

ONLY IN COLLEGE

*could a boy and a Girl meet like this, fall in love,
and have to face THIS many obstacles!!!!*

a completely fictional story by

KYLE MARES

THE BEGINNING

"So, um, yeah, this is the story of the only girl I think I've ever really in my life, so if you don't mind it would be great if you could go a little easy on me here, okay?" I surveyed my fellow classmates and realized with a sinking kind of feeling in my stomach that I probably should have written about vampires and battleships after all.

My instructor, whose name I simply could not get a hang of no matter how many times I heard, made several coughing sounds for no reason whatsoever. "I should hope, Chance, that as this is a fiction class that this is a fiction story."

"Oh, it is, ma'am. This is totally fiction. You can tell because this is funny. Real life is more of a punch-to-the-guts, kick-in-the-balls kind of thing. Real life chews you up and spits you out no matter what you do, and makes sure that no matter what you do, you'll never be happy. So this clearly isn't real life." I grinned sheepishly at the rest of my class, and started passing copies of my fiction submission around. "Not that I'm bitter or anything."

THIS IS THE
STORY OF A
GIRL...



THE MIDDLE

"The art of using fourth grade crush tactics successfully in college requires a very, very delicate balance, my friends. So when we throw the water balloons," Miller said, grinning, "aim low. No faces."

Danny sighed, stood up from sitting on the bed and walked to the window to look out. Arms crossed, he turned back to us and said, "Why are we doing this again?"

Miller glanced at me. It was his turn, his rules, so it was my turn to be witty. "Why not? If you have something better to do, go do it. Go study or something, and we'll tell you what happens in the morning."

Miller had finished filling his second garbage bag with perfectly filled water balloons, and carefully set it with the other by the door. "Really, Danny. If you want to go, Chance and I can do this by ourselves. Go back to the dorm and sleep or something. Or stay here and keep Jesse company."

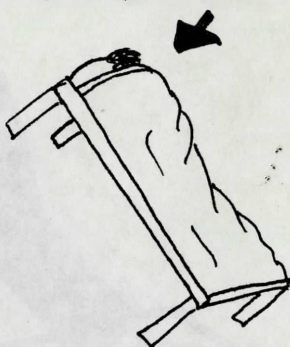
Jesse was Miller's roommate. Jesse liked to sleep, and did so for nearly every minute he was out of class. Jesse and Miller had been placed together because housing thought they had similar interests: Miller had written that he "liked to sleep with girls" but his handwriting was so illegible they could only read half of what he wrote.

It wasn't so bad. Jesse was an okay guy, as long as you didn't mind talking to him through a blanket. And if you tried to sit on his bed, he'd kick you to the floor to bleed while he readjusted his comforter. I had never seen him go to the bathroom, so I assumed he kept a jar or something under the covers with him.

"What are you doing now?" Jesse's voice sounded like a mumble, emanating from under his pillow. "Like I can't guess, I mean. What's her name this time?"

Danny and I both looked at Miller, who started grinning

JESSE!



widely. Miller and I had been best friends since met during our first week of freshmen classes two years ago. I was pretty sure I knew every woman he had already been with and wanted to meet, but even I wasn't sure whom this display of immaturity was supposed to impress.

"Come with us and find out." Miller said into the bedspread, then grinned a little wider as Jesse declined the invitation by switching sides under the blankets. Then, Miller looked at Danny and me and held up a campus map with the route we were going to take crudely drawn on it in blue marker. "We have to hit this sorority. That's where the Pink Monster is coming out of. Maybe the girls will think this is funny, maybe they won't."

"They won't." Danny sounded nervous. I was surprised he wasn't gnawing at his fingernails or something. He was easily only five minutes away from crying.

Miller didn't appear to notice. "Now, whether Alpha Moo Goo Gappa Whatever gets the joke or not, a certain little miss 'punk-n-stein' is going to think we're the coolest guys on campus."

"Which, of course, we already are." I had such a gift for understatement. Now I remembered: "punk-n-stein" was the "clever" nickname Miller had come up with over breakfast while he was describing the latest girl he had a thing for. I was the only one Miller had later told that the girl was actually this Cynthia in his poetry class. Her clothes were vaguely punk-looking to Miller's vaguely midwestern sensibilities, hence the nickname.

I had never met Cynthia. Neither had Miller, for that matter; he had apparently spent the last few weeks in class just staring sheepishly at her and never getting up the courage to talk to her. That's what he had told me in private. He told everyone else that the two of them had already made out in the men's room, but that it was a big secret and therefore should never be mentioned. Which meant everyone, including her, had to have already heard about this nonexistent relationship she was in.



"But water balloons?" Danny was practically throwing a tantrum right there in the room, reminding me we were up to something. "Why can't we just pretend to use them, or soap their windows, or something else? This is like assault!"

Miller dropped his arm around Danny's shoulders, and nodded conspiratorially. "That's what the face paint is for."

I shook my head and smirked. "It's not assault, it is childish, and we're all out of soap. Don't worry, they're just water balloons. Aim for their cars if you want. It's only water. No one is going to die."

Danny looked unconvinced. This was his first semester of college, and he wasn't entirely comfortable with all the freedom. But with Miller and me steering him towards an unknown and scary life of absolute stupidity and unaccountability, I tended to be forgiving of his reluctance towards anything new and potentially dangerous.

I checked my watch. We had about thirty minutes before the scheduled time for the "Do you want to be a cheerleader?" party out at the Delta sorority house, so we figured the Pink Monster would be on the move in fifteen minutes.

"It's time, man." I walked to the door and picked up one heavy bag of filled balloons, holding it out for Danny to take it or not. "If you don't want to do this, you won't. I don't care, Miller doesn't care. But you're either in or you're out. Right now."

Miller tightened his arm around Danny, patted his shoulder, then broke contact and walked to the door. He picked up the other bag and slung it over his shoulder.

Danny was looking down, but I could see a little smile cross his face. "I guess if no one gets hurt . . ." He grabbed the bag from me and grinned.

I grinned right back. "Only their pride, man. Let's go."

By the time we were strategically ensconced in the bushes at the edge of the park across the street from the sorority house, Miller and I were all business and completely prepared to wage a wet war on any girl who stepped out the front door. We both

knew this was childish, junior high stuff. We did not care. Painful high school memories of being rejected by cheerleaders will do that to you.

Danny had been shaking with fear since we left Miller's room, and now had night chills on top of that. "We so should not be doing this, guys."

"I'm going to throw you instead of these damn balloons if you keep that shit up." Miller turned back and threw a little twig he had picked up at Danny. "If you want to run away, run away. Otherwise, keep quiet and stay down."

I leaned in towards Danny, figuring he could use a little encouragement or something. "Don't worry," I whispered, "we've done much worse than this and everything has turned out just fine."

It was too dark out to see for sure if Danny got paler, but I'm pretty sure he did at that point. "You guys have done worse than this? What would have happened if you got caught?"

Miller chuckled, his eyes trained on the house. I just smiled to myself and whispered, "For some stuff, jail time was a definite possibility. And expulsion is always a constant presence in our lives. But hey, you'll get used to that, I think."

Danny made a mewling sound, either in pure fear or disbelief. Miller suddenly had gone tense as the front door opened and a group of girls started carefully coming out. "It's time," he hissed.

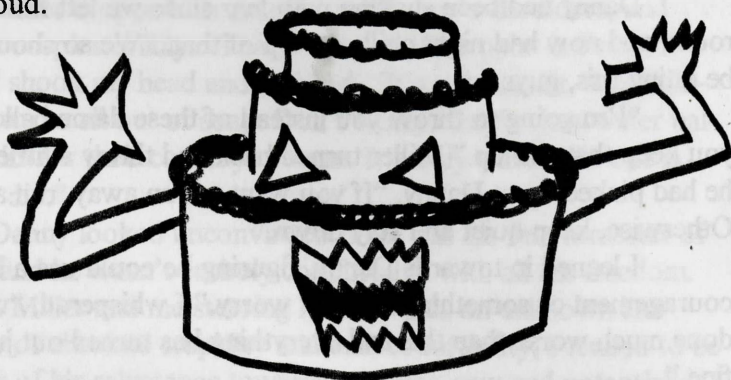
I didn't know any of the girls' names, but I recognized them from around campus. They were the standard sorority bunch that you saw at every party, maybe exchanged smiles with in hallways, but there was no need to know them beyond that. Even if you did get lucky, you were sleeping more with the perfect outfit and makeup than the girl inside. But they weren't really the targets.

Being held between a platinum blonde in a red dress and a tall brunette in a white one was the Pink Monster: a giant three-tier white cake with hot pink frosting that was the annual contribution of the Phi Kappa Si sorority. It was garish, it was apparently always delicious, and we figured it would take around twenty balloons to make it a pink stain on the driveway.

Maybe the next time we jokingly asked a cheerleader to save us a piece, she wouldn't roll her eyes quite so mockingly.

"Isn't that pretty?" whispered Miller.

"How long does it take to make a cake like that?" I wondered aloud.



"Wait, so we're doing all this because neither of you dated cheerleaders in high school and a cheerleader here said you couldn't have a piece of their cake?"

"Shut up, Danny!" Miller and I simultaneously hissed.

