

SHORT HUMOR STORIES



SARA QURT

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"Quiet down, everyone, and get in your seats!" hollered Vice Principle Rosenbaum.

Rosenbaum was a tall, husky Austrian man whom no one dared to mess with. No one except *me*, that is, because I always knew he had a soft side beneath that bulky exterior. Some people's soft sides make them cry in movie theaters; others make them stop to smell the flowers; but fortunately for me, Mr. Rosenbaum's soft side convinced him to let me off the hook for all the trouble I had caused last year. There was a catch, however: Now I had to use my talents for good instead of evil, so I became a motivational speaker.

There I was, pacing up and down backstage, waiting for the big man to announce me. I wasn't nervous or anything; I just liked pacing. Peering through the curtains, I saw a full auditorium. Everyone was there: the faculty, the students, the seniors, even the *super* seniors. I gulped. Mad Matt was sitting too close to the stage. (I feared a repeat of the cantaloupe incident, only this time I bet he'd use watermelons.)

"And now, ladies and gentleman, let's give a warm Sugar High welcome to one of our very own students, Mr. Todd Gafferty!"

I shuffled onto the stage with my hands in my pockets. The crowd went wild. Rosenbaum handed me the mic and whispered, "Pull up your pants, sonny!" I glanced down at my father's suit pants, which were indeed three sizes too large for me in the waist. I was pretty sure no one wanted to see my Bugs Bunny boxers, so I gave 'em a big yank.

"Good afternoon, disciples. I'm Todd Gafferty, founder of the Church of Todd. You may know me better as the class clown, resident jackass, or 'that guy', but today I'm coming to you as a student. An *equal*. I know exactly what you're going through, because, believe it or not, I used to be just like you: an overstressed, overworked, over-tormented study monkey." I gazed around the audience. Most of the students were snickering, but not laughing out loud like I had hoped. A few of them were staring at me with their hands folded, all stiff and serious like. Now *that* gave me the willies!

"Now, don't get me wrong, school *is* important, but so is having fun. We should all learn to chillax and take a breather once in a while, instead of

freaking out about report cards, essays, that library book you forgot to return that's hiding under your bed with a six-month-old bran muffin...that kinda stuff." *Good, here come the laughs.* Probably cuz I said the word 'bran'.

"Relaxation is sorta like alcohol: it's great in moderation, but you don't wanna overdo it, or you'll end up like me at Sammy's bar mitzvah. Let school be your Morning After pill, because a balanced mind is a healthy mind. *Balance* is key."

Okay, let's back up this paddy wagon. My name is Todd Gafferty, and I'm a senior at Sugar County High School, but last year is when I had all the fun. School used to be a nightmare for me. I flunked so many tests and got yelled at by so many teachers that it's a miracle I made it past the tenth grade. I also used to be an atheist. You may be wondering how the two are related. Well, shut up and I'll tell you!

You see, I was baptized as a Protestant, but ten years after that my folks stopped going to church. Perhaps it was because Sugar Congregational's parking lot was too small, or because they didn't serve donuts as a wholesome church should. Or, most likely, because they didn't believe in God. I don't know their exact reason for dropping the charade, but I do know that their beliefs had absolutely no impact on mine.

I didn't believe in God because...I just *didn't*. Theists seem unable to grasp that concept. For me, rejecting the notion of deities was as simple as telling the color of the sky. (The sky is blue, the grass is green, and God does not exist.)

In contrast to us, my next-door neighbors, the Spitznogles, were extremely religious. But they were Jews, so I guess they had to be. (History of hardship, and all that.) Their son, Samuel Spitznogle, was but a year younger than me and my best friend since diaper days. Most kids called him by his nickname: Sammy Spitz. (Now with fifty percent less syllables!)

I loved Sammy like the brother I never had, but sometimes...sometimes I envied him. He got to skip school all the time to observe the Jewish holidays (that's a shitload of holidays), and the lunch ladies prepared a special *kosher* meal for him each day, which, let me tell ya, looked a lot more appetizing than the non-kosher *mystery meals* the rest of us endured.

All that special treatment, because of some religious beliefs? Well, eventually it got me thinking, and I'm *dangerous* when I think.

My stroke of brilliance arrived during the summer before junior year. What if

I created my own set of excuses and called it a religion? And if I acted seriously about it, seriously enough to convince my parents and teachers, then - heck, I could get away with just about anything! But it would have to seem legit. First I'd need to pen some kind of 'holy manuscript', like the Bible or the Torah. I figured this task would come easily and enjoyably to me, a writer by hobby, troublemaker by trade.

So began my summer of little sunlight. I locked myself in my room and scribbled away in my notebook until my right hand cramped up, and then, being ambidextrous, I'd switch to my left. This behavior continued for several weeks (until I ran out of notebooks).

During this time my parents began to worry about me. I didn't want them poking around and finding out what I was *really* up to, so I started wearing all black. I dyed my hair black, smeared white powder all over my face, and borrowed some Bauhaus CDs from that girl down the street. That way they'd think I'd gone goth and leave me alone. Surprisingly, it *worked*.

When I finished writing my scripture, I had four notebooks filled to the margins with characters, commandments, and canon. I typed it all up on my laptop and took it to a local printing shop. The final product was a black, leather-bound book with the words 'Student Bible' in gold letters on the front. Fancy-shmancy.

I dubbed my religion Awesomeism, because its followers are required to brag about how Awesome it is, and pray thrice a day to the three Awesome gods: Larrius, Movus, and Curlion. With one week of vacation left, I happily washed the crap off my face, pulled on some khaki shorts and a T-shirt, and went outside. My parents, especially my dad, were very relieved.

"Welcome back to the land of the living, son!" he beamed, giving me a hearty punch in the arm. "I'm sure glad that phase is over. Say, how about I treat you to a baseball game?"

"When?"

"How 'bout this Friday?"

"No can do, Dad," I said with a sigh. "Friday's the Sabbath." He hit me with a quizzical look.

"Wait a minute. Ain't that Sunday?"

"Nope. For *Christians* it's Sunday, Saturday for Jews, and Friday for Muslims," I explained, nearly giving Dad a heart attack.

"You wanna be a...a *Muslim*? Like those terrorists?"

Sometimes my father's ignorance astounded me. And I thought atheists were supposed to be *smart*. Then again, who's ever heard of an atheist from the Bible Belt?

"Nope," I exhaled, deciding to let it go. "I just like Fridays." (And I had no interest in watching the Sugar Beets take on the Georgia Peaches.) I pulled the Bible from my pocket and swung it back and forth before his beady eyes. "I'm an Awesomeist. See?"

Dad stumbled inside with his hands pressed over his stomach as if he'd just been shot. I tiptoed behind him, crouching in the shadows of the screen porch to listen in.

"Marion! Come quick!" he shouted. Mom bustled from the kitchen with a soapy frying pan, an apron full of grease and a look to kill. (She takes dishwashing very seriously.)

"What? What is it, Albert? Can't you see I'm in the middle of something?"

"It's - it's Todd. He's...getting in touch with his *faith*."

"Oh dear!" Mom exclaimed, dropping the pan with a cymbalic clang. "I feared something like this might happen." Her eyes darted nervously side to side, and she began chewing on her greasy fingernails like a frightened rabbit gnawing on a carrot. Jeez, and I thought she'd be the voice of reason! "Well, maybe if we leave it alone, it'll pass -" Her voice dropped to a whisper. "Like that goth thing."

"What if it *doesn't* pass?" Dad barked. "Will we have to start going to church again? Because, let me tell ya, Al Gafferty is *not* a churchgoing man."

"Oh, calm down!" she shushed, bending low to pick up the frying pan, her Southern hips wagging to and fro. "I'm sure he won't drag us into anything. Todd's always been a clever, independent sort of boy. And who knows? A little religion might do him good."

Way to lie, Mom.

"I sure hope you're right, Mama Bear, cuz if not, I blame you. It was your idea to get him baptized in the first place."

Mom sucked in air, planting her greasy fists on her love handles. The "indignant" look.

"If my memory serves, it was *our* idea! We did it to appease our folks."

"Okay, Neville Chamberlain, if that's the way the gravy flows. Now how's about you appease my *appetite* with a little home-cooked grub?"

Blah, blah, blah.

As their argument died down, I nestled into the hammock with a tall glass of lemonade and the Student Bible tucked safely under my arm.

"This is going to be a great year," I thought. "One day as an Awesomeist, and I'm already causing trouble."

September 6th, the first day of school. Ah, what a glorious morning! I awoke to the sound of Jerry Spitznogle's lawnmower making its rounds. Mr. Spitz was totally OCD when it came to his lawn. We called him "Mowin' Moses". ("There goes Mowin' Moses, parting the sea of crabgrass!") ("LET MY SEEDLINGS GROW!")

I yawned, stretched, scratched inappropriately and yawned again before crossing the glacial floor to my dresser. Thanks to global warming, it was an usually chilly Southern autumn. (My dad absolutely *refused* to clean the heating ducts before Equinox, so I had to drag my feet across the coals every morning. Except, you know, they were more like ice cubes. And I was cold.)

I wished to express my newfound beliefs through my clothing, but all I had in my drawers were jeans and tees. (And a pouch of hippy lettuce.) "Hmm," I wondered. "WWJW?" ("What would Jesus wear?") He'd keep it casual - nothing too flashy. Prophet, shmofet! He was just a simple carpenter at heart. (I learned *that* one from Indiana Jones.)

"I know! I'll pray to Larrius for guidance! After all, he *is* the god of good looks." I knelt by the end of the bed with my hands cupped. "Oh, Awesome Larrius, please shed a glitter of Awesomeness on my humbled head! I ask not for fame, I ask not for riches. All I ask of you is a sign. What should I wear to school today?"

Right then, as if on cue, Mom knocked on the door inquiring about my dirty laundry.

"Uh, give me a second!"

I scrambled around the room, picking up all of the residents of Mount Yuckmore and tossing them into the hamper. Well, not *all* of them, since there was still that half-eaten bran muffin under my bed (half was all it took to get the job done), but that could wait a month or two before the stench got unbearable.

"Some time today would be nice," hollered Marion from the hallway. I could hear the faint scratch of her slippers against the hardwood. (A fondness for pacing seems to run in the family.)

"Coming, Mom!" With one arm, I hoisted the hamper high above my head like a strongman at the circus. (It must've weighed *at least* thirty pounds.) With the other hand, I opened the door and dumped the load by her feet.

"Thanks, dear," she grumbled sarcastically. "I really appreciate that."

"You're welcome!" I replied, cheerfully and completely non-sarcastic.

Just as Mom bent to grab the laundry basket, I noticed what she had on. And I liked it.

"Mom, what do you call that thing you're wearing?" I asked.

She stared at me with an exhausted look, the first of many to come.

"It's a bathrobe, Todd," said the graduate of the School of Tough Love (class valedictorian). "You would know that if you ever took a *bath*."

"A robe? Like the Ancient Greeks wore?"

"Uhh...kind of. Sort of. Not really."

"Sweet! Can I try it on? It *is* unisex, ain't it?"

Mom shrugged off the bathrobe with a sigh, revealing a pair of ratty lavender pajamas draped over her aging form (gravity is unkind). She handed me the cloud-like material, shook her head disapprovingly and walked away.

I slung it on and dashed into the bedroom to model in front of the mirror. It was warm, pure white and heavenly comfy, like those towels I used to swipe from hotels.

"Lookin' sharp, Todd! But wait - something's missing!" I dug around in my closet until I found what I was looking for. "A hat!" Now, hats were not normally allowed in school (For reasons unknown. Something to do with gang wars, I think), but it really completed the look. Jews had their yamakas, Muslims had their turbans, and me, I had a great big sombrero on my head.

"Hmm, not quite there yet."

I donned a pair of sunglasses to further stick it to the Man. They were *reflective* sunglasses, so, if cornered, I could easily BS some lines like, "The eye is the window to the soul, and I don't want you *infidels* gaping at my soul!"

I strolled to the bus stop with an air of absolute confidence. The other

children laughed at me, and called me names, and they wouldn't let poor Gafferty join their reindeer games, but *I*, however, felt like a million dollars in those clothes. Movus, the god of money, would approve.

"Aw, man, I'm gonna be late for class!" he whined. Same old Sammy, always worrying; more concerned with grades and attendance records than the fact that his best friend has turned into a walking wardrobe malfunction. *Gods bless him*. He pounded his fists on the stubborn locker, which happened to be adjacent to mine. (It was originally assigned to some freckly dweeb – but we took care of *him*.)

"Have you tried jiggling the lock?"

"Yeah. No dice."

"Here, let me give it a go!" I pressed the palm of my left hand against the cold metal door and my right hand on the lock. *Clink!* It popped right open like a jack-in-the-box.

"Hey, thanks! How'd you do that?" I smiled mischievously, thinking of the little black book deep within the pocket of my robe.

"I have the power of the Lord on my side."

"Huh?"

"Lord Curlion, the God of Dumb Luck." I let his look of utter confusion linger for a minute, because I found it highly amusing, but when he started biting his lip, I knew enough was enough. Sammy always bit his lip when he was on the verge of a Big Emotion, and everyone knows that teenaged boys, even Jews, would *die* before exhibiting Feelings in public, and I didn't want my best friend to kick the bucket. "Chill, bro! I'll explain everything at lunch."

"Okay." Sammy shrugged. "Well, thanks again for the locker."

"No problemo! Now hurry up and get to your precious First Period, before they mark you absent and revoke your "Goody Two-Shoes" privileges!" He quickly slid the books out of his locker and into his bag, but just before turning to go, he looked at me with those big, brown, expectant puppy-dog eyes. It was moments like these that Sammy's youth showed.

"What about you?" he asked. "Where are you headed?"

"Me?" I responded, with a reassuring grin. "I'm headed straight for trouble." I

slammed my own locker shut and strolled down the hallway, whistling AC/DC's "Highway To Hell".

I hovered outside the classroom for a solid five minutes after the bell rang. (For Awesomeists, lateness is a virtue.) Then I made my grand entrance. Ms. Stevens, the irritable, middle-aged English teacher dragged me by the sleeve to an empty corner of the room. She tried to keep her voice down as much as possible while expressing her rage. She sounded like an angry balloon letting all the air out.

"*What in God's name do you think you're doing, dressed like that? Hmm?*"

"Which god are you referring to, Ms. Stevens? Because *my* gods all agree that my outfit is fly!" This comment made her cheeks puff up, so now she *looked* like a balloon, too. English teachers must *really hate* slang.

"Take off your hat, or I'm sending you to the principal's office right now!"

"Sorry, Mam. No can do. I mustn't bear my head in public. How sinful! Besides, I've got an *awful* case of bed-head!" Ten seconds later, I was kicked from the classroom. (*Figuratively*, of course. Teachers haven't been allowed to use violence since, like, the *seventies*, although there *had* been some rumors flying around...). One of the good students, Katie, escorted me to the main office, letting me go with a toss of her hair and a roll of her eyes. All was going according to plan. Muahahahaha!

Miss Chipper, the secretary with a winking mole on her chin, leaned over the intercom with all her gold-plated jewelry dangling. (The device was rather superfluous, since his office was just in the next room; a point of how lazy our society is getting.) In her wet, heavy voice, she breathed, "Mis-tah Rosen-baum, you have a vis-i-tah." I always laughed when she talked, though I couldn't say no to a handful of stale butterscotch from the dish on her desk. Mmm, butterscotch, combining my two favorite flavors! *Perhaps I'll make it a holy food.*

"Send him in, Cheryl," grunted the big man in charge. I took a deep breath and adjusted my sunglasses, so I wouldn't turn to stone from looking at him. *Here goes my first test of faith!*

Sitting in that leatherback chair, with the vice principal breathing down my neck, I felt like Jesus testing the waters. If I tread lightly, perhaps I'd make it

across, but if I splashed around too much, I'd get sucked down in the whirlpool known as in-house suspension. It happened to me once before...*and it wasn't pretty.*

I had an impossible mission in front of me. (And I don't mean *Mission Impossible*! The first two were okay, and Tom Cruise was a pretty cool dude, until he joined that cult and got all couch-jumpin' crazy. Scientology is straight-up *whacked*!) First I had to show Mr. Rosenbaum that I was serious about my religious convictions. Then I had to get him on my side, without pushing his buttons. The R-Bomb be hatin' his buttons pushed.

"Straighten up, lad! And listen to me when I talk!"

"I *am* listening, sir. *Only 'cause I can't shut off my ears...*"

"What was that? Quit your mumbling!"

"I said I'm sorry for disturbing you in your office this morning...and that is one *heck* of a tie! What are those, Smurfs?"

"*Penguins*, actually, and it's 100 percent silk."

"Sweet! Where'd you get it?"

"My wife bought it for me, for our twenty-fifth annivers— *hey!* I know what you're trying to do!" I shrugged my shoulders and smiled innocently. Or, you know, as innocently as possible.

"Excusez-moi?"

"You're trying to change the subject; get me all...*confused*!"

"I wouldn't dream of it, sir."

"Well, it ain't gonna work this time! I'm on to you, Gafferty; on you like a hound who's caught the scent!" I had to suppress a big laugh there; it's not every day the V.P. compares *himself* to a dog! "I hear you've purposefully violated the dress code today." He looked me up and down with a smirk.

"Heh. Nice bathrobe. Did you borrow that from your *mother*?"

"It's *unisex*!"

"Trust me, son, no heterosexual man would be caught *dead* in that robe."

"But it's the traditional clothing of my religion! In fact, thousands of Awesomeists are *required* to wear it each year, when they make the pilgrimage to Topeka."

"*Kansas*?"

"Sure! That's where the gods are said to have touched the earth. So everyone

gathers around this funny-shaped rock –" Rosenbaum slammed his fists on the desk.

"Enough! You're giving me a headache. What's all this crap about religion?"

"Why, Edvard, I'm so glad you asked!" I said, using his first name to see how much it would irk him. I dug into my pocket and presented him with the Bible. He scowled and ripped the book from my hands. Apparently, it irked him *a lot*.

He stared long and hard at the cover, and then quickly skimmed through the rest of it. I could see his temples throbbing, and his face turned a deeper shade of red. Poor man! *Thinking* must cause him such pain!

"Is this some kind of joke, Gafferty? Did you buy this thing at a gag shop?"

"No, sir. I got it from the online church, at Awesomeism-dot-com." That was me, thinking on my feet. Now I'd have to get Sammy to draw up some website. (He's got 1337 haxxor skillz.) Well, at least I didn't blab the truth. That would've been very bad. "If you turn to the last page, you'll see a list of commandments that I must follow, both in and out of school. If I fail, I'm afraid I'll have to whip myself raw like that psycho albino dude from *DaVinci Code*. You know what I'm saying?"

"Yes, I'm familiar with the movie. Now let's have a look at these...so-called 'Commandments.'" He read down the list, growing more and more infuriated with each one. Some of them disturbed him so much that he shouted out loud.

"Thou shalt not wait in line? Thou shalt not take orders from thine elders?! This...this ain't no *religion*! This is flat-out *heresy*!"

"Keep going," I said. "It gets better."

"Thou shalt not work on the Sabbath, Thou shalt not be disturbed during prayer, Thou shalt...thou shalt not be fed anything *cryptic*?"

"It means mysterious. Like the cafeteria food."

"I know what it *means*! I'm not an imbecile!"

"*Could've fooled me...*"

"STOP MUMBLING!" Sometimes I forgot how loud that man could be, and how frightening it was when he got in your face like that. I nearly peed myself.

"So...will you vouch for me? Will you respect my religious needs?" His expression eased up a bit; it went from rabidly enraged to just mildly pissed-off.

"Maybe. I'll need some time to think about this, and talk it over with your teachers."

"And Principal Peach?"

"Naw, Peach is practically retired. *I* pull all the strings around here."
Rosenbaum the Puppet Master. *Creepy!*

"Thank you, sir. May I go back to class now?" He nodded. I stood up to go, but then he grabbed me by the collar before I took a single step.

"Hey, what the...?"

"You've got a lot of nerve, kid. I like that in a boy you're age. Too many wimps in this generation..." He let me go with no show of Feeling, and I bolted from that office like a bat out of Unterworld (my version of Hell). I turned a corner and collapsed against a wall, severely shaken by weirdness. Mr. Rosenbaum just gave me a *compliment*! I swear to gods, I will never understand that man...

I put my pencil down and flexed my fingers in accomplishment. I had just completed my greatest artistic masterpiece since that finger-painting of the stegosaurus I did in kindergarten. Too bad it wouldn't count for anything. Mr. Plebe, my pre-calculus teacher, had no appreciation for the arts.

Riiiiing! Ah, third period at last! I packed up my pencil and other pointy math implements and swung my backpack over my shoulder with a Herculean heave. I had reason to be excited. Third period was my favorite class of the day...*because it wasn't a class at all!*

Lunchtime was like a ray of hope from the heavens, and best of all, today was Enchilada Wednesday! (Mexican food was the only tolerable meal at our school, since it used enough spice to cover up the taste of rotting meat.) Just the thought of warm, steamy enchiladas made me drool like Rosenbaum, and I felt compelled to skip down the hallway. So there I was, skipping merrily along, when out of the blue came a big, lanky kid in mal-core garb.

They called him Mad Matt, but that was just a stage name. (He sang in a band, The Killian Murder Hawks, and when I say 'sang', I mean 'screamed his head off like a tone-deaf macaw'.) I tried to skid to a halt, but Custodial Worker Jenkins had just waxed the floors that morning...

"Gafferty! What the frig?! Watch where you're going, asshole!" He shook his spike-covered fist at me.

"Sorry, Matthew."

"You *better* be sorry, or I'll rip your friggin' head off! And – hey, what'd you call me?"

"Matthew."

"Only my momma's allowed to call me that! It's Matt, you worthless punk!"

"Silly me! I wouldn't want to upset your dearest momma."

"What'd you say about my momma?" He took a threatening lunge towards me, and since his clothes were dripping with chains, this movement created a pleasant jingling noise.

"Nice pants, Matt! You could be your own orchestra!"

"Oh yeah? Well...nice friggin' bathrobe, you friggin' fairy!" I tilted my head back and sighed.

"For the umpteenth time, it's UNISEX!"

Mad Matt barked like a dog (which translates to *laughter*, for those of you who don't speak Bully), and then cupped his hands around his mouth to make a very touching announcement.

"Hey, everybody, Gafferty's a...*unisex*ual!" Some of Matt's cronies slapped their knees and hooted, even though their feeble minds couldn't process the joke. Everyone else just shook their heads in disgust. I chose this moment to walk away. "Hey, where you goin', fairy? I'm not through with you!"

"Well, I've had *more than enough* of you, and now I'd like to eat my lunch in peace."

When I entered the cafeteria, all of the underclassmen pointed and jeered. (It was their first time seeing me in my new outfit.) The upperclassmen continued with their meals, totally unaffected by it. (It took a whole lot of energy to keep a senior interested in *anything* for more than five minutes.)

I spotted Sammy waiting in the lunch line, and strolled over to him.

"Yo, Sammy! My man! Why you wastin' your life away in this line?"

"What do you mean? I'm buying lunch, like I do everyday." I wrapped my arm around his shoulders and dragged him away from the counter. "Oy! Todd! What's wrong with you? It was almost my turn!" I turned on him with my most mischievous smile yet.

"From now on, I don't wait in lines, and neither do you! Come on. We're moving to the front."

I barged through to the head of the line with Sammy following weakly

behind, still mumbling in protest. A chorus of grunts and whines rose up in our wake, and the greasy lunch-lady squinted at me in disbelief.

"Excuse me, young man, but you've got to wait your turn like everyone else."

"Please, Ms. Winterstone, having to wait in line is a sin! *Literally*. It's against my religion."

"And what religion might that be? *Rude*-ism?"

"*Close*, but...no. I'm an Awesomeist. I'd let you hold my Bible, but I don't want the pages covered in sloppy-Joe. No offense."

"None taken. But, seriously, get back in line. I've got a spatula, and I'm not afraid to use it!"

"Oh, all right. You're no fun..."

We trudged all the way to the back of the line, which was now halfway out the door. Sammy Spitz was not an angry person by nature, but when any man is denied his enchilada, blood *will* be shed.

"Nice going, Todd! What was that all about? Now we won't get a table! You're lucky you're my best friend, or else I'd smack you. Aw, man, I'm so *hungry*..." He clutched his empty stomach in agony. I could hear my own tummy a-rumblin', also.

"Me too, man. Look, Sammy, I'm sorry! I thought I'd get away with it, but maybe my approach needs a little work..."

"*I'll* say! And what's an Awesomeist, anyway?"

We purchased our lunches and crouched in a corner to eat them, since Sammy was right. There *were* no tables left. I explained all I could, without sounding like a complete lunatic. I told him about my parents' reaction, and my proposition to Rosenbaum. Then I showed him the Bible, which he found particularly fascinating.

"Why is it called the *Student* Bible?"

"I dunno. Cuz we never stop being students, I guess. There's always something to learn."

"And what have *you* learned from this experience?"

"That I should try harder to win people over!"

"How about 'lying gets you nowhere'?"

"Now, why on earth would I say a thing like that?"

