

JO KNOWLES



READ
BETWEEN
THE
LINES

JO KNOWLES



CANDLEWICK PRESS

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*To the man driving the Volvo station wagon who gave my family
the finger in 2003 even though we didn't deserve it,
thank you for inspiring this story. And to Robin Wasserman,
who encouraged me to write it.*

—J. K.

ONE: FINGER BOY

(Nate: 8:15 a.m.)

I.

I STEP OUT OF THE MASS OF STINKING BODIES and get ready to catch the ball.

“Granger’s open!” someone yells.

Ben Mead has it. He pivots on one foot, trying to find an opening among the hands blocking his vision. He sees me and pauses doubtfully, then looks around for someone else. Anyone else. Everyone knows passing to Granger is about as effective as throwing the ball out of bounds. Or worse, handing it over to the other team.

I raise my hands to show him Granger’s ready anyway. I am wide open.

He darts his head around again. Desperate. Ben Mead is the captain of the basketball team and doesn't even need to take PE. But I guess, for him, it's an easy A.

"Give it to Granger!" another commands. It's Keith. He's always looking out for me, even though it comes at a risk. It's never a good idea to be friends with the Kcoj. That's "jock" spelled backward. Because I am the opposite of a jock.

Ben passes it to Jacob Richarde instead. He's also on the basketball team and also most likely trying to get an easy A. He dribbles a few times but gets swarmed by the other side. Without warning, he hurls the ball at me four times harder than he really needs to. Like we're back in third grade playing dodgeball and he not only wants to hit me—he wants to make it count.

I hear the break before I feel it. It's kind of a click. Like the sound my dad's fingers make when he cracks his knuckles, one by one, as he watches a fight on TV. Like he's the one getting ready to use his fists.

The basketball slips from my fingers and bounces into a mass of hands and white T-shirts, half of them covered with red mesh pinnies to show which team they're on. Ben and Jacob look at me with disgust as a red gets the ball and dribbles toward the other end of the court. The

rest take chase—a sprawling, blurry candy cane. Their sneakers squeak on the gym floor. The sound echoes through the empty stands.

“Defense!” Ben yells above the squeaks. No one responds. I hate gym.

I stand alone at my end of the court, finger throbbing, and try to concentrate on not letting the water welling up in my eyes spill over.

Please, God. Not that.

I take a deep breath to calm myself, but that just seems to make the pain worse, as if proof of life makes the pain that much more unbearable.

How long does it take for a broken finger to start to swell up like a sausage? I grit my teeth against the throbbing and wait to find out.

Ms. Sawyer blows the whistle she keeps on a black cord around her neck as a second wave of pain rushes at me and brings me to my knees. The candy-cane mass beyond me becomes a pink jumble as my eyes water again. If I wasn’t in so much pain, I would laugh. They are so far from *pink*.

I blink away my tears before anyone can see.

“Granger!” Ms. Sawyer yells. “What do you think you’re doing?”

Her tiny body bobs toward me. Behind her, the candy-cane mob turns to finally notice they are short one guy. Not that my participation was making much difference.

Keith is the first to part from the pack and follow Ms. Sawyer up the court, ignoring one essential rule of survival: Never show the crowd you feel sorry for the Kcoj, or *you* become the Kcoj. But he's my best friend. He can't help it.

"Granger!" Ms. Sawyer yells again. It's weird how in gym class everyone resorts to using last names, like we're in the army or something. I don't see the connection. Maybe it makes us seem more tough. Most of us, anyway.

Ms. Sawyer's small head peers down at me. She tilts it to the right and squints at me the way a crow looks at a dying animal on the side of the road, soon to be roadkill.

Do I let him live, or put him out of his misery? I bet she's thinking.

Kill me now, I think back. Please.

She bends down and puts her hand on my shoulder. It's small and dainty. Not like you would think a gym teacher's would be.

"Let's see, kiddo," she says. *Kiddo*. Like I'm nine instead of a ninth-grader. Somehow though, coming from her, it isn't insulting. It's comforting.

She reaches for my hand, but I pull it away fast,

knowing it will hurt more if she touches it. Instead she bends down to get a closer look and winces. “Grab the hall pass and go to the nurse,” she says. “You’ll be all right.”

She turns and jogs toward the candy canes. This seems to indicate that I’m not hurt that badly, and everyone goes back to ignoring me. Keith pauses and turns toward me, giving me a questioning look like, *You sure you’re OK?* I give him a slight nod so no one else notices: *I’ll survive.*

At this school, and especially in this gym class, one guy showing sympathy toward another guy is not recommended. At least showing sympathy toward *this* guy. And by *this* guy, I mean me.

I stand up and immediately feel woozy. The gym floor rocks to one side, then the other. I spread my legs to get my balance, as if I’m standing on the deck of a boat. Slowly, the floor steadies and I find the hall pass at the bottom step of the bleachers.

