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# part one

## 1.

THURSDAY, JANUARY 5

*I registered for classes today. Didn't get the days I wanted, but I only have two semesters left, so it's getting harder to be picky about my schedule. I'm thinking about applying to local schools for another teaching job after next semester. Hopefully, by this time next year, I'll be teaching again. For right now, though, I'm living off student loans. Luckily, my grandparents have been supportive while I work on my master's degree. I wouldn't be able to do it without them, that's for sure.*

*We're having dinner with Gavin and Eddie tonight. I think I'll make cheeseburgers. Cheeseburgers sound good. That's all I really have to say right now ...*

"IS LAYKEN OVER HERE OR OVER THERE?" EDDIE asks, peering in the front door.

"Over there," I say from the kitchen.

Is there a sign on my house instructing people *not* to knock? Lake never knocks anymore, but her comfort here apparently extends to Eddie as well. Eddie heads across the street to Lake's house, and Gavin walks inside, tapping his knuckles against the front door. It's not an official knock, but at least he's making an attempt.

"What are we eating?" he asks. He slips his shoes off at the door and makes his way into the kitchen.

"Burgers." I hand him a spatula and point to the stove, instructing him to flip the burgers while I pull the fries out of the oven.

"Will, do you ever notice how we somehow always get stuck cooking?"

"It's probably not a bad thing," I say as I loosen the fries from the pan. "Remember Eddie's Alfredo?"

He grimaces when he remembers the Alfredo. "Good point," he says.

I call Kel and Caulder into the kitchen to have them set the table. For the past year, since Lake and I have

been together, Gavin and Eddie have been eating with us at least twice a week. I finally had to invest in a dining room table because the bar was getting a little too crowded.

"Hey, Gavin," Kel says. He walks into the kitchen and grabs a stack of cups out of the cabinet.

"Hey," Gavin responds. "You decidè where we're having your party next week?"

Kel shrugs. "I don't know. Maybe bowling. Or we could just do something here."

Caulder walks into the kitchen and starts setting places at the table. I glance behind me and notice them setting an extra place. "We expecting company?" I ask.

"Kel invited Kiersten," Caulder says teasingly.

Kiersten moved into a house on our street about a month ago, and Kel seems to have developed a slight crush on her. He won't admit it. He's just now about to turn eleven, so Lake and I expected this to happen. Kiersten's a few months older than he is, and a lot taller. Girls hit puberty faster than boys, so maybe he'll eventually catch up.

"Next time you guys invite someone else, let me

know. Now I need to make another burger.” I walk to the refrigerator and take out one of the extra patties.

“She doesn’t eat meat,” Kel says. “She’s a vegetarian.”

Figures. I put the meat back in the fridge. “I don’t have any fake meat. What’s she gonna do? Eat bread?”

“Bread’s fine,” Kiersten says as she walks through the front door—without knocking. “I like bread. French fries, too. I just don’t eat things that are a result of unjustified animal homicide.” Kiersten walks to the table and grabs the roll of paper towels and starts tearing them off, laying one beside each plate. Her self-assurance reminds me a little of Eddie’s.

“Who’s she?” Gavin asks, watching Kiersten make herself at home. She’s never eaten with us before, but you wouldn’t know that by how she’s taking command.

“She’s the eleven-year-old neighbor I was telling you about. The one I think is an imposter based on the things that come out of her mouth. I’m beginning to suspect she’s really a tiny adult posing as a little red-headed child.”

“Oh, the one Kel’s crushing on?” Gavin smiles, and I can see his wheels turning. He’s already thinking of

ways to embarrass Kel at dinner. Tonight should be interesting.

Gavin and I have become pretty close this past year. It’s good, I guess, considering how close Eddie and Lake are. Kel and Caulder really like them, too. It’s nice. I like the setup we all have. I hope it stays this way.

Eddie and Lake finally walk in as we’re all sitting down at the table. Lake has her wet hair pulled up in a knot on top of her head. She’s wearing house shoes, sweatpants, and a T-shirt. I love that about her, the fact that she’s so comfortable here. She takes the seat next to mine and leans in and kisses me on the cheek.

“Thanks, babe. Sorry it took me so long. I was trying to register online for Statistics, but the class is full. Guess I’ll have to go sweet-talk someone at the admin office tomorrow.”