"Never mind. Well, I wish you the best of luck with your scheme, but I want

nothing to do with it." He picked his tray off the floor and went to dump it in the trash, leaving me straddled there with my mouth hanging open. Sammy had never been disloyal to me before. He was my right-hand man; the guy I was supposed to rely on! I was so confused...

"Hey, unisex kid!" Oh no, not *him* again! "Eat melon, punk!" I rolled to the side, but not fast enough. A cantaloupe hit me, full force, in the back of the head. I had no time to wonder what Mad Matt was doing with a cantaloupe in the *first* place, since I was too busy being unconscious. Clearly, my first day of school was not going so well.

Voices drifted in and out of my head.

"Mrs. Peach, is Todd gonna be all right?"

"I don't know, sweetie. He may have suffered a concussion."

"A *concussion*?! Oy vey!"

"We won't know for sure until he wakes up."

When I felt my strength returning, I tested all the parts of my body, making sure I could still move them properly. Finally I opened my eyes and sat up. I immediately regretted doing so.

"Ow! Oh gods, that smites!" Mrs. Peach, the pudgy school nurse, bustled over to a mini-fridge to procure an icepack. Peach was not medically trained to do much else. The only reason they hired her was because she happened to be the principal's wife, and he wanted to keep an eye on her; keep her away from those *man-whores* at the retirement home. Also, the school was low on funding.

"Here you go, sugarplum! My, what a nasty booboo you got!" Peach had an annoying way of treating everyone around her like preschoolers. The "booboo" was really a hideous, purplish bruise that stuck out about an inch from the rest of my cranium. That cantaloupe did some serious damage. Who'd-a thunk.

"Hey, buddy, glad to see you've regained consciousness," laughed Sammy as he plopped himself down on the edge of the cot. "Listen, I'm sorry about ditching you earlier. This Awesomeism idea of yours...well, it *does* sound pretty awesome. And I'd like to help you out, but..."

"You don't wanna get in trouble," I finished for him. "I understand." Sammy stared at his sneakers in shame. I could tell he was being honest. He really wanted to help.

Sammy Spitznogle was like a tiger, born and raised in the zoo. The only life he knew was inside the cage, sheltered and fed. But I had a feeling that deep down, he was clawing to get free, and one day...one day he'd maul the zookeeper and steal his keys. I know tigers don't have opposable thumbs, but Sammy's a *smart* tiger. He'd figure something out. If only I could think up a way to speed things along...*I've got it!*

"Hey, Sammy, I've got a task for you. A *haxxor* task. You think you can handle it?"

"Of course I can handle it! What do I look like, a n00b?" The competitive craze was already setting in. I know I've said this before, but...what the heck! All was going according to plan! Muahahahaha! Muaha-ha...ha...cough...ha.

"That's the spirit! Especially since I haven't even told you what 'it' is yet."

"Well, spit it out!"

"I need you to design a webpage for me."

"Piece of cake! Just give me the details, and I'll cook one up over the weekend." I wondered what was up with all the baking references. Huh. Must be a nerd thing. Or maybe just a Sammy thing. Either way, it was sure making me hungry! I never got to finish my lunch...

"Hey, Samster, wanna come with me to the office? I'm jonesing for some butterscotch."

"Sorry, can't. *You've* been excused for the day, 'cause of that pulsating lump on your head, but *I've* gotta get back to class." I removed the icepack for a second and cringed.

"Is it really pulsating? Cuz, you know, it feels like it's pulsating. Hey, nurse!"

"Whatever. Catch ya later, Todd!"

Later that afternoon, when Mom came to pick me up, I felt completely fine. *But I didn't let her catch on.* In true Todd fashion, I decided to milk my head injury for all it was worth. I figured it was enough to keep me out of school for a couple of days. I could use that time to incubate some new schemes; perhaps plot my revenge against Mad Matt. Were Awesomeists allowed to plot revenge? Well, they are now! In fact, the Student Bible *encourages* it!

The Ogden Twins were nothing like the Olsen Twins. They had dirt brown hair and lightning blue eyes. They spoke with a light British accent, having

moved to Sugar County from across the pond. They were younger, faster, smarter, scruffier, and evil-er. They could hand you your ass on a platter without a doubt. *And they ate anorexic chicks for breakfast.*

Jane and Mabel Ogden were the terror of the neighborhood. They played so many mean tricks on people, and set so many booby-traps...well, they were almost the queens of the troublemakers. *Almost.* Thankfully, they still answered to me, King Todd.

I decided to employ their talents in my plot against Mad Matt. The Ogdens' parents were mysterious inventors of some kind. Ergo, the twins had easy access to all sorts of what's-its and doodads. I also decided to leave Sammy out of it. I figured this was one less breach of morals for him to squabble about. Plus, he was already busy with the website.

We set up shop in my garage. I helped by carrying the toolkit, but after that, my efforts were no longer needed. The Ogdens made that perfectly clear. I guess they remembered my macaroni sculpture from a few years back, and imagined the harm I could cause with actual *electricity* and *metal*.

"Wrench," grunted Mabel.

"Wrench!" Jane called back, as she handed her sister the specified tool. This went on for a while. I just sat back in a plastic fold-out chair, admiring their handiwork.

Hours passed. The garage was getting stuffy and hot. Mabel wiped the sweat from her brow with a greasy rag. I wondered how grease was an improvement on sweat. Well, it certainly gave her that badass mechanic look. Y'know, the kind who can jumpstart an engine with nothing but a paperclip and the lint in their pockets.

"Paperclip."

"Paperclip!"

See what I mean?

"Welp, looks like we're finished. Hey, Todd, would you like to be our first test subject?"

"Sure. I'll be your guinea pig. Just promise me I won't lose a limb."

The twins tossed their heads back and giggled in unison.

"Oh, Todd, don't be silly!" squeaked Jane. "You might lose a finger or two, but not a whole *limb!*" Wow. *That* sounded reassuring.

"Please, Awesome Curlion, give me luck! I think I'm gonna need it..."

It seems my prayers were answered: all of my body parts went through unscathed, and the contraption worked like a charm. I won't tell you what it did just yet, cuz I don't wanna ruin the surprise. Let's just say...it involved *magnets*. Muahahahaha!

My folks invited the Ogdens to stay for dinner. We ate buttery corn-on-the-cob and listened to my father's gods-awful jokes.

"What do you call a platypus that can ring a bell and hum?"

"Gee, Dad, I don't know! *Enlighten* me."

"A *humdinger*! Haha! Get it? It hums, and it dings, and...it's a... humdinger..."

"We 'get it' all right, Mr. Gafferty, but...why a platypus?"

"Uhh...American humor. You dry, British types wouldn't understand."

Later that evening, we snuck off to the screen porch for a game of poker (I lost), followed by a round of storytelling.

"...And he never went swimming in his auntie's pool ever again," Mabel concluded, with the dreamy smile brought on by happy memories.

"Ooh, nice one, sister! Now it's *your* turn, Todd. What's the nastiest trick you've ever played on someone?"

"That's easy! Last year, at summer camp, I...*no*. Or I could tell you about the time I...*nah*." My mind was like a produce carton full of ripe tomatoes, but which one was the ripest of the ripe? "Huh, that's weird. I'm having trouble deciding."

"We've noticed. Why don't you make it simple for yourself and just let us in on your current scheme?"

"But...you already know it top to bottom! Better than me, even, since you two *built* the thing!" Jane rolled her eyes and sighed. Mabel yanked me in by the shirt and hissed in my ear.

"Not *that* scheme, you dolt! The other one. The big, *secret* one you've been working on all summer!"

"You mean...the Student Bible?" The twins nodded excitedly. "It's not *that* secret."

"Then how come you haven't told us yet? We want in, mate. Stop holding out on us!"

I was feeling wrongfully attacked. I had never meant to "hold out" on anyone, but...I hadn't planned on *including* everyone, either. Sammy, fine. He was my best bud. But the Ogdens? Could they really be *trusted* in this? These were the girls who dumped used condoms in pools. Did they have the finesse for handling such a delicate operation?

"Here's our request, in layman's terms: let us in, or we'll beat you up." Threats o' violence! Yay! Well, I guess I had no choice but to make them my disciples. The Awesomeist congregation was spreading, whether I wanted it too or not. That's the problem with starting a religion...

On the First Day, He Created a Mess

Monday, the day when students roam the halls like zombies after weekends of unmentionable carousing. It was the perfect day to spring my trap on Mad Matt, since his mind would be in an even duller state than usual.

When I got to school, all of the teachers and students whispered to each other as I passed. It was different from the normal, angry whispers I usually received. This sounded more along the lines of nervous anxiety; possibly fear.

"What's the matter?" I wondered. "I'm not wearing a trench coat, or anything." Just a bathrobe, a sombrero, and sunglasses. Todd Gafferty: shootin' up the school in style!

I found Sammy outside his locker, like usual, only he already had his books in hand and was simply hanging around for me to show.

"Todd, thank G—d you're here!" he exclaimed.

"What? Is everything okay?" He motioned for me to come closer. We bent our heads together in a circle of privacy; just another whispering pair.

"Everyone's talking about you!"

"Yeah, I noticed. What's up with that? What're they saying?" Sammy crossed his arms and frowned.

"Why don't you ask your new best friends, the Ogden Twins?" Oh no. My eyes grew wide, my heartbeat picked up, and I had a very sinking feeling in my liver.

"Sammy, uh...could you wait here a sec? I've gotta run. See ya!"

"Sure," his voice trailed off as I bounded down the corridor. "Seems all I do is wait..."

By the time I made it to the freshman hallway, I was thoroughly out of breath. I stopped by a water fountain, rested my hands on my knees, and panted. A group of freshmen girls shrieked at my intrusion and skittered off like chipmunks.

"Have any of you...seen...the Ogdens?" I sputtered between breaths. The littl'uns were too timid to answer, but...speak of the devils and they will appear.

"You lookin' for us?" spoke the familiar double-voice of Jane and Mabel Ogden. I looked up slowly, afraid of what I might see. The crowd parted like wilting daisies before them, and out stepped the diabolical duo. I gasped. They were costumed just like me, in white bathrobes, sombreros, and the works!

"What's all this?" I asked. "Why are you guys dressed like that?" The twins smiled innocently. Or, you know, as innocently as possible.

"Well," drawled Jane.

"You see," mimicked Mabel.

"Now that we're Awesomeists, we wanted to show our support in the best thinkable way!"

"By copying me?" I said. They nodded precociously.

"Exactly!" Yikes. I rubbed my face and sighed. "But that's not all!" Jane continued.

"Oh?"

"We've also been spreading the Word of Todd. You can expect a whole new slew of followers by tomorrow morning!"

"Aw, crap..." I groaned. It was worse than I thought. I was bombarded with questions in the hallways and surrounded by stares in every class. There was no escaping it now. The Word was out.

I decided to hold off on the grand prank until I found a way to clear up this mess.

When I got back to my locker, Sammy was nowhere in sight. Instead I found a note haphazardly taped to the door.

"Rosenbaum wants to talk to you. Go to his office during free period."

"Great," I grumbled. "*Just peachy.*"
I hate Mondays.

This second meeting with "The Man" was not so intimidating as the first. Perhaps I was wearing the old R-Bomb down. After all, there was only so much Todd a man could take before breaking down in tears like the rest of 'em. (My kindergarten teacher ended up in a spiffy, white jacket in a soft, white room. It was nothin' but cookies and naptime after that!)

"Todd, take a seat." With an overly grand sweep of the arm, he ushered me towards the small chair opposite his large one. (*Obviously* compensating for something, the poor man...)

"Are you sure you want me to sit? Wouldn't it be easier to whip me if I stood with my back to the wall, like this?" I leaned with my hands pressed against the wall for effect, but never turned my gaze for a second. I didn't really expect him to whip me, but...*one can never be too sure.*

"I said sit down! And stop fooling around."

"Hey! That almost rhymed! I bet you're a poet, and you didn't even know it. Am I right, Edvard?" I winked and nudged the air with my elbow.

"Mr. Gafferty, why do you persist on pestering me?"

"Ooh! Alliteration! Nice one, poet."

"ENOUGH! Now, before you go and spoil my mood – earning yourself a fat, juicy detention in the process – I suggest you listen to what I have to say. I've read your 'Student Bible' from cover to cover, and I've seen the website, and I'd have to say...I'm quite impressed."

As a reflex, I began uploading every excuse I could think of.

"But Mr. Rosenbaum, you don't understand! I – wait. What?"

But the bullets stayed frozen in the chamber.

"Don't sound so shocked, boy! I've talked it over with your teachers, and they all agree that you should be allowed to practice your religion unhindered. Otherwise, it would be wrongful discrimination on our part – a direct violation of school policy."

"So...this means...?"

"It means you'll get away with everything in that book, you little punk! But know this: Awesomeist or not, I've still got my eye on you. I've got those commandments of yers burned into my mind, and I'm gonna make sure you follow every single one – or else the whole deal's off! Let's see how serious you can be, Todd Gafferty. Let's just wait and see..."

I left Rosenbaum's office in a state of awe. (Trauma? Elation?) I was a little bit freaked, and a little bit excited, but mostly...I was up for the challenge. Sure, the vice principal had his underlings, and his trusty student snitches, but *I* had the whole Awesomeist congregation on my side. I rubbed my hands together in eagerness – feeling the heat of friction – as I snickered and thought to myself, "Let the games begin!"

Now to round up Sammy, the Ogdens, and the rest of the gang to inform them of my *divine* plan...

"Okay, guys, this our last meeting together before we go our separate ways," I addressed the crowd with a faked air of confidence. It was six P.M. on a Monday, and we were gathered in the rusty playground next to the Sugar County Junior High. I was sitting like a king on my throne; a king whose 'throne' just happened to be an old, moldy tree stump. "I think we should go over the plan one more time."

"I don't know," whined one of the younger kids. "It's getting dark."

Mabel Ogden shot him with a look that said, "There are scarier things out here than the dark, and you're about to be *pummeled* by one of them." He gulped and fell silent.

I looked to Sammy for reassurance, but his eyes refused to meet mine. Although he was there in body, he hadn't spoken up the entire evening, and I was beginning to worry. He occasionally shook his head in disapproval, or mumbled something to himself, or did both simultaneously, but not once did he shed a glimmer of a smile. Oy vey! What had I done to alienate my best friend like this?

"Alright. Well...remember to dress appropriately tomorrow, even if you remember nothing else. That's a white bathrobe, sombrero, and sunglasses. If you need anything from that list, ask Linda. Her sister works at the mall and gets great discounts."

The aforementioned sophomore (a girl with red hair and freckles) waved

cheerily to identify herself to the crowd. My eyes flickered to Sammy again, who was now sporting a faint blush. It was a known fact that Samuel Spitznogle had a crush on Linda Lockhart since kindergarten, but was always too shy to tell her so. (After an ego-squashing year of "Sammy & Linda Sittin' In a Tree", I could hardly blame him.) She might've been the only reason he came to my meeting that night, since he was obviously bent on *ignoring* me.

I concluded the meeting with an Awesomeist prayer; something I invented on the spot, reminiscent of a cheerleader's chant. Rather fitting, since the meeting was a lot like a pep rally. (Only more informational, and without the monsoon of streamers and Silly String.)

"Hear me, Awesome Gods of Three!

Foolish, humble lambs we be!

Guide us with your Awesome graces,

So we don't fall on our faces!"

The circle disbanded. Everyone stood up groaning about sore bottoms and grass stains. One by one, they left – on foot or by bike – leaving only Sammy, the Ogdens, and myself. Jane noticed me looking glum, and asked what was wrong.

"It's Sammy. I must've offended him somehow, because now he won't even look at me!"

"Want me to push him around a bit?" she offered.

"What? No!" I started, appalled by the very idea. The English girl shook her head and laughed.

"Not *physically*, you silly goose! I can *talk* to him for you; see what's up. I may be tough, but I'm still a girl, and girls know a thing or two about emotional troubles!"

"Oh," I sighed with relief. "Well, in that case, why not?"

We separated into pairs; Jane led Sammy away to a cluster of trees where they could discuss matters in private, while Mabel and I took a stroll around the perimeter of the school. Sugar County Junior held many dark memories for me. Mabel, however, was unaffected by its presence. She and Jane were already in the seventh grade when they moved here, and had the joy of attending a private school for the remainder of it.

"I've never seen a *building* look so sad!" she quipped, unaware of the impact

her words had on me. "Not even the concrete heaps of Britain."

"Yeah," I agreed in a deadened tone. "It was a pretty miserable place..."

I think middle school is the hardest time in many kids' lives; some more so than others. It's that point in time where everyone is trying to "fit in" and act "cool", even if it means changing everything about themselves. Old friendships are severed in replace of new ones, and it's easy to get left behind. I was always the class clown, the troublemaker – and in elementary school, that made me the shit – but when junior high rolled around, I found myself friendless and full of doubt.

Sammy was always there for me, of course, but in school we rarely saw each other. We had different classes, a different lunch – it seemed as though the institute wanted to keep the interaction between grades to a minimum. (Probably to prevent a massive student uprising.)

But that was the Old Testament; this was the New. When I got to high school, I realized that being "cool" meant being myself...*and all those fashion-crazed preppies could kiss my Awesomeist ass!*

On the Second Day, He Tried To Fix It

That morning I awoke bright and early. I didn't get out of *bed* until fifteen minutes later, however, because the autumn chill was setting in and I dreaded leaving the comfort of my blankets.

"Guess it's time to start wearin' two bathrobes."

Today was an important day on several accounts. It was my first day as a true Awesomeist; finally time to practice what I preached. I dug through my junk-filled desk drawer for a Sharpie and a Post-It note. On said Post-It, I jotted down my prayer schedule. I would pray once before school, once during free period, and again after school. No; scratch that. *What's the point of praying at all if it doesn't waste class time?* I amended the schedule to once during English, once during pre-calc, and again during history. *There, that's MUCH better.*

Today was also the first day of Reconnect-With-Sammy Week. According to Jane's reconnaissance, the poor boy was feeling neglected. So for seven full days, I planned to surround myself with no other company than my boring Jewish friend. I would sit with him at lunch, let him cut me in line (or at least *back-cut* me), have his fussy locker open and waiting for him each

morning, carry his books (light ones only), not make fun of him for being goody-goody, nor allow others to make fun of him for various reasons, and the biggest thing...*my own special surprise*...I would use my suave Toddness to fix him a date with Linda! The homecoming dance was fast approaching, and I figured it would provide the perfect casual atmosphere for our wee little lovebirds to spread their wings. *How Awesome am I?* After this week, Sammy would have no reason to doubt our friendship, and – like a properly oiled wheel – might go along smoothly with my evil plans.

I greeted him at the bus stop with a big, friendly wave and a smile from ear to ear.

"You seem awful eager about something," he spat. "New blasphemous scheme in the works?"

"Ouch! That hurts me deep! What happened to my sweet little Samster? Don't tell me you went and sold your soul to the Unterbeast?"

"There's no such thing, Todd."

"Why, *sure* there is! Verse 12 in the Book of Fergie *clearly* states –"

"Enough!" yelled Sammy. I gasped sharply and my words turned into hiccups.

"-hic- Huh?"

"I've had enough of your dumb games. You can't just...make up a load of crap and call it a religion!"

"But -hic- I thought that's how *all* religions got their start. Some authority figure -hic- decides that man was sculpted out of clay, or -hic- hatched from an egg laid by the majestic Roc, or some such nonsense – and everyone is -hic- forced to go along with it through peer pressure."

"You really think so? Shows what *you* know. You think I go to temple every Saturday because of *peer pressure*?" He took a step closer; I took a step back.

"You think I celebrate Passover because some *fool* led his *foolish* followers to freedom?" He got right up in my face and waved his arms like windshield wipers. "*Hmm?!*" I swallowed my hiccups.

"Well..." I shrugged and turned beet red. "I suppose not."

"My faith is *real*, Todd; my religion has a history. Yours does not. Religion exists to help people, and guide them through troubling times. Yours is just a mockery of...of everything I respect and believe in!"

"Wow, Sam, I had no idea you felt this way." I swung a hesitant arm around

his shoulders. He didn't punch me in the face, so I took that as a sign to continue. "I'm sorry if my Awesomeism has offended you, but please hear me out, okay? I never meant for it to attract a following; I made it just for me – to help me survive school. And you may be surprised to learn that I never once thought of it as a scheme. Not really, anyway. When I was writing the Student Bible, I actually felt – for some strange reason – that I was doing something important. Something productive in my life, instead of the usual shit." Now it was Sammy's turn to put his arm around me.

"You know what? It might be because I'm crazy, or because I've spent too much time with you, or both, but I finally understand where you're coming from. The Student Bible is your own original work – quite well-written, if I might add – and you're proud of it. You have a right to be. That feeling you haphazardly tried to describe is called the 'joy of accomplishment'. I get it whenever I hack into a big government fi – er – whenever I get an A on my report card."

"Oh!" I shouted, with the light of realization dawning on my forehead.

"So *that's* why you waste all your time studying!"

"Yeah, pretty much."

"Maybe I'll give academic excellence a shot!"

"Uh...why don't you just stick to clever schemes?"

"Good idea! I wouldn't want to infringe on your thang." We both started laughing, and I couldn't stop myself from doing something I hadn't done since kindergarten, at least not in public: I gave my best friend a hug.

The other kids snickered and called us homos, but I didn't care, because Day 1 of Sammy Week was off to a great start. The bus pulled in and I made a gallant gesture with my arm.

"After you, buddy."

"Why, thank you, kind blasphemer!"

Instead of taking my usual seat in the troublemaker's section (the way back of the bus) I sat up front with Sammy.

"So, tell me more about this...hacking into government files gig." The young Jew turned his head slowly towards me, all humor and color drained from his face. His brown eyes dimmed to a cold black.

"If I tell you...I'll have to kill you."

"Uhh...forget I asked!"

I waltzed into to school that morning with a sombrero on my head, a grin on my face, and my best friend by my side. I was met with three kinds of looks: 1) stern game-faces from the faculty, 2) secret winks from my Awesomeist sentries, and 3) dumb, cross-eyed stares from everyone else who was not in the know. The hallway crackled with forthcoming tension, and those who listened closely that day could've sworn they heard that Clint Eastwood spaghetti western theme (you know the one) playing in the background as I walked. It would be rather pretentious of me to say that time stood still, so instead I'll say that it moved annoyingly slow.

The tolling of the first period bell set everything into motion again. Teachers stopped making out with their girlfriends and students picked up their briefcases...um, no. Strike that; reverse it. Anyway, it was all a rush of scuttling heels and flying papers, so I can't really say. I waved a grim goodbye to Sammy, and then took my post outside the English classroom while all the good students filed past. I lingered there as usual, before making an appearance, only now it was not so much for fashionable lateness than for necessary mental prep time. I needed to "get my, get my, get my, get my head in the game!" (Rest assured, intellectual readers, that is the first AND last time I will ever be quoting that *atroc*ity of a TV musical; it was merely meant as a gag. And as for the non-intellectuals: OMG! Zac Efron, is, like, TOTALLY HAWT!!)

I walked in. Ms. Stevens glared at me coldly, but she remained seated at her desk and didn't seem to be all in a tizzy like normal.

"Good morning, Todd. You missed roll call for the twelfth time this month, you know..." I rubbed my hands together, thinking,

"Ooh boy, here it comes! Mount Menopause is about to erupt!"

"...But I don't mind. Why don't you take a seat, if that is what you prefer. Since I am your elder, you are not required to obey my orders." She finished with a polite - nay - a *smarmy* smile, and if there's one thing I loathe in a teacher, it's smarminess. (Among other things, of course. *Many* other things.) I bet she was laughing maniacally on the inside, which was entirely unfair, since *I* was the only one supposed to laugh maniacally around there!

"You're damn straight I don't have to listen to you, and I *refuse* your offer to sit! I shall *stand* instead!" This bold, yet idiotic, proclamation had sounded a lot Awesomer (and a lot less idiotic) in my head, but I had to follow through. The Word of Todd was final. ("So shall it be spoken, so shall it be done!")

I stood myself stupid for the next fifty minutes. My feet got sore, my legs cramped, my self-esteem ached from the other students' laughter, and my only relief came at prayer time, when I allowed myself to kneel by the radiator with my back to the class.

"Please, Lord Curlion, have mercy on my soul! Today ain't turning out exactly how I planned, and I need all the luck I can get."

I gazed out the window with hopeful eyes, up at the gray autumn clouds, and I thought - though it could've been my sunglasses playing tricks on me - I honestly thought I saw a glimmer of golden light bursting through.

The gracious bell rang, signaling the end of first period, and I assumed the hardest part of the day was over. Next was pre-calculus, a class with a good handful of followers in it, so I wouldn't have to go it alone. (Not that the soporific Mr. Plebe posed much of a threat.) After that came lunch, then free period, then French, with history battling cleanup. I knew if I could make it that far, I'd be home free...*for the day*.

Unfortunately, it was only the second day of the school week. I had many grueling battles ahead of me. *This holy war was not yet won*.

Pre-calculus. Possibly the most boring class to ever be conceived by Man. (I'm sure the Unterbeast could think up a boring-er one.) But then *she* walked in, and things got a little less boring. And a little *more* gods-awful.

