

Excerpt from *Kathleen's Story*

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The First Day of Sixth Grade

Weeks pass by faster and faster as you get older. My fourth grade teacher told me that every year passes by faster and faster, and it really does. Weeks go by like nothing. I thought about this the first day at Hillcrest Middle School, again and again, as I prepared for my first week there.

Everything was different from elementary school because we had never attended an Open House like before. I spotted a printed list on the guidance window with the list of every student enrolled in each homeroom. I scanned the papers until I located my name under Mr. Ellerbeck's science lab. Shrugging, I began heading towards the C hallway.

Although I had grown to 5'2", I suddenly felt incredibly insignificant. There had to have been people sauntering around who stood at least 5'6". Even more peculiar, it seemed like every other girl was wearing at least eyeliner, eye shadow, and lipstick. I nearly collided with a girl who looked like she was in the eighth grade because she seemed to have an arrogance about her. A few people had out their cell phones, texting mysteriously, scanning the hallways for teachers or other adults.

As soon as I stepped into Mr. Ellerbeck's room, I noted (IMMEDIATELY, I might add) that he looked like Thomas Alva Edison. I bit my lip from attempting to crack up. And nothing's worse than seeing a sixth-grader engaged in her own Laugh Fest. I definitely did not want to get tormented on the first day of middle school.

I wonder if Mr. Ellerbeck also had a peculiar voice. He was already standing at the front of the classroom in his starched three-piece tawny suit with a briefcase and a neat stack of papers, staring off into space. I felt like I was in the midst of a *Brat Pack* movie and people were going to launch paper airplanes in his direction (and possibly send his toupee sailing off his head). Yet my hilarious vision was not a reality as I glanced around the classroom. Silent, inwardly groaning students surrounded me, some with their heads down. A slacker boy with pants two sizes too big and a filthy pair of Vans was slouched in

the corner. The bell then rang in this shrill, disturbing manner that startled me quite a bit.

Well, part of my vision came true. I wondered if Mr. Ellerbeck was partly made of wax because his voice was ancient and shrill. "LADIES AND GENTLEMEN," he proclaimed like he was about to do something Major. "WELCOME TO HILLCREST MIDDLE SCHOOL. I AM CONDUCTING YOUR ORIENTATION, DURING WHICH YOU WILL CONDUCT YOURSELF WITH VIGILANT RESPECT. THE NAMES IN THIS HOMEROOM RANGE FROM CUMMINGS TO ELLIS."

He then paused for ~~three minutes~~ maybe twenty seconds (which, by the way, was still uncomfortable).

I waited for his head to explode. It didn't happen.

Good grief, I thought to myself. Nick's name also started with D. I wondered if he had this quack as a homeroom teacher in sixth grade. For the first time in my life, having the name DeMayo was like... severely uncool. (And his name was only slightly after mine in the alphabet... Detrio, so I planned on asking him when I got home.)

Eventually (after 9 minutes, 48 seconds, AKA 588 seconds of agony), I held my schedule in my hand. Then as I let out a slightly exasperated sigh, noticing I had Mr. Ellerbeck for first period, I heard a pretty exaggerated "Pssstttttt," like in the movies.

I glanced to my left to see a pleasant, beautiful dark-haired girl with hazel almond-shaped eyes. "I wonder if we have any classes together so we can survive this barren wasteland called middle school," she whispered. "Let me see your schedule."

Quietly, she nodded and counted. "Three, we have three classes out of seven together. And as a matter of fact, we share first period together, so we will be able to head into the hallway for a few minutes and-"

The bell then rang to dismiss homeroom.

"Right now," I blurted out. "Thanks for being nice," I extended my kindness. "What's your name?"

"Mia. Mia Davis," she smiled broadly.

"Kathleen DeMayo," I responded.

"DeMayo... I have heard that last name somewhere before," she cocked her head a bit.

"Yeah, we kind of get around," I laughed. "Well, my cousin Andrew is the band teacher at Northside High School. My cousin Russell works at CNN, and..."

"I think I have heard of the one who is the band teacher," she smiled again. "You know what, before we suffocate, let's stand in the hallway for a few minutes. We can head to the water fountain and umm, look cool, I guess."

"Frankly, I think this is our last chance at freedom," I stifled a grand laugh. "This Ellerbeck guy seems pretty intimidating."

