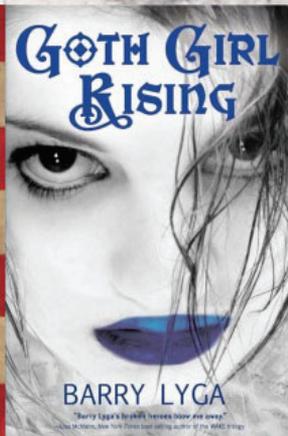
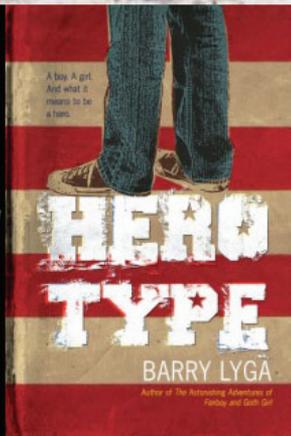
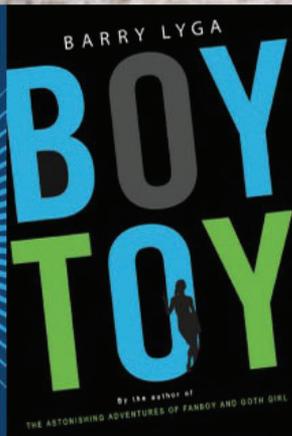


BROOKDALE AND BEYOND

A Barry Lyga Sampler

Includes a sneak peek at
Barry's first graphic novel!



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E-ISBN 978-0-547-76387-3

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INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the Barry Lyga Sampler!

In this e-book, you'll find excerpts from four of Barry's young adult novels, collectively referred to as the "Brookdale books," since they share a common setting in the fictional town of Brookdale, Maryland.

Each excerpt here features a short introduction by Barry, as well as a snippet of an interview about the book.

We've also included some free short stories. And as a special treat for you, those who have downloaded this sampler, we are proud to present the first chapter of *Mangaman*, Barry's first graphic novel, with art by the illustrious Colleen Doran!

We hope you enjoy this look at Barry's work. To buy any of the novels (including *Mangaman*), visit your local bookstore or favorite online bookseller.

Visit Barry online at www.barrylyga.com, www.facebook.com/barrylyga, and www.twitter.com/barrylyga.

TIMELINE FOR THE BROOKDALE BOOKS

Since the Brookdale books are connected but are not a traditional series, people sometimes ask what is the "right" order to read them in. We went to Barry and he had this to say:

"It really doesn't matter which way you read the books. But there are two ways I tend to imagine people reading them: chronologically and publication order.

"Chronologically is the order in which the stories take place. So, in that case you would start with The Astonishing Adventures of Fanboy & Goth Girl, then go to its immediate sequel, Goth Girl Rising, which

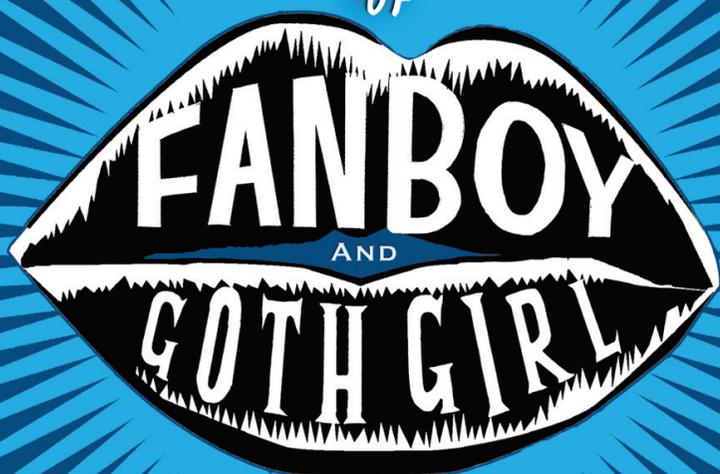
takes place about six months later. Six months after that comes Hero-Type, and Boy Toy overlaps the end of Hero-Type by about a week.

“Publication order is just the order in which the books were published, the order in which I wrote them: The Astonishing Adventures of Fanboy & Goth Girl, Boy Toy, Hero-Type, and then Goth Girl Rising.

“But honestly, I’ve had people read ’em in all kinds of orders and it doesn’t seem to affect things at all. Just dive in!”

BARRY LYGA

THE ASTONISHING ADVENTURES
OF



"A captivating, darkly entertaining first novel." —Tom Perrotta,
author of *Election* and *Little Children*

THE ASTONISHING ADVENTURES OF FANBOY AND GOTH GIRL

Lyga's first novel, *The Astonishing Adventures of Fanboy and Goth Girl* was called "an entertaining read no matter what age you are" by *USA Today*. *Newsday* said, "What a find," and *Booklist* and *School Library Journal* both gave it starred reviews.

But you should read it and decide for yourself!

Young Adult Review Network: *In the acknowledgements to Fanboy and Goth Girl you mention that Tom Perrotta told you to embrace your comic book passions. Can you tell us a little more about this relationship, and how Mr. Perrotta had an impact on you and your writing?*

BL: Tom was my creative writing professor in college. He's obviously a phenomenal writer, but he's also a terrific teacher. At the time that I was in college, comic books weren't considered to be as cool as they are now — they weren't really considered a valid art form by many people. As a result, I felt sort of self-conscious in the creative writing class, surrounded by people who were reading "real" literature, as I sat there with my comics. Tom took me aside one day and told me that my love of comics made me unique in that class and that I shouldn't be ashamed of it. It took me a few years, but I finally understood what he meant and embraced my own geekitude, and the rest is history.

(Interview excerpt courtesy of yareview.net. For the complete interview, visit <http://yareview.net/2010/04/interview-with-barry-lyga-part-1/>).

There are three things in this world that I want more than anything. I'll tell you the first two, but I'll never tell you the third.

1

I WANT TO *NOT* RIDE the bus to school every day, but that would be a waste of a really big want — it'll take care of itself eventually. Until then, I put up with it, like today.

So what do I want? I want a copy of *Giant-Size X-Men #1* in Mint condition.

I would settle for Near Mint, I guess, which would definitely be cheaper, but I'd really like to be able to say that my copy is pretty much perfect. On eBay, a Mint copy starts at at least eight hundred bucks, which is way more than I can afford, but maybe once I get my driver's license, I can get a job after school and put together the money. Sounds crazy, I know — some ancient comic book from the 1970s. But it's important.

I also want a new computer. Multiprocessor, maxed-out memory slots, wireless everything . . . When my parents got divorced, my mom got custody of me, and I got custody of the old Pentium clone that used to sit in the den at our old house. Thanks to the very best in Microsoft/Intel engineering, it crashes every time you exhale too hard in its general vicinity. It's tough to accomplish the kinds of things I want to accomplish with that going on. I want Flash animation! Video editing! Heck, I just want to be able to use Photoshop or Illustrator for ten minutes without rebooting.

Thinking about a pristine *Giant-Size X-Men* #1 and a humming new computer usually gets me through the bus ride to school. Today's an exception. Today, I don't need to spin fantasies because a living, breathing fantasy has just gotten on board: Dina Jurgens, who manages to make climbing the steps to the bus look like something that crazy parents' groups boycott.

It's a good day when a goddess gets on the school bus with you. In my two years suffering as this particular school bus stutters over potholes and gravel, winding its way through the back roads of Brookdale, Dina has only ridden a handful of times.

She's a senior, two years older than I am, but she looks like she could have stepped off a runway somewhere: blond hair, bright green eyes, soft and puffy lips, and a body that's pure torture. There are plenty of hotties at South Brook High, but Dina's a cut above and beyond. Of all the things I hate about South Brook, the fact that she's graduating in a few months is at the top of the list. How am I supposed to go through junior and senior years without catching glimpses of her in the hall?

Dina checks out the seating situation, scanning the back seats, which are packed. The bus driver — a wheezing, leather-faced troll appropriately named Mr. Dull — closes the door and hits the gas, jerking Dina forward a little. She flips her hair out of her eyes, then rolls them at Mr. Dull's temerity. She heads for the first empty seat, which happens to be, well, next to me.

I try to play it cool, but let's be honest — that's tough to do in the presence of a goddess. I go with my first instinct, which is to try to dip my hand into my pocket for the safety totem I keep there. I always feel calmer when I touch it.

But it's awkward getting a hand into your pocket when you're sitting down, doubly so when there's someone right next to you. My elbow brushes her side, and she looks at me like I planned it. "Hey!"

"Sorry," I mumble. I feel like I should explain that I wasn't *trying* to touch her, but she's already looking away.

"What happened, Dina?" Sounds like Kayla Meyer. A junior, one who hasn't gotten a car yet. One who apparently ranks as Worthy on

the Dina Jurgens Scale because her older brother is Steve Meyer, who I think dated Dina's older sister or something like that. I don't know. I don't really pay attention to stuff like that.

"My car wouldn't start this morning."

"Bummer."

"Yeah, I told my dad that it *has* to be ready by the weekend because ..."

I tune it out and keep my head down so that no one will bother me. But being so close to Dina rattles me. I keep wanting to turn and stare, but even *I* know that that's not cool. So I settle for cutting my eyes left as often as I can. I get flashes of skirt and leg and the shadow of what could be a breast, but I'm not sure and I don't want to risk looking for longer than, like, a tenth of a second. So it's sort of like dumping the pieces of a puzzle out on the floor, looking at them, and then trying to put it all together in your head. With your eyes closed. So close! So far!

It goes like that for a little while, the bus jerking and bouncing along, making Dina's anatomy do very interesting things that she's apparently unaware of (and of which I'm woefully underaware, given those quick glances). Dina talks with Kayla, the Usual Idiots yell and chatter, and Mr. Dull's beloved country station blares out of the radio.

At some point, I realize that I probably look like an idiot, my head bent down, doing nothing (apparently), staring down at my feet. I pretend to look for something in my backpack, but there's just school stuff and comic books in there. And God knows I don't want to pull out a comic book while Dina's sitting next to me! I wish I had something — *anything* — else to read, something that didn't scream "Geek!" at the top of its lungs and jump around in nerdly war paint. Like . . . I don't know . . . *Hot Rod?*

When we screech to a tooth-grinding halt at the school, a sudden brilliant stroke hits me. Dina is sitting next to me. On the aisle. She'll get up to leave and I'll get up behind her. Behind her. From here to the exit, I'll be right behind her, with an unobstructed view of The Back of Dina Jurgens. Not as splendid a sight as The Front, but not bad in its own right. Sweet.

So Dina gets up and I grab my backpack (watching her legs as I do so — wow), then get up and move to get behind her —

And Mark Broderick pushes me back. “Move it.”

He doesn't even look at me as he does it. He's a big senior with short bleached hair and a face like old hamburger. He dresses like Eminem, if Eminem weighed twenty pounds too much and couldn't keep the sweat stains from spreading out under his armpits. This is the weirdest part — he smells like boiling leather. I've never been able to figure that part out.

Up until now, the only contact I've ever had with him was smelling that unique aroma as he walked past me on the bus. But right now I watch him as he struts up to the door behind Dina. A flood of bigger, meaner, and/or tougher kids fills the aisle, and I'm not about to step into that flood, so I just stand here and wait and watch Mark's back and the buzzcut that clutches his scalp.

Now that I'm standing, it's easy to slip my hand into my pocket. As usual, I feel immediate calm when I touch the bullet that I keep there. I started carrying it about a year ago.

Everything's OK; I've added Mark to The List.

THE LIST

the list is getting pretty long these days. It's a compilation of everyone who's ever pissed me off for no reason whatsoever. All of those Jock Jerks and Clique-its who treat me like dirt just because they can. Someday, when I've left this stupid little hick town with its stupid little hick people, the ones on The List are the ones I'll be sure to remember more than anyone else. I'm not sure how, but I'll remember them. Sometimes I can almost sympathize with those guys who go nuts and shoot up their schools, but no one on The List is worth dying or going to jail for. The best revenge is living well, my dad told me once. So I'd be happy to show up at my tenth reunion in a stretch limo, or with a supermodel on my arm, or with a TV crew filming one of many documentaries about me or something. Just waltz in and make a show of ignoring them all, unless I get the chance to nail some-

one with just the right comment at just the right time. The difference between *them* and *me* being that I would have a reason for doing it. A stupid fantasy? Maybe. But reliable.

The List started in sixth grade. I was in the school spelling bee. I was the first one to go and I stepped up to the microphone. I had no idea how high it had been turned up or how loud it would be, so I spoke in a loud, clear voice. When I said, “Massachusetts,” it came out “MASS” and filled the entire auditorium, like some huge, heavy thundercloud of sound as I realized what was happening, and I managed to quiet down for the rest, but the enormity of my own massive, booming voice and the look of shock on the faces in front of me freaked me out — my voice cracked and shot up like a girl’s for “achusetts,” and I was so rattled that I didn’t even spell it right and I washed out in the first round.

That day I got in the lunch line and Pete Vesentine and Ronnie Warshaw started pushing me and imitating the crack in my voice: “Get out of *line!* Get out of *line!*”

“No, no, like this,” Ronnie said, and then said, “MASSachusetts,” managing to break on every syllable and throwing in a limp wrist for added comedy.

I was smaller than them and there were two of them and no one was going to help me, but I didn’t want to get out of line and go to the back. My mother always told me to ignore bullies, so that’s what I tried to do: I just sort of squared my shoulders and got back in line.

“Hey!” Pete this time. “Hey, no butting! You can’t butt in line.”

“I didn’t butt,” I said (probably too earnestly). “I was here already.”

“You can’t butt,” Pete said again, and Ronnie backed him up and they pushed me out again, only this time I lost my grip on my lunch money and a quarter fell onto the floor.

I was just about to pick it up when Ronnie stepped on it.

I looked up at him. “Come on, Ronnie,” I said, trying to sound calm and reasonable. “Let me have my quarter.”

“Let me have my *quarter*. Let me have my *quarter*.” More falsettos and limp wrists from Pete and Ronnie.

“Come on.”

Ronnie shoved with his foot and lifted it off the floor at the last minute. My quarter went skimming down the hall. I chased after it, followed by their laughter. When I reclaimed it and turned around, the line had moved. Ronnie and Pete were giggling to each other, almost at the door that led into the cafeteria. No way they'd let me back in line.

As I took up my new position at the end of the line, I decided to start The List.

2

RONNIE AND PETE are still around. Along with their Cro-Magnon buddies (read: the JJ, the Jock Jerks, the population of the football, soccer, lacrosse, and basketball teams), they dogged me through the rest of middle school. But fortunately high school deposited them in the sort of idiot classes they belong in — basic math, lots of “Tech Ed,” and, my favorite, “Reading” (can you believe they have to have a class called that?) — while I was placed in the “Fast-Track” for gifted and talented students. I almost never see them, except for gym class, where they’re pretty easy to avoid.

But they’re still on The List. No one gets removed from The List. That’s sort of the point.

I give myself a moment to let the sensation of touching the bullet calm me. I found it one night, left neglected and lonely on the workshop bench in the basement at home. The step-fascist must have dropped it behind something and forgot about it. It just sat there on the bare workbench, glinting in a shadowy pocket near a box of screws. I stood there for a long time, having trouble catching my breath. I waited for someone — Mom, the step-fascist — to show up and say something.

Nothing.

So I grabbed the bullet in a fist closed so tight it went white, and I’ve had it ever since. My lucky totem; my safety blanket.

Relaxed now, I head into school, where Mark Broderick is swallowed up by the throngs of students (but his name is now indelibly imprinted on The List) and Dina Jurgens goes off into whatever world is inhabited by Senior Goddesses, and I go off to homeroom.

But before I get there, I see Cal by the lockers. He's my only real friend at school, the only one I bother to hang out with outside of school. (Or, the only one who bothers to hang out with *me* might be more accurate.) He's also one of ten black kids at South Brook, and the fact that I know there are exactly ten black kids at my school should tell you something right there.

He's taller than I am and bigger and just generally cooler. Plays football and lacrosse. Wrestles. Unlike the rest of the JJ, though, he's smart and he doesn't treat me like dirt. He loves comic books, too. That's actually how we met — back in eighth grade, he saw me reading *League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* and stopped at my desk. "When did that one come out? I've been waiting for it."

I couldn't believe it — here was a guy who had girls swooning over him, more friends than I could count, and the weird sort of cachet you get by being a fun, friendly black kid in a white school . . . and he was into comic books?

At first I thought it was yet another ruse by some ill-intentioned idiot designed to lead me into a trap for the amusement of others. Like the time a few years ago when I gave a passionate report on collectible card games as a metaphor for cultural change in a social studies class. Todd Bellanger told me afterward that he had some rare Magic: The Gathering cards in his locker. I couldn't believe it. Well, actually, I couldn't believe he had them and I also couldn't believe that Todd was even bothering to talk to me, since he usually was one of my tormentors. But maybe we'd found a common ground.

So I went to his locker, and instead of Magic cards he shoved a bunch of pictures of naked men into my hands, then shouted, "No, I don't want your gay porn!" really loud, so that everyone in the hallway turned and saw me with the pictures and laughed and laughed . . .

So I was suspicious of Cal immediately, especially since I knew lit-

tle about him — recent transfer, played football, hung out with a lot of jocks. I'd been burned before.

"Yeah, well, this is the issue after the one with the Wright Brothers," I said.

Cal blinked, obviously confused. "What? I must have missed more than one. When did the Wright Brothers show up? I didn't know they were in the story."

They weren't. He had passed my test, and so I cautiously entered into a conversation with him, which eventually evolved into the only friendship I have at South Brook.

"Hey, Cal!" I close in. "I found this website last night that lays out the whole Xorn-is-Magneto thing from Morrison's run on *New X-Men*. This guy, it's unreal. He's got scanned-in panels and pages and he annotated them all and there's a timeline and —"

"Yeah, that's cool," Cal says, but it doesn't sound like he thinks it's cool. He looks around quickly. I've seen this behavior before.

"But I didn't tell you all of it." I'm rushing, trying to get it in. "There's also links to a whole site that shows all the other times Magneto disguised himself, and a thing about *House of M* —"

"Uh-huh." Cal gives me a quick grin, then walks away. Down the hall, I see Mike Lorenz and Jason Benatovech waving at him. Football players. Well, that's life being Cal's friend. When the jocks call, he goes. On the mean streets of hick rural high schools, you have to keep up your popularity and your cool factor if you want to survive as a black kid. And being seen with me — especially talking comic books — is the best way to see your cool stock plummet.

Cal doesn't even really know he's doing it. I can tell because he never refers to it, never acts as if he's done anything wrong. It's just survival. Just high school crap. It doesn't bother me. Not anymore. Not really.

3

FOR SOME REASON (it's not important), South Brook High School has been taken hostage. Mike Lorenz, Jason Benatovech, Pete Vesentine, and Ronnie Warshaw are all dead with bullets in their heads. Todd Bellanger has been shot, too, but he's not dead, just writhing in pain and crying. I note with some satisfaction that Mark Broderick is also among the deceased.

I'm hiding in the computer lab, and that's when I realize that everyone is being herded toward the gym. Cal is with them, and he looks angry and scared all at once. I realize that with a single distraction Cal would be able to disarm one of the bad guys and probably rescue everybody (even the ones who don't deserve it).

From the computer lab, I'm able to hack into the bell system, which is all automated. I can kick off the distraction and save everyone.

And that's when my arm explodes.

I look around. My fantasy of the school invasion has to be put on hold. (It's a good fantasy, and I add more details each time I relive it.) What the hell just happened to —

Again. Pain. Erupting in my right shoulder. I rock to one side with the force of the blow and bite my lip to keep from crying out.

I'm in gym class, or, as the idiots who teach it insist on calling it, "Physical Education." "Education," as if they're teaching us something

other than the utterly useless skills of volleyball, flag football, and pushups.

And my personal favorite (I'm being sarcastic), dodge ball. What genius invented this game? What unrelentingly stupid jackass decided that it was a good idea to take a cluster of people with widely varying body types, strength levels, and skill sets (to say nothing of ever-shifting moralities and ethics), and then encourage them to *hit each other* with a ball?

I always try to get out early and easily — a glancing shot off my leg or shoulder. So I was standing in the Dead Zone of the game, whiling away “Physical Education” in my fantasy world, when the pain hit me.

And again.

I look over. The only other person in the dodge ball Dead Zone with me is Mitchell Frampton, a big stupid junior with shaggy blond hair that hangs over his eyes. He's grinning a dumb grin, his lower lip dried and cracked as he chews on it, and then he hits me again, in the *exact same spot*. My shoulder feels like it could just detonate, dropping my arm to the floor.

“Pussy,” he says. “Pussy. Whatcha gonna do? Pussy.” And wham! Again. Same spot. Uncannily in the same damn spot. My vision goes red for a moment with pain.

Why is he doing this? I don't even know him. I've never even *talked* to him before. I look around quickly. No one's watching. On the gym floor, everyone's busy being physically educated by firing rubber balls around, what fun. The two gym teachers (sorry, *physical educators*) are standing off in a corner, talking and gesturing to each other, totally useless, not even watching the

Ow! Again!

Not even watching what's going on. I want to yell, but no one would hear me unless I screamed bloody murder at the top of my lungs and then I'd just be another wimp, another wuss, another

Again!

tattletale. I'd be the crybaby, the momma's boy, the pussy, the weakling, the

Again!

victim. Let's see, what else have I been called over the glorious years? How about —

Again!

"Please stop," I say to him.

"Make me." Again. Again. Same spot, over and over. It's as if a Mitchell Frampton's fist-size part of my arm has become a mass of raw meat and screaming nerve endings. "Make me."

I can't. He knows I can't. I'm a computer geek, a comic book geek, a study geek. Even in the Fast-Track classes, I'm apart. To complete the stereotype-made-flesh that is me, I'm also half a head shorter than most guys my age, and while I'm not a ninety-eight-pound skeletal weakling, my body is, in some ways, like one of those armature dolls, all straight, uninterrupted lines, uncut by any sort of evident muscle tone. I've got my South Brook High gym T-shirt on, and that's it as far as armor goes.

"Just ignore them," my mother used to tell me, when I was a kid, when I was younger, when the other kids would tease and make fun. "Why do you care what they think? Just ignore them and they'll go away."

They didn't go away, though. She was wrong about that.

And the more I told her about them, the less she wanted to hear, and even when I was a kid, I could tell that she didn't want to hear about it. She had other things to worry about. She had to leave my dad and run off with her boyfriend, and for some reason she decided to add to the complications by dragging me along, too. Dragging me along, then ignoring me when I told her the other kids were making fun of me, were tormenting me, and what great advice: "Ignore them." So I did, even though they didn't go away, and pretty soon there was nothing to say, nothing to do, because how are you supposed to suddenly stand up to them after years of silence and nothing? Besides, I *can't* get in trouble. I just can't. I have one thing going for me: my brains. My ticket out. And college means transcripts, so unlike the rest of these idiots, my permanent record actually means something.

When I was a kid (when my parents were still married), I was terri-

fied of our basement. My dad had an old winter coat that he left hanging on a hook down there to use if he suddenly needed to go out the basement door for some reason. One time I went downstairs to get something, looked into the darkened basement . . . and saw a shaggy form with arms — *arms*, no doubt about it — lumbering there, leaning against the wall, and I ran like hell, ran up the stairs so fast that when I tripped I fell up the stairs into the foyer, slamming my knee into the metal strip that sealed the bottom of the front door, my knee exploding with a pain so sudden and sharp that I thought my leg had been sheared off.

Ten stitches in my knee. Blood everywhere. My first experience with unreasoning, unrelenting pain. I didn't know it at the time, but it was a preview of the rest of my life. Pain for no reason. Pain in different varieties. It was just Dad's coat, of course. Morphed by bad light and a particular angle and a kid with a wild imagination into something out of an old Steve Niles comic. Morphed into pain I didn't even deserve.

So I guess I'm used to it. I just wish my bullet weren't in my gym bag along with my clothes; I need it. But I stand there and stare straight ahead while Mitchell Frampton giggles and keeps hitting that *same damn spot*. And I realize that someone else *does* see. Someone sitting up on the bleachers at the far side of the gym. Someone dressed in black, with black hair, the face just a white blur. Watching.

Good. At least someone sees.

BOY TOY



She's more than just a teacher to him.

BY BARRY LYGA

*Author of *The Astonishing Adventures of Fanboy and Goth Girl**

BOY TOY

Josh Mendel has a secret. Unfortunately, everyone knows what it is.

Five years ago Josh's life changed. Drastically. And everyone in his school, his town — seems like the world — thinks they understand.

But they don't — they can't.

And now, about to graduate from high school, Josh is still trying to sort through the pieces. First there's Rachel, the girl he thought he'd lost years ago. She's back, and she's determined to be part of his life, whether he wants her there or not.

Then there are college decisions to make, and the toughest baseball game of his life coming up, and a coach who won't stop pushing Josh all the way to the brink.

And then there's Eve. Her return brings with it all the memories of Josh's past. It's time for Josh to face the truth about what happened.

If only he knew what the truth was . . .

Lyga's second novel, *Boy Toy*, courted controversy and accumulated a wealth of critical acclaim for its sensitive and unflinching handling of difficult subject matter. The book received multiple starred reviews (*Publishers Weekly*, *Kirkus Reviews*, and *School Library Journal*), as well as the Cybill Award for Best YA Novel. The *New York Times* called it "an upsetting, intense, intricately drawn portrait," and the *Los Angeles Times* said, "*Boy Toy* does what any good novel does: examines the hard truths of human experience."

Young Adult Review Network: *Boy Toy is an amazingly difficult novel to describe in terms of plot. However, it seems like Josh's main issue is not so much the actual sexual abuse but the memory of it. Could you*

elaborate on the fine line between the two, and what you were thinking about this distinction as you wrote?

BL: I have always said that *Boy Toy* is not a book about abuse — it's a book about baggage. It's about figuring out how to deal with the stuff in your past and somehow move on. That's the distinction I drew in my own mind as I was writing the book.

(Interview excerpt courtesy of yareview.net. For the complete interview, visit <http://yareview.net/2010/04/interview-with-barry-lyga-part-1/>).

TEN THINGS I LEARNED AT THE AGE OF TWELVE

1. The Black Plague was transmitted by fleas that were carried throughout Europe by rats.
2. If you first paralyze it, you can cut open a frog and watch its lungs continue to inflate and deflate.
3. There are seven forms of the verb “to be”: am, being, been, is, was, were, and are.
4. In order to divide fractions, you invert the divisor to arrive at the reciprocal, which is then multiplied by the dividend. (Mixed fractions must first be converted to improper fractions.)
5. In Salem, the witches weren’t burned at the stake — they were pressed to death under big rocks.
6. Islam was founded in the year 610. It is the third of three world religions worshipping the same God.
7. Each point on a “coordinate plane” (created by the joining of an X-axis and a Y-axis) can be described by an ordered pair of numbers.
8. “Monotheism” is a belief system centered on a single deity, while “polytheism” subscribes to belief in multiple deities.
9. The area of a circle can be determined by using the formula πr^2 , where r is the radius of the circle.
10. How to please a woman.

BATTER UP

THINGS THAT HAPPENED AFTER AND BEFORE

“LUCKY THIRTEEN,” my dad said when I blew out the candles on my birthday cake, and my mom shot down his lame attempt at humor with “Oh, Bill!” in a disgusted tone of voice.

But honestly, that’s not the important part. Not at all.

The ending began and the beginning ended and the whole mess just got fucked up beyond belief at the party at Rachel Madison’s house a few days later. A few days after “Lucky thirteen”/”Oh, Bill.”

The party turned out to be little more than an excuse for Rachel and Michelle Jurgens and Zik Lorenz and me—the Four Musketeers—to hang out in Rachel’s basement. Music videos on the TV and sodas and chips and some sort of hot potato casserole that Rachel announced she had made on her own. And three kids sitting around awkwardly trying to be coy with each other. Three kids and me.

It was like watching the mating rituals of retarded birds, clumsily stepping the wrong patterns around each other over and over again. I sat to one side on a brittle office chair and tried not to be bored.

“Something wrong?” Rachel asked at one point, kneeling down next to the chair. My mind flickered for a moment

—*dark room and then a light*—

and I adjusted my position in the chair.

“No. Why?”

She gestured to Michelle and Zik, who sat on the floor, leaning

against the sofa. They were giggling at the TV, sharing a bowl of chips, their greasy fingers slipping against each other. “Well, you’re just sitting over here by yourself . . .”

“You’re here now.”

Her face lit up. “Can I sit with you?”

“Well, I guess . . .” I looked doubtfully at the old chair, which had no room for a second party.

Rachel didn’t wait; she planted herself on my lap. The chair squealed. My mind flickered again

— *Was — was — was —*

“This isn’t a good idea, Rache.”

“It can hold us.”

She was my size, wearing a loose sleeveless top and a skirt worn low on her frame. Too skinny, to tell the truth; her skirt tight enough to emphasize the lack of hips, low enough to expose her concave belly. Her hair was dirty blonde and cut short, her face shining, sprayed with an even blast of freckles over the bridge of her nose. Luminous blue eyes. She twisted and put her arms around me. Flicker again

— *Was that what you wanted? —*

and then Rachel saying, “Is this OK? I need to steady myself.”

