

*Simon*  
SORT  
OF  
*Says*

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## two

### in which my new seventh-grade class learns that a sackbut is a kind of trombone

The hardest thing about moving to Grin And Bear It, Nebraska, is not leaving Omaha, or giving up the internet, or even moving into a house that we frequently share with dead people. (Funeral homes in cities are businesses; funeral homes in small towns are actually *homes*.) The hardest thing about moving to Grin And Bear It, Nebraska, is starting a new school. In February. Ask anybody: That's the stuff of seventh-grade *nightmares*.

GNB is so small that it only has two schools: a grade school called Johnny Carson, and a combined junior high and high school called GNB Upper. GNB Upper buses in kids from miles around and it still only has a hundred-odd students.

I imagine every single one of those hundred-odd students is going to take a good look at me when I show up for

school. A new kid in a place this small? It's like my dad says: There's no blending into an empty field.

(In addition to being a deacon, my dad likes to make up his own wise sayings. So that's Dad.)

At least I talked him out of walking me to school like a second grader. Even *without* Dad holding my hand, I have enough self-consciousness to fuel the robot uprising. When I leave our house I feel good about my shoes—red Chucks, good and scuffed, February-cold feet totally worth it—and okay about my Minecraft sweatshirt and my jeans. I'm even reasonably optimistic about my hair, which I managed to get to stick up only in the front. I don't like my stiff and clearly brand-new backpack, but I never got the old one back, so I power through that like a champ.

The school is down on the river, about a block away from Main. I scouted the route over the weekend and learned the best way to get there isn't down Main but down one of the side streets and up to the back of the school. The side streets in GNB are different from the ones in the suburbs where we lived in Omaha. There's something about the way the houses here spill onto the front lawns that makes me think no one in this town has ever locked a door in their life. In the distance, radio telescopes haunt the hills.

As I get close to school my heart starts to pound in my throat, but there is basically no way to get lost, and I arrive with plenty of time before the bell rings. It's weirdly warm considering it's February—the kind of day where in

Phoenix they might have on parkas with their shorts, but in Nebraska a few kids are wearing shorts with their parkas. Outside the school it's the usual scene: clumps of kids standing around on the sidewalk in the slush-soggy grass. Some guys are straddling bikes by the bike racks, stepping them back and forth like nervous horses. Some girls have spread their scarves on the concrete and are sitting on the steps that go from the staff parking lot down to the sports fields. They have their knees clamped tight and are blowing on their hands, but there's no way they're going inside.

Everybody—the bike boys, the clump kids, the stair girls—all of them turn and watch me go by. I stick my hands in my pockets like that's fine, heading past the bike racks and along the side of the school. I turn the corner and find the front door and another batch of kids who stare at me. I make it up the steps without tripping or dropping anything or falling prey to any of the other disaster scenarios my brain is working overtime on. (My brain, if you haven't got this yet, specializes in disaster scenarios.)

My dad was worried about me finding the office, but I manage somehow—maybe because it's right inside the door and labelled *office*. I meet the school secretary, fill out a bunch of forms, totally blank on my new address, fidget with a pen, get stared at like a zoo animal through the office's glass walls as the bell rings and the morning rush comes in, and eventually get introduced to the principal.

The principal's name is Ms. Snodgrass, and she looks like she's spent her whole life trying to overcome being

called Ms. Snodgrass. Like, she's got a razor-sharp haircut and a fuchsia motorcycle-style jacket. On her face she has that look owls always have, like she's bored but barely suppressing suspicion and rage. She flips open my file.

There's not much in it. I was homeschooled all last year, and I asked my parents not to include the records from before that. At a glance I probably look like a homeschooler. But Ms. Snodgrass takes more than a glance, and the look she gives me makes me wonder if she's thinking: *Juvie?*

Or maybe she thinks all seventh graders are potential criminals.

"Simon O'Keeffe. Did you sign the good conduct pledge?"

"I think?" I signed, like, seven things.

She flips through the file until she finds the correct form. It's the goldenrod one. I have signed it. She squints one more time at my name, like she might recognize it, but—

"Well, Simon," she says. "Welcome to Grin And Bear It. We're glad to have you."

She smiles, owlshly. Like she would totally eat Mr. Tuna.



What with all the forms and stuff, homeroom is almost over before I get there. I sneak a peek through the chicken-wire glass rectangle in the door of room nine. Apparently, whatever teaching happens in homeroom is also over; from what I can see through the glass, people are just talking or last-minute-homeworking or doing their hair or whatever.

My fingers are cold and my heart is fast and I think

about waiting it out, but that wouldn't help; I'd just have to go to the next class. So I open the door.

It creaks. Of course it does. The whole thing is exactly like my brain thought it would be: everybody falling silent, everybody staring. Even the teacher is staring. Going in is like stepping out onto a stage, I swear.