There she was, sitting to my diagonal left. I could smell her lilac body spray mingling with the post-gym-class stench of her classmates. It was pretty gross, actually. (The *perfume*, not the sweat. I'm a *manly* man, and we manly men love us a good stink!) But girls will be girls, and as far as girls come, Linda Lockhart was not so bad. I could easily see why a poor sap like Sammy would go gaga for her. She was pretty – not knockout-supermodel-poster-licking pretty – but still pretty. She had a girl-next-door, warm-fuzzy-sweater appeal. Strawberry hair in pigtails, rosy cheeks dotted with freckles, light, minimalist lip-gloss...yep.

"Todd? Todd!"

"Who? What? Where? When? Why?" Ah, the five W's. Some English teacher along the road had burned those into my brain, and now I can't say one without the other four. (It's a trademark of sorts.) Linda had her arms crossed and her eyebrows all questiony.

"You were *staring* at me," she all-too-accurately accused.

"Oh," I mumbled guiltily. "Sorry."

Alright, so I admit it. I was crushing on Linda too, but only an itty-bitsy, teeny-weeny, yellow-polka-dot-bikini's worth. She meant nothing to me, I swear! There were plenty of other fish in the Sugar High aquarium, and I would never, EVER do anything to jeopardize my friendship with Sammy. (Well, not when it came to girls, anyway. I would *always* be a troublemaker. Troublemaking was in my blood!) I know I sound a little defensive right now, and you'll soon find out why.

Mr. Plebe wrote our assignment on the whiteboard with the world's squeakiest, smelliest marker before passing out from the fumes and nodding off at his desk, like usual. The smart kids (who were actually the average kids, since this was an academic class) got right to work. The dumb kids (who were just plain dumb) played paper football with all their dumb buddies. (In this class, the dumber you were, the more friends you were likely to have.) The bored kids (comprised of both smart and dumb) shifted their gaze between the window and the clock. The devious kids, me included, doodled their plans for world domination on the back of their notebooks. I had something less lofty, but perhaps more difficult, than global conquest in mind. I chose this moment to ask Linda if she would go with Sammy to the homecoming dance. Or, at least, that's what I *tried* to ask her. I was kinda nervous, so it must've come out wrong.

"Hey, Linda, I was wondering...that dance is coming up, and...You don't have a date already, do you? Cuz if you don't, that's great! Well, not great for *you*, cuz that would mean you're some kind of ugly loser...or a freshman...but you're *not* an ugly loser! You're a good-looking, semi-popular, sophomore girl!"

"Todd, where are you going with this?"

"I just wanna know if you'd like to go to the dance with...a friend of mine." I was so tongue-tied at this point that I forgot my best friend's name. Linda mistook this simple brain-fart for something else: the proverbial friend-of-mine ploy.

"Sure, I'll go with you!"

"You will? That's Awesome! I'll tell him to pick you up at eight."

Gods-damn pre-calculus! That class put me in such a stupor, I didn't realize what I had done until lunch, when I sat across from Sammy, staring into those big, brown, soul-melting eyes. I closed my own puny, gray ones and

gulped. The first day of Reconnect-With-Sammy Week, and I had already ruined it! Crumpled it up and flushed it down the toilet...

"Um, Todd? You're being awful quiet today. What's up?"

"Nothing." Nothing I couldn't fix. *Hopefully*. Friday was approaching faster than a speeding bullet, and could demolish tall friendships in a single bound. It would take more than prayer to get me out of this mess.

I drifted through the rest of the day in a terrible, ghostly trance. Not even Mademoiselle Rodriguez (the mocha-skinned Latin goddess of a French teacher) and her scandalously low-cut dress could snap me out of it. But then history class arrived like a brick in the face. Today, I remembered, with a wave of nausea, was oral presentation day. And guess what? I knew less about Abe Lincoln than a Lincoln Log, and Linda Lockhart just happened to be in that class.

"Hiya, Todd! I can't wait for Friday! I already mentally picked out the jeans I'm going to wear. We're gonna have so much fun! Are you gonna spike the punch like last year?"

"Yeah, sure, whatever." Good GODS, why couldn't I muster up the courage to tell her the truth and set things straight?! What started out as an innocent misunderstanding was quickly turning into a nightmare. "Hey, uh, Linda? About homecoming. I think I gave you the wrong idea..."

"Shut your yappers, class!" bellowed the backwoodsy Mr. Hickory, louder than any of the students had been. "And that means *you*, Mr. Gafferty, if you want to, that is. Now, who wants to present first?" Obviously, no one raised their hand. "C'mon! No takers? Alrighty, then. I'll jus' pick from a hat."

Need I even tell you who he picked first? As I was standing up there, with a useless sheet of blank paper (I was supposed to take notes), groping my mind for facts, I transcended the plane of nervousness to another dimension altogether. The Dimension of Silliness, which is similar to being high.

"Lincoln was our sixteenth president. I remember that because I'm sixteen years old. Age of consent, ladies! He was born in a log cabin and had a gnarly beard, just like Mr. Hickory! Then he...uh...read some books by candlelight, cuz, y'know, this was *before* Ben Franklin invented the flashlight. No, wait, that can't be right! He ran for office in 1860, and won. Duh! That's why we put him on the penny. He also freed the slaves and got shot in the head by some pissy actor named John Telephone Booth. The end."

After that came the most deafening silence I had ever heard. I couldn't look my teacher or my classmates in the eyes, and instead just stared at the floor, searching for salvation and finding nothing but stray pencils and paperclips. Then someone started clapping – slowly at first, but soon everyone joined in. The applause grew louder and louder until even Mr. Hickory's shouts were muffled by the noise. I was reborn in a sea of relief.

"Thank you! Thank you very much!" I wiggled my hips in my best Elvis impression. "The King has left the building!" And I did leave – just strolled right out of that classroom, down the hall, and out the door. I needed some fresh air.

"Todd, open this door right now!" shrieked Mrs. Gafferty for the seventeenth time. I wasn't in the mood to call her Mom at the moment. (She shouldn't have to share in my shame, just because we share DNA.) I wasn't in the mood for anything, really, besides curling up in the fetal position between my Roger Rabbit sheets and reflecting on what an ass I had been.

"Your history teacher called, and he has some good news for you," she said in a friendly voice, suddenly changing her tactic.

"Yeah right!" I whispered. "She must think I'm pretty gullible." (Or has a vastly different opinion of "good" news.)

"He's letting you give another presentation!" See what I mean?

Hours passed. When Mr. Gafferty got home from work, he decided to join in the game.

"Todd, why won't you listen to your mother?" Silence.

"If you don't get your ass out of bed and stop hating yourself in the next five minutes, I'm getting the sledge hammer and busting down the door!" Wow! He knew me really well! On the other hand, *I* knew that we didn't have a sledge hammer. It was an empty threat.

Six o'clock. Dinner time.

"Todd, I'm really worried about you!" Mrs. Gafferty's turn again, using yet another tactic: the "worried mom" approach. "You haven't come down for supper. I made your favorite: mashed potatoes drenched in maple syrup!"

"Eww!" I groaned. That was my favorite meal when I was, like, five – before

my taste buds fully developed.

"Well, you've got to eat something! I don't want you turning anorexic on me!" Silence. (Laughing in my head.) She didn't know about the mondo stash of junk food I kept in my sock drawer. If I had to, I could barricade myself in and never have to leave my room for a month. Though the issue of relieving myself without a bathroom would get rather nasty...

"Sweetie, I'm serious! Do you want to waste away to nothing? You've got a whole wonderful life ahead of you!"

"What's the point in going on?" I wailed in the most emotastic voice I could muster. "My life is misery!" Mom gasped and scurried off. See, two can play at that game. Unfortunately, she went straight to the phone and dialed up the gods-damn Suicide Hotline! Can you believe it? I guess I underestimated her...

When the paramedic arrived, I kindly explained the situation to him. He was a young guy, just out of college. I believe his name was Pete. Paramedic Pete turned out to be real helpful and understanding. I told him all about my problems at school, and he gave me some great advice. We even split a bag of sock-drawer Doritos and swapped prankster stories.

11:43 pm.

"Then I cleverly disposed of the fishnets and scrubbed down the surfboard, leaving no trace of peanut butter."

"So they never found out it was you?"

"Nope! And that's why I love working at the morgue!" Pete yawned and checked his watch. "Oh, hey, it's almost midnight! I should probably get going. You've got school tomorrow, and those mortally wounded folk don't drive themselves!"

"Yeah," I mumbled airily. "See you around."

My joy at making a new friend put me in a much better mood. I crept into my parents' bedroom and apologized to them. Dad was already snoring. Mom had her eyes closed, pretending to sleep, but her triumphant smile gave her away. She was such a sore winner.

I trudged back to my room, set my alarm clock, and crawled into bed with a brand-new, shiny attitude. It was as if someone had clicked the refresh button on my morale. Come tomorrow morning, I was ready to thank the hell out of Mr. Hickory for giving me a second chance, and to fess up to Sammy about

my accidental date with Linda. Pete said you should always tell the truth when it comes to unintentional screw-ups, so people will think you're a good, honest person and you can sail under the radar.

Lies are for when you screw up on purpose.

"You did WHAT?!"

So far, Sammy wasn't taking it as well as I'd hoped. Oh gods, if only I had a time machine! (Perhaps I'll ask the Ogdens to build me one for Wintermas.) We were sitting on the rock ledge in the cramped courtyard during free period, surrounded by dead flowers and freezing our skins off in the autumn chill, but this was the only place for privacy around here (every other nook and cranny in all of Sugar High was occupied by hormonally-charged teenagers sucking face.)

"Look, Sam, it was a complete accident! And I'm sorry. Have I told you yet how sorry I am?"

"About thirty times."

"Well, allow me to say it again! I'm so sorry, I'm the sorriest man in the world – even sorrier than Hitler would've been, if he had a conscience! I'm sorrier than Einstein for inventing the atom bomb! I'm sorrier than George Lucas for creating Jar Jar Binks! I – am sorrier – than sorry itself! In other words, I am really, *really* sorry!" I finished, gasping for breath. Then I tried (and failed) to mirror Sammy's trademark puppy-dog eyes. "Why won't you forgive me?"

The stony-faced Jew crossed his arms and sighed.

"I would if I could, but I can't."

"Meaning?"

"I just don't understand how you could ask someone out by accident." He closed his eyes and shook his head. "It sounds like a load of bullshit to me."

I gasped sharply, and then pretended to fan myself with my hand. In an old Southern woman's voice, I said,

"Samuel Spitznogle! Since when did you start cussin'?" I thought a little humor might help to patch things up, but (once again) I was wrong.

"Since you *accidentally* stole the love of my life, Todd."

Whoa! Where did that one come from? I was totally taken aback *and* affront, causing me to get a bit snappy.

"Pff! Love of your life? You've never spoken a word to her, ever. Not one word." Without meaning to, I had struck a painful chord in him. Sammy shrugged inwardly like a turtle retreating into his shell, his face beet red with shame.

"I was...getting around to it," he mumbled. I wanted to shut my mouth right then and there, but Bitchy Todd was still on the attack.

"Oh yeah? In which century? Face it, buddy, you're so shy around girls it's pathetic! I was only trying to *help* you, by asking Linda out *for* you. You could use a touch of my charisma!"

"Maybe, but I sure could do without your awful arrogance! How come you didn't run your little scheme by me first?"

"Cuz I wanted it to be a surprise!"

"Some surprise. Remind me not to invite you to my next *birthday party*."

Yeowch! I was getting burned and zinged left and right! Who knew Sammy had it in him? Well, I could see this battle of words was going nowhere, or at least nowhere I wanted to be. I took a moment of silence to cool off and then started over again from scratch.

"Sammy, please try to hear me out, okay? I know you're sick of hearing it, but I truly am sorry. I messed up, and now I'm admitting it. I'm trying to fix what I broke. I know I don't always give you the mad props you deserve, and it may seem like I take our friendship for granted, but trust me: deep down I got nothin' but love for my sweet Semite brother from another mother!"

I waited for a response, a nod, a smile – anything! Finally, after nearly choking to death on the tension, the reluctant turtle popped out of his shell. He had tears in his eyes, and at first I thought he was crying, which is a BIG no-no in my book, but it turns out he was *laughing*. Not malicious laughter, like some preppy boyfriend-stealer's, nor maniacal laughter, like mine, but a pure, innocent expression of mirth. It was music to my ears!

"Damn you, Todd Gafferty, and your hilariously lame ghetto impression!" he said, while recovering from the latest bout of laughter. "You know that gets me every time..."

I beamed at him with the broadest, stupidest grin and asked,

"Does this mean I'm off the hook?"

Sammy shrugged.

"I guess so." His face did an immediate double take (which is something I

used to think only happened in movies) and dipped five shades paler.

"But...!" he shouted.

"But?"

"But! But, but, but, BUT! Linda!"

"Yeah, Linda does have a nice butt..." I teased. Sammy scowled at me, so I stopped.

"No, Todd, don't you get it?! *I* know you asking Linda out was a mistake, but does *Linda* know? How're you gonna break the news to her?"

"Aw, shit," I groaned, as my Elmer-glued world crumbled to pieces yet again. I only had until 8:00pm on Friday to find some metaphorical duct tape and fix this mess once and for all. That gave me exactly...um...

"Hey, Sam, can I borrow your graphing calculator?"

"Sure – it's right there in the front pocket."

"Thanks, buddy."

48 hours, 24 minutes, and some odd seconds (not taking sleep into account) to think up a plan that would save me from the homecoming dance, get Sam and Linda together, and not make me look like a jerk in the process, though two out of three ain't bad. Basically, I was counting on a miracle – a burst of inspiration that would drain every ounce of my creative energy. Not even Jack Bauer could pull this one off.

The clock was ticking.

"Think, Todd, think Todd, think Todd, think..." I chanted, just audible enough to annoy the heck out of every other kid in the classroom, yet at the same quiet enough not to disturb Sleeping Ugly, a.k.a. Mr. Plebe (though, judging by the amount of toxic marker fumes he had inhaled that day, it would've taken *a lot* more than true love's kiss to wake him out of *that* coma!).

I had been chanting for over five minutes now, but no seed of inspiration reared its wonderful head. My brain-field lay pathetically fallow. Some scheme-ster I turned out to be, huh? I guess the cat's outta the bag. Reader, I have lied to you. Well, not so much *lied* as blew my Awesomeness way out of proportion on several occasions. But I have a right to, don't you think? This is *my* gods-damn story, not yours! So...nah, nah, nah! **XP** (Angry

squinchy eyes with tongue sticking out, not to be confused with icky-dead-guy face.)

Sorry. Just had to shake that out of my system. *Moving on...*

Pre-calculus: the scene of the crime. Not to mention Linda was sitting too close for comfort, wrapped up in her pink, fuzzy fantasy world in which I take her to the homecoming dance, compliment her outfit/shoes/hair/other, pretend to listen, sway mindlessly back and forth to some sappy 90's pop ballad, sneak a goodnight kiss, and later admit to having an okay time. No wonder my brain was blocked! Her presence was like an unusually attractive tumor, pressing against the inside of my skull and metastasizing by the minute. Honestly, how could I look that girl in the face and say, "I'm sorry, but there's been a mistake"? Oh, if *only* I were a complete asshole! Sadly, I am but a three-quarter asshole; I happened to be born with a conscience. Granted, it was a small, shriveled, pre-mi conscience that works only when it wants to, but once in a while it gets the job done. (And you know what they say about men with small consciences...)

Despite what you may think, it's not easy making nothing out of something, like turning wine into water. And my problems were 200-proof. I imagined my dilemma as a standardized test, which I usually score quite well on. (Only because they're like school tests minus the difficulty. Thank you, No Child Left Behind Act!) I arranged my measly options in multiple-choice format, hoping this would make things easier.

1. *You accidentally asked your best friend's crush to homecoming. What do you do now?*

- A) Tell her the truth and hope for the best
- B) Make up an excuse as to why you can't go
- C) Go to the dance, ditch her, and let Sammy take your place
- D) Go through with it all despite the consequences
- E) None of the above

"No way I'd ever do A! A isn't my style. B might've worked a week ago, but now would be cutting it close. I'd probably come off as a jerk for trashing our plans at the last minute. C would *definitely* make me look like jerk to Linda, and D would compromise my friendship with Sammy. I guess that leaves me with E, which...isn't...a choice. Damn! Why'd I even put a fifth option? Gods, I suck at test-making."

Somewhere along the way, my internal monologue had shifted gears into an external one. I was faced with a dozen rude stares from the smart (average) kids, who were actually trying to *pay attention to the teacher*. (Weird, I know, right?) And Mr. Plebe, who was actually awake, asked me to "kindly" quit mumbling and solve the equation on the board, "If that is what you so choose, Mr. Gafferty."

"Eureka's Castle!" I shouted, snapping my fingers in excitement. Mr. Plebe had just inspired me (Weird, I know, right?) with an Awesome idea. Let's call it...Option F: *Cause such monumental trouble that even your faith-acknowledging teachers will be forced to report you, and the R-Bomb will suspend you from the dance*. But first, to pretend to solve that equation. "The answer's cosecant times the square root of x over 5."

All of a sudden, Mr. Plebe began choking on what seemed to be nothing more than his own spit. He sank to his knees and trembled, as if in terrible shock. At first I wondered if he were having a heart attack, or if he had perhaps OD-ed on marker fumes and was now slipping into a seizure.

"Gafferty..." he gasped, clutching at his bowtie. "Rosenbaum's office... now!"

"Should I get the nurse?"

"Not necessary; just...go!"

I did what I was told, even though following his orders was technically a sin. I could repent later. This was an emergency! Or...so I thought. Let me tell ya, it's pretty frustrating being wrong all the time. Can't a messiah get a break?

When I got to the office, Rosenbaum was right there waiting for me, blocking the hapless Miss Chipper with his massive girth. "He must be pretty pissed," I thought, "If he's letting me bypass the usual bureaucracy and get right to the meat of the punishment."

"Todd, my boy, I'd like to congratulate you!" he boomed, slapping me so hard in the back I thought for sure my sixth thoracic vertebra had just slid a centimeter to the left. (I'm like Rain Man when it comes to bodily pain.)

"Congratulate me?" I asked, dumbfounded yet again. "Whatever for?" *Certainly* not for giving Mr. Plebe a heart attack, unless his coworkers shared the same opinions as his students. Edvard swung his gorilla arm around my shoulders. His walrus mustache smiled at me.

"Todd, let's be honest; the rest of the faculty and I, we all thought you were a

dumbass! Until today, that is. Boy, did you prove us wrong!"

"Well, I thank your backhand for that compliment, but to what do I owe the honor?"

"And modest, too! Did you or did you not solve Mr. Plebe's super-hard bonus problem in pre-calculus today? The one he *assured* none of you would get, but decided to put it up on the board anyway, just for kicks and giggles?"

"I, uh, don't think I did, sir."

"Ah, but you *did*, Todd, you did! Without even using a calculator! Your teacher just informed me of your incredible scholastic feat over the intercom, and it's his decision to bump you up to the honors class! Isn't that great? You can finally stop disappointing your family!" Rosenbaum, worried for my silence, waved his fleshy hand over my eyes. "Todd? Are still with us, lad?"

No, I was not. I was far gone. There are two words that Todd Gafferty fears most in this world, the very utterance of which will send him into a panic. The first word is 'inoperable'. The second one is 'honors class'.

"Vice Principal Rosenbaum, you can't!" I cried, slipping into formality in my time of stress. "Think of my health!"

"Oh, but I *can*, Todd! I can!" He wore the most sickeningly smug smile, stretched across his pink, beefy face and cushioned by multiple chins.

"Ruining children's lives is just one of the many perks that comes with the title, and as for your *health*, I say toughen up! I know it's a stretch, but somewhere inside that flaccid slacker body of yours, I'm sure there's the potential to be a good student."

"But, but...the Student Bible encourages laziness!" I whipped out my trusty 4"x6" textual companion. (I said *textual*. Get your minds out of the gutter, people!) "See! It's right here in Chapter 7, Verse 2 of the Book of Trogdor!"

...And so the winged beast proclaimed unto the peasants: 'Thou shall not do today what thou couldst well do tomorrow, if thou wisheth to save thy village from a terrible conflagration!'

"And here again, in the Sixth Solidian Psalm!"

...The working man knowest no joy; All work and no play maketh him a dull boy.

"That's all very well, Mr. Gafferty, but doesn't your precious *bible* also tell

you to reach for the stars and be all you can be? Book of Diznee, Chapter 3, Verse 15, if I recall correctly."

No fair, no fair, NO FAIR! The R-Bomb had me beat at my own game. How is that even possible? The man must have an IQ of 38, give or take, but he certainly did his homework. Maybe something good can come of that after all. Who knew?

"Please, *please*, sir..." I was groveling now, on my knees at his feet. How pathetic. Sometimes I wish I weren't such a wuss, but...on second thought, given the choice between balls and brains, I'd inevitably choose brains. The one can always compensate for the other (reproductive capabilities aside), but not vice versa. Sadly, there were those at my school (ahem, Mad Matt) who hadn't figured that out yet, and continued to make the rest of us miserable with their boorish antics. Ha. *Boorish*. That's such a British word. I probably picked it up from the Ogdens. Those two ought to be quarantined lest they should infect other honest patriots with their haughty vocabulary! (Lest? *Haughty*? Aw, crap. I must be entering the advanced stage.)

"Get up, Gafferty! The fruity bathrobe's one thing, but this is just emasculating and *humiliating*, even by your standards!" Rosenbaum hoisted me up by the sash. I thanked gods my robe didn't fall open. (I was going commando that day.) (It's a Scottish thing.) (What? Don't give me that look! Wikipedia will back me up on this! (*citation needed*))

Edvard may have had his mind set on this whole "honors class" schtick, but if he believed for one millisecond that I, Todd Gafferty, Lifetime Achievement-Less Award winner (eleven years running), would degrade myself to toiling over an extra helping of schoolwork every other day, then he had another thing com...ing. Oh. Oh, oh, oh! More inspiration! What are we at now? Option G? H? Q? Okay, Q it is!

Option Q: Use the newly-acquired shitload of homework as an excuse. Linda will think you're trying hard (for once) to be a good student and honor your sudden drive to study. (Chicks dig that sort of thing.) Then, when the moment is right, present an alternative escort of the younger, more Jewish variety. This way, you come off looking jerk-free and everybody wins! Problem solved!

"Bless you, Option Q!" I thought. "If you were a woman, I would make love to you right now! Well, not *right* now, since we're still in Rosenbaum's office, and I don't have a rubber on me, but...you get the idea. Call me!"

Isn't it Awesome how things just...come together over me? (Cue music.) Like a jigsaw puzzle of destiny, with dumb luck as the glue. When I got home, I planned to pray my ass off to Lord Curlion, my personal savior. ...*"He who toucheth his hand to this Funny-Shaped Rock shall be blessed with one of three divine gifts by the Gods: Movus, Granter of Wealth; Larrius, Granter of Beauty; and Curlion, Granter of Good Fortune. All gifts are Awesome. A possessor of any will become Awesome and go far."*

- Joshmo the Prophet, Origins, 4:26

Ah, Friday. An "off" day. (All electives.) I had anatomy first, which isn't as interesting as you might think. The only reason I joined was for the illustrated textbooks, expecting some kind of soft-core porn, but all I got were these tame, genderless diagrams. (Oh, and a few photos of dead people near the back, à la "Body Worlds". Somewhat cool, but I can't get off on that. What do I look like, a sick necrophiliac? Don't answer that.) Today we went over the skeletal system with the help of "Corpulent Boy Skinny", our plastic model skeleton. Big fun. (Hey, Ms. Francis, notice the complete lack of enthusiasm in my tone? Yeah. It's called *sarcasm*. So when I say "That class was Awesome!", I really mean "Hurry up and let us dissect a cat like you promised!")

Next stop: Psychology. I took *this* class in the hopes that it would sharpen my manipulative skills. So far, it seems to be working. I've already managed to brainwash a quarter of my high school population without even trying. Now that's what I call mob mentality in action! (The Christians call it the Crusades, Witch Trials, and Spanish Inquisition, to name a few.)

The Ogdens must've had the same idea. Normally, freshmen aren't allowed to join this class, it being a fancy-shmancy upperclassmen elective and whatnot, yet there they were, sitting to either side of me, furiously jotting down notes. (They must've bullied their way in.) Outside of Sammy and that quiet Asian kid in the corner (every school has one), I had never seen such academic dedication.

When Dr. Flugelshmitz (his real name was Mr. Brown, but he looked like a Flugelshmitz) paired me with Jane for our parenting project, I was psyched, thinking this would be an easy A. The goal of this assignment was to protect and nurture our very own yolkless egg, ahem, *child* for the remainder of the year and return it safe, sound, and free of risqué tattoos.

Mabel, who got paired with that quiet Asian kid, looked less than thrilled.

She protested to Dr. FlugelsmhitZ, vouching for a same-sex couple so she and Jane could work together.

"C'mon, mate, don't split up the Dream Team!" she pleaded. "It's legal in several states!"

"I'm sorry, Miss Ogden, but Mr. Tamamushi needs a partner," he replied.

"And, much to the state of Kentucky's disappointment, incest is still *il*-legal nationwide."

Touché, FlugelshmitZ. Touché.