Ms. Sawyer blows her whistle again. The sneakers go back to squeaking and the shouts to *Pass it! Pass it! Pass it! Shoot!* pick up. I’m not sad to leave them.

I walk down the empty hallway slowly, savoring being able to walk without fear of being pushed or tripped.

The floor is littered with crinkled-up paper and pens with no ink.

A strip of toilet paper.

The distorted metal from a spiral notebook.

An empty Doritos bag.

A crushed Gatorade bottle. Blue.

And me.

Mr. French, the head custodian, is usually so fanatical about clean hallways. Any time I leave class to hide in the bathroom or go to the nurse, I see him in the hall with his push mop, cleaning up everyone's garbage. I always try to say *hi* or *thank you*, because I imagine it is a crappy job, but whenever he sees me, he looks away and hurries down the hall. One time I bumped into him when I was rushing out of class, and he dropped his mop and kind of panicked and just stared at me like I was a ghost. Then he kept saying he was sorry, as if me bumping into him was his fault. He's a strange guy. My guess is he's out sick today because this place looks like a dump.

I reach out with my good hand and clang the locks on the locker doors, just because I can. *Clang-clang-clang*. It feels good to be bad for once. Confident.

I wish this could be me all the time, not just in the safety of an empty hall. I wish I could be more than the kid everyone likes to watch fall on his face because he's "clumsy" (they trip me). Who wears lame clothes because he's "poor" (my dad doesn't give me money to buy the

right stuff). Who's a "wimp" (how does a skinny guy like me stand up to someone twice his size without being trampled?).

They don't know me.

My finger throbs with each step as I get closer to the nurse's office, which is in the same direction as the main entrance. Or exit, depending on how you look at it. I consider what would happen if I kept walking and didn't go to the nurse's office. What would happen if I slipped outside? Slipped away?

But the throbbing aches all the way up to my eardrums now, and I am so tired.

All I want to do is lie down and disappear.

II.

In the nurse's office there is a daisy-covered plastic shower curtain hanging from the ceiling to hide the vinyl-covered bed that smells like bleach and makes a farting sound when you roll over on it.

I can't wait do to that now, despite the embarrassing sound. I just want to go behind the curtain and drink from

the paper cone cup that makes the water taste funny and swallow the white pills that I know will barely dull the pain. I want to lean back on the farting bed and stare at the dots in the ceiling tiles and listen to the nurse make personal calls because she forgot I'm in the room, behind the curtain, pretending not to exist.

The nurse swivels around on her stool when she hears me come in. Her thick thighs bulge over it so you can't see the fake leather seat. She eyes me up and down, scanning me for what's wrong. Her eyes settle on my cradled hand, then hone in on my finger.

"Ouch," she says, wheeling herself over to me. She reaches for my hand, just like Ms. Sawyer did. She's a nurse. Doesn't she know that's a terrible idea? Why do people always want to touch what hurts?

I pull my hand out of reach.

"I need to take a look," she says, smiling in a gentle sort of way. She has eyes like a deer. They are deep brown and too big for her face. She blinks at me. She's wearing green eye shadow and thick purple mascara. The green matches her nurse's shirt.

"I won't touch it. Promise."

I step forward and hold out my swollen finger. It's even bigger than a sausage now. It makes me think of

those old-fashioned cartoons of Tom and Jerry when Jerry hammers Tom on the head and a furless pink bump pops up out of his skull and pulses like a neon sign.

Womp-womp-womp.

“Hmmm,” she says, squinting. Her name is Mrs. O’Connor. She darts her head around my hand, trying to see my finger from all sides. “Looks like a bad one. Think you broke it, hon?”

I remember the sound I heard when the ball hit. I’m sure there was a crack. But I don’t think bones really make a sound when they break.

“I don’t know,” I tell her. “Could I just lie down for a while?” The floor has started to sway again.

“I wonder if you should have that X-rayed,” she says, ignoring my question.

The floor sways in a new direction and I stumble a little. “No,” I say. “I’m sure it’s just a sprain.”

She frowns.

“Couldn’t I just lie down?” I ask again.

“Of course, hon. Let me call your folks and see if it’s OK to give you some ibuprofen for the swelling.”

I don’t have folks. I have a *folk*. She should know this by now since I’ve spent enough time in here. Maybe it’s just a word she’s used to saying in the plural.

Maybe it's just wishful thinking, that there is someone else she could call besides my father. She's had to deal with that *folk* on the phone before. It couldn't possibly have been pleasant.

She glides back over to her desk. There is something graceful in how she moves across the floor on that stool, her feet pointing at the same angle, as she zooms away from me. Like she's trying to fly.

"What's the number, hon?"

I tell her.

She clicks the number using the eraser end of a pencil.

"Hello, is this Mr. Granger?" she asks. She turns to me and winks, as if to say, *I got this*.

I'm pretty sure she's about to be disappointed.

