

Maybe
with a Chance
of Certainty

John Goode

*Sales of
Foster High*

I DON'T remember the moment I knew I was broken.

I was seventeen and on the edge of an eighteen that seemed terrifying to a young man not sure what his sexuality was going to be. I knew I liked guys but was still under the delusion that an attraction to guys didn't make you gay, just like drowning didn't mean you were breathing water. It just made you different, and as we all know, in high school there is nothing worse than being different. Though every TV show or movie will tell you the wacky, zany, oddball character is not only cool but a necessary component in most social settings, no one ever closed their eyes and wished they ended up being Screech.

I never assumed I was broken by coming from a singleparent family that consisted of a mom who spent more time drinking and partying than being an actual parent—not that I had any idea what an actual parent looked like. Again, pop culture had taught me that a mom was either baking pies in pearls and heels, Xanax smile pasted to her face like a postmodern zombie, or the spunky single lady who worked hard and never seemed to secure herself a real romantic entanglement. My mom was neither of those, and the concept of a dad was about as familiar to me as walking on the moon would be.

I was emotionally retarded in a way that made connecting with another human being so daunting a task that even considering it could cause my heart to race and my breath to stop altogether at times. Since junior high, boys had made me feel funny, and not in a laughing sort of way. That clumsy, all-feet-and-no-balance stutter that most teenage boys feel toward girls, I would get in the locker room. Let me assure you, no one sounds slick stuttering like they are having a seizure. All sound would drain away as my vision would zero in on the boy next to me as he slipped out of his jeans. More than once I found myself forcing my eyes to look away so I could finish dressing for PE.

By the time I started high school, I had constructed a virtual igloo of emotional distance between me and everyone else. I projected a coldness that bordered on snobbery; I was the guy everyone knew of but no one could recall talking to personally. I imagined myself an urban legend of Foster High School, like Sasquatch or a chupacabra. Everyone had a friend who had seen me talking to someone, but no one had ever talked to me directly. I was a ghost wandering the halls, head down, backpack over one shoulder, eyes focused on where my next step would take me and nothing more. In a social environment where being cool and liked were currency, I was a monk who had taken a vow of poverty, which then necessitated a vow of celibacy. I sidestepped conversations, ate lunch by myself, and practically ran home after school.

I didn't know it, but I was broken in a way that wasn't readily evident to those around me. As anyone who has read comic books knows, when one sense is taken from you, the others become almost superhuman, allowing you the ability to get by in life the best you possibly can. Since I was completely and utterly devoid of any knowledge of how emotions worked for other people, my mind had taken the unused space and used it to amplify what book smarts I already possessed to a Rain Man level of intellect. I was the person who never needed to study, never needed to read anything more than once, and always finished his test first. I am sure in some alternate universe there was a high school that found possessing a vast array of useless knowledge to be a badge of notoriety that would have garnered me some kind of social credit. Alas, I was not born there. Instead, my brain made me a nerd at worst, at best the quiet, smart guy who never seemed to look up when he walked. I think that's why I never saw him coming.

I knew who he was, of course; everyone did. His name was Brad Greymark, and he was one of those lucky few that walked on rarefied air as he passed you by in the hall. He was on the baseball team, and every image I have of him before we met was of him wearing a letterman's jacket, green with white leather sleeves and adorned with a huge F on his lapel, making him look like a superhero amidst the rest of us normal people. He wasn't perfect-looking, though he was closer to it than most, but he was good-looking enough to get you to turn your head at least once, and with Brad, once was all he needed. With his dark red hair and green eyes, he was the very model of a modern teenage athlete, strong features with just a hint of prettiness that made him irresistible.

He had to know how popular he was, but it never came across when he talked. There was an earnestness in his attitude that made you want to like him despite all of the obvious benefits already bestowed on him by the universe in general. I never knew anyone to dislike or take umbrage with his obvious gifts, as was so common in the high school ecosystem. Normally people like him were coveted and loathed behind their backs, but this was not true when it came to Brad. It was as if, instead of pushing down those around him by reminding them of his physical superiority, he shared it somehow—like, when you were talking to him, somehow you were made more popular as well. I had, of course, never talked to him, but I had eaten lunch more than once near the group of people that gathered at his feet every noon to break bread, and had found his presence almost akin to listening to royalty speak. His voice was strong and soothing, containing none of the odd tones and subliminal insecurities most high school boys possessed. It was easily recognizable above a crowd, and no matter where he was in a room, it commanded attention.

Which is why when I heard it coming from right in front of me I almost screamed.

I had been walking through the hall as I normally did, head down, concentrating only on getting out of the building. Navigating a high school hallway is no easy task, since the inborn pocket of comfortable space most people possess seems to have no value when you have fifteen minutes to run to your locker, grab the books for your next class, and catch up with gossip before you're tardy. If you weren't careful, you could get body-checked more times than a right-winger at a hockey game without even the briefest of acknowledgments by the person who had committed the personal foul. I had perfected an almost radar-like ability of knowing how to pass by a crowd of people without them ever knowing I was there. So when I saw a set of size twelve Converse sneakers directly in my path that day, I swerved sharply left to avoid the inevitable collision. The sneakers moved to intercept me. As I tried to pull right, I heard his voice say, "Hey," and mentally, I lost it.

