

IF ONLY, A TALE FROM A THURSDAY

Rise and shine, Space Rangers!

Evan woke up on Thursday the way he had woken up most Thursdays of 4th grade – resentful of anything trying to rouse him from bed. He resented his Buzz Lightyear alarm clock which had blasted off for the second time, which meant school started in 52 minutes which meant he had 32 minutes to catch the bus. Mom would be in shortly to rush, rush, rush him through breakfast and then his babysitter/neighbor/former-best-friend's big sister Lizzie Lim would ring their doorbell so that Evan and his former-best-friend Davis Lim could walk to the bus together. *So annoying*, though Evan, playing the whole series of events in his mind.

“Evan-bun!” Mom called, honey in her voice, “Wakey-uppy-time!”

The nine-year-old oozed out of bed, barely brushed his teeth, and gave his messy blonde-brown hair a half-hearted pass with his pudgy fingers, the closest he was going to get to

combing. He splashed water on his face, then went to his overflowing closet which he was supposed to have tidied up yesterday but didn't. Finding the right shorts and shirt was harder than it should have been, *so annoying*. He ended up picking his third favorite shirt – the one with zebras that he got from Davis's last birthday party at the Zoo. It was a good shirt, soft, zebras, green. Too bad Davis Lim wasn't a good friend, at least not his best friend, not anymore.

Bing-bong! sounded the doorbell. Evan sighed.

Davis Lim and Evan Clark were best friends since kindergarten, at least until yesterday. Evan was at Davis's house and they were playing *Dance Dance Dance Dance, Volume 11*, as they often did, and Evan was using the blue controller and Davis was using the green controller, as they always did. But then, in the middle of their choreography... you know it doesn't really matter. It hurt Evan's feelings, and Davis knew it, and that was the end of the friendship.

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The bus stop wasn't far but it sure felt like a long walk. The three block walk was by far the longest Davis and Evan had been near each other without speaking. They were steaming at each other for unkind words spoken more in frustration than anger, but neither kid was going to give an inch.

When the school bus arrived, Davis boarded first and went straight to the second-farthest seat to the back on the right; the seat that the two former friends had shared for their entire lives.

"Mr. Harris," Evan said to the busdriver. "Could I have a different seat for today?"

"What's wrong with your seat?" asked the gruff busdriver, who wasn't terribly interested in children.

“It’s just Davis wasn’t nice yesterday and I don’t want to sit with him because when we were playing *Dance Dance Dance Dance, Volume 11-*”

“Sure, fine,” interjected the busdriver, checking his watch. “You can sit next to Red Connors, that’s the only open seat.”

Ugh thought Evan. *Now I’m in for it. But at least it’s not butthead Davis.*

“At least for today,” stated Evan, confidently.

“Fine, grab some pleather,” said Mr. Harris. *He always says that,* thought Evan. *So annoying.*

Carmichael Connors was in Evan’s class and was an infamous kid at Moffett Elementary from a notorious family. Carmichael’s older brother Radleigh had set a 5th grade record for detentions in a year, and his sister Ysabelle had been expelled for hitting a teacher with a chair (at least that’s what everyone said). Carmichael was more class-clown than criminal, but he had a bullying streak in him. In the earlier days of 4th grade, he had been a menace to Evan in particular. But even this was better than sharing a seat with stupid, selfish, mean Davis Lim.

Evan approached Carmichael timidly. The redhead wore a brand new, NBA Authentic Retro ‘97-’98 Chicago Bulls Dennis Rodman jersey. “I’ll sit here?” Evan squeaked. He had been trying to sound tough but his words came out like a little mouse.

“Sure, no problem!” responded Carmichael Connors happily. “I’ll move my bag.”

That’s weird, thought Evan. As the redhead slid his oversized backpack under his seat, Evan was sure an insult was coming. He wasn’t the most athletic kid in his class, hence his reputation as an “easy out,” not to mention his animal t-shirts had made him the butt of many taunts from bullies over the years. Evan was starting to regret his choice.

“How was your weekend?” asked Carmichael, a strange question considering it was Thursday.

“Good,” replied Evan, “Though it was four days ago. *This* weekend’s closer to now than last weekend was.”

“You’re right,” laughed Carmichael Connors. “It’s been so long since I’ve had a weekend, I must have forgot how the whole ‘days of the week’ thing worked.”

Um, what? thought Evan, though the look on his face relayed the exact same thing. Carmichael had been out of school for some time and none of Evan’s friends knew exactly why. Neither did Mom. Some kids said he was sick with something awful, some said he was suspended for stealing, a few thought he was expelled - but obviously not, since here he is.

“Where I’ve been,” Carmichael continued, “I would have done anything for a weekend. Even one day of a weekend would have been great.”

“Where were you?” asked an intrigued Evan.

“Heh,” replied the redhead, not answering the question. “I’m here now, and I’ll tell you like I’ll tell everyone, I’m never going back.”