I reached into our bag and grabbed three water balloons. Miller already had one in each hand. I didn't even glance back at Danny; I figured he could join in if he wanted, assuming he hadn't sprinted off at this point.

"Alright . . . okay . . ." Miller's voice was a growing whisper, and just as I caught the glimpse of a grin form on his face, he exploded upwards and slung his balloons in high arcs at the girls and their cake as they approached their car. "Girl power my ass!" he screamed.

My balloons were on their way a few seconds later, and I had just thrown my third as I watched Miller's first explode all over one of the brunettes. It was childish, it was immature, and it was probably illegal. But seeing their faces when my first balloon hit the Pink Monster absolute dead center was so worth any ramifications, I was already planning next week's attack.

That cake must have been really moist, because my balloon did not pop. It just burrowed directly into the center tier, leaving a

huge pink wet hole on the side facing us. But the impact was enough of a surprise to shock the girls, and at the same time they screeched and jumped, throwing their hands up to protect their hairdos. As a result, the Pink Monster got tossed up in the air to land upside down right on the front lawn.

Miller and I each threw three more in the following seconds. He aimed for the girls; I aimed for the cake. I kept my eyes on the increasingly soaked girls and rapidly disintegrating Pink Monster, to my immense surprise a water balloon was flung hard and fast from right behind me. I glanced back, and caught Danny looking at me sheepishly. "You only live once, right?" I smiled and nodded. I was suddenly really glad he came.

Miller ducked back into the bushes, and we crouched down as well. He clapped his hands once as we listened to tortured screams and loud profanities echo in the night. "Well, it's probably about that time."

Danny was so new to this. He pointed down at the bags. "We have like a hundred balloons left. What time is it?"

Miller couldn't help but laugh lightly. "It's time to run." And so he did.

I rushed Danny to his feet. "What, we're leaving all those balloons? It took an hour to fill them all!"

We started sprinting after Miller through the bushes as I yelled out, "What, are you worried about fingerprints?" We ran between the trees as the mix of shrieks and profanity grew louder, as the wet and angry girls decided to check out just who had ended the 5-year reign of the Pink Monster. I decided tomorrow I'd leave an anonymous message suggesting next year they should just bake brownies.

This was had actually been a pretty tame exercise despite whatever Danny thought, but I still didn't want to get caught. I could only imagine what sort of secret payback those sorority girls had for evil male pigs.

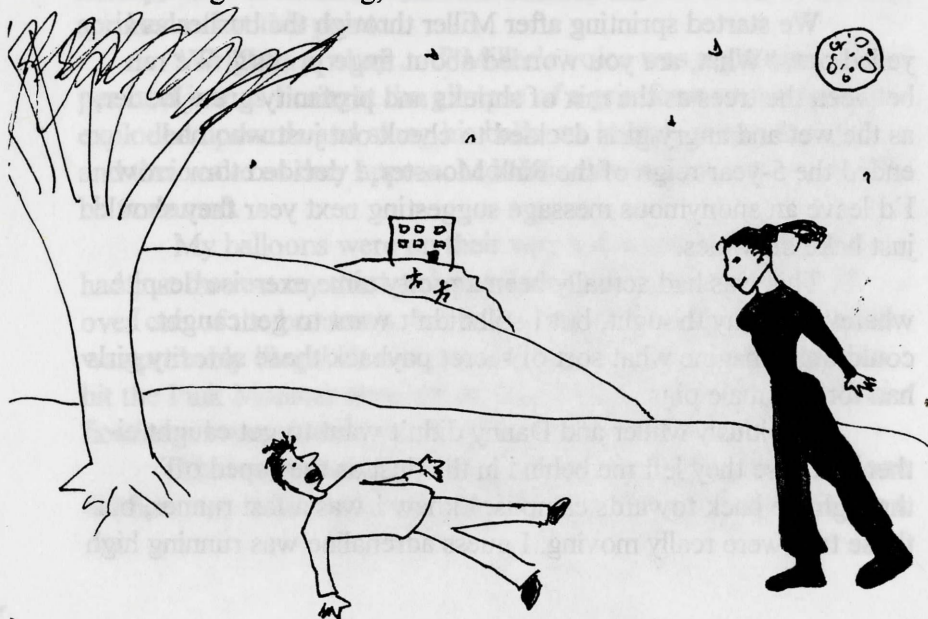
Obviously Miller and Danny didn't want to get caught either, because they left me behind in the dust as they sped off through the back towards campus. I knew I was a fast runner, but those two were really moving. I guess adrenaline was running high

for Miller, and Danny probably tapped all the fear he had had inside since 4 p.m. that afternoon.

Looking ahead, I saw Miller and Danny cross the street between the park and the campus, and disappear into the darkness of the unlit east parking lot. I was thinking about catching up when suddenly someone jumped out at me from behind a tree just at the edge of the park. They didn't even try to touch me, but I was so surprised I reacted anyway and ended up slipping on a patch of leaves and sliding to the ground to land hard on my back. I looked up from my crash site, and saw a girl I didn't know staring down at me.

"I know what you guys did," she said very softly, "and I just want you to know that." Dressed in all black and her jet-black hair tied back in a ponytail, everything blended into the shadows except her pale face. Then she ran off towards campus. I remained on the ground just to cover everything in my head.

"A mystery girl enters my life," I whispered to the night, "and leaves me flat on my back." Did she want to join in on our fun, or was this future blackmail stuff? Was she as hot as I thought she was, or had it been a trick of the moonlight? I had no idea, and as I helped myself to my feet I realized I didn't really care. As I started to jog back to Miller's dorm, I decided that as long as it made things interesting, I did not mind at all.



Stumbling slightly through the cafeteria as I made my way past islands of gross-looking buffet food, I kept my blurry eyes focused solely on the beverage island where the tomato juice beckoned. I wasn't much of a morning person, but I found tomato juice helped ease the pain of bright lights and of having to achieve consciousness slightly.

TM
LOO

Last night, when we all met up back in Miller's dorm room, we had decided to raid Jesse's emergency supply of Coronas and play endless games of **Goldeneye** until three in the morning. I had a bio test at noon today, but I figured helping James Bond save the world again was a little more important than the intricacies of cellular mitosis.

Of course, that meant I had gotten around two or three hours of sleep last night. Once I got back to my room, I noted that my own roommate Luke continued to be AWOL. I met him once the first week of this semester, and then never saw him again. All that was on his side of the room was a bed that had been untouched since August, and a poster of the band Garbage on the wall. I preferred the constant presence of Shirley Manson to Luke anyway, so I didn't mind having the room to myself. I hoped he wasn't dead, but I also wouldn't mind that scenario since I could probably keep the poster, then.

I had tossed and turned in bed trying to sleep, but I couldn't forget how cool my encounter with that mystery girl had been. I also couldn't forget how cool it was to waste all my/James Bond's enemies in the game when I got the Golden Gun. If only I could have the Golden Gun and mystery girl at the same time in real life. In my morning stupor, I nodded to myself: that would be really cool.

"Chance!" I recognized that was my name, but it took a couple of seconds to realize my name being said aloud meant someone was calling me over. I took a huge gulp of juice, then turned towards the general direction of the voice. The cafeteria was pretty empty for a Friday morning, but one of the blurs I saw

off in the distance looked like Miller, so I told my body to move in that direction and waited patiently for it to eventually comply.

When I got close enough for Miller's face to properly come into focus, I noticed he was smiling broadly. I knew that meant he was sitting with a girl.

Her back was to me, but even in my usual early morning reduced state of consciousness I could tell she had a smoking body, jet-black hair, and a rather unique fashion sense. As I reached the table and got a good look at her, I saw she was wearing a black male tuxedo jacket with a plastic purple flower in the lapel, a plain white tee-shirt and checkered plaid pants with red Converse shoes. As her clothes registered in my head, I decided I really wanted to get to know the girl who could pull that ensemble off and look great doing it.

Then her smiling face registered, and I realized I had already met her. Last night in the park. My mystery girl. My ass really hurt from having fallen hard on the ground, but I decided I'd keep that complaint to myself. I just took another sip of tomato juice and smiled right back at her.

Miller beamed up at me from his seat. "Chance, have you ever met Cynthia? Great girl from my poetry." He looked back at her. "Did I mention you write really cool poems? I liked the one about the magical birthday maggots eating your dead grandma's brains."

"That sounds like a winner," I remarked. There was all this tension in the air, mostly on my part because I wanted to have sex with Cynthia right then and there. My mind was rapidly awakening, because I knew I'd have to be extra witty and charming if I was going to get anything accomplished. As I took a seat next to Miller, across from Cynthia, my mind began racing to find a way to get Miller to leave the two of us alone so I could work my magic . . .

"Well, I gotta go, dude." Miller patted me on the back, and smiled back at Cynthia. "I guess I'll see you in class next time. Whenever that is."

"Mondays and Wednesdays, actually. I think you've missed about half of the classes so far." Cynthia smiled a little at

Miller as she spoke, but when she finished she looked at me and really smiled. At least I thought that was the case. As desperate as I was to shake this morning fog, some of my blood was draining from my head and relocating elsewhere in my body. I took another sip of juice, and nonchalantly adjusted my pants.

