

## Mr. Vicious

*I remember vividly the first day of sixth grade, fifteen years ago. I wore striped stonewashed jeans, hi-top Pumas, and a white sweatshirt with the sleeves cut off. The front of the sweatshirt had the word "VICIOUS" on it, spelled out in unevenly spaced fluorescent letters. I was, of course, the coolest kid in class. Here's my story.*

"Hey, Vandy, can you believe how *big* this place is?" I ask Tom Vandermeer. I talk to Tom because, one, he's my friend, and two, he's the only person I know in the whole class. I don't see any more of my buddies from elementary, and I'm feeling frightened. But I don't show it. I'm "VICIOUS."

Our teacher, Mr. Kaufman, calls our names from his list. Mine's Alderman, Robbie Alderman, so mine's always one of the first. He comes to my name. . .

"Alderman, Robert?"

. . . and I respond as I think any cool sixth-grader would:

"Yo."

"A simple 'present' will do the job, Mr. Alderman."

"Oh, sorry."

I hear a few giggles, but I don't let it bother me. I figure everyone's at least a *little* nervous. Besides, I'm just feeling the old man out.

I look up and down the rows at my classmates, moving along with Mr. Kaufman, matching faces with names, determining who looks cool and who doesn't. Nobody really catches my eye—maybe middle school won't be that diff—

"Pratt, Lisa?" Mr. Kaufman says at about the same time that my wandering gaze finds her.

*She was without a doubt, the most beautiful creature I had ever seen. Shimmering blonde hair that splashed around her shoulders; perfect skin unblemished by the ravages of puberty; white, even teeth that needed no orthodontist. She was the essence of pristine innocence and unsullied beauty, and I was completely captivated.*

"Pratt? Is that what he said?" I whisper frantically at Vandy.

"Yeah, Lisa Pratt. She's cute, isn't she?"

"Keep your eyes off 'er, Vandy—she's mine," I warn him, writing her name on a piece of paper and shoving it into my Trapper Keeper.

"Listen up, people," Mr. Kaufman says as he begins walking slowly around the room. "There are some things you need to know about junior high."

"Here it comes—the big speech," Vandy remarks a little too loudly. I ignore him—I can't keep from staring at Lisa.

“What’s that, Mr. Vandermeer?”

Vandy jumps.

“Do you think you already know everything there is to know about junior high? Shall we just send you on up to the high school so you won’t have to waste your time—and mine—here?”

“No,” Vandy replies flatly. More giggles.

“Ok, then—pay attention. Like I was saying, there are some things you need to know about this place. First, this *ain’t* elementary no more. We don’t wipe your noses and take naps and have three recesses and hold your hands when you walk down the hall.

“You people aren’t babies anymore, so don’t expect to be treated like babies. Understand? Second, there’s a thing called *responsibility*. You’re gonna have to learn it. Those days of cute little workbooks that you tear the pages out of and taking a whole year to write one little book report about *Dick and Jane* are long, long gone. You can expect homework *every* night, tests *every* week, detentions, suspensions, expulsions—face it people, this ain’t no party.

Mr. Kaufman has everyone’s attention now. He’s walking between the rows of desks, looming over us, confirming our fears and making us shiver in our seats.

“And one more thing before we get started today.” He was behind me now, his crackly voice loud in my ear. “I see some of the clothes you people are wearing, and I’m not impressed.” He is right beside me now, and I am afraid to look up. “My suggestion—don’t wear anything here that you wouldn’t wear to church.” He stops right in front of my desk. “Got it, Mr. Vicious?” More giggles, and I even see Lisa Pratt smiling. I want to disappear.

Somehow, some way, I had to befriend Lisa. Had to be near her. Had to meet her. But first, I had to gather enough courage just to talk to her.

“I can’t believe they actually let you *pick* what you wanna eat for lunch!” Vandy exclaimed, choosing a hamburger, fries, chocolate milk, and an ice cream sandwich. “Think about it—we can have hamburgers every single day if we want!”

“You’re right, Wimpy, we could.” We sit our trays down at one of the tables and begin eating. I scan the crowd, searching desperately for Lisa. I have turned my shirt inside out.

“You think Popeye and Olive Oil ever do it?” Vandy asked, distracting me from my search.

“What? Of course they do. Where do you think Sweet Pea came from?”

“Oh, yeah.”

