

10 Things to Do Before I Die

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Delacorte Press

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10 THINGS TO DO BEFORE I DIE



A Novel By
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Delacorte Press

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For Paulina and Georgia

Prologue: The Story of My Death

My name is Ted Burger. I am sixteen years old. I am an only child. I live in New York City.

I Will not live to see seventeen.

What else? Let's see. . . . My voice is pretty deep but it squeaks sometimes, like an old rusty bicycle. I have curly brown hair. "Brillo pad hair," in my best friend Mark's Words. I am tall and skinny. My fingers are, too. They look like twigs. "Musician's fingers," says my guitar teacher, Mr. Puccini. (Translation: "Girlie fingers.") I'm good at blowing stuff off. I have a hard time admitting certain things to myself. According to my parents, I have a "nutty, Borscht Belt sense of humor!" (I include the exclamation point because they tend to speak at a high-pitched volume.) What they mean is that I'm a third-rate clown, but they aren't really ones to talk.

This is the story of my death.

It starts the Way all my stories do, as a bad joke Whose tragic punch line somehow ends up signifying my Whole life. Or death, in this case. Ha! Ha . . . ha . . . okay, maybe my parents are right. Maybe I am a clown. I don't have the greatest comic timing. I rarely instigate—bad things simply happen to me. Pie-in-the-face sorts of things. But don't just take my Word for it. Consider the fortune I received on my sixteenth birthday (ironically, my last birthday ever, although I didn't know it at the time) When my parents took me to the Hong Phat Noodle House—and I swear I am not making this up:

You will never have much of a future if you look
for it in a cookie at a Chinese Restaurant. ☺

My mom's fortune promised a lifetime of infinite happiness. My dad's, a lifetime of Wealth and fulfillment. When I complained to the Waiter about mine, he told me that I should be pleased. "It's true, young man," he said With a smile. "One should never look for one's destiny in a dessert item. One should look for it in experience."

I agreed, sure—but deep down, I still felt sort of gypped. I asked for another one. He refused. Hong Phat policy is one fortune cookie per customer, period.

The real punch line is that I don't even like Chinese food all that much. I like french fries. But my parents forced me to go there because they said that I needed to learn how to use chopsticks. "It's a skill that Will make you part of an important demographic, dear!" Mom insisted. That's a direct quote. To this day, I have no idea What she means. (I never learned how to use chopsticks, either.) My parents Work together at the same advertising firm, so they talk a lot about stuff like "important demographics!" It's pretty much all they talk about. Maybe one day I Will understand their baffling pronouncements. I Would if I Weren't doomed to an early grave, that is.

Speaking of Which, the story of my death also starts at a restaurant. It starts at the Circle Eat Diner With Mark and his girlfriend, Nikki. I can't imagine it starting any other Way. Everything starts at the Circle Eat Diner With Mark and Nikki, at least everything that matters . . . everything that happens during those sublime, BS-filled hours When the three of us laugh and rant and eat, the hours just after school and before I have to run back home to Mom and Dad.

Okay, that's an exaggeration. I rarely have to run home to Mom and Dad. They aren't around very often. They take a lot of business trips. All of Which is a long Way of saying that I spend more time hanging out at the Circle Eat Diner With Mark and Nikki than I probably should.

Much more.

You'll see What I mean shortly. The story of my death has a very dramatic, pie-in-the-face beginning.

A Very Active Inner Life

Spring break has just started. No classes for a Whole Week! Woo-hoo! It's one of those rare gorgeous afternoons in Manhattan When the sky is swimming-pool blue and the breeze is crisp. There's no humidity at all.

Freedom! the day seems to shout. Rock and roll!

Well, the day might seem to shout that if I Were outside. Inside the Circle Eat Diner, the day doesn't seem to shout anything. It stinks of grease. The three of us are huddled over the remnants of a burger, fries, and pickle. We pretty much order the same meal every time: Circle Eat #5, the Burger/Fries Combo. I eat the fries. Mark eats the burger. Nikki eats the pickle. The Way Mark and Nikki are slouched across from me in the booth, they look more like a pair of models than a real-life couple—rail thin, dark, unblemished . . . poster children for the #5 diet.

