

**THIRD PLACE
MIDDLE SCHOOL
6TH, 7TH & 8TH GRADES**

**MY BROTHER, ISAAC
◀ By Hanel Baveja ▶**

Isaac isn't just my family. He's not just my sibling, and not just my brother. He's my twin.

You know what they say with twins- what one twin has, the other doesn't. I guess our case was particularly extreme. Isaac, the scrawny, underweight infant with a heavy case of down syndrome and mild autism, and I, Noah, the bouncy plump one with not so much as a pollen allergy.

I'm thinking about this difference, still, on the first day of 8th grade.

We're now 5 years old, dressed in red overalls for the first day of Kindergarten. Mom tried to find us as close to matching overalls as she could find- people love to see twins in matching clothes. Isaac's red corduroy Elmo overalls boasted "Mama's boy", in yellow writing on the front, as he still fit into baby sizes. Mine proudly display some kind of mustard green pick up truck, the emblem for shopping in the "big boy" section. Mom walks us into school, stopping to chat with a smiling parent. The smiling lady bends down in front of us. To me, she coos "And are you going to take care of your little brother on the first day of school?"

"He's not my little brother," I say. "He was born 3 minutes and 11 seconds before me." The lady withdraws, and asks Isaac the same question. He ignores her for a split second, vaguely picks his nose, pauses to hum a few bars of the Sesame Street theme song, and then bursts into tears. His face is red and wet. The lady bends down to comfort him, and then he's fleeing, a flash of red, and gone. Mom runs after him, leaving me with the not-so-smiling lady.

For the last ten years, Isaac has gone to a special school downtown for autistic and mentally challenged kids. Recently, it shut down. Tight economy, and too small of a population to keep it running. I don't think Isaac could have continued even if it hadn't shut down. Dad moved out several months ago. He was an education specialist, working in the public spotlight. He wanted a flawless family, but what he had was a musician wife, playing her violin at small gigs around town, and two dysfunctional 14 year old twins, one of them autistic with the ability to memorize virtually every Sesame street episode that crossed his path, and the other so consumed with responsibility and guilt that he struggles to not take his anger out on everyone who insults his brother.

I'm thinking of these memories, as I get ready for the first day of school. Isaac, for the first time in 10 years, is going to the same school as me. My school has a program for kids with disabilities- the school provides a teacher aid that travels to all the students' classes, and helps them. Ms.Campbell, Isaac's teacher aid came to our house yesterday to meet him. She's young, and pretty, with a fresh face. She looks as if she should be teaching a group of happy preschoolers instead of my scrawny 14-year-old brother.

Mom drives us to school, Isaac moodily staring out the window, for once not reciting lines from Sesame Street, his favorite show, which is what he does when he is nervous. It's silent in the car. Isaac likes silence in the morning, but I like to listen to the radio. Cheerios

and milk splatter the seats, remainders of Isaac's breakfast. We're late already. Isaac took a long time getting ready. I'm upset, although I try not to show it. The car pulls up to school, and I walk through the doors, not looking back once.

In the excitement of the first day of school, I forget about Isaac, until I walk into Biology- when I know I have come face to face with reality. The double desks built for two are filling up fast, just as they usually do, the early comers each taking up a pair of seats. I rush to the last available pair, and plunk my books by the second chair, next to me. The remainders of our class trickle in slowly. As the bell rings, I see Isaac and Ms.Campbell. She sees me and gives a small wave. My heart races. Luckily, Isaac stops, squats on the floor, and covers his ears with his eyes clenched tightly shut. His lips are moving fast, but I don't hear anything coming out of his mouth. Quickly, I move, over to the empty chair by my friend, Billy, in the corner. By the time Isaac straightens up, Ms.Campbell is relieved just to find an empty seat, and gladly sits down next to him.

Our teacher, who's barely out of college, comes in. She pulls out a yellow attendance sheet. I know I have five minutes, if that, before the inevitable happens. I was stupid to think I could hide it.

The A's. B's. I'm sitting there, sweaty, wishing our last name was Baker. There are three Bakers in our science class alone, none of them related. She passes through Cadbury and Cass uneventfully. She squints at the next name. "C-czarisoli?" she stutters, looking up. "Czarosoli, Isaac?" Ms.Campbell looks at Isaac expectantly, who picks his nose carefully.