"This is the school nurse at Irving High. I have your son here with me. He hurt his hand in gym class this morning."

She's quiet while my dad replies. Then she squirms, ever so slightly.

I picture my dad on the other line, making his combination disgusted and disappointed face. It's a bit like Ben Mead's, come to think of it.

What did the hurt magnet get up to this time? I imagine him asking.

My dad thinks everyone wants to beat me up.

I wish he wasn't right.

When I was younger and still dumb enough to go to him after "getting hurt on the playground at school" (someone kicked the crap out of me), he would always have the same two reactions: "Christ, don't be such a baby" followed by "What did you do that for?" As if I had a choice. He really loved that second one. The old joke that was never funny.

"Well, no," Mrs. O'Connor says. "It's not his hand exactly." She pauses. It's like she knows what she is going to say will sound pathetic. "He hurt his finger. Actually."

Another pause. Probably while she waits for him to stop bitching about what a lost cause I am.

"It's very swollen," she says. "I think it might be broken. I'd like to give him some ibuprofen and ice it, try to get the swelling down so I can get a better look."

She squirms on her stool and turns to smile at me sympathetically, as if to say, *I'm so sorry your father is such an asshole*, even though she doesn't seem the type to use that word except in extreme cases. I shrug back like, *No worries. I can handle him.*

She looks doubtful.

"All right, Mr. Granger," she says, twisting away from me again. "I'll do that. Yes. I'll keep you posted. [Pause.] Yes, I'm sure you're busy. [Pause.] Well, it does look like

a nasty injury. [Pause.] Finger injuries can be very painful, sir. [Pause.] Allright. Yes. I'll call you back."

She hangs up the phone but waits a minute before turning around to face me again. Her shoulders and back rise up and down. Deep breaths. Calming breaths. My dad has that effect on people.

When she stands, the squished cushion seat slowly begins to inflate, erasing the indent her huge rear left on it. "He says it's fine to give you some pain relief," she says. She walks to the cupboard and unlocks it with the key she wears on a cord around her neck, similar to the one Ms. Sawyer keeps her whistle on.

She opens a bottle and empties two pills into a tiny paper cup that always reminds me of the kind you put ketchup in at the food court at the interstate rest area. I used to love stopping there on road trips with my parents. It was always my job to fill the cups with ketchup, mustard, and relish. Before my mom left, it was the best job ever. We'd share cups and dip our fries in, talking about how much fun we were going to have wherever it was we were headed. Sometimes she'd tap my nose with the end of a fry and get ketchup on me, and before I could wipe it off, she'd call me Rudolph. Then one day my dad said, "More like Bozo," and that put an end to that. Even so, my dad seemed happy then. Happy to be with my mom, at

least. But that was before. The last time I went anywhere with him, I tried to carry two cups of ketchup in one hand, and they tipped and oozed down my hand and onto my new sneakers. My dad called me a “waste of space” and everyone looked at us, like they were trying to figure out if I really was, or if my father was one for calling me that. I think the jury is still out.

Mrs. O'Connor hands me the mini cup. “Let me get you some water to swallow those down with,” she says. She reaches for the cone cup dispenser next to the sink and fills one up.

“Here you go, hon,” she says sweetly.

Confession: I like it when she calls me *hon*. It is so much nicer than the words my dad is fond of: *Little prick. Loser. Moron. Good-for-nothing. Dumbass. Little queer. Pussy. Worthless little*—

I drop the pills onto my tongue, lift the cup to my mouth, and breathe in the familiar school water and paper smell. I swallow the pills and water in one giant gulp.

Mrs. O'Connor smiles at me again in her sympathetic way. Sometimes I think she's the only one who cares. Who understands.

I am still holding my hurt hand against my chest. It's throbbing like crazy. My finger is even more swollen now and turning purple. I can almost hear the sound of the throb.

Womp-womp-womp.

I've seen my hand look like this before. When I was nine. It was only a year after my mom left. My dad had forced me to eat everything on my plate even though I hated everything on it. Especially the peas. They were cold and wrinkled, but he made me sit there until I ate every last one. When I finished, I very calmly brought my plate into the kitchen and washed and dried it. Then I walked to the front door.

I was leaving. For good. I had decided as I choked down the last pea. This was it. I would be homeless. I would starve. But at least I wouldn't have to eat any more cold peas while my father looked on with hatred. I couldn't understand why he tortured me. Blamed me. I knew the truth about my mom. I knew it wasn't my fault she left us. Why couldn't he?

So, I was leaving. And I wanted to go with a bang. Or, more accurately, a slam. I knew it would piss him off, but I wanted to show him I didn't care anymore. I wanted him to know I wasn't afraid. Sure, I knew he'd probably come after me. Make me pay. But maybe I could outrun him. My anger was stronger than my fear and common sense.

