

The Art of Unrequited Love

By Nick Anderson

Grade/Year/Age/Girl Reference Guide

Real World | January 2009 - Present | 21 - ?? | Girl at Treehouse Gym, Hannah, Barb, Nicole, Emily

College | July 2005 - December 2008 | 18 - 21 | Good Sarah again, Brittany, Gamer Sarah, Felicia, Laura, Mysterious Sarah, Kristy

12th | 2004 - 2005 | 17- 18 | Coco, Emily

11th | 2003 - 2004 | 16 - 17 | Evil Sarah

10th | 2002 - 2003 | 15 - 16 | Jamie, Bad Sarah, Alicia

9th | 2001 - 2002 | 14 - 15 | Good Sarah, Laura

8th | 2000 - 2001 | 13 - 14 | Princess Megan, Amber Rose, Dannette?

7th | 1999 - 2000 | 12 - 13 | Erin, Nicole?

6th | 1998 - 1999 | 11 - 12 | Megan?

5th | 1997 - 1998 | 10 - 11 | Chelsea

4th | 1996 -1997 | 9 - 10 | Chelsea

3rd | 1995 -1996 | 8 - 9 | Chelsea

2nd | 1994 -1995 | 7 - 8 | N/A

1st | 1993 - 1994 | 6 - 7 | Heather

Chapter 1 - Heather (1st grade - 1993)

When I was in first grade, I met Heather. She was the first girl I ever remember getting gooey feelings about, those damn gooey feelings that would be the bane of my existence for the rest of my life. At the time though, the feeling was strange, unpredictable, and most importantly, nice - the static fields between our shoulders as we sat side by side at the craft table, the secret, nonchalant hand holding on the playground - they moved me in a way I could not yet describe. I can't say I remember exactly how it happened. I'm pretty sure there was some initial bonding over a Duck Tales puzzle, that lead to an affair that lasted almost a semester. In the warm Texas autumn I would chase this bobbing pile of blonde hair around the playground, follow her up trees, through ponds, absolutely anywhere she would lead me. But sometime in November, while sitting in the cafeteria, she threatened to break my arm if I told anyone that we were boyfriend and girlfriend. Glaring over the table, she snapped a Dunkaroo's cookie stick with two fingers, dabbing the ends in chocolate dipping sauce to simulate blood.

I've always known how to pick 'em. All things considered though, this was by far the best relationship I've had, ever. It was fun while it lasted, ended somewhat amicably, we were friends for years afterwards - if I could go back in time, I'd rest my hand on my little six year old shoulder and say "You enjoy this, you little spaz in your weird purple shirts and Goosebumps t-shirt. Things aren't going to be this good for a long time."

Chapter 2 - Chelsea (3rd Grade - 1995)

Third grade does weird things to people. Or it did to me, I don't know about you personally. For me it went kind of like this - I was finally starting to become cognizant of the world, which was exploding with new and more confusing things daily. I was obsessed with The Mighty Morphin' Power Rangers, which provided a nice launching pad of absurdity for my knowledge of the world and the laws of physics governing it. Mexico caught on fire for a short time, forcing us to stay indoors as a thick haze painted the sky bright orange day and night for two weeks straight. But hands down, the most disorienting thing about the third grade was Chelsea.

Chelsea's mom gave us slide projector presentations about sea creatures. Once a year since I had started elementary school, our teacher would lead us to a darkened room off the library, where the calm, slow-speaking woman would click through square images of vibrant coral and sea amenities. I wish I had more context to give you on this, but I really have no idea what all this was about. I have a feeling no one did, as teacher and student alike nodded understandingly, acceptingly, as she explained the migration patterns of sea turtles.

In third grade Chelsea was in my class, and I finally made the connection when crazy sea lady showed up for a big presentation we were putting on. It was an after school sort of thing, informal, in that same weird little room off the library. Still parents lined the walls, video cameras in hand, as we sat indian style in the center of the floor hugging giant dioramas that smelled of rubber cement and Crayola water-based paint. Chelsea's presentation was on Manatees of all things - she stood at the front of the room, swaying from foot to foot, clutching a paper mache sea cow to her chest like a giant teddy bear. Nervously she explained about a dozen memorized facts I can't remember as her long brown ponytail danced back and forth rhythmically. I really dug that ponytail.

These things are hard to communicate when you're young. It's silly enough just feeling them. The strange urges - to look at the ponytail, to touch the ponytail . . . to yank the ponytail? I just wanted to touch her, I think, I wasn't sure in what way. When we sat close my hand twitched like a divining rod, pulling me towards something, and that feeling of not knowing what result it

would yield terrified me. So I never did. No touching, no yanking, not even any talking - I'd be surprised if by then end of that year she even knew what my name was. While other boys 'did' - that is, garnished their understanding out of yanked ponytails, touched hands, flipped skirts - I simply watched.

That is not to say that I was a quiet child, by any stretch. Oh, I liked to talk. I loved attention. At the time I had my career options narrowed down to rockstar or talkshow host. A couple of friends and I had formed the singing-sensation "The Milkyways" (named after the candy bar, not the heavenly body, of course), but for some reason a trio of pre-adolescent choir boys singing Beach Boys songs wasn't really a market niche in those days. On several occasions I would also come to school adorning a tiny suit coat my mom had purchased at goodwill and begin to interview classmates en masse, making small quips in an interview that was really about me.

Sorry, I haven't given ample time to Chelsea - this story is her's after all, not mine. But I want to paint a picture for you. Third grade is the beginning of alot of things, I think, not the least of which is your abrupt release into the Plinko board of social hierarchy. Sure, there have been signs, maybe some indications up to this point, but it's all been guesswork. All of a sudden that music prodigy gets a little too inspired by Freddie Mercury and abandons the piano to start hand-stitching pleather vests - the game up to this point is null, you could land anywhere. Me, I never really stopped playing dress up and make believe. No matter where I've been in my life, there's been some sort of goodwill suit coat, some sold out stadium waiting for me in my mind.

I'm not going to say that particular skill set didn't come in handy at times, but it certainly did very little to help me win the affections of a real girl, who could not see the stage lights or hear the roar of the crowd behind me. The closer I got to initiating contact, just any sort of words, the more the orchestra faded and was drowned out by the sound of my own rushing heartbeat, a clock ringing silent alarm, reminding me that the spirit and courage I had counted on to get me this far was all imaginary.

No third grader should ever take love this seriously. If you are in third grade and you are reading this, *yank that ponytail*. I don't know why, but it works. Case in point - Trevor.

Trevor was tall and athletic, for a third grader, and talked with his butt. He would literally bend over, grab his cheeks, and begins moving them in a pattern that resembled speech for all the girls on the playground. I stood there baffled, as the girls swooned and giggled, asking Trevor's ass questions like some kind of surreal ventriloquist act. Chelsea was a big fan - "Trevor's talking with his butt again" her friend would run up and inform her, and together they'd scurry away to sit on the dirty gravel and stare into Trevor's crack.

How do you compete with that? How do you even approach it? You might as well ask Dali why he thought clocks should melt. You couldn't. You just couldn't. So the whole year I didn't say a thing. Not a damn thing. Of all the things I look back on I think that's what gets me the most.