Mark's brown hair is a mess. His ratty T-shirt bears the logo GIVE THIS DAWG A BONE. His brown eyes are Wild. They're always Wild. This stems from a belief he's had since he Was a little kid that something bizarre and miraculous could occur at any moment—a giant-squid attack, the Rapture—and When it does, it Will require his personal involvement in some Way. So he's perpetually on guard.

I envy him for this. I always have. He's never bored.

Nikki is hardly ever bored, either, but for less delusional reasons. She's got a very active inner life. This I can relate to. She's constantly turning everything over in her mind—every event and conversation, no matter how trivial—and milking it for its hidden Wisdom. You can tell from the Way she listens, from the Way she looks you in the eye . . . you can even tell from how she dresses: mostly in black. With Nikki, blackness doesn't have an agenda. She isn't trying to play the role of a misunderstood hipster or a sullen goth. She isn't trying to fit in With any crowd, either. (To be honest, the three of us don't really belong to any crowd. Not unless you include the other people Who hang out in the Circle Eat Diner all the time, like Old Meatloaf Lady and Guy With Crumbs in His Beard.) Nikki just doesn't put a Whole lot of thought into her Wardrobe. She's got too much else going on inside. Once she told me that the only reason she dresses in black is so her clothes Will match her hair. I loved that.

Her eyes are What really tell the story, though. They're like onyx, calm to the point of being alien, the eyes of the extraterrestrials you see in UFO documentaries. They radiate that same mysterious hypnotic "We-come-in-peace" vibe, even When she's joking around or scheming.

Funny: I probably think more than Nikki does about the Way she looks. Ha! Not that I'd ever admit that to her. I definitely Wouldn't admit it to Mark. I have a hard enough time admitting it to myself.

Wet Willy

Mark's fingers start to drum on our Formica tabletop. He's grinning. I can tell he's about to make Wisecrack. Sure enough, apropos of nothing, he says: "Dude, all you ever do is talk. Let's figure out something for you to do for once."

I haven't been talking. I haven't said a Word in the last two minutes. I've been busy shoving soggy fries into my mouth. I know What he means, though.

"Like What?" I ask, playing along.

"How should I know, Burger? Something. Anything."

Mark has never called me by my first name. Not once. Not even When We first met back in the third grade, When our teacher, Ms. Bellevue, pulled me aside and introduced us. "Ted Burger, this is Mark Singer. Mark is an only child, too. Did you know that? You have something in common!" I didn't know What to say. Mark responded by licking his finger and sticking it my ear. The old *Wet Willy*. "No, that's not appropriate!" Ms. Bellevue shrieked. She then sentenced him to a long time-out in the hall, after Which Mark called me every permutation of Burger under the sun—Crapburger, Snotburger, Buttburger. . . .

The point being: even my own name can be used as a punch line. Most things can and always have been, especially in Mark's capable hands.

"How about if I start Working here as a fry cook?" I suggest. "I'm serious." Actually, I'm not, but Mark's accusation has provided a convenient excuse to segue into some juicy Circle Eat gossip. "I know they're looking for a new one. You know that guy Leo? He got fired."

"Leo got fired?" Nikki gasps. "The guy Who looks like you?"

"He doesn't really look that much like me, does he?"

Nikki just smiles.

"Well, I'd say he rates about an eight on the Afro Q-Tip meter," Mark says. "You rate about a nine point-five."

"Hey, I got the look, right? Why not flaunt it?"

Mark grins. "Amen, Burger. Amen."

Mark has told me a million times that I look like a Q-Tip With an extra-thick cotton swab at the top end—very skinny With "Brillo pad" hair. Personally, I believe Leo rates higher on the Afro Q-Tip meter than I do. Come to think of it, Mark himself rates the highest. But there's no point in arguing.