The chair creaked again, louder, as if to say, “Hey! I really mean it!”

“I don’t think this is a good idea, Rachel.”

“Come on.”

“I’m just worried about the chair.”

She wiggled on my lap. I wasn’t worried about the chair.

I couldn’t let this continue. I struggled to move her off of me, our bodies chaffing against each other. Her butt slipped and ground against my pelvis in a way that was almost-pleasant, almost-painful.

“Please,” and I managed to move her off of me without dumping her onto the floor.

She fixed me with a glare and a pout at the same time. Rachel Madison was the first girl I noticed when I started noticing girls in fifth grade. Back then, she was a skinny little tomboy with no breasts and the best on-base percentage in Little League that season at .425.

By seventh grade, she’d grown out of the cute tomboy phase,

though not much had happened in the chest department. Like so many girls, she emphasized the positive, though, with tight jeans and skirts designed to show off the legs and ass toned over months of beating the throw to first. Up top, she favored the loose blouses and shirts that hinted that maybe, *maybe*, something was starting to sprout under there.

She sauntered over to the snacks, hips swinging in a pathetic attempt at being older than thirteen.

“I have to go to the bathroom,” she announced suddenly.

Michelle jumped up and the two girls trooped off to the bathroom together, leaving Zik and me to switch the channel to ESPN, where the Red Sox were clobbering our dear Orioles.

Moments later, the girls returned from the bathroom. Instead of returning to her make-out position with Zik, though, Michelle, clapped her hands together and said, “Hey, guys, want to play a game?”

In no time at all, we were all sitting cross-legged on the floor across from each other, an empty Coke bottle between us.

“Whoever gets the bottle pointed at them,” Michelle said, as if giving a book report, “gets to go into the coat closet with the person across from them.”

That meant Rachel for me, Zik for Michelle. Coincidence? Of course not.

“Are you sure this is how you play Spin the Bottle?” I had never played before, but it didn’t seem to jibe with the lore gleaned from older kids over the years.

“This is how my sister plays,” Michelle said, and all argument stopped. Michelle’s sister, Dina, was drop-dead gorgeous, famous for having had a man offer to leave his wife for her when she was in eighth grade. At least, that was the rumor. No one doubted it, though.

Rachel spun the bottle, giving it a weak little twist that sent it in a quarter-turn before the top of it pointed at me like a compass needle pointing north.

“You and Josh go into the closet,” Michelle squealed.

“It didn’t go all the way around,” I said. “The bottle has to spin all the way around at least once, otherwise it doesn’t count.”

Rachel pouted again, but went ahead and spun the bottle once more. It landed perfectly and squarely on me. Again.

“See?” Michelle said, as if something had been proven. She heaved herself to her feet and threw open the closet door. “Get in there, you two!”

Rachel slid in quickly. “How long are we supposed to be in there?” I asked.

“Don’t worry about it,” Michelle said. “I’m keeping time.”

As the closet door closed on me, it occurred to me that Michelle would do nothing of the sort. She’d be getting her hands greasy with Zik again.

The closet was nearly empty. A thin sketch of light from under the door made it so that we weren’t in complete darkness, but I couldn’t really see anything at all, except for those weird dancing color spots that drift in front of your eyes when it’s dark.

“Sit down,” Rachel whispered. I sat.

I couldn’t see her, but I could feel her just ahead of me, sitting cross-legged. I closed my eyes to a new darkness. Flicker

— *turn on the lights if you want* —
and then back to the present.

I opened my eyes. Spots whirled and spun. The dark went to semi-darkness. I thought I could see something in the far distance. It shifted.

Rachel changed position, going up to her knees. I felt more than saw her lean towards me in the dark. A sudden giggle penetrated the closet from outside: Michelle.

“Sounds like they’re having fun.” Rachel’s breath clouded, warm, against my face. She was practically on top of me. I almost jerked out a hand in self-defense, but I held back.

“I guess so.”

“Don’t you want to have fun?”

Flicker

— *touch* —

“I guess so.”

She giggled like Michelle. “I’ve been practicing spinning that bottle all week.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.”

She leaned in even closer; her blouse brushed against my hand. Then her lips pressed to my cheek. They were slippery with too much lipstick. She fumbled for a minute, adjusting, and eventually found my lips. More slimy lip action.

“Don’t you like me?” she whispered.

— *touch* —

— *lick* —

— *ok* —

— *yes* —

“Sure.” I could feel her trembling—*vibrating*—over me, supporting herself on her hands, elbows locked. Belly pressed to my knee. Blouse drifting against my hand.

“Kiss me,” she said, and kissed my lips again, this time probing with her tongue.

I opened my mouth and she sighed deep in her throat when our tongues touched. It sounded familiar. Universal. I closed my eyes again and pretended. Pretended I wasn’t in a closet in the Madisons’ basement, with Zik and Michelle intertwining fingers ten feet away through a cheap fiberboard door. Pretended I wasn’t sitting cross-legged across from a flat-chested girl with freckles and a too-slutty skirt that looked wrong on her, but would have looked so right on someone else.

Instead, I moved forward with my body and my tongue. I heard a familiar grunt of approval. I reached out to touch her

— *touch* —

— *yes* —

and slid my hands down to the bare skin between the blouse and the skirt. I crushed my face to hers, let my hands move the way they wanted, the way they knew . . .

And the next thing I knew, Rachel slammed my chest with both

fists. She was too small to hurt me, but she managed to push me away, breaking the hold I had on her, jerking my hands away. “No! No!”

She shoved me, kicked out with her feet, and then the door was flung open and Rachel dashed out of the closet, wailing, tugging at her blouse and skirt, running for the stairs.

Michelle and Zik were sprawled on the sofa, fooling around. They looked over at me, lipstick-smeared, as Rachel charged up the stairs. I heard an adult voice call out. Then another, and then a babble of them — her father, her mother, her brother, home from college.

And that was how one part of my life ended. And another began.
Thirteen years old. Five years ago.

STRIKE ONE

1

ROLAND MAKES A DECISION

COACH KALTENBACH shouldn't have said it. He shouldn't have opened his big, fat, stupid mouth. Because if he hadn't said it, then I wouldn't have heard it. And I wouldn't have hit him so hard that his head left a dent on the lowest bleacher when he collapsed.

We were running laps in the gym — third straight day of April rain, so we couldn't practice outside. Mr. Kaltenbach, varsity baseball coach, was standing near the bleachers, yelling at us to “pick it up pick it up pick it up you goddamned girls!”

“Come on, move it, Lorenz!” he bellowed as Zik ran past him.

“Get the lead out!” he bawled when Jon Blevins ran by.

“Do I have to call the girls' softball team in here to show you how this is done?” he screamed to no one in particular.

As I approached Kaltenbach, his mouth opened and his eyes gleamed, and I waited for the insult.

And then he said it.

Truth be told, I don't even remember deciding to hit him. You'd think that hitting a coach and a teacher would be something that you'd ponder. You'd weigh the pros and cons. You'd really consider it before doing it. Especially if you're me, if you're praying for a scholarship, a scholarship to take you out of this little town that knows far, far too much.

But I didn't think about it. I just stopped dead in my tracks, pivoted on my right foot, and smashed my fist into his jaw.

Kaltenbach made a sound like "Hut!" and staggered backwards, arms pinwheeling, his clipboard dropping to the floor. There was no way he was going to keep his balance; he went over backwards, landed on his flabby ass (good news for him) and then the top half of his body kept on going, and he fetched up against the bottom bleacher with the back of his head. *Whonk! Crack!*

I wasn't sure what had cracked—the bleacher, or Coach's head. I didn't really care, either.

Behind me, the sound of running feet squeaked to a stop on the gym floor. Someone said, "Holy shit," loud enough for it to echo.

Zik was at my side in an instant.

"Dude. What the fuck?" He was breathing hard. On the other hand, I was breathing regularly. I touched my fingers to my neck; my pulse was normal.

Kaltenbach groaned from the floor and rolled to one side.

"Oh, man," Zik moaned. "Why did you *do* that?"

Kaltenbach winced as he sat up, probing the back of his head. I think he wanted to say something or get up and get tough with me, but I just stared at him and clenched my fists by my sides. He was *so* out of line and he knew it.

If it had just been the two of us, he would have let it slide. But there were witnesses.

"Office," he said, then hissed in a breath as he touched something tender where he'd fallen.

Which is how I ended up in the office of (according to his desk plaque) Roland A. Sperling, Assistant Principal. Known to students far and wide as "The Spermling."

"Joshua, Joshua, Joshua," he says, sighing as he squeezes into his chair. "Joshua."

"Roland, Roland, Roland," I mimic, right down to the sigh. "Roland."

"We've talked about that before. You need to show proper respect."

“Calling you Roland is better than what the other kids call you, isn’t it? And at least I do it to your face.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Sure he does. “If you say so, Roland.”

The Spermling is a fat slug of a man. He goes beyond obese and into “generates his own gravity” territory. I’d say he’s a black hole, but black holes are *small*. The Spermling is more like a Jupiter-class gas giant, bloated and round.

On his desk near one sausage-y hand lies my student file — I recognize it instantly from the sheer bulk. It’s at least twice as thick as any other I’ve ever seen. He taps it with his pen and looks at me thoughtfully. “I thought you liked baseball, Josh.”

“I do.”

“You won’t go very far in the game if you punch your coach.”

I bite my lip. It’s been twenty minutes since I decked Kaltenbach and my knuckles still hurt. They throb. But that’s OK. It’s a good kind of throbbing because I know where it came from. It’s a justice-throbbing.

“I won’t be playing my whole life. I’m not planning on going pro or anything. I just like the game.”

“Discipline and respect aren’t just about baseball,” he tells me. “Or even just about assistant principals. When you’re out there in college or in the real world —”

“I know. I won’t be allowed to punch people.”

He starts tapping his pen again, this time against the plastic Rolodex. “Did he say something to upset you? It’s been a while since you’ve lashed out so . . . physically. He tells me he was goading you boys to run faster.”

For a moment, I’m back in the gym. Been like this for years — I get these weird, full-body flashbacks that last maybe a second, maybe two. I call them “flickers.” So for a second, I’m back in the gym, just as Kaltenbach says *it*.

And then back in the Spermling’s office.

“I don’t want to talk about it. Just go ahead and punish me.”

The Spermling leans back in his chair, finding a new target for his

pen-tapping: the computer keyboard. “Josh, I don’t like punishing you. You’re a bright kid, and I think you’ve got a bright future waiting for you, if you settle down long enough to take it. I’ve cut you a lot of slack because of your history and because your grades are, quite frankly, better than any other three students’ combined.”

“I appreciate the vote of confidence, Roland.” I get up to leave. “I’ll be seeing you, then.”

“Sit down.” His chair howls in protest as he leans forward against the desk. “We’re not finished. Assaulting a teacher is serious business. You could get in a lot of trouble. *Legal* trouble. I don’t think you want to be in a courtroom —” He cuts himself off here, as if something caught in his throat. What the hell — ?

Oh, I get it. “Again.” He was about to say, “I don’t think you want to be in a courtroom *again*,” but he stopped himself.

I say it for him. “You’re right. I don’t want to be in a courtroom again. Wasn’t much fun the first time.”

Tap-tap-taptaptaptap. The pen goes crazy on the desk. “Mr. Kaltenbach doesn’t want to press charges. Says he knows how things can get heated during a practice.”

Goddamn *right* he doesn’t want to press charges. Because then I would tell everyone what he said.

“Given your history, I think the best thing is for you to talk to Dr. Pierce.”

The school shrink? “Aw, Christ, no! Come on, Roland!”

He spreads his hands in front of him as if to encompass the panoply of options in the world. “What would you prefer? What would *you* do in my situation?”

What would I do, Roland? I’d ask the question you don’t want to ask: Not “Did Coach Kaltenbach say something to make you upset?” but “What did he say?” But no. Not you, Roland. You’d rather just avoid that and play “Bad Boy” with me, wouldn’t you?

“I sure as hell wouldn’t send me to Pierce. She doesn’t know what she’s talking about. Let me call Dr. Kennedy instead.”

He considers that. Dr. Kennedy is my usual shrink, the guy I used to see twice a week. Now I’m down to once a month.

The Spermling nods slowly, as if this whole idea was his, as if he somehow manipulated me into this. He doesn't realize I was going to see Kennedy this week anyway.

"That's acceptable," he announces with all the import and gravity of Moses handing down the Commandments. "Make the call here."

I go ahead and call Dr. Kennedy's office. The receptionist recognizes my voice right off the bat and says, "Confirming tomorrow's four o'clock?"

"Tomorrow at four o'clock." I make it sound like I'm requesting, not confirming.

As she hangs up, I vamp a bit — "Tell Dr. Kennedy I appreciate him fitting me in." — before hanging up.

The Spermling grunts. "It's almost last bell, so I want you to get ready and go home. I have to suspend you for a couple of days." Before I can protest, he holds up a hand to stop me. "I know, I know. And I really *don't* want to punish you, but I can't let you hit a teacher and get away with it. Don't worry — I'll make sure your teachers let you make up the work. Come back on Monday. Things should be smoothed over by then."

"This sucks, Roland." I get up to leave. The Spermling is putting my file away, replacing it on his desk with one that's even bigger. I've never seen *that* before.

"Well, suck or not, it's what is," he says without sympathy. "You've got six weeks of school left, Josh. Try to get by. And try to respect me."

"I'll work on it, Roland."

2

RELEASING EVE

ZIK LORENZ IS MY BEST FRIEND in the world because he's never asked about it. He's never said, "What was it like?" or "Are you OK?" or "Do you ever think about her?" Zik's cool. Which is amazing because the rest of his family is complete and utter shit. His big brother, Mike, is a real Cro-Magnon type. Played lacrosse and football for all four years before graduating and then flunked out of community college, where he now serves as some sort of coach's assistant, making sure the water bottles are stocked and getting towels for guys his own age. Loser.

Zik's dad is like a grown-up version of Mike, and his mother is hardly ever around. She's always off at yard sales and garage sales and flea markets, buying crappy reproduction furniture that she swears she's going to refinish. She's also so insane that she named Zik "Isaac," with every intention of calling him "Ike" his whole life. Yes, that's right — the woman named her kids Mike and Ike, after the *candy*. It's a miracle Zik hasn't killed someone yet.

I give him a ride home, as usual. He doesn't have a car yet, so he chips in for gas and I drive him to and from school so that he can avoid the indignity of being a senior on the school bus. It also means he can play baseball — he would have no way of getting home or to games, otherwise.

"Twelve times 144," Zik says.

“One thousand seven hundred twenty-eight,” I tell him, without even thinking about it. “Cut it out.”

“The square root of 52,” he says, warming up.

I can’t help myself: “Um, 7.21110255. C’mon, Zik, I’m not your personal calculator.”

“Distance from Neptune to Venus. In inches.”

“Zik! Goddamn it!” Sometimes I hate him. “That depends on each planet’s position at the time. Right now, for example, Venus is on the other side of the sun from —”

“In inches,” he says again.

“Christ. OK. *Right now*, it’s, uh, 1.8556877×10^{14} inches. Jesus.”

“How long to get from home to Uranus?”

“You’re not going to my anus any time soon, so stop it.”

Having tested my math/astro skillz to his satisfaction (as if he would know if I just pulled the answers out of my ass . . . which I didn’t), Zik chortles and kicks back to enjoy the ride. I gun the engine on Route 54, heading to south Brookdale. Zik waits until we’re about five minutes from his house before asking. “What happened, man?”

“I hit Coach.”

“No shit. I saw that, dumbass. What did the Spermling do to you?”

“Oh. That.” I watch for the turn to Zik’s development. “Three-day suspension.”

“That sucks.”

“I do ’em on my head. Don’t worry.”

“Why’d you hit him, J?”

I’ve been dreading this question. From Zik in particular. Because if I tell Zik what Kaltenbach said, then that means I bring the whole mess from five years ago back into the light. And Zik has never once made me tell him about it. So do I drag that rotting carcass into the bright, sunny clearing of our friendship, or do I just piss off my best friend?

Just then — it’s really embarrassing — I flicker

— *slide my hand up her skirt* —

and come back to the present. Weird. That was Rachel, in the flicker. From the closet, five years ago. I don’t get any sort of erotic

charge out of it, but then again, I barely felt anything erotic at the time I was doing it, either.

Zik doesn't know about the flickers. "If you don't want to talk about it, fine. I just want to stay off your shit-list. I don't want to piss you off like that."

Not a chance. Zik would never in a million years say to me what Kaltenbach said.

Pick it up, Mendel! You never —

Not quite a flicker. But enough of a pause that Zik just grunts and opens the door. "See you tom — Oh, wait. Never mind. I'll ride the bus."

"No way. I'll still drive you."

"Come on, J. I can't ask you to —"

"You're not asking, dickweed. I'm telling. I'll pick you up same time."

He hovers in the doorway for a moment. "What about practice?" he asks, with the air of a poor kid pushing for one more present from Santa Claus.

"I'll get you. Don't worry."

He hesitates again; he wants to accept the offer, but some polite part of him (welling up from a DNA source long recessive in the Lorenz genotype, but active in Zik) feels like he should decline. I don't give him a chance to act on his better instincts — I inch the car forward enough to knock him out of it, then lean over and close the door. He hops in the rain for a second, keeps his balance, then flips me off with a grin as he dashes toward the house.

All's right in the world.

I was hoping for some peace and quiet at home so that I could gather my thoughts and assemble choice phrases for my diatribe on the injustice of my latest suspension, but strangely enough Mom and Dad's cars are both in the driveway when I pull up.

Inside, I hear voices — Mom is upset, Dad is calm. Can't quite make out what they're talking about. The usual scenario.

My mother is like those moms you see on the commercials — the

ones who are cool and collected, who launch flotillas of children from battleship-sized SUVs and have a ready jug of sweetened fruit punch on-call at all times. She works as a research assistant to one of the professors at Lake Eliot College. She lives for facts.

Dad, though, is one of those guys you see on the really bad sitcoms where you think, *How did he end up married to the hottie?* He works in marketing, where his slogan is, "Convincing the world it's wrong, one product at a time." He deals in fantasy. And he wallows in it.

So it's not particularly out-of-the-ordinary to hear Mom arguing and Dad grunting occasionally as the near-silent partner. What *is* weird is having them both home so early in the day.

They're in the kitchen as I come in. Mom standing by the counter, leaning on it for support, Dad at the table, the newspaper spread out before him.

"Who are you people and what have you done with my parents?" I demand, trying to break the ice. It hits me almost as the words leave my mouth: The school called them. Good old Roland decided to bend me over and screw me in advance.

Mom gives Dad a look that says, "Well?" but Dad just shrugs. Mom sighs. "We have to talk to you."

"I'm sure." Before I can launch into my defense, though, she goes on:

"This is very serious, Josh. This is difficult for us."

This can't be about my suspension. I've been suspended before.

Letters came from the Holy Trinity? *That* could be it. I didn't check the mail, so maybe one of them did and this is it. My future's been decided.

She starts to talk, then bites her lip. She's been crying. Her arms shake, bearing her weight as she leans into the counter. Mom's slim and ageless, but she looks a hundred right now.

"I can't believe this. I can't believe it."

"What, Mom? Tell me."

She nods and stands up straight, then takes my hand like she used to when I was a kid. "We wanted you to hear it from us. That's why we came home. They're letting her out, Joshua. They're letting that

woman out of prison.” Mom’s voice goes from reedy to boiling over by the time she hits the word “prison.”

She doesn’t have to tell me who she —

— *tongue tracing a line of cool heat up* —

and I blink, actually jerking my head at the power of it. Mom thinks I’m upset — she pulls at me, and I’m disoriented enough to let her do it. Suddenly I’m being hugged by my mom for the first time in years. It’s a weird feeling; these days, I’m five inches taller than her. I go to put my arms around her in return, but I end up crushing her to me, flattening her breasts against my chest, too aware of them, letting go —

Mom won’t let go. I let her hug me, my arms lamely akimbo. She’s sobbing.

“Mom, it’s . . . It’s OK . . .” I look to Dad for help again. He’s strumming his fingers on the table.

“She’s a sick woman.” He says it very calmly and at first I think he means Mom.

She breaks away from me and screams, “Then leave her where she is!”

“She has to see a shrink twice a week,” he says, again very calmly. I think of my sessions with Dr. Kennedy. I started out at twice a week, too. I wonder who Eve will be seeing? Wouldn’t it be bizarre if it ended up being Dr. Kennedy? Could that even happen? Are there laws about that?

“She didn’t even serve half her sentence!” Mom rants.

“Hell, these days we’re lucky she was in that long.” Dad taps his pen against his upper teeth for a second, turning into the Spermling for that brief moment. “You OK with this, Josh? You want to talk about it?”

Mom fixes Dad with a glare like something from an abstract comic book: hate vision, instead of heat vision.

“I’m seeing Dr. Kennedy tomorrow.”

He nods. Mom seems mollified. A bit.

I assure them I’m all right and I do my best to keep my legs from shaking as I head to my room. Eve. Eve is getting

— *do you like* —

out of prison. When? I forgot to ask. I should have

— *move over like that and* —

asked them when, but I didn't even think to

— *guuuuhhh! Ohhhhhh!* —

ask and the flickers are strobing as I make it to my room and collapse on the bed, as I flip back and forth between the present and multiple pasts, and I realize I never even told them I was suspended.

SESSION TRANSCRIPT: #214

Dr. Kennedy: Still worried about college?

J. Mendel: Yeah. Still haven't heard from the Holy Trinity.

Kennedy: You've already been accepted to Georgia Tech and College Park and Clemson, right?

Mendel: Yeah, but those were my safety schools. MIT, Yale, and Stanford are the ones I'm really waiting on. It's like, everyday I run to the mailbox, but . . . nothing. It's tough because the money at those schools is, you know, a lot. My parents don't have a lot of money. I don't know how it's going to work out.

Kennedy: It's natural that you're going to be anxious about this. I'm not going to tell you to relax about it, but I do want you to try to remember that three good schools have already accepted you and you can afford to attend each of them. Just remember that, OK?

Mendel: Yeah.

Kennedy: Now. Why did you hit your coach?

Mendel: You ever do any sports, doc?

Kennedy: I rowed crew in college.

Mendel: Then you know — sometimes coaches just need to be hit.

Kennedy: Be that as it may —

Mendel: I love that expression.

Kennedy: Glad to brighten your day. Be that as it may, was it worth

a three-day suspension? Was it worth the possible legal ramifications?

Mendel: There won't be any legal ramifications.

Kennedy: For hitting a teacher? That seems pretty serious. They usually don't let things like that slide. Not these days.

Mendel: If they make a big deal out of it, they'll have to take it to court, right? And if they take it to court, then I'll testify as to what he said. Believe me, he doesn't want that to get out.

Kennedy: See, now we're getting there. You hit him because he said something to you. You didn't mention that before.

Mendel: You didn't ask.

Kennedy: We've been doing this too long for games. You know damn well I asked why you hit him. So what did he say, Josh? What ticked you off?

Mendel: We were running laps and the little prick was goading us on and when I ran past him, he dropped his voice so that I was the only one who could hear him, and he said, "Pick it up, Mendel! You never slept with me, so I ain't about to take it easy on you!"

Kennedy: He said that? He actually said that to you? Well, you were right: He needed to be hit. What a piece of shit.

Mendel: My sentiments exactly.

Kennedy: You can't let this stand. You should report what he said.

Mendel: Why bother? It'll just open up the whole thing again. And at least now I know what everyone's thinking. I have confirmation.

Kennedy: Confirmation of what you've always expected?

Mendel: Yeah.

Kennedy: Do you think *everyone* at your school thinks like Coach Kaltenbach?

Mendel: I don't know. I see the looks I get sometimes. Especially from the female teachers. It's like they're afraid of me. Like they have to avoid touching me or they'll catch the molester virus.

Kennedy: You haven't molested anyone. You are the victim . . . the target of molestation.

Mendel: Once you've been touched —

Kennedy: You said the female teachers in particular. Why them?

Mendel: I don't know.

Kennedy: Until you punched out your coach, you've never harmed a teacher, right? So why would they be afraid of you?

Mendel: Maybe they don't want to spend five years in jail like, y'know. Like . . .

Kennedy: Like Mrs. Sherman. Hmm?

Mendel: I guess.

Kennedy: What do *you* have to do with that? She chose you, Josh. Not the other way around.

Mendel: I guess.

Kennedy: Do you think there's a teacher at the school who's interested in you? Sexually?

Mendel: No! No.

Kennedy: It's not uncommon for a sexual predator to latch onto a previous —

Mendel: No. No one. It's me. They're afraid of me.

Kennedy: That just doesn't make sense. I think you're projecting something onto them.

Mendel: Oh, God. Psychobabble bullshit. You're not supposed to —

Kennedy: I know, I broke the rule. Here's a dollar. But look, clearly there's still some residual worry about Mrs. Sherman and about what she did. It's perfectly natural for you to fear the same reaction from women in similar positions. Are any of these teachers young? Attractive?

Mendel: Every school's got at least one like that. You're not listening to me. But I appreciate the buck.

Kennedy: Josh, don't be obtuse. I know how bright you are. Think about it: What are the odds you're so concerned about this just as Mrs. Sherman is being released from prison? How do you feel about that? Scared? It's OK to be scared.

Mendel: I'm not scared.

Kennedy: There's already a protective order in place. She's not allowed within a hundred yards of you.

Mendel: Why? What's she going to do to me? I'm not twelve any more. I'm six-one. I outweigh her by a hundred pounds. I could —

Kennedy: What? What could you do? Hurt her? Is that it? Did you want to hit her? Is that why you hit your coach? He was there and she wasn't.

Mendel: No. I don't want to hurt her. I hit Kaltenbach because he was a fucking douche bag, OK?

Kennedy: There's no doubt in my mind that Kaltenbach is a fucking douche bag. But you have every right to be angry at Evelyn Sherman. Every right to want to hurt her. I don't want you to *act* on that anger, but I want you to know that it's OK, that it's understandable.

Mendel: [unintelligible]

Kennedy: What's that?

Mendel: I said — I said she liked to be called "Eve." Not Evelyn. Eve.

3

TELL ME

AFTER MY SESSION with Dr. Kennedy, I head over to South Brook High and wait in the parking lot for Zik, who comes running up from behind the building—the rain ended last night, so practice was outside. He spots me, waves.

“Watch the mud,” I tell him when he opens the passenger side door. I drive a crappy little Focus from before the pre-Cambrian Era, but I like to keep it clean. Zik’s cleats are caked with mud and grass. Kaltenbach’s an idiot for having outdoor practice without waiting for the field to dry.

“No fear,” Zik says. He leans against the car and pries off his shoes, then dumps them into a plastic bag. We’ve done this routine before.

“Dinner?” I ask him, once he’s strapped in and ready for take-off. It’s a rhetorical question. Zik would be up for driving to the moon if I asked—it would keep him out of the house.

“Yeah, let’s hit the Narc.”

“I don’t want to.”

“Oh, come on, man! They’ve got the best fried chicken!”

The Narc is a big local grocery store off of 54 on the north side of Brookdale. It’s actually called “Nat’s Market,” but at some point in teen history, that got shortened and corrupted to “the Narc.” Har-har. Its defining characteristic is the ancient lunch counter tucked away in the back, open from noon to seven. Throwback to a rumored time

when such things were common, or so I've been told. The only other time I've seen a lunch counter is in old movie footage of the civil rights movement.

But I have a rule about the Narc — I don't go there before midnight.

"You want Narc fried chicken, I'll sit in the car while you go get it."

"Man . . . Never mind. Drive-through anything's fine. Except for Taco Smell."

I drive aimlessly for a while. No rush. I like being in the car, as long as traffic isn't too bad. Cars are little privacy cocoons that we take with us. If you could refuel while driving you could, theoretically, stay in your car for ever.

Zik's usually a chatterbox, but he's saying nothing right now, so I figure it's on me.

"So, how was dickhead at practice today?"

Zik snorts laughter. "You gave him a black eye."

"No shit!" Score one for me!

"And he was wearing his cap different. Forward, you know? Like this?" Zik demonstrates with his own ball cap, tilting it forward at an odd angle. It's just right to avoid brushing, say, a big ol' goose-egg on the back of your head. I can't help it — I giggle like a five year-old who just heard someone say "poop."

"Then it was all worth it. My sacrifice has not been in vain."

"Yeah, speaking of . . ." Zik stops to point out the drive-through for Lake Side, a pretentious local joint with fries to die for. I agree with a shrug. "Speaking of sacrifice, man — how'd your parents take the news?"

Eve. My heart jackhammers for a second, and I think a flicker's coming on. "The news?"

"Getting suspended?"

Oh. That. "They're OK with it."

He shakes his head. "You've got the coolest parents in the world."

