

BETTER WITH BUTTER

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already sitting on the curb, waiting for me to collect it. “Prepared for your presentation?”

I try to catch Mom’s eyes one last time before I leave the safety of the car, but she’s doing a frozen, straight-ahead stare to avoid my gaze while also answering Principal Huxx for me. “She’s Grandma Prisbrey. She’s been practicing her speech for days. She’s going to be great!”

“I look forward to seeing Marvel live up to her potential,” Principal Huxx says, and my stomach flippity-flops with the pressure. Now I have to give my speech *and* impress her.

A car behind us honks. The car line is for quick drop-offs. The honk is a friendly one, but the message is clear—move it or lose it.

“Coming?” Principal Huxx asks me in a way that’s definitely not a question.

I step onto the curb next to my backpack.

She slams the car door and waves my mom forward.

Finally, Mom looks at me through the rolled-up window. She gives me her biggest smile and two thumbs-ups. Then she speeds away, abandoning me to my doom.



BLANK SLATE

My classroom buzzes with excitement about the presentations. Honestly, I don't get these kids. It's like they don't even see the potential problems. Anything could happen. We could get a bad grade, forget our speeches, blush too much, sweat uncontrollably, get laughed at, fall off the stage, or do some other terrible thing that is yet unknown.

I try to deep breathe the panic away. It doesn't work. I keep getting big whiffs of Addie's chocolate chip cookies, which bring me back to my impending doom.

Addie walks around with a tray, offering homemade baked goods to everyone. She really shouldn't do that. She might run out before the presentations even start, but she looks blissful in her white dress and red apron. I

wish I could be like her—relaxed and excited. I don't like being the class worrywart. It's just who I am. Taking my worries away would be like scrubbing the freckles off Addie's face. It can't be done.

Before Addie has a chance to offer me a cookie, our teacher, Ms. Day, makes us line up at the classroom door. From this point, it's just one long march to the stage.

I'm really not feeling good now. It's like a thousand tiny pins are jabbing at my insides. I want to ask my teacher if I can go to the office to call my mom, but I'm trapped between Theo (posing as Steven Spielberg) and Jamie (dressed up as Chet Baker, some dude who played the trumpet), and the line moves me along like a conveyor belt that doesn't stop until we're standing in the curtain wings of the auditorium stage.

I feel hot and sick, but no one seems to notice. That's the thing about anxiety. It happens in the head, and no one sees it. Sometimes I wish I had a broken arm or something. At least then people could see what's wrong with me. They might even sign my cast or ask me how I'm feeling.

Ms. Day walks down the line checking our placement, and my spirits rise. As soon as she gets to me, I'll tell her I'm sick and need to leave. I fixate on Ms. Day like a cat tracking a mouse. She's close, so I'm mere seconds away from rescue.

While my head is turned toward her, Jamie (the most

obnoxious kid at Bayside) blows his trumpet in my ear.

I nearly jump out of my skin. I whip my head around and give him a death glare.

He falls over laughing.

I really don't like that kid.

I turn back toward Ms. Day. She's already three kids down the line. Jamie's little joke made me miss her, and I'll never forgive him for it.

I try to get Ms. Day's attention by frantically waving my arms over my head, but she doesn't see me. No one notices me at all, and before I can get out of there, the stage lights flicker.

"Showtime, people! This is it!" Ms. Day shouts like we should be excited.

Only, I'm not. I'm terrified—knee-knocking, heart-pounding fear. But I can't escape. I have no choice but to suck it up and power through. Mom's right. I've been practicing for weeks. I know my speech. I'll just say it quickly, and it will be over. It's thirty tiny seconds—not even a full minute. *I can do it. I can do it. I can do it.* I shake my hands to release the jitters.

Addie is leading the line. She moves forward.

The rest of us follow, moving ahead with baby steps like a slow-motion conga line.

As we shuffle past Ms. Day, she says, "Don't forget to smile for the camera."

What? Camera? I tap Theo (one of the nicest kids at Bayside) on the shoulder as our line creeps along. “What does Ms. Day mean by *camera*?”

He looks at me like I’m from Mars. “They’re going to record our speeches so we can review them together in class. She told us yesterday. Don’t you remember?”

I shake my head like a gyroscope. I definitely do not remember that. Most likely, I was in the office with a stomachache when my teacher dropped that particular bomb. “I thought they only recorded the play?”

Theo shrugs and moves forward with the line. “Some parent volunteered to do it, I guess.”

I gape at him and stop moving. Kids pile up behind me.

I’m not going out there. Cameras were never part of the deal.

Jamie pokes me in the back. “Move.”

“No.” I’m not letting them record me making a fool out of myself.

As the front of the line continues to march onto the stage, a space begins to open up in front of me, but I don’t want to go forward. I want to go back. I turn around and try to go in the other direction. I’m a salmon swimming downstream while the rest of the school is swimming up.

