

CHAPTER 1

I was stuffed in my locker.
Again.

It wasn't so bad. Lockers are a lot roomier than you'd think.

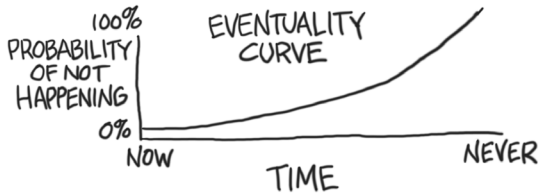
Especially when you're as short as I am. I might be the shortest twelve-year-old on the planet. Which would be cool if they kept world records for that sort of thing. But they don't. I checked.

Mom says to me all the time, "Nicholas, you'll grow eventually."

Eventually is a Mom word that means between now and never.



ME ↗
INSIDE
MY
LOCKER



Mom's just trying to cheer me up. Which is fine. What's not fine is when she calls me Nicholas. My name is Nick. *Nicholas* sounds like some kid with head lice on Memaw's favorite show, *Dr. Holmes*.



Memaw doesn't think I'm short. She says, "You're just stuck that way 'cause when you were four you were so cute we stacked bricks on your head so you'd never grow up. You'll get unstuck. Eventually."

Memaw makes up a lot of stuff that almost makes sense but not quite.

The fact is, I'm short. Which is exactly why Roy stuffed me in my locker in the first place.

I fit.

Roy has issues. At least that's what Dr. Daniels, the school counselor, says. The only issue I see is: Roy is a mutant troll.

Unlike me, Dr. Daniels doesn't have troll-vision. She says Roy is just a regular kid who feels powerless and gets control by controlling me. She's full of beans. Roy is just mean. Some kids are, you know.

Even though I felt safe in my locker, it wasn't exactly comfortable. My butt had fallen asleep. Living-dead asleep. It's called zombie butt. And as everyone knows, zombie butt leads to log legs. You can sort of move with log legs.

ROY IN REAL LIFE

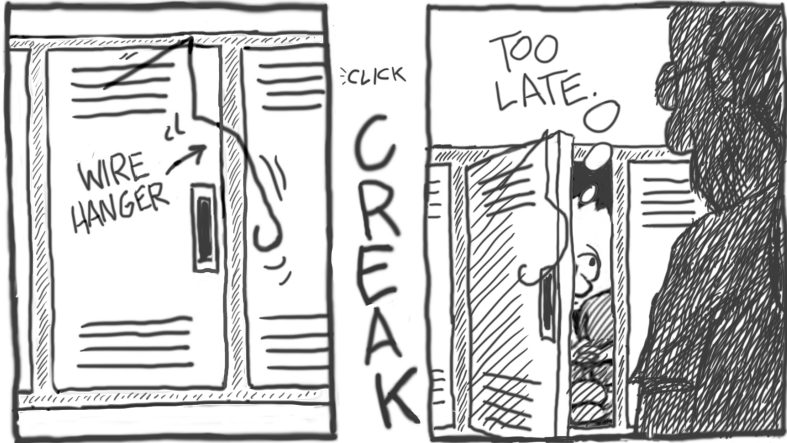


ROY IN MY LIFE



But not really.

I knew if I didn't get out of that locker soon, I wasn't getting out at all. And I really didn't want to have to wait for a certain *someone* to come along to help me out.



CHAPTER 2

It was the janitor, Mr. Dupree, staring into my locker. He was the *someone* I didn't want to find me. Mostly because he's weird, but also because he would make me go see Dr. Daniels in the office.



Mr. Dupree isn't weird like all grown-ups are weird. He's way weirder. I think he's a hippie. Like Memaw when she was young. Hippies are dinosaur versions of skaters.

