

When Ordinary Isn't  
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Matthew Nielsen was an ordinary boy. He lived with his ordinary family in an ordinary house. He lived in an ordinary city in an ordinary state (Utopia 25) and went to an ordinary school. Each Utopia was consecutively numbered, and Matthew lived in the newest one. There was nothing abnormal about him, because he lived in Utopia.

One ordinary day he was at school during study hall doing his science homework when his teacher suddenly told him to go to the principal's office. Matthew was confused. He hadn't done anything wrong. He sharpened all his pencils before class, got an ordinary grade on his English test, and sat in his usual seat during lunch. Then he remembered. On Tuesday he had played 4-square instead of tag at recess. That was it! He was almost sure of it.

When he got to the principal's office, Matthew said, "I'm sorry I played 4-square instead of tag the other day. It just looked really fun, and I didn't want to wait until today, and--"

"That's all right, Matthew. I was hoping you could show our new student around. But, why don't you come see me after school tomorrow, and we can talk about recess rules."

"Yes, sir," Matthew replied, a bit annoyed that he had given himself away.

"So," Matthew said, now that he and the girl were in the hallway. "I'm Matthew."

"Courtney." The girl said.

When she said her name, he saw she was chewing gum, and was fascinated. He'd never met a real live troublemaker before. The worst thing he had seen anybody do was take an extra slice of pizza at lunch. That boy had gotten in so much trouble. Curious, he asked, "What's the worst thing you've ever done?"

"Hmm," she said. "That's tough. The time I actually got into one of the zoo exhibits? When I hacked into the FBI website? Oh! Probably when I "borrowed" a car and drove myself to school."

Matthew was so shocked he almost fainted. The worst he'd expected was watching a PG-13 movie without parent supervision! He definitely shouldn't try to join a study group with this girl. He might end up not doing his homework! But still, his curiosity got the best of him. "Why aren't you in jail?"

Courtney responded, "Oh, yeah. I was in juvie for a year. Just got out."

Matthew was now legitimately afraid. He was walking next to a criminal! "No," he told himself. "It's just like Mom and Dad always say. Criminals smell fear. Just go on like nothing is wrong and they won't give you a second glance. But also call the enforcers, and the nearest adult." He had made that last part up, and was very proud of it.

The next day, Courtney sat next to him in math. What was he going to do? "Calm down," he thought. "She was probably reformed in juvie, and reduced to not sitting in her assigned seat."

As the teacher started talking, Courtney dropped a folded piece of paper on the floor, waited a few seconds, then picked it up, and asked if it was his. Of course Matthew shook his head no, but she put it on his desk anyway. "She's crazy if she thinks I'm about to pass notes with her," he thought. Especially in Ms. Kelter's class. All teachers were strict, but Ms. Kelter was the strictest. Of course, no one actually said anything about it. All the kids just silently

agreed. But before Courtney could get in trouble, Matthew put his hand on his desk, covering the note, then casually slid it into his lap.

In hindsight, Matthew thought that he should've just let her get in trouble, and they would never have become friends. A friendship with a criminal was crazy. But instead, he helped her, and changed his life.

After English, when they were on their way to PE, Courtney asked if he read the note. It looked like this:

**Matthew,**

**Meet me at bus #3 after school. I know, that's not your usual bus, just say you're going home with me. About your parents, just text them, and say you're doing homework or whatever, and you'll be home by 6:30. Trust me.**

**-Courtney**

The note answered his questions, but it was still iffy. Maybe he could convince her to actually do her homework. "Sure," he thought to himself, "I can do this!" But then he remembered. "Courtney, sorry, but I can't hang out today."

"Why not?"

"I have to see Principal Chase after school."

Courtney was shocked. "You have to see the principal for playing 4-square instead of tag? That's ridiculous! At my old school, we were allowed to play whatever we want at recess. All these rules are unfair. Just skip the darn meeting."

"But Principal Chase will find out!" Matthew protested.