I made up for it in dreams, though, the most effective anesthetic for prolonged periods of longing. Texas classrooms are designed for the modern daydreamer - the intense rays of sunlight coming in from the single pane windows, the quiet, cool hum of industrial air conditioners creating a chilly vacuum removed from the summer heat. And the carpet - the grey blue weave was still new when I was there, though by the time I left it was worn to that itchy Brillo pad consistency that's just as hard as the concrete below it. I remember making friendship rings out of the strands when they were still plush enough to pull out individually, and knowing even then that there were parts of that school I'd want to keep with me in one way or another. In those dreaming spaces, those high ceilings and abnormally large chairs, I found no trouble creating a private place in my mind where me and Chelsea were not only familiar, but were in love - the deep, actual love that only a third grader can feel. For a while I imagined me and Chelsea living in this sort of bizarre white room beneath my driveway. I had it all planned out - there would be a secret elevator, sunken into the pavement, that my parents wouldn't know about. It would raise out of the ground when I approached, lower me down to this sterile-feeling white room with various pieces of white furniture and best of all Chelsea. Her brown hair and eyes were the only things that punctuated the serene space that glowed like the inside of a movie-set spacecraft.

I swear to god I'm not a creep. I have no idea from whence this Silence of the Lambs-esque

fantasy came, but frankly I refuse to worry myself about it. One of the tenants of childhood is immunity to impure thought, so wherever that thought came from, it was a good place. Plus this is where this dream ended - I truly had no idea what we would do in this place together.

Another dream I had involved guns. The aliens began their descent into the classroom from the roof, the windows darkening and fog billowing down from the fluorescent lights. We had to act fast, for as we all know, aliens wait for no man. Mrs. Hudson goes to the coat closet and retrieves the rifle the school has provided for us in case of situations like this - it weighs a ton and she does not think she will be able to fire it. She scans the classroom for the manliest of the third grade boys to take the mantle of exterminating this otherworldly threat, an action which will consequently save the entire class, including Chelsea. Especially Chelsea.

Mrs. Hudson initially makes the mistake of handing the rifle to some guy who's name I can't remember, we'll call him Ryan. As he begins to inspect it nervously, I intervene to correct a glaring oversight -

"Ryan," I ask him, "Have you ever even shot a gun?"

"Well," he admits sheepishly, "I've shot a BB gun before . . ."

I shake my head. "That's what I thought." I say, removing the gun from his childish hands.

It's important to note that I had never fired a gun either, not even a BB gun. But this was not seen as a problem. Like a pro I leaned down to one knee, the gun making all sorts of clicking sounds I had heard in movies. Chelsea would clasp her hands and look at me hopefully, trustingly - as a ceiling tile descended slowly, revealing a squat, E.T.-like being, backlit dramatically with colored lights.

Here's where things got complicated - see, I actually really liked aliens. As a concept at least. Usually at this point in the fantasy I began to communicate with the alien, reaching a peaceful agreement - he was just confused, did not realize he was barging in on a long division lesson. That's just how aliens enter places, it's not their fault. I make good friends with the aliens, sometimes even leaving with them. Regardless of the outcome, everyone is impressed and jealous. Especially that dope Ryan. He totally would have shot the poor alien.

The trade off for daydreams has always been time - at the end of third grade I had a headful of fantasies but still was unable to communicate them. If anything the canyon between me and reality had widened, and I thought about Chelsea so much that it was now impossible to even see her as a real person. Everything she did was imbued with the drama of yearner's exaggeration, and suddenly the orchestra was playing for her too - as she skipped through a foursquare court, as she opened a carton of milk - I remember feeling just this gush of who knows what as she attempted to pull the little flaps apart without ripping them, the most pensive look on her brow. It was living poetry, it really was.

This daily routine continued. Through summer, to fourth grade. Through fourth grade summer to fifth grade. I've got more stories from these years if you want to hear them sometime, but they really have nothing to do with Chelsea, apart from the way every story has something to do with the person you loved at the time.

So let's skip ahead to fifth grade. I'm in Mrs. Guice's class, which is great because she loved Star Wars. Now, waiting three years for a girl is one thing, but being too shy to talk to one deserves neither pity nor praise. It's simply embarrassing. I wish I could take all the sighs I breathed those years and replace them with exclamation points. But then I also wonder if that would have even mattered. Some days I think yes, others I think no.

What happened was, I had a sleepover. One of those great fifth grade sleepovers where you pass out at five in the morning after running shirtless through the neighborhood waving empty mountain dew two liters. If you've never ran shirtless through your neighborhood in the middle of the night I recommend it, it's extremely cleansing. But you tend to let things slip in the throes of uninhibited youthful catharsis. Like maybe the fact that you had a crush, or had had crush for a very long time and had never said anything about it.

"Since THIRD GRADE?" Jake wooped. "Oh man. That's too long."

Everyone agreed.

"Are you going to tell her? LET US TELL HER" Robby pleaded, his eyes glowing with anticipation.

"No no no," I insisted, "I can handle it. Don't."

“We’re going to tell her.” Robby insisted, crawling into his sleeping bag. “Or you need to. Somebody needs to.”

As I closed my eyes that night I felt uncomfortable. I had reason to be. Ten year old boys aren’t exactly known for keeping their mouths shut, or taking social norms into account before they speak. And sure enough, all through Monday’s lunch Robby smiled so wide that secrets were being secreted from the gaps between his big dumb teeth. He wasn’t saying anything to the guys that weren’t there, he was a pretty decent guy that way. But when I saw him scanning the cafeteria I began to scarf my PB&J, while he in turn began to haul ass through his Lunchables. My mom never let me eat Lunchables.

Still stuffing crackers into his mouth Robby sprinted from the lunch table and myself after him, out the open double doors, down the gravel-dirt path to the playground.

In those days Chelsea spent her time on the old wooden playscape, or the swings near by. This day she was swinging softly by herself, like a dove swaying back and forth on a light branch caught in a breeze. The smile, maybe that’s what got me the most.

Robby was skidding in the gravel, giggling wildly, B lining towards her. I grabbed him by the shoulder and begged him:

“Please Robby, I don’t know what she’ll say.”

He looked confused, but slightly moved by what was now visible anxiety.

“That’s why were asking her, right?”

I sit on the top level of the new metal playscape, by the fire pole. I can see Chelsea from there, I can see Robby talking to her. Jake too, why did he go? He didn’t need to be a part of this. Occasionally Chelsea looks over and I avert my eyes even though she’s a good thirty yards away. What are they talking about for so long? It feels like days before Robby finally gives her a nod and runs back to the spot below where I sat.

“She says she doesn’t like you.”

Oh god, the pain in this moment -

“She doesn’t want to see a movie with you.”

It was like being slowly punctured by the fragments of every hope shattering inside you -

“But she will if you pay her.”

“What?”

“Three dollars an hour. Five dollars for a kiss.”

I’m going to be honest with you - I really considered this. I checked my velcro Power Rangers wallet, and as usual found absolutely no money, just the backs of some action figure boxes and a cool piece of string I had found on the floor at the grocery store.

“How long is the movie we were gonna to see?” I asked Robby.

Robby just shook his head.

