

the epic, completely true blue,
(almost) holy quest
of Debbie



Sparks
s.j. adams

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✧ One ✧

My dad's a regular guy, and my mom's a total kook, so I guess I had a fifty percent chance of coming out normal. Leave it to me to screw it up.

When I was a kid, Mom was always saying things like, "You know, Debbie, a lot of girls find out they have psychic abilities when they hit puberty. Maybe you'll be one of them!" That was her idea of encouraging me to dream big. I think she was very disappointed when I started shaving my legs and didn't suddenly remember that I was a plowman in a former life or something.

I assume that it was all her fault when Dad moved to Minneapolis to live with another woman when I was twelve. I didn't exactly blame him. It was probably either that or get dragged to another "couples retreat" where he'd have to dance around naked with middle-aged strangers and eat figs.

And I'm one hundred percent certain that it's her fault that I always feel like people can read my mind. I work really, really hard not to think about sex or having to pee or anything embarrassing like that when I'm in class, because I just can't shake the feeling that someone in there—maybe everyone—will be able to tell what I'm thinking about just by looking at me. I know that they can't, really, but I always *feel* like they can.

When I'm in public and something personal comes into my head, I count to twenty-five over and over and just focus on the numbers, hoping that even if it doesn't get anything all the way out of my head, maybe I can at least jam the signal for any mind readers who happen to be nearby.

And that's what I was doing on the cloudy Friday morning before my junior year spring break as I rode to school in Lisa Ashby's car.

"When he holds my hand, he does this thing where he rubs one of his fingers

between my thumb and index finger,” Lisa said. “Like, back and forth, back and forth. Its a-mazing.”

1, 2, 3, 4 ...

Lisa, my best friend of all time, was driving me to school and talking about her new boyfriend, Norman Hastings, who’s probably the most boring human being on the planet. I didn’t want her reading my mind and knowing that I thought she was making a huge mistake.

“My next project is going to be to get him to stop dressing like he’s going fishing for trout,” she said.

“Fishing for trout?”

“Yeah. When he’s not in school, he dresses like he fell out of an Eddie Bauer catalog or something. If you saw him on the street, you’d say, ‘Now, there goes a guy who’s going fishing for trout!’ ”

I chuckled in spite of myself. Lisa was the funniest person I’d ever known. No matter how upset I was, she could always make me laugh.

To me, Norman looked like ... well, he just looked like a *Norman*. He looked like he had taken a picture of a doctor from an old pamphlet about venereal disease to the barber and said, “Make me look like this!” And he was one of about six people in school who took the option of wearing a shirt and tie rather than the normal uniform (a plain shirt in blue or white, the school colors, with iron-on lettering optional if you insist on expressing yourself).

“Oh, and hey,” Lisa said. “I probably can’t give you a ride home today. I’ve got some stuff going on with Jennifer Pratt.”

“That’s okay,” I said. “I can walk. It probably won’t start raining until late.”

Lisa had turned the radio off right after they’d said that Omaha was expecting the biggest storm in five years, and we always get Nebraska’s weather here in central Iowa a few hours later. There was still some blue sky above us, but dark clouds were already rolling in from the west.

“And I won’t be able to watch TV tonight, obviously,” Lisa went on.

“No problem,” I said, as if it didn’t matter.

But it did. It mattered a *lot*.

1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 ...

It’s amazing how much it hurts to see your best friend hooking up with a loser.

And Lisa wasn't just my best friend, she was also pretty much my *only* friend. She and I had spent every Friday night since sixth grade in her bedroom watching cheesy old family sitcoms—the kind where every episode ends with someone getting a lecture with soft music in the background, followed by everyone hugging. *Full House*, mostly. We'd been through that whole series four times. It was our thing.

Honestly, I'd have preferred to be watching something more “adult,” but Lisa and her family were really religious. They thought shows where people swear or have premarital sex were trashy, and I just went with the flow. I even went to ACTs (Active Christian Teens) with her, despite the fact that I was really sort of an atheist. Keeping my thoughts to myself at those meetings was stressful enough to give me migraines.

And now I'd been dumped. Cast aside. Left behind. My services as a friend were no longer needed. I'd been blown off for the last boy on the planet to be named Norman.

NORMAN!

As soon as we got out of the car, Norman and a couple of his friends from the FCA (Fellowship of Christian Athletes) started walking toward us.

“Here he comes,” she almost sang.

She skipped away from me (yes, skipped) over to Norman and his boring FCA friends. I half expected her to break into song or something.

And here's the thing: I don't think anyone in Lisa's family would be against it if she and Norman got *engaged* by the end of high school. Getting a ring as a graduation gift next year was a distinct possibility for her.