It's our turn at the window, so I get to avoid responding to that. The truth of the matter is that by the time I decided to go tell them last night, Mom and Dad were in the middle of a fight, and next thing

I knew Mom was out the door and backing out of the driveway. That's her usual response to their fights — flight. I figured that wasn't the best time to tell Dad. In the morning, while he was eating breakfast, I told him, including what Kaltenbach had said to set me off.

“He really said that? You're sure you didn't misunderstand him?”

“Yeah, Dad.”

He shook his head sadly. “You're seeing Kennedy today, right?”

“Right.”

“OK. Good.”

And mission accomplished. If Mom had been home, there'd have been a scene.

The girl at the drive-through window hands me our change and two bags of food. We keep going north up 54. Route 54 is the main road through Brookdale, bisecting the town into east and west halves almost perfectly. Go north far enough and you end up in Canterstown, which is such a small hick town that even people in Brookdale make fun of it. The Canterstown Sledgehammers, though, are a kick-ass ball team. They've beaten us ten times out of the last ten games, and four out of five before that. Kinda sucks to get your ass kicked by shit-kickers.

Zik dives into his bag, and the smell of perfectly-fried fries makes my mouth water. I drive with one hand and stuff my face with the other. As we enter Canterstown, Zik rolls down the window and hurls his soda at the sign that says, “Welcome to Canterstown, Home of the Mighty Sledgehammers!” He can't help it — you can never completely escape your DNA, after all.

“You're pretty quiet, man.” Zik rolls up the window. “Usually you've got something to say.”

He's right. But entering Canterstown has sparked a memory. Not a flicker; a memory. Eve — Mrs. Sherman — whatever — brought me here to a little family restaurant once. Late in the day, right after school. The waitress thought I was Eve's little brother, and Eve didn't say anything to disabuse her of the notion.

Awesome restaurant. Best turkey pot pie I've ever had in my life,

and the strawberry pie for dessert was made with fresh strawberries that they picked from a patch a half-mile away . . .

“— the newspaper,” Zik’s saying.

“Huh? Sorry, man, I missed that.”

He sucks in his breath. “I said I—I saw the article. The one in the newspaper. About her.”

“Oh.” *Former teacher released from jail.* That was the headline in this morning’s edition. Simple and to the point. Buried on page seven.

“I’m just saying, that’s all.” He’s dancing close to the edge here. We’ve never talked about it. Not once. Not even about what happened at Rachel’s that night five years ago; he was ten feet away and he never asked me. But I bet he asked Rachel. Or Michelle told him. Flicker

— *little bastard!* —

“Shit!” Zik shouts, as I twist at the last second to avoid the kid on the bike.

My breath comes fast. “Little fucker! Shot out at me like that!”

“Dude, I saw him coming. He fucking *signaled*. It’s like you wanted to plow him down.”

Is that true? Is that what happened? Did I miss something while in the flicker?

“I better take you home.” The dash clock says it’s not even seven yet, and I hate to dump Zik at home while his parents will still be up.

He’s morose, but he understands. Or at least he pretends to understand, which is good enough for me. Sometimes that’s the mark of a best friend—someone who puts up with your shit and pretends it doesn’t bother them.

Former teacher released from jail.

That’s it. My name’s nowhere in the article, of course. I’m “a local minor male.” I was a minor, so my name was out of the papers, but everyone still knew. After Rachel’s closet, how could everyone *not* know?

According to the article, her family was there in the courtroom,

but said nothing. I guess that was her brother and her mother, then. Her father's dead. I wonder if her husband was there? Are they still married?

—*fucking little bastard!*—

—*stop him*—

I pull over to the side of the road amidst honking horns. Hit the hazard lights. I just need a second to collect myself. Just a

—*tell you once, tell you twice*—

—*fucking teach you to fucking*—

Just a second.

4

WALKING BACKWARDS

WITHOUT REALIZING what I'm doing, I go to her apartment.

I have the address memorized: 1033 Fire Station Road, Apt. B. There's no fire station there — there used to be, back when Brookdale was founded, but now it's a collection of apartment complexes and condos. I remember the address from the subscription to *Electronic Gaming*.

I pull up at around eight. It's dark by now, dark enough to need headlights, dark enough for street lamps to glow.

Former teacher released from jail.

Why wasn't I there? Shouldn't someone from my family have been there? Isn't that how it works with parole?

I find a parking spot and sit there for a while. So this is déjà vu, huh? Not like the flickers at all. The flickers are real, like sci-fi time travel, only for a second. This déjà vu is just . . . creepy. Creepy as hell.

It's imperfect, though, because this place isn't the same as five or six years ago. There's a little island of grass between the parking lot and Fire Station Road — six years ago, they had just planted these spindly bushes there, and now it's like a green barrier of thorns.

Other things have changed, too. The retaining wall on the south end of the complex has been freshly painted a cheerful blue — it used

to be naked gray cinderblock. The yellow stripes on the parking lot tarmac are bright and straight.

— *not much, is it* —

Potted plants line the walkways. They weren't there before. I'm *on* the walkway. I somehow got out of the car without realizing. God, am I losing my mind?

OK, so potted plants. The big crack in the sidewalk, the one I used to jump over, is gone. She used to hold my hand as we walked from the car, and every time I would come to that crack, I'd jump over it as if it were an endless chasm . . .

She used to hold my hand . . .

My fingers twitch. There's a brick archway that leads into a little outdoor alcove with a row of steel mailboxes. Beyond, through another archway, are the stairs, concrete risers that go up for six steps to a landing, then a half-turn, six more steps to the first floor. Twelve steps in total. I know because I counted them and the number was the same as my age —

"Don't go so fast. I'm an old lady."

"You're not old, Mrs. Sherman."

"That's sweet of you, Joshua."

— and when I turned thirteen, I started counting the landing, too, and then a couple of days later, in the closet with Rachel . . .

It's like I'm walking backwards through time, propelled by memory, receiving the occasional rocket-boost from a particularly powerful flicker.

I lean against the alcove wall. There's a new security light that shines directly on the mailboxes, and a bulb of opaque glass suspended from a corner, way up high. Camera. I stand there a while until I catch my breath, then scan the mailboxes.

Unit B.

The little black tape from a label-maker spells out: Maguire, S.

I touch it, just to make sure it's real. The raised white letters bump my fingers. Fuck the camera. I prod at the label with my fingernail until I find a loose corner, then slowly peel it back, but there's nothing underneath.

I'm tempted to go upstairs. To walk up those twelve/thirteen stairs, down the corridor to Unit B. Knock on the door.

And . . . What? Ask S. Maguire if I can walk around? See if the inside of the apartment has changed as much as the outside of the building? Relive the memories of—

This is fucked. What am I *doing* here? She's not here. She hasn't been here in years.

Back in the car, the remains of my fries and burger from Lake Side have gone cold and the ice has melted in my soda. I toss it all in a trash can. I shouldn't have come here. It was stupid. What did I expect to find? I pound a fist against the steering wheel—the Focus is old, but tough enough to handle the occasional temper tantrum.

I'm in no hurry to go home. By now, Dad will have mentioned my suspension to Mom, so I'm scheduled for a severe talking-to when I walk through the door. Not my favorite way to kill time. Besides, since I had to chuck my food, I'm still hungry. Might as well have one final meal before being hassled.

The way home from the old apartment takes me past the Narc. My stomach rumbles. Fried chicken sounds really good right now. I pull in and get halfway to the lunch counter before I realize what I'm doing.

I'm in the Narc before midnight.

OK, calm down, Josh. Chill out. Maybe *she's* not working today.

I'm frozen in the canned goods aisle, unable to move. A woman with a squealing kid stares at me like I'm a sasquatch stumbling in from the wild. I have to get out of here.

But I'm too terrified to move. She could be here, around any corner. She doesn't *have* to be at the lunch counter; she could be on a checkout aisle or stocking shelves or something.

She could, in fact, be about to come around the corner into the canned goods aisle.

I bug out. I head back to the doors, forget that I can't go back out the way I came in, then dodge for an empty checkout aisle. Quick scan: she's not at any of the registers. I breeze through the empty aisle and blow through the automatic doors, back into the humid April

night and straight into Rachel Madison, who's standing there in her red Nat's Market apron, nursing a Coke.

We stare at each other for a second. We're maybe two feet from each other, closer than we've been since that day five years ago. I want to run like hell — I'm not track-and-field fast, but I could get pretty far before she could say anything.

Instead, I stand rooted to the spot, wondering with sick horror what she'll say. I realize — and honest to God, this is the first time I've realized this — that I never apologized to her. I never got the chance back when it all happened, and I've tried to stay away from her since then. Too difficult to be near her. And she never works past midnight, so . . .

It's my first time really looking at her in years. She never did finish filling out. When she got too old to play baseball with the boys in Little League, she shifted over to softball, which kept strengthening her legs into a muscled dream. Her hips have rounded a bit — helps her on the pitcher's mound, and makes it fun to watch her walk away. Her breasts topped out at A cups, but she makes the most of them.

I'm staring. I have to stop that.

— look all you want —

Gah! She's gazing at me, worried. "Josh? Are you OK?"

Flickers! Goddamned flickers! "Yeah. Yeah, I'm all right. Sorry." There we go — an apology after five years. Think it counts? No, me neither.

"You looked a little . . . spacey for a second there." She narrows her eyes, pulling the freckles in towards the bridge of her nose. They've lightened a little bit over the years. Or maybe it's just make-up?

"Yeah, I guess . . ."

"Don't usually see you around here," she goes on. "I always thought you were the one guy in Brookdale who didn't like the Narc."

I don't know what to say.

"Or maybe you just keep avoiding me? Like in school?"

Something to say pops into my head: "I saw you in the game against East Brook last week. Your fastball is unreal."

She leans against the wall and takes a sip of her Coke. “It’s even better than when you couldn’t hit it.” She grins at me, and I want to kill myself for her kindness. How can I deserve that?

“That was overhand,” I tell her, remembering her blistering fastball as a kid. “Underhand isn’t the same.”

She checks her watch. “I’m off break now, but I’ll take you up on that.” She heads for the entrance.

Take me up on that? On what? She saunters away — the hip sway that she hadn’t perfected at 13 is effortless now at 18. What the hell is she talking about?

“What do you mean?” I call after her. I start to follow her, then stop when I realize how bizarre it is to be chasing after the girl — the woman — I molested.

“I’ll call you,” she says, half-turning to mime holding a phone to her ear, then slipping back through the automated door and into the store. I stand there for a while, my hunger forgotten, my confusion overwhelming.

After a minute or two, I go back inside to buy a newspaper, then head home.

Mom and Dad (mostly Mom) used to get sketchy about me reading about the case in the newspaper. By the time I get home, Mom has already tossed out the newspaper; I read the story this morning, but she can’t know that. I sneak my copy into my room and hide it for later. Mom calls out to me from the laundry room downstairs, where she proceeds to give me all kinds of holy hell about being suspended again. Where Dad was blasé, she’s in a fury.

I promise to try harder and to avoid further suspensions, which should be easy considering that there’s only another six weeks of school. Even *I’ve* never managed multiple suspensions in that period of time. Mom seems mollified and swishes off to bed, leaving me to fold the laundry. I could have lived my entire life a happy and fulfilled man without learning that my mother has a thong —

— *push it aside* —

Ah, Christ. Like Eve. I don't need this. I really don't.
In my room, I take out the newspaper and read the article:

Former teacher released from jail

By Stephanie Gould, Times Staff Writer

With members of her family in attendance, Evelyn Sherman appeared before Judge Eric L. Fletch, who suspended the remaining time of her sentence and ruled that her probation would begin immediately. Sherman had served nearly five years.

Four years and 10 months earlier, Fletch sentenced Sherman to serve fifteen years in the State Women's Correctional Facility. In February, Sherman's attorney, Danielle G. Cresswell, filed a motion for a reduction of her sentence. A hearing took place in March, at which time Fletch said that he would make a decision later.

Last Friday, Fletch told Sherman that, based on reports from her therapist, the prison psychologist, and guards at the prison, he felt it would be a waste of the correctional system to keep her in jail.

"This woman has made enormous strides," Fletch said in court today. "Leaving her behind bars serves no one's interest, and certainly not the interests of justice."

Sherman wept in court on Friday at the news that she would be released. She said that she is remorseful for what she has done.

"I have learned an enormous amount in the past five years," she said, "both about myself and about the situations I failed to react to successfully. I'm grateful for this opportunity to prove myself to the community and to my friends and family again."

Cresswell submitted to the court letters from Dr. Judith Fraser, who has been Sherman's therapist since her arrest five years ago.

According to Cresswell, Fraser rated the odds of Sherman re-offending at zero. James B. Olsen, warden of the prison, also submitted an affidavit calling Sherman "a model prisoner," citing her work teaching illiterate inmates to read and write.

With her release, Sherman begins five years of supervised probation. Under the terms of her parole, she must register as a sex offender, complete a sex offender program and have no unsupervised

contact with children. She must also attend therapy sessions twice per week.

“We’re very grateful for the judge’s compassion and that this nightmare is over and this young woman can go on with her life,” Cresswell said.

Sherman was 24 at the time of her arrest. She will turn 30 later this year.

Gil B. Purdy, the District Attorney who prosecuted Sherman, appeared in court to protest her release.

“This woman is a sexual predator. She preys on young men. I don’t see how we can let her out on the streets,” Purdy told the press immediately after the hearing.

State Police arrested Sherman five years ago based on allegations that she had engaged in sexual activity with a local minor male while she taught at South Brook Middle School. She was also accused of providing that same student with alcohol. Sherman initially pleaded not guilty, but later changed her plea to guilty.

Reach staff writer Stephanie Gould at stegould@lowecotimes.com.

Remorseful? Really? I have a hard time believing that. That just doesn’t sound like her. I’m tempted to call the reporter and get a first-person account of what happened in the courtroom, but she probably wouldn’t even talk to me.

I carefully clip the article from the paper and throw away everything else.

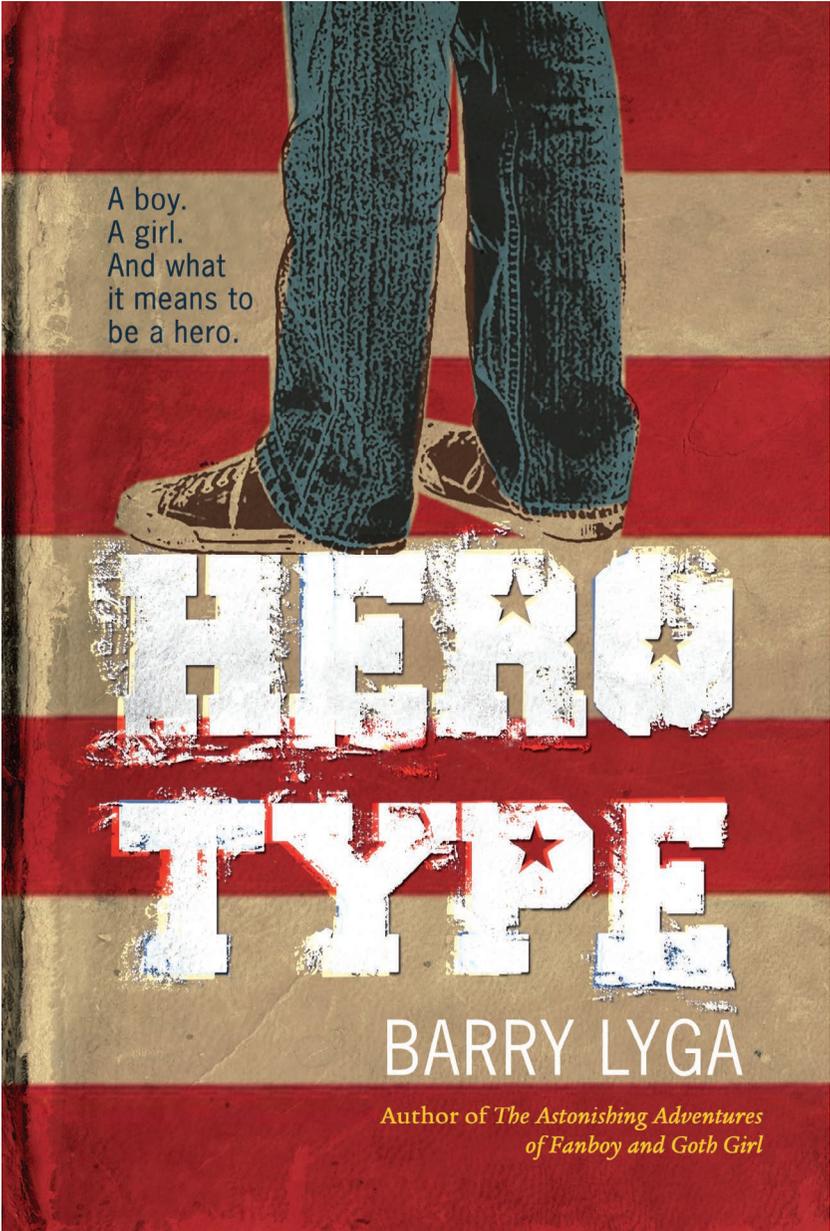
At the bottom of my closet is a fire safe I bought at Staples, hidden under some gym clothes and old toys. Within is a sea of tiny plastic cases — microcassettes. A copy of every tape Dr. Kennedy has made of our sessions. Five years of my life, completely documented on tape. Not many people can say they have that.

Also in the safe is a clipping of every article from the *Lowe County Times* about Eve Sherman. I look through them for the first time in years; there haven’t been many articles since she went into prison. Headlines jump out at me:

Sherman to serve jail time
Sex, lies and videogames
Sherman attorney: “No insanity plea”
Sex-scandal teacher changes plea

Eve is out of prison. She's out. She's . . . somewhere. Is she staying in the state? She can't teach any more, so what is she doing? What about her husband? The article is a piss-poor source of information.

I lock the safe again, now including the new clipping, then cover it with its camouflage, lie back and drift off to sleep, flickers sparking and wheeling off into the dark.



A boy.
A girl.
And what
it means to
be a hero.

HERO TYPE

BARRY LYGA

*Author of The Astonishing Adventures
of Fanboy and Goth Girl*

HERO-TYPE

What makes a hero?

Maybe it's courage, the kind Kevin Ross (Kross to his friends) showed when he saved Leah Muldoon's life.

Maybe it's living with your own guilt so someone else doesn't have to

...

Maybe it's the way Kross was in the right place at the right time . . .

Or the way he wouldn't back down when everything that mattered to him was called into question.

Maybe it's keeping your friends close—like the Council of Fools, a motley collection of goofballs and whacked-out teenage jesters—even when they don't really understand you.

Or maybe it's striving to do the right thing . . .

Or figure out what the right thing is in the first place.

Maybe it's trying to figure out how to live with a father who barely speaks, a father who guards a dark secret from his past.

Maybe it's all of this.

Or none of this.

Kross saved someone's life. Maybe that's enough to make him a hero, regardless of his own terrible secret.

Then again . . .

Maybe not.

With *Hero-Type*, Lyga tackled patriotism, war, and heroism, all seen through the filter of a very confused teen named Kevin Ross. In a starred review, *Kliatt* called the novel a “neatly plotted look at what real patriotism and heroism mean [that] will get readers thinking.” *School Library Journal* said, “Lyga’s fans will be rewarded by his authentic teen characters, his willingness to tackle tough issues, and,

most importantly, his ability to encourage a dialogue that is crucial to democratic participation.”

Young Adult Review Network: *Kevin realizes that his purpose is to open people’s minds, but ironically, sometimes Kevin himself is rather closed-minded about opposing opinions — this is such a great way to trust your readers and make Kevin a complex character. But were you ever worried that readers with political leanings more like Kevin’s nemesis Riordan’s would stop reading the book?*

BL: I gave that a little thought, but not much. I wrote *Hero-Type* from a fairly angry place. I was angry about the sort of brain-dead way our culture approaches public issues and politics, and I didn’t care if I made people who disagreed with me angry. After all, they had already made me angry, so turnabout is fair play!

What I’ve discovered, much to my pleasure, is that the kids reading *Hero-Type* have never really thought much about the issues Kross gets into in the book, so this is sort of their introduction to it all. So I hope that down the road when some brain-dead reactionary tries to convince them that it’s OK to censor, it’s OK to block speech, that they will respond, “Oh, hell no, it isn’t!”

(Interview excerpt courtesy of yareview.net. For the complete interview, visit <http://yareview.net/2010/04/interview-with-barry-lyga-part-1/>).

“There I was one night, just a normal guy.
And then there I was the *next* night . . .
Goddamnit, I was still just a normal guy.”

— *Bruce Springsteen, speaking to the crowd on July 7, 1978,
at The Roxy, Los Angeles, California*

OVERTURE

YOU KNOW those pictures of fat people?

I'm talking about the ones in the ads for diets and weight-loss drugs and stuff like that. You know them. They always show the "Before" picture of the person back when they were a big, fat slob. And then they show the "After" picture, which is like this totally buff hottie.

Here's the thing about those pictures, though: for the longest time I couldn't figure out why the pictures were labeled "Before" and "After" because to me it was obvious they were two completely different people.

But I get it now—we're at least supposed to *think* that it's the same person, made over thanks to the miracle of whatever the company is peddling. It doesn't have to be just for weight loss. It can be for any big life change.

I've always been skinny, so I don't need to lose weight, but I think about those pictures a lot. Especially now. After my own big life change.

So why do my "Before" and "After" pictures look exactly the same?

HERO

1

SURREAL

EVERYWHERE YOU GO, it seems like there's a reminder of what happened, of what I did. You can't escape it. *I* can't escape it. I wouldn't be surprised if someone suggested renaming Brookdale "Kevindale." That's just how things are working out these days. The whole town's gone Kevin Crazy.

Take the Narc, for example. The big sign out front, the one that normally announces specials and sales, now says "THANK YOU KEVIN FOR SAVING OUR LEAH." That's just plain weird. The same spot that usually proclaims the existence of new flavors of Pop Tarts or 2-for-1 Cokes is now a thanks to me. It's just surreal, the word my friend Flip uses when he's slightly stoned and can't think of a better word to describe something strange.

But I sort of understand the Narc sign. After all, Leah's dad owns Nat's Market (called "the Narc" by every kid in town *except* Leah), so I get it.

But . . .

Then there's the flashing neon sign that points down the highway to Cincinnati Joe's, a great burger-and-wings joint. Usually it just flashes "JOE" followed by "SAYS" and then "EAT" and then something like "WINGS!" or "BURGERS!" or "FRIES!" or whatever the owners feel like putting up that day. Now, though, it says:

JOE
SAYS
GOOD
JOB
KEVIN!

Even the sign at the WrenchIt auto parts store wishes me a happy sixteenth birthday. And when you drive past the Good Faith Lutheran Church on Schiffler Street, the sign out front reads: “GOD BLESS YOU KEVIN & LEAH.” Which almost makes us sound like a couple or something. And I don’t even *go* to Good Faith. I’m what Mom calls “a parentally lapsed Catholic.” (Usually followed by “Don’t worry about it.”)

Continuing the Tour of Weirdness that has become Brookdale in the last week or so, you can see similar signs all over. My favorite — the most *surreal* — is the one near the mall, where someone forgot to finish taking down the old letters first, so now it says, “SPECIAL! SAVE KEVIN ROSS IS A HERO!”

Gotta love that.

And, God, don’t even get me *started* on the reporters.

You probably saw me on TV. First the local channels and then — just this past weekend — the big time: national TV, courtesy of *Justice!* I didn’t want to do the show, but *Justice!* was one of the big contributors to the reward money. I don’t have the money yet, and it’s not like the producers are holding it hostage or anything, but when someone’s planning on dumping thirty grand into your bank account . . . I sort of felt like I *had* to go on. Dad said it was my decision, but I could tell he was waffling. It’s like, one part of him figured I deserved the money, and another part of him hated the idea of this big media company having that over my head, and *another* part of him probably wanted the whole thing just to go away.

Anyway.

They (you know, the *Justice!* people) filmed in Leah’s living room, Leah being the girl whose life I saved.

See, here's the deal the way I told it on TV and in the papers: I'm walking along near the Brookdale library and I hear this scream from down the alleyway. So I go running and there's this big guy and he's hassling Leah and he's got a needle in his hand.

He was big. I was — and am — small. But I couldn't help myself. I just threw down my, y'know, my backpack and I charged him and somehow I managed to get him in a wrestling hold like they taught us in gym class. He dropped the needle and Leah screamed again and the guy grunted and tried to shake me off, but I was sticky like a parasite, man. I just held on and tightened my grip and he couldn't move.

And Leah called 911 and that would have been that, but it turns out the guy in question was Michael Alan Naylor. The Surgeon. Or . . .

"The man responsible for a series of abductions, rapes, and murders throughout the Mid-Atlantic," said Nancy deCarlo, the host of *Justice!*, just before she introduced me to the nation in all my zitty, sweaty, panicky glory.

They stuck me on Leah's sofa with Leah, who looked poised and calm and radiated perfection. It was like Beauty and the Beastly or something. Nancy talked. I listened. I answered her questions, but I can't really remember it at all. I was too caught up in the moment, sitting so close to Leah that I could smell her perfume and the hot TV lights and the *Justice!* people running around and everything. It was crazy.

They showed a reenactment of the whole thing, shot in grainy black and white, with some little emo kid playing me, running down the alley, jumping . . .

It was TV. They didn't tell the whole story, of course.

Maybe that's because *I* didn't tell *them* the whole story.

2

BUS RIDE OF CHAMPIONS

IT'S HARD to get used to the way the world's treating me. No one ever really paid attention to me before and now . . .

Well, for example, there's *People*. They wanted to put me on the cover along with other "Teen Heroes!" like the kid who woke up at night to smell smoke just in time to get her family out of a burning house, and the other kid who went to computer camp even though his home had been devastated by Hurricane Katrina. (I don't know how going to computer camp makes you a hero, but *People* says it, so it must be true, right?)

But let me tell you something—bad enough I agreed to have my face plastered all over TV. I wasn't about to give *People* an interview, so they cut me from the cover, thank God.

Oh, and then there were the reporters. *Billions* of them.

OK, not billions, but a lot. It's down to a few local guys now, but for a while there, there were about ten or fifteen of them and they were sort of camped out on the sidewalk and in vans on the street where me and Dad live. Which was embarrassing because we live in this crappy basement apartment in an old house and people took pictures of me coming out of it. They took pictures of Dad, too, when he came home from work, which is also embarrassing because he's usually in his overalls and doesn't look all that impressive. I tell people my dad works for

the government, which isn't a total lie. He used to be in the army and now he's a garbage man. That's sort of a government job. Government contracted, at least.

You'd think that it would be against the law to hang around outside my home and wait to take pictures of me, but Dad says it's not.

"You're considered a public person now," he told me in a rare moment of lucidity. "The privacy laws are a little less strict around you. The sidewalk and the street are public property, so they can wait there as long as they want."

He told me to just ignore them, that they'd go away as soon as there was another story to cover.

Easy for *him* to say. Dad doesn't care what anyone else thinks. But I'm *ugly*, OK? And I have face pizza like you wouldn't believe, so I really, really hate having my picture taken. Bad enough everything was splattered all over TV courtesy of *Justice!* but now I also have to deal with the thought that my picture might show up in the *New York Times* or in *Us Weekly*?

I was pretty much fed up with walking into a solid wall of bodies and flashbulbs every time I left the house, so it's actually cool that *Justice!* has aired because now they've mostly gone away and I can just go to the school bus like a normal person.

I hop on the bus and the doors close and it's totally silent. Like someone just cut a nasty fart and won't own up to it.

And then someone clears their throat and says, "Way to kick ass, Kevin."

I don't know who says it. I can't even turn in time to look for the person when suddenly the whole bus erupts into applause. It's like drums in a tin can.

God, even on the school bus. I can't escape it. I thought this was over last week, but I guess the airing of *Justice!* over the weekend just got people going again.

I expect the bus driver to shout for us all to get quiet and for me to sit down, but when I look over my shoulder, *she's* standing up, clapping her little heart out for me.

This is unreal.

What do I do now? What do I say? Am I supposed to make a speech or something? God, I hope not.

I smile as best I can — when I smile, my face becomes even uglier, so I avoid it whenever possible. See, my lips sort of peel back and my teeth just hang out there like they're dangling in space. So I keep my lips pretty tight together when I'm in situations where I have to smile.

"Thanks," I say, because I don't know what else to say. The bus driver slides back into her seat, which I take as my cue to sit down.

I take the first seat I see, not pressing my luck. It's next to a kid I don't know, a freshman.

"Saw you on TV," he says. "You looked OK."

You'd have to cut through ten miles of bad jungle overgrowth before getting within pissing distance of "looking OK" for me, but he's not pulling my leg. He seems sincere, a sure indicator of some horrible variety of brain damage. Poor kid. So young.

"Way to kick that guy's ass," he goes on. "I read about him online, you know? They called him 'the Surgeon.'"

"Yeah. I know."

"Because he would anastomize his victims," the kid announces proudly.

"Anesthetize," I tell him. I have some trouble pronouncing it myself, but at least I *tried*.