Well I didn’t do it. Me and Chelsea never spoke again (or ever, I guess). It felt awful and unusual to even think about her now - what was there left to say? Up to this point, I figured I had all probable outcomes figured out. For years I had planned in my mind what I would say in every situation, I was just waiting for the fuse to be lit and I would be ready. Only one factor remained unaccounted for - that Chelsea was destined to grow up to become a total bitch. Like I said, the game up to this point is null. That dove on the swing had sharp talons and a beak just waiting to peck holes in boyhood romances. You think I’m just being bitter, but its true. I went to middle school with Chelsea too - even worse, my mom got a job in that weird little room off the library with Chelsea’s mom the following year. Every morning she would drive me and my sister to work with her, where I would catch a bus from the elementary school to the middle school along with Chelsea, Chelsea’s friend, and a couple of our neighbors. We sat together in that room every damn morning for an entire year, not talking, but this time I guess it made more sense. The last memory I have of Chelsea is standing behind her outside, waiting for the bus to pick us up. Her friend is standing close to her and whispering, and she just shakes her head and says loudly, “Once a no, always a no.” Damn Chelsea. I got the point the first time.

Chapter 3 - Megan? (6th grade - 1998)

I can't say for sure what awaits sinners after death, but Cedar Park Middle School was created to give us the general impression. Not just my school, but all of them - grouping eleven to thirteen year olds together in an attempt to absolve their private struggles collectively is like - well, like middle school. You know exactly what I'm talking about.

It isn't easy for anyone, as hard as it is to convince yourself of that at the time - it has nothing to do with how good you look or how not-awkward you manage to be, because you are so busy viewing yourself from a tiny internal mirror about the size of a dentist tool - you inspect one piece at a time, seeing each individual flaw, but never getting the gestalt which is usually not all that terrible.

I was not all that terrible. I look at the pictures now and think that I look like a pretty typical eleven year old; factory stamped, standard issue. But at the time I could not believe that I was anything other than an unholy contrivance sent to destroy conversations and run first impressions directly into brick walls. Not one was to be left alive.

One day as I stood outside a classroom, I attempted to balance myself on the back of a desk - on the chair part, which was attached to a desk-surface with metal loops that held the whole thing up. This is really hard to do, if you've ever tried it. I was finally reaching an equilibrium, rocking back and forth rapidly to maintain my masterful levitation, when an older boy walking by me stopped.

"What are you doing to that chair?" he asked.

I paused, confused.

"Hey, this kid's fucking that desk!" he yelled, attracting the attention of everyone within earshot. Laughs mixed with feigned disgust was thrown to me by peers, as I attempted to explain the whole balancing thing they did not seem to be grasping. Unable to lay logic over the tops of the heckles I walked away sheepishly, vowing to never perform any activity out of the ordinary in public again.

That is how those days went - I walked to class, I tried not to do anything eye-catching . . . I

sat in class, I tried to hide my doodles so no one would see. From every orifice I was teeming with this unusual energy that was contraband to the middle school mindset - it could not be relieved in small spurts on P.E. courts or through engaging social settings - it came out all at once, through my pencil or my mouth, through my walk and my awkward and still developing hand gestures that at the time looked less like body language and more like the pantomime of an animatronic Goofy welcoming you to the Epcot Center.

But there was one place where this energy was welcome - not just welcome, but expected. And that was the middle school dance. In talking to others I've been told that my school's dances were much better than theirs - mine took place in the darkened gym, and lasted from six until ten.

"Until ten?" someone always says. "Mine were right after school, our parents had to pick us up by five. They were in the fully-lit cafeteria."

Sucks to be you guys. Did anyone even go? I probably wouldn't have. Actually, that's not true; I would have shown up anywhere I was told I might be able to touch a girl. But that's beside the point.

At five forty we would line up outside the double doors. Since three o'clock I would have been twitching on the couch nervously, too preoccupied to play Tekken 3, my outfit of choice already laying on my bed like the remains left from a vaporizer gun in a cheesy science fiction movie. For this particular dance, the ensemble was simple - a bright blue shirt with a group of aliens standing around on the back, one of which was dressed eccentrically and wearing a rainbow clown wig. Above them in bold graffiti letters was written "THERE'S ONE IN EVERY CROWD". This was my way of telling the ladies what exactly it was I was bringing to the table. This was accented by a pair of not-yet-washed Lee pipes, the pants that finally answered the deafening cry of the public for smaller pockets stacked within larger pockets, several layers deep like Russian nesting dolls. To finish the whole thing off was a pair of near-new Airwalks, blue and grey canvas with fluffy soles and flat bottoms that I had only worn through the grass once, whose bright white tips remained relatively un-scuffed.

Everyone was wearing carefully planned out attire, what my mom called "Looking their best without wanting people to think they're trying to look their best". Except for Ryan Butts. He was

wearing a suit and cummerbund.

“He cleans up nice.” Joey said. Joey wore basically the same thing as me, only his tshirt was bright orange and said Quicksilver on it, with a picture of a wave. Both our scalps were saturated with hair gel, and we stunk of Adidas cologne. This was the top of our game.

To get to the gym we had to walk through the cafeteria, where the lunch lady stood behind a portable vending cart selling nachos, popcorn, and glowsticks (?) with all the passion of court ordered public service. Everyone threw their jackets and purses into a big pile beside the coat racks on the stage, and made their way down the surreal, unlit hallway to the gym.

Inside the giant dark space, bad 90’s R&B permeated the air while colored lights and disco balls spun eccentrically across the crowds of our peers, obscuring them, making it hard to find who we were looking for. Me and Joey were supposed to find Jake and Steven, but soon were separated ourselves - everywhere there were bodies and faces and laughter and soon I could not tell where in the gym I was.

If I could go back to any time to relive the thrill of the chase, I would choose a middle school dance. Before we could drink, before it was even possible to have sex, before anyone had boyfriends or exes, there were these huddled groups of self conscious boys and girls that knew nothing except the exhilaration of placing one’s heart on the line for the sudden rush of endorphins that came with being liked. Something less than love but more than toleration. All any of us wanted was to be preferred, in some way, to be the one out of the several to be dancing instead of swaying idly, hands to their sides. You could just feel the awkward energy. Something about the whole situation made me just a little more capable, and I found myself staring at girls, receiving stares in return . . . no longer caring where Joey was.

I was not overwhelmingly confident, but I had a pattern that worked. At the first downbeat there would be the nervous hussle, the whisper-and-stares - the segregated masses attempting to rearrange themselves boy-girl boy-girl. I was too nervous to just jump in and start asking girls to dance - I waited for all this hubub to settle. Because about a minute in she would surface - the girl that had been passed over.

This has *always* been my girl. The first-picked never suited me, never wanted me - you

could see them tallying the boys circling them like vultures, keeping silent score. No thanks. There is something innately unattractive about a girl that can conjure a partner with the flick of her hips - especially the self-awareness that develops from being told that she is pretty far too often.

No, the real catch will never have her choice of dance partner. She'll probably be wearing neon leggings that her mom picked out, her hair may be a bit frizzy and her makeup silly and unwarranted, but when she smiles at you you're getting sincerity, and that beats short skirts and flavored lip gloss without contest. It might also be important to note that when you meet this girl again in college she will be gorgeous and you will wonder why you walked right past her all those years ago.