Mark came up With the line first, so I can't throw it back at him. Besides, once you've been saddled With a disparaging product comparison, it's tough to shake.

"So When did Leo get fired?" Nikki presses.

"Last Week," Mark says. "You didn't know?"

"I had no idea," she says. "We Were here last Week. Almost every day."

"Yeah, except Tuesday," he says. "That's When it happened. I heard it Was crazy. I heard he Was ranting about going on a killing spree."

"Are you serious?" Nikki glances toward the kitchen, her eyes Widening. She lowers her voice and leans across the table. "But he's so nice."

"Yeah, Well, you know What they say about 'nice.'" Mark makes air quotes With his greasy fingers.

"What do they say about 'nice'?" I ask.

"Pets are nice," he and Nikki chant in unison, as if reading from the same Hong Phat fortune cookie. "People are dogs."

I laugh. "I see. Did you guys hear that at an animal-rights rally?"

"My dad said it," Mark says. "He's looking for a 'thing.'"

"A thing?"

"That's What he said." He gobbles down some more of the burger.

"We Were hanging out With Mark's dad the other night," Nikki explains. "He's been acting sort of sad lately. So I asked him What Was Wrong. He said that he doesn't have a 'thing'—you know, like a hobby or a passion or Whatever. He said that he goes to Work, he comes home and Watches the news, blah, blah, blah. So Mark told him that maybe he should get a pet. You know, like a big furry dog, and they could play together, and go on long Walks, and become best buddies. He thought this Was really funny. He Was like, 'I already have a crazy son. Isn't that enough?' And Mark Was like, 'But pets are nice.' And he said, 'Son, you know, you're right. Pets are nice. People are dogs.'"

I glance at Mark. "Wow. Heavy. What did you say to that?"

He shrugs at me With his mouth half full and ketchup dribbling down his chin. "Woof, Woof."

Things I Love About Rachel Klein

It's easy to see Why Mark and Nikki make a great couple. For one, they look alike. They're both blessed With the same Mediterranean complexion, the same carefree thrift-store style. They've also nailed the elusive "We're-hot-and-We're-comfortable-With-it" vibe. They could be brother and sister. But it goes beyond just a physical resemblance. It's metaphysical. They're almost yin and yang. They share lots of private jokes and long, meaningful glances. They finish each other's sentences. They even hang out With each other's parents. It's as if they're adults.

I don't get it. Because my own girlfriend—

Let's just say that our relationship rests a few rungs lower on the maturity ladder.

It's not that I don't love Rachel Klein. Of course I love her. What's not to love? There's her blonde hair (short cropped and funky), her blue eyes (soft), her fashion sense (bohemian: sandals and floral dresses), her GPA (4.0 and rising), her sense of social commitment (she's a member of Amnesty International), the fact that she's really—Well, for lack of a better Word—nice . . .

Yet . . . there are some things I don't love about Rachel Klein. In no particular order:

She thinks I have a crush on Nikki.

She bugs me about hanging out at the Circle Eat Diner so much. She once asked me—very, very nicely, of course: "Why spend all your time there With them When you could be spending time With me?"

She Won't have sex until she's "ready."

See number 3.

The Swirling Vortex Inside My Head

Before I get back to the impending catastrophe at the diner, though, there's something I should mention. The only reason I was lucky enough to meet Rachel in the first place (and I know I was lucky) is because I approached her on a dare, instigated by Mark and Nikki. I wouldn't even have a girlfriend at all—much less one to complain about—if it weren't for them.

Here's what happened:

It was four months ago, the week before Thanksgiving break. Classes had just ended for the day. Mark and I were out loitering with the rest of the kids on the school's front stoop, shivering in the wind. We were waiting for Nikki.

Suddenly Mark spotted Rachel Klein.

"Burger, there's that new junior," he whispered. "You know, the Amnesty International chick? I saw her checking you out."

