

Mission Hill by John Ginsburg Sample (Chapters 1, 2 and 4)

Chapter 1 Park Avenue

September 3, 2023, 10:40pm

At 10:40pm, when the single shot echoed sharply through the dark of night, no one inside the Barnes-Morgan house heard it.

Julie was in bed, in her black silk pajamas, fast asleep. After popping a sleeping pill, she'd listlessly worked her way through a tall glass of Glenlivet. Her latest mystery book, *The Clown*, lay open on the bed beside her. Her bedside lamp was still on.

Julie's daughter Amanda was wide awake, down in the lower level. When the shot rang out, she was curled up at one end of the sofa, her legs folded under her favourite wool comforter. The sixty-inch monitor was paused at the end of a Pussy Riot video on YouTube. She was on her Galaxy S23, with her headphones on, listening to her retro list. Springsteen. The volume was turned up as high as it would go. At the same time, she was texting her neighbor and best friend Jenny Scott, who apparently had a new obsession with a guy they both knew from the previous year at school.

what do you think of jeff

jeff riley?

ya

he's okay i guess why? are you all into him now or something

he's nice cute really cute

i guess

Shortly after 1am, Amanda switched off the music and went to bed.

If any of the neighbors heard anything, none reported it to the police. And why would they have? They would have heard a loud, sharp crack. It could have been many things. Like thunder. Or fireworks. Or an event in the park. And if they'd been curious enough to look out their windows, toward the Barnes-Morgan house, there was nothing unusual to see. In the driveway, the motion-sensing floodlights had dependably turned off after forty-five seconds. There was a light on over the front doorstep and a light

on in the basement. But unless a person had been watching at the exact moment Ken Morgan drove up to his house, there would have been absolutely nothing more to see. The gruesome scene in the driveway would have gone totally unnoticed. Morgan was dead. His body lay collapsed on the ground beside the driver's side door of his blue BMW. For the four houses on the opposite side of Park Avenue, any view of him was completely blocked by the car, as it was for the Scotts next door.

It wasn't until 4am that Julie realized what had happened. She woke with a start and noticed that her husband wasn't beside her. On his side of the bed, the sheets hadn't been turned down. Her first thought was that he must have gone to a friend's after the fund-raiser. He probably had too much to drink and stayed over. But there was no text on her phone. He would have texted. With a growing sense of alarm, and feeling a bit foggy, she slowly made her way downstairs. All the lights were off, except for the front landing. There wasn't a sound. She walked through the living room, and immediately looked through the blinds on the west-facing window. In the darkness she could see her husband's car, parked in the driveway. A bit puzzled, she set off around the house, walking from room to room, looking for him. Maybe he'd fallen asleep in his office, or somewhere downstairs. But he was nowhere to be found. She returned to the living room and turned on the exterior lights over the driveway. There was the car. Could he have dropped off the car and then left again, with someone else? It just didn't feel right. He would have texted. It was a few more minutes until she went outside and walked over to the driveway. At first, the blood on the windshield and hood of the BMW didn't register, not until she walked around to the driver's side of the car, where she discovered what had happened. There was the body of her husband; motionless and grotesquely spread out beside the car. His head lay at a strange, horrible angle to the rest of his body. The side of the car and the paving stones under his head were splattered with blood. There was a bullet hole in his temple.

Overcome by shock and as pale as a ghost, Julie rushed back into the house and dialed 911. Then she went downstairs to wake her daughter.

Chapter 2 Billy meets Natalie

5 months earlier

Prescott High School March 20, 2023

'Okay, that does it for today, Billy. Please have a go at the problem at the bottom of the page. See you next time.'

Torture sessions. That was how Billy Carson thought of these extra Math classes. Painful. Boring. Impossible to understand. All those weird symbols you were supposed to write. He not only had to stay awake, he had to look like he was trying to follow what Ms. Curran was saying. It was a messed-up form of punishment, that's what it was. But he had no choice. If he wanted a pass in Math, he had to attend.

