

## **The Proper Way to Eat a Cookie: Dawn Christianson**

Dread twisted Joy's stomach as she thought of the day ahead of her. This would be her first day back at school since the treatment and she didn't feel ready. She grabbed the sticky note off the bathroom mirror. As usual, Mom was long gone at work already, but she always left messages for Joy on the mirror. Usually they were reminders, but lately they've only been sweet notes of encouragement. It read, Your beautiful my sunshine, keep your chin up. Mom. Joy sighed, dropping the note to the bathroom counter. She didn't feel beautiful. Her hair was gone and she looked frail and weak. How could she be beautiful after all that? Leaning in over the sink, she gazed at her reflection. Her make up was perfect, everything exactly as it should be. Including the always messy eyeliner, today it was flawless, but those eyes! Blue eyes stared back at her, sad and alone. Her gaze traveled to her scalp where little blonde hairs started growing back. Bringing her wig up to her scalp she compared the shades. Fairly close. Not enough for people to notice. Hopefully.

Hurrying through the rest of her morning routine she made it to the bus stop with a few minutes to spare. Kicking at a pebble on the ground, she waited.

"Joy! Your home!" a voice called behind her.

Her heart skipped a beat at the sound of his voice. Turning around, she smiled. It was her new very attractive neighbor. Aaron just moved here early this summer. She had a chance to meet him, right before she left for her treatment. And ever since then she couldn't stop thinking about him. He was tall and had amazing curly brown hair, and those eyes! Oh, those eyes which could melt any girl's heart with a glance!

"How was your stay?" He asked as he walked up and gave her a side hug. His arm around her shoulders was heavy, and she winced at the pain.

Recovering before he could notice, she forced a smile and lied. "It was great!" She hadn't told anyone from school the real truth. All of them thought she moved in with relatives. Carefully constructing a web of lies, she had everyone thinking her relatives were going through a hard time. Supposedly wanting to help, she moved in for a while to help with their kids. No one knew the truth and she was gonna keep it that way. After all, the treatment was successful. She would recover and move on with life as if nothing ever happened, and no one needed to know.

"My relatives have got their feet under them now." She kicked at a pebble on the curb. "They didn't need my help any more so I was able to come home." Looking up she stared into his eyes.

He gazed back. What if he saw through it all?

"That's great they're doing better, I'm happy your back, school will be much better with you." She felt her face warming and her wig felt crooked. She could only hope he wouldn't notice.

It was time she changed topics, her lungs greedily drank in the cool air. She hadn't noticed she had stopped breathing till now. "It feels so good to be back, didn't even know I missed this old bus stop!" Needing him to stop looking at her, she looked around as if remembering good old times. That was when she noticed, her old neighborhood friend, short little Samuel walking up the street.

A twinge of guilt stabbed her stomach. Samuel was the only real friend she ever had. And she hadn't talked with him since entering highschool. He was her best bud growing up. They shared so many adventures when they were younger. From playing in the woods together, to him teaching her how to properly eat a chocolate chip cookie, to the time they even started a neighborhood lawn mowing business together. But all that changed in highschool. Everyone at school thought he was weird, and kind of a nerd. Being so smart in grade school, they advanced him two whole grades. So even though he was a junior, he should technically be a freshman. As they started high school Joy finally saw that being friends with him was keeping her from other friendships. She didn't want him holding her back socially, so she let him go.

Earbuds jammed in his ears, Samuel listened to classical music as he weaved through the crowded hall. Since he was so small for his age, he possessed many abilities his peers didn't. Including the ability to squeeze through crowded spaces with little effort. As usual he kept his head on a swivel. Being small had its positives, but the huge downer was the bullies. Yes, music was a stress reliever to him, but the tradeoff was the loss of hearing his surroundings. The harassment wasn't extreme, mostly verbal snipes he ignored. But if he could avoid getting slammed around, it was even better.

Today though he wasn't just looking to avoid people, he was also looking for someone. Seeing Joy on the bus this morning, his mind wouldn't leave her alone. She seemed different somehow, and he couldn't quite place it. Definitely skinnier, that could be it, but it seemed like there was more. Maybe staying with her family was hard on her.