I was tempted to give Mark a wet Willy, but it would have been giving him too much credit. If he wanted to pull a prank, he had to tell a better lie than that.

"I'm serious, Burger," he said. "You should go up to her and introduce yourself."

"Are we being filmed for some sort of reality show right now?" I asked him dully.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, you are trying to set me up for some kind of nationally televised humiliation, right?"

Mark scowled at me. "Dude, you gotta drop the clown act. It's getting old."

"Excuse me?"

"Why don't you believe that Rachel Klein would be interested in you?"

"Gee, Mark, I don't know. Look at her. Now look at me. You do the math."

"The question you should be asking is: Why wouldn't she be interested in you?"

I offered a guess: "Because she's cute and I look like a Q-tip with a Brillo pad afro on top?"

"Burger," he moaned. "You're a stallion, dude! And who cares about looks, anyway? She obviously sees the swirling vortex inside your head. That's what matters."

"She sees the . . . What?"

~~“She sees that you’re a tortured soul. She sees What the rest of them don’t see, What I see. And
What Nikki sees, too. She sees that you’ve got plans. She sees that you Want something more . . . that
you sit in your room alone and play guitar for hours—that, dude, you’re a sick guitarist! She sees that
She sees that you Worship that band from Brooklyn, Fakes the Clown—”~~

“Shakes the Clown. They’re named after the movie.”

“Whatever. She sees that you Worship that band. But she sees that What you really should be doing
is starting your own band, living life like the rock star you are—”

Out of nowhere Nikki’s arms appeared around his Waist. He hugged her back. As usual, the
embrace had an oblivious, summer-blockbuster intensity; a passerby might think that Mark had just
returned home from a long War or unlawful incarceration. Finally he took a deep breath.

“All I’m saying,” he continued, “is that—”

“I should go up and introduce myself to Rachel Klein,” I finished for him.

Mark smiled, satisfied. “Exactly.”

“You mean that blond chick?” Nikki asked, letting him go. “The new chick, right? The cute one
The one Who’s so into Amnesty International? That’s so funny! I saw her checking Ted out in the
cafeteria!”

“See?” Mark said. He beamed at me in triumph. “She’s attracted to you, Burger. So What are you
gonna do? I dare you to go up to her.”

“I dare you, too,” Nikki added. “It’s about time you cashed in on your charm.”

“My charm?”

“Yes, Ted,” she said dryly. “That shy, mysterious, tortured-soul thing you Work so hard to cover up
With your clownish shenanigans? That charm?”

I didn’t reply. Instead I just blushed, like the clown I am.

Something to Think About

Now, here's a question. Hypothetically, if you approach a pretty stranger on a foolish dare in order to escape a three's-a-crowd-type situation With your best friend and his girlfriend (a situation that arises all too often), are you also partly—secretly, unconsciously—motivated by a desire to impress your best friend's girlfriend?

You don't have to answer right now. It's just something to think about.

Exit Cue

Back at the Circle Eat, Mark has Wiped our plate clean not only of hamburger, but also of grease. There's nothing left whatsoever. I can see my distorted reflection in the plate's ceramic White glaze. The guy's metabolism never ceases to amaze me. He's even taller than I am, he sucks up burgers With the efficiency of a vacuum cleaner—and he barely Weighs in at a hundred twenty pounds.

“But seriously, Burger,” he says. “What are you gonna do this spring break?”

“Well, I'm glad you asked,” I tell him. “Because for once, I have a ‘thing.’ See, Rachel is helping to organize a big student Amnesty International retreat this summer in the Catskills. It's gonna be real fun. There are gonna be a bunch of kids from all over the country, hanging out at this old camp, and tons of speakers are going to come. Diplomats, ambassadors . . . it's the kind of thing that'll look awesome for colleges, you know? But I have to Write an essay and fill out an application to get accepted. So Rachel is coming over tonight to help—”

“Whoa, slow down there, Chatty Cathy,” Mark interrupts. “I don't know about this. You're saying you're going to spend the first night of spring break Writing an essay?”