"No he won't. I'll make sure. You won't get in trouble, your mom won't find out. Just go to bus #3. Trust me." And with that, she ran off. Matthew was still uncertain, but he wasn't able to talk to Courtney the rest of the day. So, after school he got on bus #3, and hoped for the best.

He walked down the bus aisle till he saw Courtney. He sat down next to her. "So, how did I get out of my meeting with the principal?"

As if it were nothing, she said, "Oh, yeah, that. Principal Chase got a copy of this." She handed him a note.

**Dear Principal Chase,**

**Matthew told me about his meeting with you, but I'm afraid he can't make it today. We've been planning a trip ever since last month. Maybe he could see you on Monday instead. I hope you understand, and that it's not too much of an inconvenience. Thank you.**

**Sincerely,**

**Charlotte Nielson**

Matthew was shocked. The last kid that had forged a note was sent to Utopia 1 (where rules were more strict because it was the original Utopia and had to set an example for all the others). He didn't want that to happen to him! Still, he was pretty sure that Principal Chase would be oblivious to the fact that it was forged because it came from his mother's email address. As much as he was afraid for Courtney, he was equally star-struck.

When they got off the bus at what Matthew assumed was Courtney's house, he wasn't surprised to see that it looked exactly like every other house on the block--light blue with a solar-paneled roof and a beige porch. A paved path led up to the house, lined with a perfect row of identical bushes. The grass was perfectly green with no weeds and not a single brown patch. Each window had a flower box the identical shade of brown, filled with perfectly spaced flowers all blooming at the same time. The only thing that set each house apart was the name printed on the mailbox.

Matthew assumed that when they went inside, it would look identical to all the other houses in all the other Utopias. He was wrong. The first thing he noticed was that the front door had a lock. The only other locks he knew of were on the bathrooms and a few rooms in the town hall. Looking closer, he noticed there was no keyhole. He also noticed that the glass on the windows was particularly thick, and all the rooms inside had doors with locks. "What's with all the security? You'd think you were an Elder or something."

Courtney laughed. "No, just precautions, because of juvie and all."

"Wow. I've never seen so many locks in one place."

"Yep." she said. "The front door can only be opened twice a day. When I leave for school, and when I get home, unless there's a visitor"

"That's crazy. What about your parents?"

"I live with two guards. My parents don't live in a utopia."

"WHAT?" Matthew was shocked. "You've lived on the...the... outside?"

Courtney wasn't even phased. "Yeah. After my so-called shenanigans, they forced my parents to sign a contract to let me be in a program that brings outsider kids to the Utopias to "reform their ways" and "turn them to the greater good." She made air-quotes as she said this. "Barf. They just want everyone to follow their rules, to stop being unique, and to give up their basic rights as American people. Technically it's not against the law because Utopias are just large gated communities with rules and people can leave any time. Like HECK do I believe that."

"Courtney!" Matthew couldn't believe that she had just said the H word. Even his parents didn't say it. "Language!"

She scoffed. "What? Am I supposed to say golly gosh gee?"

"Courtney!"

"Fine, whatever." She rolled her eyes.

Matthew desperately wanted to ask Courtney what life was like on the outside. The closest he had ever gotten was when his dad's second cousin's wife's step-brother's kid's friend's family traveled to Utopia 1, and had to use a real outsider airport. Finally, he couldn't resist. "What was it like?" he asked. "Outside, I mean."

Courtney thought before answering. "Different." she said. "Both in good ways and bad. Everyone has locks on their doors, because there are bad people out there. I mean like, people who break into your house and steal your stuff. People who beat up others to take their money. People who kill when they get upset."

"What about the enforcers?"

She chuckled. "They're called police. They help a lot of people, but they can't always make it in time. There are a lot of things that happen in here that you guys make a big deal out of, that happen so often outside, it's crazy. It's nice that everyone trusts each other here, but they trust too much. Your government--"

"The Elders." He quoted what he heard on TV. "The government in Washington is corrupt. They cheat, lie, and steal to get what they want. But the Elders at Utopia love, care for, and protect the people."

