

FAT GIRLS

From Outer Space



FRAN ORENSTEIN

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About the Author

Just a Piece of Glass

Mirror, mirror on the wall
Who is this creature round and small,
With mousy hair in greasy clumps,
Giant zits in raw red lumps?
Teeth encased in shiny wire.
You're so pretty. Liar. Liar.
Big butt, big thighs
Why me, why, why?

HELP

The mirror doesn't answer me.
It's just a piece of glass you see.
Frederica (a.k.a. Freddy) Gold, age 12

Who Am I?

I'm not what you see
On the outside
Or want me to be
To please you
I am who I am
I do what I do
'Cause I'm true
To me
So look in me
Not at me
You'll see me
The real me
This is the key
That lets me be free
To be me
That's who I am
Frederica (a.k.a. Freddy) Gold, age 12

Chapter 1

Bad Body Day

Freddy assaulted the piano. She pounded the opening chords of Liszt's *Hungarian Rhapsody*. The lamp on the piano shook with the vibration. Isis, the cat, hid under the ottoman. Freddy pushed all her anger into her fingers, pummeling the keys. The house throbbed with the pulsation of Freddy's rage. She raised her hands in anticipation of smashing another series of chords....

"Hey, you crazy? It's Saturday morning. Quiet, down there," Mike yelled.

"Quiet yourself," she shouted back, slamming the keys one more time.

"Fredericka, your brother was sleeping. Don't make me come in there," her mother called from the kitchen. "Go get dressed before your friends come."

Freddy stomped up the stairs. Mike muttered something from his room across the hall. She turned toward his door and stuck out her tongue. "Sorry," she muttered but didn't slam the door to her room. It wasn't Mike's fault she was angry. As big brothers went, he rocked compared to others she knew about.

Isis sat watching from the top of the dresser, her yellow eyes gleaming and her tail twitching. "What are you looking at?" Freddy growled, as Isis arched her neck and yawned. "So, OK, you don't care. How would you feel if you looked like Garfield, with a fat belly hanging down to the floor?"

Isis licked her paws, watching as Freddy pulled out shirt after shirt and tossed each one on the floor. Freddy groaned, throwing herself down on the bed, said, "What am I going to do?"

Isis stood and stretched. Suddenly, she leaped five feet across the room and landed on Freddy's stomach. "Ouch, that hurts," she cried. "You are one crazy cat." Isis purred and settled down on her chest, pushing her nose into Freddy's neck. Still pouting, Freddy smoothed the soft black fur as Isis purred louder, gently kneading her claws against bare skin. "Hey, no claws." Freddy sat up and pushed the cat off. Isis resumed licking her paws, pretending indifference to such undignified treatment.

Freddy's eyes filled with tears. "What am I going to do, Isis? Why can't I look like Brittany or Lauren? You know, thin and beautiful." Even her best friend, Jess was petite with light blue eyes and dimples, which looked as if somebody'd poked holes in her cheeks when she smiled. She'd even settle for her other best friend Ruthie, with her flaming red hair and green eyes. Ruthie wasn't as thin as Jess but not fat like you-know-who, either. Freddy hated her body. She just wouldn't go to the game. Maybe she'd never go out of this room again.

"Frederica?" her mother called. "Ruthie and Jess are here. Where are you?"

She cringed. Why did her mom insist on calling her Frederica? "God, I hate her." Freddy could feel a huge lump in her throat. She'd hated her mother more and more since her dad had left them. Her mom had become a grouch and she cried so much—she wasn't Mom anymore. Freddy absently stroked the cat. "Do you miss Daddy too, Isis?" There

was no way out of this. She swallowed the lump and shouted, “OK, Mom, I’ll be right down.”

There was a sharp rap at the door. It opened just enough for a hand to reach around waving a bright blue tee shirt. “I think somebody needs help,” a deep voice said.

Freddy grabbed the shirt and pulled it over her head, yanking it down as far as she could over the jeans. “OK, come on in.”

Mike grinned from the doorway. “Looks good on you, Freddy.”

“Is it clean?”

“Sure it’s clean. I got it from the pile on the left side of the floor. The dirty clothes are on the right.”

“How can you live like that?”

“Hey, I know where everything is.” Mike looked around. “Besides, your room is starting to look a lot like mine.”

Freddy surveyed the floor, or what she could see of it, as her mother’s voice echoed up the stairs again. “I’ll get them later.” She smiled, swallowing a small lump. “Thanks, Mike. I’m sorry I woke you up.”

