

## Ripples.

As soon as she got home, Jess plopped her bag onto the counter, grabbed a bowl of Cheez-its, and raced up to her room before slamming the door closed. As she reached for her sketchbook, her thoughts raced. Did she really matter? Was what Veronica said true? Her mind took her back to that afternoon.

As she walked back to her locker from Social Studies, Jess noticed Veronica had tripped a younger 7<sup>th</sup> grader and was talking to her in a mean tone of voice. Jess immediately began walking over to her.

“Veronica, that’s not nice!” She exclaimed.

“Oh, and you think you’re opinion is supposed to matter to me?” She said with an ugly grin.

“Well, if we’re going down that path, what really matters here is focusing on lessons and getting your work done.” Jess pointed out.

“You really think you matter, dork? You really think that out of over 7,000 people, you’re the one who should be accounted for? Guess what: you’re just like everyone else! NO ONE CARES! Toodles!” She exclaimed and strutted away.

Jess had been so astonished about what Veronica had said that she didn’t move until the warning bell for Math had rung.

Now, as she thought back to what had happened, she was surprised that the conversation had taken such a sudden turn. But the main question that Jess had tried to

forget, that ended up tucked away in some dark corner of her mind, still lingered. Did she really matter? She walked over to her mirror and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear.

Jess was a 12 ½-year-old girl, with chocolaty hair that she was told looked dark red in the sunlight. She had grueay eyes, which meant blue/green/gray; Jess invented the word so that it wouldn't take as long to say for others with her eye color, and lots of freckles that mostly dotted the bridge of her nose and cheeks; with a few scattered far and wide across her forehead.

“Jess! I'm home!” Her mom yelled from the kitchen, back from work.

“Great, Mom! I'll go get Collin from ASPFC!” Jess replied. ASPFC stood for After School Program For Children. Every day after Kindergarten at Jess' old school, Lakeshell Elementary, Collin went to an afterschool program at Rolling Hills preschool, which was right next door to Lakeshell. There he made arts and crafts with other kids and his former preschool teacher, Ms. Lubell, until Jess or her mom came to pick him up.

As Jess glanced down, she realized she hadn't had a single one of her Cheez-its. She grabbed the bowl and her beanie-it was January, after all-and jogged down the stairs. She dashed into the kitchen, said a quick goodbye to her mom, emptied the Cheez-its into a baggie, and grabbed her coat before racing out the door. After that, she simply walked in silence except for the crunching sounds of Cheez-its being consumed. She knew that as soon as she picked up her brother, he would talk to no end, so she relished the silence while she could.

When she got there, Collin was sniffing. It was obvious he was upset, but he didn't want his classmates to know.

“Thank you, Ms. Lubell! Collin will see you tomorrow!” Jess said, while grabbing Collin’s hand and making her exit.

“Anytime, dear!” Ms. Lubell replied. Collin nodded at her as Jess closed the door behind them.

“Sooo. . .what happened?” she inquired.

“It was fine.” Collin replied, focused on the stone he was kicking on the sidewalk.

“Come on!” Jess teased, elbowing him in the arm.

“Fine. . .” Collin said grudgingly. “Joey said. . . that my art project looked stupid,” he said, holding up the remains of a cardboard hedgehog.

“Then he grabbed it form me and started tossing it around to everyone in the group. Ms. Lubell was in the restroom. I told everyone to give it back to me, but they wouldn’t. Then Michael passed it back to Joey and he stepped on it. I started crying and when Ms. Lubell came back, she thought I broke it.” By then, Collin was sniffing and there were small tears in his eyes.

“Aww, Colin,” Jess said in a soothing tone. “We can always make a new one.”

“But it’s not the same!” he said, distressed.

“No, it’s not,” Jess replied. “Ms. Lubell doesn’t let you do mohawks or nerf guns, in your crafts, right?” Collin’s eyes brightened.

“Are you saying what I think you’re saying?” he asked.

“Yep. I’ll help you make a new one. We might have just enough time before dinner if we hurry. Race you home!”

For dinner they had corn on the cob and croissant sandwiches. Collin refused to have dinner without his new hedgehog buddy, which he dubbed “Billy,” so they had to

add an extra leaf to the table so Billy could sit next to him. Collin and Jess' mom ate most of their food, but Jess only picked at hers. She got the job done, though, and she was glad she did, because her mom had a special treat for dessert.

“Ice cream! I found this at Price Chopper on sale!” her mom exclaimed, holding a tub of vanilla.

“Ohmygosh! OHMYGOSH! OH-MY-GOSH!” Collin screamed, running all around the house, only pausing once and a while to catch his breath.

“I'll get the bowls and spoons. Are you sure we should give him any? He seems hyper enough already,” Jess stated with a smirk.

“Jess! How dare you! And to your own brother!” Collin exclaimed before continuing his routine.

Jess plopped the bowls and spoons on to the counter and her mom scooped equal portions into each. That night, Jess and Collin ate their ice cream in front of the TV.

When she got to bed, Jess was very happy, but not enough to keep the question in her mind at bay. . .

The next day at school, Jess had just finished English class and was strolling back to her locker to change her books before the transition to Social Studies. Before she got there, a girl stopped her. Jess recognized her as the 7<sup>th</sup> grader from yesterday.

She was African American, with blackish, redish hair styled up into a cute but messy bun. She also had freckles and proudly wore a teal headband with black lettering on it that said: LBGTQ+ with a rainbow heart on either side.

“Hi!” she said enthusiastically. “My name is Layla. I just wanted to say ‘thanks’ for what you did for me yesterday. It mattered a lot to me to see someone finally stand up to Veronica!”

“You’re welcome!” Jess replied. “See you around!”

“Bye!” Layla called as she scurried off to her next class.

After school, Jess kept thinking about the conversation she had with Layla. Something about it just kept coming back to her. Then it hit her: MATTER. Layla had said that what Jess had done to help her MATTERED. Hmm . . .

“JESS!”

“YEAH?” Jess yelled back, wondering if she did something wrong.

There was a knock on the door.

“Come in!” Jess said. Collin was standing in the doorway.

“Hey, buddy. What’s up?” Jess asked.

“Thank you for Billy, and for cheering me up!” Collin exclaimed.

“Aww . . . you’re welcome!” Jess said, before hugging him.

“Bye!” yelled Collin, already halfway to his room.

“Bye!” Jess replied.

She then diverted her attention back to her thoughts. Did she matter? She knew the answer without any hesitation: yes, she did. She helped both Collin and Layla, right? And that mattered to them. It helped. And if Jess hadn’t been there to do it, then Veronica might have hurt Layla. Or Collin might have gotten home sad with low self-esteem. So it mattered that she did those things. So it mattered that she was there at all. It mattered, that, if she chose kindness over a mean spirit, other people might do the same. It was a

bunch of ripples. All of her decisions affected others, which affected others. Jess sighed with contentment, happy to have settled that in her mind. She then reached for her school folder, to make sure she had all her assignments done. Social Studies? Check. Math? Check. Science? Check. English? Wait! Jess still had an essay to do for English. What was the topic? I Matter Because. . . Jess smirked. This would be too easy. She took a pencil, a paper, and a deep breath, and started writing.

I matter because. . .

THE END.