“Stupid,” I mutter, shaking my head. “Look, we gotta think of something I can say to Lisa that won’t sound dumb. Mr. Kaufman already made me look like an idiot.”

“Yeah, and wearing your shirt like that really helps.”

“Shut up, Vanna.” That’s the name I use when he starts irritating me. “Seriously, help me out, here.”

“Ok, let me think. Umm...let’s see...well...man, I can’t think of nothin’. I’m tryin’ to eat here.

‘Well stop eatin’ and try thinkin’ a little harder, wouldya?’

“Ok, ok. Why don’t you try offerin’ her some gum?”

“Gum?”

“Yeah, gum. Everyone chews gum, especially since we’re allowed to in school now. It’s perfect.”

“Gum. That’s not bad. You think it’ll work?”

“You got any better ideas?”

I admit that I don’t.

I meet Vandy the next day, outside before school begins.

“Did you get gum?” he asks me. He’s already chewing on what looks like three pieces of Grape Bubble Yum.

“Yeah, I got gum.” I open my bookbag. “Bazooka, Bubble Yum, Bubblicious, Big Red, Wrigley’s Spearmint, Big League Chew—she’ll have to like one of these, don’t you think?”

“I guess so. Why don’t you just ask her? She’s coming this way right now.” Vandy motions with his head and I turn around to look.

*My stomach began to churn, and my mouth dried up. She looked even more stunning than I remembered from the day before. She was wearing jean shorts and a sleeveless pink shirt, and her hair was pulled back in a pony tail that bounced and swung when she walked. She was nothing short of a goddess to my eleven-year-old eyes.*

“Look how short her shorts are, Vandy! She’s unbelievable!”

“Yep, she’s real pretty, that’s for sure.”

“Wish me luck, man. I’m gonna go sweep her off her feet.”

“Good luck, Robbie,” Vandy says, popping a giant purple bubble all over his face.

I stop Lisa as she’s walking up the steps to the doors. My first three questions are memorized. “Hey, Lisa. How’s it going this beautiful morning?” I am so smooth.

“Fine, Mr. Vicious.” She smiles, and my memory fails me.

“Uhh...”—don’t panic, be cool!—“uhh...call me Robbie. So, did you do your math homework?” I recover nicely.

“Yeah, did you?”

“Sure did. It was easy. Hey, you want some gum? I got every kind you can think of.”

“Yeah, I’ll take a piece.” Nothing left but to reel her in. “Ya got Juicy Fruit?”  
*Juicy Fruit! I’d forgotten Juicy Fruit! I started feeling dizzy, and my eyes wouldn’t focus. Only a complete idiot would forget Juicy Friut. Juicy Fruit!*

“Umm, sorry. I don’t have any Juicy Fruit. But I’ve got lots of other kinds. Take a look.”

She looks into my giant stash of chewing gum, the stash without any Juicy Fruit. “I’ll take a piece of that pink lemonade Bubble Yum, please.”

“Okey, dokey. You’ll like this a lot better than Juicy Fruit, anyway. “ Maybe this won’t be a total disaster after all.

“Oh, and can I have a piece for my boyfriend, too?”

Boyfriend? No!

*Thank God Mr. Kaufmann didn’t assign seats—yet another middle school perk. I managed to claim a desk right next to Lisa. She sat on my right, Vandy on my left. Still reeling from her shocking revelation just a little earlier, I felt I deserved some sort of explanation. I wanted the identity of my adversary and mortal enemy.*

“So, Lisa, what’s your boyfriend’s name?” I whispered. Why is it she looks even more beautiful now that I know she likes somebody else? “Do I know him?”

She is leaning over, both elbows on top of her desk, copying the notes that Mr. Kaufman is writing on the board. I stare at her, admiring her face, her arms, her . . .

*Sweet Lord, she was not wearing a bra! Of course, she had no need for one yet, but I could actually see what a bra would’ve covered! The way she was sitting, leaned over with her arms on her desk, I could see through the arm holes of her shirt. There wasn’t much there, but I’d never seen anything like it in my eleven years.*

“His name’s Ezra Leyton. You probably don’t know him—he’s a seventh-grader.”

I am too distracted to hear her, still looking somewhere under her arm, praying she keeps her elbows right where they are. She follows my gaze.

“What, is there something on my shirt?” she whispers.

“Huh? Uh, no, um, it’s just that I can see . . . I mean, you—you look really nice in that shirt.” I can hardly breathe. I turn to my left.

