

Emily Cameron  
Age 13

### **Roberta's Scret**

As the lunch bell chimed after his fourth period Algebra class, Evan Harris watched while his classmates crammed their notebooks and textbooks into their backpacks and sprinted out the classroom door to the cafeteria, laughing and calling out to their friends. Evan rose from his seat and slung his backpack over his shoulder, feeling dread gnawing at his stomach. Lunchtime was the part of the school day that he hated the most. He shuffled out the door and joined the end of the long line snaking its way into the cafeteria. The other students in the queue waited with their friends, forming little groups and pairs as they talked and laughed together. But Evan stood alone.

After getting his food, he stood awkwardly in front of the cafeteria, staring at the tables and tables of groups of friends enjoying their lunch together. He watched them talk and laugh and whisper secrets to one another behind cupped hands, knowing that he would never fit in with any of them. As he stood there, unsure of where to sit, he felt the gazes of the other students pass right through him, as if he wasn't there. The familiar realization came to him, and although he was used to it, it still stung. He had no friends.

Evan found an empty table and set down his tray as he slid into the seat. He picked up the stale pepperoni pizza that the lunch lady had served and took a bite. As he chewed, he kept his head low and his shoulders hunched, avoiding eye contact with anyone. It had always been this way for him. He was extremely shy and socially awkward, and when he had first entered middle school, it didn't take him long to realize that he would never fit in. As an eighth grader now, he had no friends. He found it almost impossible to approach the other kids. He was a nobody.

When he finally got home after sitting through the rest of his classes, his mother asked him how his day had been. "The usual," he replied as he slipped his shoes off and headed for the stairs. "I ate lunch with my friends and we played basketball together afterward. And I got an A on my English test."

"Good," his mother remarked as he went upstairs. "I'm glad to hear it."

Evan shut the door behind him as he entered his bedroom, collapsing onto his bed and pressing his fists into his closed eyes. He had always lied to his mother about what school was really like for him. It was simply easier for him that way. He didn't want his parents to be worried. Whenever they asked him to invite one of his "friends" over, he made up an excuse as to why none of his friends could come. His parents usually didn't bother him after that.

The next morning at school during first period, as Evan slouched in his desk at the back row of the classroom, his teacher called for the students' attention. "Class," Mrs. Jacobsen announced, "we have a new student. I want you all to welcome her." She draped an arm around a tall, skinny girl with pale freckles and dirty blonde hair, gently drawing her forward to face the class. The girl glanced awkwardly around the classroom, then lowered her gaze, studying the floor.

"Would you like to introduce yourself?" Mrs. Jacobsen prompted.

"Uh." The girl raised her head and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. "Sure. My name is Roberta. I'm almost 13 years old. . . . And I just moved here from New York." She looked shyly at Mrs. Jacobsen. "That's pretty much it, I guess."

Mrs. Jacobsen flashed her a rare smile. "Well, we are really looking forward to having you in our class. Why don't you take a seat at the back of the classroom next to Evan?"

"Okay." As Roberta settled into the desk to the left of Evan, she gave him a brief, friendly smile.

For the rest of the class period, Evan found himself constantly glancing at Roberta. It wasn't that she was extraordinarily pretty or anything, but for some reason, Evan couldn't seem to tear his eyes away from her. He noticed the way she tucked her hair behind her ears and that she was left-handed. Whenever she caught him staring at her, she would offer him a friendly smile. Evan found himself returning her grin.

Evan had none of his other classes with Roberta, which he was strangely disappointed about. When lunchtime rolled around, Evan got his tray of food and settled down at a table alone, far away from the other kids. As he took his first bite of lasagna, he noticed someone standing in front of him. Glancing up, he realized it was Roberta. She gave him a tentative smile and placed her lunch tray down on the table. "Do you mind if I sit with you?"

"Yeah, sure. No problem," he stammered.

"Thanks." She sat down and crossed her legs under the table. For the first time, Evan noticed her eyes: fierce emeralds. They glowed with such intensity that they were almost catlike.

For the rest of the lunch period, Roberta talked about her life back in New York and all of her friends that she had attended middle school with. Evan simply listened and made remarks at appropriate times to show that he was following along. As he watched her talk, he noticed that she was unconventionally beautiful, with her high cheekbones and her fierce, glowing eyes. When she glanced down, he realized that her eyelashes were so thick and long that it was a wonder that they didn't get tangled up each time she blinked.

Throughout the next several weeks, Evan and Roberta sat alone together at lunch every single day. In first period, they talked and whispered to each other during class and shared their

answers for the homework. Over time, they eventually became very close friends. It was not something that either of them had planned. Their friendship came to be simply because they needed each other.