I gripped the edge of the door and felt the solidness of it. Then I put everything I had into slamming it closed against the House of Horror.

Somehow though, I wasn't able to move my hand away at the same time. It was as if the door itself was grabbing me. Trapping me.

I've got you. You're not going anywhere.

I felt a hot, hot pain when I finally freed myself from the door's jaw. My finger swelled up just like it is now. I bit my lips together to keep in my scream. Keep it in because if my father heard, if he knew I couldn't even get slamming the door right, he would laugh. He would say it served me right. And I couldn't let him say that. So I swallowed the scream and my tears and choked on the pain as I ran down the driveway and up the road. I ran and ran and wished I would never have to turn back. Never have to face the ugly mouth of That House again.

I ran until I found a stand of lilac bushes. I crawled under the lowest branches and hid there, crying privately under the green leaves, just as I did the day my mother left us. A deep hole had been dug out there by some neighborhood dog. I fit myself into the hole and wished I was that dog. A dog someone probably loved and didn't mind if he dug a hole under the lilacs to stay cool in the summer. My dad would make fun of me for knowing the name of the bushes. He would call me a sissy or mama's boy or worse.

But lilacs were my mom's favorite, so of course I

recognized them. Every spring she would cut a few sprigs and put them in a vase so the house would smell nice. “Like the promise of summer days coming,” she always said. Then she would hug me close, and I could feel her hope and love settle into me.

That’s how I knew what the bush was called.

I was no sissy.

Maybe I was a mama’s boy, though.

Until she left me.

Then I was no one’s boy.

When someone leaves unexpectedly, it has to be someone’s fault. You need someone to blame. My father blamed me. He blamed me, so he hated me.

The day my mother left us, I was never his boy again. I was his burden.

When the neighbor and her dog found me in the bushes that night, I begged to be left alone. But she brought me home anyway. And that night, more than my finger throbbed with pain.

No one slams the door on my father.

But secretly, I really thought he beat the crap out of me because I came back.

Mrs. O’Connor waddles over to the refrigerator to get an ice pack for me. I glance at her very tidy desk. There’s a

bouquet of flowers on one corner with a card sticking out. I bet it's from her husband. On the other corner, there's a framed photo of her family. She has four kids, and she's posing with them and her husband. They're all wearing jeans and white T-shirts. They're beaming, as if they are the happiest family in the world, even if they also look like the dorkiest family in their matching outfits. The kids seem to range in age from about four to twelve or so. They all have really white teeth. I wonder if they were Photoshopped. I wonder if they are all really that happy. Probably.

"This will hurt at first," Mrs. O'Connor says as she hands me the ice pack. "But it should help with the swelling."

She pulls a piece of paper across the bed behind the curtain and puts a fresh paper case on the pillow. "Can you sit and lean against the wall? I think you should keep your hand raised above your heart for now."

I nod and adjust myself on the bed. It farts awkwardly as predicted. I lean against the cinder-block wall. It's cold and reassuringly hard. Solid. I close my eyes and feel myself disappearing, just like little kids think they do when they hide their faces. If only.

"You'll be all right," Mrs. O'Connor tells me. "Let me know if you need anything."

She pulls the curtain shut.

I listen to her nursing shoes creak under her weight as she makes her way back to the stool. The air in the cushion empties out in a quiet whistle-breath when she sits back down. She starts to hum the tune to “It’s a Small World.” She probably takes her family to Disney World every year. That’s probably where they took that picture. That’s probably why they all look so happy.

I concentrate on my pulsing finger, almost throbbing to the rhythm of the song. I sing it in my head as Mrs. O’Connor hums.

I find that song kind of depressing, to tell the truth. People like Mrs. O’Connor’s kids get the laughter and hope part of the world; people like me get the rest: tears and fear.

Womp-womp-womp.

I close my eyes and pretend the invisible trick works.

After a while Mrs. O’Connor peeks her head around the curtain to check on me. “How’re you doing?” she asks.

I lift the ice pack off and look. The swelling is about the same, but my finger seems to be getting more purple.

“Ooh. That’s not good,” she says, stepping closer to inspect.

“Does that mean I broke it?”

“Maybe. I better call your dad back. I really think you need to have it X-rayed.”

I look up at the ceiling and sigh. She pats my knee. “It’ll be OK,” she says.

But I don’t know what she means by *it*.

She goes to make the call. It takes about two seconds to figure out that my dad is not happy.

“Well, it does look pretty bad,” Mrs. O’Connor says quietly. Pause. “Yes, I really think he needs to have an X-ray. [Pause.] No, I can’t tell just by looking. But I’ve seen a lot of broken fingers over the years, sir.” Her voice gets louder. “No, I’m not a doctor. [Pause.] All right. Yes. He’ll be here. We’ll see you soon.”

I brace myself for the look on her face when she pulls the curtain back again.

“He’s such a dick,” I tell her, surprising myself with my choice of words. “Sorry.”