He'd done all right today, though. Not only had he managed to stay awake, but he had kind of participated too, which made Ms. Curran very happy. At one point, when she'd asked him how many of something there were, he'd directly repeated back the question. Quite clever, he thought. First, it deflected the need for him to answer. And second, it made it look like he was actually thinking about it. He would definitely use the same tactic again. He just had to remember not to overdo it.

Billy glanced haplessly down at the bottom of today's printed hand-out, where he found the assigned problem. He forced himself to read it through:

Ronnie is ordering a pizza online. He intends to order the deluxe special, a large pizza with as many as four toppings chosen from the given list. He must check off any four or fewer of the 20 boxes displayed beside the toppings. How many different choices are possible? Show how you obtained your answer.

As if anyone would want to know, he thought. You'd just check off what you wanted. He folded the page neatly in half, slipped it into his backpack, slung the backpack over his shoulder and stood up to leave. 'See you next time, Ms. Curran' he said, trying to sound cheerful. Ms. Curran wasn't that bad. Her hair was kind of strange; permed or sprayed solid all the time. And she always wore grey or brown clothes; bulky sweaters and long dresses. But she was friendly, at least. Not like that psycho Mr. Snider, his first semester Math teacher. He acted like you were in the army.

Hopefully these extra classes would end soon. His grades were in the forties now, so what was the problem? As if they weren't going to pass him... His brother Ted was hopeless in Math in his senior year. They passed *him*. There was no way they would cost him his scholarship over a pointless Math grade.

Billy was very tempted to join his friends for the rest of the lunch break. But he managed to stick to his plan, nervously heading in the opposite

direction, making his way down the hall to the principal's office. The adjacent walls were covered with framed pictures and plaques; principals and teachers from the past, famous people who'd once attended the school, championship teams, scholarship winners... There was even one of his brother Ted, if you looked hard enough, a recent addition, high up on the opposite side of the hall from the office. Three times division MVP. Two-time division champion. Mr. Covid Quarterback. Mr. Second String was more like it.

Billy walked past the principal's office and stopped, looking up at the picture of his brother. He was having serious second thoughts. Maybe he should forget the whole idea. What difference did it make, really? He slipped his backpack off and unzipped it, retrieving his complimentary copy of the Prescott News. There was the offending article, right on the front page, underneath his picture. He'd read it so many times he could recite most of it by heart. *Life is simple for Prescott tennis star: you're either male or female.*

Everyone will think he's anti-trans, anti-gay; a privileged, white, redneck jerk. There was no other way to read it. But even so, so what? He could just deal with it.

It looked a lot worse on the printed page than it did on the website. He'd thought of just emailing the paper's editor to explain why he found it inaccurate and offensive. But then they'd be able to use his email to make him look even worse. So he'd decided it was better to talk to someone in person.

The principal's office always made him feel anxious, even just the thought of the principal's office. Going in there was like being interviewed by a cop after you were pulled over. He couldn't help but recall his previous visits. The first was in his freshman year. It was so embarrassing. That time, he and Andrew Reed were sheepishly marched through the hall by their Science teacher, Ms. Forbes. It was just a case of very bad timing. Ms. Forbes happened to walk back into class at the exact moment Andrew threw a condom filled with water at him. He dodged it and it burst against the wall, to a roar of laughter from the rest of the class. But luckily, they didn't have to see the principal then; just the vice-principal, who was even more embarrassed than they were.