"Yeah, that's what I said. And then he would cut them up, all surgical-like. With a scalpel. Like the Indians."

Wow. He managed to mess up vocabulary *and* history all at once. That's impressive.

"He used a scalpel. That's what doctors use."

The kid snorts as if I'm pulling his leg. He turns to look out the window, muttering something about "big-shot hero." I let it go. I don't need to add shoving a freshman out the bus window to my list of problems.

3

SCHOOL DAZED

AT SCHOOL, there's occasional smatterings of applause and some cheers, especially from people who don't know me. People who just saw me on TV or who maybe heard about things from Leah or one of her legions of friends. I hate the attention. I duck my head down and do the best lips-over-the-teeth grin I can in response. I hate my teeth. Along with the rest of my mouth.

And the rest of my face, for that matter.

I'm only in homeroom for five minutes when the phone rings on Mrs. Sawyer's desk. "Dr. Goethe would like to see you, Kevin." So I trudge off to the principal's office.

Where Dr. Goethe leans back in his chair, beaming, as he reminds me that this afternoon will be the "very special town assembly" to honor me for my "unwavering heroism," with plenty of "important people and press" in attendance.

"You know, you've always sort of flown under the radar, Kevin," he goes on. "So it's great to see this. I hope you'll take all of this attention as a sign and really step up your game."

Whatever. My grades are OK. I could do better, but why bother?

This will actually be the third such assembly for me; Dad says I can ditch them if I want, but he also says it would be polite to keep going, since people are going to so much trouble. There was already one at

the Elks Club and the VFW, and now the whole town is showing up at school this afternoon.

I assure Dr. Goethe that I haven't forgotten and then I try to have a normal day, but that isn't going to happen. I don't know if it'll ever happen again.

There's a palpable silence when I enter the lunch room, everyone turning to look at me. Leah is eating lunch with her usual group, and everyone seems to be waiting to see if I'll sit down with her, even though that hasn't happened yet and *won't* happen. Not a chance. I know my place.

Tit waves to me from his table in the corner. He's with Jedi and Speedo. I sit down with them and try to ignore the million eyes boring into me from all angles. Why does everyone have to stare? Why can't they just let me be?

And then it's like the entire cafeteria sucks in its breath all at once. Like we were all watching TV or something and a car blew up out of nowhere. Or something. I don't know. I'm bad at metaphors or similes or whatever they are. Ask any of my English teachers.

Tit clears his throat really loud, trying to get my attention. Jedi makes his *vvvvvvvvvhhnn* noise and I look up from my dry hamburger and Leah is standing there. I try to swallow, but I'm nervous and my throat's dry and I think, *Oh, cool, Kross — you're going to choke to death right here*, but that doesn't happen and instead I sort of cough and I think, *Oh, even better — you're gonna spit up a gross brown wad of partly chewed burger while Leah's standing here and the whole school is watching*.

But, somehow, that doesn't happen either. I manage to keep my mouth shut and my food somewhere between my teeth and my throat.

There's an endless moment of silence. It's like church. Been a while, tell the truth. But I remember it well — this is what it sounded like in church, just before Mass, when the processional music stops and Father McKane stands at the altar and everyone's perfectly quiet for just those few seconds between the last strains of music fading away and Father McKane saying . . .

Leah saves the day by speaking because I'm just sitting there, lost in my Catholic past. First she flashes me this *totally* dazzling smile that nearly blinds me and makes me ponder the awesome power of those tooth-whitening strips. Then she says, "I wanted to invite you to my party."

In a way, I'm glad for the burger-plug jammed in my craw; otherwise, I'd probably say something witty and brilliant like, "Huh?" Instead, I just nod wisely.

"My parents are letting me throw a party next Friday and I wanted ..."

She looks around, suddenly aware that everyone in the lunchroom is staring at us, that the usual dull roar of conversation has quieted to a burble of whispers. Beauty and the Beastly all over again. Good for her — she doesn't let it bother her.

"I wanted to invite you," she says, smiling perkily and bouncing a little bit. I force my eyes *not* to follow the bounce, which is easier said than done.

She holds out a little cream-colored envelope. After fifteen or twenty years, I realize that it's for me. I take it.

"I really hope you can come," she says again, and spins around and marches back to her table.

I rediscover my ability to swallow just as the lunchroom erupts into applause. Oh, God. Not again.

"Dude, you rock *and* you roll," says Tit.

"Cut it out."

Jedi jumps in. "Man, you know who'll be at that party? All the hotties, man."

"Can I go with?" Speedo asks.

"Shut up, guys." They're talking too loudly and I don't want someone to overhear my buddies acting like the horndogs they (OK, OK, *we*) really are. It's embarrassing.

"I wanna go with," Speedo says.

Tit reaches out for the invitation, but I shove it in my pocket before he can grab it. "Stop it, guys. No one's going."

Tit shakes his head. "You saved her life and stuff. You should go."

“Yeah,” Jedi says. “Maybe she’ll give you a *special* reward.” He mimes oral sex with a french fry.

I look around, panicked, making sure no one notices. The guys crack up. They don’t know. They don’t care.

Later, in science class, I examine the envelope. I’m supposed to be taking notes, but I sit in the back and for once no one is looking at me.

A little cream envelope, very lightweight. My name written across the front in what must be Leah’s handwriting: *Kevin*. I like the way she makes the “K,” with a sort of flourish, like it’s something special.

Green ink. Green is her favorite color.

It isn’t sealed. I pry out the card inside. It’s a stiff piece of matching cream paper, pre-printed — in green, of course — with Leah’s name and address and the time of the party. Leah has written at the bottom *Don’t forget a bathing suit!* and I think for a second that I might pass out.

And then, off to one side, is another handwritten note. Did she write this on all of them? I don’t think so — the handwriting is slightly different here, as if she jotted this last part down quickly, in an uncertain rush.

Please come.

That’s all it says. Two words.

God, how do I get into these things?

4

THE COUNCIL OF FOOLS

OK, I'VE HAD ENOUGH mind-numbing weirdness for one day, so after Bio I decide to skip math. I head off to the auditorium instead. There's a janitor's office back there, behind the stage and off the wings. It's locked, but Speedo scammed a key last year and made copies for all of us. The office is always empty at this time of day because that's when the custodians all head out to McDonald's for lunch.

I'm not the only one who needed some time away, it looks like. Flip and Fam are here, slobbering all over each other on one of the pitted metal desks.

"Whoa, sorry, guys." I start to back out.

"No, no!" Flip jumps up. Fam looks a little annoyed, but she just runs her fingers through her hair and straightens her clothes. "Hail, Fool! Dude, stick. Stick."

I sort of want to leave because I'm sure they have better things to do than hang with me right now, but Fam doesn't look annoyed any more, so I guess I'll stay. I wish I were alone, though. I really just want to be alone right now.

"Hail, Fool," I say back, and Fam repeats it.

"So today's the big day, huh?" Flip gets this gleam in his eye, and for a second there, I'm worried. As soon as I knew about it, I begged him — honestly *begged* him — not to pull any pranks at the ceremony

this afternoon. Bad enough I'll be on display for everyone in town; I don't need some craziness interrupting it and stretching it out.

No sooner do I think it than the door opens and in comes the rest of crew: Speedo, Jedi, and Tit. The gang's all here, and the room's a confusion of "Hail, Fool!" as everyone says hi.

And then Tit starts chanting, "Kross! Kross! Kross!" and the rest pick it up, except for Flip, who just looks bored, and I don't blame him.

"Guys, come on." But they're not listening to me.

"Guys, you're making too much noise. Someone will hear."

They don't care. They just keep chanting.

"We're proud of you, Kross," Flip says once the chanting has died down.

"Yeah, man." Jedi chimes in. "*Vvvvvvvhhhn*. You put Brookdale on the map!"

"I did?"

"Sure," says Flip. "It's freakin' hilarious. I mean, people are talking about *Brookdale*. When's the last time that happened?"

"Uh, that whole thing with that teacher screwing Crazy J," Speedo says.

"Crazy J" is a senior named Josh Mendel. He gets into a lot of fights and it's generally agreed that he's a class-A nutjob from way back, when he had sex with a teacher back in middle school.

Flip waves it off. "Whatever. There's one of those in, like, *every* town, so who the hell cares?"

"I was just in the right place at the right time, guys." It feels like a lie when I say it, but it's true in its own, weird way. I sort of wish I could *be* Josh Mendel, even with all his problems. He's tall, good-looking, he takes no crap from anyone. I take a moderate amount of crap and I wish it was less. He could have any girl in the school. I only want one. I don't see why it has to be such a big deal.

I guess I should explain about the Council of Fools and all of this "Hail, Fool" nonsense.

See, back in middle school a bunch of us decided that school was

crap. School was for fools. So we became the Council of Fools, an organization dedicated to proving the absurdity of school and all aspects of social life.

If that last bit sounded rehearsed, it's because it's part of our charter, which every Fool has to memorize. Yes, we have a charter. We're pretty scarily organized, tell the truth. Especially considering that there were five of us at the time (Fam joined later, in high school), and *you* try to get five middle schoolers to do anything for any length of time. The fact that we're still together speaks well for us, I think. Of course, we're dedicated to generally messing with people's heads, so maybe it's not all in the best cause, but you can't have everything.

We all have Fool names, like Kross. Bill Yingling became Jedi because he's constantly making this *vvvvvvvvhhnnn* noise, this weird little humming thing that sounds just like a lightsaber, so we all decided he's a Jedi. Speedo and Tit are tied for most embarrassing names — Tit got his because his last name is Titus, so how could he *not* be Tit? Speedo got his name because when we all took swimming classes a few years ago, he wore this nearly gone Speedo while the rest of us wore loose-and-baggies. You can't let a guy forget that kind of shame, not if you're a real friend.

Last but not least, there's Fam and Flip. Fam's our only girl member — and she's only a member because she's Flip's girlfriend. She joined at the beginning of this school year. She was just this little freshman chick who for some reason glommed on to Flip. I don't get their relationship — it's like all sex and Flip driving her places. But I don't try to figure it out. Her real name's Julia, which became Jules, which became Jewels, which became *Family Jewels*, which . . . You get the point.

Joseph Brenner — our fearless, peerless leader (his own words) — is Flip because his mom was always telling him to watch his mouth and “stop being so flip!” which seemed really hilarious back in, you know, seventh grade. He's sort of our Head Fool because even though he's in the same grade as the rest of us, he's the oldest. He flunked out of third grade; not because he's a dummy but because he's so smart. He would get bored in class and zone out all the time and his teachers thought

he was a retard or something because he never did his work so they “held him back.” That’s such a stupid phrase, but it’s so accurate, too. I mean, on the one hand it’s totally teacher-talk for “flunked.” On the other hand, in Flip’s case they really *were* holding him back. Literally.

Fortunately, Flip didn’t let it stop him. He just kept on doing his thing, but he was careful to wake up in school long enough to get a C average and keep on plugging ahead.

“No way I’m staying in school one day longer than is strictly necessary,” he told me once.

Repeating third grade was pure torture for him. He already knew everything there was to know up to grade six by then, but he couldn’t be bothered to do the tests because he thought they were boring and stupid.

Which they were. Most of us don’t have the balls to say so, though.

Flip doesn’t suffer fools gladly. Which is why we sort of went with an ironic twist and called ourselves the Council of Fools. And the best part of Flip being in charge is that he could drive earlier than any of us, so we’ve been pretty mobile ever since we started high school.

We started out with stupid little pranks in middle school. Just dumb kid stuff, really. Like exploding lockers and turning off the water to the girls’ bathroom. Junk like that. But freshman year, Flip topped himself. He hacked into the school computer and started changing grades. Only instead of screwing people and lowering their grades, he went in and gave a bunch of jocks *better* grades, high enough that they could keep playing lacrosse. Why?

“Because it’s a Foolish thing to do,” he said. Sometimes when Flip talks, you can hear capital letters in his voice.

I got his point, though. Usually you hack into a computer to do damage, right? But Flip was doing something wrong that was actually helping someone.

“It’s a moral, ethical, and philosophical paradox,” he told me, puffing away on a cigarette, hunched over his computer. “And besides, why not?”

The whole thing became the Council’s greatest triumph/failure (they’re sort of the same thing to us, really). Someone found out about

the hacked grades and assumed that the lacrosse team was responsible (we never clued them in, of course) and they had to forfeit the entire season.

“Unintended consequences,” Flip intoned when the news broke. “Not just a good idea, but the law.” I didn’t quite get that one. But that’s OK. If you understand half of what Flip says, you’re on solid ground.

Probably Flip’s finest hour, though, was the amazing kidnapping and debut of Officer Sexpot.

5

THE INCREDIBLE TRUE SECRET ORIGIN OF OFFICER SEXPOT

NO, SERIOUSLY. I'm not making this up. You think I could make this stuff up?

See, all kinds of speeding and stuff goes on here in Brookdale, but no one ever wants to pay for more cops. And when they *do* get pulled over, they just bitch and moan about getting pulled over anyway. So I guess it's a Catch-22 for the mayor and the cops.

A couple of years ago, someone got the bright idea to do like they do in other towns and put a dummy on the road dressed as a cop. No, really. They actually do this. They take one of the town police cars and stick it along the highway like it's just parked there. And they stick a dummy at the wheel and people seeing it think they're busted so they slow down and by the time they drive by and realize they've been had, it's too late — they've already slowed down, mission accomplished, no money spent, no overtime, etc.

It's not a bad plan because you never *really* know if that cop car up ahead is legit or a fake. So you slow down no matter what.

Or at least, you *used* to.

See, six months ago Flip stole the dummy.

Well, that's not how *he* put it.

"I kidnapped Officer Sexpot," he told us all triumphantly. "But really, she wanted to come with me. She was pretty tired of sitting in

that car all the time. She craves excitement. She wants a *life*, boys.” (He said “boys” even though Fam was right there.)

And when you see her up close, she sort of *does* look like one of those blow-up dolls. I don’t know where the town got her, but she looks like she sort of had a shady past, you know?

So she became our unofficial mascot and then one day Flip got this brilliant idea: we would start dressing her up in outrageous outfits and pose her places and take pictures and then Flip would hack the pictures into people’s e-mail accounts and web sites.

It’s a *blast!* Honest! The lovely and wooden OSP has done time as a call girl (in front of the First Baptist Church), a French maid (bending over a grave marker at the cemetery), and — my personal favorite — a very naughty Mrs. Claus on Christmas Eve.

On the mayor’s roof.

Doing something very jolly that put the “X” in “Xmas” with the mayor’s Santa statue.

And let me tell you, it was a *bitch* getting that thing up to the roof and back down before the mayor and his wife got home from church, but it was worth every sore muscle on Christmas morning.

These are the things we do, we Council of Fools. We’re bored a lot.

6

A BIG MOMENT (OH, JOY)

BEFORE LEAVING the janitors' office, I secure another promise from Flip not to mess around today.

He looks at me like I just kicked him in the shin. "Kross. I'm hurt. How could you think I would embarrass a fellow Fool like that?"

His expression is so sad and forlorn that I almost feel bad for bringing it up. But then his face splits into the grin I know so well. "Besides," he says, "it'll be much more fun watching you go through the whole thing. If I pranked it, you'd get a break."

Fam slaps his shoulder. "Be nice."

I go to my last two classes and try to focus, but when the day ends, I feel no relief because there's more to come.

The ceremony takes place on the football field. I can't say "football stadium" because that would imply that South Brook High has, well, a *stadium*. And the truth of the matter is that all we have is a field with a bunch of hard-on-your-ass bleachers and two goal-posts and a scoreboard that isn't even digital—it still has those numbers cut in half horizontally that flip over themselves to update.

So, this is how Brookdale treats its hero-types: it tortures them.

They've put up some kind of stage at one end of the field, and that's where I stand, along with the mayor, Dr. Goethe, and a bunch of other people I don't know. I think they're aldermen or councillors or something. I guess if I cared, I'd ask to be introduced.

All I know is that the entire town of Brookdale is sitting on the field on folding chairs or on the bleachers. Or at least that's how it feels. There's a whole hell of a lot of people out there, and I squirm every time I think about it, which is all the time right now because they're right in front of me, so I'm basically one big ball of squirm.

Leah is up here, too, standing near me. She smells nice — like lilacs. I guess. I don't really know what lilacs smell like, so it's tough to say. But in poems and stuff, people are always talking about the smell of lilacs and they say it with this sort of wistful emotion that makes me think lilacs must be just about the best thing in the world, and that's what Leah smells like right now — the best thing in the world.

OK, settle down, Kross.

I don't even want to *think* about what *I* smell like. I think my deodorant gave up a couple of hours ago and it's hot out here and I really hope that some of the funk I'm detecting is just radiating from the crowd.

Flip was right: If he suddenly overloaded the speakers with feedback or had the Council set off firecrackers over by the parking lot, I'd at least get a minute without everyone staring at me.

But there's no break in sight, so I have to stand here the whole time, while Dr. Goethe introduces me and talks about what I did and how I'm Brookdale's new TV star, which gets some laughs — *Ha ha, the ugly kid is a TV star*. Then the mayor takes the mic and babbles for a while about Civic Pride and Lending a Hand and how I am, apparently, the New Face of the Today's Youth, which, let me tell you, does not bode well for Today's Youth's chances for ever getting laid.

Thankfully, I'm not asked to speak. Because I would probably puke.

Unbelievably, it turns out there's a key to the town — the key to Brookdale. This makes me think of a big dome over the town, with a little door and a teeny, tiny keyhole. Now *that* would be cool.

Leah is the one who gives me the key. Of course. She's wearing a cream dress with green trim. She wears it at least once a month, usually for something special. She wore it today for me.

She hands the key to me and she's smiling and she's beautiful and

she's lilacs and I think — no, no, wait, I'm pretty sure — I'm going to pass out here and now, which would just be *perfect*, wouldn't it? Right there in front of Leah, in front of the entire town of Brookdale and probably half of Canterstown, too.

But I manage not to pass out. Leah gives me a little hug that sends sparks all along my body and makes me rigid with fear that I'm going to pop a boner right here on stage. Oh, man, that would suck.

Fortunately, Little Kross decides to behave. Leah steps away from me, leaving a fog of lilac confusion in her wake. There's applause as I perform the supremely heroic act of standing there with a dumb look on my face, holding the key in one sweaty hand. Looking out at the crowd, I see Dad and Leah's parents and Tit's mom and the Council, everyone applauding except for Flip, way in the back, his arm around Fam's shoulders. She's clapping and cheering, but Flip just looks sort of bored and isn't applauding at all, which is cool because this is *so* not a big deal.

Now what do I do with the key? I feel like everyone expects me to hold it up over my head like a trophy or something, but it's sort of small, only a little bigger than a *real* key, so no one would even be able to see it. It's sort of a brassy color, but it doesn't feel all that heavy, so that's probably just paint. It has a little red stone set in it, and it's engraved: "Brookdale, Maryland" with the date.

God, this is stupid.

And, sadly, it's not over yet. Because now there's more speech-making. People saying incredibly stupid things about me, going back to the whole hero thing, making me sound like I tracked the Surgeon from his lair with my trusty bloodhound and a sniper rifle before besting him in hand-to-hand combat on top of a speeding bus filled with orphans and nuns. And ninjas. Ninjas are involved somehow, too.

I zone out long enough to imagine all of that and snap out of it to more applause. I have, apparently, just been offered free manicures for life at a local salon. Why would I want a single manicure, much less a lifetime's supply? (And how many manicures *are* there in a lifetime's supply?)

It gets better: free DVD rentals (I don't have a DVD player!) and free meals at some local restaurants (yeah, because I love eating alone in public) and a bunch of other crap.

By the time it's over, there's sweat soaking through the back of my shirt. My armpits are a swamp. I imagine my zit cream running down my face like melted makeup.

"We have one last surprise for you, Kevin," the mayor says, and beckons for me to join him at the microphone. Oh, Lord.

"You turned sixteen last week, didn't you, Kevin?"

I lean into the microphone. "Yeah." Oops. I'm supposed to say, "Yes, sir," or something like that, right?

"Don't have a car yet, do you?"

"Nah." Oops. Again.

"Well, stop by the lot. We'll take care of you."

The crowd goes crazy with more applause.

And then it's all done, thank God. The final round of applause dies out and the mayor thanks everyone for coming and that's that, and I breathe a sigh of relief.

Dad starts to make his way towards me, while the mayor makes sure to get one last picture with me.

"Are you serious?" I ask the mayor. "About the car?"

"Of course! We'll help you spend a little of that reward money, huh?" He slaps me on the back and laughs like it's a joke, but it's not. "I'll get you a great deal, don't worry. Give you my cost on the whole thing. I've got the perfect car in mind already."

Being mayor of Brookdale is not exactly a high-paying gig. We learned that in an elementary school unit on local government. I think he gets like ten grand a year, which — if you ask me — is probably ten grand too much to run this place. So he has to have a regular job, too, and this particular mayor owns a car dealership.

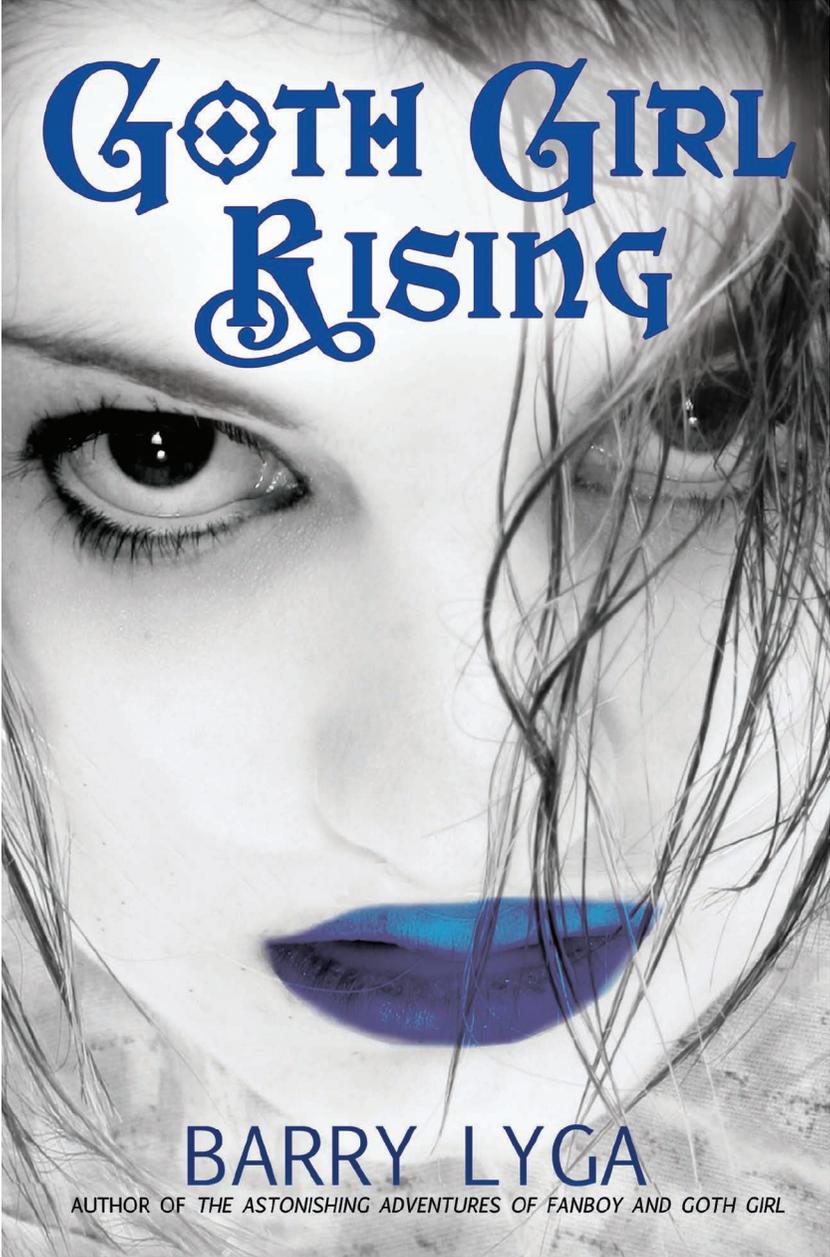
This is actually a pretty sweet deal, all things considered. Dad wasn't going to be buying me a car anytime soon, after all. I wouldn't need Flip to drive me everywhere all the time. I could have some freedom.

Even though I don't really deserve it.

Because . . .

And then Dad's on the stage, shaking the mayor's hand, and he puts his other hand on my shoulder and the mayor says, "You must be so proud of Kevin."

And it kills me when Dad says, "Yes. I am."



GOTH GIRL RISING

BARRY LYGA

AUTHOR OF *THE ASTONISHING ADVENTURES OF FANBOY* AND *GOTH GIRL*

GOTH GIRL RISING

Time is a funny thing in the hospital. In the mental ward. You lose track of it easily.

After six months in the Maryland Mental Health Unit, Kyra Sellers, a.k.a. Goth Girl, is going home.

Unfortunately, she's about to find out that while she was away, she lost track of more than time.

Things seem normal at first. Roger's his typical, pain-in-the-ass fatherly self. Jecca and Simone and the rest of the goth crowd still do their thing. And Kyra is back in black, feeling good, and ready to make up with the only person who's ever appreciated her for who she really is.

But then she sees him. Fanboy. Transcended from everything he was into someone she barely recognizes.

And the anger and memories come rushing back.

Fanboy. The Spermling. Miss Powell. Roger.

Her mother.

There's so much to do to people when you're angry.

Kyra's about to get very busy.

Goth Girl Rising, the sequel to *The Astonishing Adventures of Fanboy & Goth Girl*, marked Lyga's first time writing from the point of view of a teen girl. "Lyga dives with typical boldness into the complexity of teen emotions and, for the first time, the female perspective . . . [A] raw, furious, heartbroken narrative," said *BookList*. And VOYA (Voice of Youth Advocates) claimed, "Lyga finds his inner female — she is angry, destructive, and 'effed up,' but very real and raw."

Young Adult Review Network: *As a young female, I was highly empowered when reading Goth Girl Rising. Kyra touches upon topics I do*

not see much in YA, and she declaims them all . . . My question is: How do you know what teen girls think about? How is it possible to create such a realistic female when being a male writer? Was it more difficult, or easier, to write a female narrator than your male narrators?

BL: You know, when it comes to knowing what teen girls think, it's really just a matter of paying attention. I've always have a lot of female friends, and I just listen to them. When you actually listen to people, you come to understand their fears, their concerns, their desires. So when it came time to write Kyra, I felt like I had a pretty good notion of what it's like to be a girl today — the social pressures, the cultural forces, stuff like that. And then you just add in the insecurity that comes with being a teenager — regardless of your sex — and I felt like I had a good handle on it.

I thought that writing Kyra would be tougher than writing Fanboy or Josh or Kross, but in truth, it was a piece of cake. I invented Kyra, after all — there's no one in the world who knows her as well as I do. I just sat down, said to myself, "OK, now I'm Kyra — what am I thinking?" and the book exploded out of me.

(Interview excerpt courtesy of yareview.net. For the complete interview, visit <http://yareview.net/2010/04/interview-with-barry-lyga-part-1/>).

my hair my hair
my hair's gone brown
i look in the mirror
and who do i see?
a brown-haired girl
who is she?

1

MY MOTHER AND I both spent a lot of time in hospitals. Unlike her, I survived.

Before she went and died, my mom told me to stop bitching about my cramps all the time. “It’s nothing that every other woman on the planet hasn’t gone through,” she said.

And besides, she went on, your period is a good thing. It’s a sign that you’re alive and healthy.

Easy for her to say — cancer was eating her lungs from the inside out, so what’s the big deal about some cramps, right?

Still, I knew that what I was experiencing wasn’t right or normal. It wasn’t what other girls were feeling every month. (I know — I asked around.)

Weird thing, though: After she died, my cramps sort of got better. It’s not like they went away; they just stopped being so intense and so consuming. I started to think that, OK, maybe *this* is what other girls felt. Like I had been abnormal before, but now I was somehow becoming normal, that now the world was working properly and everything was good and normal and usual.

Everything except my mom’s *face* . . .

My mom’s face before they closed the casket looked like a Barbie doll’s.

A Barbie doll someone had left in the sandbox too long.

All plasticky and too shiny, but somehow gray at the same time.

And then one day after the funeral—it was a pretty nice day, too—I took a box cutter from my dad’s workshop and slashed across my wrist. It hurt, but not that much. Not bad at all.

So I slashed the other one, too.

And that’s how I ended up in the emergency room and then in front of a judge and then locked up in a mental hospital.

That was my first time in the hospital. And I got out and I covered up my scars and I went on with my life and I tried to figure out what it was all about, and I’m *still* trying to figure it out.

But it just gets more and more complicated all the time. Every day. The world doesn’t slow down long enough for you to figure out anything; it keeps adding things in. Things like geeky guys and comic books and comic book conventions and effed up teachers and . . .

And another stay in the hospital.

2

GOD I'M *DYING* for a cigarette. I turned sixteen while I was away but this stupid state says you have to be eighteen to smoke, so they wouldn't let me smoke in the hospital.