“I don’t like that talk,” she says. But she pats my knee again and smiles. Code for *But, yes. He really is*.

I lean my head back against the hard wall and close my eyes again.

Here is my fantasy:

I’m sitting with my dad in the waiting room at the hospital. It’s full of people moaning about whatever pain it is

that brought them there. My father will appear physically uncomfortable having to be near so many people, especially people who are “bellyaching.” I will enjoy watching him squirm. A hot nurse walks into the room. She’s holding a clipboard. She scans the list on it and calls out, “Nathan Granger?” My father and I will both stand up at the same time because my name is the one and only thing we share. But the nurse will check me out, not my dad. She’ll smile and give me a sexy look and say, “Come with me,” in this really suggestive way, and I will smile back at her and then give my father a very fake-sorry face. The hot nurse and I will disappear down the hall together, leaving my father alone with all the drug addicts and runny-nose coughing little kids. Instead of taking me to some tiny little cubicle with curtains for walls, the nurse will take me to a supply closet. She’ll tell me how hot I am and start to undress and say how she wants to be the one I lose my virginity to and how she’s going to make sure I never forget my first time and . . .

Mrs. O’Connor starts humming “It’s a Small World” again.

I shift uncomfortably on the squeaky bed and try to think other thoughts before she sees what else is suddenly swollen.

Oh, God.

I concentrate on the pain in my finger instead. The paper crinkles under me. Then I hear a click on the other side of the curtain. It's the sound of the office door opening.

"Well, hello, Claire. How are you doing, honey?"

The curtain is closed so I can't see who's on the other side, but I only know one Claire. Claire Harris. And she is even better than my fantastical hot nurse.

"Hi, Mrs. O'Connor," she says.

"How can I help you, hon?"

I'm kind of surprised to hear her call someone else *hon*. I thought that was just for me.

"Uh," Claire says quietly. "I have cramps."

I wish I hadn't heard that.

"Aw, hon," Mrs. O'Connor says again. It's kind of bugging me.

"They're really bad. Can I call my mom?"

"Sure, sweetie. I'd let you lie down, but the bed's occupied."

Claire peers through the curtain.

Oh. My. God.

"Hey," she says. She doesn't seem to be embarrassed by the fact that I know she's having her period.

"Hey," I say, but it comes out like a high-pitched croak.

“What happened to your hand?”

Claire Harris just asked me a question. Claire Harris is *talking* to me. Keith is going to die of jealousy.

“Gym,” I say. I lift off the ice and we both gasp. My finger is hideous.

“Wow. That looks, like, really bad,” she tells me.

“He’s going to the hospital as soon as his dad gets here,” Mrs. O’Connor says. “Do you want to sit down while I call your mom, Claire? What’s the number?”

Claire sits next to me on the bed and recites her number. The bed doesn’t fart when Claire Harris sits on it. It’s like even the bed has standards. I’m a little offended, but I also understand. It’s *Claire Harris* after all. Sitting ten inches away from me. So close I can smell her perfume. It smells like . . . grass? Summer. It’s nice. Like outside.

“Hi, Mrs. Harris, this is Mrs. O’Connor from school. I’ve got Claire here, and she’s not feeling well. [Pause.] That’s right. [Pause.] Oh, I know. We ladies just can’t get a break.”

Claire sighs and stares up at the ceiling. She seems unaffected by the topic of conversation, but my face is burning hot.

“She wants to go home, if that’s all right with you? [Pause.] The bus? [Pause.] OK. I’ll tell her.”

Claire stands up as soon as Mrs. O'Connor gets off the phone. I try not to look anywhere near her . . . reproductive area.

Oh. My. God.

"I'm gonna go now," Claire says. She picks up the bag she left on the floor and swings it over her shoulder. Her hair gets caught in the strap and she pulls it out. It cascades down her back like she's in a shampoo commercial.

"Be safe, hon," Mrs. O'Connor says.

"I will." She turns to me and smiles. "Hope your finger's OK, um. Sorry. What's your name?"

"Nate," I say.

"Nate." She smiles again. Then she leaves.

"Pretty girl," Mrs. O'Connor says, raising her eyebrows. "A little old for you, though, I suppose."

"And a little too hot," I say.

She laughs.

"Looks aren't everything, hon." I admit, I still like it when she calls me that, even if it's a little less special now.

The door opens again, and this time there is a bitterness that blows in with it. It does not smell like grass and the outdoors. It smells like my father. Like aftershave and stale cigarettes.

"Hi, Mr. Granger," Mrs. O'Connor says. She pulls the

curtain all the way open with a loud swish as the rings slide harshly across the bar. My father sees me and my finger and shakes his head.

“Doesn’t look *that* bad,” he says.

It never does, Dad.

I glance over at the nurse, who looks like she just smelled something gross.

My dad leans closer. “Let me see it.” He starts to reach for my hand.