I plow into Jamie.

He pushes me off him. “Knock it off, Marvel.”

When did Jamie get so big? He's a brick wall blocking my escape. "Stop it. Let me through."

"I can't! There're too many people behind me. Just walk, weirdo." Instead of getting out of the way, he moves forward, pushing me toward the stage like a bulldozer.

This kid has a serious problem. He needs to let me through. "Stop it, Jamie. Get out of my way," I hiss at him.

"Shut up, Marvel," he hisses back. He sounds furious but the weird thing is he's smiling. "Turn around, you freak."

I turn . . . and that's when I see them—hundreds upon hundreds of beady kid eyes staring right at me.

Holy moly. I'm onstage.

The whole school is there. The front rows are filled with the little kids, the kindergartners and the lower school students—first through fifth grade. The back rows are filled with the upper school kids and the scariest of the bunch—the eighth graders.

Around the perimeter of the room, the teachers stand watch like guards. I mean, it's almost as if they expect someone up on stage to make a break for it, which isn't entirely bananas because I just tried to run.

I glance over at Jamie and glare. Me being out here is all his fault.

He ignores me.

One by one, kids head to the microphone to give their speeches.

In the center of the aisle, there's a camera so big someone must have stolen it from a movie set. It's obviously recording because there's a red light on top of it that I can't stop staring at.

Ms. Day stands next to the giant camera with her flashlight. Every thirty seconds, she turns it on and off as each new kid walks up to the mic to recite their speech.

I cannot believe this is happening.

I don't hear what anyone else says because I'm too busy wiping my sweaty palms on my jeans and trying to slow my heart down.

I know I can't do it. I can't say my speech. No way, no how. I mean, jumping out of a plane would be easier, and I would never, ever do that, so this speech is definitely not going to happen.

I can't even stand on the stage for one more second, but there's no escape. I'm trapped.

I'm so freaked out I don't hear anything that is happening around me. I don't even realize Theo has given his speech and come back to his place in line until Jamie pokes me in the side. "You're next."

I turn toward him with bulging eyes. "What?"

"Go," he says through gritted teeth, and pushes me.

For crying out loud, what does that kid have against me? I stumble toward the microphone.

Ms. Day flashes the light at me.

I try to speak.

I really do. Except I can't get any words to come out. My mouth is a desert, so dry it won't work, but it doesn't matter because I can't remember words anyway.

I mean, no words at all. I'm a blank slate. The universe before the big bang.

Ms. Day turns the flashlight off and back on again as if that's the problem.

She wants me to talk, but I can't. I don't know how.

My heart takes off like a speed racer, and I start to breathe in short, rapid gulps.

The quicker I breathe, the more air I need, but I can't seem to get enough.

That unknown bad thing I was worried about is happening, and I try to get myself under control so I can make it stop and get off this stage.

I tell myself to take deep, slow breaths, but I'm a runaway cable car hurtling downhill.

My head begins to feel woozy.

My ears start to ring.

My hands go numb.

My legs turn to lead.

And then my entire body freezes. Ceases to work. Refuses to function.

I can't move.

I can't speak.

Not.

One.

Single.

Word.



FROZEN

I stand onstage frozen like a block of arctic ice, petrified into a human statue by uncontrollable full-body panic. The only thing that functions right is my heart, which beats so hard, so fast, and so loud that I'm surprised the microphone doesn't pick up the rapid thumping.

A buzzing sound fills the room as a trillion kids begin to talk about me.

Ms. Day turns the flashlight off and on again, demanding that I speak, but I can't.

I start to sweat. It pools into my palms and on my forehead. A drop slides down my face, and there's no way it's going to go unnoticed by the hundreds of judgmental kids gawking at me and recording me with their contraband cell phones.

I breathe faster and the microphone echoes my panicked puffs around the auditorium.

It's been at least fifteen seconds since I approached the microphone. As I stand there frozen, I start to count the accumulating seconds in my head...twenty...twenty-five...thirty...I should be done with my speech, but instead of wrapping up, I'm a slow-motion catastrophe unfolding before my very own eyes. I know I'm going to end up on YouTube or turned into a meme.

Thirty-five seconds zooms by, but it feels like hours.

The buzzing turns to laughter. Like a sonic wave, it starts from the back of the auditorium with the eighth graders and washes forward over the other grades until it overtakes everyone—even the little kids in front.

From the very back row of seats some kid shouts, "Get her off the stage!"

This starts a chorus of chants, and soon more kids are yelling, "Get her off the stage!" Even a couple of the little ones in the front row join in, thinking it's some kind of funny game.

Teachers call for quiet, but no one is listening. It's a full-scale riot.

I agree with them. I want to get off the stage as fast as possible, but I can't figure out how to move. The only thing that seems to work right is my eyes. I shoot them toward the stage wings, desperate for an escape route.