

SECOND HELPINGS

A Novel

Megan McCafferty



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MEGAN McCAFFERTY

 THREE RIVERS PRESS
NEW YORK

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*[Coming in April 2006 from Crown Publishers, Jessica Darling is finally back! - charmed thirds
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For my parents

June 30th

Hope,

By the time you get this, I will already be attending the Summer Pre-College Enrichment Curriculum in Artistic Learning. I think it's hilarious for a gifted and talented program to have an acronym (SPECIAL) with the exact opposite educational connotation.

While I'm psyched to escape another summer of junk-food servitude on the boardwalk, I can't help but feel like a fraud. I'm not all that interested in "experiencing the artistic, intellectual, and social activities integral for a successful career in the arts," like it says in the brochure. My motivation is simple: I know that the only way to brace myself for the indignity of my senior year at Pineville High is to avoid everyone and everything associated with it for as long as I possibly can. Hence, why my summer vacation is a deportation.

You know I would've stuck around this strip-mall wasteland all summer if you had opted to visit me in Jersey instead of jetting around Europe. Tough choice. If you weren't my best friend, and I didn't love you so much, I would hate you. Not for your decision, but for the privilege to make it the first place.

I know our e-mail/IM daily, call weekly schedule will be out of whack until you get back to Tennessee. But don't forget to write. More than once a month, if the mood strikes. And if it doesn't, well, less. Even though you're going all international on me, these are still the **Totally Guilt-Free Guidelines for Keeping in Touch**. With a special emphasis on the **Guilt-Free** part.

Enviously yours,

J.

july

the first

I can't believe I used to do this nearly every day. Or night, rather. In the wee hours, when the sky was purple and the house sighed with sleep, I'd hover, wide awake, over my beat-up black-and-white speckled composition notebook. I'd scribble, scratch, and scrawl until my hand, and sometimes my heart, ached.

I wrote and wrote and wrote. Then, one day, I stopped.

With the exception of letters to Hope and editorials for the school newspaper, I haven't written anything real in months. (Which is why it's such a crock that I'm attending SPECIAL.) I have no choice but to start up again because I'm required to keep a journal for SPECIAL's writing program. But this journal will be different. It has to be different. Or I will be institutionalized.

My last journal was the only eyewitness to every mortifying and just plain moronic thought I had throughout my sophomore and junior years. And like the mob, I had the sole observer whacked. Specifically, I slipped page by page into my dad's paper shredder, leaving nothing but guilty confetti behind. I wanted to have a ritualistic burning in the fireplace, but my mom wouldn't let me because she was afraid the ink from my pen would emit a toxic cloud and kill us all. Even in my dementia she knew that would have been an unnecessarily melodramatic touch.

I destroyed that journal because it contained all the things I should've been telling my best friend. I trashed it on New Year's Day, the last time I saw Hope, which was the first time I had seen her since she moved to Tennessee. My resolution: to stop pouring my soul out to an anonymous person on paper and start telling her everything again. And everything included *everything* that had happened between me and He Who Shall Remain Nameless.

Instead of hating me for the weird whatever relationship He and I used to have, Hope proved one and for all that she is a better best friend than I am. She swore to me on that January day, and a billion times since, that I have the right to be friends and/or more with whomever I want to be friends and/or more with. She assured me of this, even though His debaucherous activities indirectly contributed to her own brother's overdose, and very directly led to her parents' moving her a thousand miles away from Pineville's supposedly evil influence. Because when it comes down to it, as she told me that shivery afternoon, and again and again, her brother, Heath's, death was no one's fault but his own. No one stuck that lethal needle in his arm; Heath did it himself. And if I feel a real connection with Him, she told me then, and keeps telling me, and telling me, and telling me, I shouldn't be so quick to cut it off.

I've told Hope a billion times right back that I'm not removing Him from my life out of respect for Heath's memory. I'm doing it because it simply doesn't do me any good to keep Him there. Especially when He hasn't said a word to me since I told Him to fuck himself last New Year's Eve.

That's not totally true. He has spoken to me. And that's how I know that when it comes to He Who Shall Remain Nameless and me, there's something far worse than silence: small talk. We used to talk about everything from stem cells to *Trading Spaces*. Now the deepest He gets is: "Would you mind moving your head, please? I can't see the blackboard." (2/9/01—First period. World History II.)
STOP!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! I don't want to have to burn this journal before I even begin.

the second

Now, here's a fun and totally not psychotic topic to write about!

Today I got the all-time ass-kickingest going-away present: 780 Verbal, 760 Math.

GOD BLESS THE SCHOLASTIC APTITUDE TEST!

That's a combined score of 1540, for those of you who are perhaps not as mathematically inclined as I am. YAHOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!

I've done it. I've written my ticket out of Pineville, and I won't have to run in circles for it. I am the first person to admit that if an athletic scholarship were my only option, I'd be out running laps and pumping performance-enhancing drugs right now. But my brain, for once, has helped, not hindered. AM SO HAPPY I DID NOT SIGN UP FOR

CROSS-COUNTRY CAMP.

As annoying as all those stupid vocabulary drills and Princeton Review process-of-elimination practice sessions were, I'm totally against the movement to get rid of the SAT. It is the only way to prove to admissions officers that I'm smart. A 4.4 GPA, glowing recommendations, and a number-one class rank mean absolutely nothing when you're up against applicants from schools that *don't* suck.

Of course, with scores like these, my problem isn't whether I'll get accepted to college, but deciding which of the 1600 schools in the Princeton Review guide to colleges I should attend in the first place. I've been banking on the idea that college will be the place where I finally find people who understand me. My niche. I have no idea if Utopia University exists. But there is one consolation. Even if I pick the wrong school, and the odds are 1600 to 1 that I will, it can't be worse than my four years at Pineville High.