I smile. “Yes, Mark. Unlike you, I occasionally plan for the future.”

“Yeah, but you're also telling me that filling out an application for a summer retreat, Which Will take you five minutes to finish, tops, counts as doing something? I don't think so.” He adopts a pseudo-paternal tone. “And let's not forget that you really shouldn't go to the Catskills because your allergies Will act up—”

“Don't listen to him,” Nikki cuts in, elbowing Mark on the shoulder. “I think it's a great idea, Ted. It'll give you and Rachel a chance to spend some real time together, away from school, you know?”

“So how come you've never invited me on a retreat, then?” Mark asks her.

“Because you can't sit still.” She frowns at him. “And Wipe your face, for God's sake. You're disgusting.”

“Oh, sorry,” Mark says.

He Winks at me, then reaches below the table and pulls Nikki's jean jacket out of her bag, using the sleeve to clean the ketchup off his chin. But Nikki just Winks at me, too, then Wipes the ketchup-stained jacket back on Mark's face. Mark laughs. Nikki doesn't. I recognize my exit cue.

“Later, dogs,” I say, scooting out of the booth.

“Wait!” Mark Whispers. He grabs one of my knapsack straps, reining me in. “Check it out!”

My shoulders sag. “Come on, man.” I groan. “I gotta go. Anyway, I don’t feel so Well.” It’s true. My stomach is churning. Sometimes the fries at the Circle Eat don’t go down as smoothly as they should. This particular nausea is Worse than usual. It’s actually making me a little dizzy.

“Sit down,” Mark hisses, forcing me back into the seat With a violent yank.

“What’s the problem?” I ask.

He jerks a thumb toward the register. He looks panicked.

Then I see Why: that other high scorer on the Afro Q-Tip meter, the recently fired Leo, has just Walked in. He’s lurking by the door. And there’s definitely something . . . Well, a little off about him. His face is a gruesome White, except for the purple sacks under his eyes. His Brillo pad hair is a mess. He’s also Wearing a ratty black overcoat. It looks as if it’s come straight out of a Dumpster. This is conspicuous because Leo never Wears an overcoat, not even When it’s cold outside—Which it isn’t. Leo Wears a blue parka. (At least, as far as I know. And I know, having eaten his fries almost every single Weekday afternoon for the past two years.) Furthermore, Leo is now glaring at the balding young Greek guy, Greg, Who Works the front counter.

Not that any of this really grabs my attention.

No, What grabs my attention is how Leo has now jammed his right hand into his right coat-pocket. Something pointy is protruding from the fabric. This pointy thing is slowly being aimed straight at Greg—

“Everybody freeze!” Leo shrieks. “I Want to ask you something! Do you know that fired is just fried, misspelled?”

Sniveling Coward

Every cliché is Well founded. When you're face to face With death, your life really does flash before your eyes. I guess it's a lot more enjoyable to relive the past than it is to confront a deranged fry cook With a concealed gun.

So While some brave souls may try to jump in and save the day, others—namely sniveling cowards like Ted Burger—freeze up.

My brain hops the next train out of the station. I start thinking about Rachel. I realize that Rachel Will never have sex With me no matter how “ready” she is because I'll be dead. Not unless she's into necrophilia. Ha! Ha . . . no, that's not funny, either. It's not even shameful. It's despicable. But still, think about all the mistakes I made With her, about how I should have appreciated her more—again, thankfully (or not), Mark slams the brakes on this sad train of thought by jumping out of our boat and lunging at Leo.

A Round of Waters for Everyone!

“Mark!” Nikki shrieks in horror. “Don’t!”

But Mark is already in midair.

I can’t believe it. I mean, I can; this is Mark, after all—He’s going to get killed. My best friend going to get killed.

I gaze, slack jawed, as he hurtles down the aisle.