My "wife" and I gave birth to a bouncing baby boy egg. The sex was denoted by a blue ribbon wrapped around the thing, which I thought was pretty lame, but when I tried to stick my pencil stub in there, Jane promptly swatted my hand away.

"What in gods' green earth do you think you're doing, Todd?"

"What does it *look* like I'm doing, Mrs. Gafferty? Givin' our son the package he deserves! We Gafferty men are hung like horses, you know."

Jane rolled her eyes and laughed.

"First of all, I never agreed to change my name. Second of all, that pencil stub is highly disproportionate to our baby's body and would most likely break him. Third of all, I'll believe it when I see it."

"Fine," I said. "If that's how it's gonna be, then at least let me pick the name."

"Fine, but only if you pick something not too retarded."

"*Fine*. How 'bout Batman Jr.?"

"Fine!"

"Fine?"

"Fine."

"Okay, then, Batman Jr. it is."

The whole time we argued, though it was a very silly argument, Jane's electric blue eyes were locked onto mine, burning holes in my retinas. At first she wore her usual glower, but then her gaze melted into a playful smile, and I thought,

"Could it be? No, no, I must be mistaken. There's no way in Unterworld that Jane Ogden is actually *flirting* with me. Impossible! Or...is it? What if, perhaps in her awkward, tomboyish, British way, she *was* flirting with me? What then? Do I smile politely and get back to work, or do I make the next

move? I mean, where do we even stand? Does she really like me that way? Do I really like *her* that way? I don't know! I've never thought about it before. She's one of my best friends, and a freshman, and she sometimes scares the crap outta me, though granted, Mabel is the scarier twin, and Jane is awful pretty when she's angry, and she helped me reconnect with Sammy, and who says a junior can't date a freshman? And...oh gods, I'm rambling! That's a telltale sign of love! I suppose I should ask her out now. Larrius, how do I look? Is my sombrero on straight? Curlion, please spare me a shameful rejection. Movus, if none of this dating business works out, and I end up dying alone, please, please let me die rich."

When I finally sorted out the confetti in my head, Jane had long since given up on me. She had already scribbled a smiley face on Batman Jr.'s designated facial area and was busy filling out his information chart. On the line labeled "Religion" she had taken the liberty of writing down "Awesomeist".

"Whoa, whoa, whoa!" I said, plucking the pen from her fist. "Not so fast!"

"What?" peeped Jane, cocking her head to the side in a heart-wrenchingly adorable way. "Don't you want our son brought up in a fun-loving Awesomeist household? I think it's exciting, spreading your teachings to the next generation."

In truth, that was the last thing I wanted. Even as a simulation, the idea of forcing a religion on a newborn child made me sick to my stomach. He should be able to choose on his own, when he's ready. When he's seen enough of the world and explored the depths of his own mind, body, and soul. But I know Jane was only attempting to please me, and, not wanting to upset her at this crucial point in our pre-relationship, I decided to play along.

"We've got to get him baptized first!" I announced, making it up as I went. (My life's method, tried and true.) "Would you like to do the honors?"

Jane's magical eyes lit up.

"Why, certainly!"

"Spit in my hand!" I commanded, trying so desperately to keep a straight face. Trying to act like I knew what I was doing. Like this was all premeditated.

At first her face contorted in disgust, but upon realizing how serious I looked, she hawked a great big loogie and spat. Wonderful. Now I had to pretend that the warm glob of saliva sitting in my palm wasn't the nastiest thing I had

experienced all week but instead a glorious gift from the gods. I quickly wiped it onto Batman Jr.'s head and mumbled some stuff in Pig Latin, the sacred language of Awesomeism:

"Oung-yay amb-lay fo-ay ods-gay, ehold-bay he-tay miling-say orld-way!
Ay-may our-yay ife-lay e-bay ull-fay fo-ay appy-hay lessings-bay."

(Translation: Welcome to Earth, babe. I hope you enjoy your stay.)

Jane looked from me to the egg to the shiny spit on the egg and back to me again.

"So...was that it?" she asked.

"Yeah," I said. "That was it."

"So...you wanna go for coffee sometime?"

"Sure, yeah, sounds Awesome."

The bell rang and I scooped Batman into his Kleenex-insulated box, nearly dropping him in the aftershock. Yay, I just got a date with Jane Ogden! Holy shit, I just got a date with Jane Ogden. I had a lot to tell Sammy during lunch. Not to mention finally breaking my date with Linda, the "other woman". I planned to do it during gym. That way, she could take any aggression out on the pillow polo game and not on my face.

À bientôt, people. À bientôt.

"Jane Ogden asked me out," I blurted as soon as we sat down. The topic had been buzzing around my brain since last period, though my little Jewish friend didn't look half as thrilled.

"That's nice," he replied curtly between sips of orange juice. "It's good to know *someone's* love life found its way out of the gutter."

"Don't worry," I assured, frowning sympathetically. "After next period all of that will change."

"You still haven't sorted things out?" Sammy slammed his juice carton onto the table and gaped at me in disbelief. "It's Friday, Todd! The homecoming dance is *tonight*!"

I tell ya, dealing with that kid was like riding an emotional rollercoaster without a safety bar. Sometimes I wish he would learn to cool his jets.

"Chillax, Max! It ain't the Holocaust! The Toddster's got everything under control."

"Wow, Todd. Just, wow. There are so many things wrong with that statement that I don't even know where to begin."

"Then shut up and eat your hotcakes," I said, slathering the contents of my lunch tray with syrup. "Breakfast for lunch is a rare and beautiful thing. Try not to spoil the magic."

The truth is, I was just as stressed as Sammy, if not more so. The future of our friendship rested on my shoulders, or rather, on my ability to wriggle out of tight situations. Sure, I had done it plenty of times before, but maybe Curlion's blessing was starting to wear off. What if this was it for the Infallible Toddster? What if I lost my cool and everything fell apart? I had a lot of people counting on me now, being a messiah and all. I guess it was time to bite the bullet and march forth. *Que sera, sera.*

We stuffed our faces in silence for awhile, but I can't handle silence. Silence leads to thoughts, and thoughts lead to ideas, and ideas (if your name is Todd Gafferty) lead to problems. So I broke it wide open.

"I'm sorry, man," I stated flat out. It seemed like I'd been singing that tune for days now, but never before had I meant it. "I know I'm nothing but a big disappointment. My teachers and my folks have been telling me that for years. But you know what else I know?" I poked Sammy in the arm with my plastic fork to make sure he paid attention.

"Ouch! What gives?"

"This is the audience participation part," I explained. "I say 'You know what else I know?' and *you* say..." Sammy, tired of my antics, leaned his head on his hand and groaned.

"What else do you know, Todd?"

"Yeah! That's how a monologue turns into a dialogue!" I motioned for a high five, but the Samster left me hanging. "Ahem, *anyway*, I know that I am sick of letting everyone down. So as of today, I am a new man!

A *responsible* man. A man who won't charge into things headfirst. A man who won't procrastinate when his friendship is on the line. A man with the audacity to say, 'Hey, Linda Lockhart, it's over before it began!' A man that the littl'uns can look up to. You hear that, Batman Jr.?" I buried my nose in the cozy shoebox. "Daddy's gonna make you proud!"

Sammy closed his eyes and hummed as if my rant had bored him to sleep. No matter; I'm sure he's heard the same spiel a hundred times over. Heck, so

have I! Every New Year's resolution I've ever made, after every bad report card, every detention - but those were all lies to soften the blow. This time I was telling the truth, even if no one believed me. I would just have to prove it to them.

The next half hour passed without incident. I left lunch early and dashed up the stairs to study hall, where, for the first time in my high school career, I cracked open a textbook instead of playing games on my calculator. Mr. Plebe had saddled me with a landfill of homework, as expected. I had to memorize all of the trigonometric identities as well as the properties of imaginary numbers. (Yeah, apparently some numbers are more *imaginary* than others. Those mathematicians really need to get laid!)

When the bell rang, I packed up my stuff and dashed *down* the stairs, around the corner, and through the dimly lit mile of hallway that led to the locker rooms. I never used to be ashamed of changing in front of the other guys, but today I felt oddly vulnerable. Perhaps it had something to do with the fact that Mad Matt had just transferred into this class and was brandishing a gym sock filled with quarters.

"Well, well, well, if it ain't the unisex kid!"

"Back off," I grumbled. "I'm not in the mood."

"What do I have to do to get you in the mood?" he jabbed, swinging the sock around like a lasso. "Light some scented candles?"

"Ha, good one."

I had to hand it to him, that insult was rather witty, and the word "friggin'" didn't cross his lips once. (He probably kidnapped one of the creative writing kids to feed him better dialogue.)

"What's that you've got there?" Matt grunted, pointing to the closed box under my arm.

"Oh, nothing, just a stupid class project."

"So you wouldn't mind if I...gave it a look-see?" Before I could stop him, he yanked the box away from me and tossed the lid on the ground. "It's an egg," he muttered, deflated, as if he had been expecting the Hope Diamond.

"Astute observation," I said, secretly exploding with relief as Matt handed me back my baby. That's when I knew something was different. See, *Old* Todd would've found some way to screw up the situation and lose Batman Jr. to those vile hands. But *New* Todd, Just-Studied-During-Study-Hall Todd,

played his cards right and no harm was done. Thank you, karma!

Then, like a gift from the heavens, Coach Carmichael popped his head in the locker room and barked at us to "Move it along, ladies!" I quickly tucked Batman into his shoebox and hid him beneath my sombrero.

Today we were running laps around the track. Unfortunately, Linda was a quick one. (She played soccer.) Me, whose favorite sport involved a Playstation and a bag of Cheetos, had a tough time catching up, but when I finally did, I let everything spill.

"Linda...the dance...can't go with you...too much homework...so sorry...but...I know someone...who can..." She pulled me aside so I could catch my breath, and then I repeated the news in complete sentences. Her eyes wandered, and I could tell she was thinking about it, but whether or not I was off the hook was yet to be determined.

"Is he cute?" she asked. I rubbed the back of my neck, not sure if I was entitled to answer that, but, like any good salesman, I said what I needed in order to seal the deal.

"Sure, cute as can be! And he thinks you're the hottest thing since Vesuvius!"

Linda smiled meekly, obviously quite pleased. When it comes to women, flattery will get you *everywhere*.

"Who is this mystery date?" she prodded, suddenly pumped full of excitement. "What grade is he in? When do I get to meet him?"

"Questions, questions, questions! All will be revealed at the homecoming dance, if you can hold your horses until then." She immediately clammed up.

"I'll tell him to meet you by the tennis courts. Do we have a deal?" Linda nodded vigorously. We shook on it with the patented Awesomeist's handshake, which is too complex to describe. (Actually, I'm just too lazy to describe it.)

Ah, it felt so Awesome to get that off my chest! The pawns were in position; now all Sammy had to do was deliver. All I had to do was sit back, relax, and sculpt a naked woman perched on a toilet for ceramics (Ms. Dubois called it obscene, but I called it art).

Things were finally looking up.

"So, how'd it go?" I asked, addressing the pink, fuzzy elephant in the room. Sammy had just squandered his illegal haxxor income on the new "Killer

Ninja Firing Squad" game, so we were hanging out at his place for a change. "You ever notice how these games get bloodier and bloodier as the plots get dumber and dumber?" he remarked, aiming to change the subject. "I mean, 'KNFS VII: Goreus Maximus' was chock full of skull-blasting action, but why would the characters time-hop to Ancient Rome in the first place? I miss the intricate back-story of 'KNFS III: Samurai Blood Feud' and the intriguing character development in 'KNFS VI: The Rise of Shotgun Mary'. I'm a sophisticated gamer, and I demand to be entertained!"

"Then you should stick to 'Penultimate Reverie' and leave the brain-dead games to me," I said, aiming to get us back on track. "Now what about the dance? Did you have a good time?"

Sammy blushed redder than one of those octagonal signs I don't pay much attention to.

"Well, not at first," he replied, staring absently at the controller in his hands. "When Linda discovered that *I* was her mystery date, she...got a little confused."

"How come?"

"Let's just say she didn't think I was interested in her, or women in general."

"She thought you were GAY?!" I exclaimed, thoroughly appalled. Sure, Sammy dressed well, maintained impeccable personal hygiene, sang in the occasional school musical, and had an empty dating record, but *gay*? Never! "I hope you set her straight, brother, no pun intended."

The young Jew blushed again, and this time a smile spread like margarine across his face. "I told her I'd been holding out for that one special girl, the one that brightens up my day whenever she walks in the room." His smile widened. "I told her she was that girl."

"And she bought it?"

"Why not?" Sammy argued. "It's the truth! I haven't so much as looked at another girl in ten years!"

"Yeah, you got a point there." I paused the interrogation to stuff a handful of popcorn into my mouth. "Hud et gwo affa dat?"

"Great! I couldn't believe how laidback I was, or how quickly we clicked. Once we got the case of my sexuality cleared up, it was smooth sailing for the rest of the night!"

"So what's the forecast for a second date?"

"I dunno," he mused, a note of worry creeping into his voice. "She said she'd call me. Is that good?"

"Depends," I said. "Did she specify when?"

"No, but it's only Saturday." Sammy lost himself in a look of youthful contemplation. "You think I should call her?"

"Naw, give it time," I assured, though internally I was shooting off a slew of dirty words.

Sammy was happier than I had ever seen him, so I didn't dare burst his golden bubble. I didn't dare tell him that the odds weren't in his favor; that "I'll call you" rarely results in a follow up; that Linda probably didn't reciprocate the obsessive level of passion that he felt for her, and that he shouldn't put all his eggs in one basket, no matter how attractive and semi-popular said basket happens to be.

"Speaking of eggs, I should probably check on Batman Jr. He was sound asleep when I left him, but who knows what the little tyke's gotten himself into? You can never be too careful with kids."

"Uh-huh," Sammy mumbled, his eyes glued to the TV. He was too busy filling zombie cowboys with lead to take interest in my departure, or to realize that I hadn't, in fact, been speaking of eggs. Tch, sophisticated gamer my ass!

I grabbed the bowl of popcorn and wandered downstairs into the Spitznogles' living room. Mr. and Mrs. Spitznogle were preoccupied with some Jewish stuff so they didn't notice me leaving. "Sweet Moses!" I thought. "What's a fella gotta do around here to get some attention flowing his way?"

I was so used to being the center of attention at school that it felt weird passing through the neighborhood without setting any alarms off. That's when it hit me: I haven't caused any trouble lately. Of course there's been trouble, plenty of trouble, but all of it's been aimed *at* me instead of *away* from me and towards someone more deserving, such as Mad Matt. Now that most of my screw-ups have been screwed down, I think it's time to reinstall the old program, and to reinstate Operation Petty Revenge.

With that thought in mind, I strolled past my house to my other next-door neighbors, the Ogdens, to see if our vengeance machine was in need of a tune-up. Jane and Mabel usually hung out in the garage, so I banged on the aluminum door and waited.

"Who is it?" trilled Jane, followed by a round of girlish giggles that I didn't normally associate with the Ogdens. I wondered who they were holding hostage today.

"It's the father of your child," I joked. More giggles. "And I come bearing popcorn. May I come in?"

The motor came alive and the door rose slowly to reveal...the Lockharts? What were they doing here? Linda had a few feathers in her hair and her face was flushed, as if she had been engaged in a pillow fight. (She didn't seem angry to see me, which was good, though I might've been angry at her for getting Sammy's hopes up.) Her sister Lana, whom I hadn't seen much since she went off to college, was a taller, slimmer, and dare I say prettier version of Linda. I suppose I started to drool a bit, because soon all four women were glaring at me.

"Sorry for being born with eyes and a dick," I said.

"It's alright," laughed Lana, swiping the bowl from my hands. "We'll just take this as payback. So, what brings you round these parts?"

"I could ask you guys the same question."

"Well, Lin-Lin wanted to visit her boyfriend..."

"He's not my boyfriend!" whined Linda, crossing her arms indignantly, but her dreamy smile gave her away. "Not yet, anyway."

"And I needed to get my car fixed, and since the Ogdens charge less than the local mechanic...here we are!"

Huh. So Linda wasn't playing Sammy after all. Is it wrong to say I was surprised, and perhaps a bit pissed off? Gods know why. Actually, I believe I do know why.

I put all my time and effort into playing matchmaker with those two, and what did I get in return? Nothing! Not so much as a thank you from either one! But then I remembered, with a sigh, that I hadn't done it for recognition or personal gain. I had done it to be a good friend, out of charity. (And pity.) I had wanted my best friend to be happy, and now he was. Shouldn't that have been its own reward?

Yeah, it should've. I guess I'm just greedy. (Good thing there is only *one* deadly sin in my book, and that's stupidity.) (Aw, crap.) (I'm going to Unterworld, aren't I?) (And I was really looking forward to Uberworld!) (Did I mention I like parentheses?)

"Um, I can see you ladies are busy doing whatever it is girls do when left to their own devices, so I'd best be going now. Au revoir!" I gave Jane a peck on the cheek and took off.

When I got home, Mom and Dad were waiting silently in the parlor. Both of them. Together. It didn't take a rocket scientist, or even a *Christian* scientist, to figure out that this didn't bode well for me.

"Son, we've got some good news and some bad news," Dad began.

"What's the good news?"

"We just saved a ton of money on our car insurance," he said, chuckling at his own feeble attempt at humor. I just wanted him to get on with it.

"No, seriously, what's the good news?"

"Actually, there is none," he admitted, adopting a serious tone.

"So what's the bad news?"

Al Gafferty was not known for his eloquent deliveries, so he motioned uselessly with his hands, struggling for the right thing to say.

"It involves a baby," he revealed.

"You're PREGNANT?!" I gasped, my eyes darting to Mom, who shook her head in alarm.

"No way! As soon as you reached the terrible two's, I ran out and got my tubes tied. Your father got a vasectomy. The doctor told him it was redundant, but better safe than sorry, I always say!"

"Then what...?" Suddenly it hit me like a brick factory in the face. "Batman Jr.!"

Mom lead me by the hand into the kitchen, the way she used to lead me downstairs to the bathroom when I had to pee in the middle of the night, warding off imaginary monsters that lurked in the shadows. But now Mom *was* the monster, for what she had done, the details of which would soon be revealed. My other hand was stuck across my eyes as a blindfold. I didn't want to look, but I had to. It's like a train wreck.

No, that's not giving it enough credit; the sight was much more gruesome than a train wreck.

Peering through my fingers at the shattered mess on the linoleum, I mentally fell to my knees and wept. On the outside, I just stood there glaring angrily at the world's worst grandmother. (Put *that* on a coffee mug and drink it!) All she had to do was baby-sit him for a few hours while I was out, and now Batman Jr. lied in white, paint-chip pieces at my feet: so young, so eggy, so dead.

"Well," said Marion, "Look on the bright side! At least there's no icky yolk to mop up."

"Oh, yeah, the *bright* side," I echoed sardonically. "So when you die, I'll just say 'At least there's no icky blood to mop up!'"

"Calm down, honey," she breathed, rubbing her hand in circles on my back, as if I were a baby throwing a tantrum. "Maybe we can fix it. Your father has a glue gun..."

"Fix it? FIX IT?! If all the king's horses and all the king's men couldn't put that Humpty fellow back together again, what makes you think a little glue and blind optimism will do the trick?"

Okay, so I *was* a baby throwing a tantrum, but it felt good letting the steam out. (Maybe I'd get to suck on some tits if I kept it up.)

"You're acting like this is the end of the world, Todd."

"No, I'm acting like my infant son was just murdered, my chances of passing psychology reduced to 'not likely', and my chances of dating Jane Ogden eliminated."

"Hey, when you put it that way," chimed Dad, gliding into the room, "You're pretty screwed!"

Mom shot him a look of cold fire.

"Shut up, Albert! This is half your fault."

"How?" he shot back.

I listened eagerly to find out what happened, since no one wanted to give me a straight answer.

"I took him out of the box to change his diaper," explained Mom, "But then you called to me from the other room, so I set him on the counter."

"Yeah, but it's not *my* fault that *you're* too stupid to know eggs roll!"

"But it wasn't the fall that killed him!" screamed Mom, thickening the plot.

"It was *you* accidentally squashing him with your mammoth feet!"

I was fooled into thinking my anger had subsided when suddenly the five W's struck again:

"Who gave you permission to touch him? What did you think you were doing? Where did your brains fly off to? When were you planning on telling me? Why, for gods' sakes, *why*?"

The parental units paid no attention to me. They continued to go at each other, leaving the topic of smashed eggs and moving onto other things, such as missing cash and strange phone calls, while I quietly swept Batman's remains into a dustpan. I had never seen them fight like this before, and I couldn't make heads or tails of it. The holidays were coming up, and I wondered if I'd be eating Thanksgiving dinner at two separate houses, or receiving two sets of Wintermas gifts this year.

I dumped the eggshell back into the shoebox, which would now serve as a casket. The next step was notifying Batman's mother, so I fished the cell phone out of my robe, dialed Jane's number, and took a deep breath.

"Ello, Todd," she answered in that darling accent. "How's our baby doing?"

"Not good, I'm afraid."

"Oh, dear! Is he sick?" To intensify the project, Dr. Flugelshmitz handed out diseases to his students through e-mail. Jane and I hadn't received any yet, so we assumed we were dealing with a healthy boy. So much for that.

"Worse than sick," I sobbed. "He's dead."

"Dead? Already?" She didn't seem sad or mad or bothered at all, which made me nervous as heck. (Denial is the first stage of grief.)

"What do you mean *already*?" I asked, worried that she had expected this from the start, that I was a terrible father, and that it hadn't taken long for me to prove her point.

"Usually Mr. Brown waits a month before making the call, but I suppose it's more shocking this way."

"Okay," I said, collapsing in an armchair and resting my feet on the coffee table, making myself comfortable for a long explanation. "You lost me at 'ello."

I listened intently as Jane divulged the true purpose of the project, which she had learned from Lana Lockhart earlier that afternoon. It turns out our teacher was playing us like a kazoo. All that stuff about raising the egg from infancy to adolescence was a crock. What he *really* wanted was to have us experience

the loss of a child first-hand, a psychological trauma considered one of the hardest to pull through. (I awarded him 10 points for cleverness, 11 points for douche-baggery.)

"I'll send out invitations to the funeral," Jane concluded. "And I know you like to write, so you can get started on the eulogy, which doubles as our essay portion. Oh, Mr. Brown will love it! He'll give us an A for sure!"

I hung up relieved, albeit a little disappointed. The *nerve* of this problem, resolving itself like that! Who does he think he is? Todd Gafferty's problems are like Big Macs: they're supposed to come with a side of challenge. I didn't order the stress-free salad!

Of course then Mom had to step in and super-size everything.

"Todd, honey, I hate to tell you this after everything that's happened today, but...your father and I are getting a divorce."

"You can't do that!" I shrieked at the top of my lungs, tears welling up in my eyes (*physical* ones this time), even though I knew it was not my decision to make. I had finally succumbed to the dreaded Feelings.

Dad stormed into the room to see what all the fuss was about. He took one look at Mom all stony-faced and me all teary-eyed, and said,

"You told him, didn't you? After all he's been through. Nice going, Marion."

Mom opened her mouth to retort, but I was quick to cut her off.

"You can't get divorced! You...you guys are atheists!"

"I'm sorry your mom can't keep her big mouth - wait. What did you call us?"

"Well, you are, aren't you?"

It was seven years to the day that my staunch WASP grandparents had moved to Florida, and, consequently, our family had stopped going to church. My folks had been checking out Dawkins books from the library, taking adult science courses (including *evolutionary* biology) at Sugar Community College, celebrating "Wintermas" instead of Christmas, having kinky sex (the walls are too thin), attending pro-choice rallies, playing John Lennon records, scribbling out the "In God We Trust" from every bill they've earned, stealing hotel bibles, and skipping around singing, "We're free! We're free!" for the past seven years, so it seemed like a no-brainer to me.

Dad shot a wary look at Mom. She responded with a solemn nod.

"I suppose so, but what's that got to do with anything?"

Just then my tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth with the force of a thousand peanut butter sandwiches, and for the first time in my life, I was rendered incapable of speech. I ran upstairs to my room, away from them, away from the spiraling madness.

I crashed onto my bed and pulled the Bible from my pocket. I stared at it intensely for a moment before tossing it, pages fluttering, into the wastebasket. (Don't worry, there wasn't any garbage in there. I use my floor for that.)

"Slam dunk."

What was I doing carrying a holy book on my person, even one I made up? That's, like, possession of an illegal substance! It went against everything I believed, or, in this case, *disbelieved* in. Some atheist I turned out to be.

At least I wasn't giving godless unions a bad name, like my parents. All I could do was fume and watch as they carelessly foddered the neighborhood gossip cannon. I mean, what would people think when they examined the facts?

Sammy's parents: Jewish, happily married.

Jane's parents: mysterious, Presbyterian, still together after all these years.

My parents: atheist, divorced.

Add a pinch of faulty reasoning that creationists are known for, and *bam!* You've got yourself a scapegoat soufflé! I guessed it was up to me, the last good atheist, to put a stop to this unholy disunion.

I held my sore diaphragm until the shudders went away (who knew sorrow actually *hurt*?), wiped my eyes dry, and made an oath to never speak of the Feelings, not even to Sammy.

