

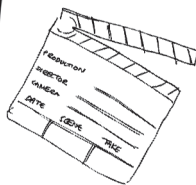
LOVE
one

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For the bluesmen, remembered and forgotten

Josh Is Reminded of a Song

The first time Josh sees her a song he has heard only as background music pops into his head. The song is: “I Saw Her Standing There”. In fact, she isn’t standing, she’s sitting by the window in his language arts class, talking to Tilda Kopel, who is at the desk next to hers. She and Tilda seem to be friends, but Josh has never seen her before so she must have moved to Parsons Falls over the summer. “I Saw Her Standing There”. Of all the songs in all the world. He doesn’t even like the Beatles – and he thinks it’s a dumb song – but that’s what he hears when he sees her. This is what he means about life being ironic; it gets you every time. Mercifully, his heart doesn’t go *boom* the way it does in the lyrics. All it does is stumble a little. On this day, the start of a new school year, she is wearing an electric-blue top, green skinny jeans and a gauzy silver scarf wound through her hair, some of which

is pink. She smiles – not at him, at Tilda – and he feels as if he's been struck by lightning, only without being killed or permanently scarred. He stops so short at the sight of her that the boy behind walks into him. Only Mr Burleigh's desk prevents Josh from falling flat on his face. Talk about making an entrance. Everyone notices him, though not, of course, in a way that is good. Especially since Mr Burleigh notices him most of all.

"And who might you be?" Mr Burleigh is known for his death-ray looks and scalpel-like sarcasm. That and his general irascibility.

Josh tells him.

"Josh Shine." Mr Burleigh's eyebrows draw together like a bolt. "Your reputation precedes you, Mr Shine. Much as rats preceded the plague."

He can only wonder which reputation. Would Mr Burleigh have heard about his run-in with the head of the math department – when Josh, the department's star student, told Mr Lattery his solution was wrong and got detention for insubordination, even though he was right? His petition for more vegetarian options than pizza in the lunchroom? The failed campaign he led last year to donate the money earmarked for the Christmas dance to the food bank? His considerable skill at chess?

Mr Burleigh doesn't smile: he smirks. "Didn't you

cause an explosion in the science lab last spring?”

“That was someone else.” It was true that Josh was there – and that he was marched through the school to the principal’s office like a prisoner of war (minus the handcuffs and bag over his head) – but he’d been counting down not blowing up. “And it was an accident.”

The new girl by the window isn’t the only one who laughs, but she is the only one whose laughter sounds the way warm fudge syrup tastes.

Embarrassed and possibly injured, Josh collapses into the nearest seat. She is pretty. Not stop-breathing gorgeous, but there’s something about her. And he is definitely attracted. He has, however, no aspirations. This girl isn’t in his league. The fact that she is already tight with Tilda Kopel – born to be Prom Queen if not Queen of the Universe – makes that pretty clear. Tilda Kopel doesn’t hang out with the lower orders; she’s not *in* the “in” crowd, she is the “in” crowd. If Josh fainted on the sidewalk in front of Tilda, she wouldn’t step over him, she’d step on him. Possibly laughing. They’ve been in school together since first grade, but she’s never given any indication that she can see him, unless he’s done something to embarrass himself. In eighth grade they were put in the same group for a history project and she never once spoke to him. Not even when she was asking a question

she knew he would be the one to answer. Not even when he spoke to her. Josh has never asked anyone out, but if he ever does he won't pick a pal of Tilda Kopel's, he'll pick someone from the same species as him.

Fixations Not Fantasies

Her name is Jenevieve Capistrano – though, as she told Mr Burleigh on that first morning with a melt-that-block-of-steel smile, her friends call her Jena.

At this particular moment, Josh, who is not her friend and has little chance of ever being one, is standing on a metal step stool at the bathroom sink, looking at himself in the mirror. Trying to see himself as Jenevieve Capistrano would see him – if she saw him, which seems unlikely. Since he's shorter than just about everyone else, when she does look his way her eyes probably go straight to the person behind him. He needs the stool so his chin isn't lost below the bottom of the glass.

He thinks about her a lot. Not constantly. He has more to occupy his mind than Jenevieve Capistrano. But often. As if she's stuck in his brain and can't get out. This happens to him all the time with songs. He hears a song

for the first time and it's so good that he can't stop thinking about it. If he can, he'll sit down right away and start working out the music on his guitar. He'll fall asleep with it running through his head, and wake up with it still going. If he hears it playing, he'll stop to listen till it's over. When he was little he'd refuse to leave places if a song he liked was on the radio or the sound system. It drove his parents crazy. People were always asking what was wrong with that boy, standing in the doorway with his coat and hat on, rapt as if being spoken to by God. But that kind of thing has never happened with a girl. Not until now. No matter where he is – at school, in town, at home – part of him is looking out for her. *She might be around that corner... She might step through that door... She might be in that coffee bar having a cappuccino...* He's like a smoke alarm waiting for the toast to burn. He'll be on his computer, or eating his supper, or hanging out with his friends and suddenly realize that he has no idea what's going on because he's thinking about Jenevieve Capistrano. *Where does she live? Does she like cats? Has she ever heard of Robert Johnson?*