She shrugged. "Eh, my eighth-grade cousin Lara had him. Everyone thinks he is a troll, but he's actually pretty easygoing. He just imitates mock seriousness to make himself look intimidating."

"Eh, not so sure about that," I told her, "But we shall see, right? Do you know anything about any of our other teachers?"

"Well, I think our Language Arts teacher, Mrs. Perry, is really young and actually interesting to listen to, and our gym teacher, Coach Gramsden, is about 157 years old. He's actually loads more intimidating than Mr. Ellerbeck."

"Well, thanks for the warning," I half-snorted. "That's probably the part of the day I am looking forward to the least. Changing in the locker room."

"Lara says you don't have to the first day of school, but you will tomorrow. Could be worse, I guess," she mumbled, trying to be optimistic.

"Well, let's head back in and try to look like conscientious, pretentious snobs," I joked.

"Let's," Mia made a very serious face. "Hillcrest Middle School, at the heart of the Georgian Riviera," she rambled.

I didn't understand what she was talking about, but I guess I sensed her sarcasm when a VERY nerdy boy walked through the door. He plopped down in the seat right next to me, in the front row, at the center of the room. He then turned to me and said, "You know, optimal seating maximizes the chances of me acquiring the content at a masterful level."

"WHAT?!" Mia croaked. "Am I in the bad dream being greeted by Supernerd?"

He then let out a smattering of nasally laughter. "Unless the teacher changes our seats, which I hope he doesn't considering the room is nearly full now, I need to tell you that your year will be ENRICHED because of ME."

"Hallelujah," Mia sang out quickly.

"Um, do you know Mia already?" I snuck in the quickest question possible.

"Yes, yes," the boy responded as if he was expecting the question. "Affirmative. Mia Davis and I have had the grand pleasure of sharing class since the..."

"SECOND GRADE," Mia groaned loudly.

"No, it was the *first* grade," he interrupted.

"Uh, what's your name?" I interjected back. "I need to know who Supernerd is in case I need for you to come to my rescue."

"Timothy Zielman, at your service. And just to let you know, I think quite highly of Mia Davis," he smirked.

"Don't. Get. Any. Ideas," Mia grunted.

"MIA?!" a voice called out a few seconds later.

"DANIELLE?!" Mia called back. "Oh my goodness, let's do lunch today! I will seek you out. I hope!"

"I'll be seeking you out, also!" Timothy cried dramatically.

"Restraining order!" Mia sang just as dramatically (if not more dramatically) back to him.

Then (praise the Lord) the bell rang. Mr. Ellerbeck then headed to the front of the classroom in a stiff manner, standing behind his teacher station, which had test tubes galore.

"Good morning," he stated as if he was addressing the House of Representatives.

"Good morning," we all responded.

"To put things aside, my name is David Ellerbeck, and I have taught at Hillcrest Middle School since 1984, or 'the year of the flood', as you may believe."

I actually laughed. A few others actually laughed as well.

"Science is my passion and I hope to instill the same in you. To do well in this class, you need to be superior listeners and take notes, which you can use for various purposes. The textbook is going to be your best friend for the next ten months, so do not lose it or do anything to it so others cannot use it in the future. Therefore, you may not highlight your textbook or write annotations in the margins. This is not college. Reading the textbook and studying thoroughly will help you with the labs I prepare for you. Any questions?"

Timothy's hand shot up immediately as if the president of the United States or a rock star was addressing the class. "First, I want to establish that I study thoroughly for every test I take. I often spend two hours studying for important tests. I am wondering how often we have tests because they are my mere existence."

A few classmates snorted. I didn't know who has been exposed to Timothy before, but wow, I inferred within 45 seconds of knowing him he had mad skills.

Holy cow, I thought to myself, From Park View Elementary School to Harvard. Perhaps Timothy Zielman was one of those advanced brains who would head off to MIT or some major college in just a few years. He talks LIKE AN ADULT.

"You will have tests every two weeks," Mr. Ellerbeck responded.
"Any other questions?"

After realizing nobody else had a pressing inquiry, he pressed on- and hard- for the very first hour of my middle school life. An hour I could never have back. Soon, I realized that the days of icebreakers and easy beginnings were over.