There is nothing worse than your body reacting to someone before your brain can even recognize who it is. It is a Pavlovian response when you run into someone you are attracted to and aren't ready for it. There is a something that runs up your spine, as if every particle of your being is somehow magnetically pulled to the other person. Whatever automatic system your body has for keeping itself upright and moving forward temporarily fails, and inevitably you are going to stumble like your sneakers have grown three sizes too big.

And because I was a teenage boy, I instantly got hard.

There are few materials known to man more unforgiving to an erection than denim. It is coarse, dense, and not even the least bit interested in giving you an inch or two of room as the swelling member gets bigger. I don't know any male who has not felt the gnawing maw of jeans clamping down on their member at least once in their life. Sitting down, standing up, running laps, eating lunch, there is never a penis that is as comfortable hard as it is soft in a pair of jeans. The only thing worse than throwing a bone in the middle of a hallway while standing in front of a straight guy is adjusting your hard-on in the middle of a hallway while standing in front of said straight guy, without seeming

like you are playing with yourself.

So as my member slid down my jeans, inch by agonizing inch, I forced myself to focus at a spot between his eyes and tried to replicate the heterosexual male head nod that all teenage boys except me seemed to know, and responded with a, “Hey,” that was a few octaves higher than I initially intended. My right hand was still gripping the history book and folder I had just retrieved from my locker, so as he began to talk, I tried to move the book slowly in front of my groin as unnoticeably as possible.

“So you’re kind of smart, right?” His question was far more rhetorical than an actual inquiry, since he kept talking without waiting for an answer. “Because Gunn is a cool coach, but he is a dick about grades.”

Which only makes sense if you knew how our high school worked. Coach Gunn was a bulldog of a man that spent his days coaching baseball and teaching history. That seemed to be a godsend to our school’s jocks, who had to maintain a grade point average of 2.75 to stay on the team. They thought, since he coached them, that his history class would be a breeze. So every year the new group of jocks would do everything they could to make sure they got into his class. And every year, a fresh group of boys found out that Coach Gunn did not believe in a free ride. Brad had paused to wait for some kind of response from me, which was his second mistake; his first, expecting me to be normal in the first place. I wasn’t used to talking to actual people, much less people waiting for me to respond to them. I had lost myself doing two different things that ended up becoming one, and I was completely unaware of him waiting for me. My gaze had moved from the space between his eyes and drifted to the almost luminescent green of his eyes and had stayed lost there for a few long seconds. At the same time, my hand had moved the book over my now-hard dick, and instead of just covering it from view, it pressed against it.

And the two things had become one.

His eyes led me to the ruddy blush of his cheeks that, upon closer inspection, seemed to hide pale freckles, which made his skin seem that much more perfect with its newfound imperfections. His freckles led down to what I could see of his muscled neck, hidden by the collar of his jacket on either side, with what must have been the first Adam’s apple I was ever transfixed by. His neck led my eyes down to a thin white T-shirt that seemed to amplify the hard muscle that made up the twin curves of his pecs instead of covering them. The way the cotton seemed to dip between them almost invited a person to see how deep the space between them lay. I could see the impression of a chain underneath, and, when he shifted his weight, I spotted the glint of silver between the white T-shirt and the jacket. I felt, in a way, like I had almost seen the band of his underwear.

“You okay?”

My head jerked up with a blur as I realized I was still standing in the middle of a high school hallway with a huge erection covered only by my history book. “Yeah,” I said quickly, not sure exactly what I was answering.

Obviously he didn’t either, because he cocked his head like a dog and asked, “Um, to which one?” “What?” I asked, as confused as he was—if that was possible. And then, whatever buffer in my head had frozen freed itself, and time started moving normally again. “Yes,” I said again, now answering his question, followed by a sharp, “No.” Which didn’t sound good. “I mean, I don’t... what do you mean by smart?” I could see in his eyes that whatever hopes he’d had that I possessed any superior intellect were dwindling quickly as it became apparent I couldn’t even string together a sentence of English. “I mean, there are street smarts and there is, like, math smart, which I’m not, because numbers suck, so not really, but if you’re talking about—” I began to ramble.

“History,” he said, cutting me off. “Coach Gunn teaches history, and you seem good at it.” He was talking slowly now, like he was trying to communicate with an alien. “Are you?”

“Yes,” I answered, trying to swallow.

We stood there staring at each other for about five seconds before he just shook his head. “You know what? Forget it.” He began to walk away.

And only then did my mind realize that one of the bestlooking guys in school had just been talking to me and was now walking away from me. I tried to calculate all of the different possibilities that would have made someone like him talk to someone like me. Was I getting cooler? Did he know I liked guys? Did *he* like guys? Did he like *me*? Was this a vain attempt to reach out and get me to understand that there was someone else in this world as lonely as me? Maybe he was trying to get across in code or something that he....