Still, I struggled to make that connection - I too was a non-first-picked, and rarely could I convince myself that an unattended female would prefer me over not dancing at all. Like I said, unholy contrivance of destroying first impressions. But I admired them from a distance, like at an art museum, and eventually, when we would finally be standing close enough and she would smile and I would laugh and there would be an unspoken moment of "well, we're at a dance, I suppose we might as well . . ." and then we would be dancing.

I danced with many different girls. Some of them were short and looked up at me, asked me questions or told me things as we danced. Others were tall and I spent the two or three minutes staring at their chin, brushed hastily with foundation, wondering if they were enjoying this spinning-in-circles thing we were doing. Yes, there has never been anything quite like the middle school dance.

Somewhere in the corner by the bleachers I stopped to catch my breath, where there were not so many people. The DJ was playing "Totsee Roll" and we were all shaking awkwardly, separately, to the aggressively sexual take on a beloved candy when a girl approached me. She was standing so close, literally looking me up and down like livestock.

Without much warning she threw her arms around my neck and began to dance with me. I could not dance to fast songs, so I swung my torso back and forth to the sound of synth cymbals, trying to rationalize this girl that was somehow feeling this beat like nobody's business, her eyes

closed and body swaying like a pendulum. Her long brown hair showed little sign of careful planning, so unlike the braided updos of the rest of her grade. She wore a grey fitted t-shirt and torn jeans. And her eyes, when she opened them, were not confused and muddled, but clean, cutting, razors.

There was Joey! The ol' hound, he was dancing in the same corner as me, with this tall blonde girl. She was very much not good looking, but she had the same knowing sway in her hips, which unlike so many 6th graders were beginning to show shape. Joey adjusted his arms around them trying to find a comfortable, yet polite position, as the girl more or less used him as a prop.

My girl - I believe she told me her name was Megan? - leaned in and hugged me as the song faded into the speakers. "Thanks!" she said, turning to answer the loud calls of the blonde girl that still clung to Joey's shoulders. He gave me this satisfied smirk, nodding at the developing breasts of his partner. Girls did not hug us. Even dancing was only accomplished by the obligatory nature of the event. Megan pushed her tiny frame into my body as she jabbered with the blond girl, twisting to a new song that was just starting.

The girls made conversation when the songs ended and stage whispered amongst themselves, positioning us so that they could talk more easily. Me and Joey bumped our eyebrows, looking to each other and then the girls - we were amazed, but feigned minor satisfaction as though this had been the expected result of the night. A few more songs and me and Joey were ready to up the ante - we went to the bathroom and discussed it privately.

"I don't know dude, girlfriends."

"Yeah we could totally dude."

"Who's going to ask them out?"

This was a task that, at our age, was generally outsourced.

"You can ask mine out. I'll ask yours out."

We nodded.

Returning to the floor I immediately broke whatever rhythm I had established and stood perfectly still beside Megan.

“What’s going on?” Megan asked, attempting to dance with my rigid body. “You look like you have bad news?”

Joey approached her from the left, tapping her on the shoulder politely.

“Excuse me, Nick would like me to ask you something.”

I stood unresponsive, eyes averted, trembling nervously as if at a defendant’s stand.

“He would like to know if *you* would like to go out with him.”

Megan looked at me; I smiled back politely and nodded my head. She turned back to Joey.

“When?”

We exchanged confused glances - this particular form of dating vernacular was foreign to us, as we had always thought that to go out with someone meant to be in a boyfriend/girlfriend situation.

“Um, forever I guess.”

I shook my head angrily.

“Or no, just for now. For whenever. Until you don’t want to anymore.”

Megan and the tall blonde girl smirked at each other, and erupted into laughter. “Yeah ok, that sounds good.” she grabbed my arm and resumed dancing.

“Nick, do me!” Joey whined, refusing contact with the blonde girl until all was settled. I can only assumed they worked things out, because that whole night was spent fawning over these girls, awkwardly exchanging conversation and watching their hips, attempting to move at the same time as them. Occasionally they would wander off and we would dart around in the dark like wolves hunting sheep that were slightly smarter than us, and also invisible.

“Where’d she go?” Joey asked.

“She’s over there!” I would say, pointing to Megan.

“No, not her, mine!”

And just when we thought that they had been lost forever, that they had gone home or had been snared in some other boy’s arms, one of them would come wandering out of the crowd, the other following right behind her. We would smile. We knew they were coming back.

I remember wanting to grab Megan’s hand, and doing so. This had never been so easy with

Chelsea; for years I had pined for Chelsea's affections and I could not even manage to touch her finger tips. Now maybe an hour since meeting this girl, I had surpassed years of imagined wants and was breaking new ground with each passing moment.

"Prove it!" the blond girl giggled loudly, "I dare you!"

Megan was dancing in my arms but I couldn't hear her voice.

"If you're being dared to, I think you better." I said, in the most sincere tone I could muster. I had no idea what was going on but I assumed that a dare posed between the two of them could only benefit me.

"Ok, one time." she said to the blonde girl, then turned to face me. Her eyes burst open again and released more of that cool wind, like standing next to an air conditioner just as it kicked on. She leaned in hard and pressed tense lips against mine, and I experienced my first kiss.

"I didn't see it." said the blonde girl. "Doesn't count."

Megan grabbed me by the collar and thrust her face into mine again, this time a little less awkward but still confused and muddled, her body loosely wrapped in my arms. She released and pulled in, twice again.

"Ok ok, that's enough, knock it off." The blonde girl looked away in disgust. Joey starred on slack-jawed like he had just watched a killer whale bite a sailor in half.

"Do you want to-" he asked the blonde girl.

"No."

The couple resumed their merry twirling as I held Megan closer to me, a sort of slow hug-dance ripe with the impure intent of a middle school boy.

Now don't get any ideas. We were in sixth grade for chrissake. Despite the raging hormones I was a little too young to conceive anything beyond exactly what we were doing. But there was a desire tethered to my groin, as unspecific as it was strong. I wanted whatever she had, whatever that was, however I was supposed to get it. Still, I had no idea what was to come next, so we writhed closely against each other until the lights were turned on and the DJ began to play the monster mash.

My mom was waiting in our large blue rapist van outside. It was the most uncool escort

vehicle possible but I didn't care right then. I climbed into the passenger door smiling smugly.

"How'd it go?" she asked.

"I have a girlfriend." I told her, nodding and flashing a thumbs up, like a fighter pilot signaling the death strike to his fellow, equally-cool squadron leaders.

Unsurprisingly, Monday morning felt nothing like Friday night. As most of our time together had been spent aggressively flailing our bodies together, Megan and I found we had scarce few jumping-off points for conversation at school. I tried to carry her backpack for her, lay my coat down over dubious patches of carpet, all the things I'd seen in movies that impressed girls and made you a gentleman - but they did little more than serve to creep out the girl that I liked less and less with each passing class period.

On Tuesday afternoon I stood in the dirt before Megan, who sat on a stump.

"Umm," I stated, attempting to make polite reason of the feelings I'd assumed I'd never have. "I don't want to go out with you anymore."

"K, whatever." Megan nodded and returned her attention to the blonde girl, that sat on an adjacent stump, on Joey's lap. She was a good deal larger than him, and he tried to look badass, nodding to me self-assurately while disguising a wince every time she moved.