Incidentally, I didn't rock the SATs because I'm a genius. One campus tour of Harvard taught me the difference between freaky brilliance and the rest of us. No, my scores didn't reflect my superior intellect as much as they did my ability to memorize all the little tricks for acing the test. For me the SATs were a necessary annoyance, but not the big trauma that they are for most high-school students. Way more things were harder for me to deal with in my sophomore and junior years than the Scholastic Aptitude Test. Since I destroyed all the evidence of my hardships, let's review:

Jessica Darling's Top Traumas:
2000–2001 Edition

Trauma #1: My best friend moved a thousand miles away. After her brother's overdose, Hope's parents stole her away to their tiny Southern hometown, where good old-fashioned morals prevailed apparently. I can't blame the Weavers for trying to protect her innocence, as Hope is probably the laziest guileless person on the planet. Her absence hit me right in the middle of the school year, nineteen days before my Bitter Sixteenth birthday, shortly before the turn of this century. Humankind survived Y2K, but my world came to an end.

Here's the kind of best friend Hope was (is) to me: She was the only person who understood why I couldn't stand the Clueless Crew (as Manda, Sara, and Bridget were collectively known before Manda slept with Bridget's boyfriend, Burke). And when I started changing the lyrics to pop songs as a creative way of making fun of them, she showcased her numerous artistic talents by recording herself singing them (with her own piano accompaniment), compiling the cuts on a CD (*Now, That's What I Call Amusing!*, Volume 1), and designing a professional-quality cover complete with liner notes ("Very special *muchas gracias* go out to Julio and Enrique Iglesias for all the love and inspiration you've given me over the years. *Te amo y te amo. . .*") I'm listening to her soaring rendition of "Cellulite" (aka Sara's song) right now. (Sung to the tune of the Dave Matthews Band's "Satellite.")

Cellulite, on my thighs

Looks like stucco, makes me cry

Butt of blubber

Cellulite, no swimsuit will do

I must find a muumuu

But I can't face those dressing-room mirrors

[Chorus]

Creams don't work, and squats, forget it!

My parents won't pay for lipo just yet

My puckered ass needs replacing

Look up, look down, it's all around

My cellulite.

If that isn't proof that Hope was the only one who laughed at my jokes and sympathized with my tears, I don't know what is. We still talk on the phone and write letters, but it's never been enough. And unlike most people my age, I think the round-the-clock availability of e-mail and interactive messaging is an inadequate substitute for face-to-face, heart-to-heart contact. This is one of the reasons I am a freak. Speaking of . . .

Trauma #2: I had suck-ass excuses for friends. My parents thought that I had plenty of people to fill the void left by Hope, especially Bridget. She is Gwyneth blond with a bodacious booty and Hollywood ambitions. I am none of these things. We share nothing in common other than the street we've lived on since birth.

My parents also had a difficult time buying my loneliness because it was well known that Scotty, His Royal Guyness and Grand Poo-bah of the Upper Crust, had a crush on me. This was—and still is—inexplicable since he never seems to understand a single thing that comes out of my mouth. I found the prospect of having to translate every utterance exhausting and exasperating. I didn't want to date Scotty just to kill time. He has since proven me right by banging bimbo after bimbo, all of whose first names invariably end in *y*.

My "friendship" with the Clueless Two, Manda and Sara, certainly didn't make my life any sunnier, especially after Manda couldn't resist her natural urge to bang Bridget's boyfriend, and Sara couldn't resist her inborn instinct to blab to the world about it.

And finally, to make matters worse, Miss Hyacinth Anastasia Wallace, the one girl I thought had friend potential, turned out to be a Manhattan celebute hoping to gain credibility by slumming at Pineville High for a marking period or two, then writing a book about it, which was optioned by Miramax before she completed the spell check on the last draft, and will be available in stores nationwide just in time for Christmas.

Trauma #3: My parents didn't—and still don't—get it. As I've already mentioned, my parents told me that I was overreacting to the loss of my best friend. My mother thought I should channel all my angry energy into becoming a boy magnet. My father wanted me to harness it toward becoming a long-distance-running legend. My parents had little experience in dealing with my unique brand of suburban-high-school misanthropy because my older sibling, Bethany, was everything I was not: uncomplicated, popular, and teen-magazine pretty.

Trauma #4: I was unable to sleep. I developed chronic insomnia after Hope moved. (I currently get about four hours of REM every night—a huge improvement.) Bored by tossing and turning, I started to sneak out of the house and go running around my neighborhood. These jaunts had a soothing, cathartic effect. It was the only time my head would clear out the clutter.

On one of those early-morning runs, I tripped over an exposed root and broke my leg. I was never able to walk again. My dad was devastated, but secretly I was relieved. I never liked having to win, and was grateful for an excuse to suck.

Trauma #5: My menstrual cycle went MIA. My ovaries shut down in response to the stress, lack of sleep, and overtraining. I was as sexually mature as your average kindergartener.

Trauma #6: I developed a sick obsession with He Who Shall Remain Nameless. He wasn't my boyfriend, but He was more than just a friend. I was able to tell Him things that I couldn't share with Hope. When I couldn't run anymore, His voice soothed me, and I was actually able to fall asleep again. My period even returned, welcoming me back to the world of pubescence.

His motives weren't as pure as I thought they were. Whatever relationship we had was conceived under false pretenses. I was an experiment. To see what would happen when the male slut/junkie of Pineville High—who just happened to be my best friend's dead brother's drug buddy—came on to the virgin Brainiac. He thought that confessing His sinful intentions on that fateful New Year's Eve would lead to forgiveness, but it just made things worse. I was profoundly disappointed in Him—and myself—for ever thinking that He could've replaced Hope.

No one can. Or should. Or will.

the third

When I was in first grade, my teacher wanted to bump me up two years in school. I was already reading, writing, and not wetting my overalls, which apparently put me years ahead of my peers. Miss Moore told my parents that I would be more intellectually stimulated if I was with third graders. I think she just wanted me out of her sight. I was bored out of my mind in Miss Moore's class and had no problem letting her know it.