“OK, don’t get all mushy. Enjoy the game,” he said, stepping into hall.

Freddy felt a tiny twinge of guilt thinking about how she acted before; Mike was an OK brother. She ran a brush through her thick brown hair, giving the mirror one last dirty look. “Yuck,” she said, then pushed past Mike and tried to run downstairs.

He grabbed her and tickled her side. “Hey, hold up kid. The smile’s gone.”

Freddy giggled.

Mike leaned over and whispered, “In a couple of years, you’re gonna be a knockout.”

“Oh, sure,” she said, the frown returning to her mouth.

“You’ll see,” he said seriously.

The lump was back in her throat. Freddy turned and ran down the stairs. Isis raced ahead to beat her to the bottom step.

“You look very nice, dear,” her mom said.

Freddy forced her mouth into a smile and said through clenched teeth, “Thanks, Mom.” Liar, she thought.

“Hello, Frederica,” Jess said sweetly.

“It’s Freddy,” she hissed. Mike called her that when she was born and it stuck, except for her mom, of course, and everybody in her family, and, well almost the whole world, including teachers. Why didn’t parents think of that when they named tiny babies after people who lived a thousand years ago? OK, maybe not a thousand but long enough to make it old-fashioned.

Ruthie interrupted Freddy's thoughts on naming. "Hey, I like that shirt. Where'd you get it?"

Freddy looked down. "It's Mike's. Let's go."

Ruthie looked over at Jess and shrugged. "Sure, I'm ready. Bye, Mrs. Gold."

"Have a good time, girls."

"Thanks, Mrs. Gold," Jess said, following them out the door.

Freddy looked back at the living room window and waved at Isis. The cat twitched her tail.

"Love that cat," Jess said.

"It's like she's a person," Ruthie added.

Freddy smiled, "Sometimes I think she reads my mind."

"Maybe she's a witch's cat," Ruthie said.

"Yeah, and I'm the witch," Freddy grumbled.

Nobody said anything for the first couple of minutes. Finally, Jess said, "You're a grouch today, Freddy."

Freddy thought about what Jess said, as they walked down the street toward the ball park. "I just hate myself today, that's all."

"Your hair looks great," Ruthie said, pulling at her own red curls. "Not like this mess."

"It's not my hair I'm talking about, Ruthie. Besides, I wish my hair was red and curly, not this straight ugly brown."

Jess shrugged, "So, are you going to tell us or what?"

"It's like a bad body day, that's all."

"Oh," Jess said, nodding. "Well, everybody has those, Freddy. I even saw a zit this morning."

Ruthie peered at Jess' face. "Where?" Jess pointed to her chin. Ruthie looked closer. "I don't see anything."

"Of course not, I covered it with makeup."

Ruthie looked at Freddy and rolled her eyes, probably thinking about her 4,000 freckles, which nothing could cover.

Freddy thought about her figure. What did Jess know about being fat or ugly? She didn't have a fat, ugly cell in her whole body. Everything about her was perfect, from her blond hair to her long legs. Freddy sighed and asked, "Every day's a bad body day, huh?"

"No, I guess not every day," Jess said.

Freddy nodded. "See what I mean? I have one every day."

She bet Jess never had to sneak huge sizes into the fitting room, terrified that someone from school would see her. She didn't turn red from embarrassment and want to die when

those stupid sales girls said dumb things like, “It doesn’t come any larger.” The worst was the day a skinny sales girl said to her mom, loud enough for the whole mall to hear, “Maybe she should try the woman’s department.” *Death, it’s Freddy, come and get me, please.*

“Our bodies are going to start to change next year,” Ruthie said hopefully.

Freddy raised her eyebrows. “Wow, I can hardly wait. A whole year, or maybe two or three. Or maybe never. You should see my Aunt Carol; she has three chins, with hairs growing out of them. If I have to go through life like her, I’ll kill myself first.”

“Listen, can we just forget our bodies and have some fun?” Jess asked.

“Yeah,” Ruthie said. “Let’s pretend we’re invisible like we did at camp a couple of years ago.”

Jess laughed, “We didn’t speak to anybody. Remember how mad the counselor got because we wouldn’t even look at her?”

Freddy giggled, “I thought she was going to explode by dinner, trying to get us to talk to her.”

“We would just float by and stare over everybody’s shoulders,” Ruthie said.

