

NOWHERE TO HIDE

A young woman with long dark hair, wearing a red and black plaid shirt, dark jeans, and black sneakers with white laces, is sitting on a polished wooden floor in a school hallway. She has her head buried in her arms, looking down with a sad expression. The hallway has white lockers on the left and a doorway in the distance. The lighting is somewhat dim, creating a somber atmosphere.

PathFinders

KIM SIGAFUS

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RESOURCES

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dealing with Life

Hey, I've been looking for you."

Autumn turned away from her blue school locker to see Sydney Coffman standing there.

"What do you want?" Autumn asked, shutting her locker and giving it a little push. It wouldn't close right, so she opened it back up and shoved it a little harder trying to get it shut. She waited until she heard it click and then twisted the lock before she walked away. Sydney laughed and followed her.

"Only a dummy would have trouble with their locker," Sydney said, falling in step beside her.

Autumn didn't reply as she shifted her heavy backpack to the other shoulder.

"I hear you might be trying out for the play," said Sydney, walking backward in front of her.

"So?"

"With the way you talk, you've got to be kidding. You can't even pronounce the name of the play. It comes out sounding stupid, like 'The Jingle Dreth.'"

Autumn tried to ignore her by walking around her and taking a side hall to the parking lot. Sydney caught up to her and gave her a push.

"Hey, I'm talking to you."

"My mom is waiting in the car."

Sydney laughed, pushing her again. "I don't care."

"Stop it," said Autumn, falling back against the wall. She straightened up and caught a glimpse of a couple of kids coming down the hall toward her. She swung her backpack around and held it in her arms for protection.

Two girls rushed toward Sydney with a grin.

“I see you found Autumn,” Bree said. “We were looking for her too.”

“Yeah, she’s thinking of trying out for the play,” replied Sydney. “But I think she might change her mind.”

They stared at Autumn’s stony face as her gaze fell to the floor. She hugged her backpack tighter to her chest.

“You know that we try out for the fall play every year,” said Jayden. “What makes you think you have a chance to get a part?”

“We always get the best parts anyway, so you might as well forget it,” added Sydney, and her friends nodded.

“Fine ... whatever,” replied Autumn, heading for the door again. The three girls laughed and walked behind her.

“She’s so stupid,” Sydney whispered loudly to her friends. “I mean, not only does she talk weird, but she’s too stupid to get her homework done. I heard Mr. B. talking to her after class yesterday. She hasn’t turned any homework in all week.”

“It’s none of your business,” Autumn shot back, struggling as always with the s sounds in the word. She pushed the door open and stepped outside.

As she ran down the steps and headed for her mother’s car, she could hear Sydney yell after her, but she didn’t stop.

Autumn headed across the parking lot to a white SUV. Her mother was waiting there with two-year-old Sam, who was crying. Autumn’s mother was trying to comfort him.

Autumn opened the front door to see her mother glaring at her.

“Why didn’t you answer those nice girls back?” asked her mother, trying to find the pacifier. “If you ignore everybody, you’ll never make any friends.”

Autumn pushed her shoulder-length black hair out of her eyes and sighed. Her mother had no idea what was going on, and she didn’t want to tell her. It would just make matters worse. Better to just keep it to herself, she thought.

She was late getting out of school, and she could tell her mother was mad. Autumn’s dark eyes clouded over as she steeled herself for the yelling she knew was coming.

“And where have you been, Autumn Dawn?” her mother asked impatiently. “I’ve been here for ten minutes.” She fumbled with Sam and then spat out, “What is wrong with this kid? He won’t quiet down!”

“I had trouble with my locker,” Autumn replied as she threw her backpack in the back seat and got into the front seat. “What’s wrong with him?” she asked,

pointing to her brother.

“He hates that car seat,” said her mother. “It’s almost too small for him now.” She growled and turned around to face forward. “He’ll just have to get used to it.”

“Maybe he needs a bigger seat,” replied Autumn as she leaned over to dig into the diaper bag sitting next to Sam. She handed him his pacifier, then she buckled her seat belt and added, “Maybe we should get one.”

Autumn’s mother laughed loudly as she shook her head. Her short blonde curls bounced around her heart-shaped face. “No money for that.” She started the car and pulled away from the school. “How was your day?” she mumbled.

Autumn glanced over at her. “Same as always. Mom, can we do something fun this weekend?”

“I have to work.”

“Oh.” Autumn sighed and stared out the window as they drove through town.

Autumn loved living on the White Earth Reservation. Located in the northwest corner of Minnesota, it was beautiful there. There were woods and lakes all around, and Autumn spent most of her time outside.

Her father, Tom, also grew up there. His Ojibwa name meant “One Who Gathers,” but everyone called him Tom. The thought of her father made her smile. She’d been told many times that with her black hair and dark brown eyes, she looked just like him.

Autumn sat back in her seat, staring out the window as she thought about him. He liked to tell the story of how he met her mother. His parents were hoping he’d find an Ojibwa girl to marry, but he fell head over heels in love with a girl from Topeka, Kansas, by the name of Melissa Stewart. She had come to the reservation to visit a friend for the summer. Her curly blonde hair set her apart immediately from the dark Native American women he was used to seeing around town. Everyone noticed her, as a matter of fact, and Tom had to work hard to make sure she noticed him in the sea of men trying to get a date with her. Autumn’s father told her he won her mother’s heart with his charm. Her mother said it was his work ethic and kind heart.

Once they were married, they both worked hard to support their little family. Her mother got a job working at the library, and her father worked for a construction company. They did a lot of things as a family, until her parents’ occasional fights turned into an everyday occurrence. When she was younger, he took her fishing. Now she hardly saw him at all.

