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2,600 words

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"My very eager mother just served us nine pizzas," said Ms. Giddell. Her class of second-graders parroted the sentence, almost in unison. Daniel Dorn said it with them: "My very eager mother just served us nine pizzas." That's how they could remember them in the right order, Ms. Giddell explained, pointing in turn to the illustrations on the pull-down diagram hanging from the projection screen at the front of the classroom. "Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars..."

Ms. Giddell was tall and thin and kind of pretty but not as pretty as his mother, Daniel thought, and her hair was shorter, frizzier. She moved her hands a lot when she talked, and she sure liked to talk. But he would hold it, Daniel decided again, trying not to look at the block of wood between the two dusty erasers on the ledge of the blackboard. Mercury, Venus, Earth-- he repeated them silently to himself as he bounced his legs

beneath his desk--Jupiter, Mars, Pluto. Now he knew their names, most of their names, and their order of my very eager mother just served us nine pizzas, like the Roy G. Biv who Dawny said made all the rainbows. He gazed at the great big rings with the different colored circles on them: red and green and blue-green, red and blue and green and gray. In the picture they were close together, but in outer space they were far, far apart. We live on the green and blue one near the middle, Daniel thought, but there are others. They're very, very far away. Their names were as strange and distant to him as Iowa, which was where the little girl across the street from the old house had moved. (Then they had moved, too, but after the little girl across the street had already gone to Iowa.) And in the middle was the sun, which was yellow and bright and not a planet at all but a big ball of fire that kept everybody warm and held it all together. Of course, he knew that one already. And the moon, which is white and closer than the others but farther, much much farther away than Iowa. Saturn, Uranus, Neptune, he recited in his head. There were nine, but he lived on Earth. He knew that already, too.

Daniel leaned forward in his desk and bounced his legs, looking again at the block of wood. It really wasn't that far away or all that much trouble to go up to and grab. It wasn't nearly as far away as Saturn or Iowa. And he was allowed to take

it--supposed to, really, if he needed it--so there was nothing stopping him. Except Ms. Giddell was still telling them about the planets and their names and their order. When she said they could have a break, when it was time for gym, then he would get up and go to the blackboard, but for now he would sit and wait. He could hold it.

Ms. Giddell was still pointing and explaining, and the way she spoke was different from the way Daniel spoke. She said her words funny--like na-ow instead of no, and she said Mondee, Tuesdee, Wednesdee, Thursdee, Fridee, Sadurdee, Sundee. She spoke a lot and nervously, and she had frizzy hair, but she was still kind of pretty. She'd taught them their names and their order, which were both important because they helped to tell them all apart. Really, though, the sentence about the mother and the pizzas only helped with the order. It wouldn't help them remember the names. Daniel silently sounded out the names of several places he knew about and either had or had not been to, holding it and bouncing his legs as he recited them in his head: Jupiter and Saturn and Earth and Connecticut and Maryland and also Iowa... Why do they talk different here? he wondered.

He could hold it till gym. He assured himself that he really could, but he also guessed that maybe he couldn't. But he stayed in his seat, wiggling his legs, because he thought that at any second (not this second but maybe the next, or maybe just

another second later) Ms. Giddell would tell them it was time to line up by the door and march down to the gymnasium. It would hurt to stand up, but he would, and everybody would walk together down to the gym where maybe they would play scooter basketball, and while everyone was walking in and forming teams he would go then--so he wouldn't even need the block at all. When he came back, he would be picked last by one of the teams. But he would be picked last anyway.