Chapter 4 - Erin (7th grade - 1999)

In seventh grade, I was sitting with Ian and Sheldon in the hallway working on a group project, while they talked to a girl they both knew.

“Hey Ian, I heard you got some dick this weekend?”

Sheldon burst into laughter.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Ian reposed. “I got some puss.”

“Whatever, whatever,” the girl said, sashaying away, “Amy?”

“You know it.” Ian beamed proudly.

“That’s what they say.” The girl turned the corner, twirling a wooden hallpass on her finger.

“Ian rainbow kissed that girl.” Sheldon intoned with sincere respect. Ian nodded, smiling coyly.

“Niiiiice.” I replied.

Sheldon smirked and leaned in, his eyes low and unhygienic. “Do you know what a rainbow kiss is?”

“ . . . no.” I replied. Kissing a girl under a rainbow? In some sort of . . . arc? I imagined a rainbow shooting out of my mouth like a death ray, decapitating the girl I was trying to kiss.

Sheldon leaned in closer and began to whisper something in my ear, while Ian looked around pensively to ensure no teacher was picking up on this delicate tidbit of information. Unfortunately, Sheldon was so concerned with being secretive that I could not *actually hear* what he was half-whispering, half-giggling into my ear.

“Now you’re dirty like us.” he concluded, sitting upright again.

I nodded wisely, improved my posture to reflect the sudden maturity I now possessed.

“That’s great.” I said, “That, that’s really awesome.”

While writing this I looked up what a rainbow kiss was, and only now do I know that they were talking about the play by Scottish writer Simon Farquhar. At least I think so; there was an alternate definition, but that couldn’t have been it because it was *fucking disgusting*. I swear to god, I was not thinking about shit like that when I was twelve. I guess I was the odd one - I

should have shared in the filthy fascination, perhaps making up my own (untrue) stories of sexual conquest. But I just couldn't - I felt like a horrible person even entertaining the thought. The strange encounter I had with Megan had left me sour on a lot of things - the rank hormonal passion that had powered our weekend-long stint was rocket fuel in a motorized scooter, and I felt that I would be just as happy on a bicycle.

The bicycle was Erin. Every other morning she would come waltzing into my science class, her timing so predictable that I learned to show up before her (which was quite early); to sit in the general cluster of desks near her usual spot. Her brown hair was perpetually done up in a sloppy ponytail, her choice of clothes comfortable and contemporary, t-shirts and jeans, instead of the tight, high maintenance skirts and tank tops that were more typical amongst her classmates. We lived in central Texas after all, the heat alone gave half an excuse for girls to prance around in scarcely more than bathing suits. Sometimes they did. I really miss Texas sometimes.

But the thing about the t-shirts and the sweats was that Erin wore them beautifully - while other girl's clothes were pinned to them like censor bars, restricting their movement and cutting off their circulation, that grey Aggies sweatshirt effortlessly draped itself around Erin like a storm cloud, concealing some quiet mystery of what form lied beneath - I imagined it was a tiny man drinking tea by a window, a single lamp illuminating a book of divine feminine secrets clasped tightly in his hands. When she entered the room, the orchestra played a sweet, slow string number that sounded like water lapping a quiet shore.

I didn't talk to her of course. I should maybe point out that in this seventh grade science class, I was not particularly well liked. If you've read the previous chapters you might have picked up on several reasons why your twelve year old self might have hated my twelve year old self - if you'd like another, for narrative's sake, I was also quite sure that I was consistently the most entertaining person in the room. Any room. I had experienced some initial success as a class clown in elementary school, but this skill was not translating itself well with this more mature audience. Rather than exiting the stage gracefully I resolved to push the bar on the things I had always thought were funny, like slapstick, feigning down syndrome, and very terrible puns. After many class periods of bombing I refused to give up, and this is when I became annoying.

I got ridiculed alot that year. I deserved it. Certainly, a correct amount of social repercussion is what's made me a less-annoying adult. But there was a kid in this class named Eric Herms, and he was meaner to me than anyone else in my life. The meanness was such a dense, spiteful sort of hate that I was hurt the most by the lack of all perceivable reason for it. Saying he bullied me is like saying that Hitler bullied the Jews - it was a campaign. I imagined him sitting at a large wooden desk at night, plotting out new and more horrifying ways to make me pay for my social shortcomings. The truth of the matter is, he was just extremely adept at finding the tender parts of you, and gnawing at them until something broke.

The first time I met Eric, he said:

“Hey faggot.”

Nonchalantly, too. He had said this tapping an open palm on my desk as he walked by. I looked up, confused - he was in the back of the class by this point, talking with someone. He was skinny like me, but athletic - he had orange-blonde hair and a big, stupid nose. I had noticed him before but I had never - why the hell did he just do that?

After that day, Eric always had something to say. Every failed joke was dealt a finishing blow.

“Did you read the chapter about helium?” someone asked.

“Yeah,” I replied smirking, “I couldn't put it down!”

“You're a queeeeer” Eric sneered from behind us.

He was infinitely more clever than me. Well, I don't know if clever is the right word. But he had special powers. He could broadcast my weakest parts; put them on public, reserved display at the center of attention.

He was on the bus I rode to the middle school in the morning - the same one I had to ride with Chelsea. When I got on the first time he nearly lost it.

“Oh, not this kid. Sit in the front!” he commanded. “I don't want that guy anywhere near me. He picks his nose, and wipes it everywhere.” I received a sustained look of horror from every passenger on the bus. From then on, every morning when I reached the top of the stairs everyone would fill out their seats, set their backpacks beside them, until there was not room at all

for me to sit.

“We can’t leave until everyone sits down!” The bus driver would yell into the big rectangular rearview mirror. “The bus isn’t even full! Find someplace to sit!”

The bus was full enough for me to be bogarted out of a seat. Eventually I would sit down on the edge of some seat, the person occupying it reacting in bitter disgust, as if I were carrying with me a large, uncovered tupperware container full of human feces.

I’m going to be perfectly honest with you, reader. I feel like we’re establishing an intimate bond here, and I don’t intend to let any detail escape your grasp. So I have no qualms in telling you that in seventh grade I *did* pick my nose. Now, I could give you a lot of legitimate excuses, like my chronic allergies that made this quite a beneficial activity, but the fact is that it was a bad habit I had just never gotten around to dropping. Eric had seen me in the act once. I worked so diligently to conceal it, but this kid was a bloodhound for embarrassment. I hadn’t stood a chance.

He turned the crowd against me.

He turned Jeffery against me.

One morning, I got on the bus as usual. Hawaiian print shirts were all the rage at the time, and I was wearing a bright, palm-laden button up the front, a white undershirt beneath it. I had just bought it, and could not be more proud - it was one of those rare great moments where I was wearing not just what the other kids were, but what the cool, cream of the crop kids wore. It was a day I had science class, and I couldn’t wait for Erin to get a load of me in this freaking great shirt.

After about five minutes of shuffling around, attempting to find a seat, the bus driver’s screech reached its maximum octave and a boy dangerously close to the back of the bus moved his backpack over and rolled his eyes. Now, the back of the bus is where the cool kids sat. Or I guess in this case, the most dangerous. There was Eric, some goth kids, and a large hispanic girl with three teardrop tattoos to the side of her left eye. She was as loud and obnoxious as all get out, and I was sitting *frighteningly* close to her. I was in their territory.

