

# Dinosaur

*by* Chris Miller

"It's story time. Everyone move to the story circle and quiet down."

Nelson made sure not to hurry over to the circle because Mrs. Edwards smelled like peppers and onions again, especially when she looked directly at him. He couldn't decide which was worse, the coffee breath or the pepper and onion breath. Both are gross, in his opinion.

Jamie and Chris snickered as they walked by. Nearly every day, they made comments about Nelson's dirty pants and his ragged shoes that looked like a dozen angry woodchucks nibbled at his feet.

Many days Nelson eats a flattened peanut butter and jelly sandwich and crushed potato chips because Jamie and Chris had a habit of stomping on his lunch bag when the teacher wasn't looking. Nelson usually didn't mind.

"Get a lunchbox next time you freak," Jamie would say, as he danced over the brown paper bag in a ceremonious fashion. One time a chocolate pudding exploded during this lunchbag sabotage ritual, coating Jamie's jeans, and backfiring on him as the rest of the children called him poopypants for the next month. But rather than relish in the reversal of fortune, Nelson barely paid attention.

"Smelly pants," said Chris, with a sneer as he walked over to the story circle. Nelson didn't even hear him, because he was too busy looking at Marianne, with her shimmering golden hair, parted with care and topped off with patterned bows. He wanted to see where she sat within the story circle and strategically sit nearby.

Despite their differences in upbringing, Marianne was always friendly to Nelson, at times sitting on the swing next to him on the playground, to the dismay of the group of girls who wandered the asphalt as one being, chanting names and singing the popular songs of the week like an ill-fitting chorus line.

Marianne walked up to Nelson, her plaid dress bouncing at her heels. "Hi Nelson."

"Marianne, Nelson, please sit down. Don't make me move your cards to red."

The cards, each bearing a different student's name and following the stoplight ranking system, were a disciplinary combo and Mrs. Edwards' only real form of currency with the students. The good and bad were only buffered by the yellow cards, which indicated a warning. Nelson and Marianne both had yellows already today.

"The longer you take to get to story circle, the less time we have to hear the story. Don't ruin it for the rest of us," said Mrs. Edwards.

Marianne sat down in the already cramped circle, and Nelson was unable to sit next to her, so he picked a spot diagonally behind her. And as Mrs. Edwards spoke to the group, he desperately tried to get her attention, first by clearing his throat, and then raising the stakes by eliciting a "psst" sound.

Mrs. Edwards smiled to the group, despite the growing irritation with the pupils who took too long to quiet down. "Today's story is called, 'What Does a Dinosaur Eat for Breakfast?'" Her breath is often similar to a dinosaur's, thought Nelson, who flared his nostrils when Marianne looked in his direction, sending her into barely contained giggles.

Mrs. Edwards paused at the moment that Nelson snorted like a dragon. "Nelson, if you can't participate in story time, I'm sure we can find a place for you at the principal's office. And we can call your mom while we're at it. Can you please quiet down?"

"Yes," he answered sheepishly.

"What does a dinosaur eat for breakfast?" she read. "Is it toast and a bowl of oatmeal?"

Marianne looked behind her again, and Nelson pretended to pick his nose and roll a fake booger between his thumb and index finger.

Mrs. Edwards stopped again, and glared at Nelson with a recognizable twitch in her lower eyelid. "So, why don't you tell the rest of the class what happens in the book if you know the answer. You obviously do, or you would pay attention."

All of the students' eyes were fixed on him, and now Nelson was embarrassed. It's not that he didn't want to pay attention. He

already knew the answer to this book. But he wouldn't dare tell the rest of the class or Mrs. Edwards.

He knows that a dinosaur eats three eggs sunny side up, with hot sauce, and two pieces of burnt wheat toast. That's if the dinosaur wasn't out too late with, according to his mom, "those downtown whores and degenerates." Nelson didn't know what a degenerate was, but judging from his mom's tone of voice and the hiss through her teeth when he leans down to listen through the registers on the cold dark floor of his bedroom, as if bowing in prayer, that a degenerate can't be a good thing.

He's well aware of what a dinosaur eats, and he cowers whenever he hears the large feet stomp into the house and into the kitchen, rifling through the fridge and complaining about the lack of salami and pickle loaf, which often grew into the sound of plates breaking, followed closely by screaming and crying.

He tried his best not to look at Marianne, or any other student, and Mrs. Edwards resumed reading.

