

(from *Leah* by J.M. Reep)

THE FINAL DAYS before the first day of school passed quickly, and each day found Leah even more nervous and worried than the last. She was worried because she was always worried about the first day of school, but she was also worried because she believed that high school would be an awful experience for her, if only because the other option—that it would be wonderful—seemed so unlikely. Late Sunday night before the start of school, Leah lay in her bed, restless, as her imagination terrorized her with all sorts of fantastic scenarios. Suppose she were to get lost, or lose her schedule of classes? What if the room number of one of her classes was switched, but no one notified her and she found herself in the wrong class? Would the teachers be friendly or mean? And what about the other students? What would they be like? Her ninth grade class would be almost three times the size of her eighth grade class which meant she would be surrounded by unfamiliar faces everywhere she looked. She finally fell asleep as she entertained the possibility that, as unlikely as it was, she might make a friend on the first day of school. Anything was possible, but everything still seemed frightening.

She didn't sleep well, and when her alarm clock went off at 6:00 a.m.—an hour and a half before the start of her first class, Leah was already awake and sitting on the edge of her bed in the darkened bedroom, trying to summon all her strength and courage. She would need it to face this day. She wondered if any of her classmates had suffered through the same sleepless night that she had.

Not wanting to waste any time, and too nervous to sit still anyway, Leah stood up from the bed and began her morning routine. She spent a lot more time than usual getting dressed and ready to leave because she wanted to look nice on the first day of school and make a good impression. She didn't always care about looking pretty, but today was a special day. At 7:15, when she left her bedroom, all traces of sleepiness had vanished and she was wide awake, but a sick, nervous feeling in the pit of her stomach accompanied her as she opened her bedroom door. Before she went downstairs, she noticed the door to her parents' bedroom was still closed and there didn't seem to be any signs of life coming from the other side. Leah wondered if her parents were awake yet and worried that they weren't. Her father had agreed to drive her to school this morning so it was crucial that he, at least, be awake. Leah quietly approached the bedroom door, and she put an ear against it and listened. She could hear the sound of water running which meant that there was someone in her parents' bathroom using the shower, most likely her father, for he was always the first to leave the house in the morning. Breathing a sigh of relief that her parents were awake and getting ready for work, Leah turned and went downstairs.

She went straight to the kitchen, which was quite dark, even though, outside, the sun had been up for almost an hour. Leah flipped the light switch and was blinded for an instant by the flood of light. Her stomach was still queasy, but she decided she should try to eat something before she left for school. She poured a small glass of milk and carried it to the breakfast table. She sat down and enjoyed the stillness and silence of the kitchen as she took a few cautious sips from her glass. She knew there wouldn't be many moments of quiet like this today, so she had to seize them when she could. After a moment, she glanced at the clock on the wall on other side of the kitchen. The time was 7:22; the first school bell rang at 8:00 sharp. Leah tried to ease her sense of urgency and anxiety by imagining how silly this would all seem later that afternoon when the first day of school was over and she could finally relax. Certainly that time would come, but it seemed like so far away. There were so many dreadful events to endure before then. She knew today would feel like the longest day of the year.

She turned her attention away from the clock and inspected the pile of her belongings that she had

stacked on the breakfast table last night before she went to bed. At the base of the stack was her three ring notebook, brand new and purple. Inside of it were five subject dividers, plenty of notebook paper, and a plastic zipper pouch which contained two pens and two sharpened pencils. Also inside the notebook was her all-important class schedule and a map of her new school. A few days ago, she had used a pencil to lightly shade the squares on the map that represented her classrooms.

Sitting on top of the notebook was one of the books Mrs. Nells had bought for her daughter at the garage sale the week before. It was titled *The Little Book of Volcanoes and Earthquakes*, and it was just that—a little book, not even 200 pages, that would be easy for her to carry on her first day of school, but it was still long enough that it would provide several days worth of reading. Leah didn't know whether she would find time to read her book today since she didn't know how busy her classes would be, but knowing that the book would be with her was a comfort. It represented a link to her home: a reminder of the security of her bedroom—something familiar in an unfamiliar place. For now, though, the book sat idle, on top of her notebook.

