

The Amoeba

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When I was in the seventh grade, my Honors English teacher, Ms. Kazowloski, made us keep a journal. Seventh grade was the year we went to the Junior High school and it was a loathsome year for everyone. Well, everyone but the Amoeba. The Amoeba walked around in a big group, inseparable, glommy – onto guys mostly. They reminded me and Tim of the shapeless organism we were learning about in bio, and when he told them that, they liked it. They took it as their own. I am an Amoeba, they would say. They wrote it on the cover of their notebooks; they wore it on their sleeves. There were seven girls officially The Amoeba – they were the ones together that day in the hall when Tim said they looked like the amorphous single cell – Sandy, Ashley, Courtney, Stacey, Kimmie, Cindy, and Mindy. They had other girl friends though – Margot, Kelly, Suzie, Tracey, Chrissy – but they weren't official. I watched them when I sat in the back row in English class. It was just like that Dr. Seuss book where some sneetches had stars on their bellies and they strutted around saying how great it made them. Even though they were all sneetches, the ones without wanted to be the ones with. There were levels within levels.

I wasn't even a sneetch. It wasn't just that I couldn't write Amoeba on the cover of my notebook – it was that I wasn't even the same species. At Timberland Junior High, three grammar schools converged and our grammar school was by the far the least cool. The other two were located near two towns; and even though they were only towns of about 2,000, they were hipper because of it. While we tried to tip cows over, they tried cigarettes; when we chased boys on the playground, they kissed boys in the milk line. Those kids had better clothes, and worse, they were wittier, quicker, and more confident because of all that togetherness and money.

In sixth grade when Jordache jeans were the thing to have and Tretorns were the sneakers to wear, I couldn't get them. Or, I could only get the lesser version of them. The Tretorns I finally got were from a discount store, but the V was in solid yellow. That was the season the V was cool, like red madras or pink polka dots. I got last season's version, and not even the color I had wanted last season. Anyway, in the sixth grade I could convince myself not to care too much about it. My parents tried to give as much as they could and I knew that these were just material things...they didn't matter.

Still, when I got to the seventh grade, I didn't have that same fortitude—suddenly, clothes really mattered. They mattered because Sandy Mattler's clothes were really nice. She always looked good. She didn't just wear her Swatch (she had 17 of them), she wore long flowing skirts that she bought from Bloomingdales – the one in New York I heard her say. She wasn't hip – she was beyond that and merely in step with fashion – she was cool, she had her own style. I wanted my own style

too. I wanted to evoke ideas: romance with a long skirt, ruggedness with a suede shirt, classiness with the perfect black pants.

I tried. I raided my mom's closet and wore pants that were too big for me. She had argyle sweaters and I wore them – an attempt to make the transition from kid, to prep. In my own closet, I found my athletic clothes – t-shirts with logos from every soccer team I ever played on, every camp I ever went to. I turned to this, as my style, taking a cue from Flashdance, cutting my t-shirts and sweat tops. I wore sweats to school with my fraying muscle T's. I wore jeans all the time. I was a jock anyway and I wanted to be strong. I felt strong, as if I could still beat my little brother in basketball, or go faster than him on a bike down the hill by our house.

The teacher wrote, "If I could be anyone in this room, I would want to be..." That was our journal topic for the day. Usually the topics would be something stupid and I would just write song lyrics in my journal. We had to leave the journals in a box on the windowsill and she said she wouldn't read them, ever; she said they were for us. It seemed dangerous. I hated this topic and thought it was unfair. What was she trying to do, have us admit we'd rather be someone else, say, flat out, that we are jealous? Aren't these bad things for a developing mind? Isn't she supposed to be the teacher? I wanted to answer it though, more than I wanted to write about anything else she had ever posted on the board. I wanted to because I knew the answer; I knew before she stopped writing the sentence on the board.

