

I know that when you see me, you see me as a normal seventh grader. You see me with long auburn hair and brown eyes. But, really, I'm dyslexic and that makes my life hard—harder than you would think. I've been bullied and I've been scraping by on a narrow edge.

For the past five years I've been homeschooled. I can't handle school because of the hurt others cause me just because I'm different. The other children around me caused me to become anthropophobic—I now shy away from others and I am afraid to meet new people because I'm scared that they will hurt me more. But this is the story of how I overcame my fears. This is my story about courage.

“Honey, wake up.”

I groaned and yawned groggily. “Why are you waking me up so early, Mom?”

“First day of seventh grade,” my mom’s green eyes twinkled in the pale morning light. She stood up and opened my blinds all the way.

“Right,” I swallowed. “All of a sudden I feel really sick.”

“You’re just nervous, now get ready,” my mom walked to my bedroom door, “breakfast is waiting.”

I forced myself out of bed and got ready before trudging downstairs.

“Are you excited?” my mom smiled at me as I ate my toast.

“No,” I muttered and rolled my eyes. “Today’s going to be awful.”

“Stop being so pessimistic, Brook.”

“Remind me again why I’m suddenly going back to school?” I pushed my plate away and crossed my arms, leaning back in my chair.

“You are going back to school because it is good for you and Joyce wants to share the experience of middle school with you,” my mom sighed and stood up, collecting dishes to clean them.

“It’s just going to be the same as when she was in first grade,” Andrew, my older brother, walked into the room. His brown hair was tucked into a backwards baseball cap. “It’s going to be a ‘razarkaple’ day, isn’t, Brook?”

“Andrew, don’t tease her! Get to the bus stop before you’re late!” my mom scolded and furrowed her brows angrily.

I held back the tears burning at the back of my eyes. I looked down at my plate and bit my lip.

“Oh, honey,” my mom sighed, “Don’t let Andrew get to you.”

I shook my head and stood up, exiting the kitchen and slinging my backpack over my shoulder. I walked out the door without a word to go to my new school.

Joyce was waiting for me outside of the school, a big smile plastered on her face, her blue eyes bright under her blond hair. She ran up to me when she saw me.

“I’m so glad that you decided to come, Brook!” Joyce exclaimed and hugged me.

“Today’s not going to be fun,” I sighed.

“Cheer up, Brook! It’s going to be awesome! Come on, I think we have the same schedules!” Joyce was her same bubbly self as always. She grabbed my hand and took off running toward the doors where students were crowding into the school.

I held my breath passing through the people and tried not to touch anyone as Joyce found our way out of the sea of students. We went to the office and grabbed our schedules and extra information, like our locker combinations. My locker was unfortunately nowhere near Joyce’s. She wished me luck before we departed in different directions.

I opened my locker and set it up before looking to find out what my first class was. I trained my eyes intently on the paper trying to see through my dyslexia. I felt a headache coming on already.

“Need help there?” someone asked. I jumped backwards, my back slamming into my locker. I widened my eyes and looked up to see who had confronted me. The boy raised his eyebrows in surprise and stepped back.

“N-no,” I stuttered and spun around to face my locker, calming down my breath. I then turned to the boy. “No, I don’t.”

“Okay, then,” the boy, looking surprised, wandered off.

I squeezed my eyes shut for a second and opened them, sighing. I finally made out the words on my schedule, gathered my books and stumbled to class.

Inside, I found my seat in the front of the classroom so I could see the board better and got situated.

“Hey, I’m Ana,” a girl leaned against my desk and smiled down at me. “You weren’t here last year, who are you?”

“I-I’m no one,” I averted my glance down at my desk. Ana hesitated for a second and then replied, “Okay, then...”

She joined a cluster of students at the back of the classroom. I saw her shrug to her friends who were all looking at me, confused. I put my head down on my desk and closed my eyes.

Memories came over me from first grade.

Carolyn Sumpter, an old friend that had quickly turned into an enemy, pushed her short blond hair behind her ears and turned to the group of kids surrounding her. They all looked down at me, bemused.

“Brook,” her gray eyes shone meanly down at me, “can you read this?”

“Why can’t you read it yourself?” I questioned.