Someone grabbed him from behind. Putting his head in a choke hold, they tore out an ear bud. "Hey Tiny, whatcha listening to?"

Samuel didn't even have to guess who was behind him, he already knew by the voice. It was Aaron. The new neighborhood kid who tortured his life.

"Classical?!" Aaron shoved him away. "To make you smarter? Just keep listening!" He mocked. His possi laughed and they turned to go." You'll get so smart your brain will explode!"

Anger burned within him, come back after come back raced through his mind but he stayed quiet. No use saying anything, it'd only make things worse. Plugging his earbud back in and weaved through the students in the other direction.

There was a pause in his music as the next song began. Suddenly his ears were assaulted with Carly Rae's song Call Me Maybe. His little sister must have messed with his play list again. If this song was played only a few minutes early, Aaron would have heard. They would never leave him alone again! Making a mental note to fix his list later, he spotted Joy up ahead.

She stopped at the water fountain. Time seemed to slow. She was only ten feet away, he should say something. But what? He pulled an ear bud out. She was at the taller fountain. He could use the shorter one. He preferred that one anyways. It fit his height. Insecurity flooded his mind. Girls didn't want guys who were shorter than them. If he drank from the small fountain that would only remind her of how short he was. Only a few steps away, he needed to decide now!

Joy's back ached. Her pack was so heavy and leaning over the water fountain only aggravated it more. She couldn't take it anymore. Needing relief, she slid the backpack off her shoulders. Her hair caught in the strap. As the pack slid it took her wig with it. Mortified, she turned trying to catch it before it fell.

Samuel saw her wig fall to the ground. It all made sense now. That's why she was so skinny. The helping family thing was a lie. She spun around and he caught her eyes. Panic written on her face. He needed to do something to help to get the attention off of her! Looking around no one seemed to notice, yet.

Weaving down the hall faster, he dodged through. Taking his speed up to a sprint, he hoped to grab attention. It wasn't enough. He needed more. Song still playing in his ear, he opened his mouth and sang along. Quiet at first, then louder. Making a great display he sang out with all his heart, as loud as he could. "Hey I just met you, and this is crazy. " He grabbed the nearest girls hand and dropped to one knee, "But here's my number, so call me maybe."

"Let go of me!" The girl recoiled pulling her hand away.

"What is he doing?" A guy next to him asked.

Scanning the faces, all eyes were turned to him. He kept it up, singing his heart out, gathering a crowd, till he finished the chorus. Glancing back, there was no sign of Joy anywhere. Hopefully she was able to get her wig back on without anyone noticing.

With every shred of dignity torn from him, he rose to his feet and walked on as if nothing happened. But he saw everyone's criticizing looks and heard their comments. Aaron and his possi were there too, doubled over, laughing at him.

Samuel grabbed a giant chocolate chip cookie and put it on his tray. Today wasn't all bad, cookies always made him feel better. Scanning the cafeteria, he spotted Joy, there was an extra seat next to her too. He was ten feet away, when Aaron sat next to her. She was all smiles and was laughing.

Sick to his stomach he kept walking, heading for the corner where there was an empty table.

Joy couldn't believe her luck. Aaron seemed as if he liked her. He was so cute and he was talking with her! Her heart skipped a beat and she lost her appetite. Reaching for her chocolate milk she washed down the bite of cookie in her mouth.

"Hey Tiny!" Aaron called to someone behind her.

Turning around she saw Samuel.

"Why don't you give us an encore?" Aaron spoke loud enough to gather people's attention.

Samuel hung his head and kept walking. Anger rose inside of Joy. No one knew what Samuel had done for her. And now Aaron was embarrassing him further. How could he be such a jerk?

Joy stood up and grabbed her tray.

"Hey? Where're you going?" Aaron asked.

"To go sit with my friend." Joy retorted as she followed Samuel.

She couldn't believe she had wasted two whole years, missing out on a real friendship.

Samuel plopped his tray down on the abandoned table, and sat down. Looks like he was gonna eat by himself, again. A warm hand touched his shoulder and he turned.

"Thank you, for earlier." Joy smiled at him. She set her tray down and sat next to him.

She picked up her half eaten chocolate chip cookie and smiled. “Mind showing me again, the proper way to eat a cookie?”

At that moment Samuel knew, Joy was back.