

As you read this story, look for how Mia changes-and why. The JAOS of Specter Elementary

Making new friends isn't worth the trouble for Mia—until she meets a special someone BY LAUREN MAGAZINER | ART BY c.b. CANGA

> ia slumped down in her seat as the car rolled to a stop. It was her third new school in two years, and she was starting to feel like she moved more than a checkers piece. Last time, she didn't even bother making friends or joining clubs. What was the point, knowing that it wouldn't last? Best friends forever—what a joke!

"I'm going to be late for work, honey," prodded her dad. Mia looked out the window, surveying her new prison—erm, school—with

a scowl.

Specter Elementary was an old, ramshackle house with a single clock tower and creaky windows. The building was taller than it was wide, sitting atop a hill. No matter which way you looked at it, the school constantly seemed in danger of blowing over, even in the slightest wind.

"Do I have to go?" Mia whispered.

"You'll be great," her dad said, his eyes unmistakably on the car's clock. Mia wished he'd never taken this new job. Why did she always have to give up her life just because her dad made a choice without her? It wasn't fair!

Mia slammed the car door shut and stormed into the front office. An administrator led her to her new classroom, and as her teacher introduced her, Mia could feel her face growing flush, with anger, with loss. She balled her hands into fists as she looked out into the strange faces of all her classmates.

These weren't her friends. This wasn't her home. This would never be home.

SETTIN How does this description fit with the title of the

GO ONLINE TO WATCH AN AUTHOR INTERVIEW

ow Character Change



CHARACTER What does this sentence tell you about how Mia is leeling?

FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE Why does Mia feel like a piece of driftwood?

INFFRFNCF

Whv does the

glance hurt

Mia?

CHARACTER

What does Mia's

reaction tell you

about her?

t lunch, Mia chose a spot all by herself, far from the other kids in her class. A few people tried to catch her eye, but she looked away. She ate with her head down, and she imagined herself wearing a funeral veil, mourning her old life, **back when she didn't float around from school to school like a piece of driftwood**. She *used* to have friends, before her first move. And she had friends after her second move too, but they were ripped from her so fast that it was more painful than just not having friends at all.

That whole first week at Specter, Mia ate at the far end of the table, all alone, completely invisible to everyone. But to her surprise, on Friday, two people slid close to her.

"What are you doing?" Mia asked.

"Joining you," said a girl in pigtails. "I'm Natalie. And this is—" "Travis," the boy next to Mia said. He was short and round and very red. He had a face that blushed every time he talked.

"So, what do you want?" Mia said curtly. Natalie looked at Travis, and her look seemed to mean something to the two of them. It was a special friendship glance that made Mia ache.

"We just came to see how your first week was going at Specter," Natalie said. "You've been kind of quiet. So we thought we'd introduce ourselves. In case you were shy or something."

"I'm shy," Travis added in a whisper. Mia sighed. She wasn't shy—she just wasn't getting attached. "Uh, Specter's fine."

"Just fine? Then I guess no one told you about THE GHOST," Natalie exclaimed.

"The ghost?" Mia said.

Natalie wiggled her fingers. "The ghost of Specter Elementary! Legend has it that there's a ghost who haunts the halls. If you put your ear up to the wall, sometimes you can hear a whistling sound."

"My brother told me that if you say 'Specter ghost' three times fast into a mirror, it will appear and suck your soul out of your bellybutton with a straw," Travis said, his voice hushed.

Mia frowned. "You're making fun of me, aren't you?"

"What do you mean?" Natalie said, taking a bite of her turkey sandwich. "You think I'm that gullible? You want me to put my ear to the wall or talk into a mirror, and then look stupid in front of the whole school."

Travis flushed, while Natalie blanched. Together, they could have been a candy cane.

Natalie quickly put down her sandwich. "That's not at all what we—" Mia stood up suddenly, her eyes prickling with tears. Without another glance at Natalie and Travis, she sprinted out of the cafeteria. ia didn't stop running until she was safe in the bathroom, locked inside a stall. Don't cry, don't cry, don't cry, she thought. Then, despite herself, hot tears slid down her cheeks; she snozzed into a wad of toilet paper. As she flushed her snotty tissues down the toilet, she thought she heard a whistling sound coming from the walls. But it was all in her head, right? She walked out to the sink, seeing her own uneasy expression in the mirror.

INFERENCE Why does Mia do this?

"Don't be silly," she said aloud, chuckling. "There is no Specter ghost." But then she whispered 'Specter ghost' twice more—just to see.