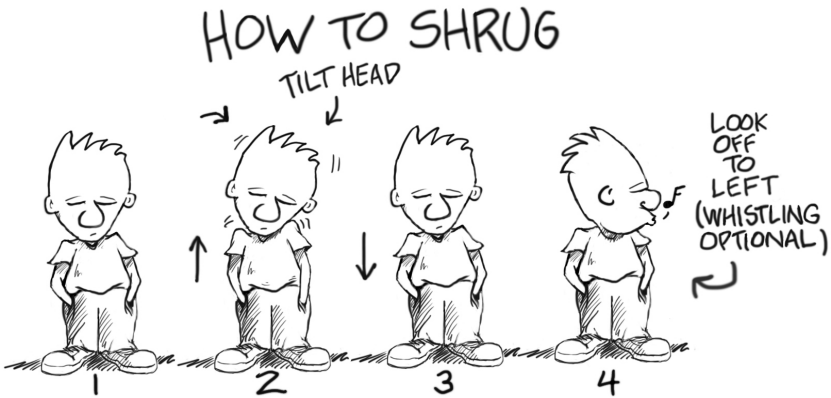


After he opened the locker, Mr. Dupree stood there for a few seconds. Then he said, “You seem to like it in there.”

I shrugged. The shrug is my go-to move when anything I say may be used against me later.

“Because I find you in there a lot,” he said.

I shrugged again.



“You want to tell me how you got in there?”

I shrugged a third time.

“Shrug, you’re not going to tell me? Or shrug, you don’t know how you got in there?”

I shrugged a fourth time. A new world record! Woo-hoo!

Mr. Dupree wasn’t impressed. “Then I guess it must have been Emily.”

I guess I must have looked surprised because he added, “Nick, I’ve been at Emily Dickinson Middle School a long time.”

Emily isn’t real. At least, I don’t *think* she’s real. And she’s definitely not the ghost of Emily Dickinson, the poet. Kids invented her years ago to explain all the weird stuff that happens at school.

Like, why do the last five minutes of class always seem to take forever? It’s Emily (she holds back the minute hand). Why does the cafeteria serve beets (which no kid has ever eaten in the history of the universe)? Emily again (she’s a beet freak). Who sets up the toilet paper dispensers so that only one teeny-tiny sheet comes out at a time? That’s right—Emily (sometimes she’s just mean).

Emily gets around. But she didn’t shove me into my locker. And I was not about to tell anyone who did.

Mr. Dupree shook his head, then reached in and pulled me out of the locker. That’s when we both noticed the huge rip down the side of my shirt.

“Emily again?” Mr. Dupree asked.

No shrug this time. You can’t do five shrugs.

Five shrugs, and adults go from *thinking* you're messing with them to *knowing* you're messing with them.

I shook my head no.

The shirt must have ripped when Roy stuffed me into the locker. Mom's going to notice. Shrugs and head-shakes don't work on Mom. I'll have to come up with some excuse. It can't be something lame like the dog did it or shirt-ripping aliens tried to abduct me at recess. And I can't blame it on Emily. It's not her style.



I tucked in my shirt to hide the rip as we started toward the office. Luckily, homeroom had already started, so the halls were empty. You never want to do the Wimp Walk to the office in front of an audience.



I like to keep my mouth shut during these walks. Anything I say is always used against me.

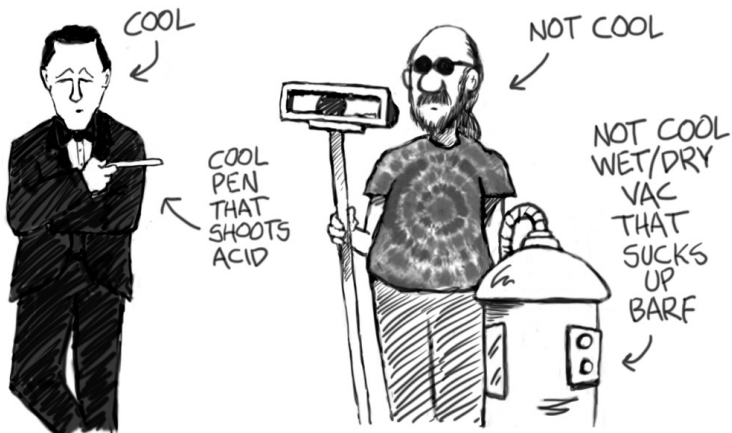
Unfortunately, that day Mr. Dupree wanted to chat. Out of the blue, he asked me if I'd ever been to Borneo.

