

# A Hair Out of Place

*A Said-So Academy Story*

by Juno Threadborne

**A**t Said-So Academy, everything was in its place. That was the point of the place.

The uniforms matched. The clocks agreed. The grass outside was precisely short enough to whisper "controlled environment" without seeming military about it. Even the silence between class bells felt... *tucked in*.

Which is why Ms. Thomas always stood out—not because she broke the rules, but because she bent them into more interesting shapes.

She had the kind of presence that made ceilings feel too low. Her hair was usually tied back with a pencil—just a pencil, mind you—but she wielded it like a wand disguised as a tool. It spun when she thought, flicked when she disagreed, and somehow never fell out, even when she walked with purpose (which was always).

Fen watched her the way you might watch a thunderstorm blooming far away across a valley. Not fearful. Not fascinated, exactly. Just *aware* in a way you couldn't explain afterward.

To most people, she was a student. A clever one. Two years ahead in everything and somehow still likable.

But to Fen?

She was the only person in the building who moved like she belonged to more than one world.

Which, as someone who *actually* did, he found terribly appealing.

Fen had, after all, spent most of his life inside a place that didn't show up on maps. The Elsebeneath had been his home, his neighborhood,

his playground, and his prison for... well, for however long it had been. Time down there tended to lose track of itself, and Fen was not one to argue with clocks.

But then came Sam.

And Sam had made things... *sticky*.

And so did Ms. Thomas.

"Fen?"

A hand waved lazily in front of his face. The kind of wave that said *this isn't the first attempt and also I'm enjoying this*.

"Fennnnn."

Fen blinked, still staring down the hallway.

"Are you in there, bud?"

He inhaled sharply. "No. Yes? I'm just—"

He shook his head, still blinking like someone who'd just woken from a vision quest.

"I was *observing!*"

Sam gave him a look.

Fen turned fully now, eyes wide with conviction. His expression hovered somewhere between indignation and enchantment—like a bard who'd been interrupted mid-ballad and was trying to decide whether to finish the song or start a revolution.

"She had her hair *down*, Sam."

Sam raised an eyebrow. “Okay...?”

“There was this one strand,” Fen continued, softer now. “Just one. Right near her temple. It kept falling the wrong way. She pushed it back twice. Tucked it behind her ear, and it still came loose.”

He paused.

“Something about it just... made everything feel real. Like, here’s this person who’s completely brilliant and unstoppable and terrifyingly composed—and there’s this one hair that won’t fall in line.”

Sam blinked.

“Dude. It’s just a hair.”

Fen nodded solemnly.

“Exactly.”

Sam sighed, deeply. “Do I want to know who we’re talking about, or should I just assume it’s the same person it’s been for three weeks?”

“Four,” Fen said softly.

“Right.”

Sam leaned back against a locker, arms crossed, watching his friend like a person watching a firework who knew it was going to explode just a *little* too close.

“You do realize she’s, like, a full human being, right?” he said. “With opinions? And homework? And, like, the ability to say no?”

“I’m not proposing,” Fen said. “I’m *not even approaching*. I’m just... marveling.”

Sam pinched the bridge of his nose. "You do remember she's a teacher, right?"

Fen blinked. Looked down the hallway again.

Ms. Thomas was gone. Or at least, around the corner.

He whispered, like the word might break if he said it too loud:

"...That's so inconvenient."

Sam nodded solemnly. "For *everyone*."

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Lunch at Said-So was a symmetrical affair.

The tables were rectangles. The trays were rectangles. The carrots were aggressively cubed.

Even the conversations had edges—quiet, polite ones, carefully honed to avoid controversy or crouton-based conflict.

Fen, naturally, did not belong in this environment.

He sat cross-legged on his chair, balancing his tray on one knee like a circus act and spinning a grape tomato with one finger as if waiting for it to confess something.

Sam was mid-sentence—something about a pop quiz and the futility of English class—when Fen stood up abruptly, eyes wide, lips parted.

"...Oh no," Sam said flatly.

"Oh yes," Fen breathed. "It's time."

"Fen. No."

"I have never been more sure of anything in my life."

"That cannot possibly be true."

"I am a constellation in the shape of a plan, Sam."

"You're a boy with a fruit tray and a delusion."

But it was too late. Fen was walking.

No—*striding*. He had a sort of spring-loaded confidence that looked like he might either start singing or propose a trade agreement. Either way, he was headed straight for her.

