

Ms. Georges, my PE teacher, looks at me with a glint of disappointment tainted with a measure of compassion. Her sharp features and mixed parentage have granted her beauty unusual of an Asian woman. Despite wearing a black t-shirt and with no make-up on, she is truly attractive. Her red-framed glasses match well with the copper highlights on her hair.

*“Okay just for today. You can clean up after you are done but remember not to throw all these food packaging in the classroom bin ok? You know you are not supposed to eat here. And if you feel the breathlessness coming back, you let me know alright? I think we will just send you back home and you can just go and rest. And I will call your parents and speak to them about what happened at P.E. Alright? I think we can let you off and you may be able to not attend P.E for the rest of the semester. Okay?”*

Ms. Georges leaves the classroom hurriedly, almost as if she were glad to be done with sorting me out.

The classroom is empty; it is recess time, thankfully. The white board has not been cleaned and scribbling from the Language Arts lesson earlier remain. ‘Minorities’; ‘Marginalising’; ‘Prejudice’; ‘Bullying’ ... It’s ironic. These aren’t just words on a board for me because I live them every day. I’m fat and ugly. At least that’s what some of my classmates claim I am. At least that’s what I think I am. They are not here now but their bags are a constant reminder of their unkindness and cruelty.

Some may think I was faking it but I truly felt faint during PE. I’m just not cut out for anything physical. I hate running, I hate jumping, I hate push-ups and sit-ups. I’m not trying to be lazy but I’d rather sit quietly by a corner playing with my phone. And now with what happened during PE earlier, I’m certain my classmates will find reasons to turn this incident into yet another meme, and to share it on the class Whatsapp group. It won’t be the first time they’ve shamed me this way. I’m a loser, I’m ugly, I’m fat, I stink, I’m good-for-nothing. And I think they are right ... Everyone sees me that way.

But I love food; I love my snacks. I can’t help it. I don’t see why I’m bullied just because I love to eat. What is so wrong with that? Everyone keeps telling me to watch my diet. Perhaps WebMD on my phone can tell me how to eat less or reduce body odour. It says here that body odour can be prevented, and I can use antibacterial soap or towel off well.

Oh crap! The class bullies are back!

*“Hey sweetheart...”* Aminah yells as she pushes open the classroom door. Her best friend Yusra chimes in. *“Hey... Darling, I’m home.”*

As if that wasn’t bad enough, Ming, whom I thought was my friend when we were classmates last year joins in the taunting too. He may be short and small but he has an air of ‘know-it-allness’ surrounding him. Perhaps it’s because his round glasses make him look intelligent. Some say he’s good looking, with a boyish charm, but I think they’ve never seen this vindictive side of him.

*“Well, if it isn’t the class loser!”*

His new found friend, Hassan, accompanies him. There is contempt in his eyes.

*“Oh my god! What are you eating?”*

*"Just leave me alone, I'm just trying to eat alright?!"* They just can't seem to leave me alone. Why? I just wanted some quiet time on my own. Why must they do this to me?

They surround me and stand over me. I want to get away and leave the room but they hold me down to my chair.

*"Why are you sitting so lonely at your desk man? We're here to accompany you so you don't feel so lonely! Hahaha! You're eating again? Teacher allowed you to eat in class? What are you munching? What? All this food is so unhealthy!"*

Ming never made such remarks in the past so why has he been treating me this way, this year? Almost mimicking Ming, Hassan interjects.

*"Teacher's pet!" All this food is so unhealthy!"*

It is just food that I enjoy. Is that so wrong? I just want to get out of the room, I just want to be alone. But my cries are ignored. Hassan shoves a rotting banana peel smeared with milo at me. It's made to look like shit and even though I can tell it isn't, it was disgusting nonetheless and the sight of it makes me want to throw up.

*"I've got a present for you. Here's something that is healthier! Banana! Hahahaha!"*

I'm not sure if Hassan realises this but he is fat too. Maybe he's better looking than I am but why does he get to bully me? And now he smears the revolting milo-stained banana on my food, food that I was about to have...

Ming seems to be enjoying the whole episode. *"Get your potassium bro! Hey Aminah! Do your thing, do your thing!"*

While the rest laugh at my expense, Aminah pulls her phone out to film Hassan's 'gift.' I try to stop her but Yusra pushes me back onto my chair. Yusra is Aminah's shadow and follows her wherever she goes. She dresses herself to look like Aminah even though she's not as pretty and is smaller in frame.

As the cackling dies down, Aminah announces she has something to say. For a while, I thought perhaps this will all end now, and that she will apologise. But I am wrong.

*"Ok, ok. Listen everyone. I learned a new joke. It's especially for Shaun. Here it goes - Your mother is so fat that when she farts, the government blames her for global warming."*

*"Oh!!!! hahahaha!!!"* Everyone guffaws loudly. Everyone but me. I don't think it was a very good joke but that was hurtful. Taunting me this way was upsetting enough but they choose to insult my mother too. Mum's not slim but she surely is no fatter than Aminah. Why do these people get to torment me even though they are fat too? Why am I picked on all the time?