He leaned back in his seat and clenched even harder to hold it, wondering what it would be like to stand on Jupiter or Neptune. He'd been to Connecticut and once to New York City and to Massachusetts and Maryland and probably some other places he couldn't remember, but not to Iowa. And not to the moon obviously. But he saw it through his window at night, just like Harold, who used it to find his bedroom. Or the sun, but that would be a stupid place to visit anyway and hard to get to. He leaned forward, holding it, holding it, holding it, and looked at Ms. Giddell's diagram (which she was still talking about), concentrated on it, trying not to think about how hard it was to hold. He wondered whether they really rode on tracks like that, and if not, what kept them going around and around instead of shooting off like marbles. Or why didn't the moon come crashing down? Or why didn't the planets fall into the sun the way he had sometimes rolled into the dip in the mattress that his mom or

dad made when he had slept next to them, or between them, in their bed. But what if, he wondered now, feeling a bit of genuine worry growing in his stomach, what if the sun just--went out? What if all the... if they did shoot out into space? If there were no sun to hold them? And he grew frightened--terrified almost--by the idea that the planets could snap off their rings and the whole mobile of the solar system could just fly apart.

The seat and crotch of his pants suddenly felt very warm, and Daniel didn't know what to say when Ms. Giddell looked at him and asked him what was wrong.

Daniel held his hands over the wet spot on his pants as he watched Ms. Giddell rummage through a cardboard box in the janitor's closet. Pushing aside a pair of winter gloves and a beaten-up book bag, she pulled out a pair of white corduroys.

"Hey! Here you go." She handed him the pants. "Just put these on. I'll be in the hall--holler when you're done." She stepped out of the closet and closed the door behind her.

Daniel removed his wet pants, peeled off his soaked underwear, and dropped them on the floor. His hands were shaking a little as he stood over his pee-soaked clothes, wishing he could throw them away or bury them or burn them. They stank like the boys' room. Then he pulled on the dry cords slowly. They felt stiff, and the legs were far too long for him. They might

have belonged to a second- or third-grader before making their way into the lost and found. Only the kids in Mrs. Engle's class wore corduroys. That was the small class down the hall, with a single table where they all sat together. Kids said that Mrs. Engle's class was the dumb class--that they were retards. Others made fun of them, saying that they were poor and that's why they wore stupid clothes their cheap moms got at Goodwill. Daniel felt retarded and cheap and poor as he rolled up the stiff bottoms of the borrowed pants. He wondered if his family would have to shop at Goodwill now, too.

He balled up his own pants with his underwear inside then knocked gently on the door. Ms. Giddell came back in and gave him a consoling smile. "Everything all right now? The pants fit?"

"No," said Daniel.

She giggled a little at his rolled-up pant bottoms and slipped a couple fingers under the waistline to see how loose they were. "Well, they'll have to do till your pants can be washed, I guess." He nodded guiltily. "Now, hon, why didn't you just get the bathroom pass if you had to go so bad?"

"I don't know..." muttered Daniel.

"Well, you know you're allowed to go any time, right?"

"Yes." He didn't know why he had felt afraid to walk up and take the block. Other kids did it, but for some reason Daniel

had been scared to take it. He didn't want everyone to see him going up to get the B O Y block, and he didn't want Ms. Giddell to see him with it. It would have made him look silly and it would have been embarrassing, and so he had stayed glued to his seat like a little wimp, even though it had hurt a lot to hold it.

"Hmm?" Ms. Giddell touched Daniel's shoulder lightly.

"I just... I didn't want to get up while you were still..."

"Oh, sweetheart," she said, her heart melting. "Any time... Any time you need to go--even if I'm still teaching--you just go up there and get the pass and go. OK?" Daniel nodded. "All right then..." She sighed and bent down to pick up his wet pants. "You wanna go to gym?" Daniel shook his head decisively. "OK, let's just go back to the classroom then and--" As she spoke, Ms. Giddell grabbed the pant legs by the cuffs and shook them out to refold them. As they unfurled, something bright and metallic shot out of one of the pockets and clattered across the cement floor. Daniel knew at once what it was, and he knew what Ms. Giddell's reaction would be when she saw it. He wanted desperately to throw himself onto it, like one of those marines who jumps on a grenade in the movies, but he stood stock still, staring at his teacher as she bent at the knees to pick it up.

A small, brown, single-bladed pocketknife, worn around the edges, with three capital letters engraved in the handle.

"Daniel," Ms. Giddell said, a hint of worry creeping into her voice. "What is this?"