I hold it out to his ugly frown to keep him from getting too close to me.

“It’s not even that swollen,” he says, turning to Mrs. O’Connor. “You really think he broke it?”

She sighs. “I don’t know for *sure*. But yes. That would be my guess. Fingers aren’t supposed to be purple.”

Good one, Mrs. O.

He squints at my finger. Any idiot can see it is a strange shade of purple and three times bigger than the others. Slowly, I curl down my pinkie and ring finger. Then my pointer and thumb, so that I’m holding my fingers inside a fist aimed at my dad. All but one finger, that is.

And my God, even though it hurts like hell to do it, because moving any of my fingers causes shooting pain up my arm, it is worth it. It is worth it to stick my big,

broken purple middle finger up at my father. To stick it right in his face.

I grin.

He frowns.

We stare.

Finally, it dawns on him what I *might* be doing. He looks confused. Would I really have the balls to give him the finger? Would I dare? We both know he wouldn't hesitate for one second to smack me across the face right here if he thought I was. Screw the nurse. Screw what she would think.

I stop smiling at the image and think the words my finger is saying. The words I have longed to say to him every time he boxes my ears. Every time he laughs when I make a mistake. Every time he calls me the name I refuse to repeat. Every time I call to invite a friend over and they say no and give some lame excuse, never acknowledging that it isn't because they don't like me but because they're terrified of my father. How are you supposed to make friends in a situation like that?

Maybe I am a Worthless Little___. But I'm only a Worthless Little__ because of you, Dad.

He grunts, deciding I don't have the balls after all. "Let's go, then," he says. "I don't have all day. This is already costing me at work."

See?

I stand up and feel dizzy but quickly find my balance before my dad can see me stumble. Be weak. Mrs. O'Connor gives me a sympathetic look.

"No worries," I say. I even wink at her. I have never winked at anyone before. But this strange feeling of ball-siness has come over me.

I hold my hand and finger up behind my dad and smirk.

I don't know why, but somehow I feel like something good is going to come out of this injury after all.

III.

In the cab of my dad's truck, we stare straight ahead, not speaking. I hold my hand upright across my chest and crack the window open to keep from getting sick from the smell of his cigarettes. He quit before I was born, when he met my mom, but picked right back up the day she left. He huffs and puffs with the window rolled up, just to torture me, I swear.

Like a dog, I lift my face to the breeze coming through the crack my window.

Every so often my dad sighs uncomfortably. He never asks if I'm OK. This isn't a surprise. Just an observation.

We pull into the parking lot and park near the emergency entrance.

"Let me see that again," he says.

I lift my middle finger toward him and think the words when he makes his disgusted face.

"It doesn't look that bad," he says again.

"Then, let's just go home," I dare him.

He looks up and squints at the hospital entrance. He takes an awkward breath and chokes. I wait for him to pull out another cigarette, but he keeps his hands on the wheel.

I wait.

He waits.

We both eye the pack between the seats, and he instinctively grabs it and opens his door.

"Let's get this over with," he says. He lights up and starts puffing as he walks toward the entrance.

I follow silently.

We pause when we step on the sensor that opens the door. He turns to me and looks at my finger one more

time. He takes another long drag. Then another. The embers glow bright, and I think he'll swallow the thing whole if he's not careful.

"You sure it could be broken?" he asks seriously.

The question takes me by surprise. So does the look on his face. It's more than annoyance. Or anger. He looks scared.

We both gaze at the door, and I realize why he's so nervous. Because I remember this, just like he's probably remembering. The two of us, standing here on another horrible day, somehow both knowing the terrible news waiting on the other side. And now it suddenly feels terrifying to move forward.

I look down at my mangled finger.

"I don't know," I say. "I'm sorry."

"Forget it," he says, dropping the still-glowing cigarette to the ground next to the butt bin. He doesn't bother to stomp it out. He steps forward bravely and walks inside.

He's gruff with the nurse at the admissions desk. She's gruff back.

We find seats in the waiting room once the nurse puts a plastic bracelet with my name on it around my wrist. I sit first, at a seat where I can watch the TV that hangs

from the ceiling in one corner. My father chooses a seat next to some other empty chairs across the room instead of the one next to me. Could be he just doesn't want to watch Fox News. Could be he just doesn't want to sit next to his embarrassment of a son. Whatever.

There's a lady sitting in the corner with her daughter. The girl rests her head on her mom's shoulder. They're holding hands. I try to remember what that felt like. My mom's hand in mine. Reassuring. Calm. Safe. When she took my hand, I felt loved.

I press my throbbing hand to my chest and glare at my father, who sits restlessly on the other side of the room.

I try to see him as a stranger would. His hair is trimmed close to his scalp. Not quite a crew cut but almost. He is clean shaven. He has no laugh lines. The wrinkles between his eyebrows are from making his angry face. His mouth is set in a scowl. He appears to be reading *Time* Magazine, but probably he's just looking at the pictures. He's flipping through the pages way too fast for anything else. Hyper. I can tell he needs a cigarette by the way his hands tremble when he turns the pages.