And then there was the time three months ago, in December. Maybe even more embarrassing. It was about Math and it was still very fresh in his mind. The principal, Mr. Brockman, was all sweaty and smelly, and asked him to sit down. Then he gave him a big lecture about how

important Math was and how he had to pull his grades up, and how Ms. Curran had offered to help him and set up extra times. It was so humiliating! It was like he was ten years old and he'd been caught stealing money out of his mom's purse. He must have been beet-red the whole time. He cringed as he remembered that awkward conversation, sitting across from Brockman, making as little eye contact as possible: "Billy, as I'm sure you know, you do not have to take an SAT or ACT anymore – if you don't want to. Most universities are test-optional since Covid. But you *do* have to obtain a senior-level standing in Mathematics. Your teacher has informed me that your Math grades this semester have finished up around the mid-thirties. We need to have those marks up around fifty, Billy. I have spoken to your parents about this, and they are in complete agreement and have every confidence in you, as I do...."

The only other interaction he'd had with Brockman was when Brockman approached him after classes one day, near the doors, to congratulate him on the USC scholarship. That made him look all full of himself in front of his friends. That was only two and a half weeks ago. Hopefully he'd be able to slip in and out of the office this time without even seeing the guy.

Billy's nervous, apprehensive state of mind changed dramatically as soon as he walked into the principal's office. Looking up after opening and closing the door as quietly as he could, he found himself face to face with the principal's administrative assistant, Lashonda Jackson. How could he have possibly forgotten that going to the office now meant he would be talking to Lashonda Jackson? How could he have forgotten? Even if he didn't see her around that much, even if she'd only been at the school since the beginning of January, he'd fantasized about her, like all the other guys in the school. She was just so amazingly beautiful. So amazingly sexy.

'Hi Ms. Jackson' said Billy, blushing deeply as he blurted the words out. 'I mean, Lashonda.' He could barely make eye contact with her without feeling like a total jerk. She had to know that he thought she was incredibly hot.

It took him a moment to remember what he was doing there. He took a quick glance at the principal's inner office. Thankfully, the door was closed. He lowered his voice a little. 'Um... do you happen to know if the people that run the school website – the paper - have an office somewhere? I'd like to talk to one of their writers. Or the editor or whatever.'

Lashonda flashed a huge smile at Billy. She wasn't even that old. Maybe thirty... Her gorgeous dark skin, her soft brown eyes, her hair, her lipstick

– her lips - her perfume... it just killed him. 'Hi Billy' she said. Billy's heartbeat shot up when he realized she knew his name.

'Yes, they do' she said. 'It's downstairs. They've been there for a while, I guess. It's a small room at the far end of the hall. I can look up the room number if you want? Do you want me to show you where it is?'

Billy blushed again. She was torturing him. 'Um, no' he said, trying to sound a little more together. Walking downstairs with Lashonda Jackson? That would be something, he thought. 'No thanks. I'll find it. Thanks a lot.'

Billy hadn't been down in the basement of the school since his sophomore year. For twelve consecutive Friday afternoons, his class had trooped downstairs into a long, dim, low-ceilinged room where they had their two-hour shop periods. There were big work benches and tools all over the place. Nobody really knew what they were doing and everybody screwed up, but it was kind of fun. You could talk and eat snacks. Mr. McDonald, the gruff old shop teacher, used to limp around laughing at what everyone was doing, telling stories about when he was young. Some of Andrew's best pranks were in that room.

At the bottom of the stairs, Billy headed to the left, in the opposite direction from the workshop. It was dark and musty. He remembered the painted concrete floors. There was a light on near the end of the hallway, outside room number 2. A few steps further brought him to the student office, room number 1, where a paper sign was taped to the closed door: *R.H. Prescott Website and Newsletter Please come in.* He knocked twice, turned the doorknob, and took a step in.

It was a very small room, no more than ten feet square. Posters and art prints covered the walls. Two wooden desks were pushed together at a right angle, barely a step from the door, both covered with books and papers. The opened door pushed right up against a chair sitting in front of one of the desks. Billy dropped his hand from the doorknob, and then had to step to the side as the door slowly closed. Behind the other desk, facing the door, was a woman, the only person in the room. She looked to be Billy's age. She looked up from her laptop as he walked in.