"Miss Moore the Bore! Miss Moore the Bore!" I'd sing, over and over again.

My parents negged the skip idea, of course, arguing that speeding up my academic growth would have a negative effect on my social development. They were afraid that if I was two years younger than all the other kids, I would be on the receiving end of countless wedgies. So, with the exception of the two hours I spent with accelerated third-grade reading and math groups, I spent the rest of the schoolday with children my own age, learning how to play nice.

I soon found a way to combat boredom in the middle of **B** is for **B**oy and **B**aby and **B**ear lessons. I'd clutch my chunky blue pencil like a microphone and walk around the classroom conducting imaginary TV interviews, but not with the classmates I was supposed to be bonding with. No, I'd pose in-depth questions to the chalkboard, the fern, or whatever inanimate object had a lot to say that day. *Does*

tickle when we write on you? Would you like to be iced-tead instead of watered? Thus, despite my parents' best efforts, I still ended up being a freak.

So I wish that my parents had skipped me, if only to provide an acceptable excuse for my inability to relate to anyone. It would have been all *my parents' fault!* As it is now, I have no one to blame but myself. More important, if my parents had skipped me two grades, I would already have my freshman year of college behind me, and not just be prepping for a six-week-long collegelike experience SPECIAL.

Never have cinder-block walls been so inviting! Never have I been so intoxicated by the scent of industrial-strength antiseptic! Never has a glorified cot with a one-inch-thick mattress seemed so comfy! Never have I been so excited by the idea of writing for six hours a day, five days a week! Never have I been so happy to see my parents pull out of the parking lot!

My dad is still pissed off that I chose SPECIAL over cross-country camp. Angry sweat on his bald head sizzled as he tried to transform the former into the latter. He's still got the sturdy, muscular frame of the star point guard he was back in the day, but the way he moped and slumped around campus gave him the appearance of a man whose athleticism was limited to beer-guzzling weekends at the Bowl-a-Rama.

Cross-country camp is just what the doctor ordered. Literally. My orthopedist said that with the proper training regimen, I could easily get back into my record-breaking shape, completely disregarding my total lack of interest in doing so. See, as a senior, a two-year captain, and four-year varsity veteran, I have a moral obligation as a mighty, mighty Pineville High Seagull to train harder than ever to overcome the leg injury that provided my father with enough video footage last spring for *Notso Darling's Agony of Defeat*, Volumes 3 and 4 (both of which will be available on DVD any day now).

When he wasn't acting depressed for my benefit, Dad spent most of the afternoon pointing out good places for me to run. This is a supreme example of parental cluelessness, as he has no inkling that my stellar SATs have made me less inclined to break a sweat than ever.

"Those stairs are good for building your uphill strength. The perimeter around the quad is roughly a quarter mile—you can do sprints around the path. If you eat dinner at the cafeteria on South campus, you can get in six miles a day right there."

Right before he left, he gave me a six-week training schedule, forty-two hard-core workouts that I'm somehow supposed to squeeze in between my seminars. Then he kissed me on the cheek and said, "If you sit on your ass thinking about artsy-fartsy crap all summer, you'll pay for it in September."

Thanks, Dad. I love you, too. I didn't even bother telling him that according to MY DAILY SCHEDULE, I will have little time to sit on my ass to *take* a crap, let alone contemplate it, which is just the way I like it. Being Busy = Avoiding My Issues. He of all people should appreciate this, as someone who hops on his bike and rides around greater Pineville (an oxymoron, by the way) for hours whenever I'm "testing his limits."

Mom may be in real estate, but I think interior design is her true calling. She was in full-on Martha Stewart mode. As with a sleepwalker, it's best not to interrupt her, or she could go psycho and strangle me with the behind-the-door shoe organizer. So I just watched as she buzzed around the room, blond hair bouncing, perky as the cheerleader *she* used to be. She unpacked all my clothes and arranged my closet so it would "meet its full stowing potential." She didn't think the room was "maximizing its blank space" and rearranged the beds and the desks before my roommate could arrive and protest the takeover of her half of the room.

Two hours past check-in, and she still hasn't shown up. According to the pink construction-paper toe shoe on the door, her name is Mary DePasquale. Since Jessica Darling is written on a yellow construction paper pencil, I would assume that the toe shoe means that the mysterious Ma

DePasquale is a dancer. That is all I know about the person who will be sleeping less than a foot away from me for the next six weeks of “sharing ideas and making memories with other highly motivated talented New Jersey teens . . . one hundred actors, singers, dancers, musicians, visual artists, and writers who will shape the cultural landscape for years to come.”

Bridget is the only other student from Pineville High who was accepted to this “highly competitive nationally recognized program,” so it’s pretty much impossible to buy into all the brochure’s rah-rah change-the-world rhetoric. Bridget would rather shape up her ass than shape the cultural landscape.

MEOW-ZA! Got any nip for my cattitude?

Bridget is still offended by my decision not to room with her. When she found out that we had both been accepted, she automatically assumed we’d stay together, exhibiting the special kind of naïveté that is sometimes refreshing—but more often annoying—in this cynical world.

“Don’t you want to make a *new* lifelong friend?” I said, intentionally hitting her weak spot, which is her unwavering need to “connect” with people.

“And, like, you do?”

Valid point. But I was not going to cave in. The mysterious Mary DePasquale was better than the certainty of living with Bridget. I know exactly what my summer would be like if I lived with her. Until I bonded with Hope in middle school, I spent the first dozen years of my life playing the quirky best friend to Bridget’s leading lady—you know, the comic sidekick whose average appearance seemed downright troll-like when sharing the frame with the incandescent, above-the-marquee beauty. Like Lili Taylor in *Say Anything*. Or Lili Taylor in *Mystic Pizza*. Or Lili Taylor in any movie, *ever*.

But turning her down did me little good. This dorm has forty rooms on four floors. Yet is it any surprise that Bridget has been assigned a room just two doors down?