I shook my head no.

Mr. Dupree told me Borneo is an island in the Pacific Ocean. It's mostly rain forests and snakes. Big snakes. Thirty-foot-long snakes. Lots of big, thirty-foot-long, kid-eating snakes.

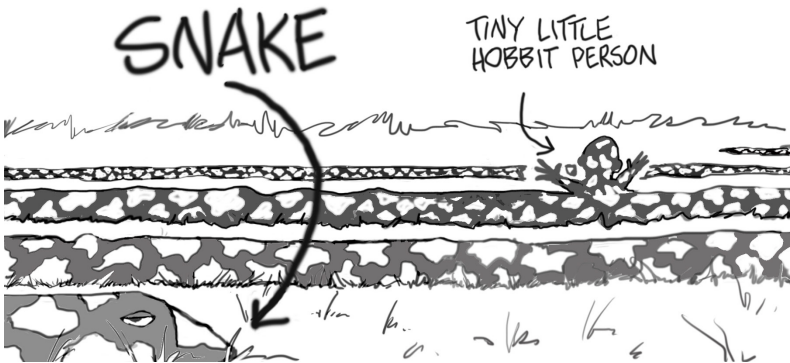


Mr. Dupree said he was once in Borneo under deep cover—like he was some sort of spy or something. Mr. Dupree doesn't look like any spy I've ever seen. Spies are cool. Mr. Dupree is not cool.

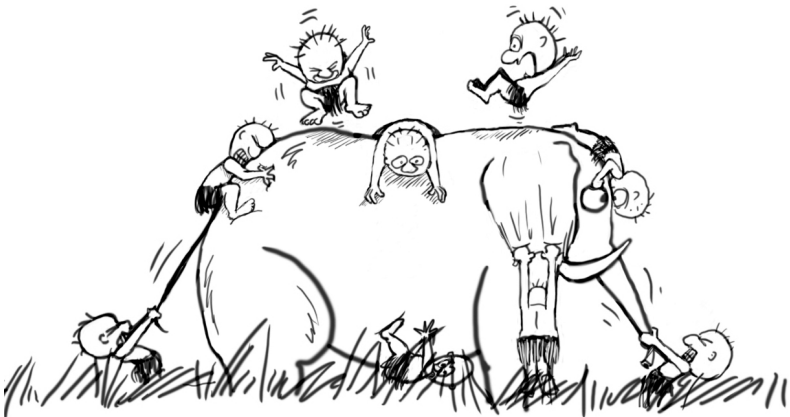


Mr. Dupree was helping stop some tribe from being bullied by another tribe that was stealing their pigs. He said the other tribe wanted the pigs to feed to the snakes so the snakes wouldn't eat them, because . . .

. . . they were tiny little hobbit people.



Mr. Dupree said the hobbit people were fierce warriors. They hunted in packs and took down elephants.



To feed to the snakes.



I did a report on elephants once. They only live in Africa and India. I turned to Mr. Dupree and said, “There aren’t any elephants in Borneo.”

“There aren’t.” He smiled. “Anymore.”

He continued with his story. He explained that every day, a couple of hobbit people would come to steal the pigs, and he would beat them back. But one night *all* the hobbit people came.

“I could ninja maybe three or four of them, but after that it was gonna be Dupree-on-a-Stick,” he said.



Even though I didn't believe a word he was saying, I had to give Mr. Dupree props for telling a good story.

