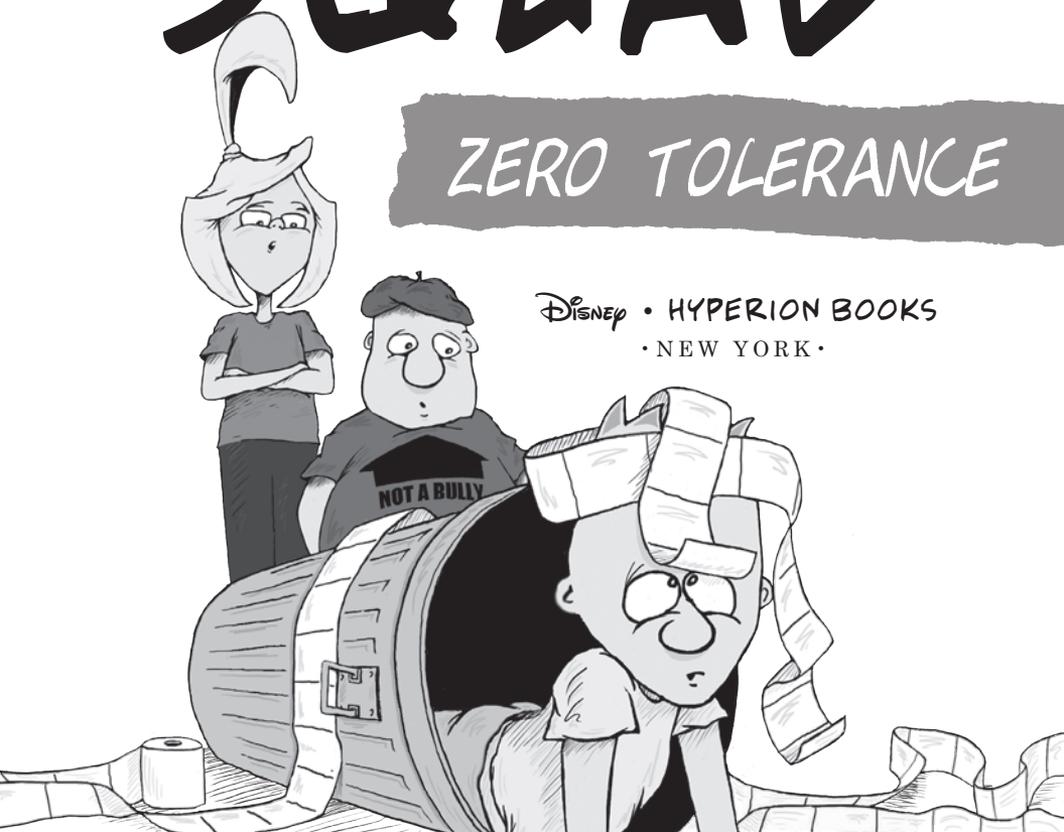


MICHAEL FRY

THE
ODD
SQUAD

ZERO TOLERANCE

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• NEW YORK •



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TO SARAH AND EMILY

THE
ODD
SQUAD
ZERO TOLERANCE

CHAPTER 1

Tall,” I said.

“No, what do you *really* want to be when you grow up?” said Molly.

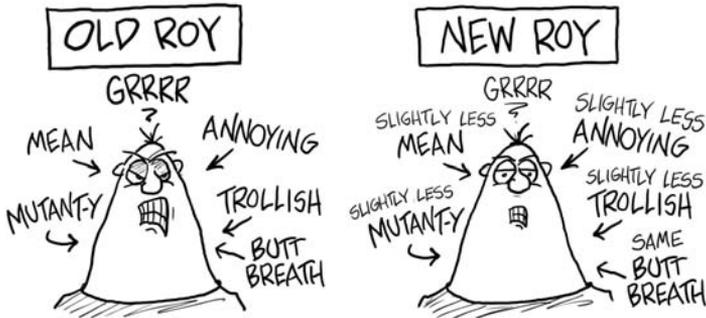


Molly, Karl, and I were standing outside school after a fire drill, doing our Safety Patrol thing. We were supposed to be looking for stragglers, but mostly, we were just trying not to look stupid.

“Or raise sloths,” Karl continued. “Did you know they only go to the bathroom once a week?”

It wasn't going well.

Everyone at Emily Dickinson Middle School still calls us the Loser Patrol, even though we saved the school from a bully named Roy.



But that was a few weeks ago. Which is like three years in middle school time.





