

Cuts

“No cuts!” Hannah shouted.

“Teacher! Kimberly took cuts!” called Paul.

“Kimberly cut me!” Myra complained.

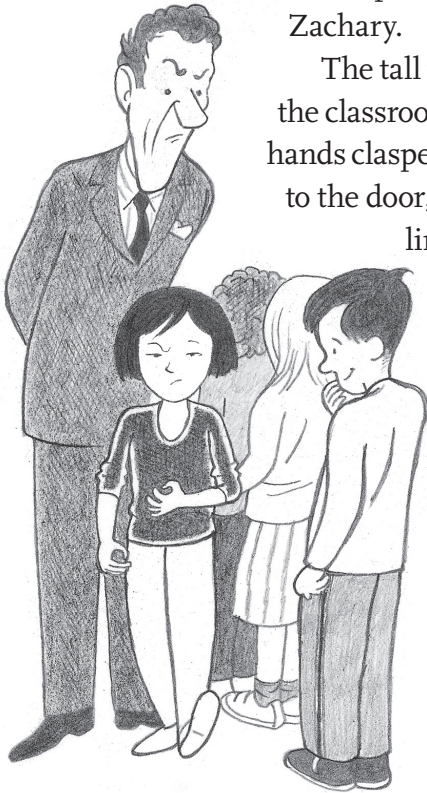
“Stop taking cuts, Kimberly,” snapped Zachary.

The tall teacher rose from his desk in the classroom at the end of the hall. With hands clasped behind his back, he strolled to the door, where his third-graders had lined up for recess.

“Kimberly, go to the end of the line,” he said. “Stop cutting in. It doesn’t matter where you stand in line. We’ll all get to the playground at the same time.”

Kimberly made a sharp about-face. She stomped to the end of the line and stood there fuming.

“Of course it matters



where kids are in line,” she grumbled. “Kids in front get the best playground balls and dibs on the foursquare court. They take the best seats on the bus! They sit closest to the stage during assemblies!”

She glowered at the twenty-four students standing in front of her.

“If it doesn’t matter, why do teachers assign line leaders?” she continued. “Why do they let the quietest kids line up first? Of *course* it’s an advantage to stand near the front of the line! Kids who don’t take cuts take a cut in the action.”

As the teacher opened the classroom door, Kimberly peered forward again. Paul, third from the front, was zipping up his jacket. She checked the teacher and the doorway and then double-checked Paul. Mentally she ran through her “Ways to Take Cuts” list.

“Should I try taking Cut-Corners Cuts?” she asked herself. “No, that wouldn’t work. Short Cuts? Nope. I think I’ll try Cut-Back Cuts. I have to get the good soccer ball this recess.”

Once more Kimberly studied the line, plotting her route. The moment the class started out the door, she stepped sideways. Ducking low, she slipped around the teacher’s back and swerved into the line behind Paul. She walked calmly down the hall as if she’d been in fourth place the entire time.

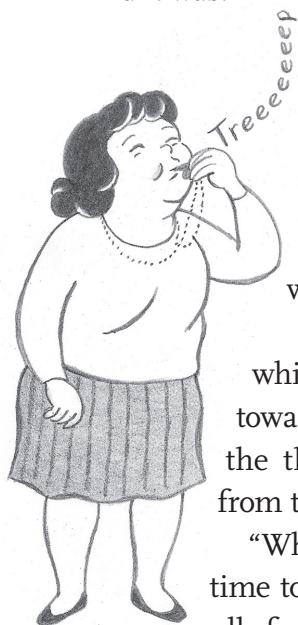
“No cuts, Kimberly!” Hannah called out.

“Get back where you were!” said Myra.

Kimberly only smiled. By now the teacher was out of earshot.

“Advantage Kimberly!” she told herself. “The soccer ball’s mine.”

And it was.



Twenty minutes later, the Playground Lady blew her silver whistle to end recess. The students charged toward the school building as they had charged out of it. Each class stood in a line before the door, waiting to be let in.

Kimberly, caught off-guard when the whistle blew, bolted from the soccer field toward the door. By the time she reached the third-grade line, she stood fifteenth from the front.

“What a disaster!” she said. “I won’t have time to get a drink before class starts. This calls for Butt Cuts.”

Kimberly was standing behind Hannah. After making sure the Playground Lady wasn’t looking, she reached down and pinched Hannah on the rear.

Hannah spun around. “Knock it off, Kim!” she shrieked.

As the rest of the line turned to see what happened, Kimberly slipped forward and cut in fourth from the front.

“My cleanest cut yet,” she boasted inwardly.

In the hallway, six students stood at the drinking fountain. Kimberly joined the line at the end.

“I’ll die of thirst if I don’t get water right away,” she said to herself. “Should I try Buzz Cuts? No way. And I don’t think I can manage Cut-the-Cheese Cuts. I guess I’ll try the most daring one of all, Domino Cuts.”