"What happened next?" I asked.

"What does every bully fear?"

"I dunno," I said.

"They fear losing control."

I was confused.

Mr. Dupree said, "If they lose control, they get afraid. If they get afraid, they run away."

"How do you make them lose control?" I asked.

"You take it from them."

"How?"

Mr. Dupree smiled as he leaned down and got right in my face. He said, "You bring the crazy."

And then—right there in the middle of the hallway—Mr. Dupree brought the crazy.

HAND SNACKED



MADE MOOSE
CALLS



YELLED AT MOLE PEOPLE AT CENTER OF THE EARTH
COME INTO THE LIGHT!



ARM FARTED
"GREENSLEEVES"

PERFORMED SOCK
PUPPET SHAKESPEARE



HARK!
SHE
SPEAKS!

OUT!
DAMN'D
SPOT!



I'd never seen a grown-up freak out like that. You'd think I would be scared, but it was really sort of awesome.

And it did the trick. "Bringing the crazy scared the hobbit people away. The tribe kept their pigs," explained Mr. Dupree.

I guess the hobbit people kept getting eaten by snakes. Mr. Dupree didn't say.

"Wait," I said. "Acting like an insane person will somehow keep me from getting stuffed in my locker?"

Mr. Dupree said, "If you scare yourself, you'll probably scare them. You can do anything crazy

or scary. The scarier the better. But never pee your pants. That's just gross."

I nodded, even though I didn't believe "bringing the crazy" would work on a bully. An arm fart concert wouldn't stop Roy.



I said, "None of that stuff really happened, did it?"

"You don't believe me?"

"You're a janitor, not a spy."

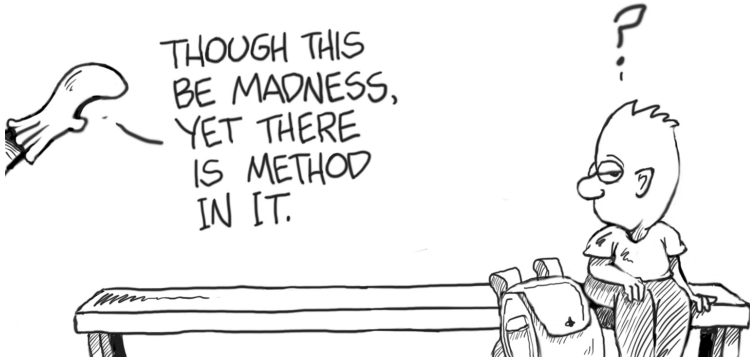
"There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy."

"Um . . . my name is Nick."

"Nick, maybe it's true and maybe it isn't. But just because I might be lying, doesn't mean I'm not telling the truth."

Huh? How can a lie be the truth?

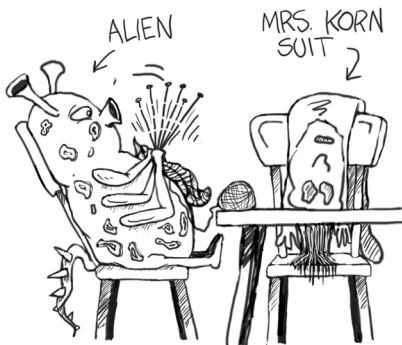
We arrived at the office. Dr. Daniels wasn't there. Mr. Dupree told me to sit and wait. He started to leave, then stopped and pulled a sock out of his pocket and put it on his hand.