“Why are you taking Statistics?” Gavin asks. He grabs the ketchup and squirts it on his plate.

“I took Algebra Two in the winter mini-mester. I’m trying to knock out all my math in the first year, since I hate it so much.” Lake grabs the ketchup out of Gavin’s hands and squirts some on my plate, then on her own.

"What's your hurry? You've already got more credits than Eddie and I do, put together," he says. Eddie nods in agreement as she takes a bite of her burger.

Lake nudges her head toward Kel and Caulder. "I've already got more *kids* than you and Eddie put together. *That's* my hurry."

"What's your major?" Kiersten asks Lake.

Eddie glances toward Kiersten, finally noticing the extra person seated at the table. "Who are you?"

Kiersten looks at Eddie and smiles. "I'm Kiersten. I live diagonal to Will and Caulder, parallel to Layken and Kel. We moved here from Detroit right before Christmas. Mom says we needed to get out of the city before the city got out of us . . . whatever that means. I'm eleven. I've been eleven since eleven-eleven-eleven. It was a pretty big day, you know. Not many people can say they turned eleven on eleven-eleven-eleven. I'm a little bummed that I was born at three o'clock in the afternoon. If I would have been born at eleven-eleven, I'm pretty sure I could have got on the news or something. I could have recorded the segment and used it someday for my portfolio. I'm gonna be an actress when I grow up."

Eddie, along with the rest of us, stares at Kiersten without responding. Kiersten is oblivious, turning to Lake to repeat her question. "What's your major, Layken?"

Lake lays her burger down on her plate and clears her throat. I know how much she hates this question. She tries to answer confidently. "I haven't decided yet."

Kiersten looks at her with pity. "I see. The proverbial undecided. My oldest brother has been a sophomore in college for three years. He's got enough credits to have five majors by now. I think he stays undecided because he'd rather sleep until noon every day, sit in class for three hours, and go out every night, than actually graduate and get a real job. Mom says that's not true—she says it's because he's trying to 'discover his full potential' by examining all of his interests. If you ask me, I think it's bullshit."

I cough when the sip I just swallowed tries to make its way back up with my laugh.

"You just said 'bullshit!'" Kel says.

"Kel, don't say 'bullshit!'" Lake says.

"But she said 'bullshit' first," Caulder says, defending Kel.

"Caulder, don't say 'bullshit'!" I yell.

"Sorry," Kiersten says to Lake and me. "Mom says the FCC is responsible for inventing cuss words just for media shock value. She says if everyone would just use them enough, they wouldn't be considered cuss words anymore, and no one would ever be offended by them."

This kid is hard to keep up with!

"Your mother *encourages* you to cuss?" Gavin says.

Kiersten nods. "I don't see it that way. It's more like she's encouraging us to undermine a system flawed through overuse of words that are made out to be harmful, when in fact they're just letters, mixed together like every other word. That's all they are, mixed-up letters. Like, take the word 'butterfly,' for example. What if someone decided one day that 'butterfly' is a cuss word? People would eventually start using the word 'butterfly' as an insult and to emphasize things in a negative way. The actual *word* doesn't mean anything. It's the negative association people give these words that make them cuss words. So, if we all just decided to keep saying 'butterfly' all the time, people would stop caring. The shock value would subside, and it would become just another word again. Same with every other so-called bad word.

If we would all start saying them all the time, they wouldn't be bad anymore. That's what my mom says, anyway." She smiles and takes a french fry and dips it in ketchup.

I often wonder, when Kiersten's visiting, how she turned out the way she did. I have yet to meet her mother, but from what I've gathered, she's definitely not ordinary. Kiersten is obviously smarter than most kids her age, even if it is in a strange way. The things that come out of her mouth make Kel and Caulder seem somewhat normal.

"Kiersten?" Eddie says. "Will you be my new best friend?"

Lake grabs a french fry off her plate and throws it at Eddie, hitting her in the face with it. "That's bullshit," Lake says.

"Oh, go *butterfly* yourself," Eddie says. She returns a fry in Lake's direction.

I intercept the french fry, hoping it won't result in another food fight, like last week. I'm still finding broccoli everywhere. "Stop," I say, dropping the french fry on the table. "If you two have another food fight in my house, I'm kicking *both* of your butterflies!"