“Ahhhhhhh!” she whined, “I can smell him. I can smell him!”

Somehow my personal mythology had expanded to include me smelling bad as well. There was no validity to this part, I showered like a mother fucker in those days.

“Smellllllssss!!” Jeffery yelled. Jeffery was retarded. He sat in the back of the bus because, who was going to stop him? The goth kids, this girl, Eric - they had adopted him and taught him to say bad words, like a parrot.

“Shit smelly son!” he yelled at me. “Shit like a *buttwipe*, kid!”

The girl pulled out a spritzer of girly fragrance, the kind you get from Bath and Body Works. She began to mist herself and the immediate area comically.

“Don’t spray that shit all over me!” Eric yelled. “Its the shit that stinks, not us.”

“Spray the shit, fucker sitting on shit, POOP!”

“You want to spray the shit?” the girl asked. She handed Jeffrey the bottle of fragrance.

There was nowhere to go, even if I had wanted to - Eric leaped ahead a couple of seats to the one behind me. He leaned over and pinned me to the seat of the bus. The boy next to me had slid under the seat and was now a few rows up, turned back, just watching.

Jeffrey jumped into the seat beside me - He held the bottle inches away from me and began to spritz me, all the while delivering an indecipherable diatribe so close to me that his spittle landed on my lips. “Now see what happens when the shit is like people? GO TO TOILET! You go stick your dick out in gym you get what’s comin like a real man!”

The phrase had no context. The assault had no context. I lied there and took it, hoping that would speed up the process. It didn’t. In the front of the bus I could see Chelsea laughing hysterically.

Exiting the bus I smelt like a vat of strawberries and rock candy that had been caramelized in the hollowed out chest of a Care Bear. I skipped my locker and went directly to science class.

When I darted in, roughly twenty minutes early, Mrs. Corr didn’t have to ask me anything. She was a remarkably sympathetic woman, probably a mother herself.

“On the bus . . . my shirt . . .”

I didn’t want to explain anything.

“Is your shirt wet?” she asked. You could easily see the deep saturation of the smelly liquid

on my shirt, my perfect goddamn Hawaiian shirt. “You want to hang it up?”

She lead me to her back office area, filled with all sorts of sciency-things - beakers, dead things in jars, models of the solar system. She pulled some hangers off a shelf above a coat rack. When she turned back, I was buttoning the shirt onto a scale model of a human torso - we had a good laugh about that. I honestly think that’s the only way I made it through those days. Ella Wheeler had it right - Laugh and the world laughs with you; weep, and you weep alone.

Sorry, that was a pretty long tangent. I can’t tell if that’s going to be crucial to the story, or if I just wanted to get it out. But the point I want to make is that when I looked at Erin, I could see plenty of reasons for her not to like me. Reason enough to never risk talking to her at all. Now this day was one of the worst yet - I sat there in my plain white undershirt, a deft statement that I had not tried at all. You wore white undershirts to school because you were poor, or lazy, or both. And sadly, all of that was better than ‘because I was accosted by a kid that couldn’t tie his own shoelaces’, so I never said a word.

Steven was my best friend in seventh grade, and I was lucky enough to have him in that science class with me. Still, I never told him this story either. We were both pretty dorky, sported the same ridiculous chili bowl hair cut, used Gameshark to fight Queen Gohma as adult Link. However, he had found a way to manage all this it alot better than I had - he was clever and unflinching in his nerdiness, and when you really own your personality quirks, it makes it alot easier for other people to tolerate them. He had a girlfriend named Anna, who was also in our class. Now, this was a great thing, because Anna was totally BFFs with Erin - so when it came time for another one of those four person group projects, guess who’s team I was on? I *lived* for the days I would come in to find test tubes and bunsen burners laid out across the lab tables. “That’s going to take four people for sure” I would think, ogling the perfectly arranged packets of experimenting materials.

Any day but today. My confidence was zapped. I would need at *least* three hours of listening to Hanson and drawing fighter jets to shake this one off. But Mrs. Corr pulled a fast one on us and wheeled out the rack of eMacs.

eMacs were these little educational computers - not the ones by Apple, I can’t seem to find

them online. Maybe I'm remembering the name wrong. Anyway, these tiny green computers folded in half like a laptop, and ran two, green-tinted programs - a word processor, and a drawing program similar to Microsoft Paint. When not in use, they rested in a wooden rack similar to a book cart, each stamped with a little numbered label.

"27!" Steven called. He always wanted number 27.

"No one cares." I told him. "They're all the same."

Steven would then point out the slightly different hue in the front cover, the smaller logo on its base. "Its not the same." he insisted. "This one is *ours*."

Everyone knew this. Eric knew this. So as me, Anna, Steven, and Erin sat around the lab table that morning, Steven opened the tiny green device to reveal that the drawing program had been left open - and on it was displayed a hand-drawn portrait of a young boy with a chili bowl haircut picking his nose. Beneath the drawing, in large block letters, was written "nick".

I wanted to die. I wanted to start one of those chemical fires we were always being told about and throw myself on it, bid my classmates to throw water.

Steven closed the program. No one said a word. Anna started reading the packet out loud, and Erin had seen, had *definitely* seen. She sat calmly as ever, and I sat there looking straight ahead and not flinching, not about to participate. Today I was separate from any sort of work packet, experiment, or letter grade. I wanted to be set on fire.

Its hard to say what dictated my next actions. I don't remember the feelings that accompanied it, but I went home that night and started to write a note. In those days, this was a popular form of communication. You would fold up the sheet of notebook paper you'd written your little message on - alot of girls knew fancy ways of doing this - and write a 'to' and a 'from' on it, like a tiny Christmas gift. I looked at the tiny package I had created. Two days from then we would have science class again. Until then, the note rode in my pocket everywhere - I did not trust to leave it at home, or in my backpack. It got front pocket treatment; a special place at the time, before a cellphone claimed that place exclusively. Consequently, when the day arrived the note had become creased and greasy, wrinkled in a few places. The last shreds of decorum it possessed I wrung out of it that morning, twisting and compressing it in my closed fist, waiting

for Anna to arrive.

I waited for her to settle. The string section in my head began to vibrato the high notes as I realized that Erin was sitting right next to her. I wanted to look as collected as possible as I made the drop, not appear as an excited errand boy, drawing unwanted attention to myself. I thought hard about the delivery - what I would say, what my eyebrows would do. I eventually settled on a subtle “Hey -” with a slight nod, while slowly lowering the note onto her desk. This was perhaps a little *too* thought out, because Anna and Erin looked at me as if I was performing interpretive dance. I removed myself quickly from the situation and stole away to my desk a few rows ahead, aimed my scorched ear in the direction of the confused girls.

“I don’t know” I could hear Anna say, giggling. The note was being rumpled. Once unfolded, Anna would read this:

Anna,

Will you ask Erin out for me?

Thanx

Nick

I never claimed to be poetic, just honest. Don’t even ask what the *x* is about, I think I thought it looked cool. At least it got them talking. I could hear muted whispers behind me as they debated the note’s contents, my blood rushing a pure adrenaline volcano through my veins. The dice had been thrown, now the only thing to be done was to wait.

