

A Letter from the Fringe

Joan Bauer

Today they got Sally.

She wasn't doing anything. Just eating a cookie that her aunt had made for her. It was a serious cookie, too. She'd given me one. It was still in my mouth with the white chocolate and pecans and caramel all swirling together.

I saw Doug Booker before she did.

Saw his eyes get that hard glint they always get right before he says something mean. Watched him walk toward us, squeezing his hands into fists, getting psyched for the match. He's a champion varsity wrestler known for overwhelming his opponents in the first round. He was joined by Charlie Bass, brute ice hockey goalie, who was smirking and laughing and looking at Sally like the mere sight of her hurt his eyes.

Get the Geeks is a popular bonding ritual among the jock flock at Bronley High.

I swallowed my cookie. Felt my stomach tense. It was too late to grab Sally and walk off.

"Fun company at 4 o'clock," I warned her.

Sally looked up to smirks. Her face went pale.

Booker did that vibrato thing with his voice that he thinks is so funny: "So, *Sals*, maybe you should be cutting back on those calories, huh?"

Charlie was laughing away.

"What have you got, *Sals*, about 30 pounds to lose? More?" He did a *tsk, tsk*. Looked her up and down with premium disgust.

All she could do was look down.

I stood up. "Get lost, Booker."

Sneer. Snort. "Now, how can I get lost in school?"

"Booker, I think you have the innate ability to get lost just about anywhere."

"Why don't you and your fat friend just get out of my face, because the two of you are so butt ugly you're making me sick, and I don't know if I can hold the puke in!"

He and Charlie strolled off.

There's no response to that kind of hate.

I looked at Sally, who was gripping her cookie bag.

I tried fighting through the words like my mom and dad had taught me. Taking each one apart like I'm diffusing a bomb.

Was Sally fat?

I sucked in my stomach. She needed to lose some weight, but who doesn't?

Were she and I so disgusting we could make someone sick?

We're not Hollywood starlets, if that's his measuring stick.

If Booker said we were serial killers, we could have shrugged it off. But gifted bullies use partial truths. Doug knew how to march into personal territory.

I didn't know what to say. I blustered out, "They're total creeps, Sally."

No response.

"I mean, you've got a right to eat a cookie without getting hassled. You know those guys love hurting people. They think they've got some inalienable privilege."

A tear rolled down her cheek. "I do have to lose weight, Dana."

"They don't have a right to say it! There are all kinds of sizes in this world that are perfectly fine!"

She sat there, broken, holding the cookie bag that I just noticed had pictures of balloons on it.

"It's my birthday," she said quietly.

"Oh, Sally, I didn't know that."

Sally and I were at the fringe table in the back of the lunchroom. It was as far away from the in-crowd table as you could get and still be in the cafeteria. The best thing about the fringe table is that everyone who sits at it is

bonded together by the strands of social victimization. We all just deal with it differently.

Present were:

Cedric Melville, arch techno whiz, hugely tall with wild-man hair and a beak nose. He has an unusual habit of standing on one leg like a flamingo. Booker calls him "Maggot."

Jewel Lardner, zany artist with pink-striped hair who has spent years studying the systems of the ICIs. ICIs are In-Crowd Individuals. She'd long stopped caring about being in, out, or in between.

Gil Mishkin, whose car got covered with shaving cream last week in the parking lot. Gil doesn't have much hair because of a skin condition. His head has round, hairless patches, and most of his eyebrows are gone. He can't shave and is embarrassed about it. Booker calls him "Bald Boy."

"Now, with big, popular Doug," Cedric said, "you can't give him much room to move, which is what you did. When you shot right back at him, he came back harder. He always does that."

"He'll do something else, though," said Gil. "Remember what happened to my car." His hand went self-consciously over his half-bald head.

"Look," said Jewel, "you're talking defensive moves here. You've got to think offensively so the ICIs leave you alone. First off, you guys need cell phones. That way, if any of us sees big trouble coming, we can warn the others. If a jock on the prowl comes close to me, I whip out my phone and start shouting into it, 'Are you kidding me? He's got what kind of disease? Is it catching?' People don't come near you when you're talking disease."