"It's, it's--" he stammered. His eyes began to fill with burning tears.

She grabbed him painfully by the arm and yanked him forward. "What is this?" Whatever kind-of-prettiness Daniel had found in her face had vanished. "Young man, you know you can't bring a switchblade to school!" Daniel tried desperately to speak, to offer some defense, but as in a nightmare his breath caught in his throat. "Have you ever brought anything else to school that you shouldn't have?" she asked him testily. She pursed her lips in irritation, awaiting his reply.

Momentarily released from his paralysis, Daniel shouted, a bit too loudly for the small closet, "A radio!" He glared at her defiantly for a moment before lowering his eyes again. He found he was too upset to cry.

When his mother arrived to retrieve him, Daniel had been sitting on the uncomfortable plaid couch outside the principal's office for nearly an hour. As she approached, he did not raise his eyes but continued to stare at his shoes, which were made of yellowish brown leather and, though quite new, were already rather scuffed. Having examined them thoroughly, Daniel found them to be both unusually small and strangely sad looking at the

ends of his borrowed corduroys. His mother looked down at him and, when he didn't glance up at her, walked past without a word to address the secretary.

"I'm here to pick up my son."

"Ohhh!" the secretary cooed, leaning to the side to give Daniel a conspicuous wink. She was rosy cheeked and fat. And she was old, maybe even forty. And Daniel had noticed while listening to her talk on the telephone as she was typing that she talked funny like Ms. Giddell. She blinked her eyes and smiled broadly, gesturing to the couch in case Daniel had somehow gone unnoticed there. "Well, he's just right there, Mrs. Dorn."

"Haley," his mother said. "Marion Haley... Actually, I was hoping I'd get a chance to talk to someone. His teacher or--"

"Let me just call Principal Martin for you..." The secretary picked up her telephone and pressed a button. Marion sat next to Daniel on the couch while waiting. Neither of them spoke or looked at each other. "Mrs. Haley's here to see you," the secretary said after a moment. "Yes. Daniel's mother... OK." She hung up and turned back to Marion to inform her that the principal would be right out.

When Principal Martin arrived, she and Marion shook hands awkwardly and exchanged pleasantries. "Please, come back to my office," the principal said. She shot Daniel a glance then

guided his mother down a short hallway. Once they had closed the office door, Daniel could barely make out what they were saying. Normally, he would have been terrified by the possibilities of what might happen to him. In this case, though, he was consumed utterly by the tragedy of losing the pocketknife. There was little worse that could come to pass now. A spanking. An early bedtime for the next couple of weeks. Certainly no television. He didn't care.

From behind the closed door, he heard clips of what his mother was saying: "...on our own..." and "...like a memento or something..." and, after a while, "...the bed almost every night." This was followed by what sounded like a few sympathetic words from Dr. Martin, and something about "understandable difficulty adjusting." As she opened the door, Marion was wiping her eyes. She zipped up her purse and walked out into the office. Waving Daniel toward the door, Marion turned to shake the principal's hand once more. "This won't happen again, I can assure you," Marion said. "Let's go, Daniel."

They walked in silence to Marion's car. Daniel sat in the backseat and tried to avoid looking up at the rearview mirror, but he could tell that his mother was still avoiding looking at him, too.

"Come on, Daniel," Marion snapped. "Put your seatbelt on already!" She reached back and fastened the buckle for him

without checking whether it pinched and without making eye contact. She started the car and quickly pulled out of the school parking lot. After a while she said, "Ed's coming over for dinner tonight. So as soon as we get home, I want you to go to your room and change into a nice pair of slacks and your white shirt. And you can just stay up there till dinner." For several minutes, Marion didn't utter another word. Then she sighed and said, "Well, Daniel, I hope you've learned your lesson."

Unsure which lesson his mother meant, peeing his pants or bringing the pocketknife to school, Daniel lowered his head and closed his eyes. The image of the pull-down diagram at the front of his classroom floated into his head. He tightened his grip on the armrest and, as though it were a mantra, repeated softly to himself, "My very eager mother just served us nine pizzas."