'Hey' she said. 'Sorry about the door. That's why we have to keep it closed. Too bad it doesn't open outwards.'

'Hey. No problem. Um, I'm Billy Carson. I just wanted to talk to you guys about your article on me.' Billy kind of half-smiled. He immediately realized how ridiculous he must have looked, just blurting it out like that. He was feeling even less sure about being there. But it was too late to back down now.

'Oh; okay. Hi Billy. Nice to meet you. I'm Natalie. Natalie Rivera. Why don't you grab that chair and sit.' Natalie pointed to the folding metal chair that the door had just bumped.

Feeling very awkward, Billy looked down at the chair and then back at Natalie.

'Sorry, but the good furniture hasn't arrived yet' Natalie said, with a laugh.

Natalie's laugh took a bit of the edge off Billy's nervousness. He carefully pulled the chair into the middle of the room and sat down. He took another quick look around the room, at the empty wooden coat stand in the corner, at the electrical panel on the wall above it, at the pictures on the walls, at the printer on the unoccupied desk. When he looked again at Natalie, she was looking at him. She had planted her elbows on the desk, and had picked up a pencil, which she was slowly twirling between her hands, smiling at him, waiting to see if he would say anything more. When he didn't, she spoke up.

'Okay.' Natalie put down the pencil and brought the article up on her laptop. 'Here we are' she said, in a quiet, matter-of-fact tone. 'Billy Carson. Tennis. So, what's on your mind?'

Billy shifted uncomfortably in the hard metal chair. 'I wanted to ask you to add a retraction to what you said about me in the article.'

Natalie reacted with a genuine measure of surprise. 'What Daria wrote? Oh. I thought it was a great job. What is it that bothers you? She said she recorded your interview and quoted directly from the recording.'

As Natalie spoke, Billy had a chance to really look at her, to take her in. She was very serious-looking. And absolutely gorgeous. She had dark brown eyes and she had absolutely no make-up on. Her long, wavy dark brown hair was tied back in a big clump. She was wearing a white, cabled turtleneck sweater and jeans. How had he never seen her around before? She was obviously a brainy type, he thought. He was always a little intimidated by super-smart people. He had to straighten up and try to focus. But why, really? The article didn't matter. He just wanted to talk to her about normal things, to look into her eyes, to be her friend. There was just something about her.

'Um, ya' Billy answered. 'She did record the interview.' He leaned down and fished the paper out of his backpack, which he'd placed on the floor beside him. He pretended to look through the article again before looking up and meeting Natalie's eyes. She had such a sweet smile on her face,

which brought on a huge blush to Billy's face. Why was he doing this? Recovering himself a little, he put his finger on the offending passage.

'Here' Billy said, ridiculously holding up the page for Natalie to see, and then turning the page over and reading aloud. 'This part. *And the blonde-haired, blue-eyed tennis ace is definitely not afraid to express himself on controversial issues. I asked him about the recent gender controversy in pro tennis, involving Jan Pressler. It's a sensationalized story that's been all over the internet and the media in recent weeks. Pressler identifies as female and is going to court to be allowed to compete on the women's pro circuit. What does Billy Carson think about this issue? "There are two categories in pro tennis" he told me. "Male and female. It's pretty simple. If you're a man, you can't play on the women's side."*

'Are you saying that you didn't say that?' said Natalie. The blue-eyed, blonde-haired tennis ace was actually very sweet. And very good-looking.

'No. I probably did. But that's not *all* I said. I also said that whatever they use to decide if you're a man or not, like DNA, then that's the rule. Some people might think it's wrong or that some other rule should be used, but who's that up to, to decide? Whatever the rules are, everyone has to follow them. I think that has to be included. When you leave it out, it makes me sound like I'm some redneck jerk; anti-gay, anti-trans, which I'm not.'

'Okay, I guess I can see your point.'