There were two sharp knocks on a stall door behind her. Mia jumped a mile. She thought she was alone. "W-who's there?" "Boo," said a muffled voice through the door.

"Boo who?" asked Mia.

"Don't cry! It was just a joke!" replied the voice. A *knock knock joke*?! Mia thought, puzzled. "Who are you?" Mia asked, slowly opening the stalls one by one. Nobody was there.

> And yet—a shiver slid down her back, a thousand goosebumps prickled on her arms. The air was colder, somehow, and smelled of snow. She could see her breath. Then something came into view the shimmery outline of a kid. Mia couldn't tell whether it was a boy or a girl; the figure was almost completely see-through.

"I know, that's a dreadful joke. Dreadful . . . or *deadful*?" the ghost said. "Punny, isn't it!" And then it grinned.

Mia laughed and panicked at the same time, which resulted in her letting out a squeaky guffaw. "What are you?"

"I think you know."

"A-are you real?"

"You know that too."

"Are you going to suck my soul out of my bellybutton?"

The ghost yawned. "If I knew you were going to call me here just to ask me ridiculous questions, I wouldn't have bothered."

Mia shivered. "Did you die . . . in this school?"

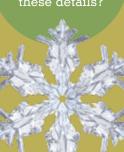
"I'm not dead! I'm just the school spirit!" The ghost paused. "Get it? School spirit? Oh, I crack myself up!" The ghost's body broke into a pile of pieces and then quickly reassembled itself. A *ghost comedian*? Mia marveled.

"Can I ask what you're doing here?" she asked.

As the ghost flitted around the room, bathroom tiles looked blurry through its body. "My job is to help out students who are in danger of disappearing."

"In danger of what?" Mia rushed to the mirror. Her brown eyes, hollow cheeks, thick hair—everything looked normal. Relieved, she moved to tuck a lock of

MAGERY Why does the author include these details?



How does the

ghost surprise

Mia?

INFERENCE What does the ghost mean by this?

> THEME How does this apply to Mia?

CHARACTER

What do Mia's solid hands show you about how she's changed? hair behind her ear—but the tips of her fingers! She couldn't see them! "Don't scream!" the ghost warned.

"I must have fallen asleep in class! Wake up!" Mia pinched herself. Hard.

"You're not dreaming," the ghost said, "you're *disappearing*. It's a slow process, but eventually you'll be a floating spirit like me!" The ghost put its cold arm on her shoulder. **"This is what you've been wanting!"**

"What are you talking about? I don't want this!"

"Sure you do. You don't do any activities. You don't talk to anyone. You don't participate in class. You don't play at recess. You're already pretty invisible might as well make the change permanent," the ghost finished brightly.

"I just moved here!" Mia cried. "I've been feeling lonely!"

The ghost hummed. "That's entirely your choice. People have tried to talk to you and be your friend. But you sit there with a grumpy face and folded arms, and it scares people away," the ghost said.

"There has to be some way to stop this—please! Help me!" Mia pleaded.

"Once the change is complete, there is nothing I can do. But it takes a long time to become a Full Ghost. The more you're absent from your own life, the more you fade away."

Mia winced. "But I can't help how I feel. What if I miss my old life?" "You've got to live in the present, dude! Wait, do people say 'dude' anymore?" "Not really."

"Groovy! Thanks for the 4-1-1. It's hard to keep up with the lingo." Mia looked at her fading fingers. "What can I do?" she asked quietly.

"Listen, I've been haunting these halls for centuries now, and if there's one thing I know it's this: If you spend your whole life missing the past instead of living in the present, then you're going to disappear."

Mia suddenly felt like crying again, but instead she wiped her hands on her pants and looked at the ghost with a steely glance.

"Want to hear another joke?" offered the ghost.

"No," Mia said firmly. "I'm going to recess."

"Excellent!"

Mia marched out of the bathroom and sprinted down the hall, not even slowing down when a teacher hollered after her. Outside, she found Natalie and Travis talking under the slide.

"I'm sorry about lunch," Mia said. "Can I join you?"

Natalie looked surprised, but she and Travis moved aside to make a spot for her. As Mia sat down, she glanced at her hands and smiled.

They were fully solid and completely visible.

WRITE TO WIN

Write a blog post from Mia, in which she describes her experience and how it changed her. Send it to "Ghost Contest" by December 1, 2016. Ten winners will each receive a copy of *Pilfer Academy* by Lauren Magaziner.

FIND AN ACTIVITY ONLINE!