

## Man, My First and Last Friend

May 3, 2025

Man (Manny) is a kid in my grade. How do I explain him to you? Well, first, he was born in 2001. This means, like me, he is sixteen years old. He mains Fox. His outward temperament is soft, but his insides are littered with naval mines. He is the only person I have ever loved. Oh, and just like me, he loves MEME.

Yes, MEME—that is a good place to start. Two years ago after Labour Day, I sat beneath a window of cold autumn light. I was fourteen at the time. A muffin wrapper filled with jelly beans lay on the laminate table. The jellies reminded me of THE BEAN MEME, and I needed this fact to be known.

“They’re just putting beans anywhere now, huh?” I quipped. I heard a snort behind me and turned to see the corners of Man’s mouth lift.

“I saw that MEME,” he said with a hint of pride. His eyes were still fixed on the cup of candy.

“It’s a DANK one,” I said. He looked up, and I noticed for the first time that his irises were dark green. “I don’t think I caught your name?”

“Sorry, yeah, I’m Manny. Or Man, whichever is easier.”

“Okay. I’m Zain!” I wanted to say, *Man is easier, because that’s what you are, a huMan*, but thankfully I was a moment too late, and the quip was lost to time.

Syllabi were passed around the room, and that was the extent of my interactions with Man on the day after Labour Day. This was mainly because neither of us knew how to ask someone else about themselves. As I walked home that afternoon, the sky was clear and cold. It had been a number of hours since I’d eaten the beans; I wondered where in my body the glucose and dye had ended up.

I won’t say that I have no friends, because I do have friends by most metrics. Lucas, who was my lockermate in Grade 6. Amos, a Marth main who hates math. But I don’t think that these are close friends. When Amos shaved his head for charity, I watched from the atrium windows. I’ve never been to Lucas’ house. My mom has never met either set of parents. But I never say that I have no friends, because that is graceless. I eat lunch with them most days. What else do you call the people you lunch with?

That said, Manny was my first real friend. While it took years to know Amos and Lucas, it took weeks to know him. After a few lonely attempts at gathering like terms, I would turn around to show Manny a watermarked MEME, at which he would chuckle to signal his understanding of its depth; a warm reprieve from polynomial limbo for us both. My eyes would slide away from the phone screen, just in time to see Man’s flit down towards his papers. I had never met someone else who knew about THE BEAN MEME. That was the difference between him and Marina, my previous deskmate and Grade 8 crush. *Marina never understood dank*, I would

reflect quietly. *Not like Manny does. Girls typically do not grasp the subtle qualities of* EDGY HUMOUR.

Yes, I could be EDGY with Manny. We were two teenage boys, after all! Once, I said the word “kinky,” and it made him laugh to tears. Together, we enjoyed fake salutes and ironic hot dogs. And every time I made him laugh, I felt blood in my cheeks.

Now, it’s lunchtime in mid-October. I reach over outstretched legs to get to my locker. It’s embarrassing to eat in the hallways, but I don’t know where else to go, so I sit and look at Amos’ laptop, over his shoulder. But today was a special day. Manny fluttered in and kneeled across from me, back to the cinderblock, with his black Adidas pants folded up like the wings of a magpie. He was uncharacteristically forward, but his voice was as soft as always.

“Do you like calligraphy?”

I don’t know what to say to this! I’ve never thought about calligraphy in my life. It’s old-person and gay at the same time. But... “Yes?”

His corvid eyes sparkled. “You should come to the art room today, they’re doing a calligraphy thing!”

I don’t exactly know what that means, but I stuff my Tupperware back into my bag and zip it up as we walk downstairs together—just the two of us, since Amos and Lucas were not interested. Manny walks with a lilt, almost like he’s skipping down the stars. My throat felt slightly dry.

The calligraphy itself was fine. You were supposed to be gentle but firm with the pen. I must have pressed too hard: I kept puncturing the white paper with my nib, scraping fibres away from the pink construction paper underneath. Manny carefully filled his paper with identical lowercase “a”s. For the first time, I sat next to him, instead of in front of him. As he carefully carved calligraphy “a”s, I reflected on his other lettering... the way that he wrought algebraic variables, curvy-like. The sharp, blue-blue pencil that he used to point out my mistakes, as if he was carefully holding my hand as we crossed a creek. Yeah, he was smarter than me, and harder-working, but he was so soft and shy. Why did he keep practicing the letter “a”?

Glancing over the other white sheafs, I noticed that his friends (girls he met through Drama who I didn’t really know) had already started writing real messages. None of them talked to me. They actually didn’t look at me at all, even when I cleared my throat. It could have been that they just loved lettering that much. Or, they were wondering what an EDGY guy like me was doing in the mostly-female art room at lunch. I wasn’t autistic enough to break out the MEMES in front of them, but I did spend the last ten minutes of lunch writing a number of uppercase “F”s (a subtle nod to the PAY RESPECTS MEME). Manny didn’t seem to catch my reference, so we just parted with a “that was cool, see you on Thursday.”

