

11:30-12:15 : Lunch

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They came back different. And I don't mean the ways you'd expect. I mean, of course they had the new haircuts and attitude problems and all the stuff you see after summer break. But they're jumpier. And they don't complain about the lima beans anymore.

Today was harder than usual. Not because of any big disaster but 'cause one of our kids never showed up this mornin for head count. Just didn't show up. Absent days 'round here usually don't mean nothin good, but Sarah's tryin to get us all to do the hopeful thing, least till friday. And I'm worried all right but all that keeps goin in my head is "thank God it's not a teacher this time" Cause really they're near impossible to replace and I'm no good at math an' recess duty's about all I can handle. But it is sad when a kid up and leaves. Cause when it's a grown person you know they made up their own minds but with the lil' ones you know someone else is pullin' em away from you. The one thing that's stayed the same is even if you do all the right things an' do right by your kids and make 'em smile and feed 'em good there's still a great big ol' world you can't do nothin about when they leave your sight.

I'm a lunch lady. It's what I do. An' I didn't used to love it-wanted to be a writer or somethin' when I was a kid- but I have to love it now so I do. Cuz it's all about the kids. Some of 'em, we're all they got. There was these two kids, little kids, right near the beginning when people started getting taken away right out a their cubicles or somethin' and put away. An' they ended up staying in the school while everything happened, kind of camped out in the science lab. 'Cause the thing is, especially in the beginning, things happened real fast. You make yourself your fancy little salad with the cranberries and you call your aunt to wish her a happy birthday, then you're sitting in a board meeting and your fingers start turning blue and suddenly you can't breathe cause you know you've got hours left to live. And once you know you've got it it's too late and most people just start driving and don't stop at that point cause it's just so damn painful to watch someone die like that, and besides, if someone is showing symptoms, they're about an hour from being the most contagious they will be. No time for phone-calls or goodbyes, it was just a game of how far you could get and how to best minimize the damage. A lot of good people went like that, just gone.

But the kids.

They woulda been all right if they'd had a key, but their mamma was one of those anti latch-key types and the kids- I mean little kids, 8 and 6- didn't want their parents mad at em for breaking a window so they turned right 'round and went back to school. An nobody wouldn't have found them if I hadn't come back to the kitchen an' seen all the mess. An I said "Mirriam, you know rats and this aint rats". Cause these kids couldn't work my big ol can opener on the counter and had eaten nothin' but from the big peanut butters with the pop off lids for Lord knows how long. An' when I finally found 'em the older one looked so wild I thought he was gonna bite me or somethin'. Big ol scared eyes. An' the younger one stared cryin' and I started cryin' too cause they just looked so small in that big ol room with nothin' but each other and coke cans from the vendin' machine in the teacher's lounge.

They're all right now. 3rd grade English teacher ended up taking 'em in. But I still make 'em two jelly sandwiches on PB&J day cause I know neither of 'em can stand the stuff after all that.

It's a lot of stuff like that- they're just kinda different now. Used to be kids like to holler right. Something bout being all short and all makes you want to scream about everything. But they don't do that anymore. And I never thought I'd miss the sound of a K-2 lunch but they just... they don't sound right anymore. It's like there's a heavy, itchy wool blanket- the type with the velvety trim that lives up in the closet- just laying on top of them- on top of us. And it's soaking wet and it's trying to suffocate us and I've gotta stand up tall like so the kids don't feel how heavy it is. But even if it's not them bein' crushed', they're still under the blanket. All that mess to say, it feels hard to breath.

But that's all we can do right? Breathe and sing songs and redraw the hopscotch board on the black top by the swings and open up juice boxes for 'em. That's all we're here for anyway. Making sure they make it long enough to find a way to move on. All of us, we're

joggin' in place makin' sure they know how to run when they're old enough. And I know they will too, kids bounce back like that.