

Family Matters

Last year we saw Sebastian every day on the way home from school, sitting in the snow and picking his nose. He had something Mrs. Stiles called a “condition.” This is just a fancy word for his legs, which are thin and swollen around the knees, or at least they used to be. I don’t know anymore. But they stuck out at weird angles, like they were trying to run away from him and got stuck mid-way. The condition also made the skin of his hips all numb so he couldn’t tell when the snow melted into his pants and a huge wet stain spread all over his butt. He was stupid, too, because even though my best friend and pretend girlfriend, Mariah Velasco, always told him he should wear a diaper every time we passed by, dropping the hint that it made him look he peed himself, he always screamed that he would never do such a thing and that only babies like Mariah would do dumb stuff like that. Then he would hobble back towards his house in his penguin way and Mariah would pretend that her feelings weren’t hurt. I never said anything during these fights. My stutter is always worse in the winter, and I didn’t want her to think I was a spaz like Sebastian. I also hoped that one day Mariah would get extra hurt and maybe cry and hold my hand and realize she was in love with me. But this is hard to do when the only thing you say to a girl is “hello.”

Sebastian lived three blocks from our school in an old green house that smelled like lasagna twenty-four-seven. This was because Sebastian was Italian and his grandmother, who was Italian, too, only ate pasta and tomatoes. She and her three daughters owned the only Italian restaurant in town and because restaurants are so busy all the time, Sebastian and his whole family only had time to eat spaghetti and lasagna and other exotic noodles (I forget the other pasta names because I cannot speak Italian or read the menu when we eat there for Thursday

night trivia). Sebastian was an only child like me, but since his father died when he was a baby, he was basically a girl since he only lived with women and probably wore an apron and cooked the spaghetti with them every night. My dad said this often when he read the newspaper before dinner and I told him about Sebastian's torturing of Mariah. He said Sebastian was "emasculated" and might be gay one day, which would make him even more messed up. My mom doesn't like it when Dad says mean things about gay people and always yells at him when she hears. Every time she promises me that Sebastian is just lonely and needs a friend, but my dad always ignores her. One time I asked if the reason Sebastian was gay was because of his conditioned legs and my dad laughed. This embarrassed me, so I never asked about the cause of his gayness or legs ever again, even though I still prayed at night that eating Sebastian's family's garlic bread would not cast a spell on me and make me like him.

On days when Mariah rode the bus to her cousin's house and I was forced to pass Sebastian by myself, he would follow me home and try to be my friend. He told stories about his girly home-schooling and told jokes so loudly that my ears could not stop from listening. Although I wished he wouldn't talk to me, my mom said that if I wasn't kind to everyone then Jesus would send me to hell. She also said she would rip me a new behind by slapping it with Dad's belt if a forever with the Devil was not scary enough. To tell the truth they were both pretty scary, so I just listened to Sebastian and never said anything. I didn't want Sebastian to hear my stutter and think I was broken like him, because I wasn't, and I'm not now. My dad always said so and I never forget that anymore, even though I did once, but that was a mistake.

The mistake started because Sebastian said he had the new Nintendo system that had just been released last year. Mariah was on the bus that day, and I was not myself because Chris

Abendroth called me a ninny when I couldn't climb the rope in PE class. Sebastian distracted me with the mention of the Nintendo, and all his new games, and my brain was lost somewhere inside of my body. He didn't complain about me being quiet or call me a baby, which is probably why I thought it would be okay to be his friend.

"Y-You've even got Z-Z-Zel-Zelda?" I asked. He just nodded and stuck his tongue through the gaps in his teeth.

"You should come play. I'm probably the only kid in the neighborhood that has it," he said. I traced the inside of my jean pockets and tried to come up with something smart to say.

"Th-that's not that cool," I said.

"No, trust me, it is. You should come." Then he patted my shoulder a little and pointed towards the hill, the chimney of his pasta-stinking house peeking over the top. I opened my mouth to speak, but nothing really came out. The cold got all stuck inside my throat and the air was trapped there. Sebastian just laughed and pulled at my arm some more.

"It'll be fun," he said, and kept holding my elbow until we had crossed the street. My brain wanted to leave and not play video games and do math homework, but my body didn't agree and kept stumbling by Sebastian's side. I wanted to say something, to tell him that I had to go home to clean the litter box for the cats and do anything but hang out with him, but winter crawled inside of me and took away my voice. I forgot how to talk. All I knew was how to walk, so I kept going.

