

ON THIN ICE

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has been stolen from him, piece by piece; first by kyphosis, a spinal abnormality which has
made him a social outcast at school and a target for the school bully, by his friends who have
recently abandoned him, by his mother who left for the West Coast taking the insurance which
might have saved him with her, and by his father who is a gambling addict who has lost the rent
money—but Ked is a builder, and using the school's Maker Space he intends to build his life
back, and maybe make a few real friends, and save his father while he is at it.

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TABLE FOR ONE



I HATE THIS CAFETERIA. It feels like the scene of a crime. It's a slow crime that has taken years—a theft, I guess. I'm not sure anyone else has noticed, and why would they? The only thing that's been stolen is my whole life, piece by piece.

It's Monday and I'm navigating my tray through the maze of kids, tables, and noise. I figure I'll sit with Danny, like usual. We're in seventh grade now, Danny and me and pretty much everyone else I know.

Sixth-through-eighth-grade classes are in a separate building, down the hill. Technically, that's Norton Middle School and this upper building is Norton Elementary, but the schools are kind of jumbled together. We still hike back up to “the kids' building” for the cafeteria, gym, library, and a few other things. And the little kids stampede down to our building for art and music and anything in the auditorium.

The point is, I've been making this slow walk between these same tables for most of my life. Ever since October, when Nephi started sitting with the other guys who are big into the maker space, it's just been Danny and me at lunch. We usually sit at the table in the back corner.

But when I get to the table in the corner, Danny isn't there. *That's weird*, I think, *I could've sworn I saw him ahead of me in the line for this so-called pizza*. I whip my head around. My shirt is stretched tight across my shoulders. (For reasons I'll explain in a minute.) I can feel the fabric start to ride up in the back as I give it a good neck tug from side to side. My eyes are suddenly wide open, alert, maybe a little panicky.

When I spot Danny, he's looking at me too. But he looks away fast. He's at a table full of people. I know that table. We tried to join it back in the fall, after Neff made his move. They didn't let us. "Nah, guys. Sorry. No space."

Now I understand: I was the problem.

I don't know why that surprises me. I don't know why any of this does. I'm always the problem these days. I guess I just expected a little more from Danny—a little more loyalty, a little more time. We've been eating together since that meant scarfing down Goldfish crackers on little rugs on the kindergarten floor. We were neighbors back then too. We went to opening day of fishing season together every year. One year he caught a trout as big as his forearm, and I was the one who netted it for him.

I get a sick, cold feeling. Danny knows I'm still here, but he's not acknowledging me. The other kids at his new table aren't

even that popular, I tell myself—but it’s a full table, so how unpopular could they be?

And me? I’m standing here with my tray of chocolate milk, an apple, and a square pizza with the bite I took out of it back in line. I look down at the empty table in front of me. I can feel my heart beating faster. I’ve been coming to this cafeteria since I was in first grade, since it was just our heads and shoulders above the tabletops. Since I was one of the kids at the full tables.

The next table over has space, but just seeing me glance over, they close ranks, scooting their butts a little closer together on the curved benches attached to the flying saucer-shaped table. My hair is long in the front, almost to my eyes. I reach up with one hand and push it back.

I know that the longer I stand, the more I stand out. It feels like people are starting to stare. At me, at my back. I stand up as straight as I can, but it’s pushing up and out against my shirts. I usually wear two: a T-shirt and an unbuttoned button-up. The button-up is a size too big for most of me, but that still makes it a size too small for my back. Every year, my back bulges out a little farther, pushing out against the fabric. That’s what I imagine my classmates staring at now, stealing looks from behind me or off to the side. I hear laughter and my heart starts hammering.

Who’s laughing? Why? It could just be some dumb joke or someone dropping their pizza cheese-side down. But when I look over at the table, I know it’s not. The guys sitting there are like the kings of my grade. They’re popular, athletic, and even smart. I

make eye contact with their leader, the human mountain Landrover Jones. He doesn't even bother to hide his smirk.

I drop my tray on the round, empty table in front of me. It clatters loudly. It doesn't matter. The volume in the cafeteria is at jet-engine level. Everyone is talking, everyone is joking. And anyone who was going to stare at me is already doing it.

I sit down alone. Everyone says we're never going to use most of what we learn in school. But some of it's important. Right now I'm thinking about math. I'm thinking about addition and subtraction all at once. I'm thinking about how everything you subtract adds up.

When Maps left our table last year, there were still three of us: Nephi, Danny, and me. We didn't even take it that personally. We all knew Maps was different. He was an instant star on the middle school teams. He had teammates to talk to and games to plan. And even when Nephi made his move to the makers' table, there was still Danny. There was still someone left. They were never leaving me alone. It was easier for me and, honestly, I think it was easier for them too.

They're not bad guys. At least I never used to think so. We all knew the deal: Things change. New classes, new teams, new schedules, and so yeah, sometimes that's going to add up to new friends and new tables. It was almost like a game of musical chairs: one less player each time. You just start up again with whoever is left.

But now Danny is gone. Subtract one, like every time before. But this time it leaves me with zero. Game over: not enough players.

Danny didn't do anything different than the others. He just did it last. He was my last friend from before, but now he has slipped away like a fish with no one to net it. I'm alone. It happened piece by piece and then all at once. Now, it's down to me and what's left of this sad, soggy piece of pizza. The table is big and round and white, like the beam of a spotlight. Like the number zero.

Welcome to the rest of my life, I think.

I hate this cafeteria.

And it hates me back.