Lisa was raised to believe that you're supposed to fall in love at sixteen, marry your high school sweetheart when you're nineteen or twenty, and be a mommy nine months later. I don't think her parents ever heard of a marriage they didn't think was a good idea (as long as it was between a man and a woman), and I think they were more disturbed by my parents' divorce than I was. It's almost like they had a marriage fetish. Probably a prayer fetish, too.

As soon as I thought of that, I had to push the image of Lisa breathing heavier and heavier while Norman prayed over her out of my brain. Out, out, out! She was still just a couple of feet away from me—prime thought-reading range.

I was going to need to find a new best friend. Fast.

I raced through the parking lot and into school as fast as I could, then ducked into the first bathroom I came to. Angela Mackenzie, another girl from ACTs who sat with us at lunch, was doing her makeup in the mirror. Next to her was an overweight girl with short blond hair that she'd done a pretty bad job of dying red and the kind of pointy glasses waitresses in movies always wear.

She nodded at me and I nodded back at her, then I turned to Angela. "Doing anything for spring break?" I asked.

She put her lipstick back in her purse and dug out an eyebrow pencil.

"Babysitting, mostly," she said. "Picking up an overnight gig in Urbandale tonight."

"I'm staying in town, too," I said. "Maybe we can hang out."

"Sure," she said. "I'll give you a call."

I doubted that she actually would. She was nice, but she was also one of those people who's friends with everyone in town, so she couldn't possibly have had much time for me.

Still, I knew that I needed to loosen up a little. Angela could help. She went to ACTs and all, but I knew she'd slept with a guy or two.

She was wearing a T-shirt that said *One Year, Three Months!* The time left until graduation, I think.

Cornersville Trace High School is the only school in the Des Moines metro area that has a uniform policy, as far as I know. The whole thing of ironing words onto uniforms is new; the reason they started making us wear uniforms in the first place had less to do with stifling free expression than stopping kids from having to worry about name-brand clothes, but when a bunch of kids complained that it *did* stifle free expression, the school board compromised. Now you could iron words onto your shirt in plain block letters, as long as the words weren't obscene or about drugs or gangs.

Lisa's T-shirt that day read *Get High on Love!*

The heavysset girl beside Angela was wearing one that said *Tangled Up in Blue*, whatever that meant.

Mine was plain white.

"Can you believe Lisa is actually going out with that Norman guy?" I asked.

"Seriously," said Angela. "She could do better."

“Hastings?” asked the other girl. “Barf-o-rama.”

“I don’t know what Lisa even sees in him,” I said as I leaned against the wall. “I mean, she’s so funny, and he’s so boring!”

“Security,” said Angela. “His dad owns ones of those car lots on Merle Hay Road. He’s totally loaded.”

“That can’t be it,” I asked. “I mean, she’s, like ... perfect. She’s cute, she’s smart, she’s funny. She’s the kind of person everyone wants to be.”

“So?” asked Angela.

“So, Norman is the kind of person everyone wants to punch.”

“Oh, for sure,” Angela agreed. “He’s boring as hell, and he’s a major assho ...” She stopped herself mid-swear and said, “Jerk. Major jerk.”

Lisa’s reputation as a goody-goody had rubbed off on me. And why shouldn’t it have? I’d practically willed it to.

“You can say the A-word in front of me,” I said. “Lisa’s the one who’s weird about cursing. I’ve actually been thinking about staging an intervention to get her to just say ‘ass’ instead of ‘tushy.’”

Angela chuckled. “Today, the A-word, tomorrow, the F-bomb!”

“Heh,” said the other girl. “In a way, you and Norman are both building her up to a fuck.”

Angela laughed. “Nice one, Emma.”

It took me a second to get the joke. When I did, I turned my head and slumped into the wall. The cold, glossy paint was cold against my ear.

“And she probably doesn’t even know it, if he is,” I said. “She probably thinks that only guys who take auto shop actually want to have premarital sex.”

“No one’s *that* naïve,” said Angela.

“She might be,” I said. “She watches a whole lot of *Full House*, you know.”

Angela chuckled. “Are you guys going to that ACTs picnic on Tuesday?”

“I don’t think I’m going to go to freaking ACTs at all anymore.”

I hadn’t wanted to say “freaking,” but the right word just didn’t come out. Lisa and her family had sunk their claws too far into me.

“Gonna join Fellowship of Christian Athletes instead?”

“Hell no.”

Angela seemed kind of amused at how upset I was. “What?” she asked. “You don’t like Christian bowling?”

“Christian bowling?” asked Emma, the other girl. “What, do the pins rise again on the third frame?”

