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“Where are we going today?” I asked Patsy.

“Baby, you’re going to a new school, special for you.” Her car was almost an army green so I pretended it was a fast moving tank and nothing could penetrate its armor. We could roll over the cars in front of us or blast through walls to cut corners. Then I imagined both sides of Connecticut Avenue were lined with soldiers saluting us. But the closer we got to downtown, they slowly changed from soldiers to ballerinas. A

special school for me, didn't sound normal. My stomach started tensing up and my palms began to sweat. The ballerinas faded into pedestrians on their way to work.

"I like my old school." I didn't want to go to a new school. I just wanted things to stay the same.

We drove to Dupont Circle. I felt far from home. I looked out of the car at the school as Patsy went around and opened my door. It was an old three story Victorian with details on the front made of concrete. A few older students lingered on the front stoop. One had sneakers with Velcro instead of laces. Another kid's head was oddly shaped like a twisted peanut.

"Will you stay with me?" I asked.

"I can't, Baby," she said and took me by the hand. "I'm too old to be going to your school, but I'll be right here when you get out." I watched her as she walked back to the car and drove off. I could feel the pressure building in my chest. What were they going to do with me? I wondered if there would be more tests like in New York. I wanted to be home.

In the lobby was a box with a pair of tennis shoes sticking out.

"What's that?" I pointed at the shoes and they moved around. They were still on someone's feet.

"Oh that's the Time-Out Box," said the teacher who then took me to a room. "Paul has a knack for getting in trouble." The teacher stopped in front of one of the kids, maybe 13 years-old, who was out front smoking. He had on a red and white striped rugby shirt with blue jeans and wore a pair of Chuck Taylors. His hair was coarse and black, with a crew cut. He was barrel-chested. His brow furrowed as his gaze landed on me.

"This is Sermon," she said. "He's going to show you around the school." He smiled until the teacher left the room.

"Okay, shit bag, follow me," he said, then slapped me on the top of my head when I didn't move fast enough. Right away I was scared of him, and I started feeling dizzy. We walked up the three flights, peeking into classes. The building was old and wasn't built to be a school. It looked like a rich family had lived there once. An older kid with white spiky hair, a beaten t-shirt and jack boots walked past us, unaware of our presence. A kid wearing a maroon Washington Redskins t-shirt stood outside the door. Sermon stopped before him and held out his open palm. The kid reluctantly dug in his pocket retrieving a crumpled dollar bill and handed

it over to Sermon, who then smiled and poked the kid in the stomach with his index finger making the kid fold in half. Sermon left me in a class with kids around my age.

“See ya later, shit bag,” he said and was gone.

“He’s a dick,” said the kid sitting next to me. He was a black kid with short cropped hair and the collar stood up on his Izod shirt. His eyebrows were thick and bushy.

“Pierre, do you need a time out?” said the teacher.

“No,” said Pierre, and then he smiled at me.

My new friend, I thought.

It was The Lab School of Washington D.C., whose name in itself implied an establishment for the abnormal. It was a school for dyslexics. There were no grades. The classes were divided into groups. It was a tactic they used so that, when we tried to compare ourselves with other schools, we couldn’t tell how far behind we were.

The student body at the Lab School was a cross-section of the city itself. Rich or poor, it didn’t matter. If you couldn’t make the grade within the standard school system, you were dumped at the Lab School. My classmates commonly lied to other kids about where they spent their days, naming any school but their own. The shame of being dyslexic was felt in and out of school. Pierre switched school names depending on who he was talking to.

When I got home, all I wanted to do was forget about school but the first thing Patsy said was:

“You should do your homework and exercises.”

“I need to take the dog for a walk first.”

Our dog Pepper was a mute with hair colored like salt and pepper. He was abnormal like me and I had never seen another dog like him. Pepper gave me an odd look when I held the leash in front of him, since I had never walked him before. We just let him go in the back yard. We went out front to play when some of my neighborhood friends came over.

“I heard you’re going to a school for retards,” one kid who lived up the block said. He was a rotund white kid with bad acne who always smelled of onions. His father was a senator.

“What do you mean?”

“You go to the Lab School right?” said another-- gangly tall kid with bright red hair that always dangled in his face. His father was some kind of judge.

“Yeah.”

“What’s the matter with you?” said a girl, whose father was a surgeon. I had a crush on her. She had a cherub face framed by straight black hair with bangs. She smelled of baby powder.

“I don’t know. They said I’m learning disabled.”

“Hi, I’m LLLLLLL...DDDDD....,” said the kid from up the block as he contorted his arm slowly, swinging it back and forth for effect.

“I have to go,” I said, pulling Pepper by the leash, and went back inside. Why did that stupid teacher have to say anything to Mother, I thought. Now everyone thinks I’m stupid. I started to tear up. Why can’t my parents just leave me alone?

Patsy was vacuuming the living room when she saw me walk in.

“What’s the matter, Baby? Why aren’t you playing with your friends?”

“I just don’t feel like it.” I went up to my room.

“You need to be doing your exercises,” she yelled after me. I picked up the half circle and placed it on the bridge of my nose, then moved the pegs around for close to a half hour. Sister walked by my room, looking in.

“No one’s watching,” she said. “Just say you did it.”

I threw it in my closet. I never picked it up again.

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