I wanted to be Sandy. Perfect Sandy, with perfect clothes, the one all the boys were in love with. She was in all my smart classes though didn't speak much in class. She was athletic and on all the girly teams like field hockey and lacrosse, while I played soccer, basketball, and softball. She seemed nice, and though she never spoke to me, she smiled – she was always smiling. She got her hair cut every six weeks and she had it highlighted. I put the pen on the paper and wrote out the words,

If I could be anyone in this room, I would want to be...Sandy.

And then I crossed out Sandy and drew a big boat over the top of her name. I wrote out some more song lyrics.

I still haven't found what I'm looking for, with or without you. Every breath you take, every move you make.

I only had to fill up ten minutes of time so I scribbled away, glancing up only to see Sandy's foot tapping. What was SHE writing?

Everyone is probably saying they want to be Sandy – I wonder if she is writing, "I would want to be me. I love me. I'm perfect Sandy."

No one's writing about me. No one knows I'm even here except for Tim. But I went to grammar school with him so he doesn't count because he's the smart dumb guy with a crush on me. I can't believe I care about these people and what they think; they're all so shallow. These are Salinger people, people J.D. would say were phonies, a bunch of mindless phonies with their 17 swatches.

"Journal time's up," Mrs. Kazowloski says. "Sandy, will you collect them and put them on the sill?"

Oh, God, even the teacher loves her. I hope she doesn't have x-ray vision and can read through the cover of this journal. This journal idea is soooo stupid.

For the rest of the class, we talked about a short story where a horse dies in the end and Mary asked if we could please stop reading stories where animals died in the end. Trip laughed at her. She started to cry and Mrs. Kazowloski gave her a pass to see the nurse.

When the bell rang, everyone filed out of the classroom. The Amoebas were first out – they had packed up their things somehow, their Ziplocked pencil cases and Jansport backpacks slung over one shoulder and out the door of 7th grade Honors English. They stopped there though, circling up like a pack of wolves. Wolves – another animal. As a group they really did resemble something from the animal kingdom. It was hard to get by them and into the hallway because they stopped traffic, eighth grade boys mostly. Tim came up behind me.

"Just push through."

"You do it then."

He tried. He had to take off his backpack and hold it in front of him like a shield. But he made it and created enough of a wave for me to get through. Once in the flow of the hall, we walked around the square toward my locker.

"The Amoebas are so self-absorbed," he said.

"It works for it...them." I said.

"What does that mean?"

"We despise them and what they stand for yet we love them; isn't that strange? Isn't it weird that what makes someone popular is that we all like them, yet at the same time we hate them for being popular?"

"I don't understand you."

"I'm just saying the power is in our hands...it's sorta like an oxymoron."

"Your hands, maybe, not mine."

"What does that mean?"

"I'm a geek, a skinny white kid, honors class-attending geek."

"Don't call yourself a geek; you're smart – leave it at that."

"Why don't you just go join their team already?"

"Tim, please be quiet."

"You can be one of them – you're just as pretty and much more cool – so, go ahead and do it already."

"I thought we hated them."

"We do, but they have more fun."

We were at my locker by now and I rolled the lock dial and my eyes at the same time. Becky, my new friend, came running up to me.

"Oh. My. God." she said.

"What?" I said, as Tim peeled off to Spanish.

"Johnny would like you," she squealed.

"JohnnyMcFadden?"

Could it be him, the cutest boy in the eighth grade, blue eyes, dark hair, great legs...?

"He just told Jane," Becky said. Becky, who'd given seven blowjobs this year. Jane, who'd done twice that, at least. These were my friends now. I went to Jane's house after school and before basketball practice. I fielded phone calls for her, Jason, Jimmy, Jordan – all the J's called. Sometimes she'd be in her room with one of them and I'd sit in the living room reading Cosmo, waiting for the phone calls.

"What?" I asked again.

"Johnny said he would like you if you had a better body."

"Oh, of course, I knew there was a catch."

"This is so great," she said.

"It's horrible."

"You'll get boobs soon, and then you can go OUT with him." She squealed again.

