

### **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-assuredly while disguising a wince every time she moved.