With a happy change of heart, I decided to fish my well-writ fairytale from the wastebasket. Some things are just too Awesome to throw out, and besides, I wouldn't want to let down my disciples this early in the game. They still looked to me to deliver the schemes, and who was I to rain on their pseudo-religious parade?

Okay, shifting gears. I had to figure out how an emotionally-challenged teenager could save a dying marriage. I knew nothing of old-people love, though perhaps it wasn't all that different from young-people love. Maybe all my parents needed was a romantic jumpstart, and what better way than to go

back to where it all began?

"Let's see, where did they first meet?" I racked my brains for the name of a restaurant, a park, a bowling alley - anything that rang a bell. If only I paid more attention to their sappy dinner-table stories... "Oh, wait, I remember now!"

My parents *didn't* meet at a barbecue or a roller rink or anywhere fun like that. Ironically enough, they met at Sugar Congregational Church! Dad was an altar boy (pissing in the holy water) and Mom was in the choir (adlibbing dirty lyrics). It was love at first sight.

Now all I had to do was shoot over there, chat up Reverend Starky and make some reservations. To the Toddmobile! (My uncle's old Nissan.) (Of course I have my driver's license.) (I don't fail at *everything*!) (Just, y'know, most things.)

Fear not, readers, for I, the Infallible Toddster, shall return in the next chapter, but for now, allow me to pass the mic on to my closest friend. You've all heard tell of *my* trials and tribulations (TNT's), but what of young Samuel's? What has that darling Jew been up to all this time, besides playing video games and hacking his way into the Pentagon? I'm sure you're all *dying* to know, so, without further ado, I present to you..."Sammy's Turn". (Truthfully, I just swiped his diary while I was over his house yesterday.) (What *dude* keeps a diary? Come on!) (He was practically asking for it.)

Saturday

Dear *Journal* (Not a diary),

Todd came over today. We played some KNSF, pigged out on processed foods...you know. The usual. Things were going great until he started pressing me for info on the dance. I don't know why he was so interested, unless - gulp - he's still got a thing for Linda. Seriously, some guys need to get a life.

What *really* happened at homecoming? Well, I'll tell you. It was inTENSE like my camping trip! Sure, we talked, we danced...but what Todd doesn't know is that we MADE OUT for, like, HALF AN HOUR on the tennis courts before the dance even started. All that stuff about Linda thinking I was gay? A total lie. It turns out she's had *me* pegged since pre-K! We could've hit it off years ago if either one of us had any balls. (Actually, I'm glad Linda has no balls. In fact, her lack of balls is one of the key reasons I'm attracted to

her.) Oh G-d, I hate myself for being such a coward...

Why didn't I tell Todd? Well, there's a lot of things I don't tell Todd, as I'm sure there are plenty of things he keeps from me. That's the beauty of male friendship. We can hang out and have fun without spilling our souls to each other, which is good because I like to keep my soul on the *inside* with the rest of my organs, thank you very much.

Another reason is because...uh...because I didn't want him to get jealous. Not many people know this on account of his mildly perverted and sexually confident nature, but...Todd's still a virgin, like me. And, uh, I have a feeling that I might lose mine first. I'm not saying Linda puts out, or that Jane doesn't put out (although she does strike me as a bit of an ice queen, not to mention I don't think they've even kissed yet), it's just...a feeling. That's all.

Oy, gotta go! Mom just called me down for dinner. She's making matzo ball soup. (Sure, it's stereotypical, but it's SO delicious!)

Later that evening

Linda came over tonight. She literally scaled my trellis, Shakespeare style, although, damn, does that mean I'm Juliet? Anyway, she said she couldn't wait to see me again, and she wanted to be spontaneous. Well, mission accomplished. Nearly gave me a heart attack! (If my heart were located where my shmeckle was.)

How did it turn out? I'd rather not say. But I will say that shortstop had better watch his hat!

Well, that's quite enough of that. Did you enjoy it? I hope so, because that's all you're going to get! As I've stated many a time before, this MY story, not yours or Sammy's or Sammy's hormones, but MINE! (I'm such a naughty little tease.)

P.S. I'm not a virgin anymore. Just throwing that out there.

"Todd Gafferty, *daring* to show his face in a church?" Jane chuckled from the passenger seat, looking quite distracting in a tight, gray sweater. "That's something you don't see everyday!"

I decided to bring her along for the ride, figuring this otherwise dreary outing could double as a first date. There was a cutesy coffee shop nearby: "The Sugar Cube." Plus, I wasn't sure if I could do it alone.

When we got to Sugar Congregational, I made the rookie mistake of parking next to a minivan. I could barely suppress my gag reflex as a buxom church mom and her four rosy darlings, all frilled out in their Sunday best, spewed forth from the dumpster-on-wheels, giggling and batting each other with their bibles. I hated them in an instant, not for the present, but for what they, with help from their sheep-brained mother and serpent-tongued pastor, would inevitably become. Freethinkers were a minority in my red neck of the woods.

Jane, noticing my frigid death stare, placed her small, yet manly hand over mine. I say manly because it was covered in scars, calluses and unwashable grease-stain tattoos. But I wouldn't have wanted it any other way. It showed that she actually *did something* with her time, something that benefited society, unlike me: the pale, scrawny result of a broken condom.

"You're feeling sorry for yourself again, aren't you?" she guessed, hitting the nail on the head, of course.

"Maybe."

"Gods, Todd, you've got to stop doing that!" She leaned in closer, and I could smell the *eau de autoshop* on her skin. "Your parents' marital troubles are no fault of yours."

"How can you be sure of that?"

"Because you're *you*, darling. Any reasonable parent would be proud! You get good grades -"

"*Decent* grades."

"You're clever, and talented -"

"At getting into *trouble*."

The tough Brit wriggled her nose and frowned.

"If you won't shut up, I must *shut* you up."

Instinctively I pulled away, fearing another "Ogden Special": a sharp-knuckled fist to the face. Mabel gave it to me once my freshman year, on the day the twins moved in next-door. I'd been helping Mom weed the garden, minding my own business, when a short, feisty brunette tramped up behind me, said, "C'mere, Pansy Boy!", and then punched me in the face for being a

pansy. In my defense, just because I was surrounded by flowers at the time does not make me a pansy! (It's my *cowardly action* that do that.)

But this Ogden had something different (and less violent) in mind. She grabbed me by the collar and pressed her lips onto mine. Her kissing was, if not as experienced, definitely as aggressive as her punching, but I was eager to teach her a thing or two. We might have made out for another five minutes if my elbow hadn't slipped into the horn, refocusing my attention and drawing stares from angry sheep. They scowled as if they spied a wolf in their midst.

"Yeah, yeah, nothin' to see here!" I barked through the rolled-down window.

"Go sing your hymns, ogle your crucifixes and whatnot."

Jane was all smiles afterwards. It made me feel lousy for feeling so lousy!

"I might never win the Nobel Prize," I thought, "Or even pass eleventh grade, but whatever the hell I think I am - a crappy student, a disappointing son, an unreliable friend - I am enough to make this girl happy."

Just because I couldn't make *myself* happy was no reason for playing down notes. I had to act happy, for Miss Ogden's sake. I had to let go of my own and mirror her feelings. An organ-grinder's monkey will dance to anything.

"Speaking of organs, let's mosey it on into church!"

"You weren't speaking of organs, Todd," Jane corrected with all the quiet smugness of an English grammar teacher.

Jeez, my girlfriend's a sharp one!

When we got into the building, I almost wished I had some rosaries to clutch. It didn't look much from the outside, but the *inside* of Sugar Congregational was a wall-to-wall Jesus fest. There were stained glass pictures, giant, wooden crosses, country music flyers . . . oh, gods, it was *awful*! Even worse than my nine-year-old brain had allowed me to remember it.

I reached for Jane's hand. She squeezed my fingers, whispering encouragements. The dingy, wine-colored carpet seemed to stretch out for miles before me, the crowd parted into rows of pews on either side like a Spartan gauntlet. All eyes were on me, the noisy latecomer. The black sheep in the flock. *The atheist in God's house.*

"Uh, hey, guys," I muttered apologetically, navigating past shiny loafers and tan pantyhose, afraid to look up. We took a seat in the very back, as far away from the preaching as possible. When eventually I *did* find the courage to raise my head, I regretted it immediately. Reverend Starky caught my eye and

held it, transmuting a painfully clear message, an almost audible warning: "You, Todd Gafferty, are not wanted here." He smiled sideways. "You'd best get out before I release the hounds."

Needless to say, it was a very long sermon. After the service I confessed my fears to Jane, who merely shook her chestnut head and told me I was being silly.

"He won't release the hounds on you," she joked. "Hounds are a strictly British thing. A Southern man would just fetch his shotgun!"

When the ushers had herded every last sheep out the doors (the older the sheep, the harder to get rid of), I grabbed the last of the stale Munchkins from the entry hall and shoved them down my throat, followed by two Dixie cups of apple juice. I was not about to confront the Devil on an empty stomach.

The Reverend was lingering by the pulpit, no doubt waiting for me. Jane nudged me forward. He was dressed in a plain, black frock with wide sleeves, a typical Protestant minister. His crisp, white hair and beard reminded me of Colonel Sanders. (I carried that bit of humor with me to keep me from trembling with fear.)

"Ah, young Mr. Gafferty, long time, no see!" He extended an amiable arm. I shook his hand with gritted teeth, distrust written all over my face. "Son of Albert and Marion, those old rascals. Stopped coming to my church 'bout seven years ago, am I right?"

I nodded firmly, smiling now. I wanted to show him I was proud of my parents. Proud of their choices.

"They probably don't believe in God, and raised their son to believe the same. And now here you are, and I can't help but wonder - forgive me, Lord, for thinking this - I can't help but wonder what it is you want from me."

"Well, wonder no more," I confirmed. "I want to rent this place out for my parents' anniversary in June." I paused, adding glumly, "That's hoping they'll make it till then."

The Reverend softened up. He removed his small, round spectacles and wiped them clean with a handkerchief, wanting, I suppose, to get a better look at me.

"Are you having trouble at home, Todd?"

I nodded again.

"We'll just see what we can do about that, then, and in the meantime, Sugar

Congregational opens her arms to you." Starky wrapped his arm around my shoulders for effect. "You are always welcome here, son."

I hate to admit it, but I *did* feel welcome. Everything about this place - Colonel Sanders, the colorful Christ-scapes, the food - was suddenly warm and inviting.

Who ever thought I'd find sanctuary in a church?

Tell him Iced Tea Junkie, the *real* author, sent you. He might feel ashamed enough to delete the post. We can only hope (and laugh at his sorry ass).

Despite things going well on the scheme-front, things on the home-front were getting worse and worse to the point where my folks starting attacking each other's weaknesses. Today it was Mom's maternal instinct and Dad's jealousy. Dad was threatening to move into a cheap, roach-infested motel where he planned to do nothing but drink beer and eat Cheetos and wear the same underwear for weeks at a time and stay up all night and let all of his colds turn into pneumonia. Mom was threatening to start dating around, dating younger men like a cougar, dating old, rich guys for their money, dating trailer trash just to mix it up, dating women, dating felons, dating the local sex offender because "Maybe I *want* to be stalked—that's a higher level of commitment than you've shown me!"

Seriously, it was getting ridiculous. I knew immediate action was called for when suddenly I, Todd Gafferty, became the most mature member of the household. That's like a gorilla having to dodge zookeeper feces. And if I tried to break up one of their fights, they'd just start playing me as a pawn. Both wanted to get me on their side; I wanted there to *be* no sides, happy and spherical, the way it used to be.

Needless to say, I had a bad case of the blues that just wouldn't quit, bluer than Picasso's "Blue Period", bluer than a *menstrual* period. My head ached and my heart was full of cramps. I took to napping after school, on the weekends, whatever chance I got. The more time I spent asleep, the less time I'd have to deal with the Gafferty Civil War, where the leading tactic was shock and stupor. (The madder my folks got, the dumber they acted; that's how it worked.)

I was lost in one of these naps when Jane gave me a ring. Snapping awake

and checking the caller ID, I was wary to answer it. I was terrified she was going to ask why I hadn't been hanging around after school like I used to, why I hadn't talked to her in so long, if she should change her relationship status to "It's Complicated". But, remarkably wise and understanding as an Ogden twin could be when she unclenched her fists (allowing more blood flow to the brain), she did none of the above. Instead she said:

"Happy Hallows' Eve, mate!"

For the first time in nearly a month, I cracked open a smile. Halloween, my favorite pagan holiday. How could I have forgotten?

"What nasty tricks await the neighborhood this year?" Jane prompted eagerly.

"Well..." I pretended to pause for effect, but really I was stalling for more time to think. I could almost hear the rusted cogs of my trickster hemisphere squealing to life after weeks of disuse. Depression was like a wet blanket on a dry hobo: he didn't deserve it any more than I did.

"Todd, are you pausing for effect or just stalling?"

"One minute, woman! Evil things take time."

I ran a mental checklist of the Halloween pranks I had pulled before. There were the Classics: mummifying houses in toilet paper, tagging cars with shaving cream, scaring the shit out of innocent children. The Neo-Classics: stealing neglectful neighbors' unattended candy bowls, spraying their pets with silly string, beating up kids for candy. And the Contemporary: gumming up tailpipes with silly string, taking a shit in the unattended candy bowls, beating up kids for money.

Those were all fun, but I didn't want to repeat a prank; sequels were for world wars, Jesus, and bad Disney movies, not Todd Gafferty. I had to think of something clever and original, something that would cut the proverbial mustard, that would put me down in history as the greatest trickster of all time, right after Bugs Bunny, the Joker, and George W. Bush. A seat among the gods.

That's when it hit me: religion was the greatest prank ever played on man. And who better to perpetuate it than a modern-day prophet and company?

"Jane, baby, I got an idea."

"Finally! What now?"

"Send a group text to the others. Tell them to dress up as their favorite religious leader and meet me at the stump. Tonight...we're going Jehovah."

The wind blew cold that Halloween night. As I stood alone on my stump, I began to hear ghostly murmurs wafting from the junior high school. I thought it must be all of the souls that had been sucked out of their bodies by the terrible place. (It turned out to be some punks with spray cans and bad spelling skills.)

One by one, my disciples materialized out of the darkness and slid through the trees towards me. It was very *Blair Witch* of them. Sammy led the line dressed as King David, wearing nothing but a plastic crown and a white sheet draped in toga fashion. His pale, scrawny Jew legs stuck out the bottom like toothpicks sticking out of a used tissue. That's basically what he looked like.

"Nice turban," he said. "Who are you supposed to be?"

Eager to answer that question all night, I treated him to a particularly manic grin.

"Muhammad."

Sammy didn't respond. He was shell-shocked. But if he did say anything, I guessed the first words out of his mouth would be 'Oy vey'.

Mabel Ogden followed in a full suit of armor, and not the cheap kind, either. Parts of it were made of actual metal. I envied her meaty allowance. She yanked off her helmet and shook her ponytailed head.

"Jesus, it's sweaty in there."

"And who might you be, fair maiden?" I said with a smirk. 'Fair' and 'maiden' were titles reserved for frillier women.

"Joan of Arc." She hawked and spat. "What's it to ya?"

If anyone ever tried to burn *Mabel* at the stake, the fire would probably shrink into an ember, whimper like a puppy and disappear.

Then came the Lockhart sisters. Linda was dressed as an angel and her older sister as a devil. Typical, slutty Halloween costumes. I rolled my eyes.

"Is that really the best you could do?"

Linda just blushed, stealing a glance in Sammy's direction. She twirled around, giving her feathered wings a shake. The boy looked like he'd just downed some Red Bull and sprouted wings himself, giving an all new meaning to "touched by an angel". Lana, on the other hand, managed to surprise me.

"Hold your tongue before I rip it out by the root, mortal slave!" she shrieked.
"You shall all kneel before the Prince of Darkness."

"Ozzy Osbourne?" Mabel chimed in.

"No, silly. *Satan*."

"Ah."

With all of those beautiful women around me, I was getting a little anxious. Where was my Jane? I didn't want to start my stump speech without her.

Finally, after pacing around a very small circle, she turned up...on the arm of another man! I hoped I was just seeing double from the dizziness. I didn't want to believe my eyes. But then he spoke, and I *had* to believe my ears. Also my nose, which detected a trace of marijuana on him.

"Todd, dude, how's it hangin'?" he said, fearlessly sauntering up to me and shaking my hand. He was dressed as none other but Jesus Christ. I supposed, once you already looked like a long-haired, hippie stoner, there wasn't much to do but throw on a nightgown and some sandals. I wanted to laugh at the observation, but the tightness in my stomach wouldn't let me.

"It's...it's hangin', alright."

All I could dwell on was how I had shot myself in the foot by staying away from Jane too long. Now she was all over Shaggy there, and what's more, she didn't even have the decency to show up in costume. She was wearing her usual Awesomeist attire. Just a bathrobe, sombrero and sunglasses.

She walked into my sphere of angst as if she'd done nothing wrong, and asked, very sweetly,

"What do you think?"

"What do I think?" I spluttered, my anger getting the best of me. Jane looked hurt and confused. "What did you expect me to think? You're not even trying to hide it!"

"Well, no," she said, gaining bite to her tone. "Why should I?"

By now Jesus had backed off and everyone else was pretending there was nothing going on. Standard protocol for couples' spats. They turned to chatter amongst themselves.

"Who the hell is this loser, anyway?" I barked, pointing an accusatory finger at the intruder. Jane balled her fists. If I had been in a state of reason, I would have taken this as a sign not to push her further.

"This 'loser' is a bloody good mate of mine, so I wish you wouldn't call him that. His name's Pothead Ted. He's new to the fold."

"Ted, huh? Sounds an awful lot like Todd," I snarled. "I guess we're all interchangeable to you."

"Oh, so I'm not allowed to have friends now?" She raised her fists. I was dead certain she was going to knock my lights out until her anger reached its peak and dissolved into moody disappointment. She clawed at her own forehead and groaned. "This is unbelievable, Todd. Way to ruin the funnest night of the year."

She threw her sacred sombrero at the base of the stump and stormed off. Her sister pierced me with a look of a thousand pointy spears, a look that said "I've got unfinished business with you in an abandoned warehouse on the bad side of town", before trotting after her. Jesus, or Ted, was busy counting stars and humming to himself. He didn't go with them.

It was only then, too late, that I realized, Jane wasn't having an affair with that burnout. What an absurd, retarded idea. Jane hadn't been disloyal at all! Quite the opposite, in fact. I had told her to come dressed as her favorite religious leader, and she had come dressed as...me.

I hopped down from the stump, picked up the sombrero and dusted it off with a sigh.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, everybody, but I've got damage control to run."

"Oy vey!"

The Mad Knitters

"Hey, who took my yarn?! I just finished making it from the llama farm!"

The group of teenagers stared at her, their needles frozen. One blinked at her.

"That's just pathetic, Kathy. So what if you don't know where the *normal* yarn has been? It's not like they dye brown yarn with pig waste—" Connie halted and the other girls groaned. "I just put more ideas into your head, didn't I?"

"Oh, my god! What if red yarn is dyed with blood?! Dog blood . . . ?" Kathy was a person who liked organic foods and clothes that she knew weren't produced by child labor. She hated artificial things and global warming – she also hated yarn bought in stores that could have been made from the wool of abused sheep.

Connie was a person who acted before thinking, as just demonstrated. She was also a drama and gossip queen, and took advantage of opportunities.

"Maybe, when Butchy dies, his body won't go to waste," Connie grinned. Butchy was Kathy's dog, and a very sensitive topic.

"Hey!" Lost yarn temporarily forgotten.

"Now, now, stop acting like children. Kathy, we'll help you look for your yarn," Katie said. She was the nice, usually calm one. She was a peace-lover and tended to believe in people's good sides. To the frustration of others, she also stood up for everybody, even when they were obviously wrong.

"I think I'll just stay here with my newly bought glow-in-the-dark needles and give you moral support. From my nicely padded chair," said Sydney, back to knitting. A bit more materialistic than the rest, she was also quite competitive. If not the first to finish knitting something, hers was the most elaborate.

Jessica snorted. "Sydney, what's the matter with you?" Jessica was the one with the strongest moral, after Katie. "Why didn't you tell *me* that you had a padded chair? Scoot!" She was also sometimes a hypocrite.

Rolling their eyes, Kathy and Connie set to work looking for Kathy's yarn. Katie glanced at Sydney and Jessica slightly disapprovingly and got up too.

About ten minutes later, Kathy spotted a grayish spot sticking out from under

Jessica's half-finished scarf.

"Hey, Jess, pause for a minute, would you?"

Jessica stopped knitting and calming replied, "Yes?"

"Do you have my yarn?"

"Maybe."

Kathy lifted the scarf as Connie and Katie looked on.

"Ah ha! Wait," Kathy held up a hand to stop Jessica, "you wanted me to learn a lesson in becoming OCD about llama yarn, correct?"

Everybody, who hadn't even realized that they had tensed, sub-consciously anticipating a fight, relaxed.

"Yeah." Jessica smiled.

BRING!

The lunchroom turned their heads towards the sound.

"Shit, now?!"

BRING!!

"Watch your language," replied Katie.

"But my next class is history, and I'm already failing!" Kathy said, rather hopelessly.

BRING!!!

"Well, at least turn those damn things off! Our cover's gonna be blown!" said Connie. Quieter, she laughed, saying, "I've always wanted to say that!"

BRI—

"Happy? Now we gotta go!" Jessica got up, dumped the remainder of her lunch, and ran out, mumbling something about the bathroom.

The rest of the group followed her, one at a time, so as not to bring more attention to them that they already had. The entire cafeteria was buzzing now — third time their "alarm clock-watches" went off; quite loudly, too.

Running to the bathroom — just as Jessica had said — Connie made sure that the door was locked and Sydney checked for anybody else occupying the bathroom. Katie pressed a button on her watch, and a hologram appeared.

A robotic voice started, "Five miles east of current location, mall being raided. Six girls calling themselves the 'Fashion Cops.'" Katie pressed another

button, and the voice said, "Bikes coming. Please step aside."

They jumped back just as five motorcycles came crashing through the wall. Each girl pressed yet another button, on their individual watches. There was a flash of light and the girls were now dressed in their semi-superhero outfits. (No capes or big S's or bat masks, just identity cover-ups.)

Getting onto her bike, Katie was now wearing a pink knitted scarf, covering half her face. (It was winter.) A light pink hat covered her forehead, leaving only her eyes visible. She was also wearing a dark pink sweater and pink sports pants. Her bike and sneakers were, of course, pink.

Kathy has wearing a sort of ski-mask, and a scarf, both green. She also had dark green leg and arm warmers on top of an olive green shirt and sweatpants. Her feet wore green hiking boots (nobody knew why she had *hiking* boots). The bike was green.

Connie's outfit was red – a red hoodie and half-size scarf. She had on dark red sports pants and red sneakers. Her bike was a light-but-not-pink red.

Jessica was wearing a blue shirt, blue-striped hat and scarf. She wore jeans (blue is a given) and blue sneakers. Her bike was blue (she had gone as far as to have her tires made special – blue).

Sydney was wearing a dark purple shirt and light purple jacket. She also had purple pants (with little very light purple 'jewels') and heeled boots. A thin purple scarf covered half of her face. Her bike was royal purple.

Zooming off, they headed towards the mall.

Sydney looked over her shoulder. "What about that hole in the wall? They might get suspicious."

"We'll take care of it later," assured Katie.

Back at the school, the teachers were talking.

"Did you hear that? It sounded like a crash!"

"Yeah, and I heard something like it earlier, when the popular girls left, just before lunch." Teachers group students, too, apparently.

"Well, we can talk about this later. (We can skip a class and call in substitutes.) Let's calm down the rest of the student population first."

They pulled up at the mall, ignoring the curious looks from the people around

them.

"Let's go!"

Racing into the building, they saw some policemen (and women) tied to a pillar by tough-looking ribbons. Their mouths were also gagged by ribbons.

"You guys keep going, I'll take care of them," said Sydney, fearing for her manicured nails.

Rolling his eyes, Connie went over to them, whipped out a camera, and snapped a picture of the police, who looked thoroughly embarrassed. She then took the gag off of one of them, asking where the 'Fashion Cops' were.

"They were headed over there," he nodded his head to the right.

"Thank you," said Katie, "we'll take care of them."

Leaving Sydney behind to untie the unfortunate police, the girls moved on.

As they got further, they began hearing bangs, booms, and breaking glass.

They broke into a run, and saw six girls throwing calculators, ripping apart sweater vests, breaking eye-glasses, and just plain destroying the Nerd Store. They were wearing small plaid skirts, low-cut tight shirts, and bright ribbons in their bleach-blond hair.

They also had fur-trimmed boots.

Roaring, "There will be blood tonight!" Kathy lunged at the nearest one, her sharp nails digging into the surprised girl's neck.

They started fighting, short but sharp nails against long and manicured ones. Hair flying, whipping each other, they screamed, but for different reasons – Kathy for the vengeance of the fur-trimmed boots, the preppy girl for her life.

This triggered fights all around them, except that it was four against six. So Kathy, in her fury and adrenaline, took on two, as did Connie, in her excitement and hyper-ness.