He was talking about how flat I was, for sure. I was too skinny, too flat. I was still a girl. I hadn't even gotten my period yet. Becky had, Jane had. Maybe that's what made them want to give head – being a woman.

"I think you'll have great boobs, you're lucky like that." Becky added. I guess that's why she was my friend. She was nice to me.

"It's still a mean thing to say. Guys are so obsessed with bodies."

Becky laughed. "I can't talk, I like big guys – all muscles and cut and – men, I like men."

I turned away. I felt she was saying I wasn't whole or full. I didn't want boobs or my period. I wasn't waiting for those things; I didn't go to the bathroom and pull down my pants and cross my fingers wishing for blood. Gross...and such a pain. And boobs...I didn't look at the small triangles of the flesh and wish they filled out a sweater.

I did wish my quads were bigger. I checked them out when I ran suicide sprints, each day examining how it swelled with the speed, pushing it harder. Becky never practiced, except for those we must we must we must increase our bust exercises from the Judy Blume novels, which sure wasn't helping our relay team any and I doubted it was enhancing her cup size – which I told her but she said it was worth the try.

"Hey, what's wrong?" she asked, but I still couldn't look at her. "It's not like you like him anyway, right? It's a good thing. It's his way of saying he thinks you're

pretty and the hottest guy in the eighth grade saying you're pretty is a very cool thing."

The bell rang, relieving me of a response.

"Fuck," she said, "Late again."

Becky had what my little sister would call a potty mouth. I slammed my locker and followed her down the hall to gym class, which is where we met. We had both run the 400 in less than 60 seconds. She said I ran like a gazelle, I told her we should run the 4 by 400 in the Junior Olympics. We've been friends ever since. Anyway, Johnny had gym our period – and we were doing indoor volleyball with the eighth graders.

"Hurry up," Becky said, already far ahead of me, dodging people as they quickly slinked into classrooms. I didn't run. We had five minutes to change and then get out on the gym floor before we were considered "Late." I watched her turn the corner and duck into the locker room.

Becky had traded with another girl so her locker would be near mine. She was half-naked when I got there. She pulled on a jog bra – which she most definitely needed – as I pulled off my shirt and undid my lock standing naked like a boy. Then I felt weird. Like Eve in the Garden of Eden after she bit that apple, I felt naked and even though I stood there topless tons of times, it felt wrong this time. It took me three times to undo the lock and I felt hot. I grabbed the wrinkled tank top from the locker and pulled it over my head.

I pulled on my soccer shorts and some old socks that needed to be washed and Becky wiped some lip-gloss across her lips.

"I have some A-cup bras," she said. "I'll give them to you later." She swooped up her hair and we were gone, out the door and onto the bleachers. The gym teachers were walking around with clipboards, like important football coaches before a big game. Only they were just taking attendance, the only thing that seemed to matter in gym class, attendance and attitude. Attitude being how much of the gym teacher's butt you could kiss each quarter.

They told us to keep the same teams as yesterday and just rotate one to the right. That, as fate would have it, put our team against Johnny's team. And it was "Johnny's team." He was the captain, he was the best. We lined up in our three by three formation. I started in the back corner, the serving spot. I couldn't help myself and snuck a look at Johnny. He was hunkered over bent-knees, ready for action. Looking at him only made the ball go directly to him when I served it; he set the ball for some tall guy who played on the basketball team, and then that guy spiked it on us. My service turn was over.

Our team lost three straight games in a row before I had a chance to reconvene with Becky in the locker room.

"I saw you flirting with Johnny," she said.

"I was not."

"Come on."

"I hardly even spoke to him."

"Whatever. I saw you chuck the ball under the net a few times aiming right for his balls. Luckily he has fast hands." She smiled with her line about the hands. I'm sure they had hooked up, on the tennis courts, two dances ago.

"He was being a jerk—I mean the teams were unfair and he was acting like they were better."

"Well you should go for it. I mean, I know I'm right about your boobs, they're about to come in."

