

## ‘FIRST GRADE

I stood at the blackboard during free time, white chalk slipping across the green surface. I proudly admired the shapes, letters, and numbers I had just formed. Then I moved to a small table to draw on pastel pink paper.

And then the lights went out.

“This is not what we do,” Mrs. Spencer’s voice boomed.

I watched her, the heat rising from my shoulders to my neck to my cheeks. I was a little scared of her. On the first day of second grade, Mrs. Spencer showed us her fingers, two shorter than they should have been. She told us she lost two fingers below her first knuckle when a wagon wheel ran over them at age four. She was tough, we all knew it.

“This is not acceptable,” she told the class. She pointed to the letters and numbers I had written moments before. She didn’t point to me, but they were mine, only mine. I looked back at my careful, neat chart: A list of student names, each with the word “like” or “don’t like” written next to the name.

She erased the board and turned the lights back on.

I erased, erased, and kept erasing that day.

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## SEVENTH GRADE

It was the night of Jennifer’s sleepover party. Seven of us arrived, carrying puffy sleeping bags, fluffy pillows, pink and white pajamas stuffed into giant bags. Some were friends from school, others from the gymnastics team. Dena, who always wore Esprit, the newest leotard, and whose lunch was filled with puddings, juices, and enviable packaged foods, was there. Her blonde hair was curled and her pajamas looked new. We all laid out our sleeping bags on the living room floor. There was a nice neat line of bags with rainbows, animals, and pastel patterns.

After we ate pepperoni pizza and drank cups of Pepsi and 7-Up, Jennifer turned on the music. We began to dance, jumping on the sleeping bags and crashing into each other. Michael Jackson’s “Thriller” came on the stereo. We squealed, and Dena and I started to dance the moves from the music video. Some of the girls sat and watched. Dena knew every move from the video, and the girls cheered her on. I kept dancing next to her. Then I heard Jennifer’s voice,

“Amy, sit down.”

They wanted to watch Dena. I sat down.

As I watched her, I thought about Michael Jackson. I pictured myself dancing alongside him. She is not the only one who knows how to dance to Thriller.

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## NINTH GRADE

He approached me in the hallway, the crisp, white "F" on his letter jacket glowing under the florescent lights. I was a freshman, and he was a junior. He was older, mysterious, and I couldn't stop thinking about him.

"Hi, I'm Ron," he said, "Can I get your number?"

I gave it to him, and he called that night. My friends told me that he was going out with another girl, Holly, but I didn't really think about it. On the phone, he asked me if I was free on Friday night. Of course I said yes. He arrived on Friday at 7, walked up to my house and rang the doorbell. My dad answered. I watched him open the door from the stairs. Ron wore a navy blue sweater, and another bright white "F" shone, this time in my living room. My dad was impressed, I could tell.

We went out that night, walked to the local college campus where the leaves were beginning to bloom and it smelled like spring. He kept calling the next few days. Then one afternoon, the phone rang.

"Is Amy there?" a girl's voice asked?

"This is," I said.

"This is Holly, and I'm calling because I was going out with Ron, but I heard he might be calling you now. Did he call you?"

"Yes," I said.

"Oh, okay, I understand. That's the way it is. I'm glad to know."

I hung up and sat down. I imagined the white "F" on his jacket. It didn't look so bright white anymore.