“You can ignore me if you want to,” she said with a pout.

I should give Bridget more credit because the acting program had more applicants than any other, but I probably won’t. I’m pissed at her for crashing what was supposed to be *my* summertime banishment. Dropping out of Pineville society had a purpose, you know. This was supposed to be my test run for college, my only opportunity to practice spinning my personality into a more alluring and/or amusing alternative to the Real Me. I could’ve worked out all the kinks this summer so I don’t waste a moment of real college life next September.

For example (and this is just an example, one of many possibilities), I could’ve written erotica and transformed myself into suburban New Jersey’s jailbait answer to Anaïs Nin. No one would’ve known any better to question the authenticity. I mean, what kind of starved-for-attention sicko would make up a whole new identity for herself just for amusement’s sake? Oh, yeah. That’s right. One who wanted to score a book contract, a movie deal, and an acceptance letter from Harvard. None other than the trustafarian turncoat herself, Miss Hyacinth Anastasia Wallace. Ack.

Too bad Bridget’s pathological honesty makes such a temporary image makeover impossible for me. I can just imagine her calling out my bullshit in front of my SPECIAL classmates. “Jess is *virgin*. Like, what does she know about throbbing, pulsating passion?”

While I don’t look forward to exhausting the energy it will require to ignore Bridget all summer, I do look forward to all the possibilities of getting out of Pineville, mostly (as much as I hate to admit it because it gives in to my girliest tendencies) the chance that I’ll meet the magnetic, brilliant boy who proves once and for all that a particular Pineville High student, He Who Shall Remain Nameless, does not corner the market on magnetism or brilliance.

the fifth

The first two days of SPECIAL are devoted to Orientation, during which we're supposed to meet people and get cozy with the campus. Instead of just letting us meet people on our own, in a natural, uncontrived way, the powers that be organize agonizing events like last night's Get-to-Know-Yourself Games.

It was during the GTKY Games that I looked into the face of pure evil. She wore blue eye shadow and hot-pink spandex leggings, and went by the name of Pammi. She had eighties soap-opera hair and a well-rehearsed bubblyness that instantly reminded me of Brandi, the school's mental-health "expert," with whom I had several run-ins last year. I swear Pineville's Professional Counselor and Pammi were separated at birth, with only one brain between them. Pammi is one of the teachers in the acting program (lucky, lucky Bridget), but for last night she was the "Play Leader," a sort of referee for these inane games. Her main responsibilities were (1) *whoo-hooing* at random intervals, (2) shouting the rules for the next GTKY game, and (3) blowing the start signal into the beak of a plastic whistle shaped—inexplicably—like a toucan.

For example:

"*Whoo-hoo!* Find each and every person in the program who shares your birth month! Go!"

Tweet!

Then I would have to find each and every person in the program who shared my birth month until all one hundred of us were in the proper zodiacological grouping.

Or:

"*Whoo-hoo!* Dance butt-to-butt with someone wearing the same color shirt as you but who is not in your birth month group! Go!"

Tweet!

And then I would have to dance butt-to-butt with someone who was also wearing a white shirt but who was *not* born in January.

This went on for three hours.

They can't possibly make us do this during Freshman Orientation next year, can they? I don't get how this is supposed to help us fit in. In theory, you're supposed to get everyone's names and become lifelong friends. I literally had contact with half the kids here last night, but how in hell do they expect me to differentiate one of my butt-to-butt dancing partners from another? Am I supposed to randomly rub my buttocks up against people to see if we've bonded booties before? "Yes, the particular musculature of your ass does feel familiar. I remember you now!" Duh.

Now that I think about it, buttocks-bumping was an unintentionally appropriate prelude to the fun we have in store for the next month. The unspoken objective for the overwhelming majority of SPECIAL students has clearly revealed itself, and it's a lot more straightforward than the enrichment crap listed in the brochure: GET LAID.

To this end, the girls on my floor have devoted much time to the creation of the Lucky Seven, an official designation of the most doable guys in the program. Girls outnumber guys seventy-two to twenty-eight, so the competition is fierce. SPECIAL is a haven for hetero boys whose interest in theater arts has inevitably led to chants of "Fag!" and other homophobic taunts at their respective high schools. This is their chance to shine. But even after taking their hardships into consideration, only seven made the cut. Very lucky for them, indeed. Very unlucky for me. See, I made butt-to-butt contact with each and every one of the Lucky Seven, none of which was a gluteal love connection.

Take "the vocal music hottie," Derek, for example. The mere mention of my name inspired him to break out into a Broadway show-tune version of the 1981 Rick Springfield tune "Jesse's Girl." That was unwise for two reasons: (1) I introduced myself as Jessica, not Jessie. I loathe being called Jessica (Almost as much as I loathe it when my dad calls me Notso, as in Jessica Notso Darling. Har-dee-har-har. It's even more hilarious *now* than it was the first billion times he said it.) (2) The song "Jesse's

Girl” is sung by a guy (Rick Springfield) who wants another guy’s (Jesse’s) girlfriend (name unknown). For the song “Jesse’s Girl” to apply to me, it would have to be a song about Rick’s lesbian envy, or something like that.

I tried explaining this to Derek, to which he replied, “Well, excuse me, Miss Buzzkill.”

I see my reputation has preceded me.

The only other notable Lucky Seven exchange was with “the saxophone player hottie.”

“I’m Mike,” he said, swiveling his butt against my shoulder blades. He was nearly a foot taller than me. “What’s yours?”

“Jessica.”

“Jessica what?”

“Jessica Darling.”

“Get the fuck out!” he yelled, bringing our butt-to-butt dance to a screeching halt.

“I will not,” I said. “That’s my name.”

He snickered.

“Seriously, what’s your problem?”

Snicker. Snicker. Snicker.

“What?”

“You look different in person. . . .”

I stood there with my hands on my hips, glaring.

“You usually look like a glazed doughnut.”

More glaring.