Billy had calmed down considerably. He knew for certain now that he didn't really care about the article. As he sat there, all he could think of was how he could get out of this situation, and just have an ordinary conversation with Natalie, and somehow become friends, or ask her out or something. 'What I meant was that whether you're a man is decided according to the pro tennis rules. That's all I was trying to say. If they're going to change the rule or the test to see if someone's a man or woman, okay. That's a whole different thing.'

Natalie nodded her head and smiled. This seemed to be very important to Billy. She was impressed at how well he'd explained himself. It was actually kind of noble. He seemed like such a nice guy. So genuine. There was such an innocence about him... 'Okay. I will talk to Daria and we will publish your actual response, in its entirety. How does that sound?'

Billy was totally mesmerized by Natalie's voice and by her eyes, and by her smile. He couldn't have cared less about the article now. He couldn't just ask her out on a date, could he? She probably had a guy, anyway. Then he had a brilliant idea. She was probably good at Math. 'Natalie, can

I ask you something? I mean, nothing to do with the article... Are you good at Math?'

'Math?' she answered, very much surprised by the question. 'Decent. Why?'

As far as Math was concerned, Billy had guessed right. He would later find out that Natalie's final grade in Math was an A+; 96%. She had also written both the SAT and ACT tests, insanely scoring 1440 on the SAT and 32 on the ACT.

'Um, I could really use some tutoring in Math. I have to get my marks up to make my university requirements.'

'Tutoring? In Math? Me? Um, wow. I don't know. I've never tutored anyone in anything before.'

Billy pressed on. This was such a brilliant idea. 'Do you play tennis at all? I can trade you for tennis lessons? Or good old cash, if you'd prefer?'

Natalie knew he was making a play on her. It couldn't have been more obvious. The hopeful, fearful look in his eyes. His nervousness. But she kind of liked him, so it felt all right. 'Tennis?' she answered. 'Um, no, not really.'

She hadn't said no. Billy saw a tiny opening. He had to move fast. 'So, Math?' he said. 'I promise I'll be a good learner. Can we talk about it at least? Please? Maybe we can meet somewhere to talk about it? How about Benny's? Maybe Saturday? At noon?' Billy took a breath. How had he managed to get that all out?

'Um, can I get back to you about this? Can you give me your number?'

'For sure. Please don't say no until we've talked about it.'

Natalie picked up her phone, opened her contacts, and handed the phone to Billy. Billy entered his number. 'Thanks' he said. He picked up his backpack and was about to leave.

'So, are we agreed on the article?' Natalie asked quickly.

'The article? For sure' Billy answered. He'd almost forgotten about the article. He slid the folding chair back toward the other desk, and carefully let himself out.

Natalie Rivera... A very cool-sounding name, he thought. Mexican? Definitely Latin-American. It would be a great name for a tennis player, he thought, laughing to himself. He was so excited, so happy. She was going to meet him. He just knew it.

His whole world had changed. He raced back down the hall and bounded up the stairs, even though he still had ten minutes until classes started. At the top of the stairs, he caught sight of his friends, heading to their home

rooms. He walked quickly to catch up with them. Andrew, Glendell and Daniel all looked back as he approached. It was rare to see Andrew without Melissa these days. 'Hey, Billy boy' said Andrew. 'What's up? Are you just getting out of Math now?'

'Nah, I had a meeting' Billy said, barely able to contain himself.

'What kind of meeting?' Andrew asked.

'Nothing. Just tennis' said Billy, breaking out into a huge smile.