"Here, Miller, let me give you my email in case you need to catch up on what we're doing in poetry. That way, assuming you show up on Monday, it'll be like you never missed a thing." Cynthia turned to rummage through her little black mesh purse—thing for a pen and paper, and Miller leaned towards me.

"See that blond albino chick over by the cereal? Check out those hooters, dude." I didn't have to look, I had semi-noticed her when I walked in. If Miller was noticing other girls, that was a good sign that Cynthia had already been forgotten. I didn't want to step on his toes if he still felt he had dibs on her, but I was going to get to the bottom of this mystery girl no matter what. Everything about her, especially her thin black eyebrows, was incredible to me. I didn't believe in love at first sight. At least I didn't sixty seconds ago.

Cynthia scribbled out her email on an old receipt and handed it to Miller, who glanced at it and folded it in half, keeping the paper tucked behind his right index and middle fingers. If he did what I thought he was going to do, I was set.

"Great, thanks, Cynthia. I'll definitely get in touch about that class. Have a nice weekend if I don't see you again today. Chance, drop by later and I'll show you those books we were talking about." Miller got up and walked off towards the cereal. I kept my eyes trained right on him. He was about to pass a trashcan near the register.

"So, you and Miller are good friends?" Cynthia asked me, taking a sip of her green tea.

I just nodded. Miller was just now passing the trash . . . *and he threw Cynthia's receipt in the trash.* My heart did a little backflip as I watched him walk up to the pale blonde and accidentally bump into her to start up the conversation. I smiled, then turned my full attention to Cynthia. It was "go" time.

"Well, the way I just heard it from Miller, you three were a

bunch of gigantic assholes last night." Cynthia arched her eyebrows, taking another long and loud sip. "Business as usual, right?"

"Can you speak a little lower, please? Hung over here." I really wasn't, but this was the most intimidating girl I had ever met. Two minutes after we first started speaking, and she's already breaking out the sarcasm? Who does that? I smiled inwardly. That's right: I did.

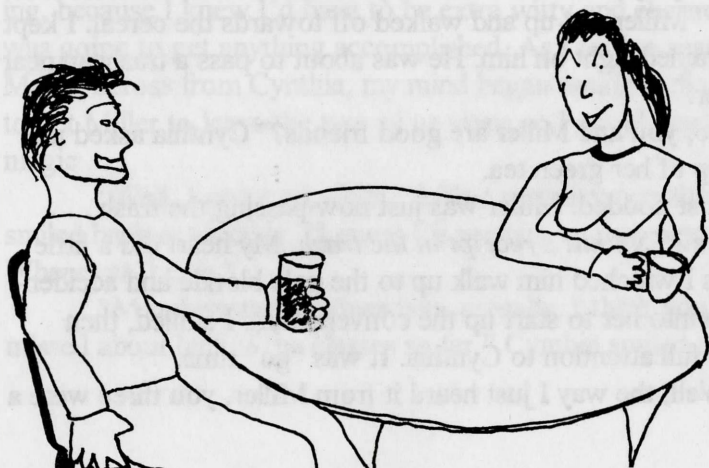
"Ah. Very responsible of you. Drinking on a school night. I thought you were better than that." Every word was delivered sarcastically, so I couldn't tell what was true or false. I could tell, with each passing moment, that I could fall in love with this girl. Verbal sparring makes up 50% of successful relationships, in my opinion. I guess I was just raised on romantic comedy films.

"I didn't know you thought of me at all. I'm surprised. Impressed. Excited."

"Dream on, buddy. I only have eyes for a certain group of boys, and last time I checked you weren't in Blur."

"Check again. That's me on the tambourine." The sound of her laughter was much better than any Blur song to my ears. I made a mental note to make a tambourine joke whenever I next saw her, just to preserve a special inside joke between the two of us.

"Wow, I should have guessed of all the possible instruments to play, you'd play the tambourine. You'll have to give me



a private concert sometime."

"Absolutely. I'm also pretty good with a harmonica."

"Really?"

"Oh, yeah. When I was a kid, I wanted to be in Huey Lewis and the News."

Cynthia sighed and shook her head, but she did it with a grin. "You children of the '80's. I seriously think something is wrong with you."

"I so agree. I blame the drinking water."

"Are you ever serious? About anything? I'm just curious, I don't really care. Alison told me you have no respect for anyone or anything, and the more I get to know you the more I can see it."

"That's interesting. The more you get to know me, and I should point out you've only known me for about five minutes, the less I get to know about you. Now does that seem fair?" Finally it was my turn to arch the eyebrows and grin mischievously. I had just scored one cool piece of information: Cynthia had talked with Alison about me. That indicated interest, I should think. I'd have to call Alison up and see how my name came up in their conversation.

She matched my grin by simply baring her teeth; swiftly opening them and snapping them shut again. "Didn't you hear me? I said I didn't care."

"See, you say that, yet you deliberately sat down here with me specifically, just to talk."

"Um, I've been here since breakfast. You just walked by and came over to talk with me and your friend, oh, now it's six minutes ago."

"I thought you'd appreciate hearing about all the fun last night. Before you read about it in the police blotter in the newspaper and got the wrong idea about us."

"I'm not sure there's a right idea."

"Really?" I leaned on the table and raised an eyebrow.

"You seem to know a lot more about me than I know about you. And do I have to bring up that you scared the living daylights out of me last night in the park? Not that I was there, mind you. That

never happened.”

“Absolutely.” Cynthia leaned towards me conspiratorially. “I heard those sorority girls are putting out a \$500 reward for information about whoever turned their precious party cake back into flour and water. I’m thinking of turning you guys in.”

“Oh, come on. I’ve got \$500 back in my room. I’ll give it to you for not turning us in.”

“What else do I have to do for it?”

I cocked my head. “Whatever you want to do. Every night is ladies’ night in my room.”

“I’ve heard that, too. Too bad it’s early morning right now.”

“Hey, it’s nighttime somewhere. Believe me, I got an A in astronomy.”

“Me, too.” Cynthia broke the banter by taking another large sip of tea. I countered with a sip of my juice. Our eyes never left each other for a second.

I shook my head slightly, and decided to just put it all on the line. Kind of. As fun as this was, I had never in my life had a conversation like this before, so I was kind of flying blind. But man, I would remember this for the rest of my life. I just hoped I wouldn’t remember her as the one that got away.

“Look, Cynthia, this is fun and all, I have to say. I saw you here with Miller and I only wanted to talk to you, I admit it. I can tell you’re just really cool, and I’m not, so I guess I was hoping to childishly impress you or something with my water balloon antics. It was stupid and immature, I’m sorry.” Was this working? I was going for charming self-deprecation, but the danger was in coming across as too pathetic. But if her twinkling eyes were any indication she seemed to be enjoying it, so I kept with it. “Sorry to waste your time. You probably realized last night in the park what a prick I am. I’ll be going.”

I got up out of my seat and was about to walk away from the table when Cynthia chuckled, looked down at the table and smiled, then glanced back up at me. “No need to leave yet. Us cool kids have to help you uncool kids along as best as we can, so I guess you could be my new charity case.”

"Wow. Does that count for community service credit?"

"It really should, shouldn't it?" She gulped down the rest of her tea, then handed me the empty cup. "While you're up, how about some more tea, though? Grab one for yourself, too. It's quite good." Her smile turned wicked. "That way you'll have an excuse to stay awhile."

I just nodded, bowed in mock servitude, then walked off to the beverage island. Trusting me with what she was going to drink, asking me to stick around and hang out with her . . . inside I was doing handstands. Even if it went nowhere, I was determined to just spend as much time in her presence as I could. She was that alluring to me. And I had so much respect for her that it didn't occur to me until much later that I didn't think of putting anything in her tea, not even for a quick laugh. If this was leading to anything, it was going to go along the most honest and respectful path possible.

Well, except for this magazine ploy I had just come up with. I realized I had the latest issue of some music magazine I had picked up for free at the record store the other day, and I was pretty sure there was a cover blurb somehow pertaining to Blur, which seemed to be her favorite band.

As I walked back to the table, holding both full and steaming cups very carefully, the only dishonest thought in my head revolved around getting her into my room. But just to see that magazine on my desk, not for any monkey business, so I still felt pretty clean and pure inside. Now if only I could figure out how to get her, a near-total stranger, to accompany me back to my dorm.

I sat down, passed her tea over to her, and took a tentative sip from my own cup. It was actually kind of good. And maybe it was the tea, but suddenly inspiration struck.

Cynthia noticed the new grin on my face. "What?"

"You seem like a girl who knows her music. Maybe you can settle a debate for me and a friend of mine."

"Okay. What is it?"

"Well, my friend Danny doesn't think the Sex Pistols are any good at all, and I think their one real album is the coolest thing ever. And I was born in 1979, the year Sid Vicious died, so I feel a

certain kinship with their music." I made a majestic motion with my right hand to indicate she was up at the plate. "So is Danny right that the Sex Pistols suck, or do you agree that they are one of the greats?"

"One of the greats, obviously. I wish I had their album, but I had to sell back a lot of my stuff to pay for my books. I'll get it back someday."

"Why wait? I've got the CD and a burner back in my room. I can run up there, make you a copy, and hustle it back here. Won't take more than ten minutes."

