

## ONE

I hated secrets. The thought of hiding the truth just made my stomach turn. Whenever I had a secret, I felt like a criminal. I felt like I was doing something wrong. Something horrible. The bigger the secret, the harder it was to hide, and I teetered on an elephant-sized secret. If anyone ever found out what I knew, the world would change forever. That's a very long time in my books.

I figured the best way to hide the secret from the world was to hide myself from the world. I became a shy, quiet nine-year-old wallflower. I never talked to anyone. I never said a peep in class or at recess. The price of protecting my secret was eating lunch alone, but I paid the price without question. All that mattered was that my secret was safe.

Then my grade three teacher, Mrs. Connor, changed everything with one question. Little did she know that her question would shake the castle walls that I had built around the truth. The dark, terrible truth about me, Marty Chan.

Mrs. Connor had asked the entire class, "What is the meaning of the word alienate?"

She adjusted her black glasses on the bridge of her hawk-like nose and scanned the classroom for someone to answer her question. If I looked at Mrs. Connor she'd think that I wanted to answer. If I put my head down she'd assume that I didn't know, and she would ask me out of spite. I wished I could turn invisible, but I had not learned how to do that yet. Instead I stared in her general direction without making eye contact. I looked like I was trying to stare at the noon-day sun. I hoped my semi-squintiness would convince Mrs. Connor to pass me over. I did not want to answer the question.

I knew the meaning of the word, but I didn't want everyone else to know that I knew. "Alienate" was something you did to make everyone mad at you. I remembered the definition by breaking the word in half and adding an "h" to the second part -- "aliens" were "hated."

If I answered the question, I would alienate my classmates. They would give me strange looks, like they did when I first showed up at school. They would make up stories about weird-o Marty. They would hound me and try to find out why I was so bizarre. Eventually, they would tear down the walls around my secret and discover the truth. The horrible truth.

Mrs. Connor singled me out. "Marty, you know the answer, don't you?"

Everyone turned and looked. I turned into a bar magnet and my classmates became iron filings. I could do nothing to shake them off.

"Well," Mrs. Connor demanded.

Mrs. Connor was the toughest teacher in the entire school. She dished out detentions faster than you could blink. She sent kids to the principal for chewing gum in class. She yelled at people for thinking about doing something bad.

One time she made Eric Johnson eat an entire bar of soap because he said something that sounded like a swear. Since then no one ever stretched their mouth wide open with their index fingers and said "I was born on pirate ship." You did not want to make Mrs. Connor mad, so when she asked you a question, you had better say something to please her.

I looked into the narrow eyes of my teacher and stammered the answer: "Alienate is a verb that means to make someone unfriendly or hostile."

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