Evan almost couldn't wrap his mind around the fact that he actually had a friend. He couldn't remember the last time someone had talked to him on a daily basis the way Roberta did. Their friendship felt so new and unfamiliar, and yet he treasured it. Whenever Roberta was absent and didn't show up to school, the lack of her presence felt like a missing puzzle piece.

Evan knew about what the other kids thought of him and Roberta. They all called them the "two outsiders." Evan decided that he didn't really mind. He was used to being ridiculed and teased throughout his whole life for his social awkwardness, and the nicknames he had been given in the past were a lot worse than the ones he was given now. When he told Roberta about this one day, she raised her eyebrows and stared at him through her long eyelashes. Her expression was difficult to read.

"You shouldn't take any crap from anybody, Evan," she said softly, looking at him with those unsettling eyes. He glanced away, staring at his half-eaten lunch. He found it impossible to hold her piercing gaze.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"Look," she said, leaning in closer. He forced himself to look into her eyes, her thick, dark eyelashes fanning out above her emerald irises. "Look, Evan. You can't just let people push you around. You have to stand up for yourself. It's just hard sometimes to choose which battles are worth fighting."

Evan thought about what she said for a moment as she leaned back and stabbed at her salad. "Roberta," he ventured, "you're the best friend I've ever had."

She smiled, the skin around her eyes crinkling into a starburst. "Well, so are you."

Evan smiled halfheartedly and glanced away. "Can I ask you something?" he said softly.

"Sure."

"Do you ever, like, wish that you weren't friends with me so you could actually have a social life?" he said, meeting her fierce green eyes sheepishly.

"What? No. Not at all. I'm glad to be friends with you," Roberta replied without hesitation.

Evan smiled, relieved. But Roberta didn't. Instead, a troubled frown passed across her face. "Hey, um . . . I need to tell you something," she said softly. She nervously tucked her long hair behind her ear and lowered her gaze, staring down at her tray of food. Evan felt curiosity and anxiety in his stomach, but he swallowed it back.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

Roberta drew in a deep, shaky breath and began to talk, softly and quickly. "The reason I moved here from New York is because . . . I was bullied really badly at school."

Evan said nothing, waiting for her to elaborate.

She glanced up at him and continued talking. "One of my really close friends spread a lot of terrible rumors about me after we had a fight . . . basically the whole school bullied me and treated me like dirt and I didn't have any friends. It was like all of sudden I had nobody."

There were no tears in her eyes, but her face was tense and cold. Evan had never seen her look so angry before.

"The reason that I wanted to become friends with you was because I know how it feels like to have no friends. And I've been in your situation before," she said.

"So . . . you became friends with me because you felt sorry for me?" Evan asked.

"Well . . . yeah. But I'm glad I did. You're one of the best people I've ever met," Roberta replied. Her tone sounded almost pleading.

Evan smiled. "So are you. Thank you."

Several months passed. As the end of the school year drew near, the only thing that changed about Evan and Roberta's friendship was that they grew even closer. Roberta eventually introduced Evan to several of her other friends that she had met and grown close to through her other classes during lunch one day. Although Evan was reluctant to meet them because he feared they wouldn't like him, he submissively agreed to eat with them for one day. As Roberta dragged him over to their table, where they sat laughing and talking, she reassured him that they were nice people and that they would like him and his "charming" personality.

Evan took a seat beside Roberta at the lunch table. Evan glanced around nervously at the others. "Hi guys," Roberta said cheerfully. "Do you mind if we sit with you today?"

A boy with glasses and dark, stringy hair shook his head and grinned. "Not at all." He turned to Evan and offered him a smile. Evan smiled back tentatively. "What's your name?" the boy asked.

"Um." Evan felt like he was going to choke on his own saliva. He could feel his throat closing up and his stomach churning. He was always nervous and shy when he met people for the first time, but he was especially nervous now. "My name's Evan," he stammered.

The boy smiled, unfazed. "Cool. I'm Christopher."

Evan ended up introducing himself to everyone else at the table, and by the end of the lunch period, he felt like they were all his friends. As the bell rang, signifying the end of lunch, and everyone at the table rose to their feet, Christopher grinned at Evan and Roberta. "You guys are welcome to sit with us every day from now on."

And for some reason, Evan had never been as happy to hear those kind words in his entire life.

And as the Evan counted down the days before school would be over, he found himself wishing that school would never end. He looked forward to school every morning, and to seeing Roberta and his new group of friends. He had finally found a place in the school. He no longer felt like he was always on the outside, looking in and longing to be a part of the drama and friendships and relationships that made up the school. Now, he was one of them.