“I just want to see how . . . well you are at reading, Brook,” Carolyn laughed, the sticky note in her hand shaking with her laughter.

“I can read that,” I smiled fakely, trying to look confident despite the hurt I felt inside.

“What does it say, then?” Carolyn held out the pink note. She giggled and shook her head at the other kids.

“It says . . . ‘Carolyn isn’t being nice’,” I smiled sweetly up at her again and handed the note back to her. Carolyn rolled her eyes and laughed annoyingly.

“You’re wrong, as usual! It says ‘Brook is stupid and can’t read!’”

Kids snickered and made jokes about me. Carlyne turned to the kids again.

“Do you know why she can’t read?” she inquired clearly and loudly so that everyone could hear. “She can’t read because she is special—and no, not the kind of special where you are treated as a gift, the kind of special where she’s different. She was born with a disease.”

“That’s gross!” a kid whispered.

“She doesn’t look like the other special kids,” another kid spoke quietly to another.

“It’s not a disease!” I cried. I could no longer hold back the tears. They streamed down my cheeks freely in little rivers. My heart grew heavy with sadness as I wiped away the tears.

“I’m always right—it’s an ugly disease. You are a loser, Brook!” Carlyne pushed me and then laughed along with the other kids as they all walked away. “Stay away from her—I heard once that her disease is contagious!”

I staggered to my knees and held my face in my hands. I whispered to no one in particular, “It’s not a disease...”

“I didn’t think that was funny,” a small voice spoke up. I glanced up to find Joyce standing there. Her hands were clasped in front of her. “I thought it was really mean. I’m sorry Carlyne did that to you. She’s just a bully.”

Joyce walked over and held out a hand to help me up. I shyly took it and got to my feet. I questioned, “You aren’t going to tease me like them?”

“No, I’m not. I like you, and want to be friends with you,” Joyce grinned. “Do you want to be my friend?”

I looked at her for a second and then nodded my head. “I’d love to be friends with you.”

“Friends?” Joyce asked.

“Friends,” I smiled.

I sighed and sat up straight as Joyce entered the classroom. She beamed at me and took an empty seat next to me.

“Glad you found your way here,” she laughed.

“Wasn’t hard,” I shrugged. I felt the eyes of the other students on us.

“Class is about to start, I’ll talk to you after class,” Joyce pulled out her notebook as the teacher strolled in. Joyce winked at me as the second bell rang.

“How did school go?” my mom asked at dinner.

“Okay, I guess,” I didn’t meet her glance.

“Did you meet anyone new?” she asked hopefully.

“No,” I retorted and shook my head.

“Did anyone *talk* to you?” she asked, seeming not to believe me.

“Yes, but I didn’t say much back to them,” I answered simply.

My mom groaned and set her fork down. “Why didn’t you talk back to them? You’re supposed to be making new friends, honey.”

“I don’t want new friends,” I responded nonchalantly. In my perspective, new friends mean new enemies. Once you tell them the truth about yourself or once they find it out, they can turn around and twist it. I learned that the hard way.

My mom met my eyes and arched her eyebrows, which meant that what she was about to say was serious. “Brook, promise me that tomorrow, no matter what, you will try your best to meet at least one new kid. Do you promise?”

I shifted in my chair awkwardly and answered, “I’m too scared to meet someone new.”

“Push your fears away and be brave,” my mom persisted.

“Mom—”

“Prove your fears wrong and be strong,” she threw out cheesy advice.

“That was seriously corny, Mom,” I rolled my eyes.

“Come on, Brook. Please promise me! Just *one* person!”

I paused and then gave in. “Fine. Only one.”

“Thank you, dear. Now just keep your promise,” my mom took another bite of her food seeming satisfied.

The next day at lunch, I sat with Joyce at an empty table in the back of the cafeteria. I ate my lunch silently, reconsidering my promise.

Joyce slammed her milk carton down on the table causing me to wince. I looked at her, perplexed.

“Brook, you need to stop this!” she exclaimed.

“What are you talking about, Joyce?” I interrogated.

“It really makes me sad seeing you like this! All you do is sit around and sulk! You need to meet more friends and hang out with others more!” Joyce furrowed her brows.