Chapter 4 Natalie

March 25

It was mid-morning by the time Natalie walked down the hallway to the kitchen for breakfast. She'd been reading in bed, on her Kobo, in her long yellow night shirt, with an extra pillow propping up her head. It was a regular Saturday morning ritual, unless she had something to do or school work. She almost always found biographies to be deathly boring, and science fiction too ridiculous. So she mostly read ordinary fiction, books she downloaded from an online readers' group. The night before, another novel bit the dust. *Lakeland County*. She'd given it a good shot, but she finally gave up, impassively marking it finished before turning the light off. It was just way too plodding, fatally weighed down by pointless detail, page after page. It was worse than boring, it was like being bludgeoned. That was her latest word for it: bludgeoned. After nearly forty percent of the book, she still had no clue what it was supposed to be about. Maybe the characters were supposed to be so unique or so unusual to keep the reader into it. But they weren't.

She was a hyper-critical reader. She would constantly complain to her mom about the books she read. Everybody was a New York Times best seller she'd say, with the same journalism-school writing skills; the ridiculous similes, the excessive adverb-adjective combinations jumping out at you on every page. And who cared, if the story didn't interest you? Most of the time, there *was* no story, until maybe you got to page four hundred, when there was some big reveal. By that time, you just didn't care. And if you did get that far, you'd have completely forgotten all the leaden detail about family histories and the endless descriptions of settings and houses and shops. You'd be better off reading about stem cells or about genome editing. Her mom would roll her eyes and ask her why she

bothered reading books at all, if they were so bad? Why didn't she read a book by Stephen King or by John Grisham or by Danielle Steel? *They* weren't boring. Or why didn't she write her own books? Maybe she would one day.

Even the classics - especially the classics - were excruciating. Virginia Woolf? Jane Austen? Oh my god. The Shakespeare they'd done in school was kind of fun, because the language was so silly and strange and nobody ever knew what was going on. Dickens could be quite funny, and those thirty-line sentences were pretty amazing. But the good-boy, bad-boy, poor-sweet-girl stories were pretty hard to digest. The American classics were mostly just lame. That wasn't stopping them from being banned nowadays, though. Contemporary fiction seemed so deliberate. A novel had to include sexual identity themes no matter what it was about, and, above all, it had to use the f-word as much as possible. The school-board-approved books they'd read for school just wore you out. Even if you could swallow all the political correctness, the instructional social commentary just went on and on. It was so predictable, and so repetitive. What could have been done in ten pages, took four hundred pages instead.

There *were* exceptions, like *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath and *Alias Grace* by Margaret Atwood. And she really liked Penelope Fitzgerald, she'd read all of her novels; her favorites were *Innocence* and *At Freddie's*. But books like those were hard to find.

Her poor mom... she was kind of rough on her sometimes. Especially during Covid, when they'd been stuck inside so much. But her mom could be so annoying. Sometimes she just wouldn't leave her alone. She had to know everything that was going on, what she thought about everything. About school, about her friends, about guys, about clothes. Music was her mom's latest thing. Her mom had decided she was a Taylor Swift fan. Natalie would cringe when her friends were over and her mom would proudly quote lines from Taylor's songs. Food was another great topic; what was healthy and what wasn't. No matter what she told her mom, no matter how reliable her sources were, her mom selectively ignored her; she'd go on and on about extra vitamins and supplements and how great they were. "You can't argue with how it's helped people, Natty" she'd say. *Natty*. She still called her that, like she was still three years old.

All morning - ever since Monday, actually - she'd been thinking about meeting Billy Carson. She had a big smile on her face. She was sure he was interested in her, totally sure. The way he'd looked at her in the office on Monday, how nervous he got ... It was more than obvious.

In the kitchen, there was a note from her mom. *Good morning. There's a sandwich for you in the fridge for work. And fruit. I hope you have a good shift today. See you later. Mom*

She hadn't told her mom about meeting Billy. She would have made way too big of a deal about it.

She popped a piece of bread into the toaster and grabbed the strawberry jam from the cupboard. Then she poured some of the cold coffee left in the pot into a cup and microwaved it for fifty-five seconds.