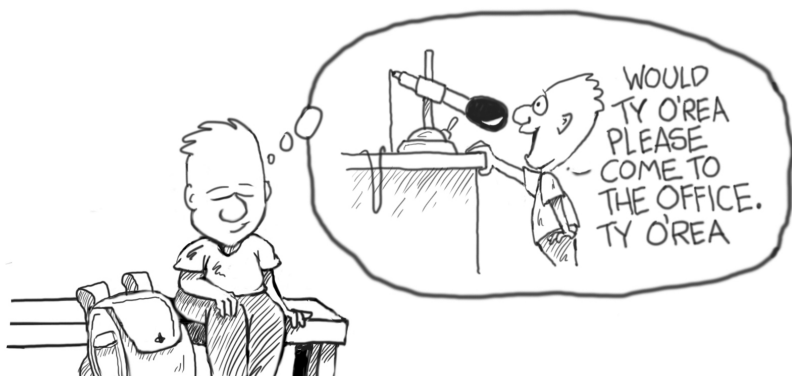
I told you he was weird.

CHAPTER 3

After Mr. Dupree left, I looked around and realized I was alone. Mrs. Korn, the office secretary who everyone says is an alien, must have been on her break.



Which meant I was unsupervised. I had the whole office to myself, including the PA system.

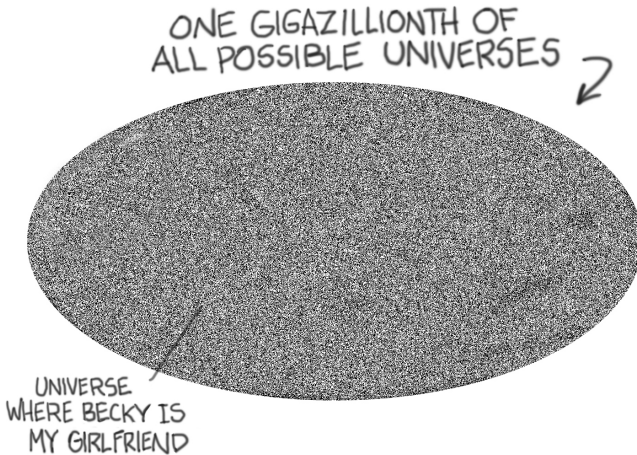


Just as I was about to get into even more trouble, *she* showed up. *She* is Becky Harrison, the prettiest girl in school. And my girlfriend. Sort of.



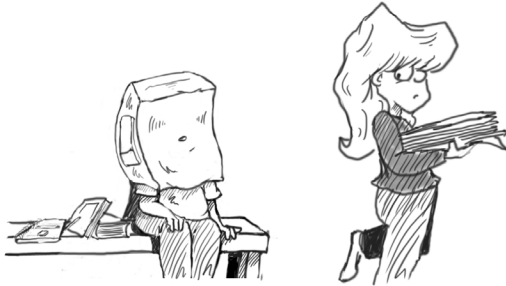
A while back, Memaw and I watched this Science Channel thing about how there might be lots and lots of universes with lots and lots of versions of everyone walking around, so that across all the universes every possible thing happens at every possible moment.

I figure in at least one of those multiple universes Becky Harrison is my girlfriend.



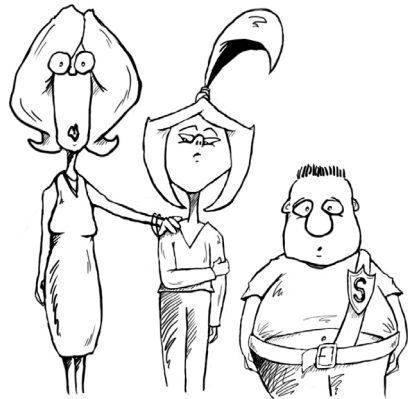
I love science.

Becky was delivering attendance sheets. She didn't see me at first. Which was good. It gave me time to activate my cloaking device.