Cynthia narrowed her eyes, but kept on smiling jovially. "Now, why would you do something like that for little old me?"

"Oh, consider it extortion. I'm afraid you'll turn me in to those cheerleaders."

"Ah, self-preservation. That I can understand and empathize with. Okay. Let's do it."

"Let's?" Do you want to come along?"

Cynthia poured her remaining tea down her throat and quickly stood up. "Sure. This is too much fun. Alison told me you were a cool guy, and there is kind of a shortage around here. I'm trying to figure out if she's right or not."

God bless you, Alison. "So am I being audited here? Or do you just want a urine sample? I'm not sure I like this observation stuff."

"Tough. You want some company or not?"

I nodded. "Alrighty, let's go!" This was too much, too weird, too cool. Even if this Cynthia turned out to be some serial killer who just wanted us to be secluded so she could dismember me, this was still shaping up to be the start of a wonderful day. Any girl like Cynthia who could hold up a conversation like we had just had and be appreciative of the satisfaction of water balloon hijinks was a keeper. Now I just had to see if she felt the same way about me.

"Hey, that's a great magazine!" Upon stepping into my dorm room for the very first time, Cynthia jumped over to my

desk and snatched up the magazine I had wanted her to see. The publication was apparently so outlandish it didn't even have a name, or at least not one I could ever find anywhere on the crudely-illustrated front cover. But if she liked it, I liked it, too.

I smirked a little. "Oh, yeah, I try to pick that up whenever I can. It's so refreshing to get a new point-of-view once in a while." I busied myself looking through my CD towers, mock-searching for my Sex Pistols CD. I knew exactly where it was (currently in my stereo; it really was one of my favorites) but I wanted Cynthia to stick around as long as possible.

"Hey, you didn't lie and tell me you had that CD just to get me up here where there was a bed, did you?"

I didn't even look up, I just smiled at my stacks of discs. "Of course not. Why would I? I've heard bathroom stalls suit you just fine, and I only mess up my sheets for those really special girls."

"Nice. You heard that story, too? Miller is such a great guy, isn't he?"

"Oh, I think he just got you mixed up with another girl when he was telling that story. He's got a little problem with the drink, you know."

"Wonderful. Not that I care too much. Who needs a good reputation anyway?" Behind me, I heard the magazine get dropped back on my desk, then I heard the whine of springs as she got onto my bed. "Hey, this is nice. Soft mattress. How do you sleep?"

I stood up and turned to face her, crossing my arms and legs and leaning against my bookcase. She was sitting fully on my bed, leaning against the wall and dangling her feet off the edge. "I've been told by girls I toss and turn, but they only tell me that after we break up, so it might just be malicious lies. At least I don't snore."

"Good. I hate guys who



snore."

"Yeah, me too." Our eyes met, and I hope I had half the sparkle in mine that hers did. Wow. "Hey, I should have remembered, I've got the Sex Pistols in my stereo right now. You want me to burn you a copy, or do you want to listen to it first?"

"Oh, I've heard it before. Who hasn't? But, yeah, play tracks two and three real quick. Those are my favorites." I quickly complied. "Bodies" was 3:02, "No Feelings" was 2:49. Close to six minutes of her guaranteed presence. Where had this girl been all my life?

"Like I said, I'm pretty impressed. Anyone who likes the Sex Pistols is okay in my book." Cynthia nodded to me, then patted her hand on the bed right next to her. "Sit down and stay awhile."

"Hey, thanks. It is my room and my bed after all. Don't mind if I do." I sat down on the bed, keeping about a foot between our legs. Too close would have been too obvious, too far apart would have brought out a San Francisco joke. If anything physical was going to happen, it would require a lot of attention to detail and careful planning.

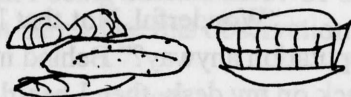
And while I thinking about the best way to try to touch her, Cynthia let loose a big sigh and then attacked me, pressing her soft glossy lips to my mouth and frantically licking my teeth with her tongue. It was the

best, wettest and most unexpected kiss I had ever got. I quickly hugged her closer, pushed my own tongue against hers, and collapsed backwards, pulling her gently on top of my body.

She leaned up, smiled down at me, then spit out her gum onto my window. I didn't mind at all. "If anyone ever asks," she whispered, "just tell them I raped you. I have an image to protect."

I reached up my right hand to cup the back of her head, and slowly pulled her to me again. Before our mouths met, I whispered, "Don't worry, I don't plan to press charges."

* S M O O C H ! *



I couldn't figure out just what part of Cynthia I liked the best. I had it narrowed down to her sense of humor, her unique perspective on life, or her perfect breasts. Though I'm sure her impressively symmetrical facial features and willingness to have sex with me after knowing me for about ten minutes played a big part as well. At least when we were done and laying in my bed, she had accepted my invitation to go on a date. I would have hated to realize I was just a momentary plaything for her. Well, not really.

Manny, the strange foreign-looking guy currently drawing Cynthia's caricature, obviously agreed with me. He had a big goofy smile on his face while he expertly captured Cynthia's face on paper with his black pen. I had to smile myself, because while the sample drawings taped to his easel were just people's heads and necks, Cynthia's caricature included those two beautiful breasts of hers. Maybe Manny couldn't speak English too well, but at least he had great eyesight.

"How's it looking?" Cynthia asked me, because from her stool she couldn't see the picture. I could tell she was itching to jump up and take a look for herself, but surprisingly she was restraining herself. Probably because since we had been walking around downtown we had seen two other artists who would have shown her the picture as it was being drawn, but as Cynthia had explained she just had to pick the most bizarre artist of the bunch.

She had certainly succeeded at that. We had both determined Manny had to be the most bizarre artist on Main Street based solely on his wearing a pink tutu around his buttoned-up brown trenchcoat. Our suspicions had been confirmed when, in his broken English, Manny had warned Cynthia she couldn't look at the sketch until she was at least 50 yards away



from him. In a quiet whisper, I had suggested that maybe Manny wasn't actually a caricaturist, maybe he was just an escaped mental patient. Manny had heard that, somehow, and thought it was so funny he told us he would knock \$5 off the bill. We had agreed immediately.



"It looks great," I assured her. I wasn't lying. Of course it was a little cartoony, but everything beautiful about her was there on the paper. The dark, shiny hair hanging down to her shoulders. The small yet intelligent dark, almost black eyes. The thin lips that could go from barely visible to curled in a grin in a snap. The oval face, a little too pale but lovely nonetheless, with hints of cheekbones and thin, arched eyebrows. I was surprised it looked so real. But of course, I was pretty much in love with her, so I had thought her picture was beautiful even when the page was still blank.

"Are you just saying that," Cynthia slowly asked, "or are you afraid of hurting crazy guy's feelings?"

"Uh, both, I think. Good choice of crazed artists, by the way. What was wrong with the nice guy with the mustache across the street?"

"I hate mustaches. Besides, Manny seems like a nice guy, and I bet he needs the money. Don't you, Manny?"

Manny smiled, pursed his lips a few times as he searched for the correct words, then took his pen off the paper to point it at Cynthia. "Move more, and I kill you. Thank you."

I nodded at Cynthia. "He means it, you know. He's totally insane. You have good taste in artists."

"Apparently I have bad taste in men. Thanks for defending me."

"What were you expecting? That pen looks sharp!" Manny shot me a dirty look, either because I was insulting his pen, or because I was moving as well and that was affecting his mojo or something. I crossed my arms and stood perfectly still. "Please continue, Manny."

Nodding his satisfaction, Manny turned back to contemplate the paper. After a minute of nothing, he added a small dot at the bottom of the page that was must have been his signature. Then he threw up his hands in a grand flourish of finality. "Tadada!" he shouted. If he noticed he had flung his pen up onto the roof of the store behind him, he didn't show it.

Manny tore the caricature off the pad propped on the easel, carefully placed it in a manila envelope from a box under his chair, and handed the envelope to me. "No let her tear the open until both you walk the way to the stream. She do, I kill."

I nodded slowly. I took the envelope and smiled, gesturing to Cynthia to get up and get going before Manny went crazy and starting drawing with our blood. "Thank you, Manny. You're a good guy. We'll come back someday." We backed away slowly, and as he counted our payment of dollars he mumbled something about eating return customers.

"All here. All beer! You come and eat again!" Manny held the money above his head and waved it maniacally. Cynthia, now at my side, grabbed my arm and squeezed. I took it as a signal, and together we turned and ran away down the quiet street of used bookstores and the occasional insane sidewalk Picasso. I tucked the envelope under my arm, and I swear as we ran off I heard Manny call after us one last time.

"Come back and eat again! And you tell friends! Manny draw the best in all the world!"

Cynthia turned out to have more patience than I ever would have imagined. She refused to look at the sketch until we had driven back to the college and were safely barricaded in her dorm room. Any picture of her, drawn or otherwise, was for certain eyes as far as Cynthia could help it, and I didn't want to start talking about how I felt to be in that exclusive club because I didn't want to cry in front of her this early in the relationship.

"This had better be good. Five bucks for a drawing? Sometimes street people bother me." She continued to fiddle with the envelope, occasionally glancing up at me to see if my eyes be-

trayed how good or bad the drawing was.