When I got home this afternoon, the first thing I did was look for my cigs. But Roger had tossed them already. Now that *he's* quit, he's an effing cigarette *Taliban*, even though it's, like, years too late for that.

"Mom's already dead!" I yelled at him. "Who the hell do you think you're saving?"

And he just gave me his Sad, Tired look. It's one of the three he's got, the other two being Pissed Off and Blissed Out on ESPN.

"You, Kyra." Like it's some big revelation. "Someone has to protect you from yourself. From all the crap out in the world."

"Don't do me any favors," I told him.

He took a deep breath. "It's your first day back home. Can't you behave just a little bit?"

I went to my room. Home all of five minutes and I was already isolated in my room. Living with Roger isn't much different from being in the hospital. He's in charge, just like the doctors and nurses are in charge in the hospital. I have no say. I have no rights.

To make things worse, I'm going back to school in the morning. I don't want to go back to school.

See, I haven't been to school in a while. Six months, which includes all of summer break, when everyone else in the universe was off having fun. Except for me. I got put away. Now I'm supposed to go back to school like nothing happened.

School seems like something that happens to other people.

Last spring, I met this guy. And I guess I fell in love with him a little bit, which was a stupid thing for me to do because it never works out and it's pointless. So I kicked him in the balls and walked away from him and even flipped him off over the Internet.

And then my dad started in on me because, see, before all of this, this kid — this *Fanboy* — had a bullet. And I guess I sort of stole it from him and he figured out I had it and he called my effing *dad* and then all hell broke loose at home because my dad was all freaked out, like I was going to try to kill myself again. And he spent all this time tearing apart the house, looking for this goddamn bullet, which he couldn't find because I'd already given it back to Fanboy . . . right at the same time I kicked him in the balls, actually.

And I kept my mouth shut, too. No matter how much my dad screamed and yelled and ranted and raved, I wouldn't tell him anything about the bullet. Not about where I got it. Not about where it went. Not about the kid who called him at work to tell him about it.

So Roger — my dad, officially — gave up. He sent me to the hospital again.

And now I'm back home. Because as bad as it was, I'm tougher than my mom.

THE LAST TIME I SAW HER

the room the room the room is rosevomit because

3

THINGS ARE A LITTLE BIT BETTER at home, of course — I have my *own* room, without a crazy roommate who got knocked up at fifteen and used to let her boyfriend beat her up. So I've got that going for me.

And I have my computer.

It's been *months* since I've been able to do anything on a computer. They had computers in the hospital, but we were monitored and we only got, like, fifteen minutes at a time, so I didn't bother.

I fire up the computer and log on to my chat program and there's Simone, like she's waiting for me. Simone's my best friend — I know all of her shit and she knows all of my shit.

So it goes like this:

simsimsimoaning: *welcom back!!!!*

Promethea387: *Thanks. Already feel like I'm in jail or something.*

Roger is being a PITA.

simsimsimoaning: *u need 2 get oiut*

simsimsimoaning: *uv ben cooped up for MONTHS*

Promethea387: *Yeah, I know.*

simsimsimoaning: *grounded?*

Promethea387: *I don't think so. He's just watching me real carefully.*

simsimsimoaning: *shit*

Promethea387: *So? Never stopped me before.*

simsimsimoaning: *lol*

Promethea387: *I'm dying for a cigarette.*

simsimsimoaning: *i can hook u up*

Promethea387: *Roger is still home. I'll have to sneak out tonight
when he's asleep.*

simsimsimoaning: *meet me @ jeccas house big party 2nite*

Promethea387: *OK.*

4

I SPEND the rest of the day in my bedroom, just sort of trying to avoid Roger *and* the thought of school tomorrow. I'm not real successful at either one.

I turn up some music and try to drown my own brain, but I only succeed a little bit.

Roger knocks on the door a bunch of times. I talk to him just enough that he won't get too suspicious and start coming in without knocking. He told me on the way home from the hospital: "This is how it's going to be, Kyra — if you give me enough reason to worry about you, I'll just come in without knocking." And then, as if he read my effing mind: "And if it's locked, I'll knock it the hell down."

He thinks when he busts out "hell" I take him more seriously. Yeah. Insert eye roll here. (Man, I wish *life* had emoticons, you know? So that when your dad pisses you off you could like click a mental button or something and just show him one of those rolleys. That would rock.)

Anyway.

After, like, *forever*, it's finally nighttime. There are no nurses to come in and check on me. No one tries to give me meds or anything like that. No psycho roommate crying herself to sleep.

Just me. In my own bedroom.

Roger knocks and then comes in and sits down. I'm lying on the bed. He sighs because that's what Roger does — he sighs a lot.

He gives me Sad, Tired.

“Are you going to behave in school tomorrow?”

“I guess.”

“I need more than a guess, Kyra.”

“What do you want from me, Roger?”

He flicks to Pissed Off for a second before returning to Sad, Tired.

“I want you to think straight for once.”

For some reason I feel sorry for him all of a sudden. That happens sometimes with Sad, Tired.

“I'll try, Dad.”

He nods and leaves. I hear him head into his bathroom, then into his bedroom. Pretty soon the TV's on, just loud enough that I can hear *something* but not loud enough to tell what it is.

I give him an hour to fall asleep.

Then I stuff a bunch of clothes and old stuffed animals and shit under my covers to make it look like I'm in bed. I get dressed for the real world for the first time since spring — all black, of course; minimizer bra, of course. In the hospital, my black hair dye washed out, so now I have this ugly brown stuff. Nothing I can do about it right now.

I sneak out the back door because that one squeaks a lot less than the front door.

Outside. I'm outside.

I'm in my own clothes.

I'm free.

Freedom! Like in that old Mel Gibson movie they made us watch in history. I want to scream it to the night sky: *FREEDOM!*

I stand in the cold and shiver a little bit. It's OK, though. The cold's OK. It's better than being in the hospital.

The only real problem is that I have no car. I used to be able to boost one pretty regularly, but I've only been home for a few hours, so I haven't been able to sneak out and steal one. So I'll have to walk to Jecca's. Damn.

Oh, well. I breathe in deep. The air's cold, but it feels good in my lungs. Better than the air in the hospital, that's for damn sure.

I start to walk.

FANBOY

And I can't help myself. Even though I try to think of other things — Jecca, Simone, the party — I keep thinking about Fanboy.

And his graphic novel. And the way he kept trying to check me out without really checking me out and how for the first time in my life that, like, totally didn't bother me or freak me out. Except it freaked me out that it *didn't* freak me out.

I don't get it.

I remember kicking him in the balls. And e-mailing him a picture of me flipping him off. I was so pissed at him. I was so angry.

There was this senior named Dina Jurgens, and she was this total *Maxim* bimchette with the tits and the ass and the legs and the tan and the blond hair and all that shit that makes guys turn into such jackasses. Against all odds, she even put the moves on Fanboy. I found out that at a party one night she started sucking face with him, which is so stupid.

So maybe I was right to be angry because I liked him and I shouldn't have, but he shouldn't have kissed effing *Dina Jurgens* of all people, but she graduated while I was gone, so she's not an issue anymore, right? Out of sight, out of mind.

But he's just *scary* talented. I mean, I've read a lot of comic books and manga and shit, and *Schemata* was just totally kickass. I busted him a lot about some of the stuff he put in there, and it really pissed me off that his main character was just wank-bait Dina all grown up, but still. It was amazing. I read most of the script and saw like twenty pages of artwork, and it was phenomenal. I still can't believe that bald little shit Bendis didn't realize he was looking at genius. (Yeah, big-shot Brian Michael Bendis. Big-shot comic book writer. Whatever. Prick. He didn't deserve to see my boobs. Long story.)

Cute, in that geeky way only guys have, really. Geeky girls can't really pull it off. Not the same way. Geeky guys have this shyness that works because it's, like, so different from the normal asshole guy behavior. So when you see a shy guy, it makes you sit up and take notice. It makes you want to understand them or makes you feel like you already understand them or . . .

I don't know. Protect them? Does that make sense?

I hate jocks. I hate big buff guys who think they were handcrafted by God to dispense orgasms to the world. They're more into themselves than anything or anyone else. And that's just bullshit. Because here's the thing: No one in this world is so great that they're worthy of self-obsession. Believe me, I know. It's just the truth. We're all flawed, broken half-people. None of us is complete or even worthwhile. We all suck.

But Fanboy . . .

See, for a while there, I thought of him as just "fanboy." Lowercase. It wasn't his name — it was just his description, you know? The way you'd call someone in the army "soldier," or the way obnoxious pigs call guys "sport" or "son."

But somewhere, somehow . . . while I was *away*, it changed. It became a *title*. It became like a proper noun, you know?

I guess he wasn't so bad. I mean, it pissed me off that he was obsessed with Dina, but *all* guys are obsessed with her, so I should really let that pass. And he kept messing up stuff about women in his graphic novel, but I realized something while I was away — he *tried*. He was a fifteen-year-old *boy* from effing *Brookdale* and he was trying to create a graphic novel about women and their problems.

I have to give him props for that.

And a part of me . . . a part of me thinks that maybe I can help him. Maybe I can help make his graphic novel even better. I mean, I was the only one he showed it to. The only one he trusted. He never even showed it to his "best" friend, this superstar stud jock who's like a secret geek or something.

He showed it to *me*.

But I really treated him like shit. I shouldn't have done that.

My shrink in the hospital — Dr. Kennedy — told me that every day is a chance to start your life over again. Which is bullshit, really, but not *total* bullshit. I guess we *can* make changes. Things aren't always set in stone, right?

Fanboy didn't call while I was in the hospital. He couldn't — he didn't know where I was. So I forgive him for that. But he also didn't send me any e-mails, which sort of pisses me off because he could have e-mailed me at least once, right?

But . . .

Look at it this way: He didn't e-mail me, which is a mean, shitty thing to do. But I was mean to him, too.

So we're even.

So everything is cool, then.

Yeah.

This is what I'm going to do: Make it all better.

I can do that.

At school, he'll be excited to see me. I'll apologize and then he'll apologize (see, I'll even go first) and we'll pick up where we left off and this time . . .

This time I'll try really, really hard not to eff it up.

5

JECCA LIVES about ten minutes away by car, but it takes me a while to get there on foot. That's OK — all that time walking and thinking is good for me.

There's a bunch of cars parked along the road, but the house is dark.

I walk into the middle of a "quiet party." Everyone's in the living room, all the furniture pushed into a circle. There's like twenty kids, all dressed in black, some with white makeup like I wear, some with exaggerated black or smoky gray eyeshadow. I'm the only one here without black hair. I feel like someone should revoke my Goth Girl membership card.

There are some candles lighting the room, but that's it.

Most everyone ignores me. They all know I've been in the loony bin for six months. Word got out. Only Simone and Jecca knew *which* loony bin, though, because even though I know almost everyone here, Simone and Jecca are the only ones I would actually call friends.

Jecca squeals and jumps up to hug me. Simone slips me a pack of cigarettes. Bless her.

I get this weird minute where I can't talk. It's like I'm totally overwhelmed. I realize: This is the first time in six months I've been with a *friend*. Six months of nothing but doctors and nurses and whacked-

out mental patients and visits from Roger. I talked to Jecca and Simone on the phone a little bit, but that was it.

“You’re back,” Jecca whispers, still hugging me.

“Yeah.” It’s the only thing I can manage to say right now. How do you talk to normal people?

“Let her breathe,” Simone says, prying us apart. She gives me one of those little one-armed hugs and then pushes a guy off the sofa so that we can sit down.

“What took you so long?” Sim whispers.

“I had to walk.”

Sim frowns. “I’ll take you home later.”

I hate that I have to bum a ride from her. I should have my license by now. I should have a car — my own car, not a stolen one — by now.

The air’s thick and sweet with pot. A bong is being passed around. The guy Simone pushed moves that slow way stoned people move. The word is *languid*, I think.

It’s weird because I figured I would have all of this shit to talk about when I finally saw Sim and Jecca again, but now that I’m here, I don’t want to talk. I don’t want to *think*. I’m really glad that the party is “quiet.” It’s like everyone just sits around and gets mellow and stays quiet. And you have to turn off your cell and shit to come in and it’s pretty cool to be in the dark and the quiet for a while. You can talk — you just have to talk *quiet*.

So we all just sit here and smoke and relax and it’s cool. The chatter’s low. No one’s talking about anything that matters.

But then someone passes the bong to me and I take a hit and it’s not a cigarette, but it’s great, really. God, it’s been so effing long.

My lungs go all orgasmic with it and I hold my breath so long that I think maybe I’ve figured out how to never breathe again, how to survive without exhaling. God, would that be cool or what? That’s what it feels like, like I don’t need air anymore, not as long as I have the sweet smoke in my lungs.

And then my eyes start to spark. That’s the only way to describe it — they spark. I start to see little bursts of color. I close my eyes and

they're still there and I exhale, letting all the smoke out in a cloud. The whole room's a cloud.

God, this is what I needed. I needed to be with some friends and just ease my way back into the real world after being in the hospital for so long. Now I can go back to school tomorrow. Honestly. I can. I really can.

Simone giggles at nothing and takes a hit and passes the bong along.

Bong along. Heh.

"What's so funny?" Simone asks.

I didn't realize I actually laughed.

Across the circle, Jecca waves to me, slowly, *languidly*. She's totally blissed out. Her parents travel a lot and she has these great mellow parties for the goths in Brookdale and Canterstown, even Finn's Crossing. No one's allowed to eff with any of her parents' stuff, but that's cool because we're all just here to get away from the rest of the world anyway.

And then it's time for hide-and-seek.

The hide-and-seek we play isn't totally like the old kid game: You get all stoned out of your mind first, and then you go hide and someone has to find you, and it's awesome because you're just blitzed unbelievably.

Last time I played was *months* ago, before I met Fanboy even. I was the seeker and everyone scattered while I sat with my eyes closed, counting to a hundred. And when I opened my eyes, it was like the rest of the world had just vanished, just gone away.

And I loved it.

I mean, I knew deep down that the world was still there. That I wasn't alone in the house, that there were, like, twenty kids hiding just around the corners and up the stairs and all that. But the illusion of complete aloneness was there and that's all I cared about at that moment — the illusion. It worked for me. I didn't question it.

So I had counted to one hundred and I was sitting there on the sofa all by myself and I was supposed to get up and go seeking, but instead

I just sat there. Just sat there, slightly stoned, completely alone in the dark. I didn't think about anything, didn't want anything, didn't really even *feel* anything. I just absorbed the solace and the solitariness of it all.

And did nothing.

I don't know how long I sat there. Could have been five minutes. Could have been five hours. Time stopped meaning anything.

Eventually, people started to get antsy and move. I didn't care. I just sat there as they slowly began to drift back into the living room.

"What the hell, Kyra?"

"You suck at this."

I ignored them.

"You're supposed to come looking for us."

"Leave her alone. She's totally stoned out."

Still ignored them. Grasped for just one last moment of peace, of alone. Clung to it. Wouldn't let go. Couldn't let go. Can't let go.

6

SO NEEDLESS to say, this time no one says I should be the one to seek. Which is fine by me.

I don't know what's happening to me. The whole time I was in the hospital, all I wanted was to get out and be with my friends. And now suddenly all I can think about is being alone. Maybe it's the pot. Maybe it's just, like, culture shock. I don't know.

Some guy I've never seen before closes his eyes and starts to count. Everyone steals away, sneaking off into the darkness to hide. I creep away to the kitchen. The pantry is a big walk-in, and there's a spot under a shelf where I can tuck myself in if I lie down. Since no one is allowed to turn on lights, if I stay very still you can't see me even if you walk into the pantry.

After a minute or two, I start to drift off, buoyed by the pot and the silence. It's all peaceful until I start to think about Fanboy. I feel really bad for him, like he needs someone to touch him and hold him maybe, someone to —

The pantry door creaks open just a bit.

I lie perfectly still, my heart hammering.

“Kyra?” It's Jecca, whispering.

“Yeah.”

She slips in and closes the door. Then she's next to me, lying next to me, the heat of her radiating to me, her breath a hush between us.

Her hand finds my face. I'm holding my breath for some reason. I let it out against her fingertips as she leans in, following her hand in the dark, and her lips touch mine.

7

THIS HAPPENS sometimes. With Jecca. It doesn't really go any further than kissing, which is no big deal, right?

Jecca makes a little noise down deep in her chest. I've been holding her out. I open my mouth and she sighs her relief between my lips and I realize that I sort of feel sorry for lesbians. I mean real lesbians, the genuine article. The women who truly feel love and passion for other women. Because it's like *everyone* is doing it these days. It's like their very sexuality, the core of their beings, has become a . . . a *fad*, something they throw into soap operas to up the ratings, or something girls do to turn their boyfriends on. It's like it's been made meaningless.

I mean, I don't love Jecca or anything. And she doesn't love me. It's not like we're gay. Because we're not.

I don't think.

This just happens, is all.

She kisses me. I kiss her back. It's no big deal.

Except it does feel good. It does feel nice. When it happens . . . sometimes when it happens, I can forget things. Big things. Little things. All kinds of things. Her lips are really soft; her tongue's soft, too. Sometimes she licks my neck or nibbles my ear, and that's great.

I guess some people would call this "experimentation," but that's not it because experimentation is, like, indicating that you would do

something full-time after trying it out. And I don't think I'm a lesbian or anything. I like boys. I know this because when I fantasize, I think about boys all the time.

But I also think about Jecca. Not other girls. Just Jecca.

This is just . . . God, it's just comforting. And safe. And I *never* feel comfortable or safe, so these times with Jecca, when this happens, it's like a vacation for me, like being sent away again, only this time being sent away somewhere I *want* to go, somewhere I like.

It's looking for a touch, warmth, connection, heat, anything.

"What's wrong?" she whispers, which is weird because she usually doesn't say anything.

"Nothing." And I lean up a little bit to kiss her. I've been thinking the whole time. Stressing. And she could tell. So I shut off my brain for a little while and just let the safety and the comfort take over.

8

LATER. I'm still stoned. *So* stoned. And smoking my way through my first pack of cigarettes in *months*. God, it feels good! I lick my lips and imagine I can taste Jecca's lipstick, which I can't, but I imagine it, which is just as good.

I'm in the kitchen, giggling with Simone as she tries to open a bag of potato chips.

"I think I need scissors," she says, pronouncing the *c* so that it comes out "skissors," which for some reason makes us both convulse with laughter until we're giggling right there on the kitchen floor.

"Skissors," she says again.

"Suh-gar!" I say, spying the sugar bowl on the counter.

"Skissors!"

"Suh-gar!"

"Va-guy-na!"

I snort laughter. "No, it has to start with an *s*." I don't know why, but it's funnier that way.

She licks her lips and tries the bag again. She gets it open without making it explode all over the place.

"She-mata!" she says, holding out a handful of chips.

I stare at her. The chips are wavering right in front of me and my gut is telling me to eat them so fast that she doesn't even know they're gone, but my brain is thinking, *What did she just say?*

“Huh?”

“Chips!” she says, and giggles because *chips* is a funny word, especially when you say it like Simone does when she’s stoned.

“No, what did you say before?”

She shoves some of the chips into her mouth. “Skissors!”

“No, not that.”

“Suh-gar!”

“That was me.”

“She-mata! Like the comic book.”

“It’s *Schemata*,” I tell her automatically, pronouncing it correctly, but at the same time, I’m trying to think ten million things at once. How does Simone know about *Schemata*? How does she know anything at all? Did I tell her? I don’t *think* I did. I don’t think I ever mentioned it to her.

Simone isn’t paying any attention to me — she wanders off with her bag of chips, leaving me in the kitchen by myself. I feel like the world’s spinning around me and like my brain is spinning, too, but in the opposite direction, and it makes me all dizzy and crazy. *Did* I tell her about *Schemata*? What did I tell her? *When* did I tell her?

Holy crap. How could I tell her about something like *that* and not remember it? Am I totally losing my mind?

And goddammit, now I don’t feel stoned anymore. I’m totally straight now, totally sober, totally pissed, and I wish Jecca was here in the kitchen, because I need someone to kiss me, someone to kiss me and not to talk, never to talk.

DEAR NEIL,

So, here I am, back home, writing to you for the first time from somewhere other than the hospital.

In case you’re interested, my first day back home sucked bigtime.

I had a fight with my dad, which is nothing new, but still. It’s never fun. And I went to a party and got high and made out with someone, which confuses me every time it happens. And then someone said something that really just . . . It just didn’t make any sense.

I'm babbling. Wow, babbling with a keyboard! Babbling with a keyboard in a letter to Neil Gaiman!

Then again, it's not like the letters I wrote to you in the hospital made much sense, either, I bet. I bet if I looked at them now, I would be like, *What the hell were you talking about, Kyra?* But I wrote them and they're done and I'm not going to look back.

That's my new thing, Neil: Not looking back. I'm going to try to look ahead. Like, I'm going to forgive Fanboy and I'm going to try to be his friend again. That's a good thing. That's what adults call "a step in the right direction."

It's not always easy for me. And I think that's what pisses me off more than anything else. People say, "Behave!" and "Don't do bad things!" and "Be nice!" as if those things are easy, as if they're simple. But they're not, Neil. They just aren't. The world is a really, really shitty place, so doing those good things, those nice things, isn't always easy.

And sometimes you have to be mean. Or angry. Sometimes that's the only way to get something done or explain something to someone. And sometimes it just feels good and right and — more important — *honest*. Isn't honesty important? Doesn't honesty matter?

OK, it's really late and I'm really tired and I think I'm still a little bit stoned, so I'm going to bed now.

9

THERE'S A LOUD beeping sound filling the universe, waking me up. I lie in bed for a minute, wondering what the hell the sound is before I realize it's my alarm clock.

God, how weird. I haven't woken up to an alarm in *forever*. I'm in my own room. Not the hospital. My own room. Strange.

Last night is already fading . . . I have the real world to deal with now.

God, it's November. I can't believe it. I missed the end of my sophomore year and the beginning of my junior year. All because my dad freaked out.

As if he can hear me thinking, Roger taps on my door. I want to yell out, *Eff off, Roger!* (I want to do that a *lot!* All the time!) Instead, I don't say anything. His taps become more insistent and he finally gives up being nice and says, "Kyra, I'm counting to three and then I'm opening the door!"

By the time he comes in, I'm at my closet, picking out my clothes for my big ole triumphant return to South Brook High. Ha.

"Didn't you hear me?" he asks.

"I'm thinking," I tell him.

"What's there to think about? It's all black."

This is true. My closet is like a refugee shelter for black clothes.

"What do you want?" I ask him.

“Your teachers all know what you’ve been going through,” he says. “They’ll be sympathetic. Like last time.”

I just keep staring at the closet. I want to say, *Eff off, Roger!* Again. Because “last time” — back in middle school, when I tried to kill myself — sucked bigtime. Everyone treated me like a freak when I came back to school. Besides, how can my teachers know what I’ve been “going through” when *I’m* not even a hundred percent sure?

Here’s the thing about parents — about adults in general, really: They think they’re In Charge. They think they Rule the World.

But in reality they’re just as clueless and effed up as everyone else. The world is just a gigantic effing wave, a *tsunami*, and it washes away all of us — kid, parent, student, teacher — alike.

That’s the world. That’s a *fact*, OK?

“Did you hear me?” he asks.

I sigh out a “yes” like it’s the longest word in the world. “Can I get a shower now?”

The bathroom is another weird place for me. My own bathroom. My own stuff. No one messing with it. No one pounding on the door to come in.

I left the cap open on my hair gel while I was gone, so it all dried out. No spikes for me today.

No hair dye, either. Did I run out before I went away, or did Roger pitch it while I was gone? Roger probably pitched it. He never liked my black hair.

I don’t have many options, so I just take the top and back and tie it into a stub, leaving the long bangs to hang down. Not bad. My bangs are not normal bangs. They’re awesome.

Roger sees me on my way out the door and says, “Can’t you get that out of your eyes?” He means my Bangs of Doom.

And I think, *Uh, no, dumb-ass. Because then people could see me.*

And he says, “People can’t even see you.”

Duh.

And he says, “You know, Kyra, the world isn’t so bad when you can actually see it.”

Gag.

10

I HATE THE BUS. Anyone who's sane should hate the bus. Ugh.

I have no friends on the bus, so I have time to think. I start thinking about Fanboy and that makes me remember Simone last night, talking about *Schemata*. Was that real? Did I just imagine it? I don't do pot a lot — maybe a couple of times a year — so maybe the whole thing was in my imagination. Maybe that's it.

Maybe.

I look at the schedule they sent me. Gross — I have Miss Powell for English. I *hate* Miss Powell. I had her for English freshman year, with Simone. Miss Powell sucks for many, many reasons. I can't believe this.

The bus stops at South Brook High, and for the first time my stomach does a weird little lurchy, hiccupy type thing.

Chill, Kyra. This is no big deal. It's just school.

I go inside and head for the office. That's where I'm supposed to "report" today. To Assistant Principal Roland J. Sperling, known far and wide (especially wide) as the Spermling. One of my favorite adults to eff with.

And once I'm there, I crack my first smile of the day. Because the Spermling isn't alone in his office — he's got Miss Channing, the secretary, there with him. Probably because the last time I was in his office alone with him, I walked out crying and with my shirt untucked so that everyone would think he molested me. Sucker.

The Spermling harrumphs and is nearly strangled by his own fat and tells me where my new homeroom is and how he's aware of my "issues" and how if I have any trouble I should feel free to come see him . . .

"As long as we have a chaperone, right?"

He clears his throat, and his meaty lips clash together in a way that makes me realize that — somewhere under that fat face — he's gnashing his teeth.

"You created this situation, Miss Sellers. We're merely living it."

"Yeah, I control things. Don't you forget it."

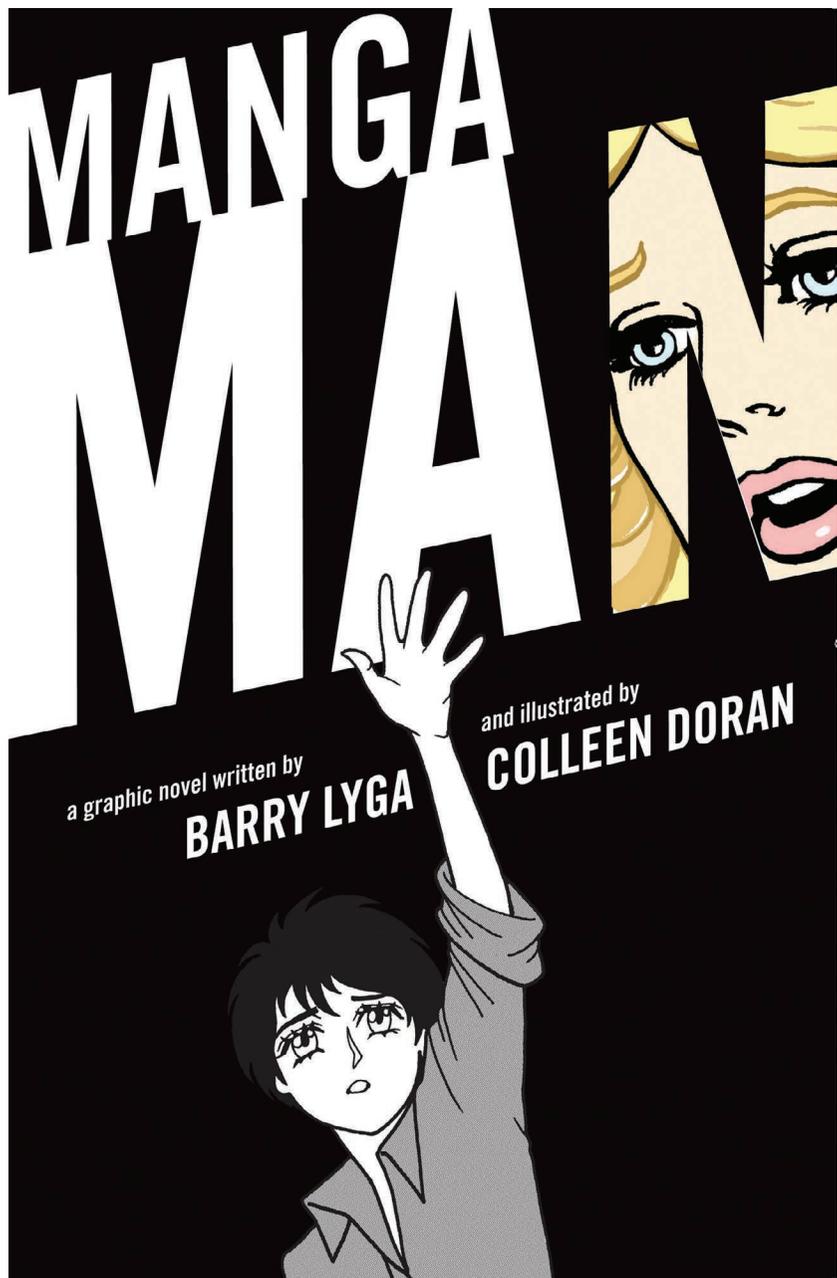
"Miss Sellers! We are *trying* to help you. One more comment like that and you'll have the dubious distinction of ending up with detention before you've even gotten to homeroom!"

