

2nd place winner

What's in a Name

by Mary Palmer

... ONE ...

"Ugh, you're so weird," Lynn complained as she walked down the street with Ana.

"You're going to have to be more specific. You call me weird on a daily basis. What, if you don't mind me asking, makes you say it today?" Ana said.

"No one uses notebooks anymore," said Lynn, giving the notebook Ana carried a disgusted once-over. "Writing stuff down on your phone is way easier."

"Harriet the spy used a notebook."

"Harriet the Spy isn't real," Lynn reminded her.

Right, thought Ana. *Book characters are not real.*

And she wrote it down in her notebook.

Lynn rolled her eyes, grabbed the notebook from Ana, and pulled her into the bakery.

Every Wednesday, Ana and Lynn went to the Vanille Patisserie, just a few blocks from their small apartment on Jefferson Street in Chicago. She didn't really care for pastries, but it was her favorite part of the whole week for one simple reason: people. Ana never got to talk to people. She embarrassed herself and her family almost every time she opened her mouth. At least, that's what Lynn told her. But her mother, insisting she get out and about once in a while, let her tag along with Lynn.

Sitting Ana down, Lynn took her by both the shoulders and said, "Ana, look at me."

Ana did not look at her. "I want my notebook."

"Your mom says I have to look at you before I leave so I know that you heard me," Lynn reminded her.

Ana huffed into her brown bangs. "Just because you're older, you act like you're the boss."

"I *am* the boss," Lynn reminded her. "Because you, for obvious reasons, can't be." Ana didn't reply. She was right, of course, but Ana wouldn't say so. She looked at Lynn, instead, who said, "I'm going to get in line to get a cookie for us both to share. Doesn't that sound yummy?"

"I'm not a baby!" Ana suddenly screamed. "I'm 14!"

Lynn's eyes twitched and she clenched her teeth. "Ana, what did we say about screaming in public? It's embarrassing. It makes people uncomfortable."

Ana stuck out her tongue and snatched her notebook back from Lynn, who rolled her eyes again and got in line. She felt bad, but she couldn't control it. Besides, something in her believed that Lynn deserved to be embarrassed, even if Ana didn't do it on purpose.

There were plenty of interesting people in the patisserie to talk to and make friends with. Ana spotted a kind-looking old lady, just a few tables over. Bingo.

Ana looked from her notebook to the old woman, and back again. Just like the character in her favorite book, Harriet the Spy, Ana kept a notebook of all her observations. Talking to people about their lives made her feel like her life wasn't so unusual.

Plus, Ana thought, *I don't have any friends. But everyone here is a potential friend. Except for Lynn.*

"Hello," said Ana, plunking herself down next to the woman. "My name is Ana."

"Hello Ana," the old woman said. "I'm Kathleen."

"Kathleen, what is something you're not very good at?"

“Oh, um...” Kathleen was quite taken aback by the question. Conversations with strangers usually consisted of topics like the weather. Ana thought the weather was boring, so she found more stimulating topics. She never found the interactions awkward or uncomfortable, though.

Because I'm not a stranger, she would say to herself. I am a potential friend.

“Well, my memory is fading, so I have a hard time remembering words. When I forget the word I want to use, I obsess about it all day, and by the time I've remembered, it's too late to matter anymore,” Kathleen confessed.

“Loganamnosis,” Ana said.

“Ana!” said Lynn, having suddenly returned with the cookie. She always showed up at the most inconvenient times, just when Ana was starting to make a new friend. “I'm so sorry she bothered you,” Lynn apologized to the woman. “We'll be leaving now.”

“No, that's quite alright. She wasn't bothering me at all. Might I trouble you for the definition of that word you just said?” Kathleen asked Ana.

Ana adjusted her glasses. “Loganamnosis - an obsession with recalling a specific word that has been forgotten, stemming from the Greek root - ”

“That's enough!” Lynn hissed in her ear. She put on a sweet face and turned to Kathleen. “Please forgive her. We really have to go.”

“It was nice meeting you, Ana!” Kathleen called after them, waving.

“You too!” Ana waved back. “Crazy the people you meet in downtown Chicago, huh, Lynn?”

Lynn grunted. “Whatever. You're so embarrassing. Can you at least *try* to act normal?”

“But I'm not. That's what mom said. That's what dad said. That's what the doctor said. That's what -”

“Yeah I get it,” Lynn cut her off. She started walking home while Ana wrote in her notebook:

Kathleen - loganamnosis

“What's so special about that notebook anyway?” said Lynn after they had been walking for a few minutes.

