

Slice-of-Life

Jessie couldn't be sure if Mike was already standing in front of the locker they shared because the hallway was so crowded with students. It was the break between first and second period, her longest break of the day, and the only time she'd have all day to talk to him about the party tonight.

"Jess!" someone called out over a throng of students. It was Leanne, her next door neighbour and best friend, at least until Mike came along. "You coming with us at lunch?"

"Can't," she called back over a sea of heads. "Volleyball practice."

"Skip it this time."

Jessie shook her head and rolled her eyes, trying to give the impression that Coach Leung would have her head on his plate if she dared miss practice. But the truth was that Jessie was barely able to keep up at practice as it was because she had only quit smoking a few weeks before try-outs and was struggling a bit to breathe during drill. She had a hard time believing that she had smoked so long that it actually affected the way she played sports. Jessie frowned as the thought ran through her head another time.

Then she saw Mike. He was standing at their locker with his hand resting on the top of the door. Troy was there too, and it looked like they were getting ready to leave. Mike doesn't have a spare, she thought to herself, so he must be skipping out. Jessie knew he didn't usually need to go to class or even study to do well on tests. He was kind of like a genius.

"We're heading out," Mike said quickly as she approached. "Want to come with us?"

Jessie thought hard before she answered. She knew she couldn't really afford to miss Algebra. She'd already failed it once, which was embarrassing, and she needed it to graduate next year. But she could really use a cup of coffee, and she totally loved taking drives out on the highway, stopping once in a while to walk around and explore a frozen river or overgrown path leading to some secret place. In those secret places, she'd shared a lot of stories with Mike about growing up, and about what was happening between her parents since they started living apart the year before.

"I have volleyball at lunch so I can't really..."

"Say no more," Mike said, grinning, before he kissed her on the forehead. "I get it."

When the warning bell for second period rang, Mike was gone with Troy before she could even ask him what to bring his dad for his birthday.

Ever since her mom moved away, Jessie had grown quite close to Mike's mom, but she didn't know Mr. Lee very well at all. All she really knew about him was that he worked at a bank, was president of the Youth Outdoor Adventure Association, and always treated her like she was an adult. Sometimes Mr. and Mrs. Lee took her out with them to fancy dinners, and they even let her order drinks. The waiter never asked to see her ID when she was with Mr. and Mrs. Lee, which was good because she was still too chicken to take the test, especially in the winter...

Mike yanked on the combination lock and, with the fingers of a wannabe guitar legend, whisked it up and set it spinning on his finger like a child with a toy. Resting his other hand on top of the open locker door, he peered inside and considered what he needed.

“Ready?” grunted his buddy Troy, now standing beside him in his jean jacket, his cigarettes in one hand and a blue lighter in the other.

“Yup, but I have to stop by the Chronc office on the way out to check in with CJ,” Mike said, grabbing a couple of books.

“Who’s that?”

“Assistant editor,” Mike answered. “Tavitz wants me to help him teach her the editor’s role or something, for next year. So I said I’d get her number and...”

Mike stopped talking when he saw Jessie. She seemed anxious, but that wasn’t anything new. He wondered if she’d been like that before her parents separated.

“We’re heading out. Want to come with us?” he asked, when she was close enough to hear over the noise in the hallway. He wasn’t really listening when she answered – he had suddenly remembered that his dad’s birthday party was tonight and that he hadn’t gotten him a present yet – but he could tell from Jessie’s expression that she couldn’t make it. He grinned and bent down to kiss her on the forehead.

“I get it,” he said, “See you tonight, okay?”

When the warning bell rang, Mike and Troy were already in the room that Mr. Tavitz, the writing teacher, liked to call the Chronicle Newsroom, even though Mike himself was the only person on the school newspaper staff that ever seemed to cover world events and other news. CJ was nowhere to be found, so they bolted past the last set of lockers of the school’s east wing and through the glass doors of the school into the winter sun. Snow crunched under their feet as they headed to the parking lot.

“We’re playing a new set of songs tonight,” he told Troy, climbing into his dad’s truck.

“I thought it was your dad’s birthday bash tonight.”

“I mean later, at Mark’s. He’s letting us use his living room to jam. Lots of people will be there.”

“You taking the truck?”

“If I’m allowed. Can’t carry my gear over in my mom’s car.”

Mike and Troy looked at each other and burst into laughter.

Pulling out of the parking lot, Mike remembered that he’d have to drive Jessie too, and that there might not be much room in the truck cab. He knew Jessie’s dad would be there when he picked her up. And he knew Mr. Morgan would be checking out the vehicle and who was in it. Mike didn’t want to disappoint him. A month before, Jessie’s dad had been pretty cool about finding out about the joints Mike had in his pocket. Mr. Morgan could’ve forbidden him from seeing Jessie, and he could’ve told his parents about what happened, but he hadn’t done either...