Here’s an analogy from simple machines: if all the events in my sixteen years of life were placed chronologically along a long piece of plywood and I needed to pick a location for a fulcrum, its

plastic head would point to the moment when I sat down next to Manny at the calligraphy workshop. That was the first time I smelled him. Green apples and clean dark hair. From that moment on, I was cursed to smell Manny's Head and Shoulders everywhere: on the third floor, on the ground floor, in stacks of dusty textbooks, above the slush between the two sets of main doors, in my jacket and my papers, when he was at school, and especially when he was not. It was ambrosia. As an adolescent, there was of course a sexual aspect to my obsession. Danny was small, like a wren, with dark brows and ceramic hands. But he also laughed at my MEMEs, and we would play Smash together, and he would *come up* to me at lunch. He would come up to me. He wanted to talk to me! I thought about him at night, but I also wanted to cup him in my hands. I wanted to stroke the top of his head with the backs of my fingers.

This fixation spanned semesters. Weeks upon months of online quizzes and unsatisfactory porn. I figured that enough rolls of the dice (of asking "does he like me?") would reveal his internals. Upon later reflection, my faith was not in the veracity of any one quiz, but rather in the statistical Law of Large Numbers. My sample mean was 52% YES. Throughout this process, I learned many digested facts about body language. Although Manny never touched me, he did laugh at all of my jokes, and sometimes his gaze drifted towards my mouth as I spoke. Agonizingly, this usually means that "they might like you!"

But here is how I knew that he liked me for sure. On Sports Day in April, we had an extended lunch. We were in the same faction, the only two unpopular kids in our randomly-assigned group. We walked together to the gas station Tim Hortons: I got a chicken wrap, and Man got an Iced Capp. He practically fucking said it to me right then.

"I'm so tired from today," he began.

"Same, I mean I don't really 'work out' so like--"

"Oh yeah, well, I kind of meant having to talk to all those random people?" Our eyes met in a flash of connection. He continued.

"It's just so hard to 'small talk', but it's worse when you don't talk at all, but everything I say..." All I did was nod. To be crystal clear, there was no prompting here. But then he trailed off, looked into my open eyes, and said, "But I feel so comfortable with you."

Fuck, man! It destroys me every time. I loved him, and it was so clear that he loved me too. He had to have.

Now, to the worst part. When we were in Grade 10, we sat on the edge of the classroom for Math 20-1, close to the northern door. (Manny might mention that the dash one indicates the rigor of this challenging course.) Hannah was gone today, and I managed to sit with Man, alone. He seemed tired; he was darker than usual. But today was a special day, and I had to proceed with the operation. I opened the New Album on my phone, pretended to laugh at a MEME, and thrust my phone out expectantly (you know the drill, Manny). He looked up and squinted, but his face remained slack.

“Oh, haha.” He looked back down at his lined paper, but didn’t write anything.

What? I only had one more buffer before the big drop, and it evoked an equally tepid response. I hurriedly swiped past it and forced my hands onto the desk so as to stop them from shaking as his dark eyes jumped across the screen: the last photo in the album.

I LIKE YOU

BOTTOM TEXT

Manny shifted in his seat, stiff and small. “Oh,” he said, for the second time. (Maybe try using words instead of letters, Man. (I didn’t actually say that.)) I realized suddenly that I was smiling like a coyote and closed my lips. His cowlick bobbed, and he inspected the metal deskfeet, and then started to pick at his fingers. “Sorry,” he said next, which was at least a word. “I’m not, uh, I—“ he finally met my eyes. “I don’t know if I really feel the same way.” His eyes slipped away in the middle of the word “same.” I knew exactly what *I* felt in that moment. Manny, gathering his assignments and notebooks into a fabric binder, stumbled over the molded chairs and left the room.

That was the last I ever saw of Manny. Well, basically. More accurately, that was the last I ever heard of him. Since that nightmarish block nine weeks ago, Manny has not said a word to me. I suppose he has made eye contact once, by accident. I made a particularly loud joke during a shared Bio 20 block, which caused his eyes to catch onto mine as our classmates crowded around the overhead projector. His eyes were still dark and full of light. I searched for hatred but found only detached curiosity, and perhaps tender pity. What a fucking joke.

So, maybe that explains Manny to you. According to the field of psychology, repeated, short interactions between individuals can create a stronger sense of familiarity than intermittent deep conversations. I think this is what happened between us. Somehow, inside or between all of these interactions, I learned who Man was. So if you want to know something less personal, here are a couple more things. He loved the taste of MSG, but rarely ate a proper lunch. If I took the blue sleeve off his eraser, he would slip it back on without a word. He was timid, but those little movements were always swift and assured. Just like me, he is sixteen years old.