

Excerpt from the story, *I'm There For You*

I wonder what people mean when they say, “It’s just another normal day.” Is their normal like my normal? Or is their day normal and mine, well, mine is something other than normal? Take yesterday, for instance. I got up late because my alarm clock wasn’t working, and hasn’t for weeks now. I told Mom about it, but she didn’t even look at me when I explained why I needed a new clock. I don’t know if she heard me or not.

Am I supposed to know when to wake up, like I have a special power or something? I do try though, because I like going to school. People care about me there, or at least they pretend to, and that’s enough for me. I like being with lots of people. It’s so different than being home, where I don’t see or talk with anyone for days. The T.V. used to be my compadre, but now that’s broken, too. Guess that’s a good way to describe my life— “broken.” I feel that way most days—definitely not like I am whole, complete, or normal.

Yesterday morning I woke to find the sun was already up. I flew out of bed and ran into the kitchen, stepping on Alice’s tail. She let out a hiss and sank her teeth into my tender, bare foot. That helped me move faster! I glanced up at the kitchen wall where the clock hung above the sink. A clock that looked like a twisted chicken: a sad, scrawny, long necked chicken with a circle of numbers on its wing. The hands resembled creepy chicken feet. It was grotesquely familiar, and I wondered how someone would decide to make something so bizarre. Why would someone BUY it, I wondered even more. With those creepy chicken “feet hands” at 7 and 4, I realized I had to be at school in 10 minutes, or it would be another tardy. I didn’t need another one of those. I already had earned more than allowed for the whole school year.

I flew back to my room, slipped into jeans that were sprawled out on the floor like legs in a crime scene photo I’d seen on T.V. Then I needed a shirt. I dug through the pile of clothes on my closet floor and found an old Batman sweatshirt and some smelly socks that didn’t match. Those would have to do, I concluded. I grabbed my shoes by the door and took off. I sprinted down the driveway and across the street. I cut between houses, hoping maybe, just maybe, I could make it to school before the bell...

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As I flung open the front door of Pine Hill Elementary and Middle School, the bell began screeching like a huge crow swooping down to peck my eyes out. “Well, good morning, Mr. Wilson,” I heard as I flew by the office. The voice came from Mr. Lily, our assistant principal. Yes, Mr. Lily. Being named after a flower did not match this man with an average face, worn and wrinkled by years at his job. Even with his authoritative presence, there was something special about Mr. Lily. Not that I could find words to describe it, but there was something about his eyes. I knew when I looked into them there was something different there. “I was...trying

to...get to class on time, really...I was, Mr. Lily,” I sputtered as my heavy breathing made it difficult to get the words out.

“I’ll walk with you,” Mr. Lily calmly stated, as he caught up with me. I slowed my pace to a stride matching his. “I’m sorry Mr. Lily, really I am. I tried not to be tardy today.” He looked at me with those eyes. He saw ME...I could feel it. I felt better. We walked the rest of the way to my classroom in silence. A silence that returned my heartbeat and breathing back to a normal rate. Kids had found their rooms, and only the squeak of my shoes, wet from the dew on the grass, filled the hallway.

By the time we reached my classroom, it didn’t matter that my morning had been crazy. As I entered the room, I saw Mr. Lily nod to Ms. Franklin. She continued her morning instructions uninterrupted as she responded with a nod and small grin. Trying to make myself small, I slunk over to my desk, sinking down in the seat. I didn’t want anyone to know I’d been escorted to the room, once again.

My desk felt familiar and comforted me. The desk was big, allowing me to slide around easily. It was a great spot too - just five steps from the door, with three desks in front of me and one behind. I could see Ms. Franklin if I tilted my head to the left, but if I sat straight up, or moved my body slightly to the right, I was hidden and hopefully unnoticed. I had a good view of the clock so I could count down the minutes to lunch when I was back in this room for English class. I knew whatever was on the menu would be my favorite meal of the day. Just sitting there made me feel better.

I glanced up at the schedule Ms. Franklin had written on the board. I could count on that. It looked like a pretty normal day, and I let out a sigh of relief. I wondered if I was supposed to have done math homework last night. I just couldn’t remember. Yesterday seemed so long ago. As my mind began to wander, I heard Ms. Franklin’s soft voice as she talked about making this a good day. Maybe life was better for her. Maybe she went to a real home each night. One with hugs, food, talking, and listening. Things all happening in a logical order—kind of like in our classroom. Everything we do seems so organized - planned and meant to happen. How does she make that work? Is that normal?

As I allowed myself to wander off in thought, the homeroom bell rang, and it startled me so much that I lurched forward in my desk and clunked my knee on a piece of metal that dug into my pant leg, creating a hole in my jeans. I tried not to let anyone see how much it hurt as I scrambled to get up and out the door to my first period class in room 217—math. I sure hoped I could figure things out better today. Multiplying fractions was driving me crazy!