“Vandy!” I say, trying not to draw Mr. Kaufman’s attention. Vandy is drawing a Pac-Man maze on his notebook. He’s addicted to that game. “Vandy, look at Lisa. Do you see it?” I scoot back so he can get a good view.

“See what?” He’s looking too high.

## SHIELDS

---

“Look *lower*, under her arm. Now do you see it?”

He’s leaning way over, squinting his eyes. “See what? I don’t even know what I’m . . . Whoa, that’s a booby!” Vandy shouts. He’s already leaning practically out of his seat, and the shock of it causes him to fall completely out, onto the floor and almost under my desk. I pretend to take notes.

“What’s going on, Mr. Vandermeer? *What* did you say?” Mr. Kaufman puts his chalk in the tray and walks toward us.

“I said—“

“Detention! No, make that two! You can tell me for the next two days after school.” Vandy climbs back into his chair. “And no more interruptions!”

“Yes, Mr. Kaufman.” Vandy looks over at me and motions for me to scoot back again. I stay right where I am. One look is enough for him—it’s *my* booby.

I sit by Lisa at lunch, still not all the way recovered from what happened earlier. I have seen more of her than I ever dreamed I would. I like it. I like her, but she has a boyfriend. For now.

“What did you say his name was? Earl? Enis, like on Dukes of Hazzard?” I’m eating fries and drinking fruit punch. Not much of an appetite today.

“His name is Ezra. Ezra Leyton.”

“Oh, *Ezra*. How do you know him?” What I really mean is *When are you gonna break up with him?*

“He lives on the same street as me. We grew up together.”

I hate him. I hope he’s not much bigger than me, just in case I have to kill him to make her like me. “Well, I hope it works out for you guys.” It makes me sick to say that, but I have to stay on Lisa’s good side.

“Thanks, Robbie. You’re a really good friend.”

*Oh, no! The kiss of death! She called me her friend. I didn’t want to be her friend; I wanted to be so much more. I wanted to walk her to and from school, even if she did live across the four-lane. I wanted to carry her books and meet her at her locker and sit by her at lunch every day. I wanted her to write my name on her folder with a big heart around it. I wanted to hold her hand and maybe even kiss her on the lips. I wanted her to go with me.*

“No problem, Lisa. Can I empty your tray for ya?” I’m so friendly.

“Sure, thanks Robbie.”

*The rest of the year passed fairly uneventfully, except for Mr. Kaufman’s heart attack in January. He took the rest of the year off, and we all felt a little guilty, as if maybe*

---

*we had been at least partly responsible for his health problems. Hey, we probably were.*

*Lisa and Ezra stayed together for nearly the entire sixth grade year, an incredibly long time for an eleven-year-old and a twelve-year-old to maintain a relationship. I stuck with my role of being her friend, though it was maddening to hear her talk about her boyfriend when I was so desperately wanted to take his place.*

*Around the end of May, about a week before school let out, things changed drastically. Lisa dropped some earth-shattering news, news I'd been waiting to hear since the second day of school.*

"What's wrong, Lisa? You're acting kinda sad." I'm so glad that the sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-graders all eat lunch separately. It gives me a chance each day to talk to her without worrying about her boyfriend being around.

"I've got some really bad news, Robbie."

"What is it?" Really bad news? We can handle anything as long as we are together . . . . Wait a minute . . . . Please don't say you're movin' away! Please don't say you're movin' away. Please don't say you're mov—

"Ezra and I broke up."

"Oh, no." Oh, yes oh yes oh yes oh yes oh yes! "That's too bad, Lisa. Why'd you guys do that?" I can hardly stay in my seat. I feel like climbing up on the table and screaming the good news to the whole cafeteria. I wanna dance, sing, jump—

"I figured it would be too hard to stay together since I'm moving."

I wanna slouch, slump, and die. My biggest fear, my worst nightmare, coming true! "Moving! You can't be moving!"

My shouts make her jump, and a few people look over at me. "Robbie, calm down a little. I'm just—"

"When, Lisa? I mean are you gonna be around this summer? Is it still in the same school district? Or are you moving out of town? Or out of state!" I can't handle it. My heart is pounding, and I feel like I'm gonna throw up all over myself. First, the best news of my life, then the worst. One second she's mine for the taking, the next she's moving to a foreign country. I'm never gonna see her again. My life is over. Lisa Pratt is moving away and—

"No, no, Robbie. We're just moving to a different house. Same city, different street. Gosh, don't worry so much. We'll still be able to hang out this summer. I'm moving to Truxell Drive, real close to your house."