The light over the sink is bright enough that he can see every mark, every scar, every bump and every stray hair on his face, which does nothing to improve his appearance. Airbrushing would improve his appearance. Or

someone else's face. Nonetheless, he doesn't slouch, but raises his chin and sticks out his chest. He looks exactly as he always looks, only holding his breath so as not to fog the glass. "Get real, Shine," he advises himself. "What Jen-evieve Capistrano would see if she ever looked at you is a geek." Not someone cool and desirable, but a short, skinny boy who wears wire-rimmed glasses and his hair longer than that of guys who aren't aspiring blues musicians. His mother says he has an interesting face, which translated into non-mother speak means that though he isn't exactly ugly, he's kind of funny-looking. Misshapen ears. Bump in his nose. Caterpillar eyebrows trying to crawl towards each other to meet. More a dinghy than a dreamboat.

He sticks his tongue out at himself. What's wrong with him, obsessing about a girl he doesn't even know? Because that's what he's doing, he's obsessing. Fixating. He's not fantasizing, thank God – not imagining her appearing in his room naked or anything like that. He doesn't even imagine kissing her. He just can't stop thinking about her, that's all. And he's wrong, it's not like the first time he heard a song he loved and went around singing it under his breath for a week. It's more like last Christmas when he heard that dumb chipmunk song on the radio and it stayed with him till New Year's. Do they even make hula hoops any more?

“You know what,” he says in a tough-guy voice, looking himself in the eyes as well as he can through two layers of glass, “you’re as stupid as a Ravenous Bugblatter Beast of Traal.”

According to *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*, one of Josh’s favourite books, the Ravenous Bugblatter Beasts of Traal are the most stupid creatures in the universe. Josh stares at the mirror, thinking about Jena Capistrano. It’s possible that he’s stupider.

“This isn’t your brain making you act like this,” Josh tells his reflection, “it’s your age.” Hormones. Apart from what he knows about human development from advanced biology, he has surreptitiously read up on adolescence in his mother’s magazines. Unlike your average textbook, the magazines give a lot of useful anecdotal information about teenagers and how they behave and why. Unfortunately, this didn’t offer him as much consolation or hope as he would have liked. It’s good to know that other people suffer in the same way, but it doesn’t make him suffer less. It doesn’t make anything any better or more bearable. Indeed, if the biologists and advice columnists of the nation are to be believed, there isn’t anything that would. Hormones are a force unto themselves. They’re like the barbarian hordes that sacked Rome; they just take over and trample on everything in their path. Josh

was counting on a growth spurt during puberty – possibly accompanied by muscles, broad shoulders and a voice like B. B. King’s – which was what the magazines said could happen, but all he got was acne, hair and, it seems, mental instability.

“It’s not even like she’s really that special.” He gives himself an ironic smile. “I mean, she’s cute – and she seems pretty smart and nice and everything, but so is Charley Patton.” And Charley Patton, being a cat, can jump from the floor to Josh’s shoulder, which isn’t a talent likely to be shared by Jenevieve Capistrano. Josh sighs. Still staring at himself, he starts talking to Jenevieve Capistrano. “Looking at it rationally, it’s actually inexplicable. No offence, but you are just another girl on a planet full of girls. And let’s be honest here. There’s a very strong probability that I wouldn’t like you if I actually got to know you. You are really pally with Tilda Kopel, and she and I aren’t exactly twin souls.” If Tilda has a twin soul it’s probably in Hell. “All I ever hear Tilda talk about are clothes and make-up and stuff like that. She’s a gossip. And she’s really full of herself. You’d think every other girl who ever lived was just God practising to make her.” There’s a knock on the bathroom door that Josh doesn’t hear. “For all I know, you’re probably so boring you could put a whole football team to sleep in the middle of

a game. And so what if you're cute?" He doesn't hear the doorknob rattle, either, or his mother call his name with a certain amount of concern. "Lots of girls are cute. There must be millions of girls in the world who are cute, and the odds are that the majority of them are cuter than you. Way cuter. Besides, being cute doesn't make you a good person. For all I know you're not half as nice as you seem. You're just cute and you have a great smile because you take good care of your tee—"

"Josh? Josh?" Now his mother is banging on the door. Urgently. "Josh! Who are you talking to in there?"

A girl I don't know, who isn't here. Who else?

"No one, Mom. I was just practising a speech for school."

"Oh. A speech." She sounds relieved. She was probably figuring that on top of tragically losing his father at such a young age, her only child was now losing his mind. "I was getting a little worried. You've been in there quite a while."

"I was just coming out." With one last look in the mirror, he steps off the stool, and lands on Charley Patton, who was resting behind him. Charley Patton howls. It's the kind of howl that once echoed through dense, primordial forests on dark, Neanderthal nights. Josh jumps into the air and crashes into the shelf where his mother keeps her make-up.

“Josh? Josh! What happened? What’s going on in there? Are you all right?”

He picks up a handful of tubes and pots.

From behind the toilet bowl, Charley hisses.

“I’m terrific,” says Josh.

It has to be some kind of miracle that so many people actually survive adolescence.