Ana shrugged. How could she possibly explain it to Lynn, anyway? The notebook was her only friend, the only one who listened. It didn't make her feel stupid, like Lynn did. It didn't make her feel incompetent, like Mom did. It didn't make her feel like a chore, like Dad did. It didn't make her feel like a baby, like Dr. Kempton, her therapist, did. It didn't make her feel like anybody. And that was the best feeling in the world. Because when you're nobody, no one can judge you.

When you're nobody, no one can judge you.

“Aren't you going to answer me?” asked Lynn.

“Um...it reminds me of mom and dad. You know, since they gave it to me.”

Lynn shrugged. “They also gave you that weird name.”

“It's a family thing. You're not my real sister, so you wouldn't understand.”

“Hey, it's not my fault my mom is in rehab. Trust me, I *know* I'm not your real sister.”

“Good,” said Ana, trying to hide how hurt she was.

“At least I have friends,” Lynn said under her breath.

“I don't have any friends,” said Ana, her eyes full of a familiar apathy that Lynn had seen so many times before.

“It's okay, Ana,” Lynn said awkwardly, finally realizing how much she had hurt Ana. “You don't need those things to be happy. You have me. And your mom and dad. Your family. Right?”

“Yep,” said Ana. What else was she supposed to say?

“So, what does your name mean?” Lynn asked, trying to change the subject.

“Sarah Omniana Sonder. My first name is the same as Mom’s, so I go by my middle name: Omniana. It means a miscellaneous collection of scraps of information on different topics, often in written form, like Harriet the Spy’s notebook. Sonder is the realization that each random passerby is living a life as vivid and complex as your own, in which you might appear only once, as an extra, eating lunch in the background.”

“That was...informative. It sounds like you had that scripted,” Lynn said.

“Kind of,” Ana admitted. “I’ve been waiting to tell you for a long time. You just never asked.”

“Well that hasn’t stopped you from telling me other useless information,” Lynn mumbled.

“My name isn’t useless information!” Ana screamed.

Lynn’s cheeks flushed. “Shh, Ana, shh. Don’t scream. I’m sorry, okay?”

She wasn’t sorry. Ana knew that from the past five years Lynn had lived with them, ever since she was taken away from Aunt Phoebe, Dad’s sister. Lynn had just finished her junior year of high school, and Ana had just completed her eighth-grade year. Lynn had made it very clear that Ana was *not* to talk to her when they were both at the high school next year. She usually apologized for the way she treated Ana only when it benefitted her in some way – for instance, getting Ana to stop screaming.

“Your initials are pretty cool,” Lynn offered, once again changing the subject.

“What?”

“Sarah Omniana Sonder. S.O.S. Did your parents do that on purpose?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never thought to ask.”

“Well, you should.”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah.”

They walked in silence the rest of the way home. When they arrived, Ana realized immediately that something was off.

Lynn, as usual, was on her phone.

“Is that your friend’s car?” she asked, pointing to the royal blue Honda Prelude parked in their apartment’s guest parking space.

“No, I don’t think...” she trailed off when she saw the car. Her whole body tensed. “Oh no.”

Lynn took off in a sprint up the stairs to their front door, Ana close behind her. Lynn was just about to open the door when someone on the other side beat her to it.

A tall, abnormally thin woman with yellow-stained teeth and a loud-cheetah print dress stood in the doorway. Her frizzy brown hair and unnecessarily bright red lipstick gave Ana an uneasy feeling. She’d never actually met Aunt Phoebe before, and didn’t know much about her because Lynn refused to talk about her.

“Lynn, baby! It’s time to go home.”

Ana’s cousin didn’t move as Aunt Phoebe pulled her in for an awkward hug. Lynn turned her head to look at Ana.

“S.O.S,” she mouthed.

And Ana understood.

Lynn knew about Ana’s disabilities, how her brain worked a little differently; and they’d never been particularly great friends. But at the end of the day, they trusted each other, so Ana wanted to help. Besides, Ana had a feeling that her parents had given her those initials on purpose. Why, exactly, she didn’t know. Maybe it was because they thought she needed help. Or maybe because they were hopeful she would give it to whoever she could. Ana liked the second option better.

Even with the tension present and the chaos sure to ensue, Ana turned to a fresh page in her notebook and wrote:

Lynn - in serious need of help.

She thought for another minute as everyone stared at Lynn and her mother, unsure of what to do. She scribbled another observation:

My name has a meaning. Maybe it means I can help Lynn. I'm capable of helping.

Ana wondered for a moment, as mother and daughter stared at each other for the first time in years, if that was really true. After all, this was unfamiliar territory. She thought back to all the things her teachers, classmates, parents, and doctors had said over the years. Whatever they tried to tell her, she knew they all thought the same thing: she was incapable.

Incapable in math class. Incapable of focusing without medication. Incapable at making real friends. But not so incapable that she couldn't be there for Lynn when she needed it most.

Why? Because autistic and incapable are NOT the same thing.