Name: _____ Date: _____

Lunch Behind the Atlases

Reading level 11 (7th grade) · 994 words

By the second Tuesday of sixth grade, Dalia knew exactly how many ceiling tiles the cafeteria had, which was two hundred and twelve, and nothing else about it. Over the summer the school had changed the lunch periods, and her two best friends from fifth grade, Josie and Hana, had landed in second lunch. Dalia had landed in first, with four hundred strangers and a ceiling that echoed like the inside of a pot. Her father cut her sandwiches into triangles, because he believed that triangles tasted better, and every day she ate hers slowly, so that the eating would last.

There was a monitor named Mr. Aziz, who walked the aisles with his hands behind his back, and on the third day he stopped beside her. "Waiting for somebody?" he asked, in a kind voice, and it was the worst question anybody had asked her all week. "No," said Dalia. "Just eating." He nodded and walked on, his hands still behind his back, his shoes squeaking all the way to the next aisle, and she looked at her apple until it blurred. Being alone was not the hard part, she decided.

So on Wednesday she tried the window seat at the end of the cafeteria, where the radiator was and the sun came in, and she sat with her back to the room. It was warm, and nobody could see her face. It also meant that she could hear every table behind her, and a laugh broke out somewhere, and then another, and she did not turn around. On Thursday she tried the gym. She sat on the bottom bleacher in the empty corner, where each bite of apple boomed like a door slamming, and she gave that up after four minutes.

On Friday she tried the library, mostly because it had a door that closed. The librarian, Ms. Pell, was a tall woman with gray braids and reading glasses on a chain, and she looked at Dalia's lunch bag the way you might look at a small, damp animal. "Food is not allowed in the library," she said. Then she took off her glasses and looked at the ceiling. "Of course, I cannot see a sandwich from here. And I do not hear crinkling. The reading nook behind the atlases is very quiet." She put her glasses back on and went away.

The nook was a gap between two tall shelves, with a round table and a globe on a stand, and at the far end of it, a boy was already eating. He was twelve, maybe, with a bowl haircut and an enormous sweatshirt, and he was unwrapping a hard-boiled egg with the care of somebody defusing a bomb. He looked up. She looked down. Neither of them said a word, and there seemed to be an agreement about that, as if the quiet had been rented by the hour and they had each paid half.

For a week they ate at opposite ends of the table. She learned that he read a fat paperback about sailing ships, and that he ate his egg in four exact bites and folded the shell into a tiny

box. His name was written on his lunch box in marker, MIN, with a small drawing of a fish. He learned, she suspected, that she hummed when she was nervous, though neither of them ever mentioned it. The globe stood between them, and once in a while one of them gave it a little spin, and the other pretended not to notice.

On the second Monday her pencil rolled off the table. It was the yellow one with the chewed end, and it skittered across the carpet and stopped against Min's sneaker. He picked it up, and he looked at the chewed end for a long moment. Then he put it down on the table and slid it toward her with one finger, very gently, like a chess piece. "Thanks," Dalia whispered, and he nodded, and that was all, but she thought about it for the entire afternoon, all through math and science and the long ride home. It was the first thing anybody had handed her in nine days.

The next day there was a pencil on her side of the table that was not hers. It was new, and it was sharp, and a yellow sticky note was stuck to it. The note said, in square little capitals, WHERE DO PENCILS GO ON VACATION? Under that, in smaller letters, it said, PENCIL-VANIA. Dalia read it twice. Then a noise came out of her, a sort of honking groan, and Ms. Pell's head appeared around the shelves like a periscope. "Quiet, please," said Ms. Pell, and she disappeared again, though the corner of her mouth was not entirely straight.

Min had gone red to the ears. "That is the worst joke I have ever read," Dalia whispered, which was the first whole sentence she had ever said to him. "I know," he whispered back. "I have been saving it for two weeks. I was afraid it was not good enough." She did not have a reply to that, so she took a sticky note of her own and wrote, WHY DID THE GLOBE GO TO THE DOCTOR? Under it she wrote, IT HAD A BAD CASE OF THE WORLD. She stuck it on his book, and he read it, and his shoulders began to shake.

That night her father asked how lunch had gone, in the careful voice he used for things that might be sore. "Fine," said Dalia, and it was almost true. It still stung when she saw Josie and Hana wave from the far doorway. But on Friday she sat at the round table, with the globe between them and her triangles on a napkin. When Min's chocolate square came sliding along the wood toward her, she ate it very slowly, so that it would last all the way to the bell.

Questions

1. Why did Dalia eat lunch alone at the start of sixth grade?

A. She had no lunch to eat
B. The lunch periods changed and her friends were in a different one
C. She had a fight with Josie and Hana

2. Why was "Waiting for somebody?" the worst question of her week?

A. It made her feel that everyone could see she was alone
B. She did not know who Mr. Aziz was

C. She had not brought anything to eat

3. How did Ms. Pell let Dalia eat in the library?

A. She said she could not see a sandwich from where she stood
B. She changed the rule for the whole school
C. She locked the door

4. What did Min do when Dalia's pencil rolled to his shoe?

A. He sharpened it
B. He slid it back across the table to her
C. He kept it

5. Why had Min been saving the joke for two weeks?

A. He had only just thought of it
B. He was afraid it was not good enough
C. He wanted Ms. Pell to hear it

6. In this story, the word nook means a

A. small, tucked-away corner
B. very long hallway
C. kind of sandwich

Words to know

monitor: lunchroom watcher
echo: bounce back sound
nook: small corner
skittered: slid quickly
defusing: making safe

Answer key: Lunch Behind the Atlases

1. B. The lunch periods changed and her friends were in a different one
2. A. It made her feel that everyone could see she was alone
3. A. She said she could not see a sandwich from where she stood
4. B. He slid it back across the table to her
5. B. He was afraid it was not good enough
6. A. small, tucked-away corner