Angela snickered. I probably would have laughed, too, if I didn’t feel like my guts were about to fall apart.

Then Emma turned away from the mirror and looked right at me. “You okay?” she asked.

“I’m just trying to figure out what the hell I’m going to do tonight. I’m so used to hanging out with Lisa on Fridays. And she’s, like, ditching me. It’s throwing my whole routine off.”

“Creature of habit, huh?” said Angela.

“Totally.”

Emma smiled, which bugged me. “You feel lost? Alone?” she asked.

I just shrugged. I’d seen Emma around, hanging out with this one guy, Tim Sanders, who I’d heard was gay, but I didn’t know her well enough to want her advice or anything.

“I know something that might help,” she said.

“If you say Jesus, I’ll punch you in the face,” I said.

She laughed, and just as she did, the first bell rang. I ran off toward my first class before she could say anything.

Lisa was lost in a world where a future with a guy named Norman who wore ties to high school was something to skip about. And I was left by myself. At sixteen, I was going to have to either face life as a total loner, tag along on Lisa and Norman’s dates, or just, like, restart my whole adolescence.

I collapsed into my first-period desk, which was the most uncomfortable desk on the planet. The chair was attached to the desk and the cold metal of the legs rubbed against my knees no matter how I tried to position myself.

While everyone else talked about their spring break plans (which made them too busy to bother with reading my mind, I hoped), I repeated to myself that I was my own person, not just half of Lisa-and-Debbie. That I didn’t need Lisa just to exist—I wasn’t just her wacky friend and sidekick, like Kimmy Gibbler, D. J. Tanner’s weird friend on *Full House*.

I repeated it, but I didn’t totally believe it.

In an attempt to reassure myself, I made a list while I waited for class to start.

Reasons I'm Not Like a Full House Character (especially Kimmy Gibbler)

1. I sometimes say curse words you can't say on family TV (at least in private).
2. My feet don't smell so bad they could set off a smoke alarm, like Kimmy's.
3. I'm failing science. (Had to cross this out after I remembered the episode where D. J. gets an F for her paper on photosynthesis.)
4. I don't go around hugging people. Much.
5. I've never snuck out of school to get a rock star's autograph, or secretly arranged to study with boys, or helped anyone sneak into a movie theater.
6. I have never taken a trip to Vegas or Hawaii or Disney World.
7. I have never come down with amnesia and needed clips from previous episodes to jar my memory.

I crossed out numbers 5–7 because they were all ways the people on *Full House* had *more* exciting, daring lives than I did, which was just depressing.

It was starting to look like the only difference between me and a wacky sidekick was that I wasn't very wacky.

So just before the bell rang, I wrote down The Big One. In really tiny letters. The one I'd never written down anywhere, not even in my diary. The one I certainly hadn't said out loud or even thought about when anyone else was in the room with me.

8. I'm reasonably sure that the reason Kimmy hung out with D. J. was NOT because she'd had a stupid, hopeless crush on her for years.

So there, Gibbler. You can kiss my ass.

✧ Two ✧

I counted to twenty-five again and again and again as I folded that list into a tiny wad and put it in my backpack. I was too afraid to rip it up and put it in the trash, because if I did, I knew I'd spend weeks imagining that someone had gone through the trash and managed to put all the tiny pieces back together again.

It's not like I hadn't *known* it was a crush. I'd been through the whole internal struggle of realizing I liked girls years before. I'd even told my dad without any real drama. I hadn't told Mom yet, but only because I was afraid she'd sign me up for workshops where they'd tell me I was a bad lesbian if I didn't change my name to Willow and stop shaving my armpits.

But I didn't want to risk freaking Lisa out and making her not want me hanging around her anymore, so I'd never told her. I could live with her not loving me back, but not with her pushing me away. I needed her, at least as a friend.

The teacher, Mrs. Malatesta, came into the room, carrying an armload of worksheets, a cup of coffee, and a stack of books.

"Good morning," she mumbled. "We have a lot to get done before spring break, so everybody sit down and shut up."

The sheer notion of getting anything done was insane. Everyone was already in spring break mode, mentally. I was lost in my own world, trying to get my mind off Lisa and onto something nasty, like popping zits, so that anyone who was reading my mind would get grossed out and stop.

Mrs. Malatesta put down her armload of papers and picked up an attendance sheet. She mostly just looked for people and then made a mark next to their name, until she got to mine.

“Debbie Woodlawn?” she said. “Debbie, are you here?”

“Here,” I said.

She looked up. “Oh, there you are, Debbie,” she said. “I didn’t see you there.”
Yeah. Her or anyone else.