I didn't like her talking about them or acting as if she knew something about how things were going to go for them. Plus, I had never even thought about Johnny until he brought up my body. I wished Becky had never told me because now I have ideas and that's just stupid.

"I don't like him."

"He's sooo cute," she said, purposefully egging me on.

What's worse is that now I was thinking about my boobs. Should I be wearing a bra? They don't bounce or anything but there is something there that's not, well, as it was before. Suddenly, I didn't feel like taking off my t-shirt. Becky must have sensed it because she turned away and gave me some privacy. Flashing everyone my half-ness, my state of growth, is probably rude. I wonder why my mom didn't give me a bra. Wasn't she suppose to know when to do that? Isn't it her job?

"Hurry up already," she said. "We can talk to him out there."

"I don't want to."

God is she boy-crazy, I thought. But, we did hurry and we did get there in time to talk to him.

"Hi Johnny," Becky said.

"Hey Beck," he replied.

"Heard you kicked ass in gym today," Becky said, kissing his ass.

I rolled my eyes.

"Hey. Don't roll your eyes, we did give you an ass-whipping."

"Maybe you'll get an A+," I said.

He laughed a big laugh with his whole body, something he did often and easily.

"You hate losing don't you?"

"I guess so."

"I respect that," he said with a big smile. "Don't take it out on me though when the teams are that unfair."

I smiled then, knowing he was trying to acquiesce. Becky started to smile too because she was successful in aiding and abetting this flirtation. Finally the bell rang just before we all started to look like a bunch of clowns.

He took a quick start down the hall and Becky huddled in close to me.

"Mmm," she said. "Something's there for sure—did you feel it?"

I just kinda giggled, acting like a girl, not knowing what else to do when feeling giddy and high like that.

I didn't see Johnny until after Becky had left me for her Science class. He

was at his locker. I had never noticed his locker was right there, even though I had probably seen him stand by it a thousand times. He grabbed a math book and turned to look around. I looked away and then felt stupid knowing I should be braver but also knowing I had nothing I wanted to say.

It was then that I saw Sandy. Her skirt was hung low on her waist and her belt was trying to hold it up but failing. The skirt drooped in loops where the belt tried to hold desperately to her body. She was getting skinnier and I didn't think it could possibly be good for her field hockey.

That day in English class, Trip told her she looked skinny. And good. He said she looked great. Sandy smiled.

I started wearing Becky's bras to school. I did fill out an A-cup and I was happy to have skipped the training bra simply because I hated the thought that my boobs were in training. In training for what and exactly how did they practice? It was just another stupid thing.

I was training all the time. High school soccer season was over but I still played traveling team. Also, basketball was in full swing and I was always trying to get Becky to train with me for the Junior Olympics. I guess all that training paid off.

I wore my basketball shorts to school one day in late February. We had a game and we had decided to psyche ourselves up by wearing the team shorts in the freezing cold. The shorts were silky and ugly, gold mostly with black trim. I didn't wear my high tops to school because I didn't want to ruin the tread—they were for gym floors only. I had on my Tretorns, without socks.

I knew where his locker was now. I checked it everyday, sometimes purposely walking around the square of our halls when I didn't have to, just to see if he was there. Today, he was there.

"Sexy mamma," was all he said. Then he whistled. If he hadn't whistled, I would have thought he was making fun of me for wearing ugly shorts in winter. But the whistle had a different emotion behind it. It embarrassed me and got my face hot.

"We have a game today," was all I could think to say.

"I might have to check out that game," he said.

"You would deign to attend the girls' game instead of the boys' game?" I asked, getting my groove on.

"If you play as good as you look...heck, even if you don't..." he said. I had kept walking past him and had turned away but before I did, he let me see him look at my butt. In English class I took my seat and forgot to look around at all the Amoeba members to see what they were wearing today. The journal topic was already on the board but I forgot to read it and forgot to write how much I hated it. Instead, I wrote about him.