The top layer of the pyramid consisted of a small purse, an item that for Leah was more decorative than functional. Her mother had bought it for her two years ago when Leah noticed the other girls in her middle school class had started bringing their own purses to school. Leah wanted to fit in, so she got one too. It remained in good condition, but that was because Leah had little use for it. Its only contents were some loose change, a small mirror that her mother had given her, some pens and pencils, a library card from her middle school that had never been used, and a few other personal necessities.

She remembered that she needed to fix herself a lunch to take to school, but before she could get started on that task, she heard the sound of someone coming down the stairs. She hoped it would be her father, but she realized he couldn't possibly be ready to leave yet. Instead, it was her mother. Mrs. Nells strolled into the kitchen still wearing her morning robe, but she was clearly wide awake, as though it were the middle of the day. She took one look at her anxious daughter sitting at the table and said with a smile, "You sure look nervous."

Leah wondered if her nervousness was really that obvious. Sometimes her parents would assume that she was anxious or scared about something when that wasn't necessarily the case. Most of the time, at home, she was at ease with herself. It was only when she faced the prospect of going out and meeting new people that she really became anxious. When she felt this way, she did her best to conceal her feelings, but this morning Mrs. Nells could read Leah's emotions clearly. Mrs. Nells didn't blame her for feeling nervous, though. She could still remember her own first day of high school and how nervous she had been. But she had been excited too, ready to start the next phase of her life.

During those times when Leah felt really nervous, like now, she was a little more willing than usual to communicate with her parents. After forcing down two gulps of milk, she said to her mother, "I need to leave by 7:40." Although school didn't begin until 8:00, Leah wanted to arrive early so she could get used to her new campus before the first bell rang.

Mrs. Nells nodded and replied, "I know. Your father hasn't forgotten; he'll drive you to school. He's upstairs getting dressed right now."

Leah looked at the clock on the kitchen wall. The time was 7:25. She usually trusted her father, but this morning, she needed everything to go perfectly. She didn't know what she'd do if she were tardy. How could she walk into her first class with all of her new classmates already there, watching her, laughing at her as she arrived late? Just the very idea made Leah feel like she was going to throw up.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Nells put two slices of bread in the toaster and then left the kitchen to go back upstairs and take her turn in the shower. Before she left, however, she said, "Don't worry, Leah. You're going to have fun today." Leah sat and stared at the toaster, wondering if what her mother said was true, and again her mind tormented her with vivid images of all the things that could possibly go wrong today. A moment later, two slices of toast popped up, cooling quickly, and waiting to be grabbed by hungry fingers. Mrs. Nells would eat them later, when she returned downstairs before she left for work.

The toast reminded Leah that she still needed to fix her lunch for school, so she got up from the breakfast table, walked to the counter next to the refrigerator, and opened a drawer that contained all sorts of bags, both paper and plastic ones, and pulled out a brown paper bag from a bundle of about fifty. Leah always brought her own lunch to school because she didn't like standing in a crowded lunch line. She opened the refrigerator door and removed a small carton of fruit punch. She placed one of the cartons in her sack and then proceeded to make her sandwich. She spread some peanut butter between two slices of white bread and then cut the sandwich into halves. She took a small plastic bag from the drawer and put the small sandwiches into it. She placed the sandwiches, along with an apple, into the brown bag, then she folded the mouth of the bag over twice and carried it with her back to the breakfast table, placing it on top of her books next to her purse. She sat down again and waited, desperately trying to remember if there was anything else that she needed to do before she left for school. She couldn't think of anything; she was ready to go.

The time was now 7:32, and the house was silent. Somewhere upstairs, her father was still getting dressed. Leah wished he would hurry. Despite her mother's assurance, she feared that her father had forgotten about the importance of this day, and as irrational as it was, she couldn't get that fear out of her mind. Leah recalled speaking to him the night before, and she recalled his promise to drive her to school this morning—but perhaps he had forgotten overnight. What would she do then? If she left right now, she could walk to school and get there on time, but she would have to leave *now*. She was tempted. After this morning, she would walk to school most days, just as she had walked to middle school, but today she wanted her father to drive her to school, just so that she would feel safe, so she continued to wait.