I always tended to blend in with my surroundings, but that was just the way I wanted it right then. The fewer people there were paying attention to me, the fewer there were who might be reading my mind.

Fifty minutes later I was back in the hallway, wondering where I should be standing, where I should be looking, and what I should be saying.

Everyone had divided into their groups already. Cheerleaders were on one side of the hall. Punk rock kids were on another. There were a couple of emo kids near the bathroom, and the stoners were in a cluster by the drinking fountain.

Which of the groups in the hall would I have been in if I hadn’t started being friends with Lisa back when I was eleven? What was I even *like* back when I was ten? I remembered being into horses and gossiping and Disney movies, but that seemed like it was a hundred years ago. Was that same person still even inside of me?

And what did it matter? I couldn’t go back to acting like a ten-year-old.

But I knew that I was going to have to stop being The Girl Who Hangs Out with Lisa and start being myself. Whoever the hell that was.

The goth kids always looked about as depressed as I felt, so that was a possibility, but I didn’t think they’d let me hang out with them. It’s hard to get in with the goth crowd if you weren’t, like, born a goth. If I tried to hang out with them after years of being The Girl Who Hangs Out with Lisa Ashby, they’d probably call me a poseur or something.

The cheerleaders on the other side of the hall probably wouldn’t let me near them, either. One thing I’ve got to give them credit for is that at least they have a formalized process for joining their group—they have try-outs. The only other groups I could think of that have a process like that are the theater kids, who have auditions, and gangsters, who I always heard make you kill someone for their shoes or something. The wannabes (the kind of gangsters we have around suburban Des Moines, at least on the West Side) probably really just make you steal a pack of gum from the Quick Trip or something, which I could probably pull off, but there’s no way they’d be the group for me anyway.

I was about to duck into my next class early, just to get the hell out of the hall, when Emma, the overweight girl from the bathroom in the *Tangled Up in Blue* shirt, came up to me.

“Hey,” she said.

“Hey,” I said back.

“I wasn’t going to tell you about Jesus,” she said. “I have something else that might help you out.”

“I can’t afford drugs,” I said.

She chuckled. “Not that, either. Another religion.”

I started walking away, but she followed me.

“She’s not just your friend, is she?” she asked.

I stopped dead in my tracks and turned toward her.

“What are you talking about?” I asked, praying to any deity who might be listening that this wasn’t proof that people could read my mind after all.

“Come on,” she said. “No one gets this broken up or stops going to ACTs because their best friend is dating an asshole.”

I felt myself going a bit short of breath.

“Whatever,” I said.

“Hey, don’t worry,” she said. “It’s nothing to be ashamed of. My religion doesn’t have a problem with it.”

I sighed. “Fine, I’ll bite,” I said. “What’s your religion?”

“The Church of Blue,” she said. “Bluedaism. It’s the best religion ever.”

“I’m not really in the market for a new religion,” I said as I started to walk away again. “My mom’s already tried them all.”

“Not this one,” she said. “Trust me. For five bucks, I’ll tell you all about it and take you on a holy quest.”

“You think I’m gonna give you five bucks to hear about a religion?”

“All the best religions cost money,” she said. “People don’t take things they get for free seriously. But it’s totally tax deductible. Probably.”

“I’ll pass,” I said.

“Just keep it in mind. Active Bluish Teens do way cooler stuff than bowling. We got George Washington’s autograph last week.”

I stared at her for a second. “You guys raise the dead?”

She chuckled. “Not *that* George Washington. The old black guy named

George Washington who lives out in Ankeny. It was part of a holy quest. I'll bet they don't do *that* in the FCA."

"I'll think it over and let you know," I said.

And I walked along to my next class.

I really wanted someone to hang out with that night, so I didn't want to burn any bridges, but Emma struck me as a real freak. And it disturbed me, in a way, to hear her talking about me liking Lisa right out loud, like it wasn't that big of a deal. Because it was. It was, like, the biggest deal ever.

In my next class, I sat next to a hairy guy named Nate Spoelstra. The fact that he wasn't attractive didn't stop him from coming on to anything with breasts—including me.

"Hey," said Nate when I sat down.

"Hey," I mumbled.

Nate scratched the back of his head for a second—he did a lot of scratching in any given day. A couple of stray hairs would fly off the back of his head each time, and sometimes they ended up on my desk. He shed enough hair in a day it's a wonder any was left, but somehow it just kept coming back. I wouldn't have thought this out loud at an ACTs event, but it seemed like Nate was proof we're related to apes. He looked like he hadn't quite evolved all the way.