Sebastian's house was clean but weird, with fresh flowers on every table and every color you can imagine. Light blue walls, checkered floors with yellow rugs, red photo frames and a fireplace made of marble, a fuzzy pink couch. Christmas lights mixed with plastic

jack-o-lanterns and cardboard boxes that were fat and full, with different holiday names marked on their sides. I looked shocked, I guess, because Sebastian started explaining about how his grandma was going blind, and so she couldn't see color that well anymore.

“My mom tells me not to talk about it, even though the house looks sort of crazy,” he said as he pointed towards the kitchen table, forcing me to sit down and stay, and then moved towards the refrigerator. He pulled out a glass bowl, microwaved it, then put it in front of me. “It's called arancini,” he said as I poked the brown, crispy balls, “they're good. You can eat them while we play.”

I grabbed the bowl since my brain had still not returned, and went to follow him as he limped towards the stairs. I wasn't really hungry or feeling anything at all, but when we passed through his living room, I glanced around the corner into a dark room, the only place that wasn't full of colors, and I screamed. There was a man there with no legs, sitting in front of the television and eating a turkey sandwich. But from far away, he looked like something else, like some sort of scary lump. He didn't even seem shocked when I screamed. He just picked some bread crumbs out of his mustache and looked at me, then back to the television.

Sebastian sighed. “Sorry, I didn't think about him. That's our tenant,” he said.

“What's that?”

“I don't really know. But I think he's my grandfather.” He shrugged. I turned and made a face like he was a psycho, which he probably is, or was, I guess. He pointed towards the stairs and began to stumble his way up. I thought about helping, but I didn't really want to touch him. I stayed a step behind the entire time, though, in case he fell. It seemed like the polite thing to do.

“He’s lived here as long as I can remember, but everyone hates him. My mom, my aunts, but my grandma hates him the most,” he said. His voice sounded scratchy, as if the stairs were giving him trouble. I watched his crooked legs move up and down, side to side, rubbing against the brown carpet of each stair.

“Wh–Wha–Why do they hate him? Did he d–do something?”

He shrugged again. “I don’t know. He just lives in that room. He always has.”

“Like f–f–for your whole life? And you don’t know him?”

“We just don’t talk to him,” he said. “I’m not allowed to.”

“That doesn’t m–m–m–make sense.”

He shrugged. “Mom just says that’s how things are.”

I didn’t know what to say to that. I just stayed quiet. Usually people just say whatever I want to know, anyways, like I wished really hard for them to say it and then they do. It seemed like magic when I was little, but then I got older and I knew better.

But Sebastian knew what I wanted to know, too. “I just never talked to him because they told me to ignore him, and since I did him, he ignored me back. Grandma never said why she hated him, but I guessed that he was mean, so I left him alone. But a few months ago I got nosy and I went into his room while he was at the doctor’s. I probably shouldn’t have, but I just felt like it, and so I did,” he said, his voice a little raspy. We got to the top of the stairs and just stood on the flat ground for a little while. There was less color in this part of the house. More grey.

“I went through this little table he has next to the couch where he sleeps. I found a ring in the drawer, a wedding ring, and I didn’t think a lot about it until I saw the inside of it. It had my grandma’s name carved on the inside.” He wiped a little sweat from his forehead and smeared it

on his jeans. His butt was still wet, and I wondered if I should say something, but I just didn't. I can't give a lot of reason for why I did any of these things, or why I don't remember why I did or didn't do stuff, but I think it's better to forget the mistake, anyways.

I stared at him and waited. He pointed towards the Nintendo and the TV, which sat on the other side of the room. I walked over, but he just stood there for a little longer and breathed really loudly. He sat down eventually, his face sort of red, and I focused on the questions in my head and hoped they would somehow travel into his brain.

He laid back onto the ground once he sat, sighing. "I gave the ring to my grandma because I thought it was her's. It had her name on it, so I thought maybe the tenant stole it, 'cause they always made him seem like such a bad guy anyways. But she started to cry and then hit me pretty hard. My mom saw and took her to her room and got me some ice. She told me just not to talk about the tenant anymore, that he had hurt grandma pretty bad a long time ago, and it was hard for her to see him everyday." We both sat in the quiet for a minute.

"W-Wha-Why won't he just leave?" I asked. Sebastian shrugged again and sat up, grunting a little.

"He probably broke her heart or something. I don't know anything about that kind of stuff. Do you?" I shook my head. "Yeah. So I just stay out of it. But sometimes I catch him looking at me kinda weird, like he misses me, even though we've never talked. I don't know. Sorry that he scared you, though." He paused again, then looked at me in a serious way that I didn't like. His eyes got all black and wide and filled up his whole face. "Why did he scare you, though? I never thought he was scary. Just mean."