My eyes are so brown they're almost black, so I just stared right back at her. "It's really, really good. For a crazy street guy you picked to draw your picture on a date downtown, you made the right choice."

"Did I? For all we know, you were right and that guy was an escaped mental patient."

"Most art people seem that way. Consider the art majors around here."

"And I let him draw me! Why! Why?"

"Because I told you at dinner I wanted visual proof that I know you, and you said you don't show up on film."

"I was just joking."

"I figured." I wanted to test the limits at this point; I had to know where I stood. So I reached out a hand and touched her arm. The lightest of touches, all about comfort.

She glanced up at me, surprised. But then she smiled, and pressed her arm harder against my fingers. "You're right," she said.

"I didn't say anything."

"You didn't have to." Her eyes locked with mine, she gave the envelope one last spin on her palm and then quickly opened the flap. Removing the paper, she held it up so I could see the drawing first, then turned it around to finally see it.

I was watching her face to see how she'd react. A whole range of emotions ran through her features, though her lips curled into an amused smile a couple times. She finally settled into a faint smile, though her eyes never stopped sparkling. "I think they gave us the wrong one. This isn't me."

I huffed in mock shock. "Excuse me? That's such a good representation of you, it's not even funny. That's totally you."

"I just don't see it."

"Cynthia, he got your hair down. Your cute little pointy nose. The way your eyes look like salty almonds, and the way your smile is just a little crooked, like the edges of Gothic letters. For five bucks, we got a masterpiece."

"I didn't pay."

"Exactly. That means that picture isn't yours. It's mine." I reached out and carefully took it out of her hand, giving it one last long look before I placed it back in the envelope. "It'll just be in my room. Don't worry, you can still visit."

She shook her head. "Why would you want a picture of me anyway? That's a little weird. This is still just our first date."

"It's a caricature, silly." I rolled my eyes with theatrical excess, and that got a little giggle out of her. "I collect those. And I need something to masturbate to when you kick me out of your room tonight."

"Who said that's going to happen?"

"You never let anyone stay late. You asked Alison about me, so I asked around about you."

"What did you find out?"

I shrugged. "Nothing, really. You transferred here this year, you're a junior like me, and you write strange poems that people either think are totally gross or completely brilliant. This girl Carrie over at North Hall gave me one of your poems from class. If I read it correctly, and poems and me don't always get along, it said you kick people out of your room right before midnight so you can do some pagan practice or something."

Cynthia nodded her head, impressed. "Wow. You really did your homework."

"Well, you made quite an impression on me. And you helped me break in my new sheets. So if you're going to kick me out, I understand."

She shook her head. "That was then. Don't sweat it, so far you're sticking around till at least four in the morning. That's my new usual time for kicking people out."

I struggled to just smirk, rather than flat out grin. "Cool. Thanks for keeping me informed on that one."

"No problem." She was staring at me expectantly, and I felt like kissing her anyway, so I carefully laid the envelope down on the desk next to her bed, then leaned my mouth towards hers.

Cynthia leaned back, preserving the distance between us. "Uh, what's this about?"

My eyes, which were narrowed to slits, opened up slightly

make the best walls. Thanks!"

I'm sure the early hour played a part in my evaluation, but I thought it was a great note. I put it back in my pocket, spent a few groggy minutes staring at the dark gray carpet for no reason whatsoever, then finally removed the Post-it note from my forehead and flipped it over to read.

"To whomever it may concern: Please help this man to his room in North Hall, and be sure to tuck him into bed. He'll call you 'mommy,' so call him 'red licorice baby.' Thanks! Sincerely, God."

Cynthia had a way with notes. Which she had mentioned at dinner. So far, everything she had told me about who she was and what she wanted to do with her life was right on the money. It was pretty intimidating.

But then I looked at my watch. And I had to smile, because even if she claimed to plan her life weeks and months in advance, my presence had at least thrown today's schedule off a little. She had pushed me out the door about five minutes ago, and my watch said it was 5:37 a.m. Four in the morning? Not this time.

It was a small victory, but it made me really happy. I couldn't tell you why then, and I can't tell you why now. It just felt good inside. Which came in handy, because I was still smiling about it a minute later, when I had just tumbled down the stairs and lay in a slightly bruised heap in the lobby of Cynthia's dorm.

"Oh, that's right," I groaned to no one in particular. "Cynthia lives on the second floor."

"This is not how friendships work!" As Danny yells and screams filled the study lounge and he generally did an eerily accurate impression of a 20-year-old baby, I have to admit I began to agree with him. This can't be how friendships work, because I can't be friends with such a reject like this.

"Look, Danny, I told we were friends. We've never shunned you or anything. Why are you like this?"

"I just don't feel like I'm part of the group most of the

time. Even when we're all hanging out, it's like Cynthia only pays attention to you! Miller talks to me only when he wants to make fun of me. I'm so sick of it!"

I did like Danny, I honestly did. But I was starting to get pissed off at this point. "Then why do you stick around? I mean, if you think things are so bad why do you keep crawling back to us? Why not find real friends if you don't think we're really friends?"

And Danny's face got that hurt look I've seen many times before, because I've had this sort of conversation many times before and I've never gotten any better at avoiding it. A kind of pained and stunned look, as all the paranoia he's been carrying around for weeks gets suddenly validated and that little voice in his head starts telling him that he really was right about those so-called friends all along. Not that that particularly feels good.

"Because I don't like most people, but I like you guys. I like you guys more than anyone else at this school." Now he was getting a little misty around the eyes, and hell, so was I at this point. "I just seriously don't want to lose you guys. You're the best friends I have."

I shifted on the lounge couch, which had gotten a million times itchier in the last minute. "Danny, I'm not saying this is the case here, but friends stop being friends all the time. It's a big deal, but it really isn't. If you were to leave our little group, you'd find new friends, I promise you that. Friends you wouldn't have to worry about whether or not they truly like you or not."

While I spoke, I wondered when Danny had gotten so crazed about everything. I had been dating Cynthia for the last three weeks, so I knew I hadn't been hanging out with him as much as I had at the start of the semester. But didn't he have other friends, or at least other things to do? Maybe he didn't. I had no idea. Maybe I had been neglecting him. I decided right now was the time to make it up to him.

"You know what, Danny? You're absolutely right. We haven't done anything cool together since that night in the park. I'm sorry about that. I've been really busy with classes and Cynthia, but I'm free now. What do you want to do?"

"Really? You're free now?" Danny looked like a kid on

Christmas morning. I made a mental note to try to find him a girlfriend, or at least a blow-up doll. Was I this insecure when I was a freshman? God, I hoped not.

"Chance, would you mind reading this thing I wrote? I kind of wrote it in chunks, so I'm afraid it reads really choppy and stuff. It's due tomorrow, so I just wanted someone's opinion on it before I try revising. And you're the best writer I know."

"I'll agree with that." Cynthia appeared out of nowhere, and sat down on the couch next to me. She gave me a quick little look that after three weeks of getting to know her I could easily understand: *I heard a lot of what Danny said, and I know you like him so I'll help you smooth things over.* By now, I really did love her. I'd have to tell her that, someday. "Can I read your story, too, Danny?"

"Of course, Cynthia! I only have the one copy so you guys will have to share, but I'd like to know what both of you think." He handed us his story, and Cynthia snuggled up to me and put her head on my shoulder so we could both read at the same time. "Be totally honest," Danny exclaimed.

"Danny, when am I not that," I asked in mock sarcasm, "that's a hideous sweater, by the way, buddy." And while Danny looked down then frantically looked around the lounge to see if there were any girls around who might also think that his sweater was the worst possibly handmade gift his grandma could have given him, we began to read.

Danny's Story

"Why not go to the casino? We're in Las Vegas! We should gamble!"

Wendy rolled her eyes at Elaine, and tried to speak calmly and slowly so there was a chance she would understand. "Elaine, we are both 18-years-old. We can't gamble. It's illegal. That means 'wrong,' okay?"

But Elaine was so hyper, nothing would have gotten through **into her stubborn mind. She was wild and has the ability to do whatever she wants or least thinks she can.**

Wendy on the other hand was an introvert. Having Elaine as

her best friend was totally out of the norm. But it did not matter. She gave up on convincing her friend gambling was wrong. Instead, they trailed from town to town drinking and spending.

She went quickly from dice, to wheels to blackjack tables. Becoming as obsessed as her friends were about the games.

Their laughter was said to be heard from miles away, as Wendy and her friends discovered how nuts life was. Even though a lot of them lost, they also had a couple winners. And it was those winners that funded the fun, the kept them going all night long. Those were the good old days until tragedy hit Wendy's world.

It all began on a typical night, just like all the other long nights of big spending and risks. But this night proved to be the riskiest of all.

Wendy had heard about a big time oil investor visiting the Mirage Casino hoping to bring some excitement into his luxury-soaked life. She had also heard that this investor wasn't too bright and has bad hair plugs. With Wendy's groundbreaking knowledge about the science of hairplugs, maybe they could sweet talk this guy into funding their entire college education. "It was worth a shot," Wendy had said, and I could not disagree.

So imagine our surprise when we sat down at his table at the dinner buffet, hoping to start a conversation, only to find him dead. We just got up and ran. I stopped to grab a donut from the dessert tray.