Mr. Lombardo, the teacher, wandered in looking like he'd just climbed out of a coffin—he always had the pale, clammy look of a guy who's been dead for a day or two. He picked up the attendance sheet to take the roll, and one of the Outdoor Kids (the ones who always hang around by the window and run to the front door just to be outside between classes) raised her hand.

"Can we have class outside today?" she asked, without waiting to be called on.

"No," said Mr. Lombardo.

"Come on!" the girl pleaded. "We're all suffocating in here! Right, guys?"

"Eighty percent chance of thundershowers today," said Mr. Lombardo. "And a chance of tornados. Last thing I need to do is bring the school's insurance rates up."

It wasn't going to start raining for several hours, but the girl should have known it was hopeless. You could just look at Mr. Lombardo's skin and tell he didn't like going outside much.

The Outdoor Kids were a group I hadn't thought about joining. But I didn't

feel like the sun gave me energy, like they always said it did for them. I think that only works for plants.

I took better notes in Chemistry that day than ever before in my freaking life. I wrote down every damn thing Mr. Lombardo said, even the stuff about his dogs that was totally off topic. It gave me something to think about besides Lisa.

Still, she kept creeping back into my brain—her smile, her hair, the way she never seemed unhappy for even a second. Every joke she'd ever told me.

Every time I noticed Mr. Lombardo looking like a corpse, which was about every thirty seconds, I remembered all the stuff Lisa had said about him when she'd had him last semester.

"He looks like he's not even human," she'd said. "Maybe some other teacher built him as a science project and forgot to add pigment to his skin!"

Ever since she said that, I had a hard time looking at Mr. Lombardo without laughing. That might have been why I was failing his class.

Halfway through class, Hairy Nate passed me a note.

Doing anything for spring break? it said.

I wrote maybe below it and passed it to him.

Gonna party, then? he wrote back.

I just shrugged, and he sent me another note.

I get off work at the Burger Box at 7.
Call me. 266-1727.

I put the note in my pocket and gave him a "we'll see" shrug.

It wasn't the first time I'd ever had a guy try to hook up with me (I'm not gorgeous or anything, but I'm pretty cute, if I do say so myself—cute face, golden-blond hair that shines no matter what I put in it, decent body), but this would have been the first time I ever even thought about saying "yes." I was getting desperate. *Anything* sounded better than sitting at home, alone, while Lisa was out with Norman.

I spent a minute trying to talk myself into liking Nate. I wasn't totally sure if I was gay or bi or what yet, officially, so I supposed I could try dating a guy. Sure, he was hairy, but wasn't it kind of mean of me to think he wasn't worth hanging

out with just because he seemed kind of gross? You can't control how fast your hair grows, right?

But then I decided that it wasn't the hair so much as the grease that made him gross. And the fact that, right after Mr. Lombardo stopped talking and let us just work on our chemical-reaction worksheets, Nate started picking his nose and talking about wrestling with the guy who sat on the other side of him. And then they started talking about getting "fucked up."

I could picture a night with Hairy Nate—I would sit around trying to keep him from doing anything stupid while he drank, smoked, shouted at a wrestling match on TV, and shed all over the couch until it was time for us to do it.

And for just a moment, I went back to thinking of Lisa as an angel who had kept me on the straight and narrow path and saved me from guys who reminded me of skinny gorillas. But I knew I couldn't let myself think of Lisa like that. Not anymore. I was going to have to start saving myself.

Even if, by some miracle, she dumped Norman and went back to hanging out with me, I couldn't go on like this. Living in her perfect version of the world was probably giving me so many ulcers that my stomach would look like a slimy hunk of Swiss cheese by the time I was thirty.

I had spent five years pretending to be her girlfriend, never stopping to think that it was all going to have to come to an end eventually. But now it had. Things would never be the way they were again. All I could do was try to take control of the way things had changed.

The whole idea of, like, declaring myself to Lisa, or whatever you call it, scared the heck out of me, but the only other option if I wanted to be with her was to murder Norman Hastings, then be there to comfort her while the cops looked for his head.

It may not have been practical, but at least it was an idea that never would have occurred to anyone on *Full House*. And it gave me something relatively safe to think of through the next couple of periods, until it was time for lunch.

Which would be at my usual table. With Lisa.

✧ Three ✧

After obsessing over her all morning, it was weird seeing Lisa sitting there at the table, smiling that super-cute smile of hers, oblivious to the fact that she'd been haunting me all day.

But lunch was clearly not the best time to tell her how I felt. There were too many other people around. Even if she secretly *did* love me back, she'd probably have to act like she didn't in case anyone who might tell her parents overheard. My best chance would be getting her alone later.

I was just going to have to get through lunch, and maybe drop some hints to lay the groundwork for later.