7:35 came and went, and as 7:40—the minute that Leah had decided she needed to leave—approached, and Mr. Nells still hadn't appeared in the kitchen, Leah began to panic. At 7:39 she heard the sound of her father coming down the stairs. She immediately stood up and gathered her pile of books, her purse, and her lunch in her trembling hands. Mr. Nells appeared in the kitchen, still looking a little sleepy. Like his wife, he noticed immediately how nervous his daughter was. He smiled and teased, "Are you ready to go?"

Leah replied by bolting out the door to the garage and climbing into her father's car. Mr. Nells followed her out of the house, opened the garage door, and took his place behind the steering wheel of his car. At 7:42, they were on their way.

Mr. Nells was 38 years old, but he looked much younger than his age suggested. There were some wrinkles on his face, but Leah only noticed them when she saw his face close up. Mr. Nells was aware that his body was slow to age, and he often joked about how he sometimes felt like an old man even if his body didn't show it. His good humor for his condition was lost on his wife, also 38, whose face was starting to show its age more profoundly than her husband's.

Mr. Nells drove with the radio off as he took his daughter to school. He never listened to the radio, for reasons that Leah never asked about, except when the weather was poor and he needed to hear the

traffic reports. The absence of an annoying morning DJ's voice was not a problem for Leah who welcomed the silence. Her father spoke to her a little, and Leah spoke even less. Her thoughts were focused on what would happen when this ride reached its destination rather than on the journey itself.

"I hope you remember the directions to your school," Mr. Nells teased, "because I don't!" He glanced at his daughter who didn't say anything. She knew he was joking. Her high school was less than half a mile away from their home—about the same distance as her middle school had been, only in the opposite direction. She had a lot of things to worry about this morning, but her father's knowledge of their neighborhood was not one of them.

"There's a lot of traffic this morning," Mr. Nells said as he steered his car northbound onto the busy avenue that led them to the school. "I guess I'm going to have to get used to sharing the road with teenagers again." Leah looked out the passenger side window at the trees and houses and businesses slowly crawl past and then stop altogether as they came to a red light.

"Are you nervous?" Mr. Nells asked, already knowing the answer. "I can't remember if I was nervous on my first day of high school. I guess I was, but I can't remember it . . . it feels like such a long time ago. But I liked high school. I made a lot of good friends."

The light turned green and as the car started moving again, Leah got her first glimpse of the high school just down the road. The main building loomed large and intimidating. She found it hard to believe that, in less than half an hour, she would be inside that building, attending her first class of her freshman year of high school.

The campus was very busy. Mr. Nells joined the line of cars driven by parents who were dropping their teenage children off. A few school buses were already parked in the bus depot, and Leah could see students descending from them. She couldn't imagine riding the school bus on the first day of school—or any other day. Sitting in a crowded bus with a lot of noisy, overactive teenagers, having to wait for her stop before she could get off would have been a truly miserable experience. Older students were driving their own cars and parking in the students' lot, which was filling up fast. With so many vehicles trying to squeeze onto the campus at once, some for the first time, a pair of police officers had been assigned to the campus to help direct traffic.

As they drew closer to the school, Leah's nervousness reached its peak. Her heart beat wildly, she was out of breath, and she felt weak all over. She didn't want to go to school today! She wished she could be anywhere else other than here, right now. If only this were some terrible nightmare from which she could awaken, and find that it was still summer and she was free to spend the day however she wished! But it wasn't a dream, and she didn't wake up. The fear that she felt right now was real, and there was no escaping it.

Mr. Nells' car was now close enough to the front of the school so that Leah could get out. Already, the cars ahead and behind them had stopped and their teenage passengers were exiting. Mr. Nells parked the car and said to his daughter with a proud smile, "Good luck today! Have fun! I know you'll do fine!" Leah barely heard him, over the sound of her pounding heart and the blood singing in her ears. With a shaky hand, she opened the car door. She gathered her belongings in her arms and with every last bit of strength she could rally, she climbed out of the car. She closed the door behind her and turned to face the school. She was here.