Now laughing, Freddy nodded. “OK, I got the message, sorry to be such a jerk.” The gremlins, Grumble and Grouch, fluttered around in her head for a couple of blocks but, as they reached the ballpark, her eyes danced with excitement.

Kids streamed in from every direction, squeezing through the gate. This was an important game; the playoff for the County Junior Baseball League title between the Blake school Dragons from Hopsville and their own Leesburg Panthers. Finally, pushing through the gate, they ran to the home team side of the ball field, scrambled up the bleachers and plopped down.

“Watch the bench don’t crack,” yelled a voice somewhere behind them.

Freddy’s heart stopped beating. She was dead. She knew without turning around it was Brock Ames, probably showing off for Brittany and his friends.

“Shut up, jerk,” Jess yelled. “It’s your head that’s cracked.”

Ruthie nudged Jess. “Don’t answer him or he’ll keep doing it. Think invisible.”

Sure enough he yelled, “Look at Fat Freddy and her pals Carrot Top and Messy Jessy.”

Freddy heard giggling. Please God, she begged, let me just disappear, but God wasn’t hanging out at the game. Brock Ames was and he was sitting two rows behind them.

“Let’s move,” she whispered.

“I’m not budging from these seats,” Jess said, between clenched teeth.

Freddy sighed and scrunched down. A loud crack behind them shattered the air.

“Hey, you hear that noise?” Brock yelled.

“Yeah, sounded like wood cracking to me,” Tommy Whitehead said loudly, getting into the act.

Then a deep voice said, “Boys, I suggest you keep your remarks to yourself. You’re starting to annoy me.”

It was Mr. Berns, the soccer coach. Brittany giggled. Then there was wonderful silence. Freddy wanted to kiss Mr. Berns, if he wasn’t so old. She just wished Brock would find somebody else to pick on. It all started last year, when Brock, leaning over to whisper in Brittany’s ear, walked into an open locker door. Freddy saw it and couldn’t stop giggling. His face turned bright red. “Shut up, fat face,” he shouted.

Maybe in a few years when she became thin and gorgeous like Mike said, Brock would ask her for a date and she’d make him beg. Then she’d make him apologize in front of the whole school for every mean thing he’d ever said about her. Of course, she would turn him down for the date. He’d turn red and slink away. Freddy giggled. Why did she always have to giggle?

“What’s so funny?” Ruthie asked.

“Nothing,” she said, trying to stop giggling.

Chapter 2

Fat Freddy

The tight game went into extra innings but Freddy didn't pay a lot of attention. She day dreamed, instead.

Hundreds of kids were jumping off the stands after the game. Suddenly Brock tripped and rolled headfirst down the stairs, pulling Brittany with him. Now Freddy could make a quick getaway. Just as she was about to escape there was a roar.

Freddy jerked and awoke from the fantasy. Everybody stood screaming as Billy Winger hit a double and brought in the winning run. The Leesburg Panthers were the new champions. Freddy figured, by next week, there would be a sign at the crossroads, courtesy of the Rotary, WELCOME TO LEESBURG, HOME OF THE PANTHERS, BLAKE COUNTY JUNIOR BASEBALL LEAGUE CHAMPIONS.

"That Billy Winger's so cool," Jess stared at the hero of the day, parading around the field with his teammates.

Ruthie shook her head. "He doesn't know you're alive, Jess," Jess gave her a dirty look.

"Well, Billy has Lauren Jasper anyway," Freddy said.

"Don't remind me," Jess said. "Come on, I'm starved."

They pushed through the crowd and made their way to the gate. Freddy wanted to get away fast before Brock could find her again. No such luck.

She spotted him, lounging around the gate. Brittany Hughes hung on Brock's arm with Tommy Whitehead and the rest of their group, surrounding them. Freddy pictured a high school football game—Brittany, with her tiny, slim body wearing a blue and gold cheerleader outfit, bright blond curls bouncing, doing handstands in front of a roaring crowd. Freddy leaned over and whispered to Ruthie, "Do you think maybe she'll gain a lot of weight over the next two years or her hair will fall out?"

Ruthie grimaced. "We would never be so lucky. She'll probably grow some gorgeous boobs and look like a movie star."

"What are you two whispering about?" Jess asked.

"Don't you hate being almost twelve?" Freddy asked, without answering Jess. "It's like nowhere. I mean you're a kid to everybody but you're not really a kid. Know what I mean?"

Ruthie nodded. "I wish I could look in a magic mirror and see myself in three years, I mean with boobs and a waist."

"I wish it was three years from now, never mind magic mirrors. I'm tired of being a kid," Jess said.