Because my brain was still lost at this moment and I had no control over my body, I screwed my mouth shut, but my eyes moved down to stare at Sebastian's legs, all twisted and weird, spread out between us. The thing I said earlier about people knowing when you have questions—that happens even when I don't want it to. When you think bad things about people, like why they're so fat or ugly or why their voice sounds weird, they know that, too. I'm not good at hiding it. I know we aren't supposed to question God's judgement, and that we shouldn't pray to change ourselves because He made us that way (or at least that's what my mom said when she caught me asking Him to take my stutter away), but it's hard not to wonder in your own brain why people have twisted legs, or no legs at all, and even harder when you have to sit in front of them and play video games and eat Italian food in their house. I didn't want him to use his psychic powers, but I couldn't stop it. He saw me, for sure, because his eyes shrank back into to their normal size and he straightened his back. His forehead scrunched up in little humps like he was angry.

“What are you looking at?” he said.

“N-n-noth—”

“Don't lie. I saw you looking.”

I gulped and it echoed through the whole room. Or at least it felt like it. “I mean,” I said, not sure what to say at all, “I mean. What's w-wrong with you a-a-anyways?”

He glared at me, his cheeks getting a little red. He seemed hurt, but I didn't know him that well, and tried to make myself feel better and tell myself that he was just squinting because of the sunlight coming through the window blinds. He turned away from me and pointed towards the Nintendo.

“Press the on button. The game is already in there,” he said, not looking at me. We didn’t talk for a while then, and the air wasn’t only trapped in my throat now, but the whole room, making everything stiff and hot and a little intense. Sebastian didn’t even crack a smile or shout, even when he beat the puzzles in the game. I tried to focus on Link walking around and poking the things in the bushes, but my insides felt cold. I wanted to go home, but there were no words for my throat to plug up. My brain had nothing to say.

I told my mom about all of this when I got back an hour later. Not by choice or anything, but because she kept standing over and asking me questions and I’m not allowed to lie when I answer. I don’t even try because she can always tell. She’s psychic, too.

“I’m disappointed in you,” she said, more than once. It seemed like all she could say. The sentence kept coming from her mouth every time my stutter got stuck and I had to take a talking break. “It’d be good for you to have a friend like that, Xavier. Someone who knows what you go through every day. It would be so good for you. I’m just so disappointed.” She turned away from the kitchen table where I was sitting and walked back towards the counter. She started slicing the mushrooms again, hunched over and not looking at me and sighing over and over. I felt like I was going to cry even though I don’t know why.

Dad stopped reading to watch me hold in my tears, the newspaper crinkling in his hands. He had been quiet during the whole story, not looking at me until right then. He didn’t say it but I could feel his disappointment, too, a little different from Mom’s but more painful in some sort of way. When Mom is angry at me I can feel it behind my eyes, where my tears sleep, like the headaches I get sometimes when I watch TV for too long on the weekends. It’s always there even though it’s kind of quiet, like my ceiling at night during bedtime when I’m trying to sleep,

or the buzzing laundry machine, or my cat, Ernie, and his tiny snores. But Dad's anger is further inside. Deeper. It's in my brain and my stomach, and it hurts like some sort of sunburn that exists only on the inside where you can't see.

Don't tell him I said this, because it would only make him more disappointed, but he used to hit me when I was little. He'd get so mad when I would do something wrong and couldn't use my words to explain why I caused trouble. He doesn't do it anymore because he goes to a special doctor now and they're working on Dad and his anger issues. But even though I know Dad is better now, sometimes he looks at me like Old Dad used to and I remember when he would hit me and how much it would sting, and I get a little afraid and can't hide it and no one talks to each other because the past makes us sad like that and also sometimes makes us cry at night when we are alone in our rooms. So I try not to think about it. But at times like that I can't help it. I can see the battle between Old Dad and Good Dad happening inside of his eyes and I never know who will win.

He just stared at me for a long time. I started to cry after trying to hold the tears in. I moved to wipe them from my cheeks, but he reached out and grabbed my wrist.

"Stop that," he whispered. "Stop crying, Xavier."

"Honey," my mom said, watching my Dad as she washed her hands.

"No, Danielle, he needs to man up." Dad squeezed my wrist really hard. "You're too old to behave like this. You know better."