Kimberly waited for the fifth-grade boy in front to start slurping water from the fountain. Pretending to look down the hall, she shoved the fourth-grade girl in front of her. The girl stumbled into a second-grader, who bumped a kindergartner, who fell onto a third-grader, who knocked a first-grader, who pushed the fifth-grade boy at the front.



By the time the kids recovered, Kimberly had slunk forward and was standing at the fountain.

“Advantage mine,” she said, bowing for a drink.

Back in the classroom at the end of the hall, it was Writer’s Workshop time. Kimberly wrote in her journal about a recent trip to Disneyland. It began:

Lines

The lines at Disneyland were torture. I had to wait over an hour to ride Splash Mountain. What a waste of time! I could easily have taken cuts to the front of the line, but my parents wouldn't let me. The line moved slower than babies crawl. You never get far in life if you don't take cuts . . .

Kimberly wrote quickly to make sure she would be done with her story by lunchtime. Students who were finished always got to line up first for lunch.

When the lunch bell rang, the teacher reminded them that it was a pizza day. "Will Myra, the line leader this week, start the line at the door?" he said.

Kimberly cleared her desk to show that her story was done. She sat perfectly still and quiet. The lunch line was the most important line of the day, especially on the days when lunch was pizza. Not only did you get your pick of pizza slices, but you were also guaranteed that the chocolate milk hadn't run out, and you could sit at the best spot at the third-grade table, the one closest to the playground door.

"Hannah can line up," the teacher called out. "Zachary and Tanya next. And look how quietly Matthew is sitting."

Today Kimberly was unlucky. By the time the teacher picked her, she stood tenth from the door.

"A kid can't cut it at school without taking cuts," she

muttered. "I'll be stuck with cardboard pizza, warm white milk, and the seat farthest from the door. Time to take Cut-to-the-Basket Cuts."

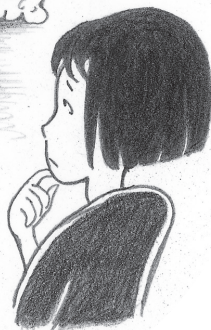
"I'm waiting," called the teacher. "We can't leave for lunch until the line is straight and quiet."

Kimberly leaned sideways to inspect the line. Before it became too straight and quiet, she pulled a wad of Kleenex from her pocket. She shot it toward the wastebasket by the door, missing on purpose. Stepping forward, she bent and dropped the tissue into the basket. Still bending, she cut in line between Myra and Hannah. No complaints. Another perfect job.

"All right, class," the tall teacher said. "Have a good lunch."

The line began to march. Kimberly followed Myra out the door and down the hall. On the wall, just before the lunchroom door, hung a portrait of the school's founder, Walter Teach Melon.

The tall teacher had taught his students that this man, more than half a century earlier, built W. T. Melon Elementary School. But the third-graders



had heard other stories. Older students told them that W. T. Melon was still alive, living above the classroom at the end of the hall. They said that he had special powers and that throughout the school year he made things “different” in their classroom.

That’s what Kimberly was thinking about as she passed the portrait. What else could explain the strange fact that the picture had changed? Usually, she was quite certain, W. T. Melon held a book in one hand and an apple in the other. Now, instead of the apple he was holding a pair of large teacher scissors.

“Hey, look,” she said, turning around to tell Hannah. But Hannah wasn’t there. In fact, no one was. Kimberly could see all the way down to her classroom, and the hallway was empty. Facing forward again, she found that she now stood last in line.

“Hey, my class cut me!” she said, puzzled. “I went from second in line to last. How’s that possible?”

Before taking another step, Kimberly saw that her shoe-lace was untied. Normally she would never stop in line to tie her shoe—kids behind her would shout at her to get moving. But now that she was last, what difference did it make? Quickly she stooped and tied a bow before joining the third-grade line as it filed into the lunchroom.

Line leader Myra stopped at the tray cart and grabbed a plastic tray. She chose a spoon and a fork and pulled a napkin from the box. Finally she entered the narrow serving room where Miss Treat, the lunch lady, stood

ready to serve pizza from behind a long pane of glass.

At the end of the line, Kimberly rocked from side to side. "What a disaster!" she griped. "By the time I get to the front, the pizza triangles will be dried out and shriveled."

Standing on tiptoe, she searched for a place in line to take cuts. Her cut of choice this time: Cut-to-the-Chase Cuts.

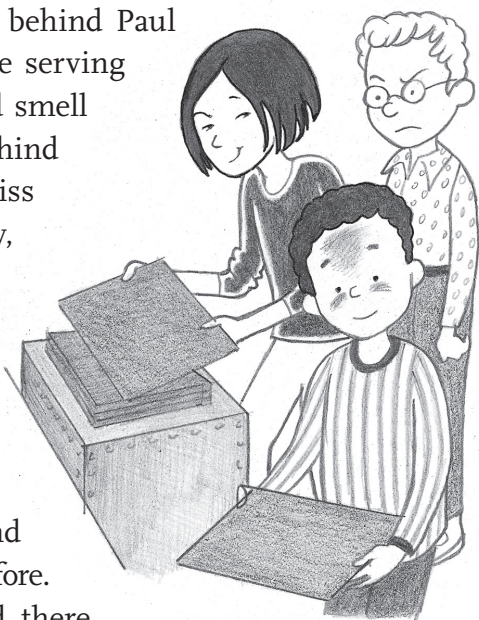
Step out! Duck! Step in! Done!