"Truxell Drive? Truxel Drive! That's just one street over from mine! Jeez, I'll probably be able to see her house from my front yard! This is unbelievable! Lisa Pratt is going to be my neighbor!"

“Yeah, we’re moving the week after school’s out. Maybe you could help me get moved in.”

“Yeah, maybe I could.” Even if I had two broken legs and scarlet fever, I would be there helping her. I get up to empty my tray.

“Okay, then. It’s a date.” She winks at me.

A date! The words and the wink cause me to trip over my chair, sending my silverware sliding across the greasy cafeteria floor. “Yeah, a date,” I say, trying to regain my balance. My knees feel funny, and I can hardly walk. This is gonna be the best summer ever!

*But it wasn’t the best summer ever, at least not at first. I did help Lisa get moved in, though all I really did was carry a few boxes from the moving van into the garage. Still, it gave me an excuse to be around her for a little while, and I wouldn’t have turned it down for anything in the world.*

*Lisa wasn’t around much that summer, not as much as I had hoped. Her family took lots of weekend trips, leaving me to anxiously fret about what she may meet and exactly when she was coming back. Those weekends when she was gone were excruciating. I would ride my bike around the block endlessly, slowly pedaling past her house, hoping that this time around, she’d finally be back. She’d return eventually, and I’d listen, completely captivated, as she told me all the details of her family’s weekend getaway. I would always ask—nonchalantly, though barely concealing my apprehension—if she’d met any boys while she was gone. After all, I was just a friend, and friends were entitled to ask such questions, I reasoned. She always said no, and a weekend-long sense of dread would evaporate, replaced by a renewed feeling of hope.*

*But this “friend” business was slowly beginning to get to me. I always wanted to ask her if she ever thought of me as anything more than a friend, but I could never muster enough courage to actually pose the question. It was agonizing to be with her, riding bikes or shooting baskets or whatever else we did, and to be unsure if she had any feelings for me other than friendly ones. She would give me what I determined, in my limited experience, to be signals: complementing my new red, black, and white Air Jordans or giving me that unnerving wink. And she never spoke of Ezra or anyone else, either. As far as I knew, I was the only boy that she ever talked to. Still, my discontent with being just a friend drove me to the conclusion that I had to declare my true feelings for her.*

*I decided to tell Lisa exactly how I felt one Monday in late July. I knew she and her family had just returned from one of their excursions the night before, so she would be anxious to tell me all about it. It was about 11:30 in the morning when I got ready to leave the house.*

“Why are you putting mousse on your hair to go out and play? It’s my little sister. She’s nine and she’s annoying.

“I’m goin’ bike ridin’ and I don’t like my hair blowin’ in my eyes and stuff. Mind your own business.”

“Who you goin’ bike ridin’ with? Vandy?”

“I said mind your own business. Get outta here.” She likes to follow me around. Sometimes it’s okay, but sometimes she gets on my nerves. Right now, she’s on my nerves.

“I bet you’re gonna go see Lisa. You love her, don’t you?” She giggles.

“No, I don’t love her. She’s just a girl. She can’t even play basketball good.” I push her out of my way. “You better leave me alone before I tell Mom what *really* happened to her flower pot.”

“You wanna kiss her, don’t you? And hold her hand and make babies!”

“Shut up! You don’t even know how to make babies!” She’s making me really mad.

“You don’t either!”

“Yes, I do! They showed us a movie in school.” *I’ll never forget that movie—it convinced me that if I ever have kids, I’ll hear about it in the waiting room.*”

“Really? Tell me about it,” she says.

“No Way! Ask Mom if you wanna know about that stuff. I’m not tellin’ you.”

“Because you don’t know.”

“I do know, I’m not tellin’ you, now leave me alone!”

“Mom, Robbie’s yellin’ at me!”

I run out to the garage, hop on my bike, and pedal away before mom has a chance to yell at me. Times like these I wish I was an only child.

It takes me about two minutes to pedal halfway around the block to Lisa’s house. I lean my bike against the tree in her front yard and take the steps two at a time to the front door. Before knocking, I check my hair in the reflection of the window. Perfect.

“Hi, Mrs. Pratt. Is Lisa home?”