“Glazed doughnut. Get it?”

“I know we just met, but now you’re pissing me off.”

He held out his hand. “I’m honored to meet you, Jessica Darling, the Queen of Anal as voted by the 1997 Adult Video Awards.”

Jesus Christ. If telling a girl she shares a name with a porn queen who specializes in butt sex qualifies as wooing these days, I’m signing up for the nunnery tomorrow.

The upside to all this is that at least I know for sure, on Day One of Orientation, that there is no hope. Not one shred of hope that I will find my true love. Not one sliver of hope that I will meet the one who will permanently erase the memory of He Who Shall Remain Nameless.

It’s good to get that out of the way. Now I can just move on.

Of course, it would be much easier to forget He Who Shall Remain Nameless and move on if I stopped having XXX-rated dreams about him.

Oh, Christ. That’s exactly the type of thing that warrants a journal burning.

the sixth

The very notion of being defrocked by a teacher is nothing more than comedic fodder for girls in the Pineville school district. A sorrier assemblage of maleness is unlikely to be found anywhere in the world. Hope and I once tried compiling a list of the hottest teachers when we were sophomores, and it turned into a carnal cavalcade of freaks, starting with Mr. “Bee Gee” Gleason, the history teacher whose irony-free wardrobe consists of polyester bell-bottoms and butterfly collars, and ending with Mr. “Rico Suave” Ricardo, my homeroom teacher, whose party-in-the-back, all-business-up-front mullet is an engineering marvel requiring no small amount of technical know-how and a complete

assortment of mousses, gels, and hair sprays.

I lamented the dearth of hot male teachers, but now I realize it was a blessing. My academic record would not be as impressive had I been distracted by the likes of Professor Samuel MacDougall, who can credit three novels, two works of nonfiction, and one hot piece of ass to his name. Finally! A new Obsessive Object of Horniness. OOOH!

“Call me Mac,” he said.

Mackadocious is more like it.

“For the next month, I will be your writing instructor. . . .”

Lip Macking Good.

“It was Alfred, Lord Tennyson, who said, ‘Words, like Nature, half reveal and half conceal the Soul within. . . .’ ”

Big Mac Attack.

“Here, in the next five weeks, I hope you do more revealing than concealing. . . .”

Oh, I’ll reveal more than that if you want me to, Mac Daddy.

“You will read and write for six hours a day, five days a week. There will be a morning workshop lasting three hours. Then a break for lunch, followed by an afternoon workshop. You will be expected to share your writing and critique each other’s work, which will help you become more careful readers and better blahdiddyblahblahblah . . .”

That’s where I kind of zoned out. Maybe it’s the humidity, but Jesus Christ, Mac brings out the David Lee Roth in me. . . .

Got it bad, got it bad, got it bad . . . I’m hot for teacher.

What makes it worse is that I seem to be the only student who has fallen under his hypnotic spell. True, he’s not the obviously crushable type. He’s skinny with thick black glasses and kinky black hair that springs off his head in all directions: *SPROIIIIINNNNNNG!* See, my idea of cute comes with a minimum IQ requirement. It’s geeky cute. It’s Rivers Cuomo, not Justin Timberlake. It’s Gideon Yago, not Brian McFayden. Jimmy Fallon, yes please! Brad Pitt, no thank you.

My mental undressing got as far as Mac’s boxer briefs when the class gasped in response to something he had said.

“What did he just say?” I whispered to a tall, anemic guy next to me, a dead ringer for the Grim Reaper. (Pun very much intended.)

“The seminar will culminate in a reading at Blood and Ink,” he replied in a subvocal growl.

This meant nothing to me. “Where?”

“Blood and Ink.”

Me, expressionless as a lifetime of Botox injections.

Grim Reaper turned to the shadowy figure sitting next to him.

“She’s never heard of Blood and Ink.”

You wouldn’t think that a girl with eight barbells in her face could be so easily horrified. I would say that all the color drained from Barbella’s face, but I was pretty sure that the vampire girl sitting behind her had drained her veins already.

Thankfully, Mac stepped in before I was ritually sacrificed.

“Blood and Ink is a performance space located in the East Village in Manhattan. It is one of the last bastions of oral storytelling. Historically, it has always been a forum where writers blahdiddyblahblahblah . . .”

I think the other reason I’m the only one Macking out is that my fellow students can only be bothered by the deepest, most intellectually rewarding pursuits.

“Now that you know what I expect of you in these next five weeks,” which I didn’t, because I hadn’t

been listening, “I’d like to find out what you hope to get out of this program. Francis Bacon said ‘Write down the thoughts of the moment. Those that come unsought are commonly the most valuable.’ For the next fifteen minutes, I want you to write in the moment. Answer these questions: Why are you here? Why did you willingly sign up for a program that traps you inside a classroom all summer long, while your friends are at the beach? More important, why do you want to write? I expect you to share your responses with the class.”

A hand shot up next to me. It was attached to another black-clad lump of a person, with skin so pale that her veins gave her a blueish hue. A vision of the Lump frolicking in the sand made me chuckle, which was not a very cool thing to do when you should be trying to make friends.

“Must I use prose? I’m a poet.”

“You can write in whatever form you feel is best for self-expression,” Mac replied.

So what did I write about? How did I account for my presence at SPECIAL? Well, without totally plagiarizing my application essay, I basically wrote that I wanted to escape another summer catering to attitudinal tourists at Wally D’s Sweet Treat Shoppe but my parents are putting every extra penny toward my college fund and would only send me to a summer program that cost little (cross-country camp) or nothing at all (SPECIAL), so I chose mental exertion over physical and applied to the writing program because I can’t sing, act, dance, paint, play the piano, or do anything else of artistic merit.

This response was deemed unacceptable by everyone in the room.

“Is that your idea of satire?” asked a guy who—literally—had the word LOSER tattooed in tiny letters across his forehead.

“Do you know how many *serious* writers were dying to get into this program?” grumbled the Grim Reaper.