“I used to want to be a zombie,” said Karl.

When Karl is being weird, Molly and I stare at him until he stops.

Karl continued, “But then I found out you have to die first.”

When staring doesn’t work, we ignore him.

Karl sighed. “My mom would never sign the permission slip.”

When ignoring Karl doesn’t work, we stare at him again and growl.

Karl took out his phone. “At least I don’t think so. Maybe I should call her and ask.”

When staring and growling don’t work, Molly takes over.

“ENOUGH!” she yelled.

“AHHH!” screamed Karl.

Molly reached for Karl. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to—”

“Not you! THAT!” said Karl as he pointed to a flapping plastic grocery bag stuck to the grass. “It’s on the list!”

The list is Karl’s List of Fears. He wrote them all out on paper for Molly and me to check when he’s being weird—which is pretty much all the time, because he’s pretty much afraid of everything.



Karl slowly backed away. “Plastic bags are alive. Any second they could blow into your face and choke you to death!”

Molly stifled a laugh. “It’s not alive, Karl.”

I was about to laugh too, just before a gust of wind came up and the bag attacked me.



Karl started walking back to class. He looked back. “Still want to be tall?”

Molly shook her head. She had that look, the I-can’t-wait-to-grow-up-and-forget-I-was-ever-twelve look.



I thought, Good luck with that. Freakishly odd friends are better than no friends at all. I know. I used to not have any friends. It was okay. . . .



But not really.

Now we're all friends because the school counselor, Dr. Daniels, forced the three of us to join Safety Patrol to cure our "peer allergies." Which turned out great in the end. Although I wish Molly and Karl had come with warning labels.



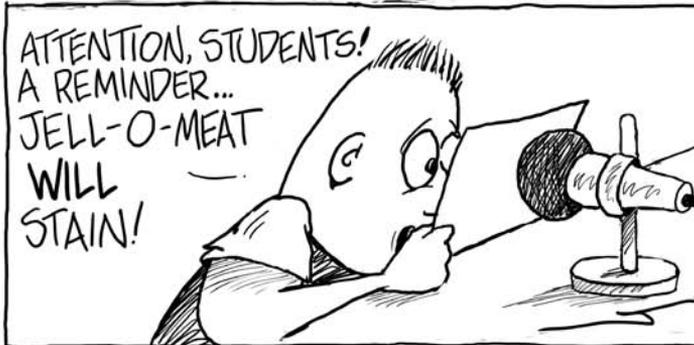
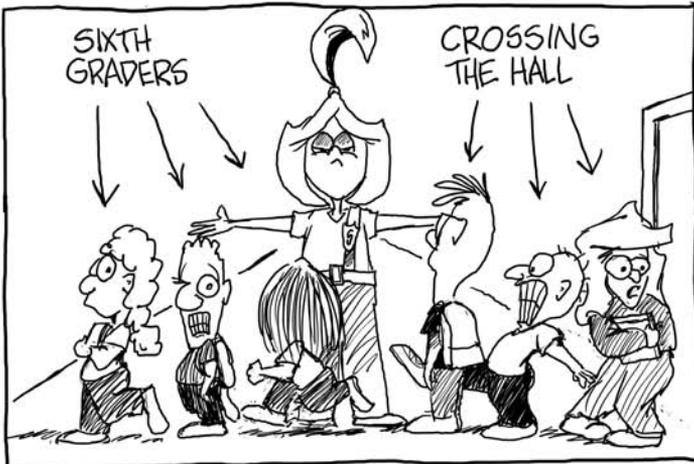
Molly can be loud and bossy. And it's gotten worse since our advisor (and school janitor) Mr. Dupree made her Safety Patrol captain. Karl and I call

her Captain Bossy Pants.

The problem with having a Captain Bossy Pants these days is there isn't a lot for her to be bossy about. The only reason we all joined Safety Patrol was to stop Roy. Now that he's retired, there's no more bullying.



With no more bullying, Safety Patrol has become pretty boring.