“She just left on her bike, Robbie. She said she was going over to your house.”

“Oh. Well, I’ll just ride around and look for her. Thanks, Mrs. Pratt.”

“Goodbye, Robbie. Hey, do you want to come back for lunch today?”

“Sure, that’d be great. I’ll find Lisa and we’ll be back in an hour.” I figure that’ll be plenty of time to do what I gotta do.

“Make sure you tell your mother where you’ll be so she won’t worry.”

“Okay, I will,” I call over my shoulder, hopping on my bike and pedaling out into the street.

*I remember exactly how I was feeling as I rode off to find Lisa. I was nervous, because I didn’t want to face the rejection and disappointment of hearing that she only wanted to be my friend. I was excited, because I was perhaps about to make Lisa my girlfriend, something I’d*



*been hoping to do since the first day I'd met her. Most of all, I was hoping she was wearing the pink shirt.*

*I rode around the block a couple of times, but we must have been riding in the same direction, because it took me a while to find her. I finally caught up with her in front of Craigie Montgomery's house, just a few houses up from mine. She wasn't wearing the pink shirt, to my disappointment. But she still looked stunning to me: her white tank top and jean shorts accentuate her summertime tan, and her blonde hair was bleached neatly white from the effects of the sun. She smiled as I stopped my bike next to hers.*

"Hey, Lisa. I've been looking all over for you."

"I've been looking for you, too."

"So, how was your weekend? Where did you guys go?"

"We just went to the lake and camped out. It was okay, but I got homesick."

Homesick for me, maybe? "Yeah, well, nothing much happened while you were gone. The Montgomery's left for vacation, and my sister broke my mom's favorite flowerpot. Mom thinks the dog did it."

"Well, at least your sister didn't blame you for it."

"Yeah, really. Well, anyway, I'm glad you're back. Hangin' out with my sister all weekend gets a little old."

"I bet it does. Hey, you wanna go someplace in the shade and talk? It's getting really hot out here."

"Sure, where do you wanna go?" I'm tired of the small talk, and ready to get down to business.

"Um...how about Craigie's treehouse? You said he's on vacation, right?"

Craigie's treehouse! Alone with Lisa where nobody would ever think to look for us! Man, anything could happen in Craigie's treehouse! "Yeah, he's on vacation. But I don't know, Lisa—we have a pretty strict rule about no girls being allowed in the treehouse. It's pretty much for us guys."

"I know about your rule, but I promise I won't tell anyone if we go up there just once. Besides, it'll be a lot cooler up there."

It doesn't take much to convince me. "Okay, but you have to promise not to tell Craigie or anybody." If everything turns out how I hope it does, I won't care who she tells.

"We walk our bikes into Craigie's back yard and lean them up against the tree. Trying my best to be a gentleman, I offer to help Lisa up the ladder, but she handles it herself. I follow up after her, enjoying the view. I can't believe Lisa and me are gonna hangout in Craigie's treehouse! By ourselves!

*Craigie's treehouse: how many countless hours did I spend up there as a kid? It was*

---

*eight feet square, six feet tall, and rested about ten feet off the ground in a towering oak tree that seemed to be created just for supporting a treehouse. We had it decorated with posters of Magic Johnson and Larry Bird and team pennants of the Browns, Indians, and Reds. Everyone who entered for the first time had to sign his name on one of the wooden walls with a permanent marker we kept on a string just inside the door. It served as a fort for playing war, home base for hide and seek, and a cool place to wait out a passing thunderstorm. And there had never, ever been a female inside. Until then.*

“You were right, this is a lot better,” I say, sitting on one of the benches along the walls. Lisa sits on the one directly across from me.

“I told you so, Robbie. You’ll have to learn to listen to girls. We’re not as dumb as you guys think.”

“Hey, I never said girls were dumb. Except for my sister.” It’s time to turn the conversation towards more important things. “Um, listen Lisa. I’ve been thinkin’. I need to talk to you about somethin’.”

“About what, Robbie?” she leans up and puts her elbows on her knees. This causes me to lose my train of thought and I start to get nervous.

“Well . . . I don’t know . . . it’s like, well . . . well, you and me, we . . . I mean, I really—“

“Robbie, spit it out—you can tell me anything.”

I take a few deep breaths to get myself under control. Suddenly the treehouse isn’t as cool as it was a few minutes ago. My palms are sweaty, and for the first time in my life, I could use a little deodorant.