Chillax, I imagine saying. *You're not the one with the smashed finger.*

He glances up and looks around the room. His knee

bounces nervously. He gives me the evil eye. *It's all your fault I'm here*, I can hear him thinking. *It's always your goddamned fault.*

It dawns on me that he's probably right. The last time he was here, in this very room, he was waiting for news about my mom. Waiting and hating me. Blaming me. Wishing it was me in the ER, not her.

It's my fault she got in the car that day. She didn't like me taking the bus. She didn't like the bruises I acquired on my ride home. Besides, she said, she liked picking me up at school. She liked to be able to check in with the teachers and other parents. It was a social thing, she insisted, whenever my dad questioned her. But she and I both knew, and maybe my dad did too, that she was really trying to protect me from the daily torture I was sure to get on the bus.

Even though I know it's not rational, I ask the *maybe* questions too. Maybe it *was* my fault. Maybe I should have told her I liked taking the bus. Maybe if just that one day I'd told her I wanted to.

But I didn't.

And she died.

She died a horrible, painful death right here. In this hospital. Because some person drank too much and got in a car and crashed into her.

My dad can't blame the *driver*, though.

Because we never found out who it was.

The police said that judging from the marks in the road, the person was probably wasted. "Typical hit-and-run," they said.

I hate that phrase.

It sounds like a baseball game.

Not murder.

It's too hard to blame a nameless, faceless person, even though I suppose we've both tried. In the end, it's easier to blame me. I know.

"Nathan Granger?" a guy nurse walks into the room. So much for my earlier hot nurse fantasy. Guess I won't be losing my virginity today after all. Surprise.

I stand up.

"Ouch," the nurse says. "That's gotta hurt."

"Yeah," I say. I glance over at my dad. He doesn't look up from his pretend reading.

"Are you with a parent?" the nurse asks.

"My dad," I say.

Finally my dad looks up from the magazine.

"Would you like to come with us, Mr. Granger? Or wait here?"

"I'll wait outside in the truck," he tells me. "You

can call me if you need me to sign anything and I'll come in."

The nurse looks at him like he is a first-class asshole.

"Will it be long?" my dad asks. "I really need to get back to work."

"I don't know," the nurse says in a syrupy-sweet voice.

My father grimaces at the sound. I know what he's thinking: *Queer*.

He's called me that enough times.

"We'll try to be as quick as we can," the nurse adds. He turns to me. "Let's go take a look and see what we're dealing with."

Before I follow him out, I watch my dad rush toward the exit. There's something about the way he hurries out that is different from the way he normally moves. If I didn't know better, I'd swear he was terrified.

Maybe it really wasn't the need for a nic fix causing his hands to shake.

Maybe he just can't bear to be in this place again.

I walk behind the nurse through a maze of halls until we get to a tiny curtained space with a bed next to a bunch of machinery.

“I’m just going to take your blood pressure and all that boring stuff. Then we’ll get you X-rayed.”

I nod. He punches some keys on a tiny laptop.

“So, how’d this happen?” he asks.

“In gym. I’m crap at basketball.”

He laughs. “Yeah, me too.”

When he finishes with the basics, he makes me get in a wheelchair and pushes me down a whole new set of mazes until we get to the X-ray area.

“You might have to wait awhile, but I’ll be back when you’re done. Want a magazine or something?”

“No worries,” I say.

He leaves me alone in the hall. There’s an empty stretcher and a line of wheelchairs against one wall. I imagine all the different patients who’ve sat in those chairs. The kids with the broken legs, arms, and fingers. I imagine most of them would have a parent by their side, not left all alone like me. I picture my father back in his truck, cursing me. Checking his watch every two minutes, getting all amped up about how much work he’s missing. Chain-smoking like a fiend. I’m sure it’ll be a pleasant drive home.

Finally, the lab-tech person comes out and looks at the chart attached to my wheelchair.

“Nathan?” she asks, then checks my wristband. She is almost as hot as the nurse from my fantasy.

“That’s me,” I say.

“C’mon. We’ll see if that’s broken. Wanna make any bets?”

“How about wishes?”

“Depends on your wish,” she says. “You don’t really *want* it to be broken, do you?” She has a dimple in her right cheek. Not on her left. I think I’m in love with it.

“Well, even if it is, there’s not much they can do for you. Give you a splint and strict orders not to bang it again, at least till it heals.”

I nod and follow her into the room. She puts a heavy apron around me. “No chance you’re pregnant, right?” she jokes.

“No chance in hell,” I say.

“TMI, my young friend,” she says, tightening the apron around me.

We laugh. I wonder how old she is. She looks in her early twenties. She smells good. Like lilacs, actually. This seems very implausible, I know. Maybe my brain is just telling me that’s what she smells like. Either way, I take it as a good sign.