I opened my mouth to respond, only to be cut off by her.

“I know you keep remembering Carlyne, but you need to forget about that. It’s the past and those who dwell in it get nowhere. Please, Brook, listen to me. I know I can’t make or force you to walk up and introduce yourself to someone else, but I’m asking you,” Joyce closed her eyes tightly, her face contorted in an expression of frustration and irritation. “I hate to sound mean, but I’m asking you—as your friend—to go meet more friends.”

“I love you like a sister and I can’t keep watching your dyslexia keep you away from being happy. Someday, you will be able to see through your dyslexia, but only if you have friends to help you. Sure, sometimes you may hit some bumps along the way, but your friends can help you up and help brush off the dust. You need more friends than just me.”

I inhaled shakily and nodded. “Fine, I’ll do it.”

Joyce opened her mouth to argue and then shut it. “What?”

“I said that I’ll do it—I’ll go introduce myself to that girl right there sitting alone at that table,” I stood up, feeling confident. I began to approach the girl at the table. I felt Joyce watching me.

Halfway there, my instincts tugged at me. I stopped and looked back at Joyce. Her eyes were focused intently on me. She nodded abruptly and gestured to the table.

Taking a deep breath, I continued and sat down across from the girl at the table. “Hey, I’m Brook.”

The girl flinched and looked up at me. She had strawberry blond hair and nervous gray eyes—

“Carolyne?” my heart skipped a beat and it took all my force to stay seated. Familiarity flashed across her face.

“Brook?” she questioned quietly. “Didn’t you go to first grade with me?”

I sighed and nodded my head. Carolyne widened her eyes as they began to swell with tears.

“Brook, I’m so sorry about what I did,” she cried. Carolyne raised her hands to her face. “I was so wrong to do those things.”

Despite my resentment towards her, I was moved by how sad and regretful she looked.

“I was desperate to get people to like me. I was just another nobody—a loser. The way I used to gain popularity was awful and terrible. I thought that being mean to others would earn friends,” she burst into a story, “but I was so mistaken. I slipped once in second grade, making fun of the wrong person and got beat up for it in front of the other kids. I deserved what I got, though. I deserved the laughter in my schoolmates’ eyes and their jokes about me being weak. I deserved it all.”

“No, Carolyne,” I closed my eyes, hoping I wouldn’t regret this in the future, “you don’t deserve that. Nobody does. You saw a chance to be popular and you took it.”

“But I hurt you, Brook,” Carolyne wiped her eyes on her napkin. “I hurt your feelings and I teased you about your dyslexia.”

“I know.” I said. “Sometimes we feel that in order to get what we desire that we must cause pain to others. Everyone feels that at some point in their life, but some see right—that injuring others isn’t the way to get what we want—but some who are really desperate can’t see that.”

Carolyne nodded and inhaled a ragged breath. “I’m so sorry and I know that you’re not going to accept my apology.”

“I forgive you, Carolyne.”

She froze and looked up at me, shocked. “Really?”

“Everyone makes mistakes and everyone deserves a second chance,” I smiled at her.

“Thank you, Brook,” she returned the smile through her tears warmly.

“Carolyne, do you want to be friends again?” I asked.

“After all I’ve done to you?” Carolyne looked at me.

“It’s in the past now, Carolyne,” I nodded.

“Yes! Thank you so, so much, Brook,” Carolyne beamed happily.

“Come sit with Joyce and me,” I pointed to the table where Joyce was still curiously watching.

“Gladly,” Carolyne accepted and grabbed her bag and lunch tray and followed me to the table. As she sat down, Joyce recognized her and looked at me for confirmation with rounded eyes. I smiled and nodded and watched as a grin spread across her face. I had forgiven Carolyne for her wrong-doings and reestablished friendship with her that I had once lost a long time ago, a double accomplishment.

“Oh, hi, Joyce,” Carolyne greeted, “I didn’t think that I would ever see you again.”

“Yeah, me neither,” Joyce winked at me.

Sometimes it comes time to push past your fears and do what you never thought that you would do. Sometimes you come across someone—someone that is a second chance for you and for them—and you need to forgive them and they need to forgive you. Forgiving enemies takes courage, but if I can do it so can you.