Leo seems as perplexed as the rest of us. His purple-ringed eyes narrow into slits. Oddly, though, he doesn’t move. So Mark crashes into him. The impact is a blur of black fabric. Mark’s T-shirt and Leo’s ratty overcoat meld into one. They topple to the floor. Instinctively I leap to my feet. I Watch as they Wrestle. It’s not like the Wrestling you see on TV. It’s not choreographed. It’s sloppy and awkward, and they slip on the linoleum and grunt and . . . at this point I’m having difficulty breathing. I’m also having heart palpitations. Plus my stomach feels as if it’s being ground up in a Dispose-All.

I don’t Want to start spring break like this, I frantically think. I Want to start spring break by laughing and telling jokes—I know I should dive in there and interfere, and aid my best friend in his struggle, but I can’t. I’m paralyzed.

Somehow Mark pins him.

“Yes!” I shout.

Leo tries to squirm. He’s beefier than Mark is, but Mark’s skinny limbs are stronger than they appear. He exploits the temporary advantage by shoving his hand into Leo’s overcoat. No, no, no. Don’t do that. That’s how accidents happen.

I hold my breath. Mark pulls out the gun and sticks it into Leo’s face, and . . .

“Oh my God,” Nikki Whispers.

Wait a second. Wait just a second here.

The gun is green.

Translucent green. It’s made of plastic.

It’s a Water gun.

Mark scowls at it. “What the—”

“Suckers!” Leo screams.

He flips Mark over and bolts for the exit. A second later the door slams behind him. He disappears down Seventh Avenue.

I glance at Nikki.

A shaky smile spreads across her face.

We both turn to Mark. He's still lying flat on his back on the floor.

Then slowly, very slowly, he starts to laugh.

It's over, I say to myself, fighting to catch my breath. It's all over.

In a flash Mark is scrambling to his feet and Waving the Water gun over his head. He squirts it a few times into the air— his sweaty face ecstatic, his black T-shirt soaked—and cries, “A round of Waters for everyone!”

Several customers sigh. A few burst into applause. I nearly collapse.

Mark performs a silly little dance in front of us all. I tumble back into the vinyl seat, as exhausted and triumphant as if I'd been the hero myself. Although there is a prickling in my belly, a little warning flash that maybe Mark didn't quite save us from this twisted freak, that maybe this is only the start of something much more sinister . . .

But I have an overactive imagination. It is over. Yes. Of course it is. I should know better.

That prickling is probably just Leo's last batch of fries.

Opportunity

Several long, nervous minutes go by before the Circle Eat Diner begins to settle down. In the meantime everybody decides to leave except Mark, Nikki, and me. And a funny thing happens. All the regulars take turns patting Mark on the back on their way out. None of us has ever actually communicated beyond “hi” until now. But the brief crisis has united us, made us a family. It’s like receiving line at a bar mitzvah.

“Nice Work, sport,” says Old Meatloaf Lady.

“You’ve got guts, kid!” says Guy With Crumbs in His Beard.

“Word, G.,” says P.Y.T. (Pale Young Thug, so christened because he has a machine gun tattoo on his bluish white forearm and several names crossed out under it).

Mark shrugs and thanks each one graciously.

I want to be part of this mass exodus, too. I want to pat Mark on the back and congratulate him and then get the hell out. I’m quivering and dry mouthed. Also, something is wrong with my stomach. It’s not just prickling anymore. It’s gurgling. But I can’t leave. Mark is in no hurry. He insists on staying. And I can’t blame him. Not only is he decompressing after an extremely traumatic experience (he disarmed an insane criminal, for God’s sake), Nikki is also smothering him with affection and gratitude. Which he deserves. So I don’t want to spoil the moment.

Still, I’m very relieved when Greg, the balding Greek guy behind the counter, announces: “I’m gonna call the goddamn cops. I don’t want that pecker coming back in here and scaring all my customers away.”

“Sounds good,” I reply. I stand up.

“Hey!” Nikki cries, letting go of Mark. “Where do you think you’re going?”