Then, something terrible happened. The girl Jessica was fighting against took out an unusually thin nail-file, and hooked it onto her hat. It began unraveling, and, to stop it, she quickly slapped the file away and tied a knot. She then turned towards the unnatural blond, whose smirk quickly disappeared. Using her karate skills, Jessica unleashed the Power of the Sun, splashing the drink all over the enemy.

"AAAHHHHH!!! IT'S, LIKE, GOING TO, LIKE, STAIN!! AND MY HAIR'S, LIKE, ALL STICKY NOW, AND, LIKE, NOT GORGEOUS!!!"

The girls on both sides stopped in their fights, and turned around.

"M-my . . . e-ea-ears th-th-they h-hurt . . ." Kathy's sensitive hearing was a weakness, as was her hatred towards the word "like" when used too often. Everybody else was affected, as well. The preppy girls, some of them now with bloodied faces and running mascara (including Kathy's opponents), all rushed towards her. But instead of comforting her and getting her out, they kicked her like an injured dog

"Well, like, look at me! I haven't, like, even paused to . . . like, oh, my god! I need to fix my mascara!" She went running towards the nearest bathroom.

"Yeah, well, like, suck it up. I can't, like, get near you, now, 'cause you're, like, too ugly for me to be seen with." She began to walk away.

A chorus of "Like totally, me too," followed, and the girls did likewise to their leader.

The wounded girl rushed out, saying "Wait for me!" And thus, her popularity was gone.

All of a sudden, a group of four thin-looking people and one fat person was silhouetted against the bright showcase lights.

A nasal voice said, "Who dares to terrorize the Nerd Store?!" A wheezing and sound of asthma medicine being taken followed.

The teachers, in their free time (substitutes), were now talking about the two earlier incidents.

One of the substitutes came running into the staff lounge, mumbling incoherently.

"Wheezing . . . advanced watches . . . hovercrafts . . . gone . . . speed of light . . ."

After a while, the teachers finally understood the message: five of the geeks/dorks/nerds/whatever had asked for a bathroom pass simultaneously and outside the door, the substitute teacher had caught the site of holograms and hover crafts.

But this just gave the lazy, gossipy teachers more to talk about.

"You! The one in red!" – wheeze – "Are you the leader of this pack of

beasts?!"

"Okay, *somebody's* been watching too much Power Rangers." Said Connie.

"I'm the leader – " began Katie.

"Ah-hah! I knew it! Our fellow knitter, here, watches Power Rangers! How else would she know that the one in red was the assumed leader? Huh, huh?!" This, of course, was Kathy.

"It doesn't matter! Every last one of you is going to pay for what you've done to the *Nerd* Store!" The tall, thin, awkward freckle-faced boy was frowning, his buck-teeth pushing out from under his lip.

"Just because we're geeks doesn't give people the right to destroy Home Base – er . . . I mean, our store," but the girl was only mumbling to herself, so her fumble wasn't noticed. She was patting Freckle-Face on the shoulders, trying to calm him down. Louder, she said, "Calm down, Eugene, or you'll have yet another asthma attack. It'd be the fourth time this week, you know." She pushed her inch-thick glasses up.

Sure enough, he whipped out two asthma medicine bottles and used them, alternating between the two like a body-builder with weights, except not really . . .

Unable to contain themselves any longer, Jessica, Connie and Kathy promptly burst out into laughter, bending over and holding onto each other for support. Even Katie was beginning to lose it.

Snorting and wheezing (frighteningly like the nerds over there), Jessica pointed at Four-Eyes and, through teary eyes, said, "Y- you! Your – pffft!"

"Four-Eyes" glared at them, knowing what they were laughing about. She had this *slight* interest – emphasis on the *slight* – in Marvel comics, and had dressed up as Wonder Woman. At least, that's what the tag still hanging on the wig said . . .

Not going into too much detail, she looked like a fool. Freckle-Face was, of course, Superman. Their companions were Big-Ears (Batman), Toothy (Green Lantern), and Fatso (Spiderman).

By now, Katie was laughing hysterically, which was nothing compared to the rest of the girls.

"Awwl wight, won't taike ufs sewiouwsly? We'll schow you," shouted Toothy through his headgear.

"Yeah! We'll kick your buttocks!" added Fatso.

Connie replied, hardly audible through her laughter, "Buttocks? What *buttocks*? We don't have *anything*, compared to – oh! There it is!" She lifted a shaking finger in his general direction.

"Huh? What?" He was confused (which was not normal for him, considering he knew science laws by heart, math formulas down to the last symbol, and the calories of every bag of chips).

"Behind you!" This time it was Kathy.

Fatso – er, *Spidey* – moved to look behind him, but stopped mid-turn. He realized they were talking about him, his behind; that and the fact that his fat wouldn't let him move any further.

With this, he rolled himself into a ball of sorts and rolled towards the group of giggling girls. They shrieked playfully, jumping out of the way.

The rest of the nerds got into superhero-stance, capes flapping in the breeze coming from a broken vent. But before they could do anything, they all stopped and fell to their knees, shaking.

The girls stopped laughing, though by now they were reduced giggling, the smallest frowns appearing.

"Is," began Katie, "something the matter?"

Their hands simultaneously, as if by the same strings, reached into their pockets and took out asthma medicine.

"Cursed disease of mine," growled Freckle-Face. "Never lets me do *anything*!"

As one, they inhaled, exhaled. Then they got up, still shaking. They held into each other for support, but not the same way the girls had, earlier.

"You win, this time, but only because we have more pressing matters to attend to."

At this, Katie stepped forward, tears streaming down her face.

"It seems we have made enemies of each other, though neither of us is a 'bad guy.' But one thing we share, one thing that connects us. Not the fact that we are human (as I'm sure not all of us, here, are), but the fact that I, too, suffer from," here a sob escaped her. "Asthma," she whispered.

Everybody gasped; at least, those that could. The nerds could only stare at her, in wonder (or maybe fear). But Kathy came forward, too, to step beside Katie.

"I, too." She didn't need to continue for everybody to understand. Connie fainted dead away, along with the ever delicate and fragile Four-Eyes.

"Hold on, I need to go walk Butchy, he's sounding a bit frantic, over there," said Kathy, hearing him scratch the door. She wriggled out of her sleeping bag and left the room.

The girls were having a sleepover at Kathy's house, it being Friday, and they were talking about the eventful day. Katie had eventually gone with the nerds to therapy while the rest stayed behind to clean up. Kathy had refused to go with them to therapy, mumbling something about evil therapists and couches. Sydney had come strutting in, as though she had saved the day, but helped (a little) to clean up.

Kathy shrugged on a jacket and put on Butchy's collar. She pulled on some gloves and slipped on her shoes, pocketing the keys.

"Don't let anything too interesting happen while I'm gone!" she yelled up. Outside (it was freezing cold), Butchy happily sniffed around, ready to get marking. Kathy just groaned and shivered, rubbing her arms to keep herself warm.

They approached a driveway with a basketball hoop above the garage door. Two basketballs lay on the driveway. Kathy paused, allowing Butchy to sniff around a little. She looked up into the stars, and took a deep breath. She loved the evening air, refreshing and cool –

"Oh, my god!"

Butchy was peeing on one of the basketballs, his leg vertical from his body (which Kathy thought was just amazing – her dog was a natural martial artist!).

She just giggled and peered at the house, hoping nobody would see this crime.

When they got back, she could hear the girls laughing from outside and hurried to get in and see what all the fuss was about.

Upon reentering her room, she saw everybody practically ganged up on Connie. She hurried to join them, anxious to hear what they had just learned about Connie.

"We've figured out that Connie likes someone, but she won't tell us who!"

Sydney was practically bouncing.

"I – " Connie began to defend herself, but was interrupted by Jessica.

"I bet I know who it is," she paused for dramatic effect, "Tom!" Tom was one of their classmates, tall, long-haired, and obsessively violent.

"No!"

"Sonny-boy?" This was what they called another one of their classmates, whose name was just too *different* to be used.

"No."

"I think you're lying," said Kathy. "It has to be!"

This is where Katie intervened. "Now now, don't make her uncomfortable."

"Yeah," pouted Connie. "I shouldn't've told you I liked someone in the first place."

BRING!

"Oh, no. Not again?" Kathy groaned, remembering the cold night.

BRING!!

This time, Katie turned it off sooner. She pressed a button on her watch, which she had picked up from a nearby nightstand.

The monotone voice was back. "Six miles south-east of current location, beach being trashed. Nine boys calling themselves the Fishermen." Another button. "Bikes coming – " Katie pressed another button before the bikes could come crashing through the second-story walls. Kathy nodded approvingly. "Bikes ready and waiting."

They ran downstairs, went through the routine before going outside, so that the blast of light wouldn't attract any unwanted attention.

By the time they got there, the beach was covered with nets and sharp rocks. Sand was piled in some areas, and pitted in others. This made it difficult for the girls to make their way across to the nine figures glowing in the moonlight.

"We've been expecting you, mortals," said the one in front. They are all tall and were wearing fishing garb – high rubber boots and gloves, overalls, and hat. "I am called Fisher, and these are my minions – or, should I say, Minnows."

The Minnows began what the girls later figured out to be their theme song.

In unbelievably high voices, four of them sang, "It's likely gonna be – "
The other four, not including Fisher, sang in much deeper voices, "Tea and crumpets" while bending their knees to go up and down.

The first four finished, "All right!"

Kathy smiled a big smile, all of her teeth white in the moonlight. Then she fell to the ground suffocating on her laughter, nearly tangling herself in the nets in the process. "This has," she guffawed, "got to be – "

"The stupidest and funniest thing I've ever seen!" finished Jessica.

They all started laughing – déjà vu – and the Minnows came over.

Half laughing, half trying to stare their opponents down, the girls fought back to back. The one called Fisher just stood near the water, hands on his hips.

"Fools! You shall never win! But, as long as you are living, I shall tell you why we are doing what we're doing. You see – though maybe you won't – the people have been polluting this beach to long, therefore infecting the water. "

Here Kathy hesitated in her fighting, realizing they stood up for similar things. "We are stopping such disgusting mortals from ever coming again, for how can we enjoy ourselves fishing if there are no fish to fish for in a fishy ocean supposedly full of fish that we can no long fish?" Kathy regained her motivation to fight – they were selfish (or shellfish?), not environmentally concerned! "You can't defeat us, so you might as well stop trying."

Connie broke out of the circle and headed for Fisher. The others tightened the circle and made up for one less person. The Minnows, unconcerned of their leader's strength, ignored this. However, what they didn't know was that at night, the girls gained powers. They gained tremendous powers, and were powerful beyond belief with these powerful powers that made them more powerful at night.

All the girls had the ability to control anything related to knitting – needles (so they could also control wood, metal, and anything else needles are made out of), yarn (thus able to control sheep, goats, llamas), and rocking chairs. (Okay, so this didn't make them terribly powerful beyond belief with powerful powers that made them more powerful at night. But it gave them a very broad and open area to control. All it took was a little imagination.)

So Connie brought several big waves from behind him (water can be used to wash yarn!) and, cough unawares, Fisher was unwillingly pulled into the depths of the ocean after about seven continuous waves. But before he went

down, he gurgled something that sounded like "Stop being such a mortal!" This finally caught the Minnows attention.

They all groaned, and Sydney swore she saw tears running down their cheeks. (How much fun was this?! Guys dressed up in such weird costumes and *crying*! Not exactly gossip, but close enough.) They cried out and stopped fighting, as did the stunned girls.

"He is still with us spiritually!" they all cried.

Even Katie looked at them as though they were running down the street in banana costumes and yelling "Peanut butter jelly time!"

"Come, they are not worth it," one of them stopped moaning long enough to say. "We shall go fish out Fisher from that fishy sea."

They pushed by Connie, who was staring into the water, as though hypnotized.

"Hello?" Kathy waved her hand in front of her face. "Is this your first kill, or something?" she asked jokingly.

"Oh, my god. What if I killed him? What if – "

"Don't worry; his friends are going in after him. He'll be fine," consoled Katie. Connie looked genuinely worried.

"What's wrong?" voiced Jessica. They were all looking at Connie, now.

She whispered, shaking, "Just before he went in, I saw his eyes. Oh, his eyes! They were a beautiful, sad brown," she trailed off.

Kathy said to Jessica, the person next to her, "**B**eautiful and **sad** is 'bad.'"

Connie continued. "I saw something, something that nearly made me cry. As though he really knew me," she broke down, sobbing.

The girls just looked at each other as they moved to comfort her.

Throughout the week, Connie was distracted. The rest of the gang tried to cheer her up – sleepovers (but that just made her think about that night), the mall ("not enough energy," was her excuse), gifts (she teared at the sight of the fake sapphire, claiming that it reminded her of the sea).

Eventually, Kathy just gave up, saying that love and all things like it were nothing but trouble. But Connie's depressing mood caught on – Kathy's infamous fighting stance was witnessed several times.

On Monday, she tried along with everyone else to take Connie's mind off of Fisher, but got impatient.

"All right," she had said. "We've tried and you won't cooperate. Why don't you stop being so quiet – so unlike you – and just tell us what's the matter?" Connie mumbled incoherently.

"We can't help you if we don't know what's wrong!"

Tuesday was just a repeat of Monday, but on Wednesday, she lost it.

"Look here, you," she said, eyes narrowed. "If you want to feel depressed, fine. But don't come moping and downcast around us, because it won't help anybody!" She was practically strangling an uncaring Connie, and Katie and Jessica came to hold her back.

By Thursday, she was venting with other people, because arguing with Connie had become pointless and unsatisfying. One such argument:

"Those geese are so dumb," Sydney had said, looking out a classroom window. A flock of geese had gathered in the school's field.

"They're just confused by global warming, is all," replied Kathy, coming over to join her.

"No, they're just stupid." Wrong course to take, on Sydney's part.

"Look who's talking," she fired back, without even needing to think.

Sydney sighed. "Why must you always insult me?"

"Cause it's easy."

Sydney rolled her eyes, and Kathy walked away.

On Friday, she nearly slapped Katie.

"I don't like how we're all so dependent on technology, now," Kathy had complained. "Those robot-taking-over-the-world prophecies are going to come true."

"Well, we're a society that's moving forward, and this can only be expected," rationalized Katie.

"But it's not right, not fair!"

"Well, you're a hypocrite, because you use the computer."

"Well, yeah, but it could be worse – I could have a doubled monitored computer, a high-tech surround sound system for a huge flat-screen TV, or –"

"But we can't be completely technology-free, Kathy."

"I know, but I think we're *too* technology dependent. I'm not saying that we can't have technology at *all*." By now, she was fuming, trying to keep her

cool.

"But why can't we move forward? It's inevitable –"

"I'm just saying that we shouldn't get ahead of ourselves. You know what I'm saying!"

"No, I don't –"

She couldn't help it – her hand moved of its own accord, but her brain noticed just before her hand hit Katie's face. But it still hit her, though not as hard as her hand would've liked it to be.

The girls all met at the park on Saturday, tense but knowing that they talk. But after only half an hour, their watches went off.

"What the shit? Again?!"

This time, nobody bothered to correct Kathy.

"One mile south of current location, convenience store being robbed. Three involved – the leader called Ding Dong and two accomplices called Sol and Luna. Bikes coming. Please step aside."

In the mood to commit crime rather than fight it, they grumpily got on their bikes in their costumes and arrived at the store.

It cheered everybody up.

In the front, obviously being the look-outs, was a man and woman in togas, the man in white-yellow the woman in blue-gray. The man was obviously Sol, as his hair was spiked all around his head and died a phony shade of yellow. The woman was Luna, her black hair short and curved to cover half her face, like a crescent moon.

Then, out walked a man in nothing in a diaper (that was particularly disturbing). He was carrying a baby bag filled with candy and ice cream, the latter already melting.

The two look-outs stood a little straighter and saluted him.

Ding Dong.

Katie slipped on her role as leader, and addressed him. "You! Return what you have stolen and apologize to the innocent bystanders involved!" But they all knew that was out of the question.

"Who – wait, I know you! I've heard of a group of girls obsessed with knitting. We villains call you the Mad Knitters."

The girls nodded approvingly at the name, but then realized the negative-ness

imbedded into his words.

"Hey," began Kathy, "just because we have healthy interests – knitting – doesn't necessarily mean we're *obsessed*. At least we're not diaper-wearing adults." Her nose wrinkled.

For once, the others were relieved that Kathy was in the mood to fight – as long as it wasn't with them, of course.

With the flick of a foot, the kickstands came out and they leaned on their bikes, some sitting. Even though this was very interesting, they still weren't entirely in an energetic mood, especially Connie. At least the diaper-man brought her back down to earth a little.

"There's nothing wrong with wearing diapers – it eliminates the need to go the bathroom in the middle of an evil plan," Ding Dong was saying.

"Oh, so you're not potty trained?" Kathy tried to raise one eyebrow, but, not being gifted in that area, settled for both of her eyebrows going up.

"Well, of course I am," he said defensively. "In fact, my parents physically abused me whenever I made a mistake during my potty-training years." He wiped away an imaginary tear.

Kathy rolled her eyes, preparing herself. She glanced over at the others, who were doing the same. Katie and Sydney took out some knitting, Jessica adjusted the earphones to her CD player, and Connie settled in for a nap.

"You see, even before I was born, my sister hated me. She hated that my father, God rest his soul (my sister eventually killed him, angry for some unforgivable past), had remarried twice without telling her, and the first remarriage, which lasted two days, ended in divorce. I don't see how this could make her so upset as to hate me, the fruit of my father's third marriage, just because my father didn't tell her about his third marriage until she commented on my mother's round belly. Then, when I was born, she refused to love me instantly, as everybody else did. My legal name is Vincent, but my childhood nickname is *Dong Dong*, which is Chinese for 'west,' though I admit it was random. My sister, the evil creature she is, took to calling me Ding Dong, which she claimed was close enough to my real nickname that it didn't matter that it was offensive. I never understood – and still don't – why she was so mean and unjust, but I, being the bigger person, though I was then just a baby, forgave her and embraced the new name with open arms. As I grew older, though, she would, as she called it, 'accidentally' hit my head (against a sharp edge too, might I add) while carrying me to one of my

parents or grandmother. My grandfather died before I was born, you know. He died, actually, when my father was but four years old, a very fragile age for such a thing. But that's all right, seeing as how I've never actually met him I don't feel like I'm missing anything, though I'm not saying that I'm glad he's dead. In any case, my sister would be so cruel to me that I had to grow up quickly. Quite literally, I became an adult in the time it takes for a child to reach the age of five. But it's all right, I suppose, considering that I am now a stronger, better person –"

"Wait. Who was your father? What was his name?" Kathy had begun turning a fearful shade of blue-white. The rest of the girls looked at her, concerned – even Connie.

His feathers having been ruffled (figuratively) by the unexpected interruption, he said proudly, "Ha, his last name was Ha. And I carry on that wonderful name. His first name, however, I shall not disclose, as it is a very feminine name and not –"

"Oh, my god," Kathy interrupted again. "And who was your sister?" she said, hardly above a whisper.

Shaken now, himself, Ding Dong replied, "S-Siyang."

Kathy let out a wail, and then fainted. It is very significant for you to know that Kathy has never, not once in her life, fainted.

Kathy was brought back to her house and left to rest. Her mother looked at her and wept silently, burying her face into her husband's shoulder.

The doctor closed the door quietly and walked down the hall to the living room, where her parents and her friends were waiting anxiously.

"She broke her leg when she fell, since nobody caught her" – the doctor looked at her friends critically – "and it may take a few months for her to heal, but she'll be okay."

Everybody else in the room breathed out a breath of relief.

The doctor motioned to Kathy's parents, and they stepped into the hallway.

"Thank goodness she'll be okay," said Kathy's mother.

"Yes, but it seems there's a more serious problem at hand."

"What is it?" demanded Kathy's father. "I thought you said she would be

okay."

The doctor lowered his voice, and said, "Unfortunately, her primary somatic sensory cortex has been damaged by acute encephalitis from a viral zoonotic disease from *aix galericulata* due to the severe shock experienced by the victim, thus triggering a case of sepsis and aspergillosis."

Her parents gasped.

"But have hope – there is a way out."

"What is it? We'll do anything!"

"She could be put out of her misery by being dosed with euthanasia. She'll die eventually, and in pain, so this would be easier on everybody."

Kathy's mother sobbed.

The doctor went back into the living room to explain the situation to Connie, Jessica, Katie, and Sydney.

"Ohmigosh, but he's so cute!"

"Ew, Sydney, he's probably at *least* twice your age." Jessica rolled her eyes.

"This is unreasonable, Sydney. Do you even know his name?" Katie attempted to raise one eyebrow, but only stretched her face in a way that made Connie laugh.

The latter took out her cell phone and took a picture of Katie's face, laughed again, then proceeded to call their class mates. "Hey, Candy, you'll never believe it – Sydney likes this guy called Dr. *Ha*. I know, right? Just think about it, like, Sydney *Ha*! Haha–"

Katie snatched the phone out of Connie's hand and ended the call. "Now is *not* the time to be fooling around. Kathy is in critical condition!"

"But she'll be fine, the doctor" – here Sydney sighed dreamily – "said so himself!"

The doctor came in at this moment, head bowed. "I'm afraid I lied, before, when I said she would be fine."

"Then you lied to us!" Connie accused.

"That's okay," said Sydney, sweetly, "I'm sure he has his reasons."

"Yes, it's just that, you know, in this hard time, I just wanted to protect you."

He coughed. "Unfortunately, Kathy's primary somatic sensory cortex has been damaged by acute encephalitis from a viral zoonotic disease

from *aix galericulata* due to the severe shock experienced by the victim, thus triggering a case of sepsis and aspergillosis."

Connie blinked and Katie coughed. Sydney just put her chin in her hand and sighed again.

Jessica just nodded, and said, "So what you're saying is that the part of Kathy's brain that receives information from skin receptors and distinguishes different types of sensations has been damaged due to a case of rabies from the Mandarin Duck species because of the shock and thus causing the presence of organisms capable of producing disease or their toxins in her blood or tissues and an infection caused by spores from moldy hay."

"Wait a minute, was that one sentence?!"

Dr. Ha nodded. "Correct. You are very well educated," he said, surprised.

"Thank you, I read encyclopedias in my free time. I've already completed a Ph-D but continue high school for show."

"Well, I – I read, too," Sydney stammered. "Not encyclopedias, unfortunately" – Sydney sent a glare at Jessica – "but I read novels."

With polite interest, the doctor said, "Really? What type of novels?"

"Oh, drama," she fluttered her lashes, and the other girls rolled their eyes. "I enjoy Gossip Girl, have you ever read those? They're quite interesting."

"Oh, er, no, I haven't." He looked away in disgust. "Anyway, Kathy will die in misery, so one option is to euthanize her."

"Hmm, that sounds pretty . . . is it a make-over?" asked Sydney.

Connie scoffed. "No, but gods know she needs one."

From somewhere down the hall, and muffled voice protested, "Hey! Yeah, well, your mama"

"My mama what?! Oh, and by the way, your un-athletic-ability-ness-ness!"

"Stop that," said an amused Katie. "Kathy's awake!"

The doctor held up his hand against the mobbing teenage girls. "She needs to rest, and we don't want to overwhelm her."

"Overwhelm, shmoverwhelm. I'm fine, guys!"

The girls rushed out of the room, down the hall, and arrived at Kathy's door. They turned the doorknob as they rushed at it, pushing it open, only to cause a pile-up.

"The door doesn't open in, you can't, idiots, pull it *out*," explained the dying

girl inside.

A chorus of "Oh, I knew that" followed, and the girls went inside.

"Hey, we heard the news," said Katie. "Are you okay?"

"Sure, why wouldn't I be?"

"Well, it's pretty terrible, what happened." Connie patted Kathy's head, who just glared at her.

"I don't see what the big deal is. It's just twisted ankle."

The four girls looked at her. "A twisted ankle? You don't have to put on a show for us, we know what's really happened."

"What? It's the truth- it's not even that bad, see?" She stuck out her foot to show them. "See? Not even a cast."

"But what about that rabid duck and the moldy hay that infected your spores?" Sydney inquired.

"What?"

"Yeah, the doctor said you were going to die!"

"What doctor?"

"You know, Dr. Ha," Sydney said. "Real handsome, and charming—"

"Handsome and charming? *Mr.* Ha?! That was my dad! He came in a disguise, he said, to cheer me up!"

"So here's your check for \$1,000,000 for the treatment. Thank you," said Kathy's mom.

"I'm sure you'll find a way to get through this." He headed for the door, but was stopped by an angry voice.

"Stop right there, evil fiend! You can't take those innocent people's money like this!"

"Who are you?"

"We are the Mad Knitters, and we've come to fight for justice!" cried Jessica dramatically.

"Sorry, cutie," said Sydney.

Why Not to Have a Pin Fetish

I live in a boring old house, in a boring old town, I go to a boring old private school, and I have boring old oodles of cash. All I do for fun is watch TV, play video games, and sometimes have some friends over. I felt like it was a boring old never ending cycle. But all of this changed one Saturday afternoon at Friendlys.

Me and my friends, Bobby, Sam, Rob, Joseph, and William had just finished gorging ourselves at a discount meal Friendlys. As usual I had "forgot" my money, so I wasn't paying. Once we were about to leave, Bobby noticed a toy grabber machine near the exit.