I saw him in the hall today. He stopped me. I was wearing my basketball shorts as a psyche and he looked at them. He looked at my butt too. On purpose, as if he were trying to say he liked what he saw. It's weird

because just last night, when we were running suicides after practice I looked down at my leg each time I brought it up and I could see the outline of my quad and I thought I wished he could see them. Now he has.

I didn't write his name inside my journal for fear I might jinx it or he might somehow know I was writing down our story. But I did write it on the cover of my Reader's Anthology. Johnny Johnny Johnny. Then I wrote his last name, in cursive like a signature—McFadden. If we got married our kids would only move one letter up the alphabet from where I am right now. They'd never be at the heads of lines or the last ones in line...hmm, I wonder if that was good. The bell rang and everyone got up to leave.

Tim came over to join me in our push to get out the door. We approached it, like always, with backpacks in hand and tried to squeeze our way out of the narrow opening filled with Amoebas and their entourage. It was especially crowded and I didn't see anything until it happened.

Sandy's face planted on the ground—bouncing off Courtney's shoulder and my backpack landing face first on the green speckled floor. Everyone cleared back quickly, making a perfect circle around the body until Courtney went toward her, bent down, and tried to turn her over.

"I think she's fainted," Courtney said.

"Get the nurse!" Trip shouted.

"It's because she's not eating enough," Cindy said, quietly to Kimmie.

Her body looked awkward. Frozen in an awkward position, arms bent strangely, knees inward, and so shrunken, so like a little girl. Her hips had vanished and her chest, her chest was almost sunken.

The nurse came and waved her smelling salts back and forth. Sandy opened her eyes, saw everyone, and then closed them again.

"Back away," the nurse said. "Please, she needs air."

No one moved until the principal emerged, a young man who looked concerned, yet at a loss—his presence alone making the crowd move back and some drift away—but he just stood there, looking down from a distance.

Sandy opened her eyes again and the nurse cooed, "You're going to be fine." The nurse pulled her up to a seated position and it was clear that she would live. A small drip of blood hung from her nose, which the nurse quickly wiped away. Our principal finally sprung to action and helped the nurse lift her to her feet. They helped her walk towards the nurse's office; Sandy avoided everyone's stares.

We heard that they called her parents and her mother showed up. A petite woman who played golf, gardened and ran. She was too tanned from all that outdoor activity and she was slight, sinewy, like long-distance runners are apt to be. The nurse said her daughter was anorexic. That she was well below her normal body weight. That she had lost 22 pounds since her physical for field hockey in September. The nurse asked whether her mother had noticed anything, whether she found it strange that her daughter was living off 100 calories a day—an apple

maybe, some sugar-free gummy bears.

Her mother said that thinness ran in the family.

The nurse said she had to go to the hospital or she might die.

We won our game that night by 24 points. I scored 18, a lot for me. Johnny was there as he said he would be. His friends came too, they cheered loudly, and a little obnoxiously—they said one girl was fat and slow and they hooted at her as she ran down the court to get back on defense. Having the boys there made everyone on our team happy, upbeat, and giddy. They livened up the echoey gym that was usually just packed with our parents and siblings.

Our team was psyched and we were winning; we had a lot going for us that night. When I knocked down some girl and she went sprawling across the gym floor, I thought about Sandy laid out in our hallway. The other girls on my team had heard about it but it was just gossip to them. Something she had coming to her anyway, they figured.

After the game, Johnny tried to talk to me. So did my dad, so I had to introduce them. I didn't want Johnny to say anything weird in front of my father, so I walked to our car quickly and got in.

Our journal topic was, "I feel fat when..." I hated it when Mrs. Kazowloski tried so obviously to give us life lessons. Why couldn't she just pick a pertinent book like all the other English teachers, then we could talk about theme, and it wouldn't have to be so personal. She gave us a lecture on body image and self-esteem. She had the nurse come in and talk about symptoms of anorexia and bulimia. No one said anything the whole class.