Courtney scoffed again. "That's crap. They're such hypocrites."

Matthew ignored the profanity. "What's a hypocrite?"

"I guess you don't have them here apparently. It's someone who says one thing, but does another. The Elders say they're better, but they take away all your choices. On the outside we get to vote for who we want in charge. We get to choose which clothes we wear in the morning. Grownups get to choose their job, who to marry, whether or not to have kids, where and when to travel, and kids choose what to stinkin' play at recess! It's absolutely nuts what they restrict in here. If you get to choose your own flavor of ice cream you're happy!"

Matthew had to admit the outside was sounding more and more appealing.

"Now, I don't care if you like getting your life planned out for you before you're even born, but I sure don't. I miss my parents--my freedom. Will you help me?"

If Matthew thought he was shocked before this, he was wrong. No words could describe how crazy Courtney was (except the ones he wasn't allowed to say). "What! No. I'm not gonna help you."

"Matthew. I have friends out there, whose parents are considering moving here. I have friends out there who, when they come, will lose their freedom and never get it back." She was misty-eyed. "I have a little sister who I'll never get to watch grow up if I stay here. Grandparents, who will die before I get out. Memories that I'll never get to make!" There were tears running down her face. "You have to help me. I can't stand it any longer. Please."

Matthew stood up and scanned his finger on the door, but turned back before he left. Courtney saw that his face had tears running down it, too. "You may have a family waiting for you out there, but I have a family--a community--in here." He turned back around, and left.

At home that evening, Matthew tried to do his homework, but ended up thinking about what Courtney had said. By the time his mom called for dinner, he hadn't even finished a single question. As he, his parents, and his little sister Ella sat down to eat, Ella started talking about her day. And as he listened, he realized that she had learned what she was told was important. She ate the food she was told to eat. She played the games she was told to play. Even the dinner they ate was perfectly tailored to each individual's taste preferences, weight, height, and fitness level. And now that he realized there was truth to what Courtney had said, he wasn't going to be able to go back to thinking everything was perfect. Because it wasn't.

Later that evening, he told his parents everything Courtney had said. Their eyes widened. His mom gave him a pill, and sent him to bed early.

The next morning, he felt nauseated, and like someone was pounding his head with a hammer. He vaguely remembered a doctor coming, and taking more pills. He couldn't remember if his conversation with Courtney was real or a dream. He couldn't remember anything about her, except that he had shown her around school.

Days later, he was finally declared 'cured' of what he was told was the flu, and went back to school. He was grateful not to be held accountable for any homework he missed. As he was walking to PE, a hand reached out of the janitor's closet and pulled him in.

"Matthew! Why won't you talk to me?" a girl whisper-yelled at him.

"What? Courtney?" It was that criminal again. She had been trying to ask him something all week.

"I don't have time for this." He pulled away, but was surprised she held her grip.

"They did something to you! Matthew, you came to my house, I talked about the outside. My sister!"

It all came back. "They must have given me something to make me forget!"

"No duh!"

"I'm gonna help you. Make me a note to get out of school tomorrow. We'll leave in the morning."

"For real? Omigosh! Thanks!" She hugged him.

The next morning, Matthew filled his backpack with food, clothes and money instead of homework and books. He was about to leave when he saw his sister. He just couldn't imagine never seeing her again. "I'll walk her to school today, Mom."

"Thanks--you're certainly feeling better!"

He smiled at his mom, then took Ella's hand and started walking.

"We're taking a shortcut." he told her. He met up with Courtney at the gate.

"You ready?" she asked while eyeing Ella.

Before they left, Matthew kneeled down to Ella and asked. "Do you trust me?" She nodded.

Then the three children did what no other adult would've dared to do--they walked through the gate, hand in hand.