I think about it for a second. That would be kinda cool, actually. It would really rub the Spermling's nose in it and it would piss off Roger, too.

But no. I have to stay focused. I need to find Fanboy.

Of course, I'm not about to tell the Spermling any of that, so I just sit there with a smirk on my face and glare at him from behind my Bangs of Doom and tap my foot because I'm dying for a cigarette.

He lets me go. I resist the urge to look over my shoulder and say, "Stop looking at my ass!" as I leave.



MANGA

MAN



a graphic novel written by
BARRY LYGA

and illustrated by
COLLEEN DORAN



MANGAMAN: PROLOGUE AND CHAPTER ONE

SCI-FI ADVENTURE meets love story—and East meets West—in *Mangaman*, an original graphic novel for teenagers.

Ryoko, a manga character from a manga world, falls through the Rip into the “real” world—the Western world—and tries to survive as the ultimate outsider at a typical American high school.

When Ryoko falls in love with Marissa Montaigne, the most beautiful girl at school, his eyes turn to hearts and comic tension tightens as his way of being drawn and expressing himself clashes with this different world he is stuck in. “Panel-holed” for being different, Ryoko has to figure out how to get back to his manga world, back through the Rip . . . all while he has hearts for eyes for a girl from the wrong kind of comic book.

Barry Lyga writes a metafictional masterpiece as manga meets traditional Western comic book style, while Colleen Doran combines manga techniques and conventions with Western comic book storytelling to create a unique, seamless—though not Ripless—graphic novel hybrid that is by turns hilarious and heartbreaking.

About the Artist: Multiple Eisner Award winner COLLEEN DORAN, in a career spanning more than twenty years, has worked on some of the greatest characters in comics, including Superman, Spider-Man, and Wonder Woman, and has partnered with such writers as Alan Moore and Neil Gaiman. Her books include *A Distant Soil* and *Girl to Grrrl Manga*. She has traveled and lectured extensively in Singapore, Japan, Germany, and England, and served as artist in residence at the Smithsonian Institute in 2006.

She won a grant from the Delphi Institute to study American pop-

ular culture, and was chosen to represent the United States at the Japan/America manga/comics seminar in Tokyo.

Visit her website at www.colleendoran.com.

PROLOGUE--
NEAR CASTLETON.
MONTHS AGO...





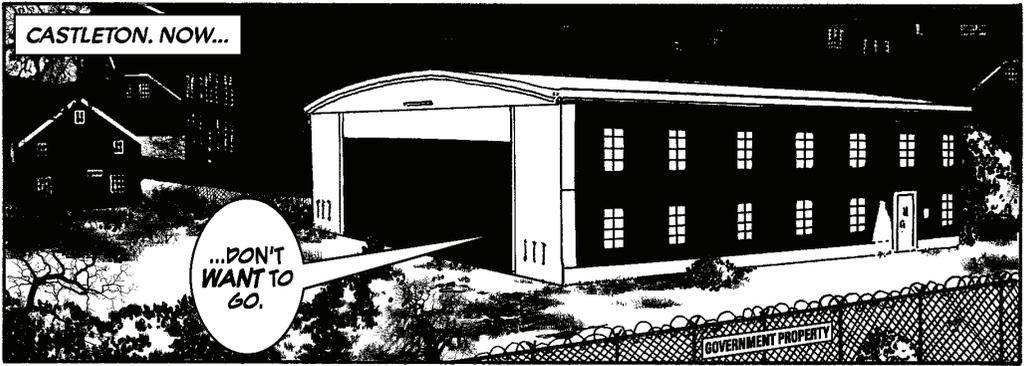
CHAPTER 1



LEXA: *He's real! He's real!*

MARISSA: *What are you TALKING about?*

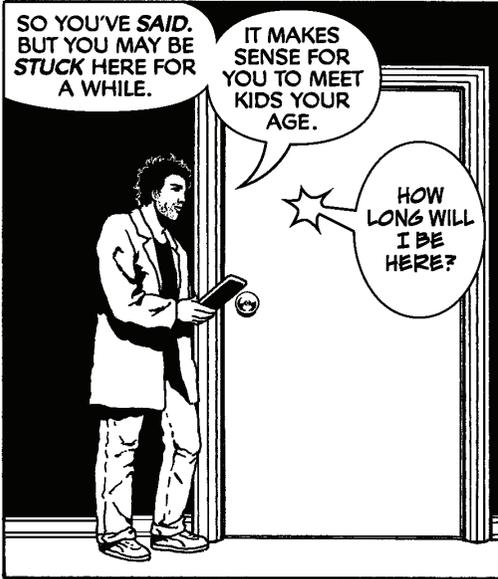
CASTLETON. NOW...



SO YOU'VE SAID, BUT YOU MAY BE STUCK HERE FOR A WHILE.

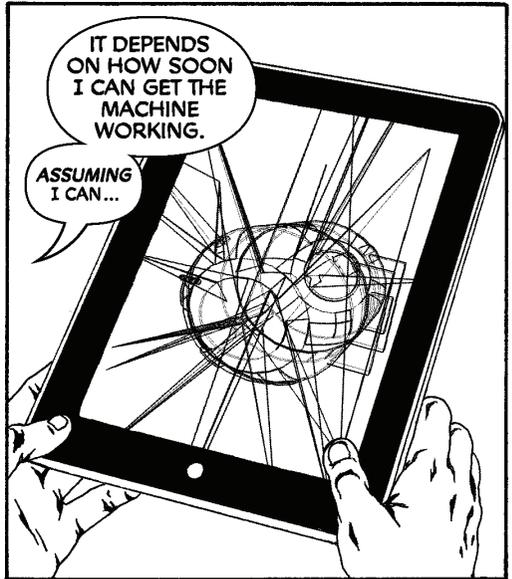
IT MAKES SENSE FOR YOU TO MEET KIDS YOUR AGE.

HOW LONG WILL I BE HERE?



IT DEPENDS ON HOW SOON I CAN GET THE MACHINE WORKING.

ASSUMING I CAN...



I HEARD THAT!

SORRY!

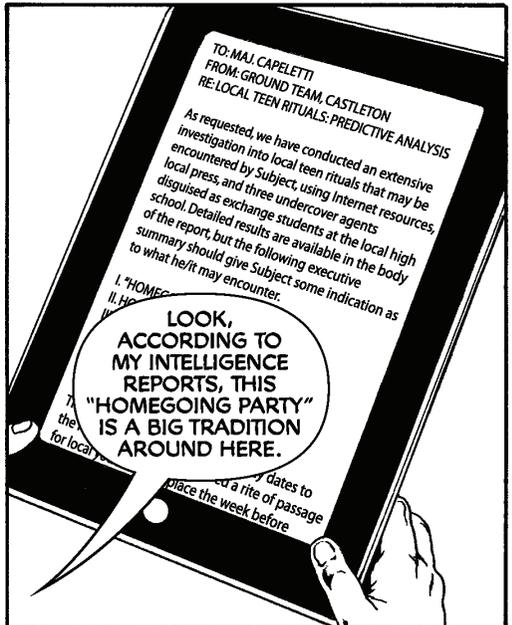


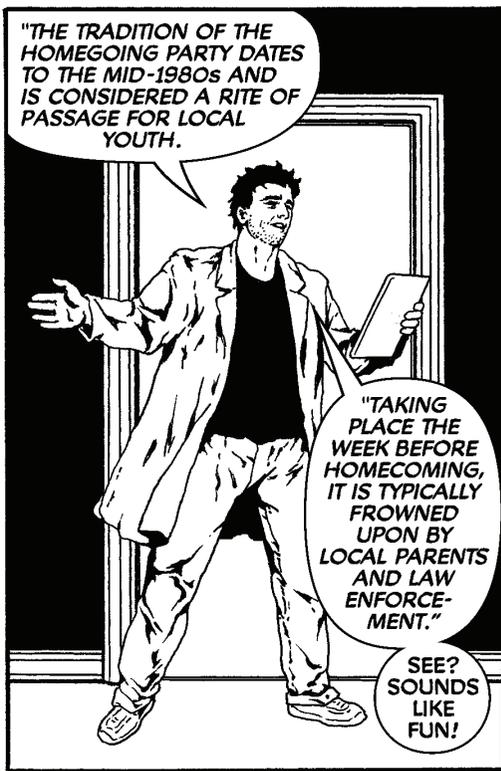
TO: MAJ. CAPELETTI
FROM: GROUND TEAM, CASTLETON
RE: LOCAL TEEN RITUALS: PREDICTIVE ANALYSIS

As requested, we have conducted an extensive investigation into local teen rituals that may be encountered by Subject, using Internet resources, local press, and three undercover agents disguised as exchange students at the local high school. Detailed results are available in the body of the report, but the following executive summary should give Subject some indication as to what he/it may encounter.

LOOK, ACCORDING TO MY INTELLIGENCE REPORTS, THIS "HOMEGOING PARTY" IS A BIG TRADITION AROUND HERE.

... dates to ... a rite of passage ... the week before









IT SAYS, "GOVERNMENT REPRESENTATIVES BLAH BLAH BLAH..." HERE!

"AN EXTRA-SCIENTIFIC EVENT." WHAT DOES THAT MEAN?

IT MEANS NO ONE KNOWS WHAT THE HELL IT WAS.



"... PENTAGON OFFICIALS AGREED TO LET THE BOY ATTEND SCHOOL BEGINNING IN THE FALL."

WHOA. HE MIGHT BE GOING TO SCHOOL WITH US SOON.



HE'S KINDA CUTE, IN THE PICTURES.

HE'S NOT EVEN HUMAN, IS HE?

HE LOOKS HUMAN.

SORT OF



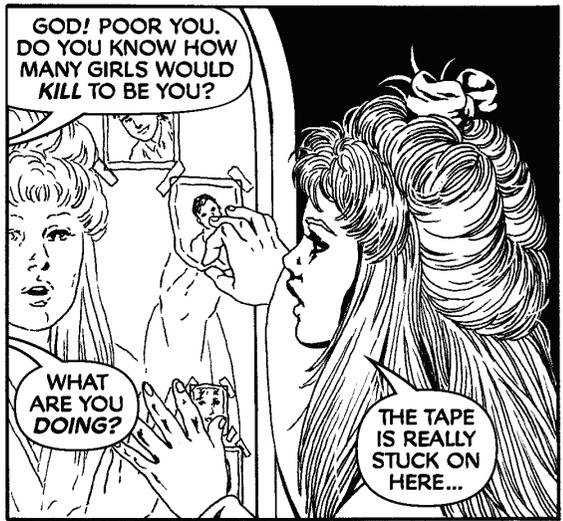
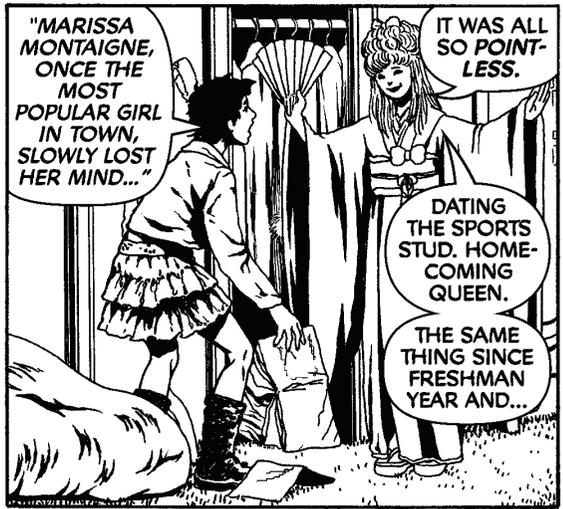
ARE YOU EVER GOING TO BE...

OK, READY!

The Covers Archive: **Person of the Year**



YOU'RE KIDDING...





...BE IN A GOOD MOOD BEFORE YOU KNOW IT!

HAVE FUN!



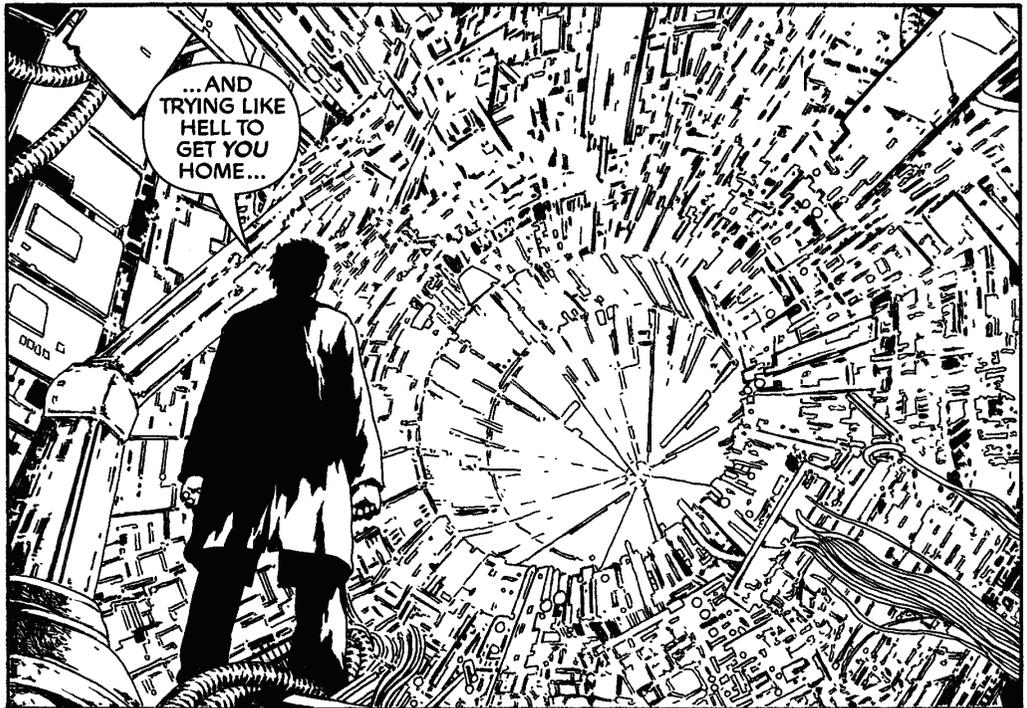
YEAH, GO HAVE FUN, MAN.



GO OFF AND PARTY. I'LL JUST BE HERE AT HOME...



...TALKING TO MYSELF...



...AND TRYING LIKE HELL TO GET YOU HOME...

SHORT STORIES

OF THE THREE short stories that follow, one was published in an anthology, one was featured on barrylyga.com, and the last has an interesting history, Barry says:

THE MATING HABITS OF WHALES

“The Mating Habits of Whales’ was written because I was asked to contribute to an anthology about teen body issues titled Does This Book Make Me Look Fat? Since I was known as a comic book fan, they asked me to tell my story in comic book form. I can’t draw to save my life, so I got in touch with my buddy Jeff Dillon and between the two of us, we put together a nine-page tale about something I don’t think people talk about a lot — a BOY and his body issues.”

HER DECADE

“This story is a part of the history behind the Brookdale books, though I wrote it many years before I ever wrote the novels. Readers of Boy Toy and Hero-Type in particular will get a kick out of this one, I think . . . and there’s a very tiny, very subtle connection to Fanboy as well! Visitors to barrylyga.com got to read this online a few years ago, and now I’m happy that it’ll be available on e-readers as well.”

THE SIXTH CREDIT

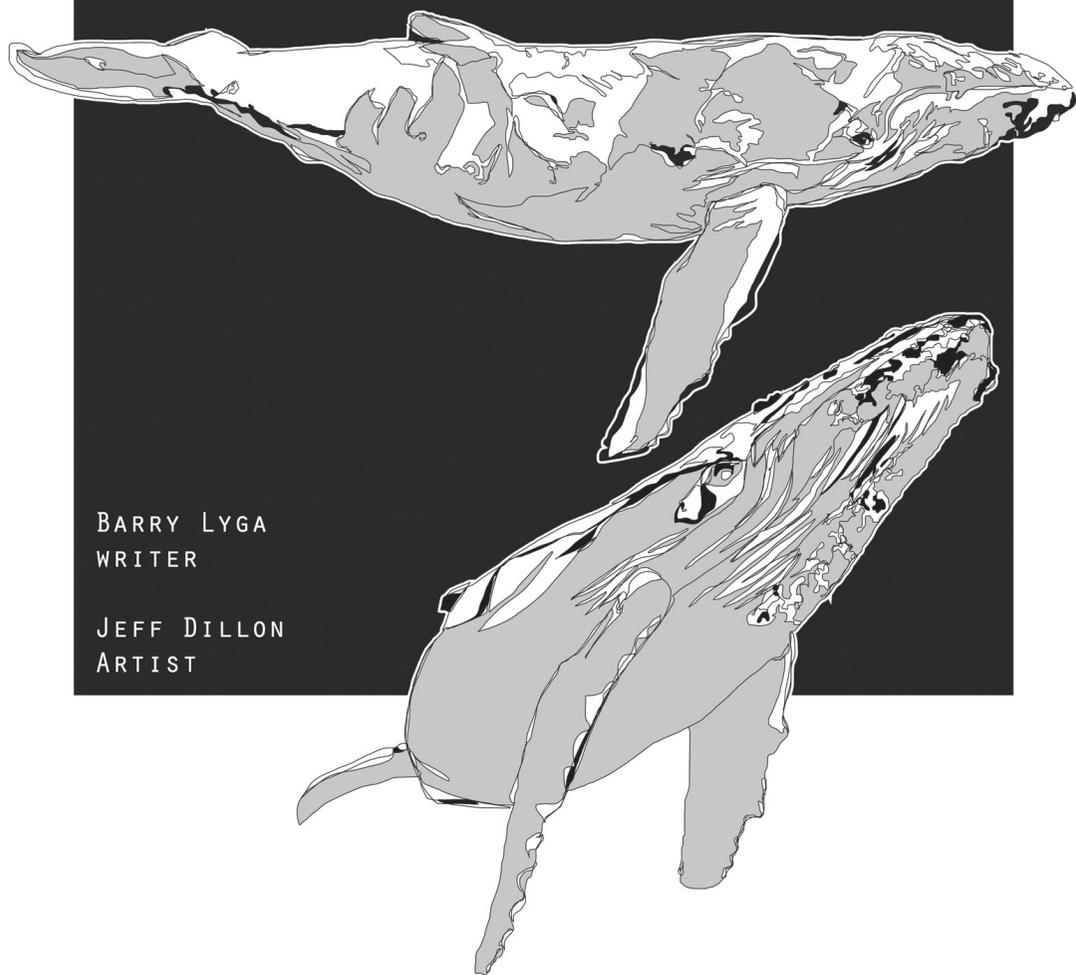
“This story has a strange sort of connection to my books, though not intentionally. Years before I ever imagined writing Boy Toy, I wrote this

story, which has some very obvious similarities . . . to the point that I tend to think of it nowadays as ‘Girl Toy’! I had long forgotten about ‘The Sixth Credit,’ and when I rediscovered it after writing Boy Toy, I realized that I had been mulling over the themes and issues of that book far longer than I’d imagined. I hope fans of Boy Toy will find it interesting reading. (Oh, and BTW—this story is quite old, as you’ll see by some of the technology references!)”

THE MATING HABITS OF WHALES

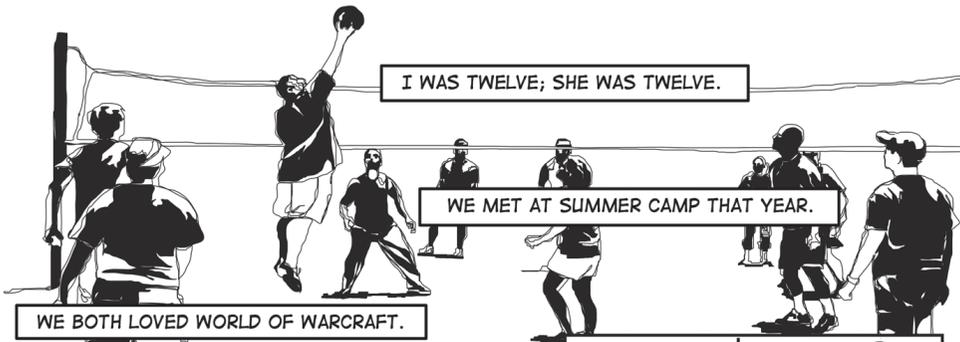
This is probably a true story...

THE MATING HABITS OF WHALES



BARRY LYGA
WRITER

JEFF DILLON
ARTIST



I WAS TWELVE; SHE WAS TWELVE.

WE MET AT SUMMER CAMP THAT YEAR.

WE BOTH LOVED WORLD OF WARCRAFT.



UM, HI. I'M DEVON.

MARJORIE.

SHE WAS THE SINGLE COOLEST PERSON I EVER MET.



GIRL OR BOY.

...LEVELED UP AND USED MY SPELL...

REALLY? AWESOME...

WE SPENT A LOT OF TIME TOGETHER.



WHICH PEOPLE NOTICED...

WHAT ARE YOU DOING WITH HER?

YEAH, MAN — **LARGE MARGE.**

SHE'S TOO **FAT** FOR YOU, YO.

EVERY NIGHT, THE SAME JOKES. THE KISSING NOISES.

BUT WE WERE JUST FRIENDS.

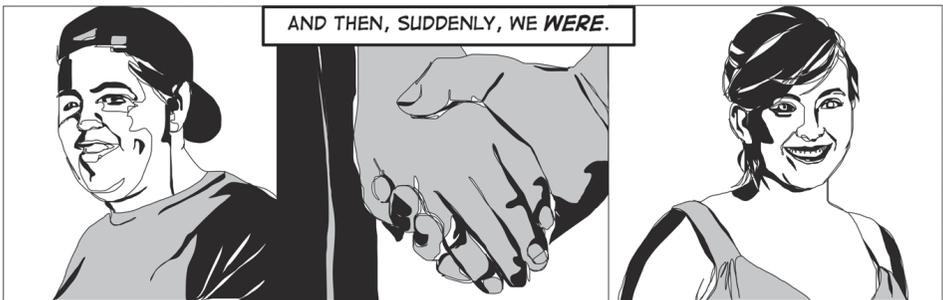


NAH, HE DOESN'T WANNA GO.

HANGIN' WITH **LARGE MARGE** AGAIN.

JUST **FRIENDS**, THAT'S ALL.

WE COULDN'T BE ANYTHING MORE, RIGHT?



AND THEN, SUDDENLY, WE **WERE.**



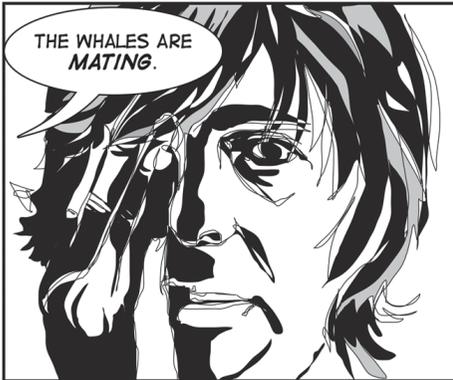
...FOR A LITTLE WHILE.



—OH, MAN—

—SEE THAT?

—THE WHALES ARE *MATING*—



THE WHALES ARE *MATING*.



IT'S OK. DID YOU KNOW WHALES MATE FOR LIFE?



BUT IT *WASN'T* OK...

I WASN'T FAT. I WAS JUST A BIG GUY. THAT'S WHAT EVERYONE SAID: MOM. DAD. ALL MY FRIENDS.

BUT WHEN I WAS WITH *HER*, EVERYONE THOUGHT I WAS FAT.

EVERYONE THOUGHT I WAS A *WHALE*.



SO I DID THE ONLY THING I *COULD* DO...

—GONNA SEE YOUR *GIRLFRIEND* TONIGHT?

NO.

AND SHE'S *NOT* MY GIRLFRIEND.

SHE'S JUST LARGE MARGE.



I DIDN'T SAY ANYTHING TO HER. THERE WAS NOTHING TO SAY, RIGHT?

I JUST STOPPED HANGING OUT WITH HER.



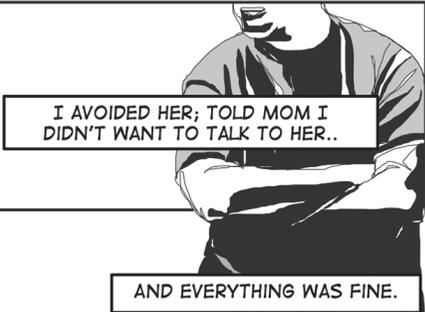
WHAT *ELSE* WAS I SUPPOSED TO DO?

I DIDN'T WANT TO HURT HER FEELINGS WITH THE *TRUTH*.



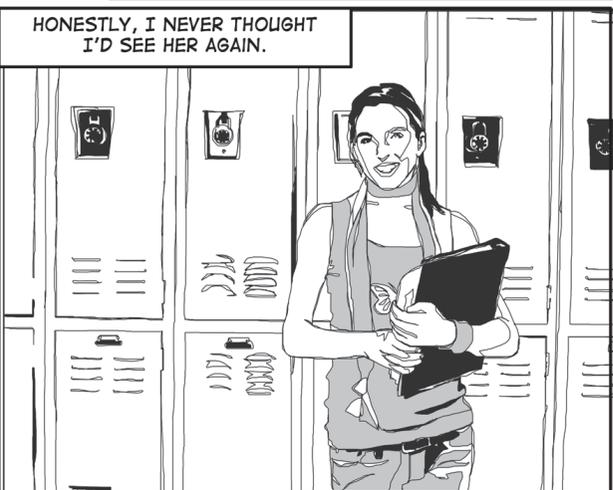
UH, NO, HE'S... NOT HERE...

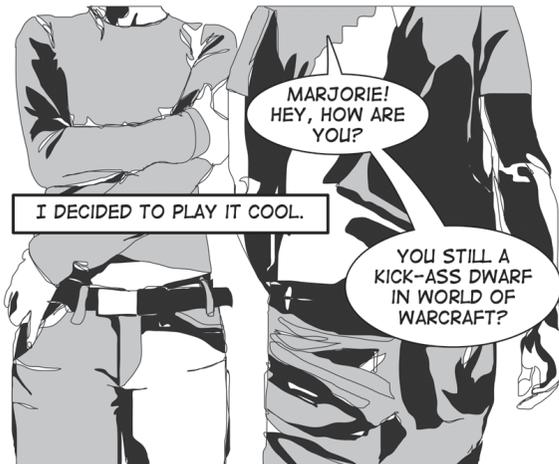
SHE DIDN'T GIVE UP, THOUGH. EVEN WHEN I GOT HOME.



I AVOIDED HER; TOLD MOM I DIDN'T WANT TO TALK TO HER..

AND EVERYTHING WAS FINE.





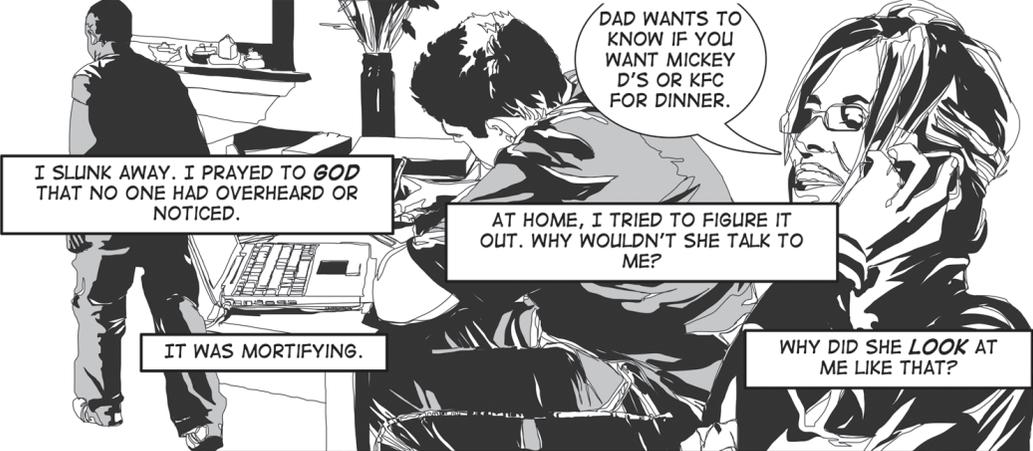
MARJORIE!
HEY, HOW ARE YOU?

I DECIDED TO PLAY IT COOL.

YOU STILL A KICK-ASS DWARF IN WORLD OF WARCRAFT?



UM...



I SLUNK AWAY. I PRAYED TO GOD THAT NO ONE HAD OVERHEARD OR NOTICED.

DAD WANTS TO KNOW IF YOU WANT MICKEY D'S OR KFC FOR DINNER.

AT HOME, I TRIED TO FIGURE IT OUT. WHY WOULDN'T SHE TALK TO ME?

IT WAS MORTIFYING.

WHY DID SHE LOOK AT ME LIKE THAT?



