

ONE

I hated secrets. The thought of hiding the truth just made my stomach turn. Whenever I had a secret, I felt like a criminal. I felt like I was doing something wrong. Something horrible. The bigger the secret, the harder it was to hide, and I sat on an elephant of a secret. If anyone ever found out, the world would change forever. That's a very long time in my books.

I figured the best way to hide the secret from the world was to hide myself from the world. I became a shy, quiet nine-year-old wallflower. I never talked to anyone. I never made a peep in class. I never played with other students at recess. The price of protecting my secret was eating lunch alone. I paid the price without question, as long as my secret was safe.

Then my grade three teacher, Mrs. Connor, changed everything with one question. Little did she know that her question shook the castle walls that I had

built around the truth. The dark, terrible truth about me, Marty Chan.

Mrs. Connor had asked the entire class, “What is the meaning of the word alienate?”

She adjusted her black glasses on the bridge of her hawk-like nose and scanned the classroom for someone to answer. If I looked at Mrs. Connor, she’d think that I wanted to answer. If I put my head down she’d assume that I didn’t know, and she would ask me out of spite. I wished I could turn invisible, but I hadn’t learned how to do that yet. Instead I stared in her general direction without making eye contact. I looked like I was trying to stare at the noon-day sun. I hoped my off-centre, squinty gaze would convince Mrs. Connor to pass me over. I did not want to answer her question.

I knew the meaning of the word, but I didn’t want everyone else to know that I knew. “Alienate” was something you did to make everyone mad at you. I remembered the definition by breaking the word in half and adding an “h” to the second part — “aliens” were “hated.”

If I answered right, I would alienate my classmates. They would give me strange looks, like they did when I first showed up at school. They would make up stories about the weird Marty. They would hound me and try

to learn how I knew answers to Mrs. Connor's impossible questions. Eventually, they would discover my dark secret.

Mrs. Connor singled me out. "Marty, you know the answer, don't you?"

Everyone turned and looked. I turned into a bar magnet and my classmates became iron filings. I couldn't shake off their curious looks.

"Well," my teacher demanded.

Mrs. Connor was the toughest person in the entire school. She dished out detentions faster than you could blink. She sent kids to the principal for chewing gum in class. She yelled at people for even thinking about doing something bad.

One time she made Eric Johnson eat an entire bar of soap because he said something that sounded like a swear. Since then, no one ever stretched their mouth wide open with their index fingers and said "I was born on pirate ship." You did not want to make Mrs. Connor mad, so when she asked you a question, you had better say something to please her.

I looked into the narrow eyes of my teacher and stammered the answer: "Alienate is a verb that means to make someone unfriendly or hostile."

"Correct," she said.

The other kids were shocked that I had said something. They were even more shocked that I knew the answer. I felt my face burn from their probing stares.

Trina Brewster muttered “Smarty-Marty” and giggled.

The most popular girl in class, Trina was pretty, smart, and she wore cool clothes. Her dad owned the only swimming pool in Bouvier — my home town. Everyone wanted to be in Trina’s good books, so when she started making fun of me, the others went along. They whispered Trina’s new nickname for me and other unkind words.

Mrs. Connor growled, “Did I say you could talk?”

Dead silence. Everyone looked down. If Mrs. Connor wanted us to be quiet, she would ask a question. Normally people threw out questions to get other people to talk, but Mrs. Connor used questions to shut people up. She scanned the church mouse-quiet room with her owl eyes, poised to swoop on anyone who dared to squeak.

“You can spend the rest of the class reading chapter eight in your textbooks,” she said.

She walked to the white board at the head of class. Behind her back, Trina screwed up her face and pretended to be Mrs. Connor. She wagged her finger

at Eric Johnson and mouthed our teacher's last instruction to the class.

"That means silent reading, Miss Brewster," barked Mrs. Connor.

Our teacher had eyes in the back of her head, and she could hear better than a dog. She knew everything that happened in her class. If she knew that you had something to hide, she just kept picking on you until you gave up the secret.

Suddenly, Mrs. Connor looked at me and asked. "Why isn't your book open?"

Around me, everyone else had stuck their noses into their books. There were a hundred things I could have done. I could have opened my book and pretended to read. But Mrs. Connor had caught me off guard. I felt like she had just lobbed me a baseball. The right thing to do was to relax and catch it. But my hands had turned into pats of butter and I couldn't field the ball. All I could do was watch it fall on the ground.

"I'm done," I said.

Everyone gawked at me.

