseburger for lunch and still not feel full! So I hide my snacks and chocolate bars from him when I can. Josie has large, brown eyes and at least a million freckles across her face. She's tall and gangly and is always chewing on her hair. She's the fastest girl in our year and can kick a soccer ball past any goalie from the other side of the field. She's the coolest person I know, and I've known her since we were three. Our mums say we became instant friends the first day we started preschool, so they decided to become friends too. I don't really remember much about myself at that age, but Josie is in all my school memories. We even got our first detention together last year—all because of a hamster named Herbert. Josie had heard one of the upper-school bullies say that he was going to flush our class hamster, Herbert, down the toilet at the end of the day. Josie told me, and we decided to go on a Hamster Rescue Mission. We hid Herbert in my backpack before school ended and took him straight to my house. But of course, Mum found out and made me take him back the very next day. I tried to explain to boring Mr. Thompson what had happened, but he wouldn't listen and gave me detention. And even though she didn't have to, Josie stood up and said she had helped to steal Herbert too—just so we could do detention together. You know a friend's a Best Friend when they're willing to sit in detention with you. Michael has the neatest, puffiest Afro out of all the boys in our year. Most people think he's weird. But not us. His glasses are always broken, and his shoelaces are never done right, so he's always tripping up or bumping into things when he walks. But we're all so used to it now that we never notice. He's mostly quiet but when he does say something, grown-ups usually look impressed and say that it's "ingenious" or "insightful" or use other strange words beginning with "in." But it wasn't long until we found out what "Seclusion" really meant, and why the new boy needed so much of it. My dad used to say that if you really, really want something, you have to keep trying for it. And since he always used to say that he had everything he could ever want, I guessed he must have known all about trying for things. I knew that I wanted to be friends with Ahmet. I

didn't really know why; I just did. I gave up trying to speak to him during the day--because of all the Seclusion he needed--but I figured after school was okay, because Mrs. Khan had smiled at me and winked that first time. So every day for two whole weeks, I waited by the school gates at dismissal. As soon as the new boy and Mrs. Khan came out to meet the woman in the red scarf, I would run over and give the new boy a lemon candy--and sometimes a whole chocolate bar. But no matter how many candies I gave him or how much Mrs. Khan encouraged him to talk to me, the new boy never said a word, and he never, ever smiled back. Not even when I gave him a whole packet of chocolate frogs, which are my favorite. said Tom. I'd never heard of anyone being allergic to chocolate and candies before, but then again, I was allergic to dogs when no one else was. So maybe he was right. After that, I decided to give the new boy my lunch fruit instead. He was still going to his Seclusion every lunchtime, so on the Monday of the third week of trying to be his friend, I took the biggest orange I could find from the cafeteria and waited by the gates. I was extra excited because I had drawn a smiley face on the skin, and Tom had given me a sticker of a dinosaur to stick on it--so those were two things that made the orange extra special. Tom loves collecting stickers--he has books and books of them at home, and whenever he gets a new one he likes, he always brings it in to show us. I've never seen him give a sticker away to someone he doesn't know very well, so I hoped the new boy would like it and know how special it was. But as we were waiting for the new boy to come out, we heard something about him that we didn't understand at all. In fact, it was even more confusing than learning about the Seclusion he was being given. There were lots of grown-ups standing behind us at the gates--there always are at the end of the day. Sometimes they talk about the news or what they're making for dinner. But mostly they talk about the weather. I don't know why, because there's nothing more boring than talking about something everyone else can see for themselves, but I guess that's what you're supposed to do when you become a grown-up. Usually we don't listen because we have more interesting things to talk about, like what we're going to watch as soon as we get home and who our favorite Olympic athlete or soccer player is.

But this afternoon, just after someone had said how sunny it was and wasn't it lovely and how they hoped it would be sunny again tomorrow, someone else said, "Have you heard about the new refugee kid that's joined the school? Even the new boy got one and I think it made him happy because he kept looking at it. I tried to whisper lots of cheerful words like "rainbow" and "popcorn" and "marshmallows" to mine, because I read somewhere that if you tell plants about happy things, it makes them grow quicker.