Freddy glanced toward the gate. Brock hadn't seen them yet. "Listen, maybe we could wait 'til they leave?"

“Come on, Freddy. Just walk by and hold your head up.” Jess said.

Easy for her to say. Freddy started to open her mouth to argue but Brittany spotted them and nudged Brock. He leaned over as she whispered in his ear. He smiled and she giggled. Freddy face burned. She looked around for a way back but the crowd was pushing forward. They were caught, like salmon swimming upstream, back to their spawning grounds. There was no place to hide.

“Well, if it isn’t Fat Freddy and her ugly pals,” Brock yelled, while Brittany giggled. People turned to see what he was talking about; but Freddy just kept her head down and pushed on through the crowd.

Jess wasn’t going to be put off. She turned and said loudly, “You’re such a child, Brock Ames. Why don’t you grow up?”

Sudden silence, as if every sound in the world turned off at that moment. Freddy’s heart started pounding and she felt dizzy. Ruthie grabbed her arm. “Let’s get out of here.”

Brock pushed Brittany aside and came toward them. Just then, Lauren and Billy came around the fence and everyone started cheering. Brock narrowed his eyes and hesitated. Then he decided to turn back and get some secondhand glory from Billy’s success.

Freddy closed her eyes and breathed. “God, Jess, what made you do that? Are you crazy?”

Jess shrugged. “I’m sick and tired of him and his big mouth, that’s all. He’s such a jerk.”

“Yeah, well, that jerk practically runs the sixth grade and since he isn’t moving away in the next three months, he’ll be running seventh grade, too,” Freddy said.

“And we’re not moving away either,” Ruthie added.

Freddy nodded. “Just think about it. We have to spend the next six years in the same schools with him.” Then she turned her face up. “We need a miracle, please?”

Jess said, “Hey, there are all kinds of new kids in the intermediate school, remember? Kids will be coming from McCauliff and Kennedy, too.”

“That’s right,” Ruthie agreed. “Maybe Brock won’t be so big and important anymore. Anyway, there are probably kids in the seventh grade now who run the school and they’ll still be there next year.”

Freddy liked that idea. Maybe they would get their miracle after all. She pictured some hulking eighth grader pushing Brock into the lockers and getting in his face. He wouldn’t look so tough then. She bet Brittany wouldn’t be giggling, either.

Ruthie looked over at Freddy. “You’ve got a smirk on your face, Freddy.”

“Just thinking about what might happen next year, that’s all.”

Jess walked faster. “Well, daydream us to La Pizza, Freddy. I’m starving,”

Food. Freddy forgot about Brock and Brittany as visions of double cheese pizza with pepperoni drifted across her mind. She could almost smell it.

Chapter 3

Jess Discovers Boys

On Monday, Billy's hit was the loud topic of conversation at every table in the crowded, noisy school cafeteria but theirs. "What do you mean, you're not going to camp this summer? It's our last year," Freddy shouted through a mouth full of chips.

Jess looked so unhappy. "I can't help it. My parents rented this house at the beach and we're all going there for the summer."

"That's not fair," Ruthie said. "We planned to spend this last summer together at camp."

"I can't help it," Jess said. "I mean, like what can I do?"

"Tell them you want to go to camp with us," Freddy mumbled through the chips.

Jess shrugged, "Well, I thought about doing that but, you know, I think it might be fun to do something different this year. You know, meet new kids and lay on the beach all day."

"You might get skin cancer," Freddy muttered.

Jess frowned. "Look, I'm sorry. I'm just not going to spend this summer with you."

Freddy looked at her sandwich then put it down. "It's not like we won't see each other again in September. I mean, it's only two months."

Jess nodded, "See, it's not so bad."

Ruthie noisily sucked soda through the straw. "We can write."

They sat through lunch silently. It would be the first year they wouldn't spend together at camp after six years. They were always Ruthie, Freddy and Jess, like The Three Musketeers—all for one and one for all. Somehow, though, it didn't feel as sad as Freddy thought it would. Jess had been changing. She didn't seem like a kid anymore. Was this what it meant to grow up? Kids who were your friends became kids you didn't like so much anymore. Suddenly, her favorite bologna sandwich didn't taste so good. She stuffed it in the bag. "I'm done," she announced.

"Me, too." Ruthie packed her lunch bag.

"I'm not done yet. You guys go on without me," Jess said, glancing at the next table.

