

# 6.

Jeff Fishkin was hopelessly lost. He clutched his hall pass as he looked down the long empty corridor. The school seemed so big to him.

He was on his way to see the new counselor. She was supposed to help him "adjust to his new environment." Now he not only didn't know how to get to her office, he had no idea how to get back to Mrs. Ebbel's class either.

The floor was slippery. It had started raining during recess and the kids had tracked water and mud inside with them.

A teacher carrying a stack of papers stepped out of a door and Jeff hurried up to her. "Can you tell me where the counselor's office is, please?" he asked. His voice trembled.

The teacher first checked to make sure he had a hall pass. Then she said: "The counselor's office . . . let's see. Go down this hall to the end, turn right, and it's the third door on your left."

"Thank you very much," said Jeff. He started to go.

"No, wait," said the teacher. "That's not right, she's in the new office in the other wing. Turn around and go back the way you just came, then turn left at the end of the hall and it's the second door on your right."

"Thank you," Jeff said again.



He walked to the end of the hall, turned right, counted to the second door on his left, and pushed it open.

A girl with red hair and a freckled face was washing her hands at the sink. When she saw Jeff, her mouth dropped open. "What are you doing in here?" she asked.

"Huh?" Jeff uttered.

"Get out of here!" she yelled. "This is the girls' bathroom!"

Jeff froze. He covered his face with his hands, then dashed out the door.

"THERE'S A BOY IN THE GIRLS' BATHROOM!" the girl screamed after him.

He raced down the hall. Suddenly his feet slipped out from under him. He waved his arms wildly as he tried to keep his balance, then flopped down on the floor.

"Oh no, no, no, oh no, no, no," he groaned. "What have I done? Oh, why didn't I just read the sign on the door? This is the worst day of my whole life!"

Suddenly he realized he was no longer holding the hall pass. He stood up and frantically looked around. "Don't tell me I dropped it in the girls' bathroom."

He heard someone coming and hurried off in the opposite direction. He rounded the corner, then spotted what looked like some kind of storage room. It was cluttered with boxes.

He ducked inside and closed the door behind him.

"Hello," said a voice.



He spun around.

A woman stepped down off a yellow ladder. "You must be Jeff," she said. "I'm Carla Davis." She smiled and held out her hand. "I'm so glad you've come. I was afraid you might get lost."



Jeff sat at the round table. The counselor sat across from him.

"So how do you like Red Hill School?" she asked.

He stared straight ahead. *There's a boy in the girls' bathroom* echoed inside his head.

"I imagine it must seem a little scary," said the counselor.

He didn't answer.

"I think it's scary," she said. "It seems so big! Anytime I try to go anywhere, I get lost."

He smiled weakly.

"It's hard for me because I'm new here," she explained. "Today is only my second day of school. I don't know anybody. Nobody knows me. The other teachers all look at me strangely. It's hard for me to make friends with them. They already have their own friends."

"I know what you mean," Jeff said.

"Maybe you can help me," said the counselor.

"Me?" said Jeff. "How can *I* help *you*? I'm the one who needs help!"

"Well, maybe we can help each other. What do you think about that?"

"How?"

"We're the two new kids at school," she said. "We



can share our experiences and learn from each other."

Jeff smiled. "Okay, Miss Davis," he said.

"Jeff," she said, "if we're going to be friends, I want you to call me Carla, not Miss Davis."

He laughed.

"Do you think Carla is a funny name?"

"Oh, no! I just never called a teacher by her first name, that's all."

"But we're friends. Friends don't call each other Miss Davis and Mr. Fishkin, do they?"

Jeff laughed again. "No," he said, then he frowned. "The kids in my class call me Fishface."

"Have you made any friends?" asked Carla.

"I sort of made one friend," said Jeff, "but I don't like him."

"How can he be your friend if you don't like him?"

"Nobody likes him. At first I felt sorry for him because nobody wanted to sit next to him. Mrs. Ebbel said it out loud right in front of the whole class. 'Nobody likes sitting there,' she said. It was like he wasn't even there. It's bad enough when a kid says something like that, but a teacher."

"It must have hurt his feelings," said Carla.

"No. He just smiled."

"He may have been smiling on the outside, but do you think he really was smiling on the inside?"

"I don't know. I guess not. I guess that's why I tried to be friends with him. I told him I liked sitting next to him. But then he said, 'Give me a dollar or I'll spit on you.'"



"What did you do?"

"I gave him a dollar. I didn't want him to spit on me. But then, later, he said, 'I'll give you a dollar to be my friend.' So I took it. It was my dollar! So does that mean I have to be his friend, even though I just broke even?"

"What do you think friendship is?" Carla asked him.

"I don't know. I mean I know what it is, but I can't explain it."

"Is it something you can buy and sell? Can you go to the store and get a quart of milk, a dozen eggs, and a friend?"

Jeff laughed. "No. So does that mean I don't have to be friends with him?"

"I won't tell you what to do," said Carla. "All I can do is help you think for yourself."

"I don't even know if Bradley wants to be my friend," said Jeff. "Today, at recess, we hung around together but we didn't do anything. He acted like I wasn't there. Then, when it started to rain, he ran around trying to push little kids into the mud."

"Could you share your feelings with him?" asked Carla. "That's the real way to build a friendship: by talking, and by being honest and by sharing your feelings. Like the way we're talking and being honest with each other now. That's why we're friends."

"But Bradley's different than you and me," said Jeff.

"I think you'll find that if you're nice to Bradley,



he'll be nice to you. If you are honest and friendly with him, he'll be honest and friendly with you. It's just like with the dollar. You always break even."

Jeff smiled. "Are you going to see Bradley, too?" he asked.

"Yes, later today."

"Do you think you'll be able to help him?"

"I don't know."

"I hope so. I think he needs help even more than me. You won't tell him anything I said, will you?"

"No, that's one of my most important rules. I never repeat anything anyone tells me here, around the round table."

"Never?"

She shook her head.

"What about to other teachers?"

She shook it again.

"What about to the principal?"

"Nope."

"Okay," said Jeff. He took a breath. "Here goes." He grimaced. "On the way here, I got a little lost, and, um, accidentally went into the girls' bathroom!" He covered his face with his hands.