I'd never won a prize before. Not even at the fair. I thought if I tried really hard and kept talking to my plant, I might win this time. And if I couldn't win, then I wanted the new boy to, because he really seemed to like that plant. But I was worried about Brendan the Bully Brooker. He's the Class Bully. His cheeks are always pink because he spends most of his time chasing anyone smaller than him around the playground. He's not very bright and hates anyone that is. If anyone gets a good grade in class or a prize, he'll try to beat them up after school. I saw him looking at Ahmet's plant and narrowing his eyes, just like he always does when he's thinking of something mean to do. I didn't like it one bit. His most common trick is to trip you up with his foot. He also likes to tip up your lunch tray as he walks by so that your food dribbles down your chest like runny eggs. He's done that to me a few times. Sometimes he gets caught. But most of the time he doesn't. And even when he does get caught, he doesn't get

detention. Most of the teachers seem to like him, though. Maybe it's because when he smiles, he looks like one of those boys who sing in a church choir on television. Mr. Thompson used to call him "a rascal"--which must be a good word because he always gave Brendan the Bully a wink and a pat on the back whenever he said it, and then let him run off again. I also know why Mum says politicians are liars and always shouts at them whenever they come on TV. Maybe Jennie will be a politician when she grows up. When we got closer, we heard Jennie telling everyone that the new boy had spent all his breaks and recess with Mrs. Sanders because he had done something bad in his old school and was too dangerous to be let out onto the playground with us. But I didn't believe her; I could tell Michael didn't believe her either, because he asked her how she knew so much about it. Jennie got angry and crossed her heart and hoped to die that she had heard Mr. Owen talking to Mrs. Timms outside the teachers' staff room and that both of them had said how sorry they felt for Mrs. Khan and how glad they were that the new boy wasn't in their class because it wasn't going to be easy to deal with him. I tried to catch his eye so I could smile at him and whisper "Hello," but Mrs. Khan caught me and told me to pay attention to my work. Next I tried to send him a note made into a paper plane--because I'm good at those--but it flew wonkily and hit Nigel on the head instead. He's a tattletale and told on me right away. I hate tattletales because they seem to like getting people into trouble more than anything else in the world, and they always smile when they're doing it. Mrs. Khan came and took the note and read it just to herself. She shook her head at me, but I think she must have found the drawing I made funny because her mouth gave a tiny smile that only I could see. Even though I didn't get lectured, I knew it would be too risky to send any more messages by airmail. Especially with tattletales around. The next day at recess, Josie, Tom, Michael, and I decided to follow the new boy and find out where he was going. But Mrs. Khan caught us following him in the hall and told us not to do it again. She didn't seem angry, but she did say that the new boy needed to be in "Seclusion" for a little while longer and that it was for his own good, so we promised not to follow him anymore. Everyone is scared of her, because when she gives detention, she doesn't just make you sit in a room; she makes you memorize long words from the dictionary and doesn't let you leave until you've learned them all by heart--the meaning and the spelling. I nodded and then ran back to where Josie and Tom and Michael were waiting for me. I felt extra happy because Mrs. Khan had smiled at me with her whole face and had given me a wink too--just like my dad used to do whenever he thought I had done something good or when he was teasing my mum. My mum and dad used to buy me a brand-new Tintin comic book for my birthdays, and Mum saves all the comics her library is about to throw away because they're too old or ripped and gives them to me, so I have a whole collection of them now. Because the Tintin school supplies were a lot more expensive than the astronaut ones and weren't on sale, I could only buy a pencil case, a small ruler, and two erasers. Mrs. Khan has extra-bouncy hair and always smells of strawberry jam --which is much better than smelling like old socks like Mr. Thompson does. Poor little blighter!" Josie and Michael and Tom all looked over at me and I looked back at them and then we stood very still together. I knew we were all thinking the exact same thing because our faces frowned at the exact same time: we were wondering what a Refugee Kid was doing in our class. Then the lady who had talked about the sun said, "It'll cause trouble-- you mark my words. It was on sale, too, so I bought a pencil case, a compass and