“I’m gonna split, too,” I say. “Just until the cops arrive and clear this up. Anyway, I should go home and get ready to meet Rachel.”

“You have plenty of time,” Mark says. “What is there to clear up? It was a water gun. The guy’s a nutcase.” He pauses. “Which is too bad because he was an awesome fry cook.”

“Not that awesome.” I groan.

“Listen, Burger, you want to know something?”

“Can I know it later?”

“I’m being serious!” he yells. “You know Why I Went after Leo? Why I really did it? To teach you a lesson, dude! To show you What it’s like to grab life by the cajones! To lead by example!”—

In spite of the nausea, I almost laugh. That might just be the silliest lie he’s ever told. Even Nik rolls her eyes. I know exactly Why he Went after Leo: for no other reason than that he’s an impulsive maniac. But I also know now that I have no choice but to stay. If I bolt, he’ll chase me down. This classic Mark: he’s pumped full of adrenaline—rightly so—eager to talk, and capable of anything. So I collapse back into the vinyl seat. I owe him that much. He did try to save my life.

“Look, here’s the deal,” he says earnestly. “It’s the first day of spring break. Your parents are out of town until tomorrow night, right?”

“How did you know that?”

“You told me, Burger, remember? The Way I see it, you should use today and tomorrow as if they were your last days on earth. You should try going crazy for once. Like I just did. You should try taking some risks, you know What I mean? Have you ever really taken a risk before?”

“I introduced myself to Rachel Klein, didn’t I?” I answer. It’s the only risk I can think of.

“Okay, aside from that,” Mark says. “What I’m saying is: Have you ever really lived, Burger?”

I blink at him. Interesting question. It reminds me of that Hong Phat fortune cookie. I probably should have tried to bolt. I hate it When people ask me stuff like this. Especially Mark. I can hardly think of anything that makes me more uncomfortable. Except . . . oh, I don’t know. Acting like a coward, maybe?

The Hands of a Burly Lumberjack

“I propose We make a list,” Mark announces. He’s still sweaty and manic. He pulls a napkin from the aluminum dispenser on the table and then unzips my knapsack, fumbling through it. “I propose We make a list of the things Burger should do over the next twenty-four hours. Okay? Let’s make a list of ten things. Like the Ten Commandments. You know, just to make it official?” He finds a ballpoint pen and clicks it open. “So. Number one . . .”

Nikki smiles at me. “How about losing his virginity?”

Mark brightens. “Excellent!” He leans over the napkin and Writes:

Burger’s Spring Break

1. Lose virginity.

My face heats up like a burner. It’s bright red. How does Nikki know that I’m a virgin? Actually, that’s an incredibly stupid question. Of course she knows that I’m a virgin. She knows everything about me. She’s in love With my best friend.

I grab my knapsack. “Okay, you guys. I’ll see you later—”

“No, no, no,” Nikki says, clamping her palm down on my Wrist. “I’m sorry. That Was so lame of me. Forget I said that.”

“It’s all right,” I mumble.

Even under duress, I can’t help noticing how much softer Nikki’s hands are than Rachel’s. Aside from the silver rings (one on every finger), Nikki’s hands are like velvet. Rachel’s hands are hard and calloused. There’s a good reason for this: she volunteers three days a Week tending to a community garden in Harlem—something that I admire even more than her commitment to Amnesty International, something that most kids our age Would never think to do—but . . . Well, the downside is that all the hours of Weeding and digging have given her the hands of a burly lumberjack.

“But Ted, you know, the first day of spring break is pretty romantic,” Nikki points out. “I mean, you Were planning on seeing Rachel tonight anyway, right? It’s the perfect time to do it.” She gives my arm an affectionate squeeze, the kind a nanny might give, then lets go. “I should know.”

Mark glances up at her, his brow furrowed. “We didn’t do it for the first time on the first day of spring break.”

“Yeah, We did,” she says.

“No, I remember,” Mark says. “It Was the second day.”

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