"But most important," said Ed Looper, plunking his lunch tray down, "is you can't seem like a victim."

"I don't seem like a victim!" Sally insisted.

She did, though.

Bad posture.

Flitting eye contact.

Mumbles a lot.

I used to be that way during freshman and sophomore years. I'd just dread having to go out into the hall to change classes. I felt like at any moment I could be bludgeoned for my sins of being too smart, not wearing

expensive designer clothes, and hanging out with uncool people. I'd run in and out of the bathroom fast when the popular girls were in there.

Cedric used to skip school after getting hassled. Last year he decided he'd give it back in unusual ways. Now he'll walk up to a popular group, breathe like a degenerate, and hiss, "I'm a *bibliophile*." A bibliophile is a person who loves books, but not many people know that. He'll approach a group of cheerleaders and announce, "You know, girls, I'm *bipedal*. . . ." That means he has two feet, but those cheerleaders scatter like squirrels. "I'm a *thespian*," he'll say lustfully. This means he's an actor, but you know how it is with some words. If they sound bad, people don't always wait around for the vocab lesson.

Jewel also has her own unique defense mechanism. When a carload of ICIs once drove alongside her car blaring loud music, she cranked up her tape of Gregorian chants to a deafening roar. Jewel said it put a new perspective on spirituality.

People were throwing jock-avoidance suggestions at Sally, but the advice wasn't sticking.

"I just want to ignore those people," she said sadly to the group.

"Can you do it, though?" I asked her. She shrugged, mumbled, looked down.

See, for me, ignoring comes with its own set of problems. There are some people—Ed Looper is one of them—who can ignore the ICIs because he walks around in a cloud all day. If you want to get Looper's attention, it's best to trip him.

But me—sure, I can pretend I'm ignoring something or someone mean, but it doesn't help if deep down I'm steamed, and as I shove it farther and farther into the bottomless pit, the steam gets hotter.

So the biggest thing that's helped me cope is that I've stopped hoping that the mean in-crowders get punished for their cruelty. I think in some ways they have their punishments already. As my mom says, meanness never just goes out of a person—it goes back to them as well.

I look at the in-crowd table that's filling up. The beautiful Parker Cravens, Brent Fabrelli, the usual suspects. Doug Booker and Charlie Bass sit down, too.

So what's inside you, Doug, that makes you so mean? If I were to put your heart under a microscope, what would I see?

Once Parker Cravens and I had to be lab partners. This was close to the worst news she'd gotten all year. She glared at me like I was a dead frog she had to dissect. Parker is stricken with *affluenza*, a condition that afflicts certain segments of the excruciatingly rich. She doesn't know or care how the other half lives; she thinks anyone who isn't wealthy is subterranean. At first I was ripped that she discounted me; then I started looking at her under the emotional microscope. I have X-ray vision from years of being ignored.

"Parker, do you like this class?" I asked.

She glanced at my nondesigner sports watch that I'd gotten for two bucks at a yard sale and shuddered. "My dad's making me take it. He's a doctor, and he said I've got to know this dense stuff."

"What class would you rather be taking?"

She flicked a speck off her cashmere sweater and looked at me as if my question were totally insipid.

"No, really, Parker. Which one?"

"Art history," she said.

"Why don't you take it?"

Quiet voice. "My dad won't let me."

"Why not?"

"He wants me to be a doctor."

Parker would last two nanoseconds in med school.

"That's got to be hard," I offered.

"Like granite, Dana."

It's funny. No matter how mean she gets—and Parker can get mean—every time I see her now, I don't just think that she's the prettiest girl in school or the richest or the most popular; I think a little about how her father doesn't have a clue as to what she wants to be and how much that must hurt.

My bedroom doesn't look like I feel. It's yellow and sunny. It's got posters of Albert Einstein and Eleanor Roosevelt and their best quotes.

Al's: *If at first the idea is not absurd, then there is no hope for it.*

Eleanor's: *No one can make you feel inferior without your consent.*

I flop on the bed wondering how come cruelty seems so easy for some people.