"That's enough, Anthony. Let him go." She said this in her special voice. He moved to look at her and his eyes got really sparkly and sharp and then he did what she asked. He grabbed his newspaper and moved into another part of the house, whispering to himself. His footsteps

were loud on the wooden floors. The noise made me cry harder and I squeezed my eyes until it started to hurt. Mom walked over and start massaging little circles into my shoulders. She hushed me and kissed my forehead until I stopped crying.

“You should apologize to Sebastian,” she said. “You know that’s the responsible thing to do, right?” I nodded, even though taking responsibility usually makes me uncomfortable and I try to avoid doing it as much as possible. But I accepted this mission from Mom because I had no choice. I dried my face on my t-shirt, then stared at the stains while I ate her stroganoff. No one talked for the rest of the night, and when I went to my room, I just buried my head in Ernie’s fur and hoped the whole world would be quiet forever.

Sebastian was not waiting in the snow when Mariah and I passed by the next day. I left her to walk by herself and she didn’t seem to care for more than a minute.

“Why are you going to that loser’s house?” she asked. I just shrugged. I think maybe if she heard my stutter she would think I was a loser, too, but I didn’t want her to believe a lie like that. She just laughed a little and then kept walking. This hurt, but I was too nervous to care very much, and also very cold. I hurried up the hill and knocked on Sebastian’s door.

No one answered for a long time. I kept knocking, but no one came to the door, and then I imagined Sebastian trying to climb down the stairs really slowly, sweating and breathing all heavy, which made me feel bad. I let myself in so he wouldn’t have to walk all the way down, if that’s what he was doing, even though I wasn’t sure, but it seemed like it would be okay. But when I walked through the door there was no one there. A television was playing somewhere far away, but everything was dark and all the colors seemed less bright. Everything seemed loud and quiet at the same time.

I waited for a little while before moving towards the stairs, hoping Sebastian would just finish coming to get me, but he never did. I walked carefully through the dark room so I didn't break anything or step on the rug with my wet shoes. The television got a little louder, and I could hear people laughing at something that someone said, laughing and clapping and laughing some more. I focused on breathing quietly, worried they would hear me somehow.

“Hey,” someone said from the other side of the house. The voice was dark and scratchy.
“Hey, kid.”

I moved my head so quickly that my neck muscles got scared and started to burn. It was the lump, the tenant, and he was staring at me as he was chewing on some waffles. Every part of me felt frozen.

“Hey, you, what are you doing in here?” he said. He moved the plate of waffles away from himself and started scooting towards me with his hands, his muscles bulging under his saggy skin.

I opened my mouth but nothing would come out. My face got hot and my chest felt fluttery but no part of my body would move. The tenant kept making his way towards me.

“You can't be here today. Sebastian is sick,” he said, huffing a little. He kept scooting and looking at me with a hardness in his eyes. “You hear me? You can't be in here, I said.”

I tried to talk but it was stuck again, it's always getting stuck when I need it most, and I started to cough a lot. The tenant seemed to get angrier the closer that he got to me.

“What's wrong with you? Aren't you listening? I said you need to get out.” He was right up by my feet now, his spotted forehead coming up near my knees.

“S-S-S-Suh-Suuhh-”

“What’s wrong with you? Speak up, kid.” He leaned closer and his eyebrows got all furry and mad-like.

“I-I-”

“You? You?”

It felt like my whole body was trying to escape through my mouth. I could feel my stomach and my intestines and my kidneys all up in my throat, my lungs swimming in my spit and hitting my teeth, my eyes popping out of their homes in my head and all my tears with them. The tenant reached out and slapped my shaky knees. His eyes had a little shine of worry in them.

“Oh, shit, kid. Oh, I didn’t recognize you.” He shuffled a little on his hands. The shorts he wore dragged a little against the rug, knotted at the end to cover the place where his legs disappeared. “Oh, kid, that’s my bad. Calm down, alright? Let’s calm down together.”

He reached out and tried to hold my hand and started breathing all weird like he was going to put a curse on me or something. He kept counting and breathing and holding my hand and I felt like my body wasn’t even mine anymore, but just a bag of skin and mushed up parts that were frozen in space and pain. For a second I tried to yell out to Sebastian with my brain, hoping he would hear me, but then my brain was frozen, too, and I wasn’t Xavier anymore, but something else, like the couch in the corner or the carpet on the staircase or the television filled with laughing people, watching who I used to be from some place far away.

“Alright, alright, don’t shit yourself. Just settle down,” the tenant said. The anger melted from his face completely and looked more like sadness. “Just calm down, kid.”