So I stay in the doorway. "Miss Rose?" Definitely gotta make sure it's the right class. No way am I going to do this twice.

The teacher, a young one with long hair and a long skirt, nods, stands up, and comes over to me. She half-smiles—she has a kind of Disney-Princess-sings-with-the-animals look—and takes the slip with my name and schedule on it out of my hand. She glances at it, then back up at me, her eyes going wide with a familiar expression. The "oh-poor-baby" expression. I hate that expression.

And, oh man, here it comes. Miss Rose reaches out and draws me into the room, wrapping an arm around my shoulders. It's sort of like a hug, except she's also making sure I'm in exactly the right place for the spotlight to hit me. The shoulder she's holding goes stiff.

"Everyone?" she says. "Everyone? If I could have your attention?"

I don't know why she even asks. New kid in class is a big deal anywhere, and in *Grin And Bear It*, it's like the circus has come to town. I stand like the acrobat on the high wire—drumroll and all—trying hard to smile and even harder to

make it look casual. The general reaction I am going for is: *Seems okay I guess*, or *Yeah, didn't really notice him*, or *Simon who?* I want absolutely nothing more than to be overlooked.

But that is so not going to happen. For one thing, Miss Rose isn't having it. "I would like you all to welcome, ummm, Simon O'Keeffe. Who is— His family just moved here from Omaha."

The room is swept by a kind of sigh: *Omaha, shining land of dreams and promises*. Yeah, right. I'm resisting the urge to run out of the room.

"*Dude,*" says a boy with green hair in the front row. "Why'd you come *here?*"

"There was an . . . incident," says the teacher.

I interrupt her. "We were driven out by alpacas. It's kind of a long story."

A dozen hands shoot into the air and the green-haired boy says: "Tell it, man!"

"Simon," says Miss Rose, sounding like she's about to melt into a puddle of sympathy.

"Also," I say, before Miss Rose can launch into whatever she's going to tell them, "my mom bought Slaughter and Sons—the old funeral home? Which, seriously, is called that." My words are coming out like there's pressure behind them, and I can't seem to stop talking. "Plus, my dad wanted to leave the big city to concentrate on his art. He's a famous sackbut player."

Laughter—the kind that can only be called snickering.



A football-player-looking boy turns to the green-haired one and mouths *sack butt*?

“It’s a kind of trombone,” I say. My dad actually plays one. He’s good—he’s, like, the tenth-best sackbut virtuoso in the entire world. I think for him the hardest part of leaving Omaha was leaving his medieval-music ensemble.

“Sack butt!” says another boy. Yeah, I might be getting a new nickname.

“Do you live in the funeral home?” asks someone at the back.

A girl, breathless with delighted horror, says, “I dunno. A funeral home sounds so creepy.”

“Would your mom rent it out for school dances and stuff?” asks another girl. She has a three-ring binder in front of her and a general air of “class president.”

“Uh,” I say. “I could ask.”

“Sweet!” exclaims the green-haired boy.

Right then the bell rings.

The bell is loud—it’s a real bell, being hit by a real hammer, sounding like a real emergency—and my body slams backward into the chalkboard, the eraser tray jamming into my hip. But none of the other kids notice. For them it’s just the bell. The room fills up with a burst of voices—a cry of *sack butt*—and the zippers of backpacks and the squeaks of chair legs and the thump of feet.

In the receding tide, Miss Rose looks over my schedule while I rub the bang on my hip with the heel of my hand. “Math is two doors down,” she says. “Room seven.”

GNB Upper—*Go Badgers!*—has two periods before lunch and three after. That means I do the whole thing five more times. Miss Rose, homeroom and English, and Mr. Dwyer, the eight-fingered shop teacher, are the only people who make any fuss, thank you, *God*. (And thank you, Saint Barbara, who I invoke because I really do think I’m going to die all five times.) Miss Rose makes her sad eyes and lets me know that her door is always open if I want to talk. Mr. Dwyer hits me on the shoulder and says, “Glad to have you with us now, my son,” and it could be he just does that to everyone. It’s no reason to panic, brain.

And honestly nothing goes wrong. All the other teachers and all the kids just roll with things. The kid with the green hair is Kevin, and he’s just one of those nice guys everyone likes. He’s into Minecraft, as much as you can in a town with no internet. The big football-looking guy is Brett, and he spends a couple of days trying to make the nickname Sack Butt happen, but it requires too much backstory and it doesn’t stick. The three-ring-binder girl is Joyce, and she is “on the leadership team.” For my first few days it’s a full-time job learning names and finding all the school’s hidden corners and cubbies and telling the alpaca story a lot.

I answer questions about funeral homes.

I answer questions about Omaha.

I say the word “sackbut” until it loses all meaning.

I don’t make any friends, really—maybe Kevin—but on the bright side I don’t attract much attention. And there isn’t any internet. No one looks me up.