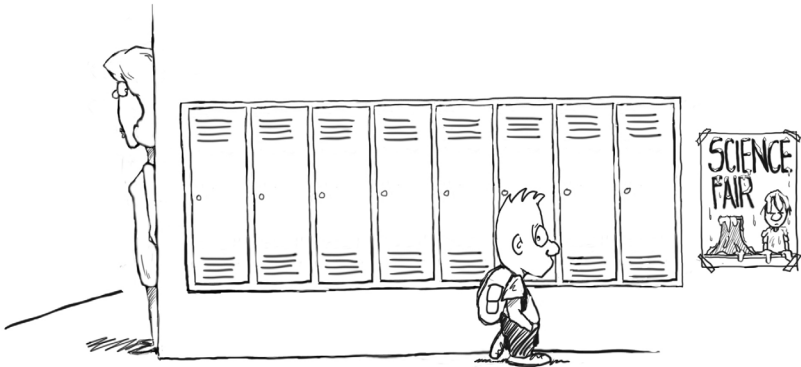
When I decloaked, Becky was gone. Which was a relief. I'm pretty sure if the Becky in this universe knew I existed, the Becky in the alternate universe would stop being my girlfriend.

Finally, Dr. Daniels showed up. She wasn't alone. She had a freakishly tall girl, and a husky kid (that's Memaw's word for fat) dressed up like a pretend police boy.



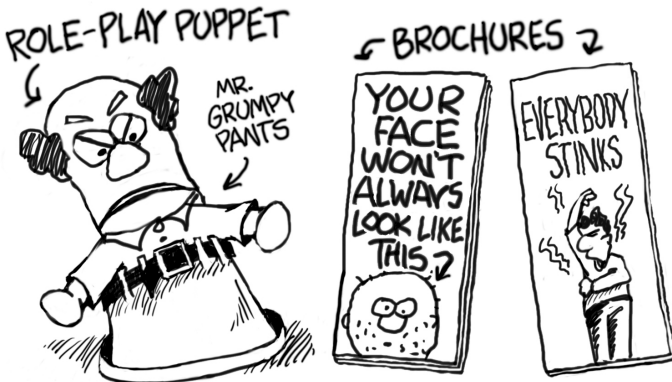
Before I could ask the husky kid if he got the belt and badge out of a cereal box, Dr. Daniels marched us all into her office.

Dr. Daniels and I go way back. She used to be my counselor at Buzz Aldrin Elementary School. She moved up to Emily Dickinson the same year I did.



I'm pretty sure she's stalking me.

Her office looks the same as the one back in grade school. Both of them were decorated by unicorns. It's all bright and shiny and filled with role-play puppets and not-so-helpful brochures.



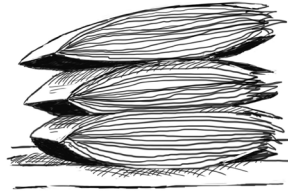
After I was done throwing up a little in my mouth, Dr. Daniels walked in with our files.

She dropped each one on her desk as she said our names. “Nick Ramsey.”

THUNK! “Molly Wibble.”

THUNK! “Karl Mooney.”

TH-THUNK! Then she looked at us in turn and said, “I presume you know each other.”

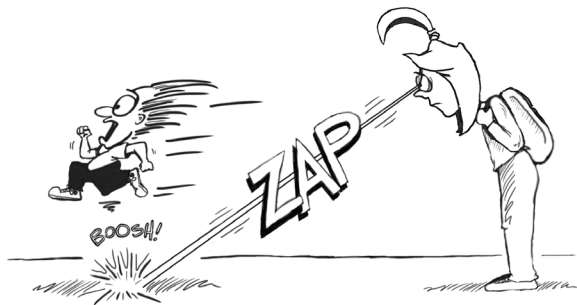


I'd seen Molly before. She's kinda hard to miss.



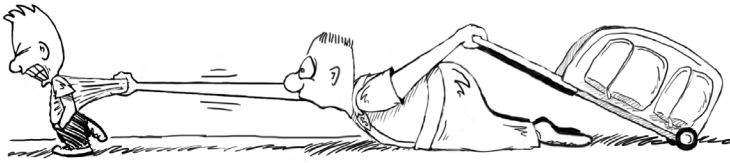
Whenever kids call her stuff like “The Molly Green Giant,” she unleashes her withering stare of pity. It's

like getting blasted with two laser beams of shame.