This hung in the air in a way that Evan didn’t quite like. As the bus motored along, adding more kids at the same stops it had every weekday since Evan was in kindergarten, he couldn’t help but wonder where it was that didn’t have weekends and what a terrible place that must be.

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Brrrring! The morning bell rang and Mrs. Hampton’s 4th graders scrambled to their seats. Evan slipped into his desk, third row from the front, second from the right, surrounded by

friends - mostly. Lisa Gower was in the desk to his left, Madison Holly in front of him, Ben Walker behind him, and of course, Davis Lim the stinker sat to his right. It wouldn't be nearly as easy to move his seat in class as it was on the bus. *So annoying. Maybe if I offer to move up to the front, but who wants to sit in the front row?*

“We have a treat today, boys and girls,” chimed Mrs. Hampton as the kids settled in. Oddly enough, Carmichael stood next to her at the front of the room, a calm smile on his face. It was weird. “Actually we have two treats. First, Carmichael Connors has returned to us after his sabbatical, let's welcome him back the Panther way!”

The class erupted in cheers! Any chance to make loud noises in class was a good thing, though Evan wished he knew what a sabbatical was - *Why does Mrs. Hampton use words we don't know? So annoying.*

“And by way of ‘welcome back,’” the teacher continued, “Carmichael's mother has sent him with marshmallow treats for the entire class!”

The class roared with joy, wow! Say what you will about the Connors family, Momma Connors certainly knew how to get twenty-four 4th graders happy to see her son.

“Actually,” interjected Carmichael, “I made them myself.”

Mrs. Hampton blinked. “Well. Isn't that just the sweetest,” she glowed, “I'm so sorry to have assumed, thank you for your generous gift.”

The class cheered again, but more subdued this time. There was a sense that the class didn't quite believe Carmichael Connors, especially not Evan who had been on the business end of too many dodgeball pegs to give him the least bit of credit.

“You can take your seat now,” said Mrs. Hampton, referring to the last row, the row of shenanigans, the row where the *bad kids* sat. Evan would loooove to sit in the last row, just once, but Mom would never allow it.

“Actually, if it’s okay with you ma’am,” responded Carmichael, “I’d rather sit up in the front. If that’s okay.”

This got the entire class whispering, but nothing that Mrs. Hampton couldn’t silence with a sharp hand. “Absolutely,” said the teacher, encouragement spilling out of every pore. “I’m so glad you’re taking your time in class so seriously.”

So annoying, thought Evan, who just lost his only chance to put distance between himself and his former best friend.

The day only got stranger from that point forward, all because of Carmichael Connors. First, the redhead volunteered to lead the Pledge of Allegiance which was a role exclusively reserved for brown-nosers and Republicans (at least that’s what Mom said). Then, for morning art, he volunteered for handout *and* cleanup duty.

“If only I had glue sticks to collect, where I was” Evan could hear Carmichael Connors saying to Ben Walker. “I’m just happy to be here.”

Just at that moment, Leticia Kaye tripped, and with an agonized “Whoaa!” her tray of glitter and paperscapes went flying, landing on Carmichael’s chest... but only after slamming his glue-covered hands onto the front of his new jersey.

For a second, no one said anything, all of the kids zeroed in on Leticia and Carmichael, collectively holding their breath. Carmichael looked down at his chest.

“I am so, so sorry, I tripped. It was an accident!” stammered Leticia.

Another tense moment passed, Evan, and everyone else, watched the lanky redhead with rapt attention.

“It’s okay,” said Carmichael, cool as a cucumber. “Things happen, it’s fine.”

Carmichael picked up the dropped glitter tray, cupping as much as he could to not make a further mess, and walked himself and his now glittery jersey to the back wash station.

“No I’m really sorry,” said Leticia trailing behind, “My mom will get you a new one.”

“It’s okay,” laughed Carmichael, “I actually like it better this way.”

What is happening? thought Evan. *I got busted up on the dodgeball court for weeks after accidentally scuffing one of that kid’s used Kobe 24s. But with a super-expensive jersey, he just laughs?*

A bewildered Evan finished cleaning up his station and sat down at his desk.

What happened to that kid?

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Recess only begged more questions. Carmichael volunteered, *volunteered*, to distribute equipment for the little kids instead of starting the period playing kickball with the rest of his class. And when he finished and made an appearance at the asphalt diamond - he passed on the chance for a cutsies-upsies!

“I don’t want to take a turn away from somebody who was already playing, I’ll just watch,” he said earnestly.

Evan and Ben Walker shared a look. Ben had gotten his share of grief from Carmichael over the years, and he was just as baffled as Evan.

“That’s weird, right?” asked Ben, knowing Evan would know what he was talking about.

“Yeah, super-weird,” responded Evan, thankful that he wasn’t the only one ooged out by the whole thing.

“Maybe he had a lobotomy,” wondered Madison Holly, joining the group of friends in the outfield. “My uncle says that’s what crazy people get to reset their brains.”