"Hi, Debbie," Lisa said cheerfully as I sat down. I'd felt like I was sloshing through a dirty gutter all morning, and she seemed like she'd been floating on a cloud.

"Hey," I said, as I tried to smile and look cute.

"Get through Chemistry okay?" she asked. She always remembered when I had trouble in a class. She was thoughtful like that.

"Not really," I said. "I think I'm failing."

"Oh no," said Lisa. "Don't worry. Look at the window. See those clouds?"

Out the window, I could see the clouds getting darker and closer, like they were peering through the window at us. It almost looked like nighttime. Maybe I'd get lucky and a tornado would blow me to Oz.

"So it's gonna rain tonight," I said. "What's that got to do with anything?"

"Maybe whoever built Mr. Lombardo made him water soluble," she said. "As soon as he gets wet, he'll just, like, wash away."

She laughed, and I laughed, too. Even when her jokes weren't *that* funny, her

laugh was so infectious that I always cracked up whenever she did.

This was part of why I loved her. If you had a problem, she'd make you feel better. She'd bend over backward to do it, if she had to. She could make a joke out of anything.

And then she reached out and squeezed my hand. Just, like, to reassure me, not out of affection, but I smiled. It was one of those stupid, teasing moments that gave me hope that maybe she had a secret crush on me, too. I lived for those moments. But they really just made it all worse in the long run.

The more she hung out with Norman, the less she'd be holding my hand or touching me. Thinking of that made it suddenly seem difficult to breathe, and trying to smile and look cute got harder and harder.

Angela came in and sat down beside Lisa and across from me.

"Hey guys," she said. "How's Norman?"

Lisa let go of my hand to hold it to her chest. "It's like a dream," she said.

Angela grinned. "I've had those kind of dreams."

"Me too," said Lisa. "Only now it's coming true!"

Angela grinned at me sneakily, like she was expecting me to share in the joke that Lisa hadn't even realized she was talking about sex dreams, but I just felt worse. I pulled my lunch out of my backpack and fished out my sandwich.

"What are you red hot lovers doing tonight?" Angela asked.

"We *were* going to go miniature golfing and then hit a late movie," said Lisa. "But since it's going to rain, we'll probably just go to an earlier movie *and* a late one."

"Which ones?"

"Who cares?"

Angela snickered. "Not planning to watch them, huh?"

And Lisa clapped her hands like a five-year-old at a birthday party.

"So," asked Angela, "has he ... you know?"

"Kissed me?" Lisa grinned.

Angela nodded.

Lisa smiled so big she'd probably be sore in the morning. "Like, a million times!"

1, 2, 3, 4, 5 ...

"Gone any further?" asked Angela.

Lisa just smiled. “We’ve sort of taken a lead off first, but I haven’t let him go to second yet.”

Yet.

My innards did another quarter turn inside of me.

“Well, over the course of two movies, I imagine you’ll get around to something,” said Angela.

“I’m not sure two movies will be enough,” Lisa giggled.

I guess I’d wanted to believe that Lisa was actually blinded into thinking that normal people didn’t really have premarital sex by all those *Full House* episodes where Becky comes over to see Uncle Jesse in the morning—she’s never still there from the night before until after the wedding episode. Actually, if you read between the lines, I think the writers made it pretty clear that they were doing it way earlier than that, but they had to keep it on the down-low to fool the kids. I had thought—hoped—they’d fooled Lisa, too.

What was she thinking, acting like this?

The teenagers on the shows she watched never went to second. Sometimes they had *friends* who did, but they always ended up regretting it. Sometimes they even got pregnant. Or AIDS, if it was one of those “very special episodes.”

My chest started tightening and my vision got blurry. I felt like every cloud outside had rolled in through the window and just, like, enveloped me. Pinned me down. It was the kind of feeling I always get right before a panic attack.

I started thinking “I love you” right out loud, loud enough that Lisa should have been able to read my thoughts even if she wasn’t trying to. Loud enough that the whole school should have turned their heads and looked over to see what the ruckus was all about.

But they didn’t notice, and neither did she.

Then, of course, things got worse.

“Anyway,” Lisa said to me, “now that I’ve found true love, we need to find someone for you! We can double date!”

“Yeah,” I said. “I totally need a boyfriend.”

“I can see if Norman has any single friends,” she said, like Norman would have any friends that I would even like.

I went back to staring at my sandwich, so I had no idea that Norman was

walking up to the table until I heard him say, “Hey, babe.”

Who in the hell actually calls girls “babe”?

I mean, people talk like that all the time on *Full House*, but that was years ago. And I’ll bet people didn’t even *really* talk like that back then.

