

Hamburger Breath

Sitting. In English class. Round table. Four allowed at a table, only ever four allowed at a table. Why. Should English class be so boring. ? Anyhow, to my right is a girl and to my left is a boy with a crush on that girl. I, of course, am in the middle, and if you want me to talk metaphors, I can. A big, blond man is teaching about a salesman dying—something like that.

The girl to my right smells her hands, and reports, “Ugh, my hands smell like hamburgers. I am not amused.” Though she does smile. She folds her hands in a little pile of fingers on the table, and for a moment I think there are five of us. I don’t want to hear about the death of a salesman, but because we are at the frontmost table, all I can give her is a tacit bemused nod. She thinks I didn’t hear or care.

From the whiteboard the voice emanates, “Willy is deluding himself in order to attain a sense of accomplishment.” Hamburger-hands over there is taking notes, and I think the boy to my left made a comment on her eternal misfortune. I’m neither taking notes nor engaged in conversation—I’m hardly there. Somewhere, my own hands are clicking and unclicking a pen.

“So, wait. Is he really well-liked?” asks my girl. “Or is he lying, or does he know...?” She is directing this question to the teacher, and between her and the teacher is me. There is a very funny thing about that arrangement. I am in the middle again. It means that she has to breathe across me to get the words to him; and as she does, I notice it’s not just her hands that smell like hamburgers. She has most definitely been eating hamburgers.

Suddenly I can’t contain the thought, and I laugh over her sentence.

Everyone looks at me and after a brief pause, the teacher starts answering her question in a long, slow drawl, explaining that Willy is deluding himself in order to attain a sense of accomplishment. The girl doesn’t look at me, she goes on writing notes with those hands of hers.

But I know something, myself, now, that I didn’t know about this girl. She has always been in perfect display: her hair has been done, her clothes are well-chosen, her shoes are tied, and sometimes she wears a little makeup. Never has her breath betrayed anything but toothpaste. But now! Now, with, of all things, hamburgers—a food I hate, a smell I detest—on her accidental speaking breath, I realize she is imperfect. It is possible for her to affect me in a negative way.

However, somehow I still love that breath, despite those awful, awful hamburgers. That’s when I knew: if you can still love a person when their breath smells like hamburgers, they’re going to be your friend forever. I stood up, and left the middle seat—I had to go the bathroom, I felt strangely like my hands needed washing.