Ruthie shrugged and stood up but Freddy followed Jess's glance. A group had gathered around to watch Todd Banks and Eddie Ryan arm wrestle. Freddy looked at Jess but she was intent on watching the boys. Freddy knew then it was more than summer camp. Jess looked different, older somehow.

Freddy turned and followed Ruthie, glancing back. Jess had moved over to the next table and joined the group gathered around Todd and Eddie. "Good-bye, Jess," she whispered.

"What did you say?" Ruthie asked.

"Nothing important. I just don't think we'll be seeing much of Jess anymore."

Ruthie looked back and frowned. "I guess she has other things on her mind now."

"Is this what it means to grow up?" Freddy asked. "I mean, like losing your friends."

"I don't know, Freddy. I know I'll always be your friend."

"Thanks, Ruthie. Maybe she just doesn't want to be my friend. I'm probably an embarrassment."

"That's stupid, Freddy."

"It's not. I'm fat and ugly. She doesn't want to hang out with somebody like me. Boys won't want to be with her if she hangs with me."

"You stop that, Freddy Gold. You're not ugly. In fact you're really very pretty. Everybody says so."

"Yeah, I hear it all the time. 'Look at that child, she has such a pretty face,'" Freddy mimicked. "But they never finish the sentence."

"What do you mean, they never finish?"

"Too bad she's so fat. That's what I mean," Freddy said.

"I don't believe that. It's in your head. It's not real."

"Jeez, Ruthie, look at me. I'm fat. How many eleven-year-old girls do you know who weigh 120 pounds? I bet your mother doesn't even weigh that much."

Ruthie bit her lip and didn't say anything.

"See what I mean? You can't even think of one. Face it, Ruthie, I'm fat. Jess did the smart thing. You should probably do the same thing."

Ruthie turned to her, fury burning in her bright green eyes. "You listen to me, Freddy Gold. I'm your friend and I don't care how you look. Understand? You're smart and funny. You're awesome at the piano and you're my best friend. If you don't want me to be your friend then fine, nuts to you."

Freddy could see the tears glistening in Ruthie's eyes and felt bad. "Hey, Ruthie, I'm sorry. I didn't mean it."

But Ruthie was still angry. "Besides, how would you like to look in the mirror every day at a face filled with big orange freckles? I won't even be able to tell if I get zits, they'll just look like more freckles." Then she shrugged and turned away. "Forget it. I'm going back inside. I have a test later."

Freddy watched her march away and, suddenly, wanted to throw up. Ruthie was the best friend she'd ever had. They knew each other forever. Her eyes blurred. She was so mad all the time. She was just plain mean. Whatever happened to the Freddy who sang and joked and giggled all the time? She sighed and walked slowly out of the lunchroom, staring at the food stains on the ugly brown floor.

Chapter 4

Fat Angel

Things only got worse. Only three more weeks of school and Freddy thought it would never end. “Listen up, everybody. I have a special announcement.” Ms. Bonner, the physical education teacher, said one morning. “Tomorrow is weigh-in and the final tests for gym classes.”

Freddy groaned. Her worst nightmare was about to unfold.

Ruthie looked sideways at her. She knew how much Freddy hated the dreaded weigh-in.

Ms. Bonner was still speaking. “Of course, there’s nothing to worry about. Nobody ever fails gym.”

Freddy thought about options. She pictured Ms. Bonner marching down the line of girls. Freddy would stick out her foot and Ms. ‘B’ would trip and break a leg. Well maybe not break it, just sprain an ankle. You can’t have a gym teacher with a sprained ankle. Then they would bring in a substitute and the weigh-in would go on anyway.

Better yet, there could be a natural disaster, like a volcano erupting or a blizzard. School would close for the rest of the year. Only there weren’t any volcanoes in Leesburg and it was June, anyway, so no snow.

Maybe she could get sick. That wouldn’t work because her mom would have to miss a day from work. What if she just didn’t show up? Then they would come looking for her and her mom would still have to take off from work to talk to the principal.

Freddy could jump in the river and drown herself. Mike would be sad. She wasn’t too sure about her mom. Ruthie would be sad, too. And maybe her dad, but you never knew with him. He didn’t seem to feel much of anything. Who else would miss her? Isis? Cats didn’t care anyway, so long as they got food. Anybody could do that.

Freddy jumped when the bell rang. Out in the hallway, she saw Brock and Brittany leaning against the wall. “Hey, Fat Freddy, wonder what you weigh?” Brock said. Kids turned around and stared. Somebody started laughing.