Norman was wearing the shirt-and-tie combo he always wore—he said it was “the Christian way to dress,” which I’m pretty sure was a load of crap. As far as I could tell from the videos we watched in ACTs, the “Christian way to dress” is robes and sandals.

I mean, what about that point on the end of the tie? Didn’t Norman know what it was pointing *at* ?

Norman motioned for Angela to scooch over and sat down in her place, next to Lisa. I was sitting on the other side of the table, pretending not to notice that my foot was bumping against hers.

“I was just telling Debbie we need to find someone for her, so we can double date,” said Lisa.

“There are some cool guys in the FCA,” said Norman. “Do you know Aaron Riley?”

Aaron wore shirts and ties to school, too. But not because of religious reasons. I’m pretty sure he thought that if it ever came out that he’d ever worn something other than business attire, he’d be barred from working at a Fortune 500 company.

I would rather date Hairy Nate.

I didn’t say this out loud, of course. I just nodded while I counted to twenty-five in my head.

“Riley’s a good guy,” said Norman. “He’s single now, too, since he dumped Gia Van Atta. You know she’s slept with four guys?”

“Really?” asked Lisa.

“So I hear,” said Norman. “That’s why he dumped her. And I’ll bet that means she’s given a you-know-what to at least, like, ten.”

“A you-know-what?” asked Angela. “Why don’t you just say it, if we all know what it is?”

Norman gave her a weird look.

“Are you sure that’s even true?” Angela went on. I could tell she was kind of offended, since she’d probably given a you-know-what to a few guys herself.

“I have it on good authority,” said Norman, confidently.

This was why I couldn’t possibly talk to Lisa about how I felt at lunch. I couldn’t even hint at it now that Norman was there. If Norman had any notion that *either* of us liked girls, he’d tell *everyone* and people would be organizing “prayer warrior” meetings for us.

“Ew,” said Lisa. “I don’t think it’s really that big of a sin to do, like, more than kissing before you’re married, but you should at least only do it with one person that you really love!”

Then I saw Norman sneakily move his arm around Lisa’s waist and pull her in closer. She put her head onto his shoulder.

With every fiber of my being, I wanted to jump up out of my seat, stand on the table, summon a bunch of spooky flashing lights, and shout “get your hands off her!” in a voice that would shake the windows and rattle the walls. I felt like the two of them had just reached into my chest, grabbed my heart, and squeezed it really, really hard, like it was a grapefruit and they were trying to make juice or whatever. My eyes went blurry and my stomach started to hurt so badly I thought it was trying to break out through my belly button.

When I saw Norman leaning over to kiss Lisa on the cheek, I finally snapped.

I picked up my brown paper lunch bag, swung it over my head, and slammed it onto the table. Hard. So hard that the bag ripped open and the container of yogurt inside of it cracked. Some pink yogurt goop spurting out and sprayed the table. Some of it bounced back onto my top, but it managed to miss Norman’s stupid shirt entirely.

“God damn it!” I shouted.

I didn’t wait around to see Lisa’s reaction. I got up, grabbed my purse, and stomped away from the table toward the hall.

As I stormed through the cafeteria, I saw Emma, the weird girl, sitting at a table with Tim, the gay guy. She tried to get my attention as I walked past, but I didn’t even slow down. I marched clear out of the cafeteria, past the drama hall and down another hall, then into the last bathroom before the side exit to the parking lot.

Inside of it, I slumped against the wall, intending to just stay there, but when I looked up I realized that I’d walked into the boys’ restroom. There were urinals. No boys peeing, thank God, but urinals.

“God damn!” I shouted again, louder this time. I smacked my hand hard against the floor and felt the cold sting of the ceramic tiles against my palm. Then I smacked it again.

What else could possibly go wrong?

All those years of watching cheesy sitcoms should have taught me never, ever to think that.

I got out of the boys’ bathroom and went into the girls’ room next door, kicked open the door to one of the stalls, and sat down on the toilet. As soon as I sat down, the crying started.

I don’t think I’d cried like that, with all of the noises and wailing and stuff, since I was about four or five. If I’d ever wondered about it, I would have thought that I couldn’t do it anymore. But it’s like riding a bike, I guess. You get so good at bawling when you’re a baby that your body never really forgets how to do it.

That boring asshole in the tie had stolen my imaginary girlfriend.

I’d wasted my entire youth—from age eleven to age sixteen-and-a-half, anyway—for Lisa. Instead of going to parties or whatever, I’d spent my high school years watching cheesy old TV shows and trying to live like I was a character in one of them.

I never even really expected her to kiss me, or sleep with me, or touch me, or any of that stuff. I was happy just to be with her. It was something. It was enough.