Ms. Thomas was sitting at the far end of the room, hunched slightly over a notebook. Her lunch was untouched. She was scribbling something in a notebook—probably grading four separate papers in three different subjects at once, while also editing her own thoughts for clarity.

She didn't see him approach.

Which gave him just enough time to second-guess *everything*.

He arrived. Paused. Stared at her hair.

It was up again.

Tidy. Precise. Pencil in bun. And just one hair out of place.

Fen's heart sank and soared at the same time.

"Hi," he said, brightly, like a boy with a parachute full of hope and a small tear at the edge.

Ms. Thomas looked up. Blinkered. Smiled.

“Hey,” she said, friendly and unfazed. “Fen, right?”

He beamed like a lighthouse.

“Yes. That’s—yes. I am he. Me. That is I.”

She tilted her head slightly. “Cool. What’s up?”

Fen realized, all at once, that he had not prepared an actual line. Or plan. Or *anything* beyond walking over here and... *existing*.

“Your hair,” he blurted.

Ms. Thomas blinked again.

“...Okay?”

“It’s up,” Fen said.

She touched it reflexively, like she’d forgotten. “Yeah?”

“I mean, I liked it down too. Both states. Binary options. Not that you’re binary. You’re very... multi-state.”

Ms. Thomas raised an eyebrow. “Are you okay?”

Fen made a noise that might’ve been “Yes,” or a mumble. Then he took a breath. Reset.

“I’m not trying to be weird,” he said, softer. “I just wanted to say I think you’re kind of incredible. And I was wondering if you ever wanted to—”

Ms. Thomas was already smiling. But it was a different kind now—gentler.

“Oh,” she said, and it landed like a feather. “That’s really sweet.”

Fen deflated slowly, like a balloon still trying to pretend it had volume.

“I’m flattered,” she said, “but I’m not really in that space right now. Mentally. Socially. Or, like, cosmically.”

Fen nodded. “That’s completely understandable.”

“Also,” she added, “you’re, like... what? Ten?”

“I’m very old emotionally,” Fen said, straight-faced.

Ms. Thomas laughed. Not at him—just into the moment.

“Well, you’re very brave,” she said. “And that was... a really lovely almost-compliment about my hair. Thank you.”

Fen bowed slightly, because *of course he did*.

Then he turned around, walked three steps—

—and tripped over a chair leg that hadn’t been there earlier.

Possibly.

Probably.

Maybe.

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Fen returned to their table with the solemn dignity of a knight who had charged into battle, lost his horse, his sword, and most of his pride, and was now carefully pretending that had been the plan all along.

He sat. Carefully.



Sam didn't say anything at first.

He sipped his juice box. Slowly.  
Watched Fen reorient his tray.  
Waited a beat.

Then:

"So," he said, casual as rain, "how'd your interdimensional coming-of-age go?"

Fen leaned forward, placed a single grape tomato in the center of his napkin like it was a token of wisdom retrieved from a mountain shrine, and whispered:

"I think I learned something."

Sam nodded, resigned.

"Maybe Ms. Thomas isn't into an octogenarian Peter Pan."

Sam stopped sipping.

"What?"

Fen waved a hand.

"Nothing."

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The rest of the day passed in a haze of sulking, only some of which was performance art.

Fen slumped through Algebra like a deflated marionette. He drew dramatic Xs over his test answers and labeled them *Here Lies My Dignity*. In English, he asked if *unrequited infatuation* was a valid

theme for his essay on metaphors and then immediately answered his own question with a sigh that somehow echoed.

At lunch he'd been poetry. By fourth period, he was a very sad simile.

Sam let him grieve. Mostly. There was some poking. Possibly a sandwich crust thrown. Maybe a note passed that read "Dear Ms. Thomas, Please ignore my friend's entire personality. Sincerely, The Universe."

But Fen began to recover. Slowly. Quietly.

By the time last bell rang, he'd remembered that oxygen existed. And by the time they reached the front steps of the school, he'd even said a word that wasn't a dramatic reenactment of inner despair.

The sky was blue in the way only after-school skies are. Sam had already started talking about going to the corner store for snacks, which Fen translated as *healing through sugar*, a time-honored tradition.

Fen was just about to agree when he heard it.

Footsteps.

He turned—half instinct, half hope.

Ms. Thomas.

Walking toward them.

Toward *him*.

Hair still up. Pencil still sharp. Eyes unreadable.

And suddenly Fen's whole recovery system collapsed into a blinking cursor of panic.