It was easy to get out that day, no one lingered in the hall, and the flow was clockwise out the door, to the right, as I needed it to be. As Tim and I walked side by side, we heard Kimmie tell Courtney about Sandy. She had tubes and she weighed 92 pounds. She told the nurse to eat her food if it was so good for her. The nurse would only take one bite so then Sandy would only take one bite. Sandy accused the nurse of not wanting to get fat.

Tim and I stopped at my locker where I threw everything in. Becky raced up to us and screamed, "You are soooo lucky."

Tim narrowed his eyes and I said, "Why?"

"He is so going to ask you out."

"Who?" Tim said.

"Johnny McFadden," Becky said.

"You like him?" Tim wanted to know.

"No," I said. "He's in my gym class."

Becky smiled and bounced up and down. "He went to her game," she said.

"Be careful," Tim said.

"Why?" I said.

"Just, because..." he said, "he's one of those guys." And he shook his head.

Becky just smiled with her teeth perfect from the braces she got off last month. Tim walked away.

"He was going to ask you out but your dad was there," Becky said in a screaming whisper.

"He was not," I said, thinking back, remembering him following us, trying to get closer, and trying to get me alone.

"He's going to ask you to the Eighth Grade Dance."

"I can't go. My parents would never let me go on a date with a boy."

"Tell them you're going with me. I'm going with Steve. We can all go together so it's not like a real date or anything."

"You think he'll really ask?"

"Definitely."

"What should I say?"

"Yes," she said. "You're going to say yes and we're going to have a great time. I'm so excited for you."

I went to the Eighth Grade Dance wearing a dress of Becky's. My parents were OK with it because it was a dance, like every other dance, held in the cafeteria, hosted by the school, and Becky's mom was driving us to and from the dance. They knew we couldn't go anywhere; the chaperones wouldn't let you leave and come back so you had to stay until your ride got there, sort of. Unless you went to the tennis courts past the baseball diamond and just met your parents in the parking lot later—pretending you came out of some door around back.

But, Johnny didn't take me to the woods. He took me on the dance floor. He pulled me close to him as only a few of the boys had the balls to do. I felt him warm and tight next to me. His hands drifted to right above my butt, everyone watching, seeing how far he would go, how far I would let him. I pulled him and spun us. He laughed.

"Are you leading?"

"I'm moving us."

"I like it," he said.

We danced every dance together. He never said, "I have to dance with my friend," like some of the other dates said going off to flirt with girls who liked them. He never spent too long with his friends when a fast song came on. He danced with me and I danced with him. Becky smiled at me across the room and I felt great.

Then he kissed me. Softly, on my lips and he held us together and I couldn't breath. Until Mrs. Hamer came up and pulled us apart.

"You know the rules," she said. But she smiled, knowing everything.

Sandy had gained seven pounds and been allowed to leave the hospital. She danced, surrounded by her friends, helping her have a good time. She was smiling as usual, as if nothing had ever changed.

Madonna came on and Johnny pointed his finger at me because I had already explained to him that I loved Madonna. He swung me around and said, "You're funny."

"Funny ha ha or funny weird."

"I meant weird but you're also funny funny," he said.

"That doesn't sound so nice."

"It's supposed to be," he said.

"That's like saying, „you're a freak. ""

"I just mean you're in all those Gifted & Talented classes and you play hardcore sports like softball and basketball, and you're friends with the sluts..."

"Hey, Becky's never said anything bad about you."

"You know what I mean, you're all these different things mixed up into one and it makes you..."

He was trying to be sincere, which I thought was amusing. I tried to hide my smile.

"...not what you'd think," he said. "A heck of a lot funnier."

I laughed because he was hardly making any sense at all, yet somehow it was still perfectly understandable.

Then he pulled me close to him conspiratorially, "See," he smiled so wide his eyes scrunched up and made a thousand wrinkles. "I'm funny too."

Mrs. Hamer spied us from her perch on the stage, cocked her head, and wagged her finger. I'm sure that's the only reason he let me go.

The Amoeba