Only now it was nothing.

I had pretended to be religious for her. I had acted as if a little kid saying, “You got it, dude” or a second grader saying, “How rude” was the height of comedy. Even when I was on my own, I had avoided watching TV shows or listening to music that I didn’t think she’d approve of. I had never argued with her when she said people I kind of liked having around were probably going to hell.

I’d even played along in a big ceremony where the whole group from ACTs put on these sterling silver rings that were supposed to symbolize a vow of chastity. I kept the ring on even though it was the wrong size for me.

Now I took it off and dropped it into the toilet.

Hell, part of why I’d stayed in Iowa with my crazy mom instead of going to

Minneapolis with Dad was to stay close to Lisa. I liked it in Minneapolis. I liked his new wife, Reine, who I guessed was technically my stepmom.

Maybe I could go live there, where no one knew a thing about me, and be a totally different person.

I counted to twenty-five a whole bunch of times, but it didn't change a thing. It never really did.

A minute later, someone walked into the restroom.

"Debbie?" a voice called out. "Are you in here?"

It was Angela.

I didn't say anything, but I sniffed really loud.

She walked up to the stall door. "Are you decent," she asked, "or are you peeing?"

"Decent," I muttered. "Come on in."

She opened up the stall door. There was no point in trying to cover up the fact that I'd been crying. My face was probably as red as a monkey's butt.

"Oh my God," she said. "Are you okay?"

I just stared at her. I wasn't going to dignify that with a response.

"Jesus," she said. "Are you *that* upset about Norman?"

I shook my head.

"Don't worry," she said. "You won't be single forever. I'm sure I can find you someone better than Aaron Riley. That guy's a douche."

"It's not like that!" I snapped.

She took a step backward. I'd never snapped at her like that.

"Lisa wanted to come have a talk with you herself," she said.

I snorted. "She'd give me a speech about how we'll always be friends, no matter what happens, and then we'd hug. There'd be slow saxophone music in the background and the crowd would go 'Awww' and everything would be all better."

Angela laughed. "Yeah, that's probably exactly what she had in mind. What would you rather she do, though? You can't just expect her to wait until you find a boyfriend before she starts seeing anyone herself."

"I told you. It's *not like that*," I said. I stared straight down at the toilet to keep from looking her in the eyes.

Maybe she read my thoughts, or maybe she just put the pieces together.

“Oh my freaking God,” said Angela. “You ... ”

I just nodded.

Angela didn’t say anything for a second, so I spoke instead.

“If you tell her, I’ll kill you. I’ll kill you so hard your parents will die, too. And your children’s children’s children.”

For a second, neither of us said anything, but I got the impression that she was trying hard not to laugh.

“Damn it,” I said, “will you stop staring at me? Haven’t you ever seen a lesbian having a panic attack on a toilet before?”

She allowed herself to giggle a bit. “Not one with that much yogurt on her shirt.”

I just looked down. I could still see the chastity ring at the bottom of the toilet bowl.

“Sorry, Deb,” she said. “I didn’t realize ... well, you know Lisa likes *guys*, right?”

I nodded. I guess I was hoping she didn’t, really, and was just pretending to be so excited about Norman, but, well. You know. It still seemed like a *remote* possibility. I hadn’t completely given up.

“I’ve been dumped before,” Angela said. “It sucks. But you move on. You rip up some pictures and you move on.”

“I don’t think it’ll be that easy for me,” I said.

“I’ll help,” she said. “You can come hang out with me tonight, if you want. I’ll get the kids I’m babysitting into bed early, and we’ll just hang out.”

“Thanks,” I said.

Nothing on *Full House* had ever prepared me for this. There were no hopeless gay crushes on that show, to start with. And the breakups were always really healthy.

D. J. and her boyfriend walked up a mountain, broke up, and walked back down, and that was that. Danny’s fiance moved to New York and he was over her two episodes later. No one ever got all the juice squeezed out of their heart.

“Come on,” said Angela. “Lunch is over. Fifth period is starting up.”

I shook my head at her. “No way.” I said. “I’m not leaving. Not yet.”

“You want me to stay with you?” she asked.

I shook my head again. “Leave me alone, please.”

“Fine,” she said. “But I’m coming to check on you. I’ll tell Mrs. Vanderbilt I have to go and that I might be a while. Okay?”

I nodded. At least *someone* gave a damn about me. Angela had even offered to skip class to be with me, which was really cool of her.

She walked out. I locked the door of the stall, and I was left alone.

A few minutes later, I was officially skipping a class for the first time in my life. It felt like I had taken the first step on the road to a life of crime.

And it was the best I’d felt all day.

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