

Friends

by I. R. Thibodeau

Thomas was nice to me, and that was new because boys were mean in 5th grade. They poked and prodded and made fun of me, and mama told me it was because they liked me, but I don't think it was. It was because of the mole on the side of my face — that ugly mole.

But Thomas let me have some of his Coca-Cola even though I had a full bottle in front of me.

“Want some?”

“Sure,” I nodded.

He looked over my shoulder while I drank. His Coca-Cola tasted better than mine, it had more fizz, and maybe it was sweeter. I took a long sip, probably too long, and he just looked around while he held the bottle for me. When I finished I offered him some of my Lemon Meringue Pie.

“Nah, I got a brownie, you want some of that?”

“No, thanks, I like this pie a whole lot, it really is good. You sure you don't want none?”

He ended up taking a forkful, and then everything fell apart.

The cafeteria was louder that day because it was the first day of classes and there were so many new people there. It was 1957, and my school absorbed one of the all-black schools as part of the new integration laws. We were just far enough north that race was beginning not to matter — though daddy would say that race always mattered. I guess there had to be some people who were mad, but there wasn't a protest that I can remember. Either way, this was the first time in our school that blacks and whites were eating in the cafeteria together and that was probably a big deal. All that the integration meant to me was that there would be more people who could tease me, and since mama and daddy weren't racist I assumed black kids were the same as white kids — I was wrong.

Black kids were nicer.

Since it was the first day we would get a bottle of Coca-Cola and a dessert. Mama told me not to be nervous, and to try and make new

friends. I didn't have any friends, so I looked for an open spot somewhere. I can't remember thinking twice about sitting next to that boy Thomas, and he and his friends didn't seem to mind me. They didn't snicker at my mole when I introduced myself. That made me happy.

"Hi. I'm Rita Bates," I had said. "Can I sit here?"

The boy who introduced himself as Thomas told me I could, so I did, and his friends all introduced themselves in turn. Around the table there was Bev, Ernest, someone whose name started with an F — maybe Fannie — Janice, Timothy, Christopher and Pattie.

I was the only white person at the table.

"How's everyone today?" I asked. I tried to remember what mama taught me about being a lady.

"We good."

That was Ernest I think. He was bigger than Thomas, but uglier too. Thomas sat with his hands folded in his lap, and he seemed shy.

"That's good ... Ernest, right? What'd y'all bring to eat?"

Everyone plopped their brown lunch bags on the table and pulled out the same thing: bologna on white and soda crackers. Only Thomas and I were different. We had fluffernutters.

"*Ooooooh, lookit!* Rita and Thomas got the same thing!" That was Pattie, I think.

There were a few giggles around the table, but nothing like what happened with the white girls when they thought you liked someone. They would tease you for hours and make notes and cards and tell the boys that you stared at them during class instead of writing your multiplication tables and wouldn't stop until you cried. They were so mean. Mama told me to ignore those girls. They hurt me, though. They made me turn red and then they'd say that I looked like a bruised apple because of my mole. It wasn't a big mole either, and daddy would tell me it was a beauty mark because it was different. But nothing different was beautiful in grade school and mama and daddy didn't understand that. That was why the whites hated the blacks so much: because they were different. They talked different and acted different. Their skin was different. And all those little

white girls and boys who picked on different people just grew up to be big white girls and boys who still picked on different people. It still makes me sick, but on that day in September while we sat in that noisy and tense cafeteria and ate our sandwiches and giggled when Christopher would go cross-eyed, I forgot that we were different. No one asked about my mole, and I didn't say anything about their skin. These people liked me.

"This is nicer than the old school," Timothy said. "These tables and fans y'all got in here, it's nice. The chairs are nice too. They don't wobble or nothin'"

"Well, yeah," I said, "they are pretty nice, but it's nothin' special. My daddy says that that school up in Brickshore county has the nicest gymnasium he's ever seen. And get this — they don't even have games in there, they just have it."

"We didn't have this stuff either," Bev pulled a folded up invitation to the annual PSA dinner out of her pocket. "We didn't used to have to be told to come to a dinner to eat with our friends. Most of the time someone in the neighborhood just cooked somethin' and invited other people over. Why y'all need rules to eat together? It's kinda phony, ain't it?"

I hadn't thought about that.

"Well, we have cookouts too, but it's hard to have a lot of people over, I guess. You know, they always talk about how clean your house is and what if the roast was cooked right 'n' stuff like if the salad was good. And then they talk about you."

"They talk about you after your ma' and pa' feed them?" asked who I supposed was named Fannie.

"My mama says that sometimes people are mean like that," I shrugged. I felt as if I had to apologize for other white people, then Thomas laughed and said us white people were weird and I agreed.

After were finished our sandwiches Christopher asked if we wanted to play *the game*. I didn't know what the game was, but Thomas explained it to me while the others waited for the Coca-Colas to come around.

“OK, so we used to play this during lunch at the old school and people thought we were weird, but it's fun. You gotta take your lunch bag and put it on your head, and you gotta keep it on as long as you can. You can't get embarrassed and take it off or let it fall off or be scared that you're gonna get in trouble. The first one to take theirs off loses and gets a smack on the back of the hand from everyone at the table. OK?”

It sounded funny, so I nodded and put my bag on my head with everyone else. That's when I got in trouble. Mrs. Patterson was coming along with the soda and dessert cart.

“Rita Bates, what are you doin' sittin' over here?” She was smiling, but I remember wondering why she was smiling, because I knew she wasn't happy judging by the way she was squinting her eyes.