I think about my mom again. Not because of the hot lab tech (that would be gross), but because of the smell

of lilacs. Obviously. I think about the very few memories I have of her. How she used to make me hold her hand whenever we went for a walk. And how she ruffled my hair and said I belonged to the Clean Plate Club any time I ate everything on my plate. The memories are still so vivid. But I wonder how long they'll stay that way. I was only eight when she left.

When she died.

The lab tech adjusts my arm under the camera and says, "Don't move." I nod and realize that counts. "Not so fast, are you?" she says, smiling. She wags her finger at me in a joking sort of way. In a mom-ish sort of way. I breathe in her perfume one more time before she leaves me and goes inside the booth to click the scan machine. I hope she doesn't notice and think I'm a perv.

From the booth, she speaks through a mic and reminds me to be still while she takes the X-rays. Then she comes out and adjusts my arm again.

When we're finally done, she brings me the wheelchair, and the nurse comes back and wheels me to the curtained room again to wait for a doctor. After what seems like hours, a doctor finally comes in, followed by my father and a strong draft of cigarette smell. I automatically sit up straighter on the uncomfortable folding bed the nurse left me on.

“It’s definitely broken,” the doctor says. “But the good news is, the break’s nice and clean. I’ll have Christian fix you up, and you’ll be good to go. You’ll have to wear a splint for a few weeks and then come back for another X-ray to make sure everything’s healing properly. But no more basketball for you for a while, I’m afraid.”

“No problem,” I say. “I suck anyway.”

My dad grunts, and I regret saying it. Christian laughs. “There’s more to life than being a good ball player,” he says.

Tell that to my dad, I think.

But then I realize he just did.

IV.

We don’t talk on the drive home. I stare out the window and hold my newly wrapped hand against my chest. Every so often, my father sighs his sigh, and I’m sure he’s having thoughts of disappointment. I’m sure he always dreamed he’d have the kind of son who was the school football star. The guy who gave swirlies to guys like me.

The guy with the hot girl under his arm. The guy with muscles and nice teeth. The guy everyone loved and wanted to be.

Instead he got me.

I've never liked sports, even before he made me believe I sucked at them. I've always been afraid of balls, especially when someone is throwing one at my face. It was obvious by the time I lost a few baby teeth that I needed some serious orthodontic attention, but my father wasn't about to pay for that. And now, at fourteen, I weigh one hundred sixteen pounds. My portrait is basically the anti-boy of the one my father imagined being enshrined on our wall, which, instead, is bare and trophy-less.

There are so many reasons to resent me. Sometimes I wonder if he would have preferred that the accident happened on the way home, when I was in the car, too. Sometimes I wonder if he secretly wishes it had been me who died.

As we drive, it dawns on me that we are not actually driving in the direction that will bring us home. He's taking me back to school. With a broken finger. Typical. I don't say anything because I know the response. "Suck it up. Be a man."

My stomach growls. I haven't eaten anything yet today. I never eat breakfast on gym days for fear of puking from overexertion. We "wasted" several hours at the hospital, and now I missed lunch period. What's the point of going back when school's practically over? Even so, in five minutes, we're driving into the school parking lot and up to the drop-off lane in front of the school.

My father doesn't ask how I'm feeling. He doesn't even say, *Have a nice day*. Or, *See you at home*. *I'll get your favorite takeout!* I don't think he would even know what that is.

Instead, he waits quietly for me to get out, his cigarette dangling a long gray tip of ash that is about to fall onto the floor of the truck. I watch it, waiting. But he doesn't notice. He just stares out the window.

"What is it, Dad?" I ask.

He keeps staring.

"*Dad*," I say again.

He slowly turns his head to me, as if waking from a sad dream. The ash starts to bend. It's hanging on by some miracle now.

"Your cigarette," I say, nodding my head toward it.

He presses it into the ashtray.

I wait, but he doesn't say anything.

"I'm sorry," I say.

He glances at my hand. My finger. Pointing at him. Flipping him off in the most pathetic way possible.

He nods.

I study his face in this rare moment where we acknowledge each other's presence. The crease between his eyes is deep and seems to get deeper before my eyes.

I wonder, with a horrible pang of regret, if it isn't an anger line after all. What if it's a sad line, made by grief?

"Go on," he says to me, not as harsh as usual. Or, maybe, for the first time, I'm just reinterpreting the tone.

Maybe I've been misinterpreting it all along.

I lower my finger so it's not pointing at him.

I want to say something. Ask him something. But what?

"Get going," he finally tells me. His old gruff self is back.

I get out of the truck and listen to the sound of the tires on the pavement as he drives away from me. I don't turn around. I don't think, as I so often do when he leaves me anywhere: *I hate you.*

I just think: *Good-bye.*

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Jo Knowles

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