She's known all over school as The Stare Master.

I'd seen Karl around, too. Karl's one of those kids you avoid eye contact with because he'll think you want to be friends. Then he'll latch on to you with his superhuman loser grip.



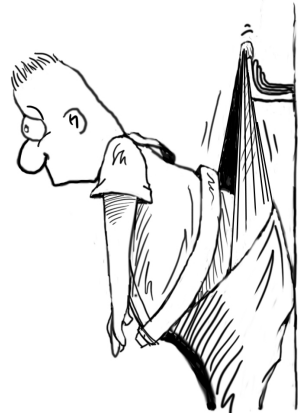
Karl is also kind of an OFFline hacker. He likes to mess around with old electronic toys and rewire them.



Dr. Daniels sat on the edge of her desk and looked at me from the BFF Pose they taught her at counselor school. She said, "Nick, this is the eighth time this year you've been stuffed in a locker. Any idea how you got there?"

I shrugged.

She turned to Karl.
“This is the ninth time you’ve been found hanging by your shorts from a coat hook. What happened?”



Karl shrugged.

She turned to Molly.
“This is the seventh time you’ve been found sprawled in the hallway with your shoes tied together.”



“Any clue as to who might have done it?”
asked Dr. Daniels.

Molly shrugged.

Three out of three shrugs! Go, team!

Dr. Daniels shook her head and sighed. Then she said, “I know you’re being bullied. I just don’t

know who's doing it. What I do know is that bullies go after isolated kids—kids who are not part of a group. And you three are definitely not part of any group.”

She nodded. “You all suffer from *peer allergies*.”

That didn't make any sense to me. I wasn't allergic to other kids. I just didn't like them very much.

TOP 5 REASONS I DON'T LIKE OTHER KIDS VERY MUCH	
5.	LAME
4.	MEAN
3.	DUMB
2.	TALL
1.	DID I MENTION TALL?

Karl raised his hand. “Does that mean we have to live in a bubble for the rest of our lives?”



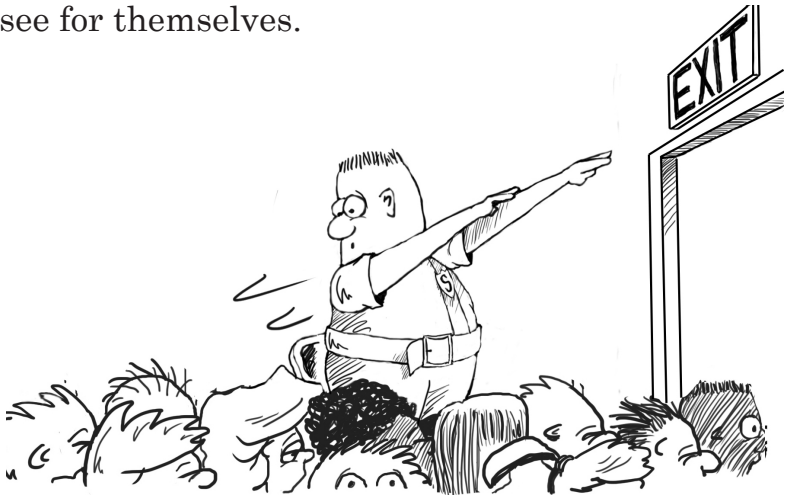
Dr. Daniels said no. Karl looked really disappointed.

“You three need a place to *belong*,” said Dr. Daniels.

Karl raised his hand again. “But I belong in Safety Patrol.”

Dr. Daniels closed her eyes. “Karl, you’re the *only* member of Safety Patrol.”

That’s when I realized where I’d seen that belt and badge before. I’d seen it on Karl during fire drills as he pointed at exits everyone could see for themselves.



Dr. Daniels continued, “Other kids find places to belong. Like sports, student government, band, or chorus. But not you guys. I don’t understand. Why?”