The day seemed to last as long as two, but finally the last bell of the day rang. I took a breath, sat and stared ahead for a few extra seconds, then got out of my desk. Kids rushed around me and into the hall like kittens scurrying to a fresh bowl of milk. What next? Head home or hang around school a bit? The school was so quiet after kids left—it was kind of

awesome. I decided to walk along the empty halls, my footsteps making tiny echoes behind me. The solid cement walls made me feel safe and protected. I looked for familiar details along the walls as I meandered down each hallway: a crack about knee high, following the 5th column of cement blocks past the science room, a huge dead spider smashed on the window of the music room (that had been there the past 13 days), and a poster for the fall play that had happened exactly 3 weeks ago, the top right corner flapping over part of Cinderella's face in the picture. I loved this time. I didn't have to think a single important thought. Meaningless details were enough to fill my mind and make me feel calm.

Feeling lighter, I started on my way home, taking the long way. The sidewalks had gathered crunch-filled leaves throughout the day, and I loved the sound as I stomped and shuffled my way down the block. The breeze on my face was soft and smelled of autumn.

Once I got home, I decided to get homework out of the way. As I worked on my math, things seemed to be clicking a little more than usual. Fraction homework had been giving me fits lately, but tonight the problems were working out more quickly and that made me smile. Maybe I am finally getting the hang of fractions. Sometimes I let this math stuff drive me nuts. If only I would just be more patient and keep trying instead of getting mad. Then it's like my brain shuts down and I can't think clearly.

Feeling upbeat, I decided to check out the fridge to see what my supper might be. Hmmmm...a piece of moldy cheese, some rubbery celery and a piece of bologna that looked a little too shiny. No thanks. I opened the cupboard door to my left, and ta da—three cans stared at me! I grabbed a can of pork and beans...a good source of protein, I told myself. I pulled the can opener out of the sink and opened the can containing my gourmet meal. I grabbed a spoon lying on the cabinet and took the can up to my bed where I managed to scarf down the whole thing in seconds.

Sitting on the bed, wondering what to do next, I glanced out the window and saw Mr. Lily walking down the sidewalk across the street. As I watched him, he crossed the road and continued walking STRAIGHT TOWARD MY HOUSE! Whoa...what if he was coming here? Why would he do that? I laid back on my bed and closed my eyes. Then, there it was, a gentle rap, rap, rap on the front door. I thought for a moment if I just held real still, Mr. Lily would go away and I could just wonder what he had wanted. No, I couldn't do that, I was just too curious. I moved to the front door, trying to tidy up a bit as I went. As I opened the door, I could see Mr. Lily turning to leave the porch. "Hey Mr. Lily," I shouted, maybe with a little too much enthusiasm. "Well, hello Mr. Wilson," I heard while I looked into those familiar smiling eyes. "I happened to be in the neighborhood," he lied, "I thought I'd stop and see if you were planning to be on time for school tomorrow." "I want to be on time every day, Mr. Lily, really I do. I just don't always get up on time. You see my alarm clock hasn't been working, and..." Mr. Lily began to chuckle as I tried to justify my consistent tardiness. I noticed Mr. Lily trying to peer through the screen door into the house, so I decided to open the door and go outside to talk to him on the porch. He seemed to think that was a good idea because he sat down on the top step,

and patted the space next to him as a signal for me to join him. My principal is sitting on my porch steps! Who is going to see us and use this moment to tease me tomorrow at school? I paused for a moment, unsure of myself and what I should do, but decided I would take a seat and see what this unexpected visit was all about.

Mr. Lily looked at me and I knew I had made the right choice to sit down and listen. “Jack,” he began, “I am in need of some help, and I thought you might be the person who could help me.” Mr. Lily needed MY help? This all seemed just too weird to me. “I am worried about one of my first graders,” Mr. Lily blurted out. “He is so scared at school, and even though I know he is very capable, he is unable to stop crying long enough to show us the great work he can do.” I realized I had been holding my breath, and let out a large sigh. “I have tried many things to make Zachary, that’s the first grader’s name, feel comfortable, and nothing seems to be helping him. This morning when we walked to class, you got me thinking. You are one of those students that could help Zachary feel comfortable at school, and get him to work up to his true potential.” Mr. Lily went on to say, “You see, Zachary has had some scary stuff happen in his life. It makes him afraid to try anything new. Do you think you’d be willing to be...like a big buddy to him, Jack? Help him to realize that school isn’t such a bad place to be?” I spent what seemed like a long time letting this information run through my head...young boy...scary stuff...afraid to try...all too familiar to me. Could I possibly help another person with things I struggled with? As I was lost in my thoughts, memories filled my brain, and I could feel my muscles tightening as my body began to curl forward. I grabbed my knees and pulled them to my chest. Mr. Lily brought me back to the moment as he asked, “Jack, what do you think?” “Mr. Lily, I, I, I don’t think I’d be very good at, at, you know, helping Zachary.”

Mr. Lily sat and looked at me for a few seconds and then confidently stated, “Jack, I know you are the BEST person in the whole school to help Zachary. Would you please think about it?” My brain was fuzzy, and my thoughts so mixed up, I didn’t know if I could respond. I turned my head slightly toward Mr. Lily, nodded, and looked back down at my knees. Mr. Lily gently patted my back twice while softly whispering, “I know you can do it Jack. Zachary needs you.” Whoa, he NEEDS me? I could never be counted on for anything. As thoughts flooded my head, I had to close my eyes to keep them inside. I lost all track of time. I don’t know if I sat there for a minute or an hour, but when I opened my eyes, I was sitting by myself on the top step of the porch. The breeze was chilly, and I could hear the sharp rustle of leaves blowing down the sidewalk.