

The Self-Manager Badge

I'm in second grade and I'm going to be eight soon. I try to be good, but my teacher won't give me a self-manager badge.

If you're good enough to be a self-manager, Mrs. Burns has you stand with her in front of the whole class. She's big and old, and my dad said she's going to retire soon. She gives you the badge and everyone claps. After that, you get to come to school with the green bobcat pinned to your shirt every day like the other self-managers.

When a self-manager breaks a rule, like walking up the slide, Mrs. Burns takes the badge away for one day. It's always scary to see because even though she frowns all the time, she really, really frowns when she's mad. If the self-manager breaks a rule seven times, she takes the badge away forever. She waits until everyone goes home and crushes the badge in her bare hands. I know that's true because Bruce saw her do it.

Jessica is a self-manager and I went to her house one time because her mom knows my mom. She's not one of my friends. I asked Jessica if I could look at her badge. She took me to her closet where her overalls were hanging up and the badge was pinned to a strap. She let me run my finger over it. The badge was smooth. I wanted to try it on, but Jessica just wanted to go outside and play.

I don't know why my teacher hasn't given me a badge. During class, I'm almost always quite. When I draw pictures, I do my best. I try not to run in the hallway, though I

do sometimes. Other self-managers walk up the slide, and I *never* do that. Yet even the bad self-managers get to wear their badges every day, and I still don't have one.

Once, I was very bad. My parents made me sit in the gold recliner and they pulled up two chairs. They've never done that before. I knew I was in trouble because of how their faces looked. My dad held up my report card. He explained that threes and twos were bad and pointed to all the threes and all the twos. There were a lot. Last year, I got only fours. My parents were disappointed in me. I cried quietly until my chest got wet. I told them I was sorry.

The next time I got my report card, my parents didn't make me sit in the big chair. My mom looked at the writing on one side of the card, then on the other, and said to my dad, "Do you think she knows what religion we are?"

"Maybe it's because of what I do for a living?" Dad suggested.

"I can't imagine that has anything to do with it."

I told my mom how hard I was working to be a self-manager and to get all fours on my report card. She said it wasn't my fault and that maybe Mrs. Burns just liked some students better than others. I didn't know people didn't like me. I decided to be more likeable.

One day, I was coloring in a picture of ice cream at my desk. I wanted to get first prize. The hamburgers we did last week were still hanging in a row on the wall. The self-managers' drawings of hamburgers were together on the left, and they had shiny stickers that said 1st, 2nd, 3rd, and 4th. Everyone else's went down the line and the pictures got

bader and bader until it got to the worst one. My hamburger was third from the last, and I was glad two other pictures were worse than mine. Bruce's was at the end of the line because it was so terrible. I was happy not to be Bruce.

I was almost done coloring a scoop of chocolate ice cream when Mrs. Burns walked past me and a self-manager badge went *ting-ting* as it landed on my desk. I lifted it slowly with my fingertips. It was lighter than I had imagined.

"Thank you!" I gasped. She had already walked away.

After school I ran to the car and showed Mom my shiny, beautiful badge. She grinned and said some of the teachers were confused that I still didn't have one, so Mrs. Burns had to give it to me.

I wore my badge to the store, and when we ate dinner with my grandma and grandpa, and I wore my badge to their house so they could see it. At night when I laid my clothes out for the next day, I pinned my badge on my shirt so I wouldn't leave it at home. Other self-managers sometimes forgot to bring their badge to school. I would never forget.

It was fun being a self-manager, but Mrs. Burns kept taking away my badge.

Once Tom asked me a question about the assignment we were supposed to be doing and I whispered to help him. Mrs. Burns reached out her big, meaty hand and I had to give her my badge. She was supposed to give it back to me the next day but she never did. I finally asked her if I could have it back. The next time, we were standing in line on the way to music class. I wasn't paying attention, and the line started moving on without

me. She held out her big hand and I had to give it to her again. The next time she took it away because I had forgotten to do my homework.

She had only given me my badge two weeks ago, but half the time, I didn't have it. I hadn't even kept it over the weekend yet. If I didn't learn to be better I'd get it taken away seven times, and then it would get crushed and I'd lose it forever.

Then I got it taken away a fourth time. I was running a little bit in the hallway with Amaya. I turned the corner, and there was Mrs. Burns talking to another teacher. I knew she wanted my badge, so I took it off and gave it to her before she asked for it. The other teacher laughed. Mrs. Burns seemed mad because I did that, only a different kind of mad than when she frowned. She breathed heavy out of her nostrils, like a horse. It felt like something had happened that I didn't understand.

When we came in from recess, I tried not to look at Mrs. Burns because I was embarrassed that I had broken the rules again. But then I had to look, because she was holding my self-manager badge up in front of the class. It gleamed in her hand. I thought she was giving it back to me, so I reached out to take it.

She crushed my self-manager badge in her hand. It crumpled easily, like aluminum foil, and the sound it made was small. Mrs. Burns threw it in the trash.

I tried not to cry, but I did anyway. As I sat on the rug during story time, sobbing and trying to remember what I had done to deserve this, I felt a new pinch of anger. It occurred to me that maybe I never had a chance to be a self-manager, because it was over before I even started trying. Maybe some people were just hateful.