

LIGHTS CAMERA DISASTER

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RIGHT NOW

I might puke.

Panic ants swarm my body. I can't sit here.

What if no one gets it? Will they boo me?

I scoot out of my row.

"Where are you going?" Zada asks as I pass her.

"Nervous," I mumble. I stand by the emergency exit door. A light breeze blows in around the frame. I breathe. Keep breathing.

"Hester? Is that you?"

Ms. Walker. She's leaning against the wall, a dim shape in the crowded auditorium.

"Hi."

"Did you . . . ?" She gestures at the screen.

My heart hammers, but I stand up straighter. "I did." I can't see her face clearly in the low light, but I'm sure she's frowning. My hands twist together.

The projector comes to life and the soft guitar builds through the overly loud speakers, and the title slides in from the top of the screen:

THIS IS WHO WE ARE

It's my movie. On a big screen.
I might puke, after all.

<< PAUSE >>

How did I get here?
It's kind of a long story. Let's—

<< REWIND >>

- Throwing away the orange
- Mom and Dad in the office
- Hiding in the closet, crying
- Ms. Walker frowning, handing me the test
- My blue elbow
- Reading the MK Nightshade website
- Watching *Jaws*
- Stressing about—

<< STOP >>

<< PLAY >>

FIVE WEEKS AGO

FRIDAY

Ms. Walker stops at my desk, puts my vocab test facedown. Disappointment flows from her pores.

Crud.

I don't want to turn it over. My palms go clammy.

I breathe. I count. I breathe and count.

I'm sweating.

Ms. Walker finishes passing out the tests, returns to the front of the room.

"You may look," she says crisply.

I don't snatch my test like everyone else. The shadow of green marker shows through its last page. Ms. Walker doesn't believe in using red ink because she says it makes tests look "too angry."

"Your homework tonight is to correct your test. Use your dictionary and look up the answers . . ."

In front of me, Sarah high-fives Nirmal across the aisle. No homework for them.

Meanwhile, my heart gets heavier with each beat. I slowly slide the test packet across the desk, pick it up by its corner, and peel it back.

If this were a movie, I'd turn it over and it'd be an A. I'd be shocked, surprised, but secretly have known I could do it. Maybe

there'd be a dance sequence, where the room would go dark and I'd jump out of my chair and do solo spins and leap onto the desks to a cheesy pop soundtrack.

But this is not a movie. At the top, in a big circle, is a D+. Next to it, *Better—but not good enough* is spelled out in Ms. W.'s perfect green printing.

My chest locks, like my ribs won't expand and my heart won't go and I can't get any air in. Then my heart slams, hard, pounding like I'm running for my life.

An anxiety attack. I've had them before, but not in the middle of a class. My hands shake and my skin gets tingly-itchy-twitchy, like there are ants swarming over me, and I want to pull. Them. OFF.

Pop out of my chair. Can't remember my calming strategies. Can barely remember my *name*.

Bolt up the row. My foot catches in the strap of my messenger bag, yanks it across the floor, and all my stuff spills out. Can't even look. Just GO.

The room is silent.

Bang into the classroom door, scabble for the knob, throw it open. Behind me, Ms. Walker calls out, but her words blur and mash together.

Stagger-run out into the hall, find my feet, pound past some lockers. I'm a gazelle chased by a lion in a nature documentary.

Classroom doors, signs, and flyer blow by and I'm in front of Mr. Sinclair, the special ed counselor's office, heart still slamming.

Don't knock, don't stop, just throw the door open. A girl wearing a royal blue headscarf sits wide-eyed in the squashy red guest chair.

Mr. Sinclair takes one look at me and tells the girl to leave. She bolts past me like *I'm* the lion.

"Hess! Hester! Slow it down! You are in charge!" Mr. S. says, and nudges me toward the chair. I sink, struggling to bring my uncontrollable gasps to a more reasonable, human-being breathing speed. Inhaling as fast as a hummingbird isn't working for me. My vision blurs. Limbs shake. It's hard to swallow. Spit pools in my mouth.

"You're hyperventilating," he says. I manage a weak nod.

"Head down!" he orders. I drop my head to my knees.

"Can I put my hand on your back?" he asks, and I nod.

His big hand rests, solid and warm. It grounds me. He counts, "One-two-three-in, one-two-three-out," and after a minute or so I'm actually able to follow his directions. The shaking subsides. The panic ants retreat. I'm breathing.

The bell rings.

"What happened?" he asks, after it's clear that I've mostly rejoined the world of the functional.

I shrug, helpless. "Vocab test returned," I say, using short sentences like he told me, so I won't talk too fast and get worked up. "I got a D plus." Breath. "It's not good enough." Two breaths. "I'm not going to be able to do the Hoot."

Mr. Sinclair kneels on the rug in front of me.

"What's our strategy here?" he asks.

I shake my head. There are no thoughts or strategies in my brain. Only a big red STOP sign, blocking everything.

"The one-inch frame," he says. He leans over to his desk and picks up a small empty picture frame. "Focus on one thing at a time."

This I can do.

“The vocab test,” he prompts.

I nod. Breathe. “I got a D plus.”

“How did you do on the last one?”

“I failed,” I admit, seeing where he’s going with this. “But it’s not enough!” I say, louder than I’d intended. On the wall across from me is a poster of a dog completely covered in mud. The caption: *It washes off.* Yeah, right. I hate that picture.

I breathe again.

“You feel like you’re trying and it’s not enough?” Mr. Sinclair says. His bald spot shines in the light.

I nod, miserable. “She even said so on my test.”

“You *are* improving,” he says. “You have to keep doing the work, Hess.” He has this expression on his face—I’m not sure what you call it, but it’s friendly and serious and thoughtful and kind of stern, all at once.

I guess I’d know that word if I’d passed my vocab test.

“One thing at a time,” he says.

He keeps going, telling me I am okay, and everything will be fine, and blah blah blah. And part of me wants to believe him.

Part of me really does.

But the other part? That part thinks nothing is going to be fine at all.