"Then read the next chapter," Mrs. Connor said.

"I'm done that one too," I said. Why couldn't I just shut up?

"Then keep reading, Marty."

"I'm done the whole book."

“Everything?”

I nodded. Around me, the kids muttered. I wished I could turn back time, but I hadn’t learned how to do that yet. Whispered questions flew around the room. Everyone wondered how I could read so fast. Rumours would be close behind. The teasing would begin all over again.

Frustrated by her noisy students, Mrs. Connor decided to get rid of the cause. She turned to me and ordered, “Go to the storage room and do some free reading.”

“But I’m done,” I said.

“Read anything you want. Anything you haven’t read yet. Go. Now!”

I yanked my Hardy Boys detective novel from the inside of my desk and got up.

Trina whispered, “He’s not normal. He’s a freak-a-zoid.”

Everyone muttered in agreement. I bolted out of the room as fast as I could. My secret was no longer safe. I stomped into the hall, swung the classroom door shut. Then I stormed toward the storage room and shoved the door open.

“Ouch! Watch it,” yelled a boy on the other side of the door. He straightened his red and blue Montreal Canadiens hockey jersey as he glared at me.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I didn’t think anyone was in here.”

“You dumb monkey butt,” he said.

“Does it hurt?” I asked.

“Duh!” He rubbed his arm where the door had hit him and flinched.

“If it hurts when you touch it, don’t touch it,” I advised.

He pulled his straight brown hair out of his eyes and sneered, “It wouldn’t hurt if you didn’t push the door into me. Stupid Anglais.”

I had heard that word before. The French kids called the English kids that, and they never said it with a smile. Anglais was not a compliment.

The French-Canadian students went to classes on the north side of my school, while my English-Canadian classmates studied on the south side. No one knew what happened on either side of the school. Rather than find out, people just made stuff up.

The English thought the French had magic powers that could turn people into frogs. The French believed the Anglais were cannibals that hungered for French meat. The only thing people knew for sure was that the French hated the Anglais, and the Anglais hated the French.

Every noon hour and recess, the Anglais and the French turned the schoolyard into a war zone. In the fall they pelted each other with crab apples. In the spring they soaked each other by kicking puddle-water. Now, in the middle of winter, they stockpiled snowballs for battle.

I didn't belong to either side of the war. I looked different from everyone else. I had black hair, dark skin, and my eyes were narrow like almonds. As much as they disliked each other, the kids hated me more. They called me names that made my eyes burn with tears and my neck feel all tingly and hot. I didn't want to go to school with any of them, but because I couldn't speak French, my parents sent me to school with the Anglais.

This meant that the boy in the Montreal Canadiens jersey was an enemy. His arms looked like they were cut from stone. Mine looked like they had been fished out of a pot of cooked spaghetti. One of his thighs was as thick as my entire body. He swung the storage room door closed and cracked his gigantic knuckles. I backed away.

The tiny room offered no hiding place. Shelves filled with school supplies surrounded us. The window had chicken wire across it. My enemy stood in front of the only escape route. I ran behind the giant wooden

table in the middle of the room, keeping him on the other side.

“Maybe we can work this out. We don’t have to fight,” I squeaked.

“Are you stupid?”

I smiled. Unlike my cruel classmates, this guy thought I was dumb.

“I’m gonna wipe that goofy grin off your face,” he threatened.

He snatched a white board eraser from the shelf behind him and hurled it. I ducked. It bounced off the wall. He grabbed textbooks and lobbed them across the table. None of them hit me. For the first time I was glad to be scrawny. I picked up a book to return fire. But as I cocked my arm back, Mrs. Connor stormed into the storage room.

“I could hear you from across the hall,” she yelled. “What are you doing in here?”

“We weren’t doing anything,” my French foe mumbled, acting like a captured soldier.

“Would you like to explain this to the principal?”

For an instant, the French boy and I were brothers-in-arms, pitted against a common enemy. Mrs. Connor had us in her sights, and her finger twitched on the trigger.

Suddenly words fired out of my mouth. “It was my fault. I was fooling around. Don’t blame him.”

The French boy shrugged, signalling that he agreed with my confession.

“I’m very disappointed in you, Marty,” Mrs. Connor clucked.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “It won’t happen again.”

“Get back to class.”

“Yes, Mrs. Connor,” I mumbled as I headed out of the storage room.

I looked back at the French boy, but he just glared at me. I was alienating everyone I met. I wished I could make friends, but I had not learned how to do that yet.