“Is this for real?” Anna asked me. She had walked up right beside me, held my note listlessly in one hand. She did not harbor the same ritualistic masochism I did when it came to note passing.

“Y-yeah.” I answered, stuttering nervously. I mean, what the hell Anna?

“Ok. Well, Erin says yes.”

My eyes widened as I considered what had just happened - I looked back at Erin. I gave her a little wave. She gave me a nervy little wave back. We were dating.

Things picked up from there, I tell you what. I’ve never been able to understand the sort of super powers one gains from requited love. All of sudden the world doesn’t hurt you like it used to - you can go days on the pure sustenance of sunshine, sleep one hour and wake up feeling great, *you heal faster*. I swear to god, I would wake up with a cold, and feel miserable until I saw her smile. Pure vitamin C, that’s what that girl was.

Erin was new to all this. Hell, we all were, but I think I was her first boyfriend. I had at least pinned, had ventured for love and watched my friends and their awkward attempts at romance, but it was really a new concept to her. Erin was one of the shyest girls I’ve ever known - I liked that about her. Definitely the kind passed over at dances. She was not the object of boys ogling eyes, because the pretty parts of her were too subtle to be perceived in a single wayward glance. This didn’t bother her. She needed not the crutch of a boyfriend, someone to endlessly loop compliments into her ear or to assure her that she was just as pretty as this or that, as smart or as interesting. It’s a good thing, I probably wouldn’t have been able to provide those services. I didn’t know what I was doing either. We were both residents of a strange limbo of puberty, one with no real end-path or goal. If you wanted to use the ‘bases’ metaphor, we weren’t even on the field. We didn’t even know there was a game going on. “What’s with all this traffic?” we would ask ourselves, circling the metaphorical stadium, looking for a parking space.

Me and Erin never saw each other outside of school. I’m guessing most couples of this age did? We were both a little too shy to approach the idea of a date, Erin especially - she was always just a little bit nervous about the whole idea of ‘going out’. I still don’t see how dates work at that age, without cars. Where would we even go? I had no resources in seventh grade. I could barely afford the next booster pack of Magic cards and I’ll be damned if I was about to give that up. I’m sure now that she would have been happy just sitting in a park with me, or watching TV together on a couch - but that is not the way my brain was wired to work. It was permanently tuned to the

dramatic. Maybe my mom and sister made me watch *Sleepless in Seattle* too many times, but it was impossible for me to picture a date without some grandiose event - a theatrical reunion at a new year's eve party, a heated conversation in a cafe just months before my bookstore chain devours hers. The top of some damn building. I felt like I had nothing to give this girl - inside out I was a mess, despised by peers save an important few and unable to conjure up romance in any sort of tangible form. It was saddening in its blatancy, and I did whatever I could to conceal it, to prove that I was worthy of adoration in some way.

That year, besides asking Erin out, I joined the track team. Given my complete ineptitude at sports, you might find this to be a bad decision - but dammit, I just loved running. Even today, I find solace incomparable in the beat of a foot against pavement, grass, or dirt - I used to run when I walked my dog. He didn't much care for it, but it did me alot of good. Anyway, I figured that this was one sport that I could maybe not *excel* at, but keep an average standing while exorcizing the demons of puberty by running in circles as fast as possible.

As it turns out, track is actually *really hard*. I kind of figured that if I sucked I would be ignored, that the coach would be happy just to see me getting all that energy out, saving myself from pre-teen obesity. But coach wanted winners. He wanted runners faster than they had at Round Rock, that damn spoiled school with the olympic-sized field and three pole-vault courts. He had an axe to grind, and I had nothing to offer that poor man, his angry mouth cancered into oblivion from thick clumps of chew which he shot at our feet with frightening accuracy.

"Rabbit Race!" he called. "Rabbit Race until you start acting like athletes instead of a bunch of girls."

I can't even tell you how much was wrong with that track program. But I'll start with the Rabbit Race. If you're unfamiliar, what this meant is that everyone on the team ran in a nice, single-file line. The person at the end of the line would run to the front of the line, and then again and again, forever, until coach was convinced we were performing acts worthy of our gender. It was hell. I was never meant to be at the front of any line, especially that one. When I was the last person in that line and coach blew the whistle, it was all I could do not to shrug - each time, without fail, I would get to about the middle of the line, before my chest felt like it was going to

cave in and I fell back to last place.

“You - you in the . . .”

Coach didn’t know my name. And we all wore matching suits.

“ALRIGHT, everyone STRETCH.”

A few people were actually quite thankful I was on the team.

“Thanks buddy.” Sheldon said, slapping me on the back in a way I was told was not to be interpreted as aggressive, but instead as friendly. He and Ian were both on the track team, and were exceptionally nice to me for being so capable of athletic feats.

“I was getting soooooo tired of running.” Ian said, sitting down in the grass beside me. “If you weren’t here, that’d go on for *at least* another hour.”

“Yeah, don’t ever tell coach your name.” Sheldon added.

“You thanking Nick for being a pussy?”

I swear, I would not have signed up for track if I knew Eric was on the team. He never wore the standard issue sweatshirt outside of practice, which was odd, since everyone was so proud to be loaned one. Mine had a burrito stain on it, but I didn’t care - I handled it like it was made out of plutonium.

“You know, you’re not allowed to come to the meets if you suck that hard.”

Eric was right about that one. Coach didn’t even tell me where the bus would be. The next week I’d come in to hear everyone else talking about this or that person’s qualifying time, completely out of touch with whatever had happened. I tell people this now and they’re appalled.

“They didn’t even want you there to cheer on your teammates? To show school spirit?”

Apparently not. Who cares, I had better things to do on a Saturday morning than watch a bunch of people run in circles. This was the least of my concerns. I had a girlfriend for chrissake. I was very busy walking beside her in my track sweatshirt. It was perhaps the most aggrandizing thing I have ever done. I say this quite honestly, because I have been drunk in many a bar and club, saturated with whiskey, convinced that I am the most badass and amazing bipedal humanoid to be placed on this earth, but not even *that* compared to the feeling I got lacing fingers with Erin as we walked to science class.

We never kissed. The most we ever did was hold hands, and even that was on rare occasions. She was so perpetually trembly, so nervous at the slightest physical contact.

“We’re very young” she would remind me.

“I know that.” I just wanted to hold her hand. But Erin was not like other girls. She didn’t have to say it - the listlessness in her eyes I had mistaken for calm, green oceans hid a constant storm that she herself seemed to have little control over. I imagine that is just what it’s like to be a twelve year old girl. Still, at times it felt like she was afraid of me. Couldn’t she see that we were on the same team? That it was us, the perpetually nervous and ridiculed against the rest of them?

I don’t know. There was some sort of a disconnect in person. Luckily, social interactions became alot easier in those days with advent of AOL Instant Messenger. If you didn’t have this growing up, I feel sorry for you. And you younger generations, enjoying these social networks so deeply woven into your offline identity, you’re missing out too. The AOL chatroom was the perfect balance of intimacy and anonymity - something we may never get back. But I digress. On chat, a wall dropped and suddenly I didn’t feel like I was pulling teeth to get a conversation out of Erin. She liked it that way, I could tell, a little bit of distance between us - she began to peel back the surface a little. Just a very little. I had alot of group chats with her and Anna, listened to them talk about the most ridiculous, asinine girl things. Once, while chatting with them, I told one of my patented lame jokes.