A casino employee tried to stop us for some reason, but we kept on going. **The employee ran after us.**

"Oh my God!" Wendy said as she cried. "I freakn told you, Elaine! I hot damn freakn told you!"

Elaine was just laughing as we bolted our asses out of Luxor Casino. I couldn't believe she was laughing in the midst of what had all happened.

"Wow that was an amazing night!" Elaine exclaimed. "We gotta do it again sometime. Hm, get some new girls that we can torture and ridicule."

I looked at her, and I knew I loved her. "Let's just ridicule one an-

other for a while," I whispered. My eyes fell closed and we began to kiss.

I felt her body begin to ease and I knew that we were meant to be. From that day on we laughed at everybody else together, disturbing everyone's mind as a team.

"That was interesting, Danny." I shook my head in disbelief, not really sure what I had just read. "Uh, yeah. You really manage to convey the sense that you have multiple personality disorder and you're like five different personalities writing a story together."

Danny narrowed his eyes. I guessed that comment hadn't gone over too well. I nudged Cynthia with my elbow. I couldn't look at her, in case we should both start laughing. "What do you think, babe?" I asked.

Cynthia wrapped her arms around me, drumming her fingers on my shoulders. Then she looked at Danny and smiled. "This story has this great positive/negative duality that is really enhanced by the fractured stress of the narrative. I think it's great! I kind of want to see it with illustrations, if you could."

That worked, because Danny broke out into a wide grin, took back his paper, and held it to his chest. "You really liked it? Both of you?"

We answered in unison. "Absolutely. It's the coolest!"

"Jinx!" I whispered to Cynthia, "you owe me soda."

"Deal," she whispered back.

"I have one more question, Chance. Where the heck is Miller these days?"

I blinked a couple times. As his best friend, I knew Miller had momentarily found religion, or maybe had just starting feeling incredible pain radiating from his liver every morning in September. He had decided he drank too much alcohol, and went home to Portland to spend a month with his parents and live a clean, sober life. Naturally, he had told most people he was going away to train to become a Navy Seal.

"He'll be back, dude. He's on a secret mission in a galaxy far, far away. But he'll be back for finals."

"Really?"

I shrugged. "Sure. But he wouldn't want you to worry about him. He told me so. We all want you to go to the computer lab right now and continue developing that negative duality that Cyn likes so much." I nodded as he started grinning. "Seriously. Go now, kid. Go, go, go."

Danny jumped up like a kid on a sugar rush. "Cool, cool! Thanks, you guys. See you at dinner?" He ran off towards the lab without waiting for our reply.

"Babe," Cynthia said once we were sure Danny was long out of earshot, "promise me you'll actually help poor Danny with his writing so he doesn't get kicked out of school someday, okay?"

I patted her hands with my own. "Don't worry. I don't think his major even requires a lot of writing."

"What's his major again?"

"Creative writing."

Cynthia playfully head-butted me. "Cute."

"I know you are, but what am I?"

"You're about to go make out with me in the women's bathroom."

"I know you are, but," I paused, as though I had just processed her thought. I jumped up, and lifted her into my arms as she laughed. "Only for an hour, though. I've got a bio test to study for."

"If it's on anatomy, I think I can help you out a little bit."

"You minx." I gave her a quick kiss, then started towards the ladies' room. "I've always preferred hands-on learning anyway."



"Can I tell you a secret?" Cynthia spoke for the first time since we left the ultimately lame Friday frat party, and it was so cold I could see her breath out of the corner of my eye. We had been sitting on the cleanest bench we could find in McArthur Park, and with my arm around her she snuggled a little closer to me.

"Can I tell you a secret?" she repeated.

I turned my head to press my forehead against hers, our eyes an inch apart. "I'd love to hear a secret. But it better not be something stupid about another boyfriend you have on the side."

"I don't have another boyfriend at the moment."

"Me either."

"Glad to hear it." Both of her hands were stuffed in her jacket pockets for warmth, but while I watched her right hand emerged clutching an unwrapped purple sucker. She slowly unwrapped it with her long delicate fingers, and sighed. "It's more of a personal secret, about who I really am deep down inside."

"I'm all ears. Seriously." Try as I might, I couldn't keep a smile off my face.

"Chance, this is no laughing matter! I feel the need to tell this to somebody, okay? I guess even after the last month I still just feel so lonely sometimes."

"Is that the secret?"

Her forehead wrinkled in confusion and her impressively thin eyebrows arched beautifully as a result. "Is what the secret?"

"That sometimes you're lonely."

"Oh! No. I don't think so, at least. It might surprise some people, I guess."

"Why is that?"

She cocked her head back to stare up at the stars.

"Because I don't need anyone. I say I don't. I used to think I didn't. But sometimes I do."

"Everyone does sometimes."

"I kind of wish I didn't. But I do. I think my secret is I just want to know someone gives a shit."

"About you?"

"About me. Absolutely."

It was my turn to share a secret. I glanced away for a quick second, so my joyful grin was swallowed up by the night. Then I leaned back in the bench as well, turning my head so I could whisper right into her ear. "I give a shit."

"About me?"

"About you."

Cynthia turned her head so we were eye-to-eye again, and lowered her voice to a whisper to match me. "I was hoping you'd say that."

"I would think it would be kind of obvious by now."

"I wasn't sure. Maybe you liked the myth of me. The weird poet girl who doesn't talk to most people outside of class, and when she does she makes mooing sounds like a cow. Maybe that's all you like now. Maybe that's all you'll ever like."

I grinned as wide as I could, hopefully getting some moonlight to make my teeth shiny and scary for her. "Maybe I just like the mooing sounds? I like it when I make you make mooing sounds."

Even she had to chuckle at that. "No, no," she softly chided me, "the one girl I actually like and respect here, Alison, writes some of the most creative and thoughtful poetry I've ever read outside of books. And when she told me you were a real quality person and a great writer, I had to meet you. So I did. And inside I'm afraid that you were just so thrilled to have, like, your own stalker, you've just been going along with everything and this whole relationship we're building is not real or something."

She paused, so I kissed her cheek and asked, "is that really how you feel? I have to tell you that's not the case at all. I liked you from the moment I met you. Maybe I don't know everything about you. But I'd like to find out. It's worth the effort."

"If I give you the chance to find out."

"Why wouldn't you? I'm the coolest guy you've met here."

"Oh, really? And you're so modest, too."

I laughed. "For sure. Point out a student with a better knowledge of literature than me, and I'll point out all the books I

loaned them to get them there."

"You're a humanitarian, that's nice."

"Well, I try. But what are you? Besides lonely."

Cynthia sighed, and I wondered if I had gone too far or something. I figured she was so used to guys either thinking she was just an off-beat chick to be intimidated by or an easy mark to borrow a cigarette from even though she didn't smoke, my being a little bit belligerent would score major points. But there is a risk in everything.

"I don't know what I am," she finally replied, "that's why I came to college. Maybe I'll find myself."

A million jokes and puns flashed into my mind, mostly revolving around lost-and-found offices and pictures on milk cartons. But I stayed empathic and somewhat serious instead. "How is the search going?"

"It's going. Better on some days than others."

"Sure."

"I don't know. Sometimes I feel invisible, sometimes I feel like a museum display. I don't know which one I prefer."

"Judging from your fashion sense, I'd say you prefer getting attention."

"Are you dogging on my fashion taste?"

"Not at all. I've told you I'm constantly quite impressed, actually. You were the most unique-looking girl at the party tonight."

"That's the look I always go for."

"I'd say it suits you." I cleared my throat, confident enough at this point of the relationship that I could help her. "I think everything would be a whole lot better if I kissed you right now."

At that, I got to see more forehead wrinkles. "You think so?"

"Sure." I could sense we were at a turning point. How I handed the next few minutes would be critical to our future together. I had to make her see how much I cared for her, and I had to make her see she really did care for me as well. She was the best girlfriend I had ever had, and we were still finding new things

out about each other everyday. If I lost her at this point, I'd be suicidal, dropping out of school and apprenticing with Manny by early next week.

I decided just to tell her that. "Have I told you you're the best girlfriend I've ever had? Every little thing you do is magic."

"Okay, Sting."

"Hey, he knows what he's talking about. And so do I. It's pretty natural to feel lonely no matter how many friends and loved ones you have. It's just a part of the human condition."

She poked me lightly in the ribs. "Did you pull that from your psych class lecture this morning?"

"Maybe. Doesn't matter. You want to know a secret of mine? Sometimes I feel lonely, too."

Neither spoke for a while. I could tell Cynthia was trying to decide if I was being truthful or just saying whatever I felt I had to. But I was being truthful, and she determined as much. "So what do you do when you feel that way?" she whispered.

I put my head down so my mouth was right next to her ear. "I find out where you are, and I come find you. And then I remember how great I've had it since that night I first met you here in this park."