I tried to apologize again, to move or do anything at all, but I just cried like a big, stupid baby. I forgot how to be myself, how to be Xavier, who didn’t cry just because his voice didn’t

work and he couldn't explain himself. My organs were all scrambled up inside of me and the only thing I could feel was Mom and Dad's disappointment exploding, fireworks under every spot of my skin and inside my head.

The tenant touched my elbow and rubbed it a little. I still couldn't move. "I'm sorry, kid, okay? Just calm down a little," he said. "I didn't recognize you at first, alright. I didn't remember you had that stutter. I can't remember shit these days, you see," he said and laughed a little. He patted the place where his legs should be and laughed a little more.

"I'm like you, you see? I'm a little messed up, too, me and you and Sebastian," he said. He tried to smile, but his grey mustache covered the edges of his mouth. "That's all my bad, kid. It's all on me. We gotta stick together, people like us. We're the only ones who know what it's like, you see. The only ones."

He hopped a little and moved his hand up to squeeze my shoulder. A big gush of something flew through my throat and cleared the whole world out of the way, and my scream shook the whole house and made the tenant jump back in surprise.

"I-I-I'm not like you. I'm nothing like you," I said. "I'm not messed up. I'm not, I'm not, I'm not."

The tenant scooted away from me and just stared for a little. His face twisted up and all his wrinkles looked dark and deep in his skin.

"What did you say?" he asked. It seemed like he had heard me pretty well. I didn't think he actually wanted me to say it again. I don't think I could've if I wanted to, anyways. My throat felt like an earthquake, all shaky and choked up.

"I-I-I. I said. I said--"

“Alright, kid, I think you’d better go,” he said, reaching out again to pat my shoulder.

“Don’t touch me,” I said. My voice was squeaky but clear. No stutter. If I wasn’t crying I probably would’ve smiled a little, but it didn’t seem like the appropriate time for all of that. The tenant looked even angrier now, hunching over like some kind of old gargoyle and grumbling at me.

“Get lost. And don’t you come back to see Sebastian anymore. He doesn’t need people like you around,” he said. My body didn’t move for a little, my muscles still stuck in their frozen positions, but then he started banging his hands on the ground, making the floor shake and chanting for me to get out like he was some sort of angry monkey. I fell back as I tried to run away from him, but I got up and screamed and moved as fast as I could. My body still didn’t feel like mine even as I ran all the way home, tears soaking into my scarf and burning against my freezing cheeks.

Dad was in the driveway when I ran up, pulling his briefcase from the backseat and shaking snowflakes from his hair. I sprinted as hard as I could and jumped onto him, knocking him over into the icy grass, and he started to yell at me until he noticed that it was impossible for me to speak or hear because I was too busy crying my eyes out. He patted my back as I cried and cried, and I wished maybe I had run into mom instead because he seemed a little uncomfortable, his hands all stiff and confused as they traced sloppy circles onto my back, but I couldn’t imagine anything for very long because the crying just took over again. It felt like that was my whole world for a while, just tears and salt and snot and the lint from Dad’s coat falling into my mouth. He sat there and hushed me until I remembered how to be Xavier again.

We sat up together and he carried me onto the porch so we could dry off and not become one with the snow. Dad pulled me onto his lap and rubbed the snowflakes from my body, which still shook a little with hiccups and coldness. He felt warm against my back and my legs.

“So, did we learn our lesson?” he said. I didn’t know what he meant, so I looked into his eyes, and I guess I was psychic in that second, too, because I saw Good Dad staring back at me and shooting little happy thoughts into my brain. I nodded because it felt right. “And what is that lesson, Xavier?”

“I-I-I-I-”

“Don’t talk. Not until you stop letting it control you,” he said. He sounded less nice this time, but that’s only because my stutter makes Dad upset, which isn’t his fault but mine for not being in control like he said. I can’t ever win if I let it control me. And I have to win.

“I-I-,” I paused for a second and breathed. “I need to listen to whatever you say. Th-at’s the lesson.” Dad laughed a little and hugged me on his lap.

“That’s right, kiddo. That’s just right. You know Dad would never teach you wrong, don’t you? You know I’d never let anyone hurt you.” I nodded and hugged his arms where they wrapped around my chest.

“I know,” I said. And I really did. And I do now. “They’re not like us, right, Dad?”

He laughed again and squeezed even harder. “That’s right. It’s just you and me against the world, buddy.”

“Yeah,” I said, giggling a little to myself. “I-I love you, Dad.”

He squeezed me again, laughing under his breath. His arms were tight against my ribs, almost too tight. I started to cough a little bit, but he just kept chuckling, and his breath was hot against my ear. "I love you too, son," he said. "I love you, too."