“She should go last, Brock. She’ll probably break the scale,” Brittany said, giggling.

More laughter. Ruthie dug her fingers into Freddy’s arm and dragged her down the hall. “They are such morons,” she said. “Don’t pay any attention, Freddy. Hey, Freddy, are you all right?”

Freddy wasn’t listening anymore. She wasn’t feeling anything. It was as if her mind and body had gone numb. Ruthie was shaking her. “Freddy, come on, you’re scaring me. Wake up.”

Freddy didn’t know how long she’d stood in the hall. Ruthie wasn’t shaking her anymore. Then she heard a sweet voice. An angel. She just knew God wouldn’t desert her.

“Freddy, look at me.”

Freddy turned and looked up at a plump, round face. Had God sent a fat angel to help her? How wonderful.

“Freddy, do you know who I am?”

It wasn’t an angel. It was Mrs. Ross, the guidance counselor. Freddy nodded sadly and muttered, “I was hoping God had sent a fat angel to help me.”

“Well I am fat and I’m sorry I’m not an angel, Freddy, but I might be able to help you.”

“Nobody can help me.”

“Oh, I don’t know. Nothing is hopeless, Freddy. Why don’t you come into my office and we’ll see what I can do.”

Freddy looked around. The hallway was empty. All the kids must be in class.

Mrs. Ross took her hand. “It’s all right, Freddy. Ruthie got scared and sent one of the boys to get me.”

Freddy sat down on the chair in Mrs. Ross’s office. She looked down at the floor and muttered, “I’m sorry I said you were fat.”

The Counselor didn’t sit behind her desk but sat on a chair next to Freddy. “Well, it’s what I am, Freddy. It’s what I’ve always been. I know you didn’t mean to say anything cruel. Do you want to tell me what happened?”

Freddy was silent for a while. “It hurts too much.”

“I know, Freddy. The kids made fun of you again.”

“You know about that?”

“I know a lot of things, Freddy. It’s my job to know what goes on in this school.”

Freddy’s eyes filled with tears. “They all laughed at me. It was awful.” Then it all spilled out. She told her about Brock and Brittany, how Jess didn’t want to be her friend anymore. She even told her about the divorce and her dad’s girlfriend—how her mom never listened anymore. Freddy told her how terrible it was to weigh-in in front of everybody. “You can’t imagine how it feels. The teacher calls out your weight and everybody hears. I keep going to the end of the line, but it doesn’t help. They all laugh.”

“But I can imagine how it feels, Freddy. You see, I was fat as a child and I went through the same thing. Kids used to follow me down the street and call me ‘two elephants put together’.”

“Didn’t you just want to die?”

“Many times.”

“But you didn’t.”

“No, Freddy. I was just mad all the time. I hated everybody.”

“So what did you do?”

“I just held up my head and pretended I was somewhere else,” Mrs. Ross said.

“Like the ground swallowed you up?” Freddy asked.

“No, I was a beautiful princess living in a castle and no one could get to me.”

Freddy thought for a second. “You mean like sleeping beauty?”

“Sort of like that, except I didn’t sleep. I dreamed about the future and what I was going to do and be. I wrote poems and stories, too.”

“Did it help?” Freddy asked.

“In a way, the writing did help. I kept a journal and I was able to write anything I felt and thought. It didn’t matter what I said because nobody else read it but me,” Mrs. Ross said.

“Sometimes I have these weird and funny daydreams. You know, about how things might be different.”

Mrs. Ross said, “Do you ever write them down?”

Freddy shook her head. “Did your mother listen to you?”

“My mother used to say ‘sticks and stones will break your bones, but names will never hurt you’.”

“That’s not true. Words hurt terrible, inside your head.”

“You’re right, Freddy. Bones will heal, but words you always remember.”

“And you remember the hurt, too.”

Mrs. Ross nodded.

“I feel better, Mrs. Ross.”

The counselor smiled. “I’m glad to hear that, Freddy. Would you like to come in to see me tomorrow? Maybe, when you’re ready, we can invite your mother to come too.”

“It’s hard for her to take off from work.”

“Maybe I can call her on the phone one night. Would that be all right with you, Freddy?”

“I guess. But not until I say so, OK?”

“Sure, Freddy. We’ll see how you feel by the end of the week. Now I think it’s already time to go home. Why don’t you come in to see me after gym class and we can talk about how it was for you.”

Freddy nodded but figured she probably wouldn’t live through gym class anyway, so it didn’t matter.

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