“Robbie, are you feeling all right?” She touches my knee, and I almost pee down my leg.

“I’ll be all right. Okay, listen. Here it goes.” I still can’t come right out and say it, but I think of a brilliant illustration. “Do you ever watch Scooby Doo?”

“Yeah, sure, everybody watches Scooby Doo.”

“Okay, well, you know how Freddie and Velma and Daphne and Shaggy are real good friends.”

“Yeah . . . .”

“And on every single show, they’re always together, all four of them. Right? They’re all just real good friends.”

“Uh-huh . . . .”

“Well, did you ever wonder if Freddie ever got tired of being just Daphne’s friend? I mean, don’t you think those two would make a really good couple?”

“Well, I guess I never thought of it like that before.”

“I mean, Daphne’s always runnin’ around in her little short purple dress, and you know has to notice her. I mean, it’s practically up to her—”

“Robbie, I still don’t know what your point is.” She is smiling at me, and the smile convinces me to just spill it. “Lisa, I don’t wanna be Freddie anymore.”

“What? What are you talking about, Robbie?”

“I mean, I’m tired of being just your—”

“Robbie! Robbie! Robert Milo Alderman, Mom wants you!”

The shouts make us both jump almost out of our benches. It’s my sister yelling from underneath the treehouse.

I stick my head out the window and glare at her. “Kimmie, what’re you doing here! Go home, now!”

“Mom wants you, Robbie. She said it’s time for lunch. She told me to go find you.”

Oh no, I forgot to tell Mom I was eating at Lisa’s! I climb down the tree and take my sister by the shoulders. “Listen, Kimmie, just go tell mom I’m eating at Lisa’s house.”

But you’re not eating at Lisa’s house. You’re in the treehouse with Lisa. I’m tellin’ Mom that.” She grins, an evil little grin.

“No, you’re not telling Mom that. If you do, I’ll tell her about the flower pot.”

“She already knows about that. I told Mom this morning. Hi, Lisa.”

Lisa is looking down on us and smiling. “Hi, Kimmie.”

“Listen, Kimmie,” I say so Lisa can’t hear me. “Don’t tell Mom I was in the treehouse with Lisa. Just tell her I’m at Lisa’s house.”

“You want me to lie? We’re not suppose to lie, Robbie, you know that.”

“It never stopped you before, Kimmie.” I am desperate to get back up to Lisa. “Listen, what if I give you some money to buy candy at the store?”

“How much money?” Her eyes light up at the mention of candy.

“How ‘bout a dollar?”

“That’s not enough. Stuff is expensive these days, you know.”

“Look, Kimmie, I only have three dollars, and I need some for—”

“Three dollars should be enough.” She grabs the money out of my hand before I have a chance to react.

I don’t protest like I would normally. I have other things on my mind. “Promise not to tell Mom where I was, you hear me? If you do, you’ll pay for it.”

“Okay, okay, I promise.” She climbs onto her Strawberry Shortcake bicycle. “Goodbye, Lisa.”

“Bye, Kimmie.”

“Goodbye, Robert Milo!”

I cringe at the sound of my middle name. “Go away, Kimmie.”

She rides away, singing my middle name over and over. I’m almost too embarrassed to climb back up into the treehouse but somehow I manage.

“Okay,” Lisa says. “You were telling me something about Fred and Daphne, right.”

“Well, kinda about Fred and Daphne. More about me and you, though.”

“You and me? What about you and me?”

“I’ve been waiting to tell you this for a long time, Lisa. Actually, since the first day of school.”

“You’ve waited almost a whole year to tell me something? Why did it take so long?”

“Well, Ezra had a little somethin’ to do with it.” I’d still like to run over him with my knobby tires.

“Ezra? What does he have to do with anything?”

I hate to hear her say his name. “Never mind Ezra. He’s not important anymore. Look, Lisa”—here it goes—“I...don’t really want to be your friend anymore.” Man, does it feel good to get *that* off my chest! Finally she knows how I really feel, and I –

“You don’t want to be my friend, Robbie? Why not?”

Wait a minute—she looks like she’s gonna cry. No, no, I didn’t meant it like that! “No, Lisa, I mean I don’t wanna be just your friend anymore.”