Wondering who decided how the boundary lines get drawn. You can never be too athletic, too popular, too gorgeous, or too rich, but you can be too smart and too nerdy.

My mom tells me that sometimes people try to control others when too many things are out of control in their own lives.

I walk to my closet and pull down the Ziploc bag in which I keep my old stuffed koala bear, Qantas. He can't handle life on the bed like my other animals—he's close to falling apart. Think Velveteen Rabbit. He was a big part of my childhood. I got him when I was four and kids started giving me a hard time in nursery school because I used words that were too big for them to understand. I've talked to him ever since.

I take Qantas out of the bag, look into his scratched plastic eyes.

This bear will not die. I lost him at Disney World and found him. Lost him at the zoo and he turned up near the lion's cage. I always take him out when I've got a sticky problem. Maybe I'm remembering the power of childhood—the part that thinks a stuffed bear really holds the secrets to life.

And it's funny. As I hold him now, all kinds of things seem possible.

Like the Letter. I've been tossing the idea around all year: how I could write a letter to the ICs, explain what life is like from my end of the lunchroom, and maybe things would get better at my school.

At first I thought it would be easy to write. It isn't. This is as far as I've gotten:

To my classmates at the other end of the lunchroom:

This is a difficult letter to write, but one that needs to be written.

Wrong, all wrong.

And there's the whole matter of how the letter will get distributed if I ever write it.

I could send it to the school paper.

Tack it to the front door with nails.

Print it up on T-shirts.

I think about the mangy comments that have been hurled at me this month.

Were you born or were you hatched?

Do you have to be my lab partner?

Do you have to have your locker next to mine?

I hug my bear. Some people go on-line with their problems. I go marsupial.

"Qantas, if I had the guts to write a letter to the in crowd at my school, this is what I'd like to say:

"This letter could be from the nerd with the thick glasses in computer lab. It could be from the 'zit girl' who won't look people in the eye because she's embarrassed about her skin. It could be from the guy with the nose ring whom you call queer, or any of the kids whose sizes don't balance with your ideal.

"You know, I've got things inside me—dreams and nightmares, plans and mess-ups. In that regard, we have things in common. But we never seem to connect through those common experiences because I'm so different from you.

"My being different doesn't mean that you're better than me. I think you've always assumed that I want to be like you. But I want you to know something about kids like me. We don't want to. We just want the freedom to walk down the hall without seeing your smirks, your contempt, and your looks of disgust.

"Sometimes I stand far away from you in the hall and watch what you do to other people. I wonder why you've chosen to make the world a worse place.

"I wonder, too, what really drives the whole thing. Is it hate? Is it power? Are you afraid if you get too close to me and my friends that some of our uncoolness might rub off on you? I think what could really happen is that learning tolerance could make us happier, freer people.

"What's it going to be like when we all get older? Will we be more tolerant or less because we haven't practiced it much? I think of the butterflies in the science museum. There are hundreds of them in cases. Hundreds of different kinds. If they were all the same, it would be so boring. You can't look at the blue ones or the striped ones and say they shouldn't have been born. It seems like nature is trying to tell us something. Some trees are tall, some are short. Some places have mountains, others have deserts. Some cities are

always warm, some have different seasons. Flowers are different. Animals. Why do human beings think they have the right to pick who's best—who's acceptable and who's not?

"I used to give you control over my emotions. I figured that if you said I was gross and weird, it must be true. How you choose to respond to people is up to you, but I won't let you be my judge and jury. I'm going to remind you every chance I get that I have as much right to be on this earth as you."

I look at Qantas, remember bringing him to a teddy bear birthday party and being told he wasn't a real bear. I laugh about it now. He and I have never been mainstream.

Turn on my computer and begin to put it all down finally. The words just pour out, but I know the letter isn't for the ICIs and full-scale distribution.

It's for me. And one other person. I open my desk drawer, where I keep my stash of emergency birthday cards. I pick one that reads: It's your birthday. If you'd reminded me sooner, this card wouldn't be late.

I sign the card, print the letter out, fold it in fourths so it will fit inside, and write Sally's name on the envelope.