After she had breakfast, she grabbed the sandwich and apple from the fridge and went back into her room. Her first-semester Math binder was in the middle of the stack of schoolbooks in the closet. She sat on her bed and flipped quickly through a few of the pages. *Here we go, Billy Carson*, she thought, with a smile. She threw the binder into her backpack, along with the sandwich and apple.

It was ridiculous how interested in guys she still was. Guys... Boyfriends. They could consume so much of your time and energy. And they were mostly such dolts. How many guys had she gone out with? Seven? Maybe you could say four of them were boyfriends. Three she'd had sex with. One of them lasted two months. One of them lasted three months. And then there was Peter, who was a two-and-a-half-week wonder. Seventeen days actually.

The guys she'd dated, she mostly wanted to forget. None of them became friends. She didn't even talk to them any more. They all wanted sex. Nothing wrong with that, but how about getting to know each other a little, like, have a few conversations about something? And they all had a jealousy/possessiveness problem. Any guy she'd gone out with for a while, thought he owned her. She wasn't supposed to talk to other guys or even mention them. And they had to know what she was doing every minute of her life. And sex? They were all so clueless. If you did have sex with them, chances were pretty good they'd freak out and disappear.

She hadn't been out with a guy in a long time, almost five months. Not since she and Peter broke up, if you wanted to call it breaking up. They'd only gone out for two and a half weeks. Two and a half weeks! Why did she even like him in the first place? Sure, he was kind of smart; he was good at chess and he could do weird puzzles and Rubik's cubes. But what did they actually do together? Ride around in his dad's fancy car a few times? Listen to his brother's band? Two and a half weeks. He was all crazy about her, called her all the time, texted her all the time. Wanted to kiss her and hold hands. And he desperately wanted to have sex with her.

He had a one-track mind. He pressed her about it non-stop for the whole time, right from their first date. Maybe he thought he was so good-looking she just couldn't resist him, or that he was so convincing. What's the big problem if you use a condom, he'd say. It won't even matter. No kidding. She eventually went along with him, because she just didn't want to listen to it anymore. Kind of a twisted reason, she had to admit. They had sex exactly one time, in the back seat of his dad's car. And then, he immediately, inexplicably, dropped her for someone else he wanted to date. It was ridiculous. It had nothing to do with the sex, or at least she couldn't see how it could have. The sex was just like you'd expect it to be for the first time. With a guy you'd only known for a couple of weeks. Awkward, rushed, kind of silly. Over in five minutes. He texted her, the day after they had sex, told her he was going to date another girl from school. She actually laughed out loud when she read the text. He was just an idiot, a very confused guy. He didn't have a clue about his own sex drive. Or about girls. There was nothing between them to be hurt by. It just didn't mean anything. Not to him and not to her. It was so pointless. She was definitely surprised, though. How could she not be? They'd just had sex the day before. After all that constant persuading on his part.

After Peter, the whole boyfriend/dating thing just seemed to dissolve into nothing. No one had shown any interest on Instagram or anywhere else. No one had asked her out. She'd had no interest in anyone either. There was nobody that caught her eye, nobody she fancied. Somehow the school year kept right on rolling. And then, out of nowhere, Billy Carson stumbles his way into her office. That was pretty funny. She liked him. He was sweet. And very good-looking. Why not meet him?

People would probably need a double take if they knew she was meeting him. The high school tennis star and the school Science nerd. What a combination! It would be the talk of the school. Ha. So what. She didn't care what anyone else thought. As for his being a tennis star, she'd barely even heard of the guy until she read Daria's article. Who could tell, he might be a super-nice guy. No harm in meeting him.

If he really did want help in Math, well, that could be fun. But she had her doubts about that. It had definitely seemed like something he'd made up on the spot, an excuse to get together. He could have just asked her. If he was serious about wanting help in Math, she'd do it. At least it would give them something to talk about. She hadn't thought about Math since December. Polynomials, trigonometry, Calculus... He was probably like most people. Didn't like Math. Didn't get it. She'd just get him writing

things out. Saying them out loud. Take the strangeness out of it a little. You didn't need a whole lot to be functional. A guy like him - a tennis player - he was all about rules and repetition, so that's how Math had to be approached. Like a kind of game.