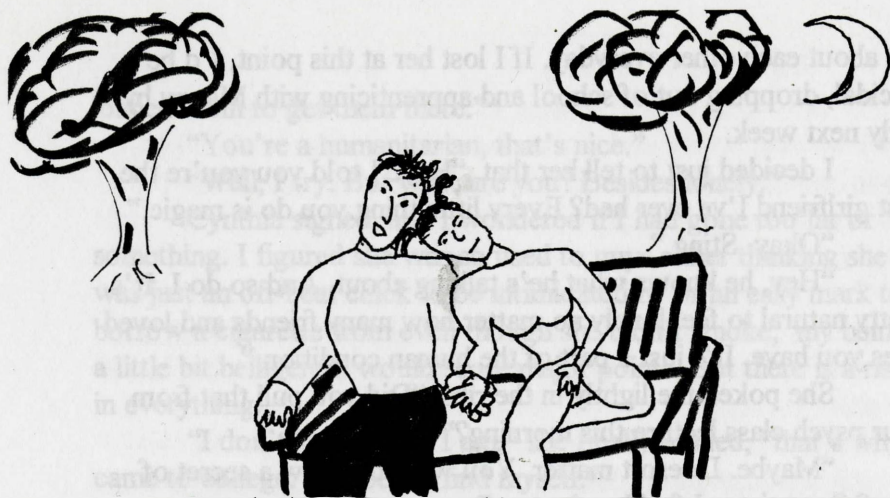
"It has been great, hasn't it? Though sometimes I do have one little regret about everything."

I felt a slight tremor of panic. "Hey, it's small but fierce. That's just genetics, babe."

She playfully slapped my stomach. "Not that. I could have used that \$500. I should have thrown you and Miller to the sorority she-wolves."

"Wow. You really are bitter about that, aren't you? How about I just give you the \$500. I was serious about having it in my room. It's in the envelope taped under my bed frame, just for emergencies."

Cynthia snuggled a little closer to me, and I felt a warm glow within me. The stars were sparkling in the sky, there wasn't anyone else in sight, and this was a romantic movie moment if there ever was one. I decided I was going to tell Cynthia that I really did love her. Why not? Maybe she was the One.



But she beat me to speaking. "I'm leaving school," she blurted out.

I knew immediately just from her voice she wasn't joking. "When? Why? Is everything okay?"

She stayed motionless, pressed firmly against me. I tilted my head back to look up at the stars, wondering how many it would take to wish on to get Cynthia to stay. Somehow I had known something like this was coming. It my inner pessimism.

"You know that I love poetry. It's what I do, it's what I write, it's what I live for. But so far, I haven't met anyone else who cares as much as I do. And these teachers wouldn't know good poetry if Shakespeare came back to life and carved a couple sonnets on their backs."

I closed my eyes. She had complained about her classes before, but I figured she was the persevering type.

"I just can't take it anymore, Chance. This isn't what I thought it would be."

"Is that how you feel about everything?"

She finally broke our embrace to sit up and look me right in the eyes. "Absolutely not. You're everything I hoped you would be. You're the reason I stayed here as long as I did."

"You've felt this way about your classes for that long."

Cynthia nodded, and looked off into the darkness surrounding us. "I'd go to class each day hoping that maybe something would change, in me or in them, and that everything would be right. But that never happened. I want to learn stuff with peo-

ple who want to be there to learn and love what they're doing. I want to be taught by people who love what they do."

I started to speak, but stopped. What I had wanted to say was coming from a selfish place inside me, a part of me that would say anything to make her stay and keep me whole. I looked up at the sky again, and I felt her hand brush down the side of my face. She had to know what I was thinking, and she forgave me. I owed it to her to say what I truly believed was best for her, not what was best for me. No matter what the cost.

"Cynthia, if that's how you feel, then you need to go." I paused, my words hanging in the air like they were suspended by the vapor wisps of my exhaled breath. "I want you to stay. But I want you to be totally happy. And if you're not happy being a student here, then I can't ask you to keep being a student here just so I'll have you around. I want you to be happy. If that means you have to leave, then that is what I want."

"Really?"

"Really." I took her hand in mine and squeezed. "Just promise you'll call, or at least email. I'm not asking for a visit or anything." I knew she lived 200 miles away, and I wanted her to be as free of pressure right now as she could be. "Just keep in touch. I want to at least be friends."

She took my head in her hands, and held my cheeks to fix her eyes exactly with mine. "We'll be more than just friends, Chance. What we have right now isn't going to go away. I promise you that. I just need to get away from here to figure out what I'm going to do next."

"I completely understand," I told her. I really did.

"Then I hope you also understand that you are a consideration for me. I'm not about to turn my back on you just because I'm turning my back on this university. I hope you know that."

I closed my eyes, leaned forward, and kissed her. Long and softly. We broke the kiss, but I kept my face inches from hers. "The important thing is we have to find our places in this world. For me, I'm going to do that here. If your path leads you elsewhere, then you have to follow it. Follow your dreams and you'll never go wrong."

Cynthia gave me a sad smile and raised one inquisitive eyebrow. "I'll bite. Where's that stuff from?"

"I kind of salvaged it from the speech I gave to a group of freshmen that were visiting the other day. The admissions office picked me to show them around and give them a bit of the spiel. It just seemed applicable."

She nodded, and returned her head to rest on my chest. We sat in silence for a few minutes, thinking our own thoughts.

I finally broke the silence. "You know, tonight might be our last chance to sex right here in the park where everything began."

She playfully jabbed me in the ribs with her elbow. "If I ran across the street and hit that emergency button, the cops would be here in seconds to shove a baton up your ass for this."

"Back to blackmail? Hey, all I really want is a little kiss. Not the end of the world, is it? It's just the end of your career at our fine university. Pretend you're at a Valentine's Day party or something."

"And why would I be kissing you, exactly?"

"Well, because you want to, hopefully. But more because this night is what we're going to remember for a long time coming, so let's make sure it goes well so we'll have something to hold onto on those cold nights when we can't cuddle up like this."

Her eyes went back to the stars, but I could hear her softly laughing. Maybe this was going to work. "You really do have a gift with words. Though I think it's all those movies you watch. Let me ask you this," she whispered, "what if your argument is based on false logic?"

"What are you, a philosophy major? What's wrong with it?"

"What if we're together again on those cold nights? What's the point of treating this like our last night together if it really isn't?"

I shrugged my shoulders and pulled her close. "The point is . . . there is no point. Neither of us know the future. And I just want to have this to remember when you're not around."

"But I," she started to say, but I pressed a finger to her

lips. Then I moved my hand and kissed her, and smiled.

"Let's just sit here together for a little bit longer and look at the stars," I said, "and then we'll go back and figure things out. Okay?"

Cynthia nodded. "I'm sorry," she whispered.

I shook my head. "Nothing to be sorry for, Cyn. Life is fucking weird like this." I sighed. "Maybe you can turn all of this into a poem or two."

"I hope so. I'm going to miss you, you know. Being with you all the time."

"Likewise. That's why I planned ahead."

I was looking up at the stars, so I couldn't see her face. But I just knew her forehead had those familiar wrinkles of confusion in effect. "Okay, you got me. How did you plan ahead?"

I smiled sadly. "Wasn't I the one who wanted your caricature? I'll tape it to my extra pillow and sleep with it at night. It'll be like you never left."

It wasn't that funny. It was actually kind of stupid. But we needed to laugh, so we both did; loud and deep booming laughter that echoed in the vast emptiness of the dark park.

"Actually, I do have one last little thing I have to tell you," Cynthia said. She ran her left index fingers over my chest, tracing large circles on my shirt.

"I'm not sure I'm up for anymore surprises, good or bad. Am I going to like this one?"

"Maybe not. It is kind of bad."

"Are you sure I can handle it?"

"I'm not totally sure. But I'm willing to give you the benefit of the doubt."

"Okay." I sighed. "Lay it on me, then. I'm ready for it."

Cynthia looked at me and grinned. Then she slapped her hand to my chest. "You're it," she whispered, jumping up from the bench giggling to run across the park. I just shook my head and allowed myself two seconds to smile and preserve the memory before I jumped up and started running after her.

THE END

I looked at the sixteen raised hands before me, and sighed. It was time for comments on my piece, and this was the part I never really got used to. I already knew this was a piece of crap. It was the life I had lived this semester, and I could barely stomach knowing I had just shared it with sixteen people who were essentially strangers to me. Especially when I hadn't even changed the names to protect the not-so-innocent! Oh well.

I pointed at Jason. "Go ahead, dude."

He lowered his hand, and a look of abject terror crossed his face. Obviously he didn't really want to speak, but he knew he had to get his participation points for the day. "Uh, I just wanted to say I liked the way you picked up the girl."

"Thanks, but it's not me. It's my character who did it."

Now poor Jason looked scared and confused. "But your character has the same name as you."

"Well, I just think it's a cool name." Better than Jason, kid. "Next comment, yes, Iris."

Iris smiled a righteous little grin. "I didn't appreciate the use of the f-word in here. I think the piece functions just as well if that gets removed."