I THOUGHT ABOUT IT ALL DAY.

I THOUGHT ABOUT IT DURING DINNER.

ANYTHING LEFT?

I THOUGHT AND THOUGHT AND THOUGHT.

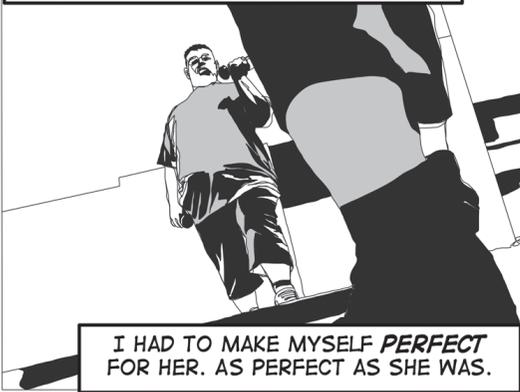


AND AT SOME POINT THAT NIGHT, I FIGURED IT OUT.

I WASN'T JUST "BIG." EVERYONE CALLED ME "BIG GUY," LIKE IT WAS A GOOD THING...

BUT I WAS FAT.

LOOKING IN THE MIRROR, I REALIZED:
SHE DESERVED A BOYFRIEND WHO
WAS SKINNY, LIKE HER.



I HAD TO MAKE MYSELF *PERFECT*
FOR HER. AS PERFECT AS SHE WAS.

I HAD A
MISSION,
THOUGH.

IT WASN'T EASY. I
WORKED MY ASS OFF.



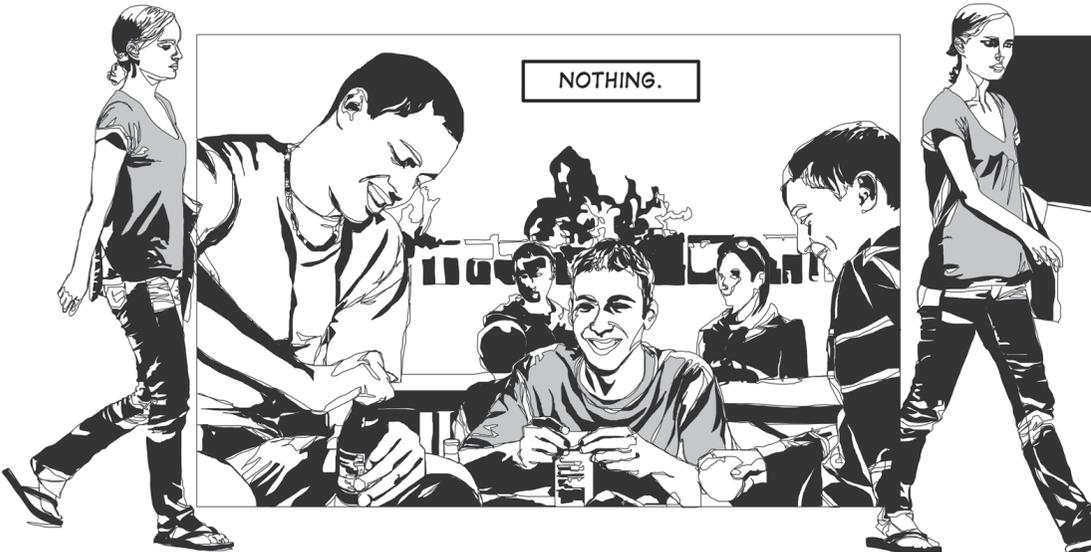
BUT NO MATTER WHAT I DID...



...NO MATTER HOW
HARD I WORKED...



NOTHING.





I HAD TO BE SKINNY.



I HAD TO BE PERFECT.



...NOTHING SEEMED TO CHANGE.



NOTHING.



WOW,
LEFTOVERS...?

I GUESS I'LL, UH,
TAKE IT TO WORK
FOR LUNCH...

OK, DAD...



AND THEN ONE DAY,
MONTHS LATER...

I FINALLY FIGURED I'D
DONE ENOUGH, RIGHT? I
WORKED SO *HARD*.

SHE HAD TO GIVE ME
POINTS FOR *TRYING*.

I SAW HER BY HER LOCKER.

AND I WAS READY. READY
TO *TALK* TO HER.



HEY, UH,
MARJORIE?



SO, UH, I WAS
WONDERING IF YOU
MAYBE WANTED TO—



GOD, DEVON!
BUY A FRIGGIN' CLUE,
ALREADY!

BUT—!

I DON'T WANT
TO TALK TO
YOU.



LOOK WHAT I
DID FOR YOU!
CAN'T WE—?

HOW SHALLOW
DO YOU THINK
I AM?

I DIDN'T DISS
YOU BECAUSE
YOU WERE
FAT.



I DISSED YOU BECAUSE YOU TREATED ME LIKE DIRT WHEN WE WERE KIDS.

THAT DOESN'T CHANGE.

AND IN THAT MOMENT, FOR SOME REASON...

...I COULD ONLY THINK OF ONE THING...



BUT...WHAT ABOUT THE WHALES?



I DON'T KNOW WHAT THE HELL YOU'RE TALKING ABOUT.

STAY AWAY FROM ME.

AT HOME, I GO ONLINE AND LOOK UP WHALES. AND GUESS WHAT?



THEY *DON'T* MATE FOR LIFE.

SHE JUST MADE IT UP BACK THEN.

TO MAKE ME FEEL BETTER ABOUT US. TO KEEP ME AS A FRIEND.



BUT I WASN'T WORTH KEEPING.

I'M *STILL* NOT WORTH IT.

BUT AT LEAST NOW I SEE WHAT I REALLY NEED TO CHANGE...

HER DECADE

MAY 20, 1991

Rain coming down. Fat drops exploding on my windshield, making brief modern art, killed by the staccato wiper blades.

Rain. Insistent tattoo on the roof of the car, on the windshield. Can't even see the damn rain, for all the darkness out there. Car's engine idles, big cat purring in the night.

Eighteen. I'm eighteen today.

Wiper blades. Wish-click. Wish-click.

And then the sky's alive with lightning. Fast-flash burst of electricity and the rain's a million silver slivers on the night and I see the tree in front of me no more than ten or so yards wow I would've hit that thing when I swerved if I hadn't hit the brakes in

Darkness again. Wish-click. Slam of thunder.

Big burst of lightning now, lighting up the entire sky like an atom bomb. My eyes scream at the white-hot blaze of sky, the explosion of brightness. In that quick wash of light, I see the other car.

Which *didn't* miss the tree.

Wish-click. Wish-click. Wish.

MAY 20, 1992

My first year at college is over and I've returned home the conquering hero, with a solid 4.0 in my prospective major, economics. Final exams were a breeze. In Econ 110b, I walked out of the room after only half the time had passed, my blue book filled with analysis and equations. The teaching assistant who took the book smiled at me sympathetically, thinking I was quitting early. When I got the test back a week later, I had a 93 percent. I wish I could have seen the look on her face when she graded it.

Today is my nineteenth birthday, and when I wake up in my own bed, in the bedroom that's been mine since I was a baby, it seems no different from any of the others.

Dad knocks on the door. I can tell it's him because he always knocks the same way — two short knocks that leave you expecting a third, which never comes.

"You up in there, sleepyhead?"

"Yeah."

Dad opens the door and comes in. He's a big guy, my dad — big in stature, big in importance. Before I was even born, he made his first fortune by renovating the downtown waterfront, then promptly took that money and moved all the way out to Brookdale. He wouldn't even let me into the city until I was sixteen. "Don't believe what the mayor and the commercials tell you, son," he would say. "It's dangerous down there. I spent too much time there to think otherwise."

"You ready for the big day, champ?"

"Sure am." Birthdays are a big deal to my dad. Last year, it was the keys to the car that I later ran off the road. This year, who knows? I've been eyeing one of the new PowerMacs. They've got a built-in FPU and they can scream at close to 100 MHz. I've been using an LCII since high school, and I just can't stand it anymore.

Dad sits on the edge of my bed and pats my knee through the covers. "You just do this, then come right home and we'll head out, OK? No reason to let this ruin the day."

I'd almost forgotten. I was thinking of my birthday when I woke up. I can't believe I forgot.

Last year, I had a little accident on my birthday. A woman named Susan Marchetti died, and because I was technically drunk at the time and because the jury found that I caused the accident, I was convicted of driving while intoxicated and involuntary manslaughter.

But even though I was picturing prison and rapes in the shower, I lucked out. The judge sentenced me to — get this — visit Marchetti's grave on the anniversary of her death for ten years.

This is how it's supposed to work: A cop will come to the house at noon to pick me up. He'll take me to the cemetery, where he'll make sure that I spend "a reasonable amount of time" at the grave. Doing what, I have no idea. Mom says I should wear my suit.

"OK," I tell him. "In and out."

Mom gives me a bouquet of flowers to leave at the grave. It doesn't change anything, but it makes her happy to give them to me, so I take them.

At 12:00 on the dot, a county police car pulls up outside the house. Dad, standing in the foyer, frowns as he looks out the window. "Ingrates," he mumbles.

He looks over at me, then back out the window as the car door opens and a pair of blue-covered legs swings out the driver's side.

"Ingrates. All the contributions I make to the goddamn DA's campaign and the judges' —"

What I *don't* want is a scene when the cop knocks on the door. "Chill, Dad. This is fine. What's the big deal? I'm not in jail, right?"

He flashes the big, proud smile he's given me ever since I can remember. "When you get back, we'll all go to Fitzwilly's for dinner, OK?"

"Deal."

And then there's a knock at the door, and I open it and look up into mirrored sunglasses. "Hi."

"Are you ready?" Just like on TV — no emotion.

"Like I have a choice?" I mean it as a little joke, but the cop's mouth,

set in a hard line, doesn't move. That's cool. Neutral. Objective. I understand.

"Let's go," I tell him, and then we're off. He lets me ride in the front seat, which is good, because sitting in the back would just be too much.

We drive through Brookdale, past the First National Bank, which still has the old sign outside reading "Brookdale Bank" from before Dad arranged the buyout. Past the old school that's been condemned. We turn up Marwood Road and then onto Church Drive, where you can find the only Catholic church in town. The cemetery's around back; my friends and I used to cut through it back in high school when we were out late at night and trying to get home before curfew.

The cop (Officer Heller, according to the little nameplate pinned to his left breast) pulls the car up to the entrance. There are a few other cars there, and as soon as I get out, I see why.

"Whoa. Wait a minute."

Heller, getting out on his side, looks over at me. "Something wrong?"

Goddamn *right* something's wrong! Looking into the cemetery, I see the Marchettis clustered around one of the graves. I recognize the parents and the older brother from the trial, and it looks like there's three or four others as well, maybe friends or extended family. The bouquet of flowers Mom gave me starts to shake, only it's not the flowers, not really — it's my hand.

"Look!" I point it out for him. "*They're* all here! I can't just go over there —"

"The judge says —"

"Can't we come back later? Tonight, maybe?"

Heller adjusts his gun belt and steps around the car. "My shift ends in two hours. We have to do this now." He reaches out, as if to take my arm. "Do I have to *make* you do this?"

"No."

So I follow him under the archway that leads into the cemetery and up the little path wending up the hill that leads to Susan Marchetti's grave. About ten yards out, he stops and parks himself under a tree,

gesturing for me to keep going. I just want to run like hell, but Heller's here and I wouldn't get very far.

Before I can get any closer or even say something, Marchetti's older brother turns around and sees me. He lets out a breath and shakes his head just the slightest bit. I want to say something — anything — but he's already turning back, nudging his father, then bending over to whisper something in his ear.

Almost as one, the Marchettis turn to look at me. The mother — already crying — wails louder and leans against her husband. Everyone steps back and aside a little as I approach, almost like I'm . . . dangerous.

I watch the ground as I walk over, then stand in front of the grave, stoop, and add my bouquet of flowers to the ones already piled there. There weren't all that many, actually, and my bouquet is bigger and more expensive than the others. I straighten up and stand there, all too aware of the Marchettis standing behind me, staring knives into my back.

The headstone is simple and plain. Nothing fancy. Just plain old granite, carved with the words SUSAN ANN MARCHETTI and the dates 1972–1991. Below it all is the phrase TAKEN TOO SOON.

The silence is fucking killing me. The backs of my calves start to tremble. I want to run or jump over the damn headstone. I mean, Christ, they're all standing. Right. Behind me! Right behind me! Jesus, one of them could have a gun or a knife — they could just jump me and kill me before anyone could move! God! Right behind me! I can't believe it. They're all staring at me. I can actually *feel* their eyes on me. And I can hear the mother sobbing and some whispering from I don't know who, but I can't make out the words and *goddamn* it! How long has it been? How long am I supposed to stand here? "A reasonable amount of time" the judge said. How long is *that*? An hour? Oh, God, if I have to stand here for an hour, I'm gonna die. I'm just gonna have a heart attack and drop dead right here. Christ, how long has it been? My hands are clasped in front of me. Is there any way I can look at my watch without letting them know? I don't want them

to see me looking at my watch. I just want to see how long it's been. I mean, I figure fifteen minutes ought to be "a reasonable amount of time," right?

"I can't believe you came."

Marchetti's father. I think. It sounds like his voice from the trial. He's a plumber or an electrician or something like that. Now what? Do I turn around? Do I have to talk to him?

"Figured you'd've appealed or gotten out of it or paid someone to come here for you."

Shit. "I live up to my responsibilities," I say.

And then Heller shouts, "Mr. Marchetti!" which makes me turn around just in time to see Marchetti coming at me, his face red and blustery, tears streaming down his face, his hands (big hands, God — a construction worker maybe?) reaching out for my throat. He grabs me with those big hands, pushing me back and choking me at the same time, and all I can think is that he's gonna make us fall against the tombstone and probably knock it over and they'll blame me for that, too.

"Fucker! Your fucking responsibilities! Fucking respons —"

Heller's there then, saying "Mr. Marchetti, you gotta calm down, get off him, you gotta stop this" and grabbing Marchetti under the arms to pull him off me.

Now I'm down on one knee and my suit pants are dirty and filthy and my collar's askew. I rub my throat as Heller wrestles Marchetti back toward his family. The mother and one of the family friends gets into the act, trying to calm Marchetti. Heller releases him and steps away, but keeps a wary eye on the man, who's still blustering and breathing hard like some huge bull.

"Mr. Marchetti, don't make me run you in," says Heller while I'm standing, brushing off, straightening my tie. "Don't do this to yourself." The whole time, he stands protectively between the Marchettis and me.

Once Mr. Marchetti seems a little more manageable (he's a big guy, but he looks small leaning against his son and his wife, crying), Heller

takes me by the elbow and starts to walk me down the pathway back to the car. I want to say something, to thank him, but the words — *all* words — stick in my throat the whole way home. I just sit there in the car, shaking, ready to puke. My adrenaline's racing, and when I walk through the door, my mother's eyes widen, and my father, who hasn't yet looked up from the paper to see me, says, "That didn't take long. Ready for some dinner?"

And I just say no and slam the door once I'm in my room.

MAY 20, 1993

After what happened last year, I almost didn't bring flowers this time. But Mom told me that it was a nice thing to do, and I figured that I could at least take the high road. Besides, this time Heller will keep an eye on Marchetti's father, I'm sure.

Heller picks me up at the same time as last year, and soon we're heading up the road. All I can think about is the nightmare I had last night. The nightmare where Marchetti's father brought a gun this time. Hid it under his coat and shot me in the back before Heller could move or even speak.

Onto Marwood Road again, up onto Church Drive, pulling over at the cemetery gate. Same cars as last year. I'm a year older and nothing's changed. Nothing.

I got the PowerMac I wanted last year. It's great, too. But when my dad asked me what I wanted for my birthday this year, all I could think about was this moment. Pulling up to the gate, seeing those goddamn cars, and knowing that *they're* waiting for me.

My stomach starts churning and I get that diarrhea feeling in my guts. I want to run for the nearest toilet.

But Heller's out of the car now, so I have to follow suit. We trudge up the hill again and Heller stations himself under the same tree. I have to admit I'd feel better with him closer, but I guess he knows what he's doing.

I hit the peak of the hill and I see them, clustered around the head-

stone. How often do they come here? Why the hell do they have to come here *today*? I hate how they seem to sense my presence, how they turn almost as one.

And then they step away from the grave. Like they don't want to be near me, even if it means moving away from their daughter.

I keep my eyes to the ground as I approach. I just can't handle looking at them, especially after what happened last year. My parents and I never even went out to dinner last year. I couldn't eat for two days.

I put the flowers on the grave, along with theirs. Like last year, Mom went all out.

So I stand again and wait again. Just like last year, I can feel the knives going into my back. I see Marchetti's father in my dream again, pulling out a revolver, cocking back the hammer, pulling the trigger and —

“You piece of shit.”

It's almost as bad as being shot. My shoulders jerk and I want to piss in my pants.

“You goddamn piece of shit,” he says.

“Lou . . .” A female voice, pleading. Momma Marchetti. “Lou, don't do this at Susan's grave.”

I'm not going to turn around. No matter what. Instead, I close my eyes and just stand my ground. I'm just going to ignore him. Take the high road. Be a bigger man.

“You killed my daughter and you bring her flowers? What kind of an animal are you? Who the hell do you think you are? You think you can *buy* your way out of this? You think your money means jack shit here?”

“Talk to me, you punk! I want to hear what you have to say for yourself. Not the line of bullshit you handed the judge. Tell me you didn't care what happened to my daughter. You didn't care about nothing but getting drunk and cruising around in the car Daddy bought you. They shoulda locked you up forever. You're worse than a psycho. You don't even have a sickness; you just don't care. You don't care about anything.”

That's not true. I care about things. I care about people. It was an accident. It was a damn accident. I want to turn around. I want to tell him.

"I woulda thrown the switch myself. I woulda put the needle in your arm, whatever. You can't buy your way out of this. You can't buy my daughter back!"

He's rambling. It sounds like he's crying. His son and his wife are trying to calm him down.

"You can't bring her back! You shoulda died instead! I wish you'd broke your neck! I wish you'd gotten paralyzed and had to lie in a bed for the rest of your life! Let your fucking father have to wipe your ass for the rest of your life, but he'd probably just hire someone to do it —"

That's it. I spin around. "Shut up about my parents!"

Lou lunges, but his son holds him back.

"Don't do it, Pop."

I'm shaking so hard, I can hardly see for the vibration of the scene in front of me. My hands clench and unclench spastically. If he comes near me, I'll kill him. I'll kick his damn ass.

"I'm doing what I'm supposed to do!" I tell him. "Just let me do it."

"You shoulda died! You shoulda died!" Crying. Can barely understand him. Blubbering the words. The world's shaking around me.

And that's when Heller steps in between us. He checks me over his shoulder, then steps up to Marchetti and says something. Marchetti backs away and Heller turns to me.

"We've been here long enough." He jerks his head toward the car. "Let's go."

I'm on an adrenaline high the rest of the day. The whole damn world vibrates and hums. Dad tries to talk to me, but I can't even hear him. All I can think about is Marchetti, my fists clenched. The two of us squaring off in the cemetery. It's insane. Just insane.

For dinner, we go out to Fitzwilly's and I manage to fork down a single bite of my favorite planked salmon before I surprise everyone—including myself—by throwing up right at the table. Right at the fucking table. Vomit all over my plate.

My birthday's ruined. They ruined my birthday.

MAY 20, 1994

Fuckin' twenty-one now. Don't fuckin' care what they fuckin' think. Fuckin' Heller, too, give me a fuckin' look like that when he picks me up. *Fuck* him!

Just a few beers, is all. Me and some buddies, celebrated my birthday early. Don't I deserve to celebrate my fucking birthday? One fucking mistake, and my fucking birthday turns to shit! What kind of fucking justice is that?

Go to her grave. Her goddamn grave. Yeah, I'm fucked up. Whatever. Her fucking mother whispers something to someone about smelling liquor on me, and I want to say, "Fuck you, bitch! I can hear you!" but I don't.

Fuck them. Goddamn it. My fucking birthday *sucks*. Get straight fucking A's in school. Fucking dean's list. Do they care? Do any of them care?

Opened my presents this morning. New trench coat. New stereo for the car. Don't even care anymore. Whole time I was opening them, I was thinking of this moment. Standing at her fucking grave.

And then Jim and Jer come over. "Have some brews — you're legal."

Just what I need. Fucking A. Just chill me out a little.

Why am I crying? Goddamn it. Can't even see the gravestone, which is a good thing. Can they tell I'm drunk? Crying because my life is shit. Forget about it all year. Push it back. Don't let myself think about it until the day it happens, man, but that's no good because it always crops up when I least expect it. Can't stand finals because school's ending and once school's out it's only a week, only a week, man, and then I have to come here, have to get into Heller's car and come here and they stand there and watch me and hate me and no one cares what this is doing to me even my parents don't understand Mom just gives me fucking flowers like that changes anything Christ.

Can't stand it. Can't stand it.

"No respect."

Don't know which one of them said it. Don't care. I feel queasy and the ground's spinning so I lean against the headstone for support and

someone shouts and grabs me and then there's all these hands grabbing at me and someone saying, "Get off of him" but who the fuck cares because I'm passing

MAY 20, 1995

OK. This year's going to be different. No acting stupid like last time. No attitude. Just suck it down, deal with it. Be mature.

Graduation is in a week and a half. Right now, all of my friends are in Myrtle or Lauderdale or Cancun, living it up, getting drunk, getting laid. Checking names off on those bunny lists.

I'm twenty-two today, still legal, but not drunk.

No, not me. And when my friends asked what I was doing for senior week, when they asked if I wanted to chip in on a condo on the beach and rent a van and cruise down, I told them I wasn't interested. I told them I would just go home. I didn't say why, no matter how much they asked. I just let them think I was a loser.

No reason for them to know, right? I mean, school ends in the middle of May, so there's never been a reason for them to know what I have to do when I come home for the summer.

Another year, another birthday. Big deal. Got a new suit and a new briefcase for my new job. Yippee. Got a knock on the door and Heller in his shades and his inscrutable look, waiting again.

Got to stand here again, on my birthday again, thinking of my friends and how they get to celebrate the hard work of the past four years. They get to party and move on. Me? I get to stand here. I get another year wasted.

Top of my class. Job waiting for me at a firm in Philadelphia. Doesn't matter, does it? Because no matter what I accomplish, I'm still standing here at her grave. And I'll be here again in 365 days.

MAY 20, 1996

My lawyer said that given the nature of the sentence, I would never be able to get out of it on an appeal, but he *did* finally ask the judge

if I had to go to the grave at any particular time on the day in question.

The judge, bless his heart, didn't care.

Which is why I'm standing at Susan Marchetti's grave at eleven p.m., alone in the dark and the silence of the night.

MAY 20, 1997

Heller's standing under the tree in the moonlight, waiting for me. I don't mind being here at night. My friends and I, we used to cut through this cemetery on the way home sometimes, when we'd been out late and had to get home quickly.

Those were good days. Me and Jimmy and Jerry and Dan. I remember one time we all managed to sneak into the Thrifty Mart out on Route 30. It was still under construction, but some of the stock had arrived early, so there were crates of six-packs stacked in the framework, covered by nothing more than plastic tarps. We took one of the six-packs and kicked back in the moonlight, sitting on some cinder blocks and drinking those illicit beers.

A Rent-A-Cop with a flashlight that shone like the sun caught us red-handed. Embarrassing as hell, really. My father smoothed things over with the people who owned the Thrifty Mart.

Don't misunderstand. It was wrong—flat-out wrong. But not evil. It was childhood mischief, but I still get a little twinge when I walk into a Thrifty Mart, even now, even though I've got money in my pocket.

MAY 20, 1998

The thing is, there's no reason for anyone to know. This is the third year in a row I've had to take this day off of work in order to come here. I told them last year that this was my grandmother's birthday and that we always made a big deal of it since she and I had the same birthday. I told them I always had to go home.

If only they knew. What would they think?

MAY 20, 1999

Three weeks ago, I sat Sara down and I said to her, “Honey, if we’re going to get married, there’s something you need to know. Something about me.”

And I told her. I held her hands in mine the whole time, because somewhere deep down I was afraid that she would jump up and run away. I told her everything. I told her about Marchetti and about why I never celebrate my birthday and about ten years of hell that would soon be over.

In the end, I was reduced to a crying, blubbering mess, and she just held me and whispered that she loved me and that if we were together everything would be all right.

And she’s right. I’m getting closer and closer to the end of this. In six months, I’ll be married. Sara offered to come with me to Susan Marchetti’s grave, but I don’t want her to see this. I don’t want her to see this sick little birthday present I get every damn year.

She stays at my parents’ house, which is where I spend the night when I come into town for my annual punishment. I climb into Heller’s car yet again.

I’ve always meant to *say* something to Heller, but I just never got the chance. I think he understands, though. He must realize how difficult this is for me every year. I always want to try to tell him how much I appreciate the help he’s given me, but when I get into that car, my brain just freezes up and my stomach starts churning and the last thing I want to do is talk to anyone.

Funny. He hasn’t changed at all over the years.

MAY 20, 2000

This is it. The penultimate year. I can’t believe I made it this far.

I haven’t worn a suit here since I stopped coming during the day, when the Marchettis might be here. So tonight I’m just decked out in jeans and a Polo shirt. It’s cool for May, a little breeze . . . The trees at the cemetery will be swaying, I know.

And I'm sitting next to Heller in the front seat of his cruiser. This time I'll say something to him. I mean, there's only one more year and then this is all done and over with. Unreal. It seems like I've spent my life doing this.

And I have, really. The best years of my life, at least.

Heller pulls up at the gate and shuts off the engine. I open my door and start to get out, and that's when I realize that he's not joining me. He's pulling a metal clipboard out from behind his seat.

"I have some paperwork to catch up on," he says, without looking up at me.

So much for a man-to-man talk on the path up to the grave.

I nod and close the cruiser door, then take the trek up the path for the next-to-last time in my life.

At the top of the hill, I make a beeline for the grave. I've walked this in my nightmares.

I don't even get a chance to take up my position when someone behind me says, "Hello."

I turn to look into the eyes of Lou Marchetti.

My worst nightmare come true. Here, 365 days away from it all being over, he's got me alone. At night. He could kill me with a knife or with his bare hands and I would be dead for at least half an hour before Heller came looking to see what was wrong.

"I'll —" I start. "I'll —"

"You'll shut up," he says. "You'll listen."

He shakes his head and takes a deep breath. "I always wondered what I would do in this situation, you know? Man, I used to tell everyone 'Give me a minute alone with that sonofabitch. Just a minute's all I need.'

"And here I got you, right? The guy who killed my little girl."

"Mister —"

"Shut up! You killed my daughter! You understand that?"

God, of course I understand, I want to tell him. I've spent nine years doing nothing *but* understanding.

He sighs, and suddenly my boogeyman is just a human being. He doesn't look angry or hateful anymore. Just tired. Just really tired.

“My daughter. She wasn’t going to college out of state like you. She was going to nursing school, though. She wanted to help people. She just wanted to help.

“Christ, I was proud of her. And she was coming home from a late night at the hospital when you ran her off the road and killed her.”

When he says it, I see it. And damn it, no matter how many times I remember that night, I can’t remember her car coming the other way, the way it must have been. I can’t remember her swerving. I can’t remember seeing her at all until that awful moment when the flash of the lightning and the angry roar of the thunder made me suddenly sober and I saw her car crumpled against the tree. I was just too damn drunk.

“I don’t care,” he goes on, “what the judge says about you paying a debt or learning a lesson. I don’t care about you goin’ off to college and landing a good job and making money. Because I know the truth. You’re a liar and a coward and a drunk driver. You’re a vicious little punk-ass murderer.

“And no matter what you ever do, don’t ever think you got it good. Because as long as I’m alive, there’s one person who knows the truth about you.”

I lick my lips. “Look, you have every right to be angry at me. I’ve really been trying, though. Trying to make, I don’t know, to make amends —”

“Amends . . .” He says it without inflection. “You can’t even tell me her middle name, I bet. Nine times you stood at her grave and you can’t even tell me her middle name.”

And, God help me, he’s right. Because this is where I’m supposed to make the connection with him. This is where I’m supposed to blurt out her middle name and prove that I’m not a bad guy.

But I can’t. Because I can’t remember her middle name. Her damn middle name.

He just looks at me, like he knew I’d fail this particular test. So maybe this is when the knife comes out, or maybe it’s a gun, and he figures no jury in the world would convict him of killing the guy who killed his daughter.

He walks away, leaving me standing my ground, trembling, whether from fear or anger or impotence I cannot say.

Before walking down the path, I steal a look at the headstone. Ann. Her middle name was Ann.

Back at the car, Heller's silent as I get in. He starts up the engine and pulls away before I've got my seat belt fastened. I'm still shaking.

"I, uh, I wish you'd come up this year," I manage to say after a minute or so.

"Oh?" Heller doesn't look over at me.

"Uh, yeah. Her, well, her father, you know, Mr. Marchetti? He was there. Tonight. Waiting for me."

Nothing from Heller. Keeping his eyes on the road.