She was Marla Patterson's mother, and Marla Patterson was one of the girls who teased me about my mole. Mama said that Marla's mom was a busy-body and a brown-noser, and daddy always chuckled and told mama to stop sayin' those things. Mrs. Patterson was a brown-noser, and a racist.

“Why in heavens name aren't you sittin' with your friends, darlin'?”

“These are my new friends, ma'am. This is Thomas, Bev, Ernest, F-Fannie, Janice, Timothy, Christopher and Pattie.”

They all said their hello ma'am's and please-ta-meetcha's.

“That's great that you're makin' new friends, miss, but don't ya think your old friends are missing you?” her smile faded a bit.

“What old friends?”

“Why, Marla and Janet and them, of course!”

“Oh, they were my friends?” I had some of my table-mates giggling a bit now.

“Well, I'd assume so, miss,” she had her hands on her hips, “don't they eat lunch with you every day?”

“No, I usually eat alone, actually. They usually point and laugh at me from another table and then call me a bruised apple and a weirdo.”

“Oh come now, I'm sure they don't say those things. And I'm sure they don't mean anything by it.”

“It's OK, Mrs. Patterson, I'm fine here with my new friends, I really don't think Marla likes me much anyways.”

“Whatever you say, missy. She'd have good reason to think you're a weirdo wearin' that bag on your head, now, wouldn't she? Why don't you take that think off and go sit with Marla. I'm sure she'll be happy to see you.”

I forgot about the bag. Ernest slipped his off and Christopher's eyes got as wide as the moon. I felt my face turning red. Now all my new friends were gonna make bruised apple jokes and ruin everything.

“Really, Mrs. Patterson, I don't wanna go sit anywhere else. I like this chair and my new friends, and I like wearin' my bag on my head. Can we have our desserts and Coca-Cola's?”

She looked like someone had smacked her. She looked indignant. But she took a deep breath, stared at me, and fished nine bottles out of her ice bin, and plopped an assortment of smushed desserts on to our table. We all thanked her, but she hustled off without acknowledging us.

“You gonna get in trouble?” Thomas asked.

“No, my mama and daddy won't care, and those girls really aren't my friends. They tease me a lot. I don't like them. They're...just mean.”

“Why do they tease you?” Thomas asked. Christopher was pointing out to everyone the Ernest had taken his bag off — that's why his eyes widened.

“I don't know, they make fun of my mole and they say I'm ugly.”

“You ain't ugly, Rita, that's stupid.”

I was blushing again. Here was their chance to call me a bruised apple.

“Thank you”

“You look like you're getting' hot.”

“Oh, sorry, this bags kinda makin' me warm.”

He lifted his Coca-Cola bottle.

“Want some?”

It wasn't until he took some of my pie that anyone said anything. Pattie made another long *oooooh* sound and the rest of the table giggled. They'd finished slapping Ernest on the back of the hand; they were watching me and Thomas now. I didn't really care, though, because I knew that they weren't gonna make up a rhyme and tease me all night like Marla would have. Thomas looked over my shoulder again, and everything fell apart.

“YOUNG MAN! Just what do you think you are doing?”

It was Mrs. Patterson again.

“You...you spit that pie out right this second! That IS — NOT — YOURS!”

Thomas swallowed and gaped at her. The groups around ours stopped talking and soon the entire cafeteria would be silent too.

“She told me I could have some, ma'am”

“Oh, she did, hmm? And why on earth would she let a little negro boy have some of her dessert when he's got a perfectly good brownie in front of him?”

“Because I let her have some of my drink, ma'am. She was just being nice.”

“Being *nice*? Rita take that darned bag off of your head! She was just being *nice*? You mean you made her feel like she had to give you some of her pie, right?”

“No, ma'am, I don't. I didn't make her do anything, we are friends. We like each other.”

This was when she lost it, I remember. Georgette Patterson turned pink and the rouge on her cheeks blended in to her skin. She gripped her cart so tight that her knuckles went from peach, to white, to red and the veins in the hands bulged. She was possessed with hatred, it seemed.

“You're not friends with her, boy. Rita just can't make friends with any of the white girls so she has to sulk all day at lunch. She doesn't even *bother* to be a proper lady anymore. She doesn't say hello to them, and that's why they don't like her. She's just sitting with you because she's *just as good as you coloreds*. And she refuses to try

and be a part of our *normal* lives, just like you and your people. It's a disgrace. White and black kids shouldn't even be in the same damned cafeteria together!"

She breathed heavily while the words she spewed dawned on her.

Thomas looked her in the eye, and I looked at the table. I could feel the entire gymnasium looking at me. I probably looked like a bruised apple. Marla said something like "Oh, look, Moley's done it again!" across the room. It wasn't until I saw marks on the table cloth that I noticed I was crying. Why couldn't I make friends? I had to speak up. Daddy would have wanted me to speak up.

"Mrs. Patterson, we're friends I —" and that was when she smacked me — right on the cheek where my mole was.

My bag fell off of my head.

The cafeteria was quiet now, and I tried to remember what daddy taught me about being brave and fighting or what mama taught me about being a lady. I didn't know which lesson would work, so I just tried to stop crying. Mrs. Patterson straightened her apron and her hair and walked away, her cart clanking. My tablemates gapped at me like I was some kind of superhero, and I didn't even hear Marla saying anything wise anymore. Thomas put his Coca-Cola bottle up to my cheek which was burning, but I hadn't noticed until the cold bottle relieved some of the sting.

"You still wanna sit with us?" Thomas asked after a minute.