The others had plenty of spare money, so we decided to try it. A half hour later, we had won each won our own stuffed toy. I had fifty cents left, the ones Sam lent me, and it was my last try. I was looking for something to grab, and I noticed something strange in the corner, it looked like a pin sticking out of something. I just had to have it. I placed the claw over it and pressed the button. The claw dropped and grabbed the pin. Strangely the pin came out, and a loud high pitched ringing started.

"It's a grenade, and a big one!" screamed Bobby.

"Run!" I yelled as we ran through the doors. William, being very clumsy, tripped over his

shoelaces and didn't get up in time to run away. Once Bobby, Sam, Rob, Joseph, and I were at a safe distance from the grenade, we turned around just in time to see the restaurant store go up in flames.

"Oh my god, how did one grenade do all this!?" exclaimed Joseph, who was in shock.

"Who would do such a thing, it destroyed the toy grabber machine!" yelled Sam.

"Umm... Sam?" asked Bobby.

"Ya, what?" answered Sam.

"You know that the grenade killed William and destroyed our favorite Friendlys."

"Ya, whatever, I all care about is the toy grabber machine!" said Sam as he

started to tear.

"Ummmmm...O.K." said Bobby.

When we got back to my house, we called William's parents and told them that he died, and that we were very sorry. But, they didn't care much. We were even invited to the "William is Gone" party. There was one thing that I regretted the most out of all of the this. It was the fact that the toy I won was destroyed in the explosion. But the fact that William died actually cheered me up, because I found his toy in the rubble. We went to William's funeral, it was his remains being thrown into a dumpster.

When all of this was behind us, we wondered where to hang out now. Eventually we decided to hang out at a close by seven-eleven. A few months later, in the middle of the summer, we were buying some ice cold slurpees there, when a guy wearing a ski mask came in and pointed a shotgun at the cashiers head.

"Gimme all yo' slurpees!" the robber commanded.

"O.K." replied the cashier as he stuffed slurpee slush into the robbers bag. When the sack was full of melting slush, the robber took out a big grenade, just like the one in the toy grabber machine, and threw it.

"Run!" screamed Random Person #1.

We all started sprinting towards the door, this time, Sam tripped over some spilled slurpee and didn't make it out in time. When Bobby, Rob, Joseph, and I made it out of the store we turned around to see our new hang-out go up in flames just like the Friendlys.

"This is too weird guys, first the Friendlys, and now the Seven-Eleven!" I said.

"Ya, do you think someone's trying to kill us?" asked Rob.

"Nah." said Bobby.

When we got home and told Sam's parents about their sons death, they , unlike Williams parents, were devastated and buried him with a huge gravestone in a private cemetery. We were sad because we wanted there to be a party.

"Now we need another new hangout." I said the next day.

Chapter 2: Friend Auditions

"How 'bout we hang out at my house from now on." Bobby said.

We all agree. We all knew that Bobby's house was going to be the next to go. So for the next few months we hung out at Bobby's house. One November day Bobby, Joseph, Rob and I were playing Bobby's PS2, when we heard tires screeching in his driveway. We looked outside through the window, and we saw the robber wearing the ski mask come out of the Mercedes. He walked up to the door and knocked on it.

We all grabbed conveniently placed baseball bats and swords and walked up to the door. Rob opened it and he got shot in the head with a gun.

"Sorry, reflexes" said the robber, "Can I be your new friend?"

"But... you just killed Rob!" said Bob.

"I said I was sorry!" he said as he put the gun to Bobby's head. Bobby screamed like a little girl and ducked. Just as Bobby ducked, the Robber shot his gun and hit Joseph in the leg.

"AAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHH!" screamed Joseph in pain as he fell to the ground.

"You just killed Joseph!" I yelled.

"No... I'm still alive..." said Joseph weakly. The robber then shot Joseph again, this time Joseph completely collapsed dead.

"Dang these reflexes!" The robber yelled.

In my anger, I threw my sword at the robber, and hit him in the neck. He didn't seem to be in much pain, surprisingly.

"Ouch, well I'll have to get a doctor to look at this." said the robber, referring to the giant bloody wound in his neck. He then skipped in a girly manner back to his Mercedes and drove away.

"Well Bobby, it looks like it's just me and you now." I said in a monotonous voice.

"Don't worry Eric," said Bobby reassuringly, "I have a great idea!"

"What?" I asked, "What is it?"

"Friend Interviews!!"

Later that day, we called Joe's parents and told them that he was killed. We didn't bother calling Rob's parents because we knew they wouldn't care. So we just threw his remains in the dumpster with William's. Then we started handing out fliers for our friend auditions.

Two days later, the auditions began. Bobby and I were sitting on two chairs, at a table, in Bobby's room, near the window on the second floor. Of course, Simon Cowell was sitting in-between us. He'll do any gig these days.

Bobby leaned back on his chair, "Bring in the first applicant."

A figure in a trench coat with a sword through his neck came in, "I'm here for the audition."

Me and Bobby looked at each other and looked back at the man that was obviously the robber.

I gave him a stern look, "Get out of here!"

He looked down in sorrow, "Awww...."

Simon sat looking forward monotonously, "That disguise is absolutely horrific."

The robber pulled out a shotgun and blew Simon's head clear off.

Eric got a more relaxed look, "At least *you* don't have to pay him now."

Bobby let out a sigh of relief, "Thank god.... Hey wait a minute!"

"Okay," I turned back to the robber, "Please leave."

The robber started to tear, "Why can't I have friends?"

Bobby also turned towards the robber, "Because you are too stupid to realize that your backpack had been slowly leaking slurpee slush since you robbed the 7-11!"

The robber, with a sword still in his neck, burst into tears and tried to say something. But I threw another sword at him, this time it pierced his stomach, "I SAID PLEASE LEAVE!"

The robber, yet again, tried to speak, but instead of words, blood came out of his mouth onto the judges desk, "I needed that."

Bobby and I looked at each other, looked back at the robber, and I shouted, "OH MY GOD! YOU RUINED MY FAVORITE DESK!!" The robber who apparently got bored left while I was yelling at him.

"Okay, NEXT!" yelled Bobby.

An apparently drunken hobo stumbled up to the blood covered desk and fell to his knees, "You got any booze?"

"No," I shook my head, "But we do have the headless corpse of Simon Cowell."

"I'll take it," The hobo grabbed his body and walked off.

Bobby stared at the hobo walking away, "What in the hell was that?"
I disregarded him, "Next!"

Chapter 3: The Third Explosion

We continued our friend auditions until 5:00 o'clock, at which point, George W. Bush walked into the interview room surrounded by eight of his bodyguards.

"Mr. Bush, I'm sorry but there can only be one applicant for a friend, your guard have to leave, now" I said sternly.

"Sorry boys, you're going to have to leave..." said the president.

"Mr. President, we HAVE to be here for you, you need protection!" said the largest guard.

"I know a simple solution to this problem! Eric, pass me the shot gun," said Bobby, I took one of the shotguns from under the table and passed it to Bobby. He shot each guard right in the head, so fast that they couldn't even react.

"Back to business," I said, "What brings you here Mr. President?"

He looked directly at us and spoke, "Well, on my quest to destroy nuc-ee-ler weapon... I kind of spent all of the money the nation had... And I heard that you, Eric, had boring oodles of cash..."

I stood up in my chair, "Mr. Bush, I will not give you my money! I use it to buy my slurpees with! Leave! NOW!" The president got out of his chair, started mumbling to himself, and left the interview room.

"Next!" Seconds later, the hobo from before stumbled up to them...

"Got anymore of those... hic... bodies? They are sooo... hic.... goooood." He managed to say.

"Umm... We have eight of them right there," Bobby gestures towards the bodies of Bush's guards, "Feel free to take them..."

"Thanksss... hic... You guys are realll... hic... pals..." The hobo picked up

the bodies and stumbled out humming a tune.

"Next!" I yelled, then a pre-teen walked into the room.

"So, I hear you have friend interviews. I want some friends, do I qualify?" he said.

"What's your name?" Bobby asked hopefully.

"Leslie," he said, "So do I get to be your friend?"

Bobby and I burst out laughing the moment he finished his sentence, once the hysteria died down, Bobby said, "Yeah you qualify. Finally someone normal! Let's get another guy in here."

"NEXT!" We yelled, as the robber came into the room covered in tears, with the sword, still through his neck.

"I WANT FRIENDS TO! IF I CAN'T HAVE THEM, YOU CAN'T EITHER!" He sobbed. He took out an extremely large grenade and chucked it at us. Since the room was on the second floor of Bobby's house, the only escape was out of the window, and so we did, followed by the robber, we jumped out and landed on a passing pillow carrying truck... When we managed to scurry to the top of the pillows to see Bobby's house, and the neighboring ones, turn into nothing but memories.

"Hehe," said the robber, who was standing on the pile of pillows next to us, "That's what you get for not being my friends and not..."

Bobby interrupted him by tackling him such that they both fell off the truck, into a cactus farm, with Bobby repeatedly punching the robber's face. The heroic thing to do would be jumping off the side of the truck as well to help Bobby... And that's just what Leslie did. But I liked the feel of these pillows, so I decided to take a nap first.

Meanwhile, Bobby and Leslie and the robber were sliding down a hill covered in cacti, using the robber as a sled to avoid pain, they kept punching the bloody mess that was the robber's face. They were approaching a humongous cliff that lead to an inconvenient spike pit.

"Why??? Why???" he kept yelling as he pulverized the robber.

"Because, I just want to be loved," There was an EXTREMELY awkward pause, "In a straight way."

"Ohhhhh, ok" And at that moment, Bobby's heart grew three times it's size. The cliff was approaching, there was one lone cactus before the plummet, only two people could hold on to the cactus... One of them HAD to fall...

At that moment, knowing what HAD to be done in order to save two of them, Bobby sacrificed... LESLIE so he and the robber could hold on...

"Bobby!!!! I loved you like a brother!!! How could you!!!???" He yelled as he fell into the abyss... Which turned out to be around four feet deep...

Chapter 4: My House

Leslie climbed out of the four-foot-deep ridge, covered in prickly cactus spines, and started walking towards Bobby, "I'm going to KILL YOU!" he said, as he took out a katana and started sprinting.

At this point, the robber took out his shotgun blew Leslie's arm right off. At this point the robber started chuckling, "Give up now, Leslie, and you'll die."

"What if I don't give up?"

"You'll die."

"Fine, let's call it a draw then!" compromised Leslie.

"Damn... Didn't think of that... It's a deal!" The robber and Leslie shook hands and Leslie walked away, but on the way, he fell to the ground, DEAD of drug overdose. That just goes to show that you shouldn't do drugs!

"Oh well, so Bobby, are we friends now?" asked the robber.

"Nope." said Bobby plainly as started walking back towards his house's remains. Meanwhile, I just woke up from my nap on the pillow truck and saw that it was driving next to the place where Bobby's house *was*, so I jumped out and went over to Bobby, who was staring at the rubble from across the road.

"Dude, you can come stay with me at my er... house..." I offered.

"Ok." Bobby had never seen my house, and I had to take him there a secret way for no reason. So, walked down the street through a back alley, into a sewer, out through a manhole and into a very wide street, "Where's your house, Eric? I've never seen it."

"Behind you." Bobby turned around and faced a mansion so big, it was bigger than a medieval castle and a McDonald's **COMBINED**. When we went inside, we saw that everything was made of gold/diamonds. I gave Bobby a tour that lasted eight hours because of the total enormity, "And finally, ending this extremely long tour, this is the GOLD ROOM!"

"Eric... Why the hell do you need a gold room... There's nothing in it!" he commented.

"Well... Ummmmm.... It's made of gold..."

"Everything is made of gold." At which point I walked away without replying to Bobby's stupid comment. EVERYONE who's ANYONE has a gold room! For the next few days, everything seemed normal. Bobby and I were playing the "X-Treme Gaming Polygonal Hexagon", a game system that would get released to the public in 2039, when all of a sudden, in the middle of the night, we heard a thump. We went outside to see who it was, but all we saw was melted slurpee slush, and someone mumbling, "I want friends..." in the closet. We had NO idea who or where this person might be.

"Let's split out and search!" suggested Bobby.

"Shouldn't we start by opening the closet where the slush leads, and where someone's whimpering?" I asked.

"Nah, that would be too easy..."

"If you say so," Then we started searching the entire house, from top to bottom to find the intruder. It took us twelve hours to finish searching to no avail.

"I give up," I told him, "I'm going to hang up my hat in this closet and go back to playing the 'X-Treme Gaming Polygonal Hexagon.'"" I opened the closet and a gunshot was heard. I looked at my hat, and it had a huge bullet hole in it. I looked inside the closet, to see the robber holding his gun with one hand, and petting my kitty in another.

"Sorry, kid, but if you won't be my friend, no one will..." he said as he brought his gun up to my forehead and was pulling back on the trigger.

"Wait!" I yelled, "What you just said, 'if you won't be my friend, no one will', that means that if you kill me you won't have friends!"

The robber pondered over this for a moment, "Damn! You're right!" he dropped his shotgun, "I'm going to have to throw this grenade in your mansion though."

"You do that..." I said to him.

"Eric! Don't let him blow up your house!" Bobby was trying to convince me.

"Let him do what he wants..." I said. The robber took a HUGE grenade threw it in my closet, and jumped out a forty story window. I walked over,

closet my closet, and took one step back. Bobby tried to jump out, but I motioned for him to stop.

Right before the grenade exploded, something was said from the outside, "OUCH! MY BACK!" The robber had just hit the ground. Second's later, the grenade exploded doing no damage whatsoever because of the four-foot gold lining in each wall.

I walked into my room, lifted my mattress, took out my shotgun, and pointed out the window. I saw the robber limping away with a crooked back, and I took a shot at him, the bullet hit his back and straightened it. "Thanks, Kid!" He yelled to me from the outside, "You fixed my back ache!"

I just stood there in total awe that the bullet had done NO damage to him... and then I lost interest and went back to playing my the "X-Treme Gaming Polygonal Hexagon" with Bobby.

Chapter 5: *The Evil*

"Bobby, do we really *need* friends?" I asked him, as he watched my 900 inch LCD HD T.V.

No response...

"Bob?"

No response...

"What are you watching?" I asked him as I grabbed his shoulder and pulled him to the side.

All of a sudden, a tune was heard coming from the T.V., "I love you, you love me, we're a happy family!"

"Bobby, no... You didn't?" I asked, with the knowledge that he wouldn't answer me. He had been taken in... zombified... by... by... the *evil*.

The *evil* that we SWORE to never, watch, listen to, or have any contact with... We also swore to put '*evil*' in italics...

This was no ordinary evil. This was... **PUBLIC ACCESS TELEVISION!**

They hypnotize you into watching their shows, and make you buy their shabby, overpriced products after EVERY show. There was only one solution which was...uh oh... "HEY BOBBY PUT DOWN MY PHONE!!!" I tackled Bobby onto the floor as he started to dial *the number*, the number of *evil*.

(666)-666-6666. There was one '6' left before I ripped the cord out. I punched

him unconscious so I had time to explain all of this to you viewers.

As I was saying, there is only one cure to *evil-itus* and that was to cover the victim in a massive amount of 7-11 slurpee slush. I had to save him... but where would I get a sack-full of slurpee slush at this hour? It was Sunday... Everyone knows 7-11's are closed on Sundays...

Bobby regained consciousness and ran toward the phone, as he walked towards it, he managed to mumble, "The God Damn ROBBER You Idiot!". He then reverted to an attempt to get the phone. I grabbed him by the neck and rammed him into a wall, to K.O. him again.

I then chained him in the phone-less dungeon. (Yes, my house has a dungeon. That's where Elvis is, he owed my money.) I had to go look for the robber, I had no idea where to look. I started running through town in an attempt to find him.

Meanwhile, as always happens with *evil-itus* victims, Bobby grew three times his size and turned green, he broke through the chains and ran for a phone. (*evil-itus* grows worse with each and every call.) He broke through the golden door, and ran for a phone. He looked through every room, but couldn't find a phone. He couldn't find one because I blindfolded him and he was too stupid to take it off.

I ran and ran, when all of a sudden, I was passing a Shiite-Soup Chinese Restaurant when all of a sudden, it EXPLODED and a giant plume of smoke came rising up. Suddenly, the robber, with his sack-full of slurpee slush, came out laughing and carrying Chinese food, "I said I wanted THRITEN shrimp in my 'shrimp fried rice' not 14!"

I didn't have time to ask, I picked up a conveniently placed AK-47 and started shooting, the robber seemingly dodged every one of them, and walked right up to me, "If you wanted my sack of slush, you should've asked!" He threw the sack on the ground near my feet, and continued eating his 'shrimp fried rice'.

When I got back, Bobby was still huge and green, but the expandable blindfold, that he somehow didn't notice, was still covering his eyes, "**FOR CABLE!**" I yelled as I dumped the sack onto Bobby.

When he came out, he was his normal self, "EWWWWW, Coke Flavor!" he looked around, "What happened?"

"Nothing."

Chapter 6: The Ghetto

As I took my morning stroll through the ghetto, a barrage of bullets was coming from both sides of me. I was in the midst of a gang war, I had no choice, I had to fight back or die...

I picked up the Uzi of some guy who was just shot, and shot at both sides randomly. As everyone knows, I can only through swords and daggers, I can't shoot guns... So I missed with every shot, but this caused the gang leaders to get pissed and team up against me.

I started running back to my house, jumping up and down like a high monkey on CRACK. Once I got inside, I sat in a chair and started to relax. But being who I am, I forgot to shut the door, seconds later, the gangs came in looking for me.

I darted up the stairs, hearing nothing but bullets behind me. At the end of the hall to the left was my room, I didn't want my stuff shot, so I went in the room to the right, and guess what room it is... The Bathroom.

Bobby was just walking towards the exit of my huge bathroom when I ran in, "Bobby, I thought you weren't in this chapter! Er... I mean, I thought you were barfing!"

"Meh" He shrugged and noticed the two gangs running into the bathroom, "What did you do now?"

"They started it!" I yelled as I hid behind him.

"Eric... Why don't you learn to shoot forward instead of sideways? (OH! That's why!)" Bobby said as he took the Uzi from me and shot everyone of the gangs members in the head, thereby, killing them, "I don't know how we will explain these bodies to your parents"

At that moment, the completely drunken hobo entered the room, "Hey... (hic) ... felers, ya mind if... (hic)... I take these... (hic)... boddddddiessss?"

"Umm... Go right ahead" I answered. (How the hell did this guy keep finding us?) He took the bodies of the gang members, stumbled down the stairs, and out the door.

"Anyway... I thought you were barfing, weren't you?" I asked.

"Actually the coke flavor wasn't *that* ba- (BARF)"

"Oh GREAT!" On my new shirt.... TO THE CLEANERS

Chapter 7: To the Cleaners!

I was pissed, my new shirt was ruined by barf, I had to go and get it dry cleaned. I was driving my Mercedes (with a 13 yr old driver's license of course.) down the block, with Bobby in shotgun, seriously.

Bobby (who was better now.) was next to me, holding a shotgun shooting everyone in the street in the head. I took a left turn and parked in the lot, and we got out of the car. We got closer to the dry cleaners, when all of a sudden, you got it, KABOOM!

The robber came out of the burning, smoking building, "Haha, I said **29** degrees not **30!!!!**"

"To the next dry cleaners!" I yelled as we jumped back in the car. Unfortunately, the same thing happened with the other twenty-four dry-cleaning places we went to. There was nowhere left in town to clean my shirt...

"Let's go to West Islip (The next town)!" Bobby suggested.

"Okay, but how does the robber know where we're going." I asked. Bobby, who was sitting next to me shrugged.

The robber who was sitting behind me shrugged too, "I guess that's a mystery unsolved..." he said.

Anyway, we drove everywhere, but we couldn't get our clothes cleaned because the robber somehow always knew where we were. "We have to outsmart him..." I whispered into Bobby's ear.

"But where to go?" He whispered back.

"Chuck E.... Cheese..." The robber whispered. When we got there we won the 1000 ticked grand prize and got fabulous toys.

It took me a while to realize, but I eventually did... I realized we were going off track, "Bobby! Why did you suggest this?!"

"I didn't I thought you did!" he said as he stopped the little light on his station and won 100 more tickets.

"No, it was me," said the robber, who had a bathtub filled with tickets, "I come here EVERY Saturday at 4pm - 9pm!"

That was it! I had a plan. "Let's go to the cleaners *next Saturday at 5pm*," I told Bobby.

And so we did, next Saturday at 5pm, we went to the cleaners, I was about to

step inside when... KABOOM!

I got the robber by the neck, "YOU ARE SUPPOSED TO BE AT 'CHUCK E. CHEESE'"

The robber started walking toward my car, "Sorry to break it to you fellers, its Sunday."

"OH SH—"

Chapter 8: The Robber!

"I'm pissed!" I told Bobby when we got to my house.

"Me too!" he said, "There was a toy-grabber in that dry-cleaners..."

"I'm sooo pissed at the robber!" said a voice from under the bed. I lifted the mattress up, and out came...The ROBBBBBBBBBBBBBBB.... Warren Buffet, investing Genius. Bobby shot him and *I* took his money.

"Hey Bob, how are we playing 3-Player with two people?" I asked.

We looked at the person in the third controller, it was, you guessed it... The ROBBBBBBBBBBBBB... Michael Jackson, Bobby shot him as well.

"How many bullets do you have, man?" I asked in awe.

"One, I used the infinite bullets cheat." Bobby said.

----- **Slight Pause for Gaming (6hrs)** -----

"Oh yeah, weren't we going to track down the robber or something?" I asked.

"Mmmhm, Let's GO!" Bobby yelled as we went outside and into my car, with the robber in the back seat. Yet again, we had NO idea where to look... We searched almost every building in town, to no avail!

"Maybe you should try my house!" said the robber from the back seat.

"Hmm... Good idea... what's your address?" I asked.

"1600 Pennsylvania Ave." He said

"We are sure to find him there!" Bobby yelled as the care sped off. (We had no idea where to go.) After 14 hours of intense search, and 1 hour of intense farting (Bobby's idea to eat beans and eggs for breakfast.), we finally found the robber's house, it was a big and *white house*. I've seen this place before... but I couldn't out my finger on it... So I just handed Bobby the rocket launcher and he blew it up.

KABOOM, and all of the sudden, hundreds of reporters came out of

nowhere, I took out the katana out of the robber's neck, "Thanks!" he said. I jumped out of the car, sliced and diced each and every reporter, and we drove off.

"You liar! That was the White House!" Bobby said as he drew the shotgun close to the robber's head.

"Ohhhhh, I meant 1601 Pennsylvania Ave!" he happily replied as Bobby put his shotgun down. We blew up every building in Washington D.C. hoping for it to be the robbers house, but APPARENTLY, he meant '1601 Pennsylvania Ave' in Argentina, so we were getting ready to get to his house.

"I have to go somewhere before we leave for Argentina." said the robber.
So...

(Punch, Kick, Hurt, Ouch)

"What's happening???" I asked with a slight hint of panic in my voice.

"The Eric who's writing this story is getting mugged by the robber!!!" Bobby yelled.

"Damn it! Robber! Get your ass over here!" I / Eric yelled.

A mysterious voice came through the air, sending chills through Bobby's ass.

"Hehe, I rule the story now! We will refer to Eric as 'Eric' while I'm in control, not 'I'!"

(Punch, Kick, Hurt, Pain)

"Okay guys, I'm back!" said the writer as he threw the robber back into the story, he was bound, gagged, and stuffed in a tennis ball container, "On with the story!"

"Okey Dokey," I said.

Anyway... I pressed a button on my car and the doors swung out and flattened, turning into wings. The muffler turned around to reveal a GIANT engine and a container filled with bags of peanuts, who doesn't love peanuts? So my car was a plane now, we were off to Argentina!

The car took off at mesmerizing speeds, with the robber dangling from a rope from the bottom. A mob of reporters was directly under the plane going the

same speed as us, "We HAVE to lose them!" I yelled as I turned the plane to the left so it was over the water, the reporters stupidly followed us and drowned... "Never mind, problem solved!"

Chapter 9: Argggentina! Or not...

As we flew through the air, I realized something. The shirt that Bobby barfed on was on sale for only a nickel at the duty-free shop at JFK airport. "We're going back..." I said.

"Why?" Bobby asked.

"We're going to the airport..." I told him.

"NOOOOO!" Bobby AND the robber yelled SIMULTANIOUSLY. I ignored their constant nagging, and turned to go to JFK.

Ten minutes later we were in JFK airspace, the radio started saying something, "Flight '3R1C 1S C007' please identify yourselves.

Bobby wanted to joke around, "Hehe, were terrorists here to kill you all." All of a sudden hundreds of fighter planes came out of nowhere, "Oh shhhhhhi —!"

"Don't worry," I told him, I pressed a button which made a laser turret appear on the front of the jet. Bobby grabbed the controls and shot every fighter plane down to the GROUND. (Skillz)

Once we landed, we went inside, and were following the hallway that lead to the shopping area. However, half way there a gay clown came and kidnapped the robber, "Noooooooo!" he yelled, as the clown dragged him back to the rubbery nosed depths of which he came. The clown then forced the robber to clip his toe nails with his teeth.