"I mean, I thought he was gonna kill me. I thought . . . God, I don't even know how he knew I'd be there then. He just showed up out of nowhere. I mean, I wish you'd been there. I was really scared."

Pulling into my parents' development, Heller glances in my direction at last. "Good."

What did he say?

"Because," he continues, "you should have been scared. You should have been scared shitless."

"You know something? If that had been *my* daughter, I would have put a bullet in your brain years ago. You should get down on your knees every day and thank God that Lou Marchetti's a good man. He could have killed you tonight. You're lucky."

He pulls into the driveway and finally turns to look at me. "Now get out of my car. You're stinking it up."

I fumble at the latch and finally get it open. Tears in my eyes. Not Heller. He was on *my* side. He was supposed to be on *my* side!

The police car pulls away in the dark, leaving me on the front lawn, crying, shaking. The hell with them. The hell with them all.

MAY 20, 2001

This is it. Last year. It's over. Over.

A car pulls up at Mom and Dad's. A young deputy I've never seen waits for me behind the wheel.

"Where's Heller?" I ask.

"Heller?"

"Yeah. Heller. Used to be a deputy."

"Oh. Steve Heller. Yeah, he retired almost a year ago. Almost forgot about good ol' Steve." With a chuckle, he puts the car into gear and we're off.

Good ol' Steve. Good ol' Steve.

He drops me off at the cemetery and comes up the path with me. No surprises this year. No Marchetti. Nothing. Just me and this new deputy and a few minutes standing over the grave.

And that's it. It's over. All done. Ten years of my life. A decade, given up for her.

Done.

MAY 20, 2002

Last month, Sara broached the topic for the first time, cautiously, the way doctors give news that's only *partly* good.

"What," she asked me, "would you like to do for your birthday?"

And I couldn't answer. Ten years of trying to forget my birthday. Years of not celebrating because there was always that grotesque pain, too. I used to like a particular restaurant, I know. I used to like . . .

But I can't even remember anymore. I would have to call my parents and find out what kind of cake I like for my birthday, and what are the old rituals and traditions that brought me so much pleasure as a child? What do I want to do on my birthday?

I don't know, I told her. I don't even know what my birthday is or should be anymore. I don't know. I've spent so long just suppressing that time, making a little zone of dead days around that date, so that I could live my life as normally as possible.

But last night, I couldn't sleep. Work was going fine, the baby was healthy — I don't know what was bugging me. Just jitters, I guess. Ten

years of this night being the calm before the storm — it's tough to shake. Somewhere in my brain, I'm still anticipating the grave.

I walked the house while Sara and Meredith slept. A storm had just kicked up, and the patter of rain on the roof was calming. I walked past my diploma hanging on the wall, past my commendation from my firm, past the photos of me shaking hands with the mayor, the city council, the town police chief. A hundred miles from Brookdale and the knowledge of what happened there eleven years ago.

I went into Meredith's room. A lightning flash from the window lit the room for a moment, throwing the mobile, the crib, and the toys into relief. I looked down into the crib at my daughter. Her hands were balled into tight little fists as she slept, and her blanket was wound around her leg just a little too tightly.

Moving slowly and quietly, so as not to wake her, I reached into the crib and straightened the blanket, tugging and adjusting it. With a sleepy coo, she moved the liberated leg into a more comfortable position. I felt tears welling in my eyes. Sara teases me sometimes, says that I'm more maternal than she is. I can't help it. When I look at Meredith, I feel like my chest is too small for my heart.

Outside, the rain and the wind lashed a tree branch against the window, back and forth.

Wish-click. Wish-click. Wish-click. Wish.

And I don't know what I'm doing here today, a hundred miles from my home. I don't know why I'm turning up Marwood and then down onto Church.

And I sure as hell don't know why I'm parking the car in the parking lot, walking up the path to her grave. To Susan Ann Marchetti's grave. But I'm doing it anyway.

Maybe because it's the only thing I know how to do on my birthday.

Her father is there, kneeling at the grave, holding something small in his hands. I can see his lips moving from here, and I stop, caught between my own need to approach and the desire to respect his privacy. But he must hear me or somehow sense me, because he looks up.

For a moment, neither of says anything. Then he says, “What . . . What are you *doing* here?”

I walk forward and stand over him for just a moment before crouching down to see him at eye-level.

“You don’t have to be here . . .” he says, confused.

“But I do. I really do. I finally get it, Mr. Marchetti. After all these years. I was wrong. From the moment I got behind the wheel that night, until a few hours ago, I was dead wrong.

“I know what I did. It isn’t that I killed her. That was bad enough. But I killed *her*.” His eyes widen. “I killed your *daughter*. She was a person, not my sin.”

And then I kneel next to him. “Look, I’ll go if you want me to go. I respect your need to be with her on this day. But I’ll come back later, because I need it, too. I need to get down on my knees and make this as right as it can be. I know that I can’t ever expect your forgiveness, but I need to spend as much time as it takes begging Susan for hers. Because what I did was *wrong*, Mr. Marchetti. And there’s no excuse for it. And you shouldn’t have to be living without your daughter. I’m sorry that you are. It’s my fault, totally and completely, and I accept complete responsibility.”

And that’s when I see what’s in his hand. A picture.

“Is that her?” I ask, and I realize that the last time I’d seen a picture of her, it had mine next to it, and a headline above calling me a killer. “Can I see?”

Silently, he opens his hands, and I see her, for the first time in years. Of course, she’s perfect. How could she be anything but?

It’s a night of doing crazy things, so I go one further. I dig into my pocket and flip open my wallet, showing him the picture of Meredith. His eyes cloud for a moment, then widen as he realizes what I’m showing him.

“Her name is Meredith, and if she went away,” I tell him, “everything inside me would die and dry up and blow away. And I never knew it was possible to feel that way. I never knew *I* could make someone feel that way.”

He looks down at the ground for a moment, and when he looks up

again, his eyes are tear-filled. “She . . . *She* would forgive you. That’s the kind of person she was. She would have forgiven you.”

“I’m glad. I don’t deserve it, but I’m glad. She wanted to be a nurse, right? You told me that and I remembered it. She wanted . . .” I trail off, then take a deep breath. I risk it — I take his hand in my own. He jerks as though shocked, but doesn’t pull away, and here we are, her father and her killer, the man who brought her life and the man who took it away, kneeling at her grave.

“Tell me about her. Tell me everything. She’s alive as long as you tell it, Mr. Marchetti, even to someone like me. Let me do whatever I can to ease your pain. Let it out. These past ten years, God, I was so selfish. The judge was wrong — I didn’t learn anything, not until it was all over. So I’m here again, as long as you need me, as long as it takes, as many years as it takes. These past ten years, they were all about me. These *next* ten years . . . These next ten years — let them be *her* decade.”

THE SIXTH CREDIT

NO ONE AT YALE has time for romance. Between lectures and seminars and workshops and the odd extracurricular activity or two, most of us are lucky just to find someone to spend the night with every now and again. That's what passes for romance here. Love is jokingly referred to as "the sixth credit," the class no one has time for after studying and prepping for the other five per semester.

The unboyfriend is a compromise. I don't kid myself that he's Mr. Right, but then again, I didn't come to Yale for an Mrs. degree, either. He's generally well behaved, doesn't lounge around in his underwear, and lets me come first most of the time, so I've held on to him. Most aren't so lucky.

I have a theory about Yale women. The guys here all think the women are crazy, and they might not be too far wrong. A truly smart, brilliant little girl is an outcast at your average elementary or middle school. No matter how cool your parents, your teachers, and your friends, the fact of the matter is that you just don't Do Smart as a little girl. Not if you want to fit in.

So that smart little girl learns how to hide that intelligence and what it is that makes her special. She learns how to keep her true self a secret, how to hide all kinds of things. And then one day she arrives at Yale, and suddenly everyone is smart, so it's OK to shine here . . . only she's forgotten who she really is by that time.

No wonder we debase ourselves to one-night stands, hookups, the walk of shame.

When you suddenly get to “be yourself,” you end up with all kinds of drama. My roommate, for example, who is obsessed with sex: Jenny, the sex Gestapo, constantly asking questions about the unboyfriend and me. “Ve haf vays to make you talk about your zex life!” Serious, nitty-gritty questions. Nothing that I wouldn’t mind talking about with a close friend, but I just met her and she’s already asking me do I go down him and if I do, do I spit or swallow, and would I ever let him tie me up?

I couldn’t figure out her deal at first: lesbian or bi, nosing around for a hookup? Nympho? And then I realized, nah, none of the above: virgin. She hasn’t told me that in so many words, but it’s the only thing that fits. Only a virgin could be that obsessed with sex. Only a virgin hasn’t figured out yet that it’s vastly overrated.

She’s like some bizarre patchwork woman, as if Victor Frankenstein had gotten his hands on parts from Marilyn Monroe and the Virgin Mary and then built Jenny.

The first time I met her, she wore a ankle-length skirt and a heavy cable-knit sweater, almost as though she were ashamed of her body and wanted to hide it. Poor thing: I could have told her that all that sweater did was exaggerate her curves, and that skirt . . . Well, it covered her legs, but it still clung to the right parts.

Listen to me, sizing her up: Now *I* sound like the one cruising for a random hookup.

The questions started as soon as she found out about the unboyfriend. Innocent enough at first, but eventually so annoying that I started wearing my Discman in the room even when I didn’t have a CD in it. Anything to get her to shut up.

When we were with others, it was better. Shy, she would usually be quiet, just listening, like a chatroom lurker only in person, but she’d surprise me sometimes. Several nights a week, groups of us gather in the Calhoun courtyard, surrounded on all four sides by the Gothic architecture of the college. One time, she borrowed my friend Josh’s guitar and started playing. It was like watching a flower open up in the

sunshine. Yes, I know how pathetically sexual that image seems, but that's what it was like. Her voice was clear and beautiful, her hands confident on the strings as she played.

When she was finished, she seemed almost embarrassed, as though she'd let out some genie she had been keeping in the bottle for a special occasion, for a wish she would need later. When I asked her about the music, she would only say that she had learned from a guy who lived in her neighborhood. Old boyfriend? I wondered, intrigued despite myself. Maybe Little Miss Innocent wasn't quite so innocent. Surely she had at least let him get to second base (breast groping, in my particular part of the country). Protecting your honor is fine, but why be fanatical about your bra?

Thursday nights were party nights at Yale, the beginning of the weekend, really. The smart folks set up their schedules without classes or sections on Fridays, giving themselves that additional night to go wild. And even the people with Friday classes got caught up in the atmosphere and went out on Thursdays anyway.

I had signed up for an English section that met Friday mornings, but it was my only obligation on that day and it was nothing that I couldn't handle with a hangover, so I left the 'houn after dinner and headed to the unboyfriend's room in D-port for the pre-party. House music was blaring and the suite was already packed with drinkers by the time I got there.

I found the unboyfriend behind the makeshift bar. He was twitching his hips in time to the music, hosing beer into plastic cups from a keg. The room smelled like stale beer already, and the press of bodies was hot and thick. I hated parties like this.

"Where are we going tonight?" I yelled to him as I came up beside him.

He grinned when he saw me, a perfect-white, straight-toothed grin that must have made the girls at Andover swoon. It did the job pretty well for public school rats like me, too, though I tried not to let on. "DKE party," he told me, offering me a beer. "Supposed to be ragin'."

"Great," I told him. "A hundred people crammed into a basement,

clustered around kegs, sucking down beer as if it could compensate for the lack of oxygen.”

“Jenny not coming tonight?” He ignored my trenchant social observation.

Sometimes I bring Jenny along, just to get her out of the room. “No. So forget your twisted little fantasy of getting us both drunk and having your way with us.” I jabbed him in the gut, which he hates, which is why I do it. What is it about men’s fascination with lesbians? You’d think they would be horrified when presented with concrete evidence that dicks are optional.

He winced and poured another beer, flashing that winning smile in another direction as he handed it off to a drop-dead gorgeous red-head wearing a T-shirt and no visible means of support. I was annoyed at myself almost before the jealousy kicked in. He was just a regular warm body, after all. And I knew that I was ten times the hottie she was — I had just chosen to dress down, in a sweatshirt and jeans, not in an outfit that screamed, “Somebody fuck me. Validate me.”

He noticed the jealousy and the annoyance, of course, considering me with a look that seemed more an appraisal than anything else. Was I jealous enough? Did my reaction conflict with his predetermined game plan?

God, I hate psych majors.

“You can fuck me later or mind-fuck me right now,” I told him, moving in close so that I didn’t have to scream above the music and the din of conversation. “But you can’t do both.”

He hates it when I talk like a guy. He put an arm around me and pulled me closer, then planted a too-tender kiss on my forehead. “Honey . . .” he started.

“Don’t ‘honey’ me. If you want her, go get her.”

He laughed. We both knew he would do precisely nothing. Not many Yale men could boast of having a steady bed partner and an almost-guaranteed lay. About as many as there were women who could count on the same warm body to snuggle with when they wanted to, or needed to.

After a couple of hours of drinking lousy beer and letting our skulls vibrate to the music, we moved en masse and more than a little buzzed to the DKE house, to spend further hours drinking slightly less lousy beer and listening to louder music.

When I drink, I tend to cling. The unboyfriend knows this, and loves it. At those times, it's almost like we have a real relationship. I hang on his arm and laugh at his jokes . . .

Rarely do I tell him he's full of shit when I'm drunk.

I did my best impression of a girlfriend, standing by him, drinking my beer, listening to him tell a story about one of his sociology professors. Was it too soon to make noises about leaving? Bored beyond belief, I looked around. The basement was lit by only two overhead lights, which cast a weak and sickly hue over a room the length and width of the entire house. The jumble of bodies made it a humid closet.

I couldn't take it anymore. I pretended that I needed to go to the bathroom and made my way upstairs. It was a little cooler there, a little less cramped, but I still felt like a refugee on a dinky inner tube, jammed together with castaways.

My eyes strayed to one wall—frames were mounted there, their contents unreadable with the light reflecting from their panes. I made my way over, enduring the occasional drunken leer and more than one “accidental” grope. The frames held certificates, citations, awards. Someone had scrawled “Wall of Fame” on a piece of paper and stapled it to the wall in the middle of the whole thing.

There were some civic awards to the frat in general, and a few certificates directed at specific members. The last one had to do with a charity game. A softball game played against a local radio station . . .

I swallowed hard. I couldn't hear the crowd any longer. But I could feel a softball bat in my hands. I had an urge to spit on the plate, dig in my cleats. It was like I was there again, nine years old again. Wood in my hands. The rocking vibration when the bat hits the ball. The coach yelling—

My eyes could not pull away from the word “softball” and the line art rendition of a bat and ball. Like it was ten years ago, I felt hands on

my shoulders, then on my hips, tilting my body the right way. “Home run stance,” he said.

Just then, someone touched my shoulder and I shrieked. I elbowed back, catching whoever it was in the gut, then turned to see that it was the unboyfriend. But I didn’t care. I pushed past him, flung my hands out before me to force my way through the crowd. Tears burned my eyes and I lunged through a throng of gyrating drunks, baptized in sprays of beer as I knocked against arms.

I ran out the back door into the cold December night air. The backyard was fenced in and spotted with small groups, huddled together and drinking. I gulped in the air, then watched my breath flow out of me in long, ragged clouds. I had bumped some people on my way through the door and they looked at me strangely before turning to go back inside. All Yale women are crazy, you know.

I could hear his voice — *home run stance* — and I could feel his hands on my hips, turning me slightly toward left field. I could feel my hands. My hands on the wood.

The unboyfriend came up behind me, then circled around front, careful not to touch me. “Gina? Are you okay?” He sounded concerned. Genuinely concerned. It must have been the alcohol. The alcohol in both of us.

I knew that if he touched me, I would go insane. Even in a platonic way, it would just be too much. Suddenly my breasts felt enormous — ponderous and pregnant and too sensitive. When had they developed? Just walking made them scream with pain. And between my legs, I felt like I’d sponged with sandpaper. Raw and open and naked.

I pushed him away from me and ran, stupidly, drunkenly, through the night. Frat Row was two blocks beyond the last campus buildings, behind the gymnasium. In New Haven, going so far as a block off campus could mean death. But I ran anyway, a lonely, obviously scared white girl, a Yalie in a city that despised them. I ran down Broadway until I could see the lights of the pizza joints and the first Gothic spires of Yale.

It was three more blocks to Calhoun, and by the time I got there, I

was panting and ready to throw up, the alcohol churning in my stomach and flying through my blood on my accelerated heartbeat. I fumbled for my passcard and finally worked open the gate.

I got lucky. I made it up the two flights of stairs and into the bathroom before it happened. I lurched into the shower fully clothed and threw up violently, all over myself, all over the shower. I backed into the wall, then slid down until I was sitting in my own vomit.

After a moment, I had the presence of mind to turn on the water. But I would never be clean. I was convinced of it.

The next day, the unboyfriend came over just as I was getting ready for my Friday-morning section. For him to crawl out of bed on a Friday morning was a sign of true devotion in that species *Homo sapiens yalensis*.

“You okay?” he asked. He leaned against one of the sinks as I watched myself in the bathroom mirror and combed my hair.

“Fine.”

“Because last night you —”

“I just drank too much.”

“Well, you —”

Just then, Jenny came into the bathroom, wearing her bathrobe and carrying her shower basket. The unboyfriend’s eyes flickered for a moment, drawn to a peek of cleavage. I forgave him instantly and effortlessly. He couldn’t help it. It was there to see, after all.

Jenny climbed into the shower, then draped her robe over the side. The water started to spray.

“I was just worried about you,” he said.

I put down my comb, took his hand, pulled him into my room, and gave him the fuck of his life while Jenny was in the shower.

I skipped my Friday section — it was half over by the time Jenny came back into the room, just in time to catch the unboyfriend buttoning the last button on his shirt. He gave her his grin — no doubt imagining what she would feel like, slightly damp, under that robe — and then left.

“Sorry about that,” I told her. I was under the covers, half dressed, my bra hanging out from one armhole.

“Did you guys, uh, you know?” she asked.

“Yeah.”

She sat down on my bed. “So, um, *what* did you do?”

I don’t know what came over me. I don’t know why I didn’t just blow her off, like usual. Instead, I told her I hit a home run. None of this first base, second base, third base stuff.

I told her how he came up behind me and put his hands on my shoulders and whispered into my ear that it was okay, this was okay. Her eyes grew wider and her lips parted as I told her how he pulled my shirt over my head, stroking my armpits lightly as I raised my arms, erecting waves of goose bumps along my flesh.

I described his hands at my waist, tugging down my shorts, then the tautness of the elastic in my panties as his fingers slid under. I told her how I returned the favor at his direction, my small hands between his legs, my hands on the —

I told her all of it. And it felt so good finally to say it all out loud, even though she didn’t know — couldn’t know — what any of it meant.

Classes ended a week later, and Reading Period began, a week of parties and late nights followed by a panicked weekend of cramming sessions in one of the libraries as the realization that exams start in three days sinks in.

It rained most of Reading Period. It always rains in New Haven, more than even in Seattle. And it’s that ugly, cold New England kind of rain, the kind of rain that seems somehow deliberate and angry. Like a pissed-off old Yankee shaking his fist. The campus is slashed by cobblestone walkways, none of which has any drainage, so when it rains, Yale becomes the College of a Thousand Lakes, leaving you the choice of plunging through ice-cold puddles or weaving around them through sodden grass and mud.

“Ivy League.” Ha.

The rain literally threw cold water on the party atmosphere of Reading Period. I spent most of the time in my room or in the Cal-

houn library, trying to make sense of John Rawls and his veil of ignorance. The veil of ignorance is supposed to create an ideal society, by putting the people who create that society in a position in which they don't know what role they will have. It's a nice idea, but it would never work. Some people are flawed from the beginning, and no matter their ultimate role, they're going to break along those flaws.

I didn't see the unboyfriend much during that week. The thought of walking through the New Haven rain from Calhoun to Davenport was like taking a cold shower for both of us. He called me at odd hours, though, knowing that I'd be awake, and made me promise that we'd see each other when exams were over. He sounded so eager and strange that I agreed.

Jenny was in a blind panic the whole time, sleeping in fifteen-minute catnaps as far as I could tell. These were her first exams as a Yalie, and she was stressed. When I was awake, she would study in the room, up in her bunk, running the ink out of highlighters as she painted her books neon. When I would finally crash, the last thing I'd see before closing my eyes would be her creeping out of the room, heading for the library and a study carrel.

I struggled through my first two exams, then, as the rain finally lifted, aced two more and turned in a final paper for my last class. Jenny's exams had hit all at once — five of them in the space of two days — and when I came back to the room, she looked exhausted, but happy.

She was also putting on makeup, something I'd never seen her do.

"My father is coming to pick me up to bring me home," she explained. "Is it okay if I show him our room?"

I felt terrible. She was solicitous, pleasant . . . a little obsessed with my sex life, but still, a good person who was nervous about being at a new school. And based on nothing more than her looks and her attitude, I'd given myself license to think horrible things about her. And here she was, as urgent as a puppy.

"Tell you what," I told her, "the room's yours. I'm going to see Erik."

That night, I went to the unboyfriend's as I had promised. A party

was in full swing, indicating that his roommates had finished their exams, too. The rest of Davenport wasn't so lucky, though, and I encountered many a scowling face as I mounted the stairs to his room.

The unboyfriend wasn't partying in the living room with the rest of the guys, so I sought him out in his bedroom. The lights were out, but he'd lit the place with candles. He was sitting at his desk, a bottle of wine and two glasses at his side.

"What's going on?" I asked, closing the door. "Expecting your girlfriend?"

He told me he loved me. He said it so earnestly and so honestly that I could feel my heart ache, could actually feel the auricles and ventricles straining in some different and fascinating new way. In the candlelight, he was absolutely beautiful, some perfect male statue carved and smoothed and sanded by a woman who was tired of waiting for God to deliver Mr. Right.

And I laughed at him, and broke up with him. All Yale women are crazy, you know. Who am I to break the rules?

I took my time going back to Calhoun. The night streets of New Haven were alive with Yalies, roaming in backpacked clusters like academic wolves. I didn't think of the look on his face, or the tears that floated, unspilled, in his eyes. I just thought about my room. And bed.

My key stuck for a moment as I opened the door, and then my breath stuck in my throat when I saw it, when I saw Jenny — beautiful Jenny, untouched Jenny — down on her knees in front of the man who was too old to be a boyfriend, the man who I instantly knew was her father. She had her hands on the wood; she was rounding second and heading for third base, no question, and I'd be damned if she didn't have a chance of getting a home run.

I slammed the door and ran.

I spent the night in the Calhoun library, curled up on one of the sofas long after everyone had quit studying for the night, watching the dusty shelves of books grow lighter as the sun came up in the window behind me.

I don't think I slept. If I did, I dreamed only that I was awake in the library, reliving that moment over and over in my mind. Hands on the wood, in the home run stance.

The next morning, I went back to the room long enough to throw some things into a bag and grab my purse. Home and winter break were just a train ride away.

Jenny came in as I was leaving, her eyes explosive with surprise, her face even lovelier than ever, painted as it was. "What you saw —" she said.

"I didn't see anything," I told her, and brushed past her.

I called a cab to the train station from a friend's room, then hopped the first train back home. I spent the four hours on the train remembering the way my hands shook numb from the impact of the ball on the bat. I hadn't played in a decade, but I could still remember it all perfectly.

At home, my parents waited two full days before they started asking what was wrong, why I wasn't eating, why I was sleeping so much.

"You know," I heard my father say to my mother at one point as they left my room, "this is like that time when she was younger. She did this before, remember?"

I didn't hear my mother's response, but I knew mine — I knew I'd done "this" before. "This."

I looked at myself in my full-length mirror. No makeup, of course — "college chicks" don't have time for that. But my hair was long and wavy and rich, black as onyx. Wide pale blue eyes, shot through with veins of sienna. And of course my breasts, just slightly out of proportion, firm and what the unboyfriend called "generous" in his more poetic moments. "Boy magnets" an old friend had called them. "They want them more than they want this," she'd said emphatically, grabbing herself between the legs, and we'd laughed at how stupid boys could be.

I borrowed the car and drove out to my old elementary school. In the back was the baseball diamond, where I'd taken my home run stance, held the wood in my hands, and driven in more runs than anyone else in county Little League softball history.

I stood at the plate and shivered under the bright, cold sun. My hands twitched as I remembered. Impact. Crack. Home run. Coach's hands on my hips, turning me toward left field. Coach's hands on my hips. My hair done up in a French braid, the way I made Mom do it when I had a game. "It's my good luck hair," I told her.

And he untied my good luck hair, still slightly damp with sweat from my batting helmet. None of this first base, second base, third base stuff. Time for a home run.

He came up behind me and put his hands on my shoulders and whispered into my ear that it was okay, this was okay. He pulled my shirt over my head, stroking my armpits lightly as I raised my arms, erecting waves of goose bumps along my flesh.

His hands at my waist, turning me to left, no — tugging down my shorts, then the tautness of the elastic in my panties as his fingers slid under. I returned the favor at his direction, my small hands between his legs, my hands on the — wood.

I realized I was kneeling on home plate, crying. I wasn't nine years old anymore. I wasn't wearing my good luck hair. I saw Jenny kneeling down, but it wasn't Jenny. It wasn't Jenny, and she had never been innocent after all.

I wiped my eyes and got back in the car. I could still remember the directions. He used to drive me there, his prize pupil, his star athlete. Mom and Dad thought it was great that he encouraged me. They were so disappointed when I didn't want to play softball in middle school. Had they seen visions of high school championships? College scholarships? Had they imagined me happy?

I parked in the driveway. He had a new car, but it had a bumper sticker announcing that he was a proud Cheetah — my old school mascot.

If I had thought about it, I wouldn't have done it. I walked up the cement walkway, went up the two steps, and knocked on the door.

I thought that when I saw him, the world might end just then, crushed by the gravity and spontaneity of what I'd dared to do. Instead, he just looked at me, puzzled, his head tilted to one side. He looked almost exactly the same, except the dark brown hair was now

salted through with gray, and the broad hands had wrinkles along the backs. I remembered him tracking fly balls without a movement, just the slide of those deep brown eyes.

He didn't recognize me, and that saved me. When I told him my name, his eyes grew wide behind his wire-rimmed glasses, and his lips moved soundlessly for long seconds.

"Look," he said, pleading. "Look. Look." He said it over and over, desperate to introduce some thought that he could not proclaim.

"Can't I come in?" I pouted. That begging note in his voice ran out of him like sap and into me like some kind of extra blood.

His throat bobbed, but he stood back and let me in. I followed him into the living room. It was as I remembered it.

He sat down on the sofa, and I joined him, sitting close. I put a hand on his knee.

"Look," he began again. "Please, let's talk —"

"I don't want to talk," I said. I ran my hand up his thigh. "I want to pick up where we left off."

"Please, don't," he said sharply, backing away. I followed him with my hand.

I licked my lips and leaned in toward him, letting my breasts press against his arm. "Why not? Don't you think I'm pretty anymore? You always used to say I was so pretty."

"You're a —" He was gasping for air, sweat beaded along his forehead. "You're a very attractive young woman," he finally managed to say.

"Let's do something about that," I said. "Let's hit a home run. Remember hitting home runs?"

"Please!" he cried. "That was a long time ago! I've been in therapy. I'm —"

"Therapy?" I grabbed his crotch but got no reaction other than a whimper, felt nothing but his flaccid penis and testicles through his pants. "Therapy? How can it be helping? You still want me to be a little girl, don't you?" He shook his head vigorously, but I pressed on, tightening my grip and pressing against him even harder. My breath came fast, in gasps, and I felt my nipples rising. "You can't be cured.

If you were cured, you'd be all over me. But you like it when we aren't shaving yet, don't you? When we just have those little bumps on our chests — ”

“Please . . .” he whined.

“Look at me! I'm fucking hot! I've got great tits! I know it because guys can't keep their eyes and hands off them. I'm a goddamn wet dream come to life, so why the fuck don't you want to molest me now, you fucking sick motherfucker!”

He let loose a loud, high keening sound, his mouth stretched so wide that I thought his jaw would crack. He had the look of a trapped animal, some pathetic dumb beast that could not pull free from a snare without shearing off its own limb. The scream climbed higher, like a woman in a bad horror movie. I shuddered, thrilled and mortally humiliated at the same moment as the most intense orgasm of my life ripped through me, as fast, as sudden, as painful as a bullet.

I pulled away from him.

“Are you,” he whimpered, stuttering his fear, “are you going to call the police?”

In that moment, he seemed as pathetic as the unboyfriend had in his instant of vulnerable confession. I couldn't help laughing.

I left him like that, quaking in his fear, impotent in more ways than one.

Once I started eating, my parents stopped asking questions. I had gotten over it, they figured. You know, like when I was a little girl, say nine years old, and I'd gone through that whole time . . . and decided to stop playing softball.

She's always been a little different, they would tell each other confidentially.

Didn't they know? All Yale women are crazy.

We're too smart to be otherwise.