“I know her type,” murmured the Lump. “She’s here so she can put one last accomplishment on her Harvard application.”

And Mac clicked his tongue. “Tch.”

I deserve this abuse, but not for the reasons they thought I did. My essay was the biggest pack of lies this side of Miss Hyacinth Anastasia Wallace. It’s one thing to lie to my (hot!) teacher. But to know I’ve sunk to a truly sad state when I’m tempted to lie in here, in the effort of making myself look better to the hypothetical reader in the future who has nothing better to do but pour over this journal. (Wouldn’t you rather beam yourself to another planet, or something twenty-third century like that?)

So in the spirit of full disclosure and unflinching honesty (that is totally unnecessary for anyone who has been reading this notebook from the beginning and sees my confession coming), I will reveal the truth. I am here for one reason.

Because *He* isn’t.

He.

Him.

HIM.

He Who Shall Remain Nameless . . .

ARRRGH.

This self-prescribed cognitive behavioral therapy isn’t getting any easier.

According to my Psych book, shrinks sometimes tell patients who have been traumatized to convince themselves that the heinous event never happened. Apparently, if the delusion lasts long enough, you’ll trick yourself into really *believing* that it did not occur. So I decided to remove the name of He Who Shall Remain Nameless from my vocabulary until I forget him entirely. At that point, He’ll still be nameless, but I won’t be excruciatingly aware of it anymore.

It's been seven months and my carefully selective amnesia hasn't kicked in yet.

~~But I wasn't about to write about Him. Nope. Just like I'm not going to think about Him now.~~
Instead I will think about Mac. And I will think about Mac *out* of his boxer briefs. . . .

the tenth

Well, after a week of endless introductions, it's official: I can't revel in my relative obscurity anymore. Until six months ago, Pineville was fairly anonymous, even to fellow New Jerseyans. Pineville High was known at all, it was only for its proximity to other notorious high schools.

Heightstown High School, for example, the upscale enclave for Wall Street commuters' kids that saw its hoity-toity reputation plummet when it was revealed that one-third of the graduating class of 1996 had contracted syphilis at one of several Senior Class Orgies organized by the student-body president in the attempt to "boost school spirit." ("Go SCO!" was a popular motto among those in the know.)

Or perhaps you recall hearing about PHS's archrival, Eastland High School, aka the Prom Mom's alma mater. Back in 1999, she left the dance floor and dropped a six-pound, two-ounce bundle of joy in the backseat of the rented limousine. Prom Mom left him screeching and covered with amniotic slime while she headed back inside and asked the deejay to play "Boom Boom Boom (Let Me Hear You Say Way-Oh)." Psychologists scratched their heads over interpreting the symbolic meaning of the song choice, oblivious to the obvious explanation, which was, simply, that she was a Hoochie Mama. (Ha. In more ways than one.)

These tabloid stories occurred at high schools less than a half hour from home, thereby providing an amusing way to pinpoint Pineville's location when introducing myself to strangers, i.e., "Oh Pineville? It's fifteen minutes from Prom Mom." I appreciated the relative anonymity, as it spared me the embarrassment of apologizing about my origins with a reflexive, "Yeah, I know. I live in the stankiest, hairiest crook within the armpit of the nation."

Here at SPECIAL, my fears have been confirmed. Pineville is now as well known as its neighbors for not one but two different claims to fame: (1) The inspiration behind Miss Hyacinth Anastasia Wallace's book and motion picture. (2) The birthplace of gangsta "pap" trailblazer Kayjay Johnson *and* the video bitch who broke his heart.

I refuse to waste ink on the former because it's only going to get worse in the coming months, but I thought that makes me want to pull out my teeth one by one with a medieval dental instrument as my SPECIAL classmates cheer me on.

I have avoided writing about the latter because I keep hoping that he will cross over into "Where are they now?" oblivion. But it's clear that neither is going to happen anytime soon. I'm known throughout the dorm as "the girl from Pineville who knows the other girl from Pineville who went to school with Kayjay Johnson!" So much for me wanting to establish an identity completely separate from Bridget's.

Karl Joseph Johnson is a shoulda-been graduate of PHS Class of 1999. He was sent to juvie after the top-notch Pineville police department discovered that he was stealing his neighbors' lawn mowers and selling them for crack money. (The giveaway? The Johnsons were the only family in the Bay Garden section of town whose lawn wasn't a weedy, overgrown mess.) But unlike every one of Pineville's juvenile delinquents before him, Johnson parlayed his petty criminal status into a full-time career when he was rechristened Kayjay, one of the five demi-himbos in the "baaaaaad" boy band Hum-V.

Because it is doubtful that Hum-V will be remembered in the annals of music history, I will briefly describe their contribution to popular culture here.

Hum-V is what I predict will be the last teenybopper trifle to come off the Orlando assembly line, a group put together in a desperately calculated attempt to cash in on TRL's *NSYNC-Eminem polarization, squeezing every last bit of air out of the barely breathing boy-band genre. Hum-V's faux-funky jams and toothachey ballads sound as synth-cheesy as their nonthreatening, harmonizing predecessors', but their lyrics are painstakingly incendiary. Hum-V is the first boy band to earn a Parental Advisory Warning label.

Kayjay was the most vocally challenged member, whose only reason for being in the group was because he had red hair and freckles. The evil geniuses behind Hum-V decided they needed Cute Redhead Freckled Juvie Boy to balance out the delicate yet deviant mix (the other fourfifths of which are Cute Baby-Faced Blond Sex Addict Boy, Cute Olive-Skinned Maybe-Italian, Maybe-Latino Junk Boy, Cute Black Gangbanger Boy, and Cute Chinese-French-Canadian-Cuban-Swedish Multicultural Gay-Bashing Boy).

