

The Schedule

Tripping on a piece of loose concrete, as he watched the blonde girl sway in front of him, Bronson stumbled down the school steps and into the blustery fall day. The wind curled the edges and bony stems of brown leaves that had the nerve to sneak onto the walkway. It would have blown his milky blond hair as well, but now it was cut short and close to his scalp. His mother always sighed with disgust when Bronson flinched at each touch of the comb or brush as it touched his pink scalp.

Not liking the feel of cold air on his face, Bronson scrunched his face tight, pushing his eyes almost closed. He nearly missed the flight of a single red leaf that twisted its way to the ground, landing with a plop among the others. He saw it, though; the bright pop of color gave him a glimmer of satisfaction.

Realizing that he might miss Rita's car in the pickup line if he couldn't see her, he forced his eyes open. They began to water and tingle, but he kept them wide apart even though his nose ran. Where was a clean hankie? The air made his skin prickle and burn. He hated strange unaccustomed feelings anywhere on his body. He shuddered when someone touched him, even when it was a friendly pat or hug.

The pressure of his watch was a friendly feeling. A gentle tug around his wrist. The constriction of his clothes was okay if the fabrics were soft and dry. His watch. What was on the schedule today? A slight feeling of panic rose from his belly to his throat where it threatened to choke him; then he realized it was Tuesday, and Tuesday was his day for chess. He was small and frail for a 4th grader. His dad told him that chess was something in which he could excel. Bronson knew better because the chess pieces were hard, cold, and unyielding in his hands. Dad's words in his pretend cheery voice

attempted to convince Bronson he was special. The vibration in his tone told him that dad knew he wasn't.

Better chess than art. Art was on Wednesday. He loved the squishiness of the paint, the colors all mixed and bright, the bright glow of the colors. What he didn't like was when he got the mess on his hands. The colors smearing and losing their bright individual lights. He didn't like his art teacher telling him to be careful and stay within the lines.

He climbed into Rita's Honda CRV. This car was better than his mom's. Mom's fancy car was a smothering blanket and big. Rita's CRV was smaller and sometimes smelled like French fries. His Mom's smelled of the fragrance the car people sprayed when they cleaned it.

"Don't sit too close." Rita's gray hair was pulled back into a messy bun clamped with something that looked like brown teeth. Getting a full-faced view of Rita, when she turned her head, he also got a good look at her red nose and swollen eyes. "I may be getting a cold or something. Don't want you exposed."

"Okay." He scooted away from her as far as possible without touching the metal of the door. "You need to take me to chess today."

"Yeah," she answered. "It's on the schedule."

"I'll be finished in an hour."

"I'll pick you up in the.." The rest of the sentence was lost in the rush of air that was her sneeze.

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On Wednesday, Bronson ate his breakfast, chewing slowly and carefully. The yogurt cup was fine. He had a spoon with a carved handle he could use to dip the creamy yogurt out. The blueberries inside were a bit mashed, which made him slightly nauseous. His muffin had honey to one side, which was fine, but he had to be very careful not to get the sticky on his fingers. He paused. The butter on the muffin was oozy. He didn't want his father to notice him moving his muffin around. Dad was drinking his coffee and reading e-mails on his iPad. Probably wouldn't look up.

"Rita is sick today. She can't take Bronson to school." Mom swept into the room looking more irritated than usual, almost mad. Her mouth a sharp line.

"You'll have to see if Elsa will take him," Dad said. He didn't look up from his messages but took another long drink of his, should be cold by now, coffee.

Oh, no, his mother's mom. Bronson felt something in him become stiff. His grandma was spiky and sharp. All bones and angles. Silver jewelry like swords. The only soft looking thing about her was the artificial pucker of her lips.

When Gram E, which was what Bronson was supposed to call her, picked him up, he sat in the corner of her large silver car as quietly as possible. His bookbag rested on the floor between them. Bronson carefully angled the bag so as not to let it touch his knees. He didn't speak to her after the first greeting of hello but sat looking straight ahead, smelling the lemon of her perfume.

"I'm not sure who will pick you up this afternoon. Your mother will send a text," Gram said. Each word that slid from her mouth was a sliver of ice.

“We aren’t supposed to text at school.” Bronson made himself turn to look at her. He felt spasms in his neck as he twisted.

“Well, a text to your teacher, then.”

“Whoever comes needs to know that I go to art on Wednesday. It is on the schedule.”

“Very well, I will make a note.”

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Bronson’s ride on Wednesday was surprising. His eyes widened. It was an unexpected mud-stained Jeep. A couple of kids in the line ahead of him snickered and pointed. Indeed, it looked strange, lost, and even a little sad among the shiny cars to the front and back. Just to make sure that Bronson was totally humiliated, a large gray-haired woman bounced out of the driver’s side, yelled, and waved at him.

“Yoo-hoo, B-boy, Granny here.” Several heads swiveled in his direction, registering polite disdain. The blonde girl swung her gaze from the jeep to Bronson and raised one eyebrow. Bronson didn’t care. It was his good granny. The one that was warm and soft and smelled like cinnamon. He rushed to meet her.

“Hi, Granny. Are you here to take me to art class”?

“Nope, I’m here to take you to my house.”

“I’m supposed to be at art.”

“Tough shit. We’re going to my house. You’re spending the night because your mom and dad have some event or another that lasts late. We’re going to make cookies.”

“Are they gluten-free? By the way, you’re not supposed to say that s--- word.”

“The cookies, gluten-free? Hell, no.” She ignored the rest of his comment.

“Will I be allowed to eat them or just help make?”

“Of course, you’ll eat.”

“Will they make me throw up or break out?” That was a miserable thought.

Bronson felt a fluttery feeling in his chest.

“Think about it, Buddy. Did the cookies you ate at the picnic make you sick?”

“No, but I’m not supposed to eat things with gluten. Gram E told me; I think.”

“Let’s just let this be our little secret, huh,” Granny said with a big wink and a smile.

Almost as if he had been allowed a carbonated drink, a choking sound gurgled out of Bronson’s mouth. It tasted strange.

“B-boy, is that a giggle?”

“I’m not allowed to make rude noises.” Bronson tried to stop the smile that stretched both sides of his mouth in opposite directions. Even his ears seemed like smiling.

Granny laughed. A big, deep-throated laugh. Bronson felt the air rush out, his eyes streaming as he joined her. When he stopped a moment to catch his breath, Bronson wheezed out, “You know laughing and giggling are not allowed. It isn’t polite to laugh and giggle.”

“Why ever not?” As she turned to look at him, he noticed that the folds of her face were warm and comfortable. She gave him a soft pat on the shoulder.

Hmm, he thought. That touch felt okay. He answered.

“Well, you know this is Wednesday. This definitely isn’t on the schedule.”