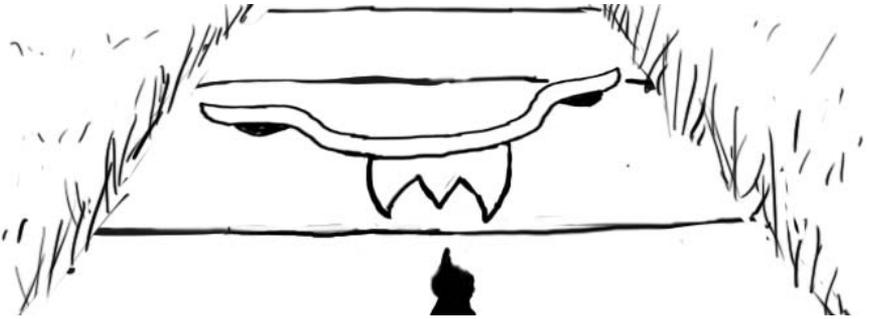


Boring or not, Safety Patrol still got us out of class. But we couldn't stay out forever, and it was time Molly and I headed back. We hadn't gone three steps when we noticed Karl stopped ahead of us. He was pointing at the sidewalk.

"What's the matter with him?" I asked.

Molly eyed me. "Is that a trick question?"

But it wasn't just Karl being Karl. When we caught up we realized it's kind of hard not to stare at the sidewalk when . . .



. . . it's staring back at you.

CHAPTER 2

It was some sort of chalk drawing.



It didn't look like anything I'd seen before—at least on Earth.

“It looks sort of like the Swamp Shifter from *NanoNerd* #75,” I said.

Karl walked around the drawing and studied it upside down (or right



side up?). He smiled. "I know what this is. It's a Swedish cheese grater!"

"A what?" I said.

"From UMaikia," said Karl. "My parents go there all the time to buy throw pillows. Mom loves throw pillows. I don't know about Dad. He just holds her purse and stares at his shoes." He nodded. "I'm not afraid of cheese graters."

Karl's ringtone went off.



"Hi, Mom.

What? . . .

That's great!

. . . I'm so
relieved! . . .

Love you too.

Bye."

Karl hung

up. "Great news! Mom found my sea monkeys' volleyball net under the cushions of the couch!"

Molly started to say something, then stopped. She turned to me. "It's not a Swamp Shifter or a cheese grater. It looks to me like some sixth grader's scribble."

"It could be a message," I said.

Molly shook her head. "Don't go there."

“It could!”

“Nick, it isn’t.”

“How else do you explain—”

“Coincidence,” said Molly.

“On second thought, it could be a carrot peeler,” said Karl.

“It’s not,” said Molly.

That’s when I dug into my pocket for the Tater Tot I’d been saving since lunch. I popped it in my mouth and started chewing. “I ’on’t mow. I ’eally ’ink it’s—”





When you almost sort of die choking on a Tot, it takes a few minutes to get your breath back and figure out

what you're going to say to the person who sort of saved your life.

"Yeah, I'm okay," I said. "Thanks for . . . you know . . ."

"No. No problem. I shouldn't have yelled and made you choke."

"I'm good."

"Right. Okay."

Molly and I stared at each other for a few seconds and tried not to say anything too icky/creepy that we would later have to swear we never said. Fortunately, we were interrupted.



CHAPTER 3

We turned around. In front of us was a girl dressed in black. Black jeans, black shirt, black hair, and black hat. We stared. She stared back.

Finally Karl asked, “Is this a staring contest? I once stared at my parakeet, Stanley, for seven hours.” Karl paused. “He was never really the same after that.”

The girl stuck out her hand and announced in a thick French accent, “Hello. I am Simone.”

I said, “Are you . . . ?”

“French? *Oui!*” She nodded. “My family just moved here.”

Karl grabbed Simone’s hand and started shaking it way too hard.



I took pity on her and pried Karl's hand away.
"I'm Nick. And this is Molly."

Molly took a couple steps back. "Hey," she whispered.

Simone looked up at Molly. "You are so . . . how you say? High?"

"Tall," sighed Molly. "I'm freakishly tall."

"No, no! *Très magnifique!* Is amazing! You are a model, *oui?*"

I snorted, then instantly regretted it after Molly pounded me in the shoulder. Hard. All that freakish height allows her to pick up a lot of speed.

"That hurt," I whined.

"Good," she said.

I glared at Molly. "*Vous êtes une pomme de terre avec le visage d'un cochon d'Inde.*"

"What did you just say?"

"He said, 'You are a potato with the face of a guinea pig,'" said Simone.

"Whoa," said Karl.

"Take that back!" said Molly as she targeted my shoulder with her fist again.

"Okay, okay," I said. "You don't look like a potato."

“Did you know that guinea pigs eat their own poop?” asked Karl. “They can’t digest their food the first time. Isn’t that cool?”

We all stared at Karl.

Simone looked at me. “*Vous parlez français?*”

She was asking if I spoke French. I was certainly *taking* French. But all that had stuck was one insult (see above) and my name in French (Nick).