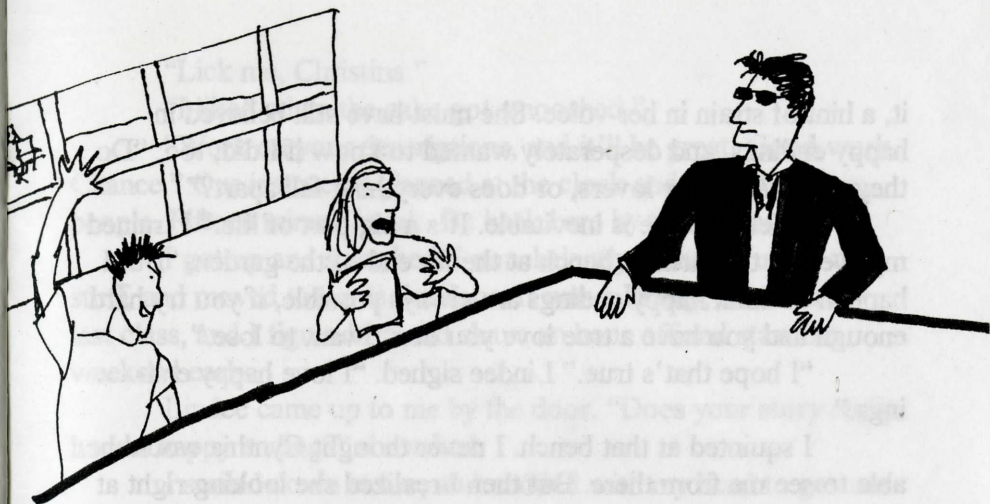
I scribbled down "Iris sucks," and pointed over at Mitch. "Go for it, dude."

"Dude!" he exclaimed. "What the fuck happened to Miller? I thought we were going to get fucking cool drug use or something with that dude, and we got shit! I'd revise that if I were you, dude."

I blinked my eyes as Iris blew a kiss at Mitch, her profane boyfriend who apparently could swear all he wanted. I wrote down "must have a big wiener," and nodded at our instructor.

"I have to say," she said, "I liked everything, especially the dialogue. But I had no idea where everything was taking place. And I had no idea what the characters looked like. What kind of a writer are you?"

I shrugged. "A lazy one. I was, uh, going for a positive/negative duality to the fractured facets of my narrative," I bluffed, "so setting and most description took a backseat to the really im-



portant stuff, which was basically the interaction between my character Chance and the love of his life Cynthia.”

“Was she really the love of his life?” From the corner of the room, Lindee’s timid voice was a surprise to hear since she usually had no comments on stories, or at least no confidence to make hers heard. “And what is going to happen to them? Do they get together again, or is that really the end?”

I smiled, and looked down at the table at my scribbled notes. “It’s an open ending,” I said slowly, “because whether it turns out happily or not is kind of up to you.”

“What do you mean?” a couple people asked at once.

I rolled circles in the air with my right hand to distract everyone while I came up with an answer. “See, some people might read that the long distance relationship was a complete disaster, and assume that was the end of everything. But maybe this couple was stronger than that.”

Seated next to Lindee, Steve scowled. “Long distance relationships never work.”

I scribbled “don’t ask Steve for relationship advice” on my paper, and glanced out the window. Our class was on the ground floor, so we had a perfect view of the little alumni garden with all the park benches and Forget-me-nots.

“But what’s going to happen to them?” Lindee kept with

it, a hint of strain in her voice. She must have still believed in happy endings, and desperately wanted to know if I did, too. "Do they stay friends, or lovers, or does everything fall apart?"

"Well, change is inevitable. It's a big part of life." I trained my eyes on the farthest bench at the far end of the garden. "But I happen to think happy endings are always possible, if you try hard enough and you have a true love you don't want to lose."

"I hope that's true." Lindee sighed. "I love happy endings."

I squinted at that bench. I never thought Cynthia would be able to see me from there. But then I realized she looking right at me with her trusty pair of binoculars. She started waving, so I did a big theatrical nod and turned back to the class.

"How about this for a happy ending," I said with a grin, "Cynthia decides she's going to take the rest of the semester off and try submitting her poetry everywhere she can, and gets a couple acceptance letters to offset the rejection pile. All the while, she moves in with Chance and they live a dangerous life of harboring a non-student in a dorm room while Chance sneaks her into the cafeteria every night for free dinner. And every once in a while, she, Chance, Miller and Danny go to the park for old times' sake and douse as many cheerleaders as they can with water balloons."

I glanced at Christina two students to my right, and held out my hand palm down for emphasis. "Not that we do that in real life. I don't know who keeps attacking you guys out there, or who ruined your cake back in August. But I figured it could put to good use in my story."

"You son of a bitch," she hissed at me. I didn't blame her. I had heard she was a really good cook, especially when it came to cakes.

"So I think I'll go with that ending, Lindee. It's not perfect, and it can't last forever. But it'll do until Christmas break." I trained my eyes over the class. "What do you guys think?"

"Eh. Could work."

"I liked the water balloons. I wanted to see those bitches in wet tee-shirts."

"Hey, screw you, Jeff!"

"Lick me, Christina."

"I liked when the cake got smooshed."

"Work on your descriptions, and it'll be great. Good work, Chance." Our instructor glanced at the clock and sighed. "Okay, people. Fifteen minute break. Be back here by two, please."

I got up and stretched. I nonchalantly gathered up all my stuff, and moved towards the door. It was a Friday, this was my last class, and I figured I could shave an hour off and start the weekend early.

Lindee came up to me by the door. "Does your story really have a happy ending?" she asked.

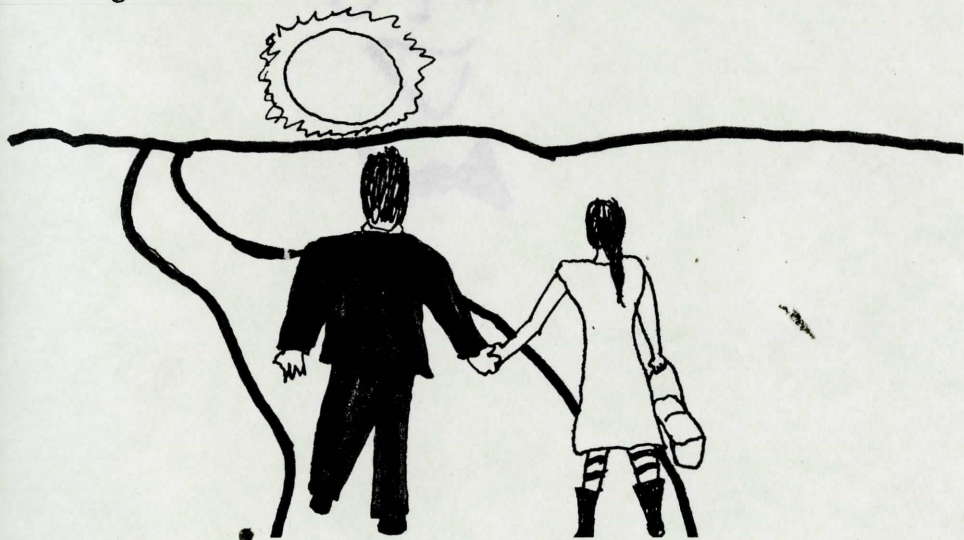
I smiled down at her, and nodded with my head to gesture out the window. Lindee furrowed her brow, then turned and looked out towards the garden. She saw a girl in a lime green cocktail dress, black-and-white striped pantyhose, and black combat boots heading towards our building.

Lindee looked back at me and smiled, a new little sparkle in her eye. "Really?"

"Really." I leaned down and whispered, "take notes for me, will you? I'm off for the beach."

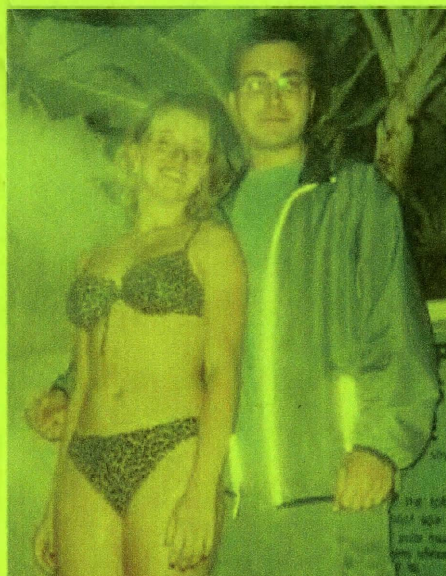
She touched my arm. "Have fun. Lucky you. I really liked your story, you know."

"You know what?" I glanced out at Cynthia, now waiting arms crossed, our picnic basket and beach towels dangling out of her right hand. "So have I. So have I."



1/24/2003
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SO ONE
THINK
THE NEW
KYLE MARKEE?
WRONG!

Kyle Mares is a somewhat dedicated student at the University of Redlands. He plans to graduate with a major in Literature and a minor in Creative Writing on his birthday, May 29, 2004.

Kyle is a Gemini, and he likes James Bond movies, long walks in the park, anything banana, and girls who can walk barefoot in the grass.

**Kyle also writes Internet movie reviews for a cult website, Mutant Reviewers from Hell (www.mutantreviewers.com).
Go there now, please.**

Kyle thinks what you're wearing right now isn't very flattering to your figure.

Kyle is allergic to penicillin. He pities anyone who has that intense allergy to peanuts, however, because he believes no one should live without the greatness that is chocolate peanut butter cups.

Kyle often speaks and writes in the third person, he would wear black all the time but his pug dog Jordan constantly sheds gray hairs, and he can not resist Cherry Coke.

Kyle is better than you.

This was a totally fictional story. If it wasn't, it would have ended on a sad note, as a certain girl's current whereabouts are unknown.

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