“That’s really caroty,” Anna typed.

“?” I replied.

“That’s what we say instead of cheesy.” she responded.

It was like its own little subset of language. I understand, it was an inside joke - my friends and I had those too. But these things that were slowly being drawn out of her, through the perceived privacy of the internet, through the convoluted joke-sayings, there was something real I was just beginning to discover. I felt as though I had docked my boat at a glacier and only now was the water becoming still enough for me to see that the shape of the ice continued deeper, much deeper into the water than I could see.

It never got that cold in Texas, so we relied on outside forces to tell us when Christmas was approaching. Major signals included the decorations that began cropping up all over town, the ads on television, the garland that seemed to sprout overnight from the door hinges of our classrooms. Me and Erin had probably been dating for a couple of month by then. It was a few days before Christmas break, and walking into science class, I saw Erin holding a plastic tube of M&Ms in the shape of a shepherd's hook.

"Nice!" I said. "Who gave you that?" I tried to conceal my jealousy, which was quite bubbly. Who was handing my girl candy-coated chocolate?

"My dad," she replied sheepishly. She handed the candy to me, along with a small wrapping papered book, Flight #116 Is Down by Caroline B. Cooney.

"Thanks," I replied, and that was it. I had nothing to give her in return. Only now, eleven years later, do I feel any sort of regret for leaving her empty handed that Christmas.

There's alot of things I'd probably change if I could go back. I know that's not a unique sentiment, but the things I want to change are small and specific. Placing a box of candy in Erin's hand wouldn't have changed much, but it would make me feel better today. "At least there was that," I could tell myself, some years from now as I rocked quietly on the patio of a nursing home. No harm in that. What I wouldn't change were the big things.

Like this one day I was changing in the locker room after track practice. On that day I looked at my low, corner locker for the first time in a completely new way -

"I can totally fit in that." I thought to myself.

I removed the rest of the things from the inside, and slid into the small, metal, chainlink structure. It was a tight fit to say the least. I pulled my right foot up by my should and, sliding my fingers through the holes on the locker door, pulled it shut with a satisfying *chick!*

"Look guys!" I hollered excitedly to my teammates.

I know.

Immediately a foot went up against the door.

"You look like one of those cats they grow in the jars." someone said, my face pressed painfully into the chainlink wall as I attempted to push the door open by force. I was getting

close. I was nervous but laughing a little, and so were the guys, and in the back I could hear some more empathetic teammates saying, “ok, ok, let the poor kid out.”

But that’s when Eric came walking up to the front of the crowd. He grabbed my padlock off the ground.

“W-wait” I said, but he laced it through the lock hole and snapped the thing shut. He looked me square in the eye as he gave the dial a big whirl, tugged on it to make sure it had taken.

“Look!” he said in that mock-happy tone. “Ya fit!” He kicked the locker so hard that everyone backed away and started to filter out of the room. No one even questioned him. They all left, every single one of them, even the ones that had been nice to me, and then Eric left too.

The room got quiet. It was Thursday. My hands began to shake a little, fingers woven into the chickenwire bars, as I thought about when the morning janitor would come in, if someone would pass through that night, or -

I heard voices - coming my way! Ian and Sheldon rounded the hallway between the locker room and the bathroom and I caught a fleeting glimpse of them - shirts slung over their shoulder as they began to leave the school.

“HEY!” I yelled, though my voice was trying against my will to be small and embarrassed.

They turned and scanned the locker room at eye level, confused, so I yelled some more.

“Oh shit dude.” Sheldon said, dropping down to where I sat caged.

“What’s your combination?”

“36,” I choked out, holding back tears by this point, “24, 57” I swear to god, that’s the exact combination. Some events brand themselves permanently into your mind, and this was one of them.

“You are so lucky,” Sheldon explained frantically, “Me and Ian were staying late to rub cold water on our nipples to make the hard for when we walked out, *or we never would have seen you.*”

I tumbled out of the locker onto the brushed concrete floor. Uninjured, physically. Not left to starve.

And since that day, I have never once stepped into a locker again.

Like I said about going back and changing things - some things are going to happen, at some point or another, regardless of what you do. If not then, I would have eventually realized that my body was the perfect shape for squeezing into lockers. I was skinny all through high school - if I would have pulled that shit then, the door would have locked instantly, there'd have been no airholes. Probably no sympathetic teammates either. Correcting a bad decision only delays it, if the mindset that made the decision is left in tact.

Sometimes you can convince yourself that if you just push it a little further, life will admit defeat and things will work out the way you think they're supposed to. Things were so close to working for me. I had a girlfriend and a track sweatshirt. I was going to wear that track sweatshirt to the spring dance that night, though it was completely inappropriate attire for the giant oven our gym became when the lights were lowered and Deborah Cox's slowjam hit "Nobody's Supposed to Be Here" began to mute snare its way around the dance floor. Erin was meeting me there. I stood outside with Steven, bobbing our heads anxiously to a silent rhythm in our heads. "Girlfriends." I said. "We're going to dance with our girlfriends." You know how much I love the middle school dance. The school dance in general.

"Yes we are." Steven said back. Like I've said, Steven had a much better handle on the situation, always.

Inside we were able to find Anna and Erin, and we all walked together into the gym. There we recklessly oscillated to Jennifer Lopez and Britney Spears, the same repetitive loop of tiny hihats digital bass thumps that harmonized so well with that song, that symphony in my head.

I heard the first slow downbeat. I didn't have to wait at all. I turned to Erin.

"Would you like to dance?" I asked in my most charming tone. It was probably not all that charming.

"S-sure," she said, placing her arms on my shoulder. I place my hands lightly upon her hips.

She twitched a little bit, and removed my hands from her waist, and placed them upon her shoulders.

I moved my hands back to her hips - Erin clearly did not know how we were to dance.

"N-no," she stuttered, "I don't, actually want to . . ."

“To what?” I asked. I was not going to put my hands on her shoulders. We looked like two zombies slowly trying to strangle each other. People were staring.

“When you dance, you put your hands,” I put my hands on her hips again.

“I know, but -” she looked me right in the eyes. “I don’t want to.”

“But *that’s* how you *dance*.” I was not understanding her reasoning at all. Our friends and teachers were all there, our enemies, the whole school. We couldn’t dance like morons.

I placed my hands on her hips one more time. Erin looked at me and began to sob. Then she began to full on cry. She hid her face in her hands and just stood there, did not walk to the bathroom, did not try to find Anna, she just stood there helpless and still, trying to hide behind her wet fingers.

To this day, that’s the only time I’ve ever caused a girl to cry right in front of me like that.

So here’s the final thing, about going back and changing things - If I could go back, I would stop myself from making her cry. I know it taught me a lesson, I know that if it hadn’t happened there, it would have happened somewhere else. But it doesn’t matter. If I could I would still want to change that.

A few days later I called Erin. It was hard, but I knew it was the right decision when I heard the relief in her voice.

“We’re just *really* young.” she told me.

“Yes,” I agreed, “We’re just really young.”