“Is that like a sabbatical?” asked Evan, remembering Mrs. Hampton’s word from earlier.

“No, that’s a nice way of saying rehab,” offered Ben confidently.

Evan wasn’t sure what a lobotomy was, or rehab, but he was almost certain that Carmichael had one or both of those things or something else because this kid... wasn’t the kid who left school earlier in the term.

“Hey rightfielders - spread out!” called Carmichael good-naturedly, “You’ll cover more ground if you spread out!”

The three friends shook their heads and spread out towards centerfield.

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Afternoon math was just crazy. Carmichael had read ahead and knew the chapter so well that he actually helped Mrs. Hampton teach the lesson.

He’s been out of school for so long, Evan thought, and he still did his homework?

Lunch? Madness. Carmichael traded Marcia Andrews his Oreos for her carrot sticks and his extra fruit punch, and Evan found this beyond insane, for a sad half a bologna and mustard sandwich.

“If only,” Evan heard Carmichael say as he munched on his carrots - not even with ranch dressing or anything.

As the 4th graders finished their lunch and lined up for basketball, Evan was shocked to see Carmichael staying behind, picking up trays and trash from the lunch tables and depositing them in garbage cans. Evan hated basketball, *so annoying*, but everyone in the school knew Carmichael was one of the best players at Moffett - he was a legacy, he was the MVP of the 2nd and 3rd grade tournaments. And now he's passing up on basketball for volunteer pick-up duty? Maybe this was a punishment that Evan hadn't heard about? It was driving him nuts, he needed to know more.

"Hey," said Evan, striding up to the lanky redhead, trying to stay as cool as possible.

"Evan my man - aren't you playing basketball?" asked Carmichael Connors, not pausing his trash pick-up.

"Aren't you?" replied Evan, since *wasn't that the real question here??*

"Nah, I'm good," said Carmichael, filling a blue trash bag with milk cartons and chip wrappers. "Besides, it's been same teams all week - I don't want to take someone else's spot."

"You can have mine," offered Evan eagerly, "I promise - you can totally have mine."

"That's okay," said Carmichael.

"But, you love basketball," reasoned Evan, "and we only get to play it like twice a semester. And you're wearing a Dennis Rodman jersey!"

"The fact that I ever got to play is enough for me," mused Carmichael, taking on the air of a sage. "So many kids don't even get to play basketball even once."

"Yeah, but, most kids don't choose to pick up trash at lunch time," fired back Evan, who then suddenly got serious. "What happened to you? Where did you go? You're acting really... different," pushed Evan, choosing his words carefully.

Carmichael smiled, “Where I was...” and his voice trailed off like a person who had seen some things. Like *really* seen things. “I would have done anything for the chance to pick up trash for a few minutes a day.”

“If only?” asked Evan, eyes wide with wonder.

“If only,” confirmed Carmichael, not missing a beat with his clean-up work.

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The final bell rang and Evan scooped up his backpack and stormed out with the rest of his class towards the buses. The marshmallow treats that Carmichael had brought were amazing, and there were so many left over that anyone who wanted one could take a second one home for later. And he scored four points in basketball that day which was pretty super-good. Though it started as a weird day, it turned out to be an okay day, at least so far.

Evan tried to figure out what he wanted to say to Carmichael on the bus ride home. He had a million questions but at the same time, the redhead seemed reluctant to say anything about where he had been or why. But at the same same time, Evan really wanted to know.

“See you tomorrow,” called Ben Walker, eating his “for later” marshmallow treat right now. Evan wanted to do that too, but he knew Mom wouldn’t be happy if he did.

“Bye,” called Evan absent-mindedly, still unsure what to say to his new... friend?

Evan’s bus was boarded, the seats were nearly filled, and Mr. Harris pulled the air brake, signaling that they were about to get on their way - but Carmichael wasn’t on board.

“Mr. Harris,” chimed Evan, “we’re missing one.”

“Red Connors is staying late to work with the first graders,” responded the busdriver, as uninterested in children now as he had ever been. “His momma called.”

Evan took his seat, alone. The other kids on the bus talked excitedly about their day - about morning glitter art and epic kickball, a buzzer-beater on the basketball court, and the amazing marshmallow treats that a 4th grader made all by himself.

The energy on the bus was wild and alive, but Evan's spirits were anything but. He was lonely.

If only Davis wasn't such a butthead, he thought.

But still. Even so. Perhaps....

Maybe he could talk to Davis about the whole Carmichael situation on their walk home, maybe Davis knew something he didn't? Maybe they could go to Davis's house and play *Dance Dance Dance, Volume II* and they could figure out the controller situation ahead of time? Maybe he would say he was sorry for saying some of the things he said yesterday and shouldn't have. Maybe, tonight, he'd clean up his closet. Maybe tomorrow he'd brush his teeth a little more thoroughly.

Maybe he'd do those things. If only he'd do those things. If only.

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