"He's here," Ms.Campbell says. The teacher nods, relieved.

"Czarosoli, Noah?" She asks. "Here," I reply. "Oh," she brightens. "You're brothers!"

Darn. Darn that last name Czarosoli, inherited from a father that moved out and hasn't talked to his only sons in months. I'm sitting in that plastic seat, wishing for a last name like Baker.

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"Retard."

There's that word again. This time, as I'm walking to lunch, I stop and face the offender.

I see the back of Isaac's head, and hurry to catch up. Suddenly, the same voice shouts, "Retard!" A group of three boys comes out of the gym, sneering, as Isaac, a deer caught in the headlights, turns confused. "God, he's even more retarded than I thought. Look at that face." a particularly fat offender laughs. My blood begins to boil. The smile on Isaac's face is slowly slipping to the floor. Suddenly, a rubber band flies out of nowhere, and pings Isaac on the side of the face, who spins around, off balance, and lands on the floor, bewildered, amidst the sound of laughter. "Cookie Monster thief, not liar," he mumbles over and over, the words tumbling out of his mouth like a toddler. "Freak," snorts the fat one.

Before I know what I'm doing, I'm running. I'm running towards the tallest of the three boys. Suddenly he's against the wall, and I'm breathing his peppermint breath. I hear myself shouting words, just bubbling out of my mouth nonsensically. My left hand curls into a fist and smashes the side of his face ruthlessly, again and again and again. The sweat on my forehead is in my eyes, stinging. Isaac's whimper has now curdled into a high pitched squeal as he begins to bawl, crying between breathes "Cookie monster thief, not liar!" He tries to pull me off peppermint-breath, his bony hands having no affect whatsoever. There's the sound of footsteps from somewhere in the distance, and then nails are digging into my back, lifting me off peppermint-breath, who's cowering against the wall.

The custodian is dragging me away from peppermint-breath, and Isaac is still shouting Sesame Street quotes.

Ten minutes later, I'm in the principal's office. Isaac is with Ms.Campbell and the nurse, getting a glass of water and a cherry lollipop.

Principal Goodman leans forward to look at me. Hands crossed, narrow, beady eyes squinting, she's inspecting me under her microscope. I'm the fascinating amoeba on her slide. At that moment, my mother rushes in the door, talking on her cellphone.

"Yes, okay. Okay, Phil. I said I'd be there. Yup, yes, see you. Okay, bye."

She takes her seat, flustered. I try not to look at her.

"Mrs. Czarsoli," Goodman begins. "Your son has recently committed a school crime- physically harmed one of his fellow students, which I understand was caused when the student in question provoked your son."

How nice. How charming. "Provoked your son." How about knowingly insulted and potentially physically harmed the boy in question's twin brother. Who just so happened to not be have a very good day, and who only reacted because he was sick of his last name, tired of his absent father, and angry with his twin brother, Isaac, who just so happens to have autism.

"Look," Goodman continues. "I'll let Noah off this time, because I understand he was provoked, but if there is just one more infraction of school rules, suspension and proper school procedure will be followed."

The crease of worry on my mother's forehead is lifted. Goodman goes on to explain exactly how the school procedure works, but my mother has stopped listening. As long as I'm not getting suspended or punished, it's fine. After the meeting, we walk with Isaac and Ms.Campbell to the car, my mother on her cellphone again. Isaac is troubled. He can't stop fidgeting, and his eyes avoid me, even in the car. "Oh, I love pigeons more than anything else in this world....besides oatmeal", he repeats over and over. This is a line from one of the first episodes of Sesame Street. Bert says it. Isaac has only recently gotten over Bert's scary unibrow and yellow skin and no longer screams in fright when he appears, but now has taken to memorizing everything Bert says.

My mother has already moved on to the next thing in her life, and Isaacs's fascination with his cherry lollipop and pigeons and oatmeal is slowly fading, and he reaches out and tries to pet the top of my head. This is a game we play sometimes, when I'm in a better mood. Today I shrug his hand off and think of reasons why my father left us.

