



## HATE AND LOVE

by Jacob Graysol

Millie woke and massaged her temples. Sunbeams framed drawn shades. *Afternoon?* She turned; her blue bandanna covered the clock. *Another anxiety blackout? What's the last thing ... the morning meeting with Simon's spineless principal!*

She rubbed her neck. *Advil!*

She slipped on her terry robe and stepped into the hallway. Simon's door was closed. *Past four already?* She approached and knocked. "How was school, sweetie?" She grabbed his doorknob. *Locked!*

Millie's eyes watered. "Did Nick bully you again?"

Silence, still, as usual. He'd have swept his desk clear and laid his head on his arms, crying.

"Focus on your friends. Nobody who matters cares about your ear."

She felt the slim key through her pocket, then dropped her hand.

"Simon, I'll respect your privacy"—she wiped off tears—"but talking always helps."

*Mousy Moorehead!* He set up today's meeting after last week's threats, then gave Nick a warning after his hollow apology. Another warning!

"I'll make *sundaes*."

She waited, then bit her lip. *Refusing ice cream? Nick must've pulled his worst.*

*Bang! Bang! Bang!* A fist pounded the front door. "Police, Mrs. Gold!"

She yelled to Simon. "It's the police! Maybe they've arrested Nick."

She ran downstairs and opened the door for a muscular patrolman.

"Millie Gold?"

"Yes."

"Earl Broderick, ma'am. There was an incident at the middle school—"

"I *told* Moorehead leniency would only encourage Nick Marden. Mousy dismissed them both to Wood Shop."

He nodded. "I need to ask about afterward."

"Simon's decompressing. I give him alone time when he's upset. You understand, with kids."

Broderick raised his left eyebrow. “It’s urgent we sort this out.”

“Then *I’ll* fill you in. In elementary school, Simon’s microtia was a curiosity, not a curse.” She brushed her left ear. “And it’s barely noticeable now, with the surgery. But Nick’s been calling him ‘half-head’ since September, shoves him in the hallway, and scorched his coat.”

“The captain’s interviewing Nick—his father gave permission.”

“Of course. *Now* his parents respect authority. They skipped *our* meeting, wouldn’t face that Junior’s a hateful delinquent. Don’t trust what Nick says.”

“We tried calling here, about talking to Simon—”

“I silence my phone when I get migraines.”

“—and to you.”

“Me? Sure.”

“Someone pulled the wood shop fire alarm fifteen minutes after your meeting. Was it Simon?”

“Why would he ...” Her jaw dropped and she grabbed Broderick’s shirt. “Was Simon hurt?”

Broderick windmilled his right arm, breaking her grip. “Ma’am!” he yelled, red-faced. “Don’t do that!”

She held out her hands. “I—I’d never hurt *anybody*, especially a policeman. Just tell me what happened at school.”

Broderick brushed down his shirt. “Right, school. The alarm caused a big commotion, everyone packing the halls. And the shop teacher was focused on securing the flammables, following protocol.” He paused. “Mrs. Gold, were you still in the building then?”

His narrative evoked forgotten memories, like yesterday’s dream. “I was.... I left with everyone else ... so crowded.... Some of the kids were yelling.”

Broderick’s phone chimed. He tapped it, muttered, “From the captain,” then looked back at her. “Mrs. Gold, I have to come in *now*.”

“But Simon’s been through—”

“Now!”

“Fine! Seeing the police take this seriously might help, anyway.”

She led him upstairs. “If only the Mardens taught Nick consideration, or Moorehead meted out consequences ...”

She gestured to Simon’s door.

Broderick rattled the knob, then scowled at her.

“It’s his safe space. Just knock.”

“*He* locked this?”

“I’ve allowed it, since the bullying.”

Broderick shook his head, turned back toward the door, then stooped and stared.

Millie followed his gaze to a crimson speck. “Simon’s bleeding!” She reached into her pocket, then fumbled with the key. “We’re coming, sweetie!”

When the lock popped, Broderick burst in, stepped to the desk, and held up his phone. Millie followed, then froze, dropping the key. Simon wasn’t there, yet his desk *had* been swept clear, clear except for three items: his clock, sixteen red LEDs displaying 12:15; the nub of an earlobe, matching the scoring knife’s gash in Nick Marden’s photo on the cop’s phone like a puzzle piece; and her cursive on a stained sheet of paper, *Nick will never tease you again*.

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