

SPECIAL

LAUREL DILE KING

Nina stroked the gum on the underside of her desk lid. The ridges and indentations of the wad were as perfect as the twin, powdery pink rectangles she had unwrapped from their comic moments ago. Now that the class had recited the Pledge of Allegiance and unbowed their heads from the moment of silence, Miss Jacobs would leave the warmth of the radiator and return to the blackboard. Then Nina could pop the gum back in her mouth. Tiny chews were all she dared, because in second grade, if caught with gum, you wore it on the end of your nose. Going cross-eyed to see the gum on your nose made you look retarded and the other kids giggled and pointed. But Nina needed her gum. Her father told her she was like a baseball player—a good chew kept her loose.

While Nina waited for the clickety-click of Miss Jacobs' shoes on the wooden floor, the desk lid grew heavy on her wrist. The room ballooned up with waiting air, like it did when everyone had finished their arithmetic worksheet, except Nina, who still sniffed the cool purple ink, fresh from the mimeograph. The quiet buzzed like when it was Nina's turn to read the Dick and Jane story aloud and she couldn't find her place. Time stuttered, like when the teacher called on her and she couldn't remember five plus eight, while everyone else waved their hands in the air. *Oh! Pick me! I know!*

Nina withdrew her arm from the desk and rested her chin on her shoulder. Back at the radiator, Miss Jacobs whispered to a large woman, with gray pin curls. Mrs. Lydol, the Special teacher. Her tennis shoes must have let her slip in during the moment of silence.

The Special class mixed together grades one through five. The Special students had dirty hair or wore the same outfit every day or talked like they had fat tongues. They ate together at a Special table in the cafeteria and yakked with their mouths full. The older kids called it the retard table.

Nina's father said retard was an ugly word that she must never use.

Mary Kay Rogers was a Special—the fat girl with boobies who forgot to flush. Nina had entered the stall right after the red-faced Mary Kay bolted past her and out of the girls' room, without washing her hands. Free of toilet paper, the porcelain bowl showcased the length and breadth of what Mary Kay had left behind. Nina backed out of the stall and bumped into Bonnie Winger, next in line. Bonnie pushed open the door. "Ooo! Yucka cucka!" She leaned forward on tiptoes. "I bet it's long enough to reach through the pipes, all the way to the boys' toilets." Two fourth grade girls, who had been washing their hands, crowded into the stall. "It was that *Special* girl," one of them said. They held their noses, though surprisingly, it didn't stink. There was only the normal muted smell, like a diaper pail, and the scent of wet, brown paper towels. By the afternoon restroom break, all the girls of Main Street School had witnessed Mary Kay's enormous turd. Next morning it had disappeared—either flushed by a teacher, plunged by the janitor, or escaped to the boys' room.

The radiator clanked at the back of the room and the two teachers leaned closer together. Outside, a sliver of sun bounced off the snow-covered branches and sliced through the window to make Miss Jacobs' hair glow like copper. Nina hoped her grown-up hair would look just like that.

Miss Jacobs smiled at Mrs. Lydol, not the smile she saved for the boys with the perfect worksheets, but the tight smile that she wore whenever Nina came for help after school, when none of

the other kids were there to make fun of her. No matter how long Nina had to wait, she never said a word until Miss Jacobs looked up from her books and papers. The bright red lips smiled and smiled, but never asked what Nina needed. The teacher made Nina do the asking. Tuesday Nina had needed help weaving her potholder. Whenever she tried to stretch a loop across the frame, another loop popped off. Miss Jacobs made her pull them all off and start over. The frame was still in Nina's desk, loops correctly strung from tooth to tooth, but none woven in yet. Like a little square harp with red strings.

Finally Miss Jacobs finished with the Special teacher and walked up the aisle next to Nina. Nina sat erect, ready to snatch her gum as soon as the teacher passed by. Clickety-click, clickety-click, clickety. . .clunk. Miss Jacobs cleared her throat. Caught? Nina wrinkled her nose in anticipation of the weight of the gum.

"Nina, honey, I'd like you to get your things from your desk." Miss Jacobs spoke so nicely. . .maybe she wasn't caught after all. "Mrs. Lydol is going to be your new teacher."

No. Nina always had clean hair and clean underpants. Miss Jacobs was mad at her because she asked for help so many times. She wanted to get rid of her. What if she had to sit next to Mary Kay Rogers? How would she eat her lunch while everyone stared?

Nina scanned the classroom. All heads were bowed, probably praying that they would never have to eat with the Specials. They would point her out in the lunchroom. *There's Nina. She used to be one of us but now she's a retard.* What would her father say when he found out Nina was an ugly retard?

Nina lifted her desk lid high enough to slide her books out, careful not to expose the gum. A hand on her shoulder made her drop her spelling book. It slid back into the metal bowl of the desk.

Mrs. Lydol—those sneakers again. "You won't need those. We have special books," she said. "Just gather your personal belongings."

The gum was her personal belonging, but with a teacher on either side of her, she could only leave with it on the end of her nose. The one thing that belonged to her, free and clear, was the blue hairbrush in the pencil tray. Goodbye yellow pencils and green chunky eraser. Goodbye potholder on the frame that belonged to Miss Jacobs. Goodbye. Goodbye. Goodbye gum.

Miss Jacobs tapped her pointy black toe. The class shifted in their chairs, whispering. For sure, everybody was sick and tired of Nina taking up so much time.

Miss Jacobs clickety-clicked to the front of the room. "Take out your spelling books, boys and girls."

Mrs. Lydol's hand clamped down on Nina's shoulder. "Come along, dear."

"Come visit us any time, Nina," Miss Jacobs said. "We're just down the hall."

Nina put the hairbrush in her jumper pocket and let Mrs. Lydol steer her toward the door. She paused for one last look at Miss Jacobs. She had written f-r-i-e-n-d on the blackboard. "Our first word is *friend*. Our *friend* Nina moved to a new class. *Friend*."

After Nina was gone, Miss Jacobs would clean out her desk and discover the gum. She would pull it off with a piece of coarse paper towel. Poor gum. Everyone would gawk at what Nina had left behind—all those teeth marks, all those germs. *We thought she might be a retard and now we know for sure.* Then the paper towel would be crumpled and thrown in the trash. No!

Mrs. Lydol put her arm around Nina to sweep her out the door. Nina ducked the arm, marched back to her desk, and opened it wide. The eyes of the class were on her as she peeled

off the gum. Miss Jacobs held a piece of chalk in the air, as if she had been assigned an impossible arithmetic problem. Nina chewed. Bazooka forever.

“Come on now, Nina,” Mrs. Lydol said. “You’re a good girl. Don’t make me get Mr. Stockwell.” Lydol could just wait and so could the principal.

Nina rolled the gum against her bottom teeth. Ready. She thrust her tongue forward and inhaled deeply.

Out came a bubble the size of a dodge ball. The class gasped. Nina blew a gentle stream of air to keep the bubble inflated. Then she gave it all she had. Pop!

There goes Nina. She sure blows one mean bubble.