Autumn sighed and her eyes clouded over as she thought back. Things

started to fall apart when Sam was born. There was a lot of fighting, and Autumn used to sit in her room with the door closed and the pillow over her head. Eventually her parents divorced, and her father moved to Minneapolis, several hours away. She hadn't seen him in a long time.

Autumn's mother worked two jobs, trying to keep the family going. Autumn had watched as her outgoing, always-smiling mother became unhappy and sometimes mean. She expected Autumn to do all the chores around the house and help care for her little brother. It left little time for anything else. Autumn didn't mind it, though.

At least that's what she told herself.

As they pulled into the driveway of their little brown house, Autumn glanced out the passenger window of the car and noticed the leaves were starting to change color on her favorite oak tree.

She had been born in the early morning hours of October seventeenth, and her father gave her the name "Autumn Dawn." The day she was born, he had gone to the hospital nursery and unwrapped her hospital blanket to put her into a red-and-yellow one with Native designs. Aunt Jessie had made it for her, and Autumn still slept with it on her bed.

Autumn was jolted back to reality as her mother put the car in park and grabbed four bags of groceries from the trunk. She started to take them into the house, ignoring the fact Sam was still in the back seat. He started to fuss again, and Autumn slowly took her little brother out of the car, wondering why her mother had taken such a big shopping trip. She grabbed her backpack off the seat and shoved it over her other shoulder. Then she smiled and pushed Sam's curly black hair out of his face as he snuggled his plump body into his big sister's arms and yawned. He laid his head on her shoulder and watched his mother fumble with the keys to open the door to the house.

The house was small, with only two bedrooms. Autumn had a room to herself before Sam came along.

She headed to her bedroom now, gently settling Sam into his crib by the window. He fussed a minute, and Autumn gave him his pacifier. He sucked it eagerly and then closed his eyes.

She quietly dropped her book bag in the wooden chair by her dresser and sat on her bed to kick off her red moccasins. All the other kids in school wore tennis shoes, but she preferred these. They were comfortable, and her father had worn a pair just like them on the weekends. Wearing them helped her feel closer to him somehow.

“Autumn, can you come in here, please?”

Sighing, Autumn got up and headed for the kitchen. Her mother was sitting at the table with a cup of tea in front of her. She gestured to a chair, and Autumn reluctantly sat in it. Her mother looked serious, and Autumn wondered what was up.

For a moment, no one spoke, and then her mother sighed.

“I just called your aunt and asked her to come and stay with us for a while.”

“What? Why?”

Autumn’s mother sighed again. “I’m having a hard time with things right now,” she admitted reluctantly. “I need some help. Jessie’s apartment building is getting renovated over the next couple of months. She’s anxious to get away from the noise and mess.”

“What did she say?”

“She’ll be here at the end of the week.”

“Where is she going to sleep?”

Autumn’s mother studied the contents of her cup. “I’m going to move Sam in with me. Jessie can room with you.”

Autumn didn’t know what to say. She didn’t want Aunt Jessie moving in with them. It was bad enough sharing a room with a baby, but at least she had a little privacy at night when he was asleep. Now she would have no privacy at all. And on top of that, Autumn was having trouble with her schoolwork. She studied when she could, but she just couldn’t seem to understand the material. She was starting to get notes sent home, which she had so far managed to hide from her mother. Aunt Jessie would surely pick up on the homework situation and then her mother would find out.

“Autumn?”

Autumn sighed. Maybe Aunt Jessie could help with the bills that were piling up. She’d seen her mother sitting at the kitchen table one night trying to decide which bills to pay and which to put back in the little box she kept them in. Autumn had felt helpless watching her mother try to cope with everything. She did her best to help, but she felt that nothing she did was ever good enough in her mother’s eyes.

She glanced up to see her mother waiting for her to say something.

“Okay,” she answered with a nod.

Her mother got up to put her cup away. “I thought we could start rearranging your room tonight. I can pull the crib into my room so Sam can start getting used to sleeping in there. That will also give you a little privacy before your aunt

comes. I know how important that is to you.”

Autumn’s eyes shot up in surprise. She didn’t think her mother had noticed that.

“I’m sorry to do this, but it’s only for a little while,” her mother went on. “I hate having someone else living here at the house. But it’s been really hard to manage things since your father left.”

“I know.”

Autumn got up and pushed her chair in.

“Go start on your homework now,” her mother added, and Autumn nodded.

“All right.”

Heading back to her bedroom, Autumn grabbed her homework out of the backpack and went into the living room. Dropping her books on the coffee table, she turned on the TV and settled back on the couch.

“Autumn Dawn, turn off that TV and get some work done,” said her mother from the kitchen.

As the TV went off and the books opened to display her homework for the night, Autumn wondered why she bothered looking at it. Half the time she didn’t understand the questions, and the other half of the time the answers she wrote down were wrong or misspelled. She also hated to read out loud. She was a slow reader and sometimes mispronounced words. Some of the kids made fun of her, making jokes about her when they thought she couldn’t hear them. She didn’t understand why she couldn’t learn as easily as everybody else. Maybe she was stupid, like Sydney said.

“Do you want some help?”

Autumn looked up to see her mother drying her hands on a dish towel.

“What?”

“You haven’t started. Do you want some help with your homework? I have some time while your brother is sleeping.” Her mother glanced down at the book on the table. “History, huh? We could read the questions together, and you can write down the answers.”

Autumn shut the book. “Uh, no. I can handle it, Mom.”

“Well, okay. But no TV until your homework is done.”

“I know.”

As her mother left the room, Autumn opened her book again. She started to read the chapter, but some of the words made no sense to her. She pulled out a sheet of paper and wrote her name at the top. It was going to be a long night, and it wouldn’t include the TV.

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