French is hard. It’s like yogacize for your tongue.



* MY TONGUE IS NOT IN SHAPE.

I played it safe. I answered Simone's question with my go-to play-it-safe move. I shrugged.

Simone smiled. "*Votre glissière est en panne.*"

"Huh?"

Simone pointed to my pants. "Your zipper. It is down."

I looked down. My zipper was up.

Molly laughed. "Made you look!"

"*Très* funny," I said.

"It *was* funny. Know why?" Karl nodded as he zipped up his own pants. "Because it's not happening to me."

Molly smiled at Simone. "Let me take you to the office, where you can register."

"*Oui, oui*, that would be, how you say, awesome? But first, who is this Emily you were shouting about?"

"She's real," I said.

Molly rolled her eyes. "She's someone kids made up years ago to explain stuff that can't be explained. Like why the pencil sharpener eats your pencils or why there's always one burnt Tot in the bunch."

Simone nodded. "Oh, I see. This Emily, she is a myth, then."

Molly looked at me. “That’s exactly what she is.”

Emily is not a myth. Emily is real. At least, I think she’s real. Or I’m pretty sure she’s real. Okay, she might not be real.

It’s complicated.

A few weeks back, we went up against Roy. He was big and mean and smelled like ripe bananas (Fiesta Mist Body Spray).

Things got a little crazy.

I used my grandmother’s phone to pretend I was someone else so I could text-torture Roy and steal the stuffed pig his mom got him (before she left). When I discovered I had become just as much of a bully as Roy, I helped him get his pig back after a pet python was released during a science fair, which caused the crowd to stampede . . . just before Roy and I fell out of the ceiling and pretty much destroyed the cafetorium. Over a few weeks of detention we worked things out, and everyone lived slightly happier ever after.

Oh, and the python is fine.

But during all that, some seriously weird stuff happened that I can’t explain. Like . . .

SOMEONE...
DISTRACTED EVERYONE
WHEN WE NEEDED
TO ESCAPE.



SOMEONE...
HELPED US FIND
OUR WAY WHEN
WE WERE LOST.

HAD
HIS
PHONE
OFF



THEN
WHOSE
LIGHT
DID HE
SEE?

SOMEONE...
CAME TO OUR
RESCUE OVER
AND OVER AGAIN
WHEN OUR BACKS
WERE AGAINST THE
WALL.



...RELEASED
DURING THE
SCIENCE
FAIR BY
?

Pretty much whenever we needed help, we got it. But I could never figure out who was helping us.

That leaves Emily. And by Emily I don't mean the imaginary person everyone thinks she is. She's NOT a ghost!

She's a real person. Someone who knows the school, doesn't want to be found, and for some reason is on our side.

"I think she's real," I said as I pointed to the sidewalk. "And I think this drawing could be a message from her . . . or him . . . or whatever."

Karl said, “You know, it could be a Julianne fry maker.”

I said, “It’s not a—”

“Why are they called Julianne fries?” asked Karl. “Who is Julianne? Why are they zigzaggy? Does her hand shake when she makes them?” He gasped. “Is Julianne sick?!”

I said, “Stop talking, Karl.”

Molly and Simone shared one of those all-boys-are-aliens looks. Mom and Memaw give me that look a lot. Especially when I let our dog, Janice, lick peanut butter off my toes.

As I watched Molly and Simone walk to the office like they were old friends it started to bug me. I mean, Simone is new. And new kids are all nice at first. They have to be. They’re NEW!

It’s just that you don’t know who they really are. You don’t know what they’ll do when you really need them. Like . . . when you choke on a Tot!

I mean, if Molly chokes, is Simone going to whack her back? It took Molly and me weeks to get where we would whack each other’s back. You have to earn a whack on the back. You don’t just throw back whacks around like they’re nothing!

“Back whacks don’t come cheap!” I said accidentally out loud.

“What?” said Karl.

“Never mind.”

“Simone seems nice,” said Karl.

“She’s okay, I guess.”

“I wish I were from France.”

“What?”

“If I were from France, everybody would be like, ‘What’s it like to be from France?’ And I’d say, ‘It’s sort of like here except everyone speaks French, and hardly anyone is ever attacked by a plastic bag.’ And they’d say, ‘Whoa!’ And then everyone would come over to my house and watch my sea monkeys play volleyball.”

“Karl, you’re so weird.”

“I know. My mom says it’ll pay off one day.”