“What? Do you mean—“

“I mean you’re the prettiest girl I’ve ever seen in my entire life. I mean ever since I saw you the first day of school I’ve wanted to be with you. I mean it just about killed me to hear you talk about Ezra every day because I wanted you to be talking about *me*. I think about you every second of the day. When you’re gone, I just sit in my bedroom and stare at your picture all day long. Vandy makes fun of me because I talk about you more than I talk about basketball anymore. You have the bluest eyes, the cutest nose, the prettiest smile, and the best pink shirt—”

“What?”

“Never mind. You’re the most wonderful girl in the whole school, probably the whole world, and I want you to be my girlfriend.” I lean back against the wall, exhausted but relieved. I can’t believe I finally told her. No matter what she says, at least I’ll know I gave it a shot. Even if she turns me down, I –

“Okay.”

“Huh?”

“Okay.”

“Okay what?” She’s completely lost me.

“Okay, I will.”

“You will what?”

## SHIELDS

---

“I’ll be your girlfriend, Robbie.”

“You will?” She will! She will be my girlfriend! She is my girlfriend! HAL-le-LU-jah!! HAL-le-LU-jah!! A year of waiting, of hoping, of dreaming, and it’s all coming true. Wow, this is unbelievable! Lisa Pratt is my GIRLFRIEND!!

“I wish you hadn’t waited so long to tell me this Robbie. I’ve liked you ever since the first day of school started too.”

*That was the first of countless instances that the ways of the female gender proved incomprehensible to me.*

“You have? What about Ezra?”

“I was just going with him because he was a seventh-grader.”

“So it *is* true that girls like older boys, huh?”

“You’re younger than me, and I like you.”

The words almost make me giggle like a three-year-old. “Only by a few months, Lisa. Anyway, so we’re together now, right?” It hasn’t sunk in yet, probably never will.”

“Right.”

“So what do we do now? I mean, I gotta tell Vandy, maybe even give Ezra a ring to tell him the good news, and we should go tell your mom because she thinks it’s cute, and I –”

“I think we should kiss.”

“Or we could do that.” Can this day get any better?

“Have you ever kissed anyone before?” She walks over and sits next to me, so close our knees are touching. Our knees are touching!

“Of course, I have. Lots of times.” I’ve never kissed a girl in my life.

“Well, I’m new at this, so you’ll have to teach me.”

Okay, well, you put your lips right on mine and keep them there forever. “It’s pretty easy, really. I’ll put my arms around your waist, and you put yours around my neck, and we’ll go from there.” I have no idea what I’m talking about. We get ourselves into position.

“It feels like I’m wrestling,” Lisa says. “Maybe we should stand up.”

“No, let’s try it again. I think you are just nervous.” I know I am.

“I’m not nervous, just excited. I wanted to do this for a long time.”

I fight back more giggles. She scoots even closer, so close that I can smell her shampoo, Johnson’s and Johnson’s. “Okay, lets give it one more shot.” She leans in, I lean in, and—

*It was simply magical. No kiss since then has held such innocence, such purity, such excitement. For me, the whole world was Lisa Pratt. Carl Lewis, Russia, Michael Jackson—I knew the names, but famous people and far off places don’t mean much to a*

*sixth-grader. But your first kiss, your first love, now those things carry weight. And you don't forget them.*

*Age inevitably brings more experience with relationships, and I sometimes try to apply this experience to my relationships with Lisa Pratt. As a sixth-grader, I was convinced that I loved her, that I couldn't live without her. But did I really love her? Does an eleven-year-old even know what love is? I ask myself these questions often, and I always come to the same answer.*

*Of course, I loved her. Love is a ponderous, inscrutable emotion, and while we can never grasp it completely, all of us feel it to the extent that understanding allows us. As a sixth-grader, I had a limited understanding of love, but what I knew of it, I knew that's how I felt about Lisa. If love was having her constantly on my mind, of being the happiest when I was with her, getting jumpy-chested and dry-mouthed just by holding her hand, then I loved Lisa Pratt.*

*She comes to mind often. My wife understands, because she, too, has a first love. We all do. When I drive by the middle school where Lisa and I first met, I inevitably smile wistfully, and wish longingly that I could relive just one day. When I hear the song "Broken Wings" by the forgotten eighties group, Mister, Mister, I remember that Lisa and I first danced to that song, in a cafeteria decorated with all the elegance of balloons and construction paper. And just yesterday, when I put the finishing touches on a simply-built tree house in my back yard and my neighbor pointed out that I don't even have any kids yet, I just nodded and offered him a piece of Juicy Fruit.*