protractor set, erasers, and a long ruler--and still had nearly a pound left over! Even though he's only a character in a comic book and isn't real, I want to be just like him when I grow up. I think being a reporter and getting to solve mysteries and go on adventures must be the best job in the world. After she had whispered and nodded for a few seconds, she suddenly turned around and, peering over her glasses at us, pointed to the empty chair at the back of the class. After whispering for a few more seconds with Mrs. Khan, Mrs. Sanders left the classroom. Most of the time he kept his head down low but every so often I'd catch him staring right back at us. He had the strangest-colored eyes I'd ever seen --like a bright ocean but on a half-sunny, half-cloudy day. In second period we had PE but the new boy didn't join in; he sat in the corner staring at his backpack, which was red with a black stripe on it and looked very dirty. Sometimes the stories are true, but most of the time they're only half true because she makes things up. Last year she told a story about Josie cheating in a soccer match by pretending to fall down so she could get a penalty kick. I didn't know what to do because I've never really scared anyone so much before that they wanted to hide from me. The woman spoke to him gently again, and after a few seconds he took the candy and looked straight at me with his lion eyes before hiding away again. I didn't think the new boy looked the least bit dangerous or like he had an infectious disease, so the rumor I thought sounded the most true was the one that said he was from a super-rich family and that his parents had sent him to our school undercover so that he wouldn't be kidnapped. Everyone knows who he is because he always steals at least three puddings from the pudding tray every lunchtime, so there's never enough to go around. Last year, I found a space-themed notebook with pictures of an astronaut floating past the moon. The ruler is one of my favorite things, because the astronaut floats across it in water mixed with silver stars. Mr. Thompson, our teacher last year, had such a boring voice that my hands needed something to do. That's why it's important to have fun stuff with you in class--because you never know when you'll need to stop your brain from falling asleep or doing something that might get you into detention. But I'll have to think of another pet besides Tintin's dog, Snowy, to travel with because I'm allergic to dogs. I don't think cats or hamsters or even trained mice could be half as useful as Snowy. And she gives us prizes on Fridays when we've all been good. Then in the third week, something happened that was so surprising and made everyone so curious, that even Mrs. Khan couldn't make us focus on our lessons properly. I've even heard of lower graders being stuck in detention for hours because they had to learn words that were as long as this page! She liked to sit at the back of the class because then she and Clarissa could pretend to pay attention when really they were drawing pictures of their favorite pop stars and giggling about someone they didn't like. Then at recess I looked around the playground for him but couldn't see him anywhere. Whenever we do PE, I like to pretend that I'm training to join Tintin on an adventure and have to be the super-fastest human being on the planet. Every birthday, I make a wish that I'll grow at least four inches taller, and I drink as much milk as I can so that my bones will stretch. Luckily he didn't see me because he was staring at his backpack the whole time. After PE, we had lunch break, and Josie, Tom, Michael, and I decided we would try to find the new boy so that he wouldn't be on his own. In the afternoon we had history, and we were split into groups, but the new boy was allowed to sit on his own and not join in. Mrs. Khan spent more time with him than she did with any of our groups, and she was pointing at things in a new textbook she had gotten him. By now,

my lemon candies were getting sticky in my pocket and beginning to look like bright yellow fuzzballs. People kept running up to her to ask if the new boy had said anything to her, but she just shook her head and said he was using a lower grade's textbook, so his reading and writing mustn't be very good. As we made our way to our usual bus stop to catch the city bus back home, we saw everyone crowding around Jennie just outside the front gates. She had a big fat bruise on her leg the shape of Australia for weeks afterward! That made everyone else in class--except for Liam and Chris, Brendan the Bully's only two friends--hate him even more. She doesn't seem to like Brendan the Bully as much as the other teachers. She didn't lean away so much after that, but she always put her arms up or used a notebook as a divider. Michael said kidnappers wouldn't come to our school to look for him because it wasn't in a fancy area, and Tom agreed. On maps it just looks a spilled blob of jam. I wanted to ask the new boy if the rumor about the kidnappers was true, and if he needed us to become his bodyguards. I could tell that Mr. Brown didn't like what she was saying, because he frowned and shook his head and then took a step to the side. There aren't many nice school supply stores where I live--they only ever have boring dinosaur sets for boys or princess sets for girls. This year, I bought a Tintin and Snowy set. And even though I've thought about it for at least a year now, I still haven't come up with anything. His dad is a professor and his mum is a lawyer, and because they're always busy, they buy him all the latest gadgets and books and the coolest new games. Josie and Michael are always competing with each other to see who can get the most gold stars and As in class. But I'm better at reading and spelling than both of them--especially Josie. It was on the third Tuesday after school had started, and Mrs. Khan was taking attendance. Mrs. Sanders always wears her hair in the exact same way and peers over her glasses whenever she talks to anyone. This was the chair: As I said, it was a pretty ordinary chair, and it was empty because a girl named Dena left our class at the end of last year to move to Wales. But before we could start guessing about what was going on, Mrs. Sanders came back, and this time she wasn't alone. said Josie