They go on to take whatever food I have left on the table without even asking me if I wanted to share.

*"You realise we are your best friends right? We can eat together."* Ming smirks. I do not know if he senses the irony in that statement but it hurt me even more to know this was once true...

Hassan speaks again, *"The banana you can eat ... hahaha!"*

Gathering whatever courage I can, despite my fears, anxieties and sadness, I exclaim, "Just leave me alone!"

It seems to work.

*"You know what? He wants to be alone. Let him eat alone. What a pathetic loser."* Yusra glances at me with such scorn. I wonder what I've done to deserve this.

They finally leave but continue to deride and mock me further even as they walk out of the classroom. Hassan walks clumsily out almost as if to mimick the way I walk.

I try to ignore the sadness and anger that overwhelms me and clean up the mess they made on my table but messages suddenly appear on the class WhatsApp group as my phone lights up. Aminah has uploaded the video she took earlier... now everyone knows I missed PE and was hiding in the classroom.

They mock me further by calling me "Fatty bom bom," "nene pu pu," and send other memes of overly overweight babies, obese women, and Spongebob stuffing food down his throat.

Why are they doing this to me? Will this not ever end? I can't take this anymore. I want to head home now. So I grab my bag and walk hurriedly out of the classroom but as I turn a corner, I find all four of them waiting there.

*"Eh! Eh! He is here man. Where you going bro? Where you going, where you going?"* Are you leaving school so soon?" Hassan's words drip with scorn.

*"Eh, let's hang out!"* Ming suggests.

I explain that I'm trying to go home because I'm unwell but they insist on hanging out. They surround me once again as they did earlier in the classroom and I am backed to the wall. Hassan, who is physically the largest of them, hits me on the shoulder and shoves me. I collapse on the floor as pain surges up my left shoulder.

*"Eh just sit down here lah!"* Take a seat man!"

*"Just leave me alone. I'm just trying to go home alright. I'm going to tell the teachers about you guys!"* I'm not sure how I found the courage to say those words but I am trembling inside. These words however had little effect. Bullies don't seem to fear anything. Why is that so?

*"Tell the teacher?! No one cares in this school. Tell the teacher huh?"* Aminah seems to know just how to hurt others with her words. Perhaps it is the truth of what she said that is sobering. Nobody seems to care about what I was going through. The rest of my class know what goes on frequently. It's been going on for the last three months. Yet everyone else keeps silent. They stay away from me. Perhaps I am that repulsive.

*"Just leave me alone. I'm just trying to go home."*

*"Just trying to go home? Why are you rushing? We are just trying to hang out. We're friends right?"* Ming keeps reminding me of this perhaps to further rub salt into my gaping wound.

*"We will make you famous!"*

And with these words, all of them pull out their phones to start filming me. I sit helplessly on the ground, sobbing and begging them to stop as their laughter and taunts fill the narrow dimly-lit corridor. The more I do so, the louder they laugh. I begin to believe that this nightmare will never end, and I just want to die, to disappear from this earth but suddenly a loud booming voice shatters the bullies' cacophony of taunts.

*"HEY! What the hell are you guys doing!? Who the hell do you guys think you are!?"*

The four of them scatter when they hear this voice. I'm not sure what inspired them to retreat. Perhaps they didn't want to be discovered. Perhaps like all bullies they are cowards. But I'm glad they ran.

As he approaches, I can tell it is my senior. I don't know Jeffrey very well but we've spoken briefly before during Orientation. He is tall, slim, confident, and, from what I hear, a very good student, one that is well-respected by his peers and by teachers too. He's also a school counsellor. Maybe that's why the four of them fled.

*"Are you okay?"* Jeffrey asks with a serious tone of concern.

I struggle to reply him as I try to form my words through the tears and the breathlessness from crying.

*"Who else knows about this?"*

*"Erm ... I dunno...I don't think anyone else knows..."*

*"You need to tell someone, a teacher. You can't keep letting people treat you like that."*

*"No, no, no, no, no. No adult can know."* Jeffrey didn't seem to understand that I didn't want to be embarrassed further. Neither did I want my parents or school authorities involved. I just didn't want to draw more attention to myself or be the talk of the school.

*"No one can know, you siao ah? It's on Instagram, Snapchat, Youtube and Twitter. The videos are everywhere on social media. You need to tell someone."*

*"You just don't understand ... Let me be alone alright?"*

*"At least consider it."*

Jeffrey gives me a pat on the shoulder before walking off. I hope he doesn't tell my teachers about what had just happened. Is he right? Should I seek help from someone? Perhaps this cycle of intimidation and harassment will end if I do. Yet what if things blow up and the bullies find ways to hurt me further? What if everyone in school knows about this?

What should I do...?

**[END]**