

JAM SESSIONS



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Illustrations by Myles Richardson

Lyrics to “The Duck Song” used with permission

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#1

Phillip's Thomas the Tank clock read 11:47. He knew he was too big for Thomas, but he loved the "choo choo choo" alarm it blared every morning.

Something crashed downstairs. Phillip pulled his covers a little tighter. As he had other nights, he put his pillow over his head.

Fragmented phrases echoing from his father's gravely voice penetrated his ear's pillow fortress. "Next time I swear ... I didn't come home for that trash dinner... Phillip and you... worthless... never again, understand?"

The voices faded, and sleep finally came.

Phillip woke. There was no familiar "choo choo choo." There was only his mother's hand on his shoulder and her other pressing a finger to her lips. She picked him up from the bed, something she had not done since he was in elementary school.

"Not a word," is all she whispered.

Tired, dazed, and confused, Phillip had no response but to comply. It was not until their old Ford Taurus had rumbled an hour down the highway that he dared to ask questions. His mom wiped her eyes as she drove. He thought he saw blood on her cheek, but he was so tired. Through her tears, she told him that answers would come tomorrow.

At an all-night gas station, they waited in their car by the store's door till a lady he had never met drove up. Phillip jumped a little as she entered the parking space a little too fast. In nights to come, that would be the image he remembered most vividly. That car racing into the space beside their car, abruptly stopping, and the woman's door flying open while the car still rocked a bit from hitting the curb.

His mom exited their car and opened Phillip's door. He squeezed his hand. She held the squeeze and as it loosened she motioned for him to follow her into the lady's car. Too soon Phillip lost another battle to sleep. He remembered waking but did not know how long they had driven. His mom carried him as the lady led the way into a house. The last thing he remembered was a cot, his mom's hand on his back, and a fear that his life would never be the same.

#2

Phillip walked into the room at 1:15. It was really late to start a school day and this looked nothing like his school.

“My skirt is ruined!” a girl exclaimed with a tear rolling down her cheek. Her eyes moved from the lump of blue icing on her bottom to the chair she was sitting in to a group of boys in the back. “It was those three!” she hissed, pointing. “Ralph, Javante, and that Chuck.”

Chuck, Ralph, and Javante all huddled together in a back corner. They seemed undisturbed the girl just shouted their name. Phillip watched one of them give his best, “Who? Us?” look. The other two shrugged and smiled.

Phillip started taking very short breaths. He was standing in the door and needed to move.

Phillip’s eyes fell on a table with cupcakes. He locked on one with pink icing and walked to it without looking around. A parent cleared her throat and Phillip reluctantly looked up.

“Only take one cupcake, young man. Just one.”

“Yes ma’am,” Phillip said though he thought his voice was barely audible. Not knowing where to go he stood awkwardly beside the table.

The mother moved away to the girl with the icing on her. “I’m sure no one did it on purpose, sweetie,” The mom said. She did not seem convinced of her own words and gave the three boys a second look. However, she did not pursue the boys or the case of the spilt icing any further.

Phillip watched as the mom turned away. He began eating his cupcake slowly. He needed to hold it more than he wanted to eat it. It gave his hands something to do. The boys in the back started pulling cupcakes out of a plastic carton.

A nearby girl looked at the three and said, “Chuck, you were just suppose to take one cupcake.”

“I only took ONE PACK. Not my fault it had six cupcakes in it!” came Chuck’s response.

Phillip moved his attention to the rest of the room. Everyone was collected in groups of three or four talking. He had never felt so alone. The teacher was at her desk behind a computer screen and a name plate that said, “Mrs. Murray.” Phillip was pretty sure she never saw him come in.

Phillip moved to the back of the room against a wall. It wasn’t a seat, but at least he wasn’t front and center anymore.

“It was a sacrifice TOTALLY worth it,” the one Phillip thought was Chuck said patting another boy, who held an icing-less cupcake on the back.

Chuck then looked up again to make sure no one was watching. Phillip realized that as far as anyone was concerned, he was invisible. Phillip scanned the room and also saw that the moms were still helping the girl with the icing on her skirt. Mrs. Murray was absorbed in a set of papers she was grading.

“Watch this,” Chuck whispered just loud enough for Phillip to hear. At first, Phillip thought Chuck was talking to him. He pushed his back against the wall trying to hide and breathed a sigh of relief when he realized Chuck was talking to his two friends.

The two friends watched with rapt attention. Chuck filled a Coke bottle half full with Sprite. Then, out of his pockets, he took a handful of soy sauce packets. “Gotta love Chinese day,” he continued. “Guys, help me open these and put them in.”

Chuck pointed to the two-liter Coke bottle as he squeezed the first packet’s contents into the container.

The boys took their time over the next few minutes, watching for anyone who might catch them. Fifteen packets later, Chuck stirred in a little more Sprite, shook up the bottle, and examined the contents.

“That’s like the perfect color,” one boy said in awe.

“I KNOW, right?”

The boy next to Chuck in a red shirt volunteered, “Ok. I got this.”

He got up with the Sprite and Coke bottles and walked with them to the front of the class. There he smiled at one of the moms before throwing his cupcake wrapper away. Then he casually set down the two bottles back on the food table and walked away.

Phillip felt his chest tighten. He wanted to go tell a mom or Mrs. Murray what he just saw, but he was not about to make that his first act as the new kid in the school.

“Come on Ralph,” Chuck said as Ralph came back to their area of the room. “Let’s play some paper football.”

Ralph looked Phillip up and down as he walked by. Phillip froze but Ralph didn’t stop. He just continued over to the desk his two friends were occupying. A paper football game began. Phillip had a friend he played paper football with at his old school. A friend he likely would never see again.

A few minutes went by, and Phillip realized his cupcake was not going to last him the rest of the day. He studied his hands, curious what they would do when they no longer had the desert to hold.

“Yuck!”

Phillip looked up to see who had yelled. A frizzy-haired girl spit her drink all over the floor. She glared at Chuck. Chuck snickered but never stopped playing paper football.

The two moms rushed over to the girl. “Ashley! Are you alright?”

Ashley broke her gaze with Chuck to bend over and cover her mouth. She looked like she was about to throw up. Mrs. Murray looked up just in time to see Ashley make a finger gesture at the boys with the hand not covering her mouth.

“Ashley,” Mrs. Murray said, “That is not appropriate behavior.”

“That’s right Ashley,” Chuck echoed, “That is not APPROPRIATE behavior.” Chuck smiled at her before resuming his game with Javante.

An intercom announcement boomed, “Phillip Rhodman, please report to the office for dismissal.”

His mom must have finished registering him. As he started toward the door, the class looked around and stared at him. Phillip looked at the last two bites of cupcake in his hand. It was turning mushy from where he was sweating. He wanted to be anywhere but here.