Bobby and I just stood there and stared, "Whatever," I said, "Let's keep going." Once we got to the duty-free shop, Bobby went to see their video game selection, and then... I saw it... There it was... At the end of the aisle... The shirt! There was ONE left! I started running to it, and noticed another boy doing the same.

I HAD to beat him there, I needed that shirt, I only had 2000 more of them in my closet! "Stay away from my shirt!!!!!!!!!" I yelled, but he didn't listen, I took out my Uzi and shot at him rapidly, but I shot to the side killing 100

OTHER innocent people. Eventually, he beat me to it and brought it to the cashier, and ran outside.

The boy started making faces at my and started walking away, at which point, he was trampled by an army of drunken hobos, the one that kept taking the bodies showed up, and handed me the shirt, "(hic)...Thanks for the bodies... (hic)... I felt that I owed... (hic)... owed ya one..." he stumbled out of the store, called over the rest of them, and picked up the kid's body, while the other hobos picked up the bodies of the hundred civilians.

A moment later, I saw a calendar on the shelf next to me, I though, "Hmmmm... The reviews said I needed one...". I decided to buy the calendar because the reviews said so.

A moment later, I saw Bobby heading to the cashier with a truckload of videogames piled in his hands. When the cashier was finally done pricing all of them she said, "\$2 please."

"THAT MUCH? FOR 100 VIDEO GAMES?" He pulled out his trusty shotgun and shot the guy behind the casher in the head.

"Ohhhhh!!! I meant 0\$!!" the cashier said in a panicky tone.

Bobby chuckled, "That's more like it," he walked over to me, "Let's go, I want to play these."

We went back in the jet car and I fired it up, I FINALLY noticed the robber sitting behind me, "How did you escape the clown?" I asked.

"I had to marry him..." said the robber in a grievous tone, as he gestured to the clown who was sitting next to him.

Chapter 10: Random Clones... Or Marijuana...

We were flying toward the landing strip at my house when Bobby reached for some more peanuts, "WHO ATE ALL OF THE PEANUTS!?" he yelled insanely loud. The robber tapped his shoulder to get his attention, then pointed to the clown, "So it was YOU was it?" Bobby was pissed, really pissed, he LOVED peanuts.

Bobby was SO pissed that he took out some "OFF" bug spray and sprayed the clown with it. The clown stuttered then laughed at this futile attempt. All of a sudden, the clown started **melting**! (Everyone knows that "OFF" bug spray makes clowns melt, hehe) The clown started spazzing insanely and JUMPED off of the plane into a conveniently placed vat of "OFF" bug spray. He died.

When we landed I turned to the robber, "Now you have to go." I paused to rub my eyes, "Huh?". Right there before me lay to identical robbers. "Which one is the real one? The other on has to die." They each pointed to themselves in the exact same manner. There was no way to solve this dilemma.

"I have an idea!" said Bobby, "Let's ask the writer." He cleared his thought and spoke into the sky, "All Might Writer! Which one is the real one?!"

The voice of the writer came down from the heavens in a calming and easing tone, "The real one is... I have no clue, you're on your own guys, sorry." So no one knew which robber was the real one, not even the writer...

"What to do, What to do..." said Bobby, "Let's ask them questions." He started interrogating them, they both said the exact same stupid answers...

"How many peanuts does a fat walrus eat in seven minutes?" I asked.

"Green!" said the robbers simultaneously. They were both equally strange and equally stupid...

"I KNOW WHAT TO DO!" said Bobby, he took out his shotgun and shot at both robbers, they both stood there smiling. A few seconds later, one of the robbers dropped dead, "Hehe, told you it would work!" said Bobby as he turned to the side to see... two ME'S!

"OH DAMN," he looked down in anguish, "Which one of you is gay?" One of the Erics raised his hand, Bobby instantly shot him, "Gay Fag...You're not Eric!"

"Nice job, Bobby!" I said as I patted him on the back, then I noticed that there were two BOBB... Arnold Shwartzeneggers standing right there, "Which one is the real one?" I asked.

"Who cares?" said the robber as he shot them both, "I need to get going."

We all turned around to get going, it was getting late, in this time, the unnoticed drunken hobo came, took all of the clones' (and Arnold's) bodies and stumbled away...

"Hey Eric?" Bobby asked.

"Hmm?"

"What just happened?"

"I don't know, but I think it's the reviewers' fault."

"Who are they?" he asked with a strange tone.

"I don't know..." I thought for a little bit, "Maybe we're just high..."

"Yeah... I think that's it..." He started walking towards my house, "C'mon Barney!". He took Barney the dinosaur by the hand and pulled him inside my house.

"It's gunna be a looong night."

Chapter 11: Let's Get Some Friends... Dead Friends...

"Hey, Bobby," I nudged him in the arm to get his attention, "I have an idea for some friends..."

"Huh, what?"

"Let's have a party in Quebec!"

"Why Quebec?" he asked.

"Because... IT'S IN CANADAAAAAAAAA!" (Everyone knows Canada is the coolest country, not counting Greenland.)

And so we did, hopped on my jet car, and sent an invitation to every Canadian kid in the world. We also invited the robber since we had his address, Bobby's idea. As usual, BOBBY was paying for it with his inheritance and...

"Hey where'd Bobby go?"

(Punch, Kick, Ow, Hurt, Mommy)

A mysterious voice came out of the sky, "Okay, this is Bobby, I just bound and gagged *the writer*, and I'm going to re-write the story from the beginning of this chapter." A fart was heard from the sky, "Excuse me."

Chapter 11 (Rewrite): Let's Get Some Friends

"Hey Bobby," Eric nudged me to get my attention, "Guess what!"

"What..." I asked.

"I'm an idiot!" He yelled out in joy.

"Since, I'M the smart one, I'll come up with a brilliant idea!" I said valiantly.

"Ooo, what is it???"

"Let's have a party in Quebec!" I said.

"YAY!" he started spazzing out insanely.

And so we hoped on Eric's jet car and flew to Canada to set up the party. We also invited the robber since we had his address, ERIC's idea. As usual, ERIC

was paying for it with his allowance and...

"Eric, stay in the story!" the voice was yelling from the sky, "WHERE ARE YOU GOING!?"

(Punch, Kick, Hurt, Paiiin!!!)

"Okay folks, I'm back and...

(More ouch)

"Back again!" Farts...

(More ouch)

A faint chuckling was heard...

Anyway.... Eric and Bobby set up the party SPLITTING the expenses, and invited everyone, INCLUDING the genius that is... THE ROBBER.

When the party was started the building was huge and awesome, there was a bouncer at the door checking the invitations. There were hundreds of potential friends inside, I wanted friends...

When I, THE ROBBER, got there, I couldn't find the invitation and the bouncer beat me up... I got pissed, I took out my shotgun, I didn't want to shoot my potential friends... But I needed to... I had to... I opened fire killing everyone except Eric and Bobby because they were in the bathroom. When everyone else died, I realized that I didn't have to kill them just the bouncer... I'm an idiot...

Why... Why... WHY DID MY MOTHER NAME ME 'THE ROBBER'

(Punch, Kick, Ow, Hurt)

THAT'S IT! I'M LOCKING MY DOOR FROM NOW ON!

Bobby and I came out of the bathroom to see everyone dead, and the robber standing in the middle of the room dancing his ass off...

"WHAT DID YOU DO?" Bobby yelled, "You killed everyone!"

"Umm... I... I... MY GUN CAME TO LIFE AND... no no... umm... I was TAKEN OVER BY AN EVIL SPIRIT AND... no no... the truth is..." the

robber paused to fart, "I got taken over by and evil spirit, which made my gun come to life and shoot everyone..."

Awkward Pause

Bobby randomly yelled, "DANCE OFF!!!" Suddenly, disco music came on, even though the D.J. was dead, and we all started dancing our butts off...

The robber danced like and insane monkey on drugs, he lifted his cup of Vodka to his lips and chugged it down, he did this eight more times. By the end of the eighth cup, he was on the floor, DEA.... Unconscious...

Bobby was break dancing so insanely fast, that the gun in his back pocket fired rapidly which made him spin EVEN FASTER! He spun so fast, that he lost consciousness. He landed on the other side of the room, ouch.

I was just shimmying up and down randomly, all of the sudden, and announcer came out of nowhere, "Congrats! You WON the Dance-Off! Here are you \$1,000,000!" he put a check for \$1,000,000 in front of my face and waved it around. When I reached for it he pulled it back, "Haha, NOT REALLY!"

I was pissed, I wanted the money, I went over to Bobby's unconscious body, and picked up the gun, and killed the announcer, taking the check... (hehe, I FINALLY learned to shoot.) I looked at the enormous pile of bodies in the room, at least 10,000 of them. Then I lost interest, went outside, and went to bed next to a dead mongoose.

When I wasn't looking, the army of hobos came, there were at least 1,000 of them, they each took ten bodies each and left. They thought that Bobby and the robber were dead, even though they weren't, so they took them to wherever they take the bodies.

Chapter 13: Hobo Paradise

The wave of hobos left the building and flooded down into a manhole. The cramped into a sewer, it was as cramped a slave-ship ON FIRE, but they progressed anyway. Once they got to and opening there as a neon sign that said, "**HOBOPARADISE**" (Or at least that's what the *DRUNKEN* hobos saw it as.) The sign actually was actually a piece of cardboard on a stick that read, "**DO NOT LIVE HERE, IT WILL GIVE YOU A LUST FOR**

ALCOHOLIC DEAD BODY BLOOD!" The wave of hobos went inside and piled up the bodies.

Bobby got to his senses and got up, he looked around to see he was on top of the pile of bodies with hobos all around. The hobos were doing something to the bodies, he took a closer look, the hobos were **INJECTING VODKA INTO THE BLOOD OF THE BODIES!** When you put vodka in blood, the blood becomes more alcoholic than the vodka which makes a great beverage to get drunk from.

Anyway, the hobos started drinking the blood of the bodies, one by one, body by body, the hobos drank away, getting drunker and drunker, when it was Bobby's turn, he took his *extra* shotgun out and blasted the hobo's head right off. At that moment, the other hobos got in a fight over the body, this gave Bobby a chance to run the **HELL AWAY**. He sprinted down the sewers and out the manhole, carelessly leaving the robber behind.

The robber woke up the second he was about to be injected. He got frightened and flinched away from the hobos, they were closing in, he had to think fast. (Unfortunately, he can't think for his life.) He pulled out his trusty shotgun and blasted away, killing row after row of hobo. When he had killed half of them, the other half killed each other in an attempt to take the bodies of their fallen comrades. The robber had done the unspeakable, he had disturbed *it*...The supreme hobo...

The supreme hobo came out of a dark alley, too drunk to see the hand in front of his face. He was so big, he was bigger than a McDonald's, a chicken, and a cockroach... **DIVIDED**. He stumbled over to the robber, "Who... (Barf)... Dares to... (Barf)... to kill my hobo... (Barf)... Hobo army?"

"Your supreme fatness, I did," said the robber on one knee.

"Then you... (barf)... you must die..." The supreme hobo ran after the robber and tried to land on him, but missed and fell... And died of a heart attack...

Suddenly, the original hobo (The One From The Beginning) came out of the bathroom, he let out a girly scream, and stumbled away faster than a **dead snail**...

The robber had done it... Disturbed the natural balance... the ratio of **'Drunken Hobos : Everything Else'** was thrown **WAY** out of proportion... Which caused every single hot dog in the world to explode.

Millions of people died that day, from eating hot dogs. May god rest their

hungry souls...

The robber darted outside, skipping like a sissy, as always, he went back home and went to bed.

When I woke up, the mongoose was holding the shotgun to my head, he spoke in a heavily accented Hispanic voice, "Move, and you die."

Chapter 14: Mongooses Suck

"What do you want from me?" I asked the deranged mongoose.

"You are a spy for the Prairie Dogs, we must interrogate you," He paused to take out a syringe, "This won't hurt... much."

When I regained consciousness, I was in a dark room with one lone lamp hanging over my head, I looked around, only to realize that I was tied to a chair. There were footsteps at the door, the mongoose came in, he walked over to me and slapped me, "Where do they hold their Nuclear Weapons?"

"Ummm.... What?" I had NO idea what he was talking about.

"Where is their military base?" he slapped me again. "Where do they develop weapons?" yet again... I was slapped. What the hell was up with the mongoose asking questions.

I looked down only to realize I was tied with floss, I got up, easily breaking the floss, and kicked the mongoose across the room. All of the sudden an alarm went off. Red and yellow lights were flashing, guards were coming, I had to think... think... think... hey look a fly... I mean... think...

I had no idea what to do, I did the first thing that went to mind, the Japanese favorite pastime, MONGOOSE KICKING! I ran through row after row of mongoose, kicking away, knocking them several feet back. Suddenly, a giant mongoose that resembled Arnold Shwartzenegger came out of a dark corner, "Prepare to die, Prairie Dog!"

"DUDE, DO I LOOK LIKE A PRAIRIE DOG?" I asked.

"Yes," he gestured to the sign on my back which read, **"I am a Prairie Dog in disguise here to infiltrate the base of the Mongooses, kill them all, and retrieve valuable information for my people."** He also gestured to the Prairie Dog costume they had put on me.

I took it all off, "Fine, do I look like a prairie dog NOW?" He jumped on my and started beating my head against the wall.

"Yes, you do look like a Prairie Dog to me!", he paused to flex his muscles, to cover up his farting, "You see... I'm blind." He continued beating me up until Bobby came into the room.

"BOBBY, how the hell did you get in here???" I asked.

"Meh," he simply replied, "It's your story." Anyway, Bobby took out his shotgun and shot Arnold SwartzeMongoose right in the head.

"Let's get out of here!" Bobby shot spastically and killed them all. Except the one that interrogated me.

The original mongoose, that I thought was dead, came up to me, "Forgive me..."

Bobby aimed his gun at the mongoose, "No!" I yelled, "He's not bad..."

"Fine..." Bobby lowered his gun, "He can live."

Once we got out of the Mongoose base, we were right outside my house (*DAMN, I didn't know megalomaniac mongooses were living in my back yard...*) "Thank you for sparing me, friends." He bowed and started running off.

"DID HE JUST CALL ME A FU--ER?!?!?!?" Bobby took out his shotgun and shot the mongoose as he was running off.

"He called you a friend."

"Whatever."

We went inside and went in my room, there sat the last drunken hobo... (The first one)... "I need your... (hic)... **BRAINS!**"

Chapter 15: BRAINS... Huggy Fiends...

Bobby and I were staring at the hobo... Who was walking zombie-like, smiling, and repeating the word, "Brains..."

I was worried about keeping my brain in my head, "Bobby... Do something..."

"I'm on it," he said as he took out his shotgun and shot the hobos head off, "There."

(You may be thinking that the hobo isn't dead since he was a zombie... BUT... he's dead. He had his last laugh... D.)

"Wow... What a waste of a chapter..." I said in a dull tone.

"Yeah let's go inside." He said.

We started walking toward the house when I took a last look at the hobo's body, "Bobby..." I looked more intently at it, "Something's moving inside the body..."

All of a sudden, a hundred blood covered objects came out of the hobo's neck. They cleaned the blood off of themselves to reveal that they were...
CARE BEARS!!!

"AHHHH!!!!!!!!!!" Bobby started spazzing out as the care bears piled on top of him, "HELP!!!!!!!!!!" He was getting hugged hundreds of times... He couldn't take it... He fell to the ground, DEA.... Unconscious.

"I'll save you!" I yelled as I took out my Uzi, then I realized that I sucked at shooting... If I aimed at the bears... I would kill Bobby. So, I did just the opposite. I let out a barrage of bullets aimed directly at Bobby, and it killed all of the care bears. The bears BURST open with the stuffing pouring out.

"Thanks..." said Bobby weakly as he regained consciousness. Suddenly, one of the Care Bears got up and sewed itself back together. Then two of them, then three, then ALL of the Care Bears repaired themselves.

Bobby took out his shotgun and blasted like hell, through the hundreds of Care Bears who then repaired themselves, "What do we do?????" Just then, the Care Bears piled on top of him giving him hundreds of **hugs**.

Moments later, the same thing happened to me, I was piled under the massive army of Huggy Fiends; I lost consciousness because one of the Care Bears farted in my face... He ate eggs for breakfast.

All hope was lost, we were both near dead, no hope was left now. Suddenly, LESLIE came out of a dark alley... "Oh shit... Care Bears..." He went over to the 'OFF' Bug Spray that fell out of Bobby's pocket before he was attacked. He read the label, **"OFF' Bug Spray Kills: Clowns, Michael Jacksons, Bunny Slippers, and... CARE BEARS."**

Leslie jumped toward the piles of Care Bears and sprayed the 'OFF' Bug Spray all over the place. All of the sudden, the Care Bears started melting... They all turned to slurpee slush, "So THAT'S what slurpee slush is..."

When Bobby and I got up, we saw Leslie, I walked over to him, "You're ALIVE?"

"Umm... Yeah, I only fainted because I was low on drugs."

"Then how did your arm grow back after the robber shot it off?" asked

Bobby.

"They grow back..."

"It's YOUR fault the Care Bears attacked isn't it?!?" Bobby took his shotgun and pointed it at Leslie's head.

"I SAVED YO---" he was cut off by Bobby blasting his head right off of his shoulders, thereby killing him.

"Bobby..." I said.

"Hmm?"

"He saved us."

"So?"

"Nothing," I turned around, "Let's go play video games."

Chapter 16: DNE EHT (Spell it Backwards Genius)

Bobby and I walked into my room as if nothing had happened. We sat down, and I pressed the 'ON' button on my 'X-Treme Gaming Polygonal Hexagon'. I handed him a controller and we started playing "Super Mario 6.4 x 10³³".

MANY hours later, after intense gaming, the phone rang, I went and picked it up. A few minutes later, I hung up the phone, sat back down next to Bobby, and took a long, drawn-out, sigh.

"What's the matter?" Bobby asked, he put the game on pause and put the controller down, "Who was on the phone?"

"I just got word from the boss..." I said sorrowly...

"The Writer?"

"Yep..." I stood up, "We need to end 'Why Not to Have a Pin Fetish I'...", I paused to fart, "And we need a death to end it..."

"Let's get the robbers opinion in this," Bobby opened my window, "HEY ROBBER!"

Suddenly, there was a knock on the door, I opened it and in came.... THE ROBBBBB... Justin Timberlake, who was quickly shot by Bobby.

"I'll try that one more time," Bobby, once again, opened the window, "HEY ROBBER!!!!!!!!!!!"

The closet door opened and out came... MICHAEL JACKSOOOO.... The Robber, "Whatcha need guys?" He asked.

"We need to end the first part of the story now, and we need to do it with someone dead." I explained.

We all thought very deeply without ANY distractions... except for eight hours of playing the 'X-Treme Gaming Polygonal Hexagon'... Many hours later, the robber stood up, "I've got it!"

"What's your ide..." before I could finish my question the robber ran out of the room, with a grin across his face.

A few minutes later, the voice of the writer periced through the sky, "Robber! DROP the BATTERING RAM!"

"Not this time buddy..." the robber said as he chuckled. He burst through the Writer's door...

"Robber! You don't know what your messing with!" I yelled as load as I could. But it was too late, there was a gunshot... and a thud.

"He's dead." Said a voice from the sky. Was it the Robber's? Or was it the Writer's?

Writer's block (Very Old), a humor fiction

I wrote this at like....1 am? It's not meant to be awesomely written, its just supposed to be weird and odd, so don't think flames will hurt my feelings. Just for clarification...*Italics, is the story.* (Parenthesis is the writer's out loud speech) and ---these are outside speakers---

Once upon a time there was-

(nononono- too lame....let me think, what is a good- oh yeah-)

Once, long, long time ago-

(I had readers- no! Too boring! Um...hmm..)

Long ago, in a galaxy far, far away...

(a girl got sued for copying Spielberg. Alright, just skip to the stupid story-)

Kiera wielded her weapon with-

---KNOCK KNOCK---

(Yeah?)

---MOM SAYS DID YOU FINISH YOUR HOMEWORK?---

(She asked.)

---WHAT?---

(she ASKED, not said!)

---WHAT?---

(If MOM said something, it would be a statement, but if she asked something, its a question!)

---WHAT?---

(YES, I FINISHED MY HOMEWORK!)

Kiera swung her weapon with-

(wait, what was I doing?)

Kiera used her STUPID weapon on her opponent. The masked man sneered and said-

(wait, if he's masked, how can we know he sneered?)

The masked man chuckled and said, "Kie-

(You know, now that I think about it, Kiera doesn't sound like a warrior name. It sounds like she's the girl who ran to Bambi after his mother died and said "Oh poor sweet deer, I shall take care of you forever more!" Ummm....)

Tatsu used her weapon on her opponent. The masked man sneered and said, "Tatsu, your day has come." Tatsu flung back her

(flung? Flew, flug, flang, flung? Huh- whatever)

long black hair, and laughed.

"You-

(you what?)

"You dork!"

(NO!)

"You nefarious felon!"

(No thank you, Officer Crupky)

"You pathetic man!"

(Good enough)

The masked villain glared at her-

(grr! That mask!)

---KNOCK KNOCK---

(GO away, I'm trying to write a story here!)

---MOM SAYS STOP POUNDING THE KEYS SO LOUD, SHE'S GOING CRAZY!---

(Well if she got me a laptop with the new keyboards that are silent, so I could plug it in my room-then she wouldn't hear me!)

The masked villain growled and -

---KNOCK KNOCK---

shouted-

---KNOCK KNOCK---

(WHAT?! YOU ARE CAUSING A LEAK IN THE POOL OF MY CREATIVE GENIUS!)

---MOM SAYS YOU HAVE TO TAKE PEPPER FOR A WALK---

[illegible]

The masked villain growled and shouted, "Leave me alone for crying out loud! Can't anyone get some peace around here? Pepper is HIS STUPID DOG!" Tatsu looked at him oddly.

(Huh? The mask again, but what?)

"Why did you say that?" The masssksked man saisaisaid "Iiii dont' knowwowowowow."

*Tatsu glaredlaredglared at himimimimimimandnaandandnand
saidssiadisaidshesaidhsaiehssishsishsesheshheee*

"Well what do you know," she hissed, looking up a few dozen lines. She shaded her eyes as she read the large print above her. "I don't think you said it at all. In fact..." She reached out and grabbed the writer.

"It was YOU!"

"But the mask..." added the writer, looking up at the type. "You don't know if he's glaring or not!" The masked man advanced with menace.

"Um...where are your clothes?" Tatsu and the masked man looked down.

"And even if we did," added the masked man. "What would we put them on?" The writer noticed she had never really given them bodies. She grinned sheepishly.

"Oops, heheh, now wait a minute!" She looked around and watched in horror as her words flew across the screen. Reaching up, she tried to catch one, but only succeeded in messing up the line of type, throwing almost everything else off balance for a moment.

"Just great," grumbled Tatsu, flung back her black hair. The writer coughed politely.

"Um..."

"What?" snapped Tatsu.

"I think uh...I think it's 'flinging'." They scowled. "But I could be wrong." she squeaked, trying to ignore the fact that you couldn't see the masked man's scowl behind the mask. He folded his arms and tapped one foot.

"You have me all riled up, missy. First, you change who I was fighting, then you-"

"No I didn't!" she interrupted, cutting off his sentence from forming in mid-air. "I just changed the name!"

"I almost liked Kiera too," sniffed Tatsu.

"You changed her from an honorable fighter, to this Lucy Lu wanna be!" The writer coughed.

"WHAT?" they demanded.

"Um, you need to add one of these things... '....'," she said, plucking one from the air, "After wanna, so it becomes wanna', and then , you need to capitalize 'they', because it's...." She faded away, as their gazes became more menacing, even though you couldn't see the masked man's face. Tatsu clenched her weapon, and the masked man cracked his knuckles.

"Get her." The writer screamed and ran from them, reaching higher to climb up on the flying text, grabbing hold onto a passing 'g'. As she righted herself, she saw Tatsu and the masked man running under her.

"I'll help you up!" said the masked man to Tatsu. The writer climbed up on the sentences, but slipped when her foot crashed into the hole of a 'u', and tri
p

ped, upsetting the line, and sending it crashing down upon Tatsu and the masked man. They groaned loudly, and finally Tatsu growled as she fought to her feet.

"That's it!" With one long smack, Tatsu managed to smack the writer right out again.

"Hey! OW, you wench, that HurT! WATCH IT!)"

Tatsu pulled out her weapon, and faced the masked man.

"Allright, where were we?"

(Huh? I'm back? YES! Oh thank you thank you!)

---KNOCK KNOCK---

(OH! Yes my dear, dear brother?)

---HUH? MOM SAYS STOP YELLING---

(Of course, my beloved sibling!)

---WHATEVER---

(Wow. Those two weren't so nice to me. In fact, they were downright rude!

Let's see if I can't teach them some manners!)

Tatsu suddenly became attacked by a seven-headed dragon, whose only words were, "Flung, flang, fleng, flinged, flanged!" which it yelled, over and over and over. The masked man finally got his mask ripped off, and it was a fish head. Then, his clothes morphed into a pink, sparkly ballet tutu that read "I'm the princess pat!", and they lived forever like that, the end.

(Yep, heh.....best story I ever wrote.)
