

Excerpt 1: A Boy Named Queen

"Welcome to grade five," Mr. Zhang says, pressing his lips into a smile. "I am sure we will have a productive year together."

On the board, he writes out the daily schedule. Evelyn knows that grade five is the end of afternoon recess, but it's still a shock to see it missing from the day's activities.

She looks around the classroom. Nadine Pratt has grown her hair long, which means that Evelyn is the only girl in grade five with short hair. She hopes her mother doesn't find out. What if she makes her grow her hair long, too?

"Now," Mr. Zhang says, reaching for a stack of papers. "Let's see how much math you've forgotten over the holidays."

As Mr. Zhang distributes the quiz, the grade fives reach for their pencils. A few line up at the pencil sharpener. A few more raise their hands and ask to go to the bathroom.

Rap-rap. A knock at the door.

Mrs. Allison, the school secretary, steps into the room.

"Another one," she tells Mr. Zhang. "New to town."

Evelyn and the other students stare as a child with long wavy hair and wearing several bead necklaces steps out from behind Mrs. Allison.

Mrs. Allison raises her eyebrows at Mr. Zhang. "A boy."

The boy wears a faded pink T-shirt and jeans with stringy holes in the knees. Poking out from under the ragged cuffs, like a clever joke, is a pair of beautifully polished, pointy-toed black shoes—the kind Evelyn's mother calls brogues. His freckles outnumber even Evelyn's. But they're strong spices—cinnamon, paprika—compared to Evelyn's weak tea stains.

"Welcome," says a flustered Mr. Zhang glancing at the clock. A sprig of his slick black hair springs out of place and a quiz drifts from his hand to the floor. Isabella once

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again dirties her pink knees.

"Hello," the boy says, taking in the room of unfamiliar faces. He speaks as though he's on stage, at a microphone, as if he has been invited to give a speech. He isn't nervous at all.

"Tell us," Mr. Zhang asks, "What is your name?"

"My name is Queen," the boy answers.

The grade fives titter.

"Queen?" Mr. Zhang asks. "Q-u-e-e-n. Really?"

"Yes," the boy answers.

Mr. Zhang touches his mouth as if he could push his words back in. "Sorry."

Kids whisper between desks. Queen studies them with steady green eyes as if he knows what they're saying.

"What brought you to Hillsberry, uh, Queen?" Mr. Zhang asks, barely pronouncing the n, turning the boy's name into "Quee."

"Mom and Dad wanted to get away from it all."

"Away from what all?" Khalid blurts.

"The rat race," Mr. Zhang says.

"Actually, the rigors of the road," Queen says.

"I see." Mr. Zhang clears a pile of books from a desk beside Evelyn. He sweeps his arm across the desktop to dust it off. For the rest of the day, his dark sleeve will be speckled with pink eraser peelings. "Have a seat. At lunch we'll find you a cubby."

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Queen places his backpack beside the desk and sits. Behind him, Connor Linman pokes Parker Simpson and points at Queen's bag.

"That's where the queen keeps her crown," he snorts.

Evelyn's heart thuds. Her face prickles.

"Ignore him," she whispers to Queen. "He's mean."

"Or scared," Queen says.

Evelyn considers this. What would Connor be scared of? A name? A name is just a piece of air. It isn't real. Not the way a poisonous snake is real, or a car coming at you full speed.

"Scared of what?" she asks Queen.

Queen shrugs. "Of something he's afraid of."

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