Oh no. Oh no. She was coming *this way*. What if she was mad? What if she was *kind again*? What if she wanted to talk and he had to use *words* again?

Fen smiled. Or tried. It came out looking like someone had described a smile to him once, vaguely, in a cave.

Ms. Thomas stopped in front of them.

“Hey, Sam,” she said, like she wasn’t about to detonate Fen’s entire emotional weather system.

Then her eyes flicked to Fen, and the corner of her mouth lifted. Just a small, deliberate smile that said *you didn’t scare me away*.

“Mind if I steal your friend for a second?”

Sam, to his credit, did not say a single thing.

He just raised his eyebrows and vanished in the direction of vending machines.

Ms. Thomas nodded toward a bench under a crooked little tree that hadn’t been trimmed in a while. It felt slightly rebellious. Fen followed.

They sat. The silence was... oddly okay.

Fen, to his credit, did not immediately self-destruct.

He folded his hands. Waited. Braced.

Ms. Thomas leaned forward, elbows on knees, fingers loosely interlaced.

“You’re really sweet, Fen.”

Fen winced.

“No, hey—listen,” she said quickly. “This isn’t the start of a gentle letdown. You already got that. I just— I wanted to actually *talk* to you. Because I think you’re doing something a lot of people don’t understand how to do.”

Fen blinked. “Embarrass myself in public?”

Ms. Thomas snorted. “No. Well. Yes. But also *feel something*, say it out loud, and live through the aftermath. That’s rare. Most people your age don’t know how to do that yet.”

“I’m not most people my age,” Fen mumbled, with a shrug that carried more than even he knew.

“I know.”

She said it like she *really* knew.

Not in a weird way. Not in a condescending way. Just... like someone who’d seen too many people trying too hard to pretend they didn’t care.

“And I think,” she continued, “that maybe you were never told what this part of life is really for. So I want to say it. Just once.”

Fen nodded. Trying not to look at her too directly, in case eye contact made the moment too loud.

“You’re young,” she said. “You’re not supposed to have it all figured out. Like... relationships right now aren’t about finding your forever person or whatever. They’re about *figuring out* how to be close to someone without losing your mind.”

Fen said nothing. But he was very still.

She nudged his knee gently with hers.

“Having a crush? That’s *practice*. Being ‘with’ someone at our age—if it even happens—is practice, too. You don’t have to act like it’s some huge, serious thing. And you don’t have to pretend it doesn’t matter, either. You just... get to learn how it feels. That’s enough.”

Fen swallowed. “So... it wasn’t stupid?”

“No,” Ms. Thomas said softly. “It was *human*.”

Fen looked at his hands.

“Sam says I’m weird.”

“You *are* weird,” she said brightly. “But in a way that matters.”

And then, after a pause:

“Do you want the pencil?”

Fen looked up.

Ms. Thomas reached into her pocket, pulled out a spare pencil—not the one in her hair, but a twin. Yellow. Unbitten. Clean.

He stared at it like it might be enchanted.

“I don’t get it,” he said.

“It’s not a trophy,” she said. “It’s a reminder.”

“Of what?”

“That you can care, try, fail a little, and still be worth someone’s kindness.”

She handed it over. He took it.

It was just a pencil.  
But it wasn't.  
Not really.

Sam was waiting by the vending machines, holding two suspiciously dented juice boxes and a bag of chips that had clearly been chosen for crunch factor, not flavor. Fen's favorite.

He didn't say anything when Fen returned. Just held out a juice box and chips like it was a peace offering. Or possibly a bribe.

Fen took it wordlessly. Sat down on the curb next to him.

For a moment, they just sipped.

The wind stirred a little, brushing past them with that after-school kind of hush. The sky was slipping toward gold. Somewhere across the quad, someone was practicing violin poorly and confidently. It was, somehow, perfect.

"So," Sam said eventually. "Still alive?"

Fen nodded. "Surprisingly intact."

"She murder your soul gently?"

"No. She gifted it a pencil."

Sam blinked. "...Is that a metaphor?"

"One hair, Sam. *One hair*. Out of place in a world of straight lines." Fen shook his head, grinning. "I think I might be the most ridiculous person alive."

"Oh, definitely," Sam said. "But also..."

He bumped his shoulder against Fen's.

"Sometimes the most ridiculous things are the most real."

Fen looked at the pencil again. Then slipped it back into his pocket.

"I think I'm gonna be really good at love someday," he said softly.

"When I'm not, you know... completely insane about it."