

1. Ashley K.

All The Puzzle Pieces

I like to fit people into the world like puzzle pieces. It's simpler that way. Plus, when I finish the puzzle, I just know Rosy will be happy again.

It's like if I close the blinds, I can read a comic book.

But I need to finish my puzzle, because I know there's a piece missing. I can just feel it. It nags at me, just like when I open a fortune cookie, I have to rip the fortune into exactly 16 pieces. I have to do that. I just know it.

I just know a lot of things.

I live with my older sister Rosalyn, my best friend. But she works every day, even on the weekends, and sometimes she looks really sad. That's why I need to finish my puzzle. If I finish my puzzle, Rosy won't be sad anymore. Rosy's puzzle piece is purpley-blue, her favorite color.

My next best friend is Mrs. Ginia. I go to her house when Rosy's not home. Mrs. Ginia's piece of the puzzle is green, just like the painting she has of her home down South. She says the South is better than the North, but I wouldn't know. I've never been.

Rosalyn teaches me from home. She's almost always a great teacher, except when we start doing math and she falls asleep on top of the worksheets.

That's okay. I don't like math much either.

I'm focused on the missing piece to my puzzle. That's why I always answer the door when the doorbell rings. Who knows when my missing puzzle piece will walk right in?

But now, I'm not so sure I'm ever going to find the last puzzle piece. Because Rosy's going to work longer. And she's decided that I have to go to school. Apparently, I don't go to school because the doctor says I'm different. But I don't think that's true. I feel fine.

I'm excited. I've never gone to recess or sat in a desk or ate with a billion other kids! Rosy says you make plenty of friends and have a lot of fun with your teacher in second grade!

But Rosy was wrong. School isn't fine. I already know I don't belong.

First, the all the other kids stared and whispered to one another as if I were an alien. I checked myself to see if I'd grown fangs or something, but I was clear.

Then the teacher said we were going to have a test over two-digit subtraction. Rosy and I had done this a long time ago. But still, my first test! What if I did terrible? Or if I didn't finish in time?

Next was reading time, which I thought was awesome. My teacher showed me the comic section, and I got this bouncy chair. But then a bell rang in the middle of class, and I jumped, thinking it was the doorbell from home. It wasn't. All the kids laughed at me. I sunk into my bouncy chair, using the collar of my shirt to hide.

On the second day, I took my test. I got nervous and started tapping my pencil against the seat, but then all the kids kept making faces at me. Then the teacher told me to stop, but I couldn't!

I just knew something bad would happen! My teacher talked with me in the hallway. I had a big lump in my throat and I was trying not to cry.

I'm not sure if it worked.

I just don't want to go back. What's the point? Everybody thinks I'm weird, and I haven't even found my missing puzzle piece. If I give up on my puzzle, Rosy's going to be sad forever.

But I have to. I put on my uniform in the morning without feeling excited. When I get to school, I hang up my backpack on the rack and go over to the side and watch all the other kids talking with friends, trying to look as if I'm doing something really important. By the time the teacher calls for us to sit down, I've counted the ceiling tiles 3 times.

There are 146 of them.

I go through the worksheets and then I swing by myself at recess. Lunch comes, where I take my perfectly creased brown bag and sit in a lonely corner.

Except today, somebody sits down across from me. "Hiya, Levi!" She's very bouncy, just like her hair, which spills out of her ponytail. She starts taking stuff out of her brown bag, which is rumpled and messy. I almost grab it and straighten it out, but I don't. I don't need her thinking that I'm weird.

"So you're new, huh? That's super awesome. You like comics? My favorite superhero is Wonder Woman. I want to be just like her. Who's your favorite superhero?"

I looked at her blankly. That was a lot of words, a lot faster than Rosy or Mrs. Ginia had ever spoke.

"Oh, I forgot! I'm Michelle, but everyone calls me Missy." She looked at me expectantly. "What's the matter? Don't you talk?"

Her confidence had swept whatever remained of mine. But I took a deep breath. "Hi Missy, I'm Levi. And my favorite superhero is Batman."

As we started talking about superheroes, other kids started joining in. Because of all my comics, I knew so much! And soon, I knew a Missy and a Daniel and an Amelia and a Jacob and all the kids in the class.

Nobody even minded when I took all of their lunch bags and straightened them out. I just told them that I knew I had to. And they let me!

On the way back to class, I realized something. I hadn't found the missing piece to my puzzle. I had added a Missy and a Daniel an Amelia and a Jacob and all the kids in the class. So maybe there wasn't just one missing piece. Maybe my puzzle just wanted to grow a little bigger.