If he fancied her, like she was almost certain he did, then what? Just play it by ear. Maybe they'd just become friends. Nothing wrong with that. School was over in a couple of months, anyway. Then they'd probably never see each other again. So it was not a big deal.

He'd actually seemed to be quite shy. Maybe he didn't know how to live up to his tennis-hero billing, or he was kind of embarrassed by it.

Maybe *she* should take the initiative, she thought. Ask him out. Then she had a brilliant idea. Dancing. She loved dancing, any kind of dancing. None of the guys she'd dated ever wanted to dance with her. Billy had offered tennis lessons as a trade for Math tutoring. How about dance lessons instead? There were lessons they could sign up for. She'd checked out dancing lessons many times. How could he refuse? If it turned into a disaster, so what? At least it would be a fun disaster.

Time to get ready. She carefully slid open the door of her bedroom closet to choose some clothes. The track on the floor was loose, and bent, so the door often came off the track. She'd meant to replace it, but she still hadn't got around to it. She'd have to borrow some tools from the caretaker.

What would it be? She thought of a white blouse and black skirt. Loafers. Maybe. Her burgundy satin shirt was looking pretty good, sitting right in the middle. With black slacks. It wasn't like she had millions of options. Maybe just a blue shirt, a white pullover sweater and blue jeans. Or there was the other skirt she wore sometimes, the blue skirt. She could wear the white sweater over that, and black leggings. That basically was all there was to choose from. She reminded herself she was going to work after meeting Billy. So it would have to be jeans and a blue shirt, and her yellow hoodie. Boots instead of shoes; it was still cold. And a tuque.

She put on the shirt and jeans and hoodie, and looked at herself in the mirror over her white dresser. Her hair! Yikes! What to do? There was nothing she could do. It was just there; thick, wavy and wild. Either she had to put a bag over her head or tie it back like she usually did. She looked at the gold studs in her ears. How about putting on those dangly triangles? Or those pearls she had? She didn't want to look like she was going for some kind of look or some kind of effect. She decided to just leave the studs alone. The gold chain looked fine. You could hardly see it

with a shirt anyway. She grabbed an elastic hair tie and tied her hair at the back.

Make-up. Her least favorite thing in the world to think about. Her mom was constantly buying make-up for her, telling her how pretty she'd look if she just tried some things: some tinted moisturizer, some blush for her cheeks, a little mascara, some brow gel, some eye-liner, some lipstick. There was a tray full of make-up in the top drawer of her dresser. She hated almost all of it. It didn't agree with her skin. Her eye lashes and her eyebrows were dark enough the way they were. Maybe she'd just put some color balm on her lips. She grabbed the stick from the top of the dresser, cool pink rose, and applied it. That was going to have to do.

She walked down the hallway from her bedroom, past her mom's room. Maybe a little perfume... She kind of liked her mom's Chanel. She walked into her mom's room and took the bottle from her mom's dresser, pouring a little on her finger and applying it to each side of her neck. She checked herself out again in the full length mirror on her mom's bedroom door. She smiled a big smile. Oh my god. What a mouthful of teeth! She looked like that comedian. Maybe her face really was a little pale. She was definitely too tall and too thin. And her boobs were so small. Like her mom would say when her mom looked at herself: just another of life's great tragedies. And then she'd laugh. The hoodie looked good though.

She drew her lips in together and left her mom's room. She went back into her own room and remembered she hadn't even turned her phone back on. She reached into the side pocket of her backpack and turned it on. Texts from Allison and Myla. Then she walked out to the hall closet, carrying her backpack in her hand. She slipped into her black boots, put on her green fleece jacket, and pulled on her latest favorite tuque. Then it was out the door to the bus stop just down the street.