

## A Taste of Heaven

Norbert Stramsky hitched up his jeans and focused on crossing three speckled floor tiles with each stride. This was the pace, he figured, that would get him to the cafeteria of Wilkerson Junior High in time to snag a square of heaven: glistening green jello under a curled dollop of whipped topping.

A hungry, short, skinny seventh grader, Norbert stood by every Wednesday as the other kids snatched up the only edible dish the hair-netted lunch ladies served. Were those kids faster? Smarter? Cooler? He couldn't figure it out, but there was never any jello left for him. And every week, he swore, would be different. He hated that feeling of *less-than* in his stomach when he watched the chosen ones dig in.

As he caught the first whiffs of sloppy joes and french fries, he heard Jesse, the new kid from homeroom, calling him.

“Hey! Nor-bert! Wait for me!”

Norbert ducked around the corner and sped up. A weasel move, he knew, but Jesse was just dang slow. He stopped constantly to chase the crumpled papers spilling out of his half-zipped backpack. Or to tie his raggedy, flapping shoelaces.

Jesse was immune to the dessert urgency. If Norbert waited for Jesse, he would again be at the back of the lunch line, left with nothing but a bowl of mushy canned fruit salad.

Today he wanted to win. He had to be ruthless.

Norbert passed three girls dawdling over a cootie catcher. He counted a dozen kids walking ahead of him down the locker-lined hallway and estimated about another dozen were already in the food line.

A rhythmic *scrape-click, scrape-click* echoed off the orange lockers just behind Norbert: it could only be Tim Russell, the class bully. Tim was unoriginal in his cruelty, pulling off ant legs, stealing lunch money, and doling out wedgies in the boys' locker room. He announced himself by circling two quarters round and round between his right thumb and index finger. Most kids disappeared obligingly.

“Don’t even think about it, Nor-*beeeeeee*,” Tim taunted. “It’s never gonna change. Jello for me, cherry-topped baby shit for you.”

Norbert flushed. He hated this very moment, when someone humiliated him and he froze, scrambling for the snappy comeback that would arrive exactly two hours from now.

Just then Jesse called again.

“Nor-BERT! Save me a seat!”

Tim sneered. “Oh, it’s your *best friend*. What’s his name, Loser #2? Dork?”

Jesse careened up to them and stopped, mouth slack in shock. He blinked and pushed up his over-large glasses. They slipped back down.

Tim shifted his attention to Jesse. “Hey, dork! Looking for Norbert, huh? I found him for you.”

Jesse shrank, just slightly, and stared at the floor.

“Now that everybody’s here, let’s start the party!” Tim circled around to Jesse’s backpack and yanked stray papers from its opening.

“Confetti!” he chirped, ripping them to bits and casting them up in the air.

Tim’s hyena laugh sickened Norbert. He could take no more of Tim’s brazen bullying, and Jesse didn’t deserve to be treated like this.

Green jello just ahead or no, he had to stop Tim’s reign of terror.

Norbert charged and planted his head in Tim’s soft gut with precision, speed, and thrust. Tim went down like a daisy in front of a lawnmower, slamming into a locker on the way.

“Let’s go, Jesse,” said Norbert. “Quick.”

“Not so fast, Mr. Stramsky,” a commanding voice echoed, “You think you’re in the WWF?” Mrs. Couch, the eighth-grade earth science teacher, approached. There would be no clean getaway today.

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Mrs. Couch reamed Norbert out, as did the one with the vice principal and his parents. Every time he tried to tell his side of the story, Tim became the victim, and he became the bully.

“How could you knock someone down like that, Norbert?” he heard.

“Unacceptable.”

“Zero tolerance for bullying.”

“That’s no way to solve your problems.”

He hung his head and endured the three-day suspension.

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The following Wednesday, Norbert didn’t even try to make time. On the way to lunch he walked one floor tile per stride and helped Jesse chase down the homework that fell out of his backpack. He hummed a little tune and gazed into the distance when Tim Russell went by, clicking his quarters together.

*Who cares*, he thought, *who cares*.

At his lunch table, he looked down at the last brownish-green grape in his dessert bowl. A cute girl from math walked by with a green jello.

*If only*, Norbert thought, *if only*.

And then the girl slowed down. Could he actually smell the limes? He put his forehead in his hands.

“Norbert?” said Stephanie, “I saw you with Tim. Last week? What a jerk. Anyway, I thought you might like this. It’s, I don’t know, a thank you?” He heard a click and looked up to spot her jello lusciousness, jiggling and shimmering, right in front of his nose.

And then another appeared right beside it, and another. *What was this?* A small bevy of seventh graders, smiling shyly and offering their desserts in gratitude.

Jesse grinned. “You might need help eating all this.”

Norbert waved his spoon. “Watch me.”