At home, I get a text.

SkrPlyr24: R U DONE W/ THE MATH HW???

I don't feel like answering, but I reply anyway.

NoahC: NO

SkrPlyr24: Mr.B IS SO RETARDED

That word again. I have a sudden urge to smash the phone against the wall. I calm myself down. Its just a word. Just a word. Words don't hurt. Fists do. I hurt. I hurt the tall boy in the hallway. No, I hurt the tall boy who was throwing rubber bands at my brother.

"It is I, your furry pal, Grover!" Isaac sings loudly from the next room.

Another day, another life. Life without Isaac. I know, I know, its bad to think these things. You can't control thoughts. They spiral off in any direction they like, filling up space and time, but weightless.

In science class, it's quiet. People are afraid to look at me, especially careful to avoid staring at my bruised eye and bloody nose. Billy doesn't talk to me, and our teacher fumbles through the lesson, confused. Its her first year, and 'what to do when a boy beats another child because the child was throwing rubber bands and insulting his autistic brother, who (*shh*) he sometimes wishes didn't exist' probably wasn't covered in her teachers handbook. The only person that even talks to me is Ms.Campbell, who quietly asks me if I'm okay. *Haha*, I think to myself. *She should see peppermint-breath*. I'm debating whether this is something Dad would be proud of, when the P.A speaker system comes on, calling me down to the main office.

I try to control myself. If you can't imagine it, think clumsy silence. Fumbling, stumbling pieces floating around in the classroom.

Stupid. It was stupid of me to think I could get away with this. Too many people saw, probably teachers, too. As I shut the door behind me, the last things I see are Isaac's wide, troubled eyes. For a second, I think I see a flash of concern, but then the door is closed and his face is gone.

I can't afford to get suspended from school. Mom says this kind of thing goes on a permanent record. I can't have a smudge like this on my permanent record.

I'm walking down the hallway. My fingers are still curled into tight fists, peppermint-breath's blood still caked onto my knuckles. I can feel the blood dripping from my nose into my mouth. It tastes bad, like boiled eggs. I've always hated boiled eggs, even though they were Dad's favorite thing in the world. I spit. Red beads pepper the speckled tile in front of me. I'll probably get charged with vandalism now, too. I do not like where this all is heading.

In my head I hear the lines from last nights episode of Sesame Street. Big Bird has just found out that Mr. Hooper is dead, and he still thinks that he's coming back to make him birdseed milkshakes and look at the picture that Big Bird made. Susan tells him that when people die, they don't come back, and Big Bird says with indignation

"Well, I don't understand! You know everything was just fine. Why does it have to be this way? Give me one good reason!"

I'm almost at the principal's office now. I see it, and have a sudden urge to run in the other direction. I'm going to get suspended, I know it. Maybe even expelled. What a joke that would be, me, expelled, and Isaac, star student at Truman Middle School.

I promise myself never again. If I'm let off this time, I will never risk myself to protect him. I shouldn't be this weak. I shouldn't have broken. Dad never would have done this.

It's astonishing how well I can lie, even to myself.

Out of nowhere, a sharp bleeping sound known only too well as a fire alarm suddenly shakes me from my stupor. Kids and teachers come pouring out of classrooms, and I numbly follow them outside, scarcely believing my luck.

Across the field, I see Ms.Campbell. Isaac is not with her.

Later we are all riding in the car. My mother, Isaac, and me. Principal Goodman announced that a student has pulled the fire alarm, and we were all released. Another hard criminal slips through the cracks.

I'm in my room that night, when Isaac walks in. He's in his flannel Elmo pajamas and carrying his keypad. The whole scene is rather pathetic.

He opens his mouth to say something, but nothing comes out. He finally sits down on my bed, and hands me his keypad.

"Where were you when the fire alarm was pulled?" I type.

He picks it up, and looks at the screen for a long, long time. His eyes fill with tears as he points to himself.

"What?" I ask, puzzled. He points to himself again, and mimes pulling on a lever, and I stare in wonder. All this time I thought I was the one looking out for him, but even Isaac, my twin brother, looks out for me once in a while.

"Don't forget to breath! In and out!" Isaac sings from down the hallway.

