

Michael's Ordinary Day

by Robert D. Shepherd

Mrs. Spigot, the cafeteria lady, plopped a dollop of instant mashed potatoes onto Michael's orange plastic lunch tray and handed the tray back to him. Meatloaf, mashed potatoes, and green beans again. "I just wanted to say, Mrs. Spigot, that I appreciate the trouble that you take to color coordinate our meals."

"Really?" said Mrs. Spigot. "And what does that mean, Michael?"

"I mean, the beans are green, right? And if you look closely, the meatloaf and the mashed potatoes are kind of green, too." The kids behind Michael laughed.

"I'm so sorry, Michael," said Mrs. Spigot. "I tell you what. Tomorrow I'll take a few hundred extra dollars from my budget and order you in a nice meal from Jean-Georges."

"That would be great," Mrs. Spigot. "Thank you."

She was right, Michael thought. She didn't necessarily like serving gloppy instant mashed potatoes and watery, tasteless green beans, but that was just what they had to offer in this school—ordinary food. In fact, everything about my life is ordinary, Michael thought. Why couldn't, just once, something absolutely fantastic happen, like, OK, what if space aliens landed a ship on the football field during second period or what if the cafeteria started serving fresh pizza from Jay's. The two events seemed equally likely.

Michael stood with his tray and surveyed the room. Let's see, he thought. I could go sit with Javier and the other lacrosse jocks, but they would just want to rib me about that goal I missed. Or, I could go sit next to Pat and Brian. No, Wendy is at that table. Michael always felt goofy around Wendy, as if he had "Dork" tattooed on his forehead. Michael decided to sit by himself at the empty table over by the far windows.

Ordinary. Ordinary. Ordinary. Every day I get up, take a shower, brush my teeth, put on my clothes, walk to the bus stop, go to class, eat this yummy cafeteria food, go home, walk the dog, do my homework, eat dinner, go to bed, get up, take a shower, brush my teeth, put on my clothes In English class, they had just read Ray Bradbury's story "All Summer in a Day," in which a bunch of kids lived on Venus, where it rained all the time and the sun came out only once every ten years. That's what my life is like, thought Michael. One ordinary, uninspiring day after another – bland, like this food.

The new kid from Earth Science – Ralph or Waldo or whatever his name was – was standing across the room with his lunch tray, looking around. After a moment, he made a beeline for Michael. He sat down next to Michael on the bench.

"Hiya." said the new kid. Something about the kid didn't look right. He looked, somehow, older, like his body was fourteen but his eyes were fifty.

"You're the new kid in Earth Science, aren't you?" said Michael. Might as well make conversation.

"Oh yes. That's right. Walton's my name. Funny thing."

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, the other people in the room. They're not moving."

Michael glanced up. Suddenly he was aware of the deafening silence around him. There was no chattering of voices, no clattering of silverware and trays. Everything was as quiet as a cave on the moon, and what was much, much weirder, everyone in the cafeteria – the kids, Mrs. Spigot, the cashier, and the new teacher who was doing lunchroom duty that day – all were frozen in mid-movement. Lisa Battigliosi, sitting at the table across from Michael, was frozen with her lips half closed around a forkful of beans the color of squashed grasshopper.

"Gross!" said Michael. Then, "What the heck?"

"That's nothing," said the new kid. He looked amused. "Watch this."

The new kid – Waldo or Weirdo or whatever his name was – pointed his index finger toward the ceiling. Then, slowly, he rotated the finger downward and stuck it into the hard Formica cafeteria tabletop. As though it were a pool of water, the tabletop opened to admit the finger, closed around it, and rippled outward in concentric circles.

Michael stared at the new kid. “Who are you?” he said. “What the heck?”

“It’s OK, Michael,” said Walton, who was now transforming before Michael’s eyes into a balding fifty-year-old in a white laboratory smock. “I have a story to tell you.”

Michael glanced around the room. Everyone else was still frozen.

“Relax, Michael. I just needed to show you some spectacular events so that you would believe me.”

“And what is it, exactly, that I’m supposed to believe,” said Michael, started to become more than a little terrified. “OK. Let’s see . . . I’m dreaming, right?”

“No, Michael. You’re not dreaming. Well, you sort of are, come to think of it.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, Michael,” said Dr. Walton, “This is going to come as a bit of a surprise.”

“Oh, you mean unlike watching people stick their hands through the tops of tables,” said Michael.

“Well, even more surprising than that, Michael. Here’s the scoop. Three years ago, you were in a terrible accident. An



auto accident. Your body was horribly mangled. Irreparable. But your brain was in really good shape – I mean, it was operating perfectly.

“So we – I mean my colleagues and I at the Werner Heisenberg Institute of Neurological Stochastics – took your brain and placed it in a vat of nutrient chemicals. Then, over a period of several months, we hooked up all your neural circuits to a computer, a very powerful computer. Are you following me?”

This guy is some kind of lunatic, thought Michael.

“OK. So, for years now, we’ve been feeding signals into your brain to create a completely reasonable simulation of reality – sights, sounds, tastes, smells, feelings, and a lot more that you probably don’t even know about, inputs to your kinesthetic and vestibular senses, information on your changing physical equilibrium as you move.”

The people in the room still weren’t moving.

“So we’ve been waiting for some time now to find an appropriate donor body and you are in luck. We’ve finally found one. A fourteen-year-old male, perfect specimen.”

“You’re telling me that all this around me isn’t real? That I’m really just a brain in a vat?” asked Michael.

“Yes,” said Dr. Walton. Michael looked around him. The people, the walls and ceiling of the cafeteria, all were dissolving into a gray mist, a mist that grew lighter and lighter until there was only whiteness.

“Now,” said Dr. Walton. “Don’t worry Michael. You will sleep. Then, when you awaken, you will be all better. In a brand new body. In the real world. Of course, it will take you some time to adjust . . .” 