Last spring, as the five Hum-V hunks poured over hundreds of eight-by-ten glossies to hand-pick the girls who would portray "bitches" in the video for their straight-to-the-middle single, "Bitch (Y U B Trippin?)," Kayjay instantly recognized the aspiring model Bridge Milhouse as none other than Pineville High's Bridget Milhokovich, the blond babe who was ranked number one on the Fuckable Freshmen List when he was a senior. Kayjay never got a crack at her before he was bounced out of PHS because Bridget was still with Burke, as he had yet to cheat on her with Manda. So to make his high-school fantasy a reality, Kayjay picked Bridget to portray the bitch who b trippin' on him. The portion of the video "plot" involved screaming at each other, then kiss-and-making-up in a torrential downpour, all shot in the slo-mo style that signifies heavy emotional stuff in the music video world.

Neither the wrath of his then-girlfriend, Shy'la, from the girl group Jillbait nor the fire-hose rain could put out the fire of Kayjay's desire. (Hmm . . . that sounds familiar. Oh, no. I think that's a line from the Hum-V Song. Christ.) Kayjay was smitten with Bridge Milhouse and was obsessed with winning her over. Bridget is a sucker for glamour and couldn't resist his offer to be his arm candy for important PR ops like movie premieres, awards shows, and parties thrown by people he'd never met. Incredibly, it only took one such outing for Bridget to discover that fame had only expanded the dimensions of Kayjay's sphincter.

"He was, like, the biggest asshole I'd ever gone out with," she reported to a rapt audience at PHS the Monday morning after the big date.

Considering that "Bitch (Y U B Trippin?)" peaked at number 8 on TRL and barely cracked the Billboard chart, Hum-V's appearance on the covers of teenybopper bibles continues to baffle me. Apparently, Hum-V's small but intense fan base—the "Hummers," as they call themselves—guarantees that Kayjay enjoys a cushy existence that has little to do with Hum-V's overall popularity. They are also responsible for the relentless haterade spewed on message boards toward "the blond babe from the video" who "broke poor Kayjay's heart" months after their one and only and very insignificant date. Bridget has vowed to never, ever date a celebrity (or quasi-celebrity) again.

"Unless it's, like, James Dean back from the dead," she says.

"Well, *that's* sensible," I say.

Though the relationship tanked, this little credit on her résumé has already made Bridget the envy of all the other girls in SPECIAL's acting program. Still, I realized that her notoriety had spread beyond the world of wanna-be actress-models when my roommate recognized Bridget right away. My roommate just happens to be Hum-V's biggest fan, or so she shrieks.

You might have noticed my roommate's conspicuous absence from my journal thus far. Every time I picked up this journal to start writing, she'd hover over my shoulder and say, "You're writing about

me, aren't you???"

This is just one of many quirks I've observed about the person with whom I'm supposed to share room for the next three weeks and five days. For the time being, I will stick to irrefutable facts untainted by my cynical analysis. We've still got a long haul ahead of us and I don't want to damn her right away with my first, second, and third impressions, as my character analyses are usually for shit. I could very well find out tomorrow that she really is cool, despite surface characteristics that indicate otherwise. If I avoid jumping to conclusions now, I won't have to feel guilty about all the mean things I'll most likely write about her later.

So here are the facts and just the facts:

Name: Mary "Call Me Chantalle" DePasquale.

Hometown: Huntsdale, which means she is from the wealthiest town in the wealthiest county in the wealthiest state in the wealthiest nation in the world.

Long-Term Goal: Principal dancer with the American Ballet Company.

Short-Term Goal: To share an unspecified "intimate moment" with each and every one of the Luck Seven. Ack.

Aesthetic Icon: It's hard to tell. Her body is so teeny that her head looks supersized in comparison, giving her the appearance of a lollipop in a tutu. She makes *me* (at five-foot-five and 105 boobles and assless pounds) look like a WWF she-male.

Telltale Quote: "Call me Chantalle." These were her first words to me. "Is Chantalle your middle name?" I asked. "Call. Me. Chantalle," she replied. Then she ripped Mary DePasquale's toe shoe off the door, the only evidence that her birth name was more spinster than Parisian prostitute. This switch is fitting, considering it took her less than twenty-four hours to provide Derek, the vocal music hottie, with a manual release. Unspecified Intimate Moment #1. Ack. The thing that really irks me about Call Me Chantalle's name change is that it's precisely the kind of summer identity-morphing that I can't get away with. Damn that Bridget!

Potentially Troubling Fact: On the bookshelves above her bed, Call Me Chantalle displays three foot-high Nutcrackers, like the hero from the ballet of the same name, a mere fraction of the extensive collection she keeps in a display case at home. They are all dressed in military garb but carry different weapons—a gun, a sword, a British bobby baton—as if they were guarding her virginity. They'd better be on high alert, because I walked in on her in full-frontal frottage with "the saxophone player hottie" on Day 5. Unspecified Intimate Moment #2. Ack.

Positively Troubling Fact: Call Me Chantalle brought a half-dozen bottles of Summer's Eve body douche, which she keeps in plain view in her closet, not to mention the Summer's Eve body wash in her shower caddy, and the travel-size Summer's Eve disposable wipes stashed in her backpack. What makes this hygienic hoarding so odd is that she doesn't even try to hide it, which makes me feel like I'm wrong for thinking it's weird. But it *is* weird, isn't it? Then again, maybe there's something that I've been doing in the privacy of my own bedroom my whole life that I think is perfectly normal but is actually illegal in thirty-two states. Call Me Chantalle could observe the way I clip my toenails and think, My God, how can she cut the pinky toenail first, when every sane person knows you *finish* with the littlest piggie???

I am doing my best to be positive, by celebrating Call Me Chantalle's quirks. After all, isn't this the beauty of having a roommate? Getting a glimpse of someone else's private world and discovering that everyone is as big a freak as you are, just in different ways?

