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Mr. Cross

Drew navigated the corridors of Bridgeton to the threshold of Mr. Cross' classroom. He inhaled with anticipation. The stench of rotting vegetables, wood shavings, and animal droppings invaded his nostrils. A dozen reptiles eating, drinking, and doing their business in a confined space magnified the smell's potency. Bile rose in his throat. He forced it down with a swallow. Sasha Barnett entered behind him. She wrinkled nose and turned back to the hallway. Her friend Cindy rushed from her desk and tugged Sasha into the room.

Drew stared at the line of glass cages on the counters illuminated by heat lamps. He recited the names as he scanned each one. Ozzie the Nile monitor, Iggy the iguana, Lactose the milk snake, Elmer and Super the geckos, Sal the salamander, Wartz the toad, Flash the painted turtle, Hugs the boa constrictor, and the legendary Prometheus. Prometheus—a snake lover's dream. Thirteen feet of hissing and slithering Burmese python.

That's almost three of me!

He fought the urge to head for the animals and read the blackboard first. Mr. Cross scribbled a message in white chalk. It said:

Welcome to Sixth-grade

1. Keep away from the animals! Violators will be prosecuted.
2. Unpack your bag and make your lunch choice
3. Meet your neighbors
4. Keep away from the animals! Violators will be prosecuted.

Mr. Cross set down the chalk. He looked to Drew. "Good morning, Mr..."

The glimmer from a jeweled earring on Mr. Cross' left ear caught Drew's surprised eyes. "Harrington. Drew Harrington."

"Nice to meet you Drew Harrington. Make yourself comfortable."

Drew picked up his personalized Popsicle® stick from the table and dropped it in the "Lunch Packer" cup. He removed his backpack and coat and hung them in a locker along the wall.

Several students searched the room for their seat. Drew passed a pod of four desks and spied his nametag. It displayed *Andrew Harrington* scrawled in cursive black Sharpie.

On his right, Kim Etter. They spent third grade together. Straight across from him, Jackson Harris, Drew's best bud since kindergarten. Diagonal right, the infamous Troy Schwartz.

Jackson strode in with the sound of the morning bell and nugged Drew's buzzed head. "I see T.T. will be joining us." He dropped his bag to the floor. "Feet under desks at all times, in case he springs a leak."

Drew swung his feet beneath his desk and smiled. "Yeah, remember back in second grade when Troy peed his pants thirty-two days in a row?"

"The punches in the kidneys all these years on the playground can't be helping T.T.'s bladder issues."

Troy stood behind Jackson with an uneasy smile on his face. "No more Tinkle Troy?" he asked.

Jackson twisted his torso around in the chair. He grinned at Troy. “What can I say? We’ve matured.”