That’s easy, I thought: ***BECAUSE THEY’RE ALL LAME!***

Sports? I thought about trying out for football until I realized the other players already have something they can kick, hit, or punch.



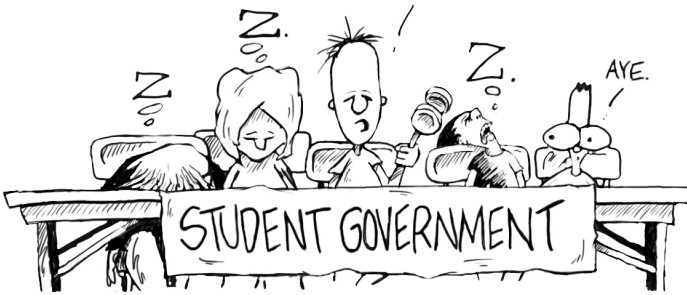
They don't need me.

Clubs? I would have to stay after school to be in a club. Roy gets enough shots at me as it is. Besides, it's a waste of time! Especially the Peer Mediation Club. As if a bunch of bossy eighth-grade girls could keep Roy from shoving me into my locker. Please.

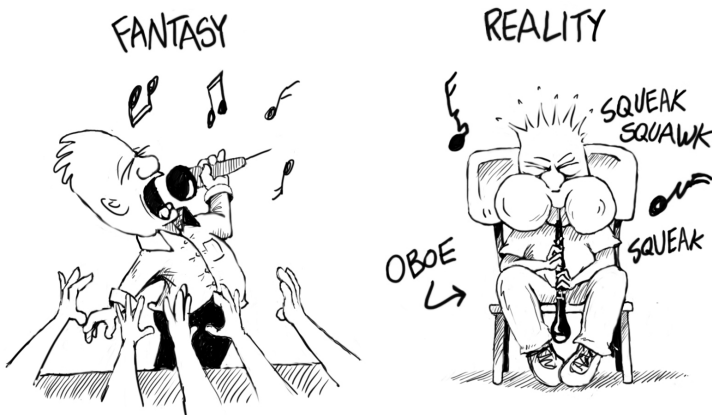


Student government? Really? They have about as much power over school as I have over Roy.

ALL THOSE IN FAVOR OF A PROCLAMATION
DECLARING CHEESE AWESOME SAY AYE.



And band and chorus are okay for some kids,
but they were where my dreams went to die.

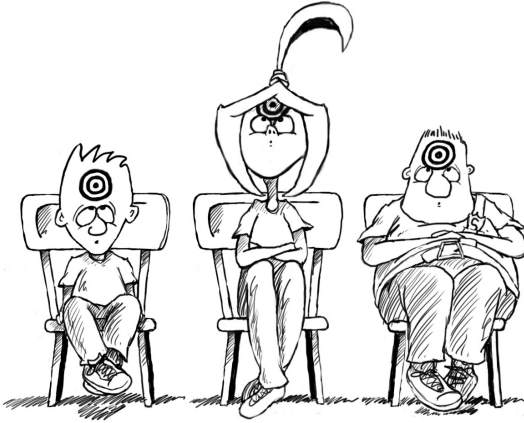


But I didn't tell Dr. Daniels any of that.

I just shrugged again while Molly looked at
her shoes and Karl picked at a scab on his arm.

Dr. Daniels continued, "I'm convinced that if
you three could each just find a place to belong,
you wouldn't have such targets on your backs."

Hello? They weren't on our *backs*.



That's when Dr. Daniels pointed at Karl and said, "And I think I've found just such a place."

Wait. She isn't going to say what I think she's going to say. No, please, no! But before I could get my brain to kick my mouth into gear, Dr. Daniels announced, "Welcome to . . ."

"SAFETY PATROL?" I cried.

Dr. Daniels smiled. "Won't that be fun?"