I got a postcard today from Hope, who's in London, where she has had a far more interesting assortment of cool characters to observe. I'd like to think that she's got the advantage of a fascinating location, but I know that it's just the way she is. At first, strangers are struck by her appearance—six feet of luminous, alabaster skin topped by wild, flame-colored curls. But then they're drawn to her

warmth, sensitivity, and good humor. No matter where she ends up at college, Hope will make lasting connections with the chatty girls in her dorm, the brooding guys in her art classes, the awkward sopranos and tenors in her choir, whoever. *She* could find redeeming qualities in Call Me Chantalle that's for sure.

I'm afraid that Hope will still be as vital to my sanity but I won't be as important to hers, simply because she will have made new friends to fill the void. I don't think she'll forget me, but she'll move beyond me, because that's the healthy thing to do when your best friend lives a thousand miles away and you can only talk to her once a week, and see her once a year.

Maybe I should try to get used to this now. Maybe I should accept that this journal is the only place that's safe to express what's really going on inside my mixed-up mind. Or maybe I should give other people the benefit of the doubt. Maybe, just maybe, I should stop blaming SPECIAL or Pineville for not serving up my soul mate on a silver platter with caviar on the side. Drop me anywhere on the map and I'd quickly prove that location isn't the problem—it's *me*.

the seventeenth

My trial run for college is still not going well. My classmates hate me. I should have known SPECIAL would be a haven for Noir Bards, and that they would have no tolerance for a fraud like me.

Pretentious and depressed, a Noir Bard is very big on the fact that he/she is a writer. They write a lot about writing, often rhyming words like *verse* and *hearse*. To them, black is always the new black. They spend a lot of time at poetry slams and other literary events, chain-smoking and washing down Paxil with (black) coffee. Their intricate facial hardware and Goth getups are painfully obvious cries for help. Here's a brief archetypal member profile, very much tainted by my cynical analysis. (But that's okay because cynicism is in keeping with the true, blackened spirit of the Noir Bard.)

Name: Rebecca Adams (aka the Female Nosferatu).

Hometown: Cherry Hill, by way of Transylvania.

Long-Term Goal: To be the next Sylvia Plath or Anne Sexton. (Read: Suicidal, then dead.)

Short-Term Goal: To creep me out.

Aesthetic Icon: Winona Ryder in *Beetlejuice*.

Telltale Quote: "Why is/Anyone/Anywhere?" (From her poem "Dying All the Time.")

Potentially Troubling Fact: She has fangs. Genuine fangs, not those detachable ones that club kids wear to torment their elders.

Positively Troubling Fact: She bares them whenever Mac calls on me in class.

I admit that there are certain aspects of my personality—my chronic, low-grade depression, for example—that would prompt Pineville High classmates to vouch for my card-carrying status in the Noir Bard camp, despite the lack of funereal tones in my wardrobe. But now that we've shared our work with one another over the past few weeks, it is clear that I am not one of them.

Take today's assignment, for example. We were asked to write a dramatic monologue in which the character talked about a Life-Changing Experience. Proving the theory that writers are a tortured bunch, I was the only student in the writing program who didn't write about being rehabbed, raped, or rejected by a parent in a viciously ambivalent child-custody case. I've never felt so normal in my entire life. Of course, SPECIAL is the one place on earth where being normal is a liability.

My monologue, told from Hope's perspective about moving to Tennessee, was not very well received. After I read it out loud, Mac made it clear that I am probably the most sunshiney, superficial

student he's ever had. This, by the way, is making it much more difficult to have a crush on him, but not impossible.

"'The harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph,' " Mac said. "Thomas Paine."

"Uh, okay."

"Dig deeper, Jessica. Work harder. Struggle with your writing. It will be worth it."

"Uh, how?"

"Tch." Mac grabbed two handfuls of his curls, right above both ears. "Any suggestions?"

"Use her departure as a metaphor for man's journey to the grave," urged Loser.

"Make the narrator a voice from the grave," suggested the Grim Reaper.

"But she's not dead," I argued, not so eager to kill off my best friend for the sake of satisfying the bloodthirsty group.

"Do you know anyone who's moved on to the next realm?" asked Barbella.

"Her brother died of a drug overdose when he was eighteen."

"That is the best thing I've heard out of you since we've been here," said Nosferatu.

"Write it from *his* perspective," said the Lump.

There were nods of approval all around the room.

And Mac said, "Tch."

I don't think it's fair for me to steal someone else's tragedy for the sake of completing an assignment. This makes it very hard for me to "dig deeper and darker." We all know that nothing *really* bad has ever happened to me—just take a look at my Top Trauma List. Every day, I wait for that doomsday shoe to drop on my head and crush my spirit.

If my classmates have any say in the matter, that shoe will be made by one Dr. Marten.

Until the Doc drops, what can I possibly have to write about? What made the admissions people believe that I belong here? Why didn't I choose cross-country camp instead? Oh, that's right. Because I suck. I broke every school distance record in my sophomore year. The only thing I've broken since then is my leg. I'm still waiting for the day I finally shatter my father's dreams of NCAA glory.

But right now, limping through workouts seems preferable to this. I may be the best writer at Pineville High, but that really isn't saying much now, is it? I just don't have it in me. If there's one thing I've learned at the New Jersey Summer Pre-College Enrichment Curriculum in Artist Learning, it's this: I may be SPECIAL, but I'm not all that special. Good thing I figured this out here and now instead of next year.

the twenty-first

Having lost all hope for friendship with my classmates, I've tried to expand my social sphere here at SPECIAL, not because I really want to but because I think it would be a good run-through for college.

Spurred by Bridget's endorsements or—more likely—in desperate need of one more order, which would put them over the twelve-dollar Chinese delivery minimum, her acting-class buddy Ashleigh knocked on my door and invited me to dine with them. I was hungry and tired of the dining hall's grilled-cheese sandwiches, so I accepted. Against my better judgment, mind you, because I do not like Ashleigh.

In Ashleigh, I've discovered a unique breed of girlie annoyingness, different from that of the Clueless Two. Manda and Sara are annoying because their whole belief system is in opposition to mine.

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