

Cloud of Witnesses

By Jane Hertenstein



Piercing the Eye

Lunch in the cafeteria was again whole new territory. At Stuart everyone was eligible for the hot lunch. Here, students brought their lunches from home and ate sandwiches with thick slices of lunch meat.

One look at the serving line and I understood why kids packed a lunch. The green beans were Three-Mile Island green, radiating a nuclear neon, and the cooked carrots looked like they'd been injected with cancer-causing red dye #5. The steam-table hot dogs were the same color as the mold growing inside the shower stall at home.

But I was hungry—especially after skipping Mama's "good" breakfast. So after grabbing a carton of chocolate milk and the bread option I began to look for a place to sit.

Deciding where and *who* to sit with could determine my entire middle school fate. I looked over the cafeteria. Clusters of kids, laughing and talking with their mouths full, hogged most of the tables. The safest thing for me

was to sit by myself. I found a seat at a table off in a corner.

“Whoa, buddy, what do you call that?” Kyle plopped down beside me, straddling the bench-seat. Above his lip was the smudge of a mustache. His lardy face reminded me of a block of government American cheese, the kind passed out at the Salvation Army.

“What?” I asked.

“That trash you’re eating.” He guffawed. “Get it, trailer *trash*.”

This guy was as annoying as Granny, but I’d learned to ignore her. So I just kept chewing my buttered bread.

After a minute, he started up again. “Check it out.”

He pointed his sandwich toward Hassan, who was scanning the lunchroom for a place to sit. If according to the middle school pecking order the foreign kid was at the bottom, then I’d gladly move up a notch. Hassan took a seat at the end of the table.

I busied myself trying to force open the stubborn cardboard spout of my milk carton.

“Hi guys!” Patty pulled up on the other side of me. As she sat down I caught the scent of lilacs and Irish Spring soap. She was the nicest girl I’d ever smelled. Not that I’d smelled that many. Anyway, I was afraid to look at her, afraid of all the backward things I might do or say.

“Roland,” she addressed me. “You transferred in, didn’t you?”

I nodded.

“From the county school.” Kyle made county sound like a dirty word. Like cootie and county was the same thing.

Patty kept up her questioning. “Do you live near Dow Lake?”

But before I could answer, she went on. “I love that place. I love to roll down the hill by the dam. Have you ever done that?”

Again, she didn’t give me time to answer.

“Or do you live near Stroud’s Run?” she asked.

Stroud’s Run was the state park down the road from where I lived.

“I once saw a coyote in the parking lot there,” she added.

“I see coyotes all the time. Hear them in the woods at night.” I finally got a chance to talk.

“Cool!”

I was beginning to loosen up and feel comfortable with the fact she was sitting next to me. “My dad shoots them.”

Her face went still. Kyle suddenly seemed interested. “With a gun?”

I changed the subject. “What’s he eating?”

Hassan was chomping on a crackery-kind of bread with a filling that looked like mashed wood chips.

“Do they even use knives and forks in Iran?” Kyle mused out loud.

“Shush,” Patty tried to hush me. “He can hear you.”

“Or do they scoop food with their fingers?” Kyle gave me a friendly punch in the side that smarted and made me wince.

Hassan stood. I thought he was going to leave the cafeteria. Instead he walked over to us. “Just so you know Iran is the cradle of civilization. It is where man learned to cultivate crops, domesticate animals. It is the birthplace of many religions. You seem to know nothing.”

The zit on Kyle's forehead pulsed. "Just to set the record straight, I know about the Cradle of Civilization and all that stuff. And maybe you'll find that out when I'm picked for *Whiz Kidz* and you and this joker here—"

Me?

"Are on the sidelines, watching."

Hassan didn't seem fazed. "I'm not worried. For I plan to try out for the Academic Bowl or *Whiz Kidz* as you call it. Perhaps you should be the one to watch out."

Where was a lunchroom monitor when you needed one? I thought they were going to start sparring over who invented iron tools first. Hassan turned and tossed his lunch in the garbage and left.

"Whoa—" I started, but was interrupted by Patty.

"I'm ashamed of you boys."

"God, you sound like a teacher or something," Kyle complained.

Patty froze him with an icy stare.

He wadded up his lunch sack and sank a bank shot from about seven feet back. As he got up he bumped me in the back of the head just as I was taking a sip of milk, spilling chocolate milk down my already wrecked shirt.

"See ya later, moron."

Patty quickly gathered up her books and lunch box. Muttering, "Coyote killer," she left in a huff.

I was back to where I had started: alone. Like a true mortal, I'd only managed to poke myself in the eye.