Kimberly now stood behind Paul near the doorway to the serving area. She could see and smell the wheels of pizza behind the glass. She saw Miss Treat slide a stringy, gooey slice onto Myra's tray. Her eyes fixed on the wedge she wanted. She was about to grab a tray when she felt a tap on her shoulder.

Kimberly turned and saw the same thing as before.

Nothing. No one stood there.

Again she was at the end of the line. To make matters worse, the fourth-grade class had entered the lunchroom. When Kimberly faced forward again, she found that every fourth-grader stood in front of her.



“Hey, no cuts!” she shouted. “You all cut me. Wait your turn!”

Naturally, the fourth-graders ignored the third-grader, and the line crept along with Kimberly at the rear.

“This line is slower than a supermarket checkout line,” she muttered. “Slower than a movie ticket line or a line to get ice cream on a hot day.”

As she inched forward, Kimberly caught sight of the drinking fountain attached to the wall. Normally she would never leave a line to get water, for fear of losing her place. But what did it matter now? Shrugging, she stepped to the fountain and took a long, cool drink.

Back in line, Kimberly continued shuffling toward the serving area. “Come on! Get moving! If I were in a car, I’d lean on the horn,” she said. “I feel Line Rage, and I’m still miles away from the tray cart. Time for the never-fail Cold Cuts.”

Kimberly checked the line. “*Ah-chooo!*” she went. Now it was time to make her move.

“I’m just getting a napkin to blow my nose,” she said, breezing past the fourth-graders. “Teacher said I could.”

She cut in line beside the tray cart. “Yep, the old Cold Cuts works every time,” she said to herself.

Lunch tray in hand at last, Kimberly snatched some silverware and entered the serving area. Gliding her tray along the metal rods, she eyed that pizza slice she’d been craving. Four students separated her from Miss Treat. Soon three. Then two. Then she felt another tap on her shoulder.

“No way am I turning around this time,” Kimberly told herself. “No one’s going to cut me again.”

A second tap came. When Kimberly ignored it, she received a pinch on her elbow. Still not reacting, she endured a jab in the back and a blast of breath in her hair.

“I’m not turning,” Kimberly vowed. “I’m not losing my spot.”

When someone stepped on her heel, however, she whirled around and snarled, “You’re history!”

Once more she was talking to empty air. To make matters worse, the fifth-grade class had somehow passed her, and now she was standing at the end of the longest line yet. Kimberly was all the way outside the lunchroom door.

“Well, I give up,” she said. “The whole school is taking cuts.” She faced the portrait of W. T. Melon, surprised that he held an apple again. “I must settle for being last, even though last one is a rotten egg.”

One slow step at a time, Kimberly moved forward. Mr. Leeks, who was sweeping the lunchroom floor with his wide push broom, walked up to her.

“Fancy seeing you at the end of the lunch line, Kimberly,” he said. “You’re usually right up front.”

Kimberly liked Mr. Leeks and was happy to have a chance to talk with him. “I hate being last, Mr. Leeks,” she said. “Last always spells disaster. A last chance is scary, making a last stand is hairy, and who wants to be on a last leg or take a last breath?”



The custodian rubbed his raspy chin. "Well now, don't you know, isn't there also a ditty that goes 'Last but not least'?" he said, and continued with his sweeping.

At long last Kimberly reached the serving area. She grabbed a tray and slammed it down on the metal rods. The few remaining pizza triangles looked as if they'd been run over by a school bus.

"And look what I get for being last in line," she muttered. "Leather for lunch."

Miss Treat smiled at Kimberly. "What a surprise to find you at the tail end of the line, Kimberly," she said.

Kimberly stared at her tray. How embarrassing it was to be standing behind everyone! She didn't even know how she got there. Without looking up, she raised her tray to accept some pizza.

"Wait right here, Kimberly," Miss Treat said. "I'll be right back."

The lunch lady hurried to the back of the kitchen. She returned holding a round tray with her large oven mittens. She set a steaming pizza oozing with cheese behind the glass.

"We always save one last fresh pizza for latecomers and teachers," she explained.

Beaming, Kimberly carried her extra-gooey pizza slice to the third-grade table. She was even more delighted to find that Hannah had saved her a seat near the door.

"Well, how about that?" she said to herself as she bit into the pizza. "Being last can have its advantages." She checked the clock. "Now I wonder what might happen if I'm last out to recess."