Which was when my brain screamed at me, “*He needs help with his history homework, you retard!*”

“Wait,” I said, turning back at him. He paused and looked back at me, and I felt my mind begin to get lost in the lines of his chin, so I blurted out, “I can help you.” He raised an eyebrow as the people walking past us stared, wondering what exactly that meant. I realized I had broken another cardinal rule of surviving high school, besides never looking up and always bring your own lunch: Never talk to someone else in front of people.

I was talking to someone else in front of other people.

I took several steps toward him to minimize how loud I had to speak. “With your history,” I amended.

“I can help you.”

“I need to pass the midterm,” he said in the same conspiratorial tone I was using. “If I don’t, I’m toast.”

I nodded to both the spoken and unspoken sentiments. I could indeed help him study for the midterm, and I was aware he would be tossed off the team if he failed it. And in a culture like high school that is completely popularity-driven, losing that letterman jacket was akin to being cast out from the pantheon of high school gods and forced to wander the barren earth with us commoners.

The ironic part is not once did I consider not helping him out of spite.

He was one of those golden boys that seemed somehow to deserve the spotlight of attention they received. Resenting or even trying to deny him that kind of adoration just seemed to be a cruel and unusual punishment for him. Imagining him not being one of the most popular boys in school was like picturing a beautiful golden retriever caked with mud, or a masterpiece of a painting covered with years of grime and dust. I think that was his secret, the reason he was so well liked even though he didn’t seem to try. People wanted to want to help him, and I’m sure the fact that he resembled what everyone pictured an ideal teenage boy in his prime to be didn’t hurt.

“It’s next week. We’d need to study pretty hard,” I said, wondering what exactly I was getting myself into. “We could meet after school at the library—”

He shook his head, cutting me off. “I have practice, has to be after that.”

I paused. “But the library closes at five.”

He shrugged. “Then come over to my house and we’ll study there.”

I froze.

“Or we could go to yours—” he started to say.

“We’ll go to yours!” I blurted out, not even giving my overactive imagination a second to imagine the horror of him seeing my mother stumbling out of her room, hungover, wondering why there was someone else in the house.

“Cool,” he said, nodding to himself. “You need a ride, or do you have a car?”

“I do not have a car,” I said tonelessly, still in shock as I realized, by not wanting him to come to my house, I had agreed to go to his.

“Cool,” he said with an easy smile. “Meet me by the locker room after five. I can drop you off at home afterward, okay?”

My head nodded all by itself.

“Awesome. Thanks, man,” he said, turning around and then pausing. “Um, I hate to ask this... but I really don’t know your name.” He seemed contrite and embarrassed all at once, which made him about a thousand times more attractive in my eyes.

I paused for an impossibly long moment as I realized I didn’t know my name either. “Kyle!” I blurted out as the memory of my given name stumbled across the tip of my tongue. “My name is Kyle!” I tried again, reinforcing it by saying it out loud a second time.

His smile turned into a wide grin as he held out his hand. “I’m Brad.”

“I know,” I said before I could stop myself. His hand closed on mine, and his head tilted to the right a bit as his eyes locked to mine, as if considering those words carefully. I felt my stomach fall out from under me as I realized what the hell I had just said. “I mean, everyone knows you,” and I followed that up with a nervous little serial-killer chuckle that would convince absolutely no one I wasn’t crazy.

He held my hand for a second too long as he said nothing and then slowly nodded. “Okay, Kyle. Cool.” He let go, but I could still feel the warmth of where his skin had touched mine. “So, after five?” My head did the bobble-head nod as I agreed. He laughed a little to himself as he turned away. “Awesome, see you then.”

I tried not to stare at the way the baggy jeans hugged his ass as he walked away. I tried but failed pretty badly.

I GENERALLY avoided the locker room like a West Hollywood hopeful avoids solid food.

PE and watching normal guys get undressed was bad enough; the thought of actual athletes getting naked, standing around snapping towels at each other, soaping up under hot showers....

This is the gay equivalent of how straight guys view girls having a slumber party. When Brad came out, letterman jacket in place, duffel bag over one shoulder, hair damp and spiky from lack of product, fresh white T-shirt clinging to his chest... it was the hottest thing I have ever seen in the flesh.

“Waiting long?”

All my life.

“Nah, not at all,” I said, trying to replicate his casual style.

He chuckled at some internal joke. “You could have come in,” he said, heading toward his car.

“Oh no,” I said, trying not to sound too strident about my refusal. “I’m cool.”

He looked over his shoulder at me and grinned. “Okay. This is mine.” He had stopped in front of a new, bright yellow Mustang that just oozed money.

“Nice car,” I said as I eased into the passenger seat, terrified of somehow ruining the car. He tossed his bag into the backseat as he jumped behind the wheel.

“Thanks. Got it for my last birthday,” he said cheerfully. Then, in a lower tone, he added, “My dad owns a dealership, so it’s a lease.” He turned the key and the car roared like an angry saber-toothed cat. It hit me it was the perfect car for him. It was masculine, tough, and pretty all at the same time. Seeing him behind the steering wheel, looking over at me and grinning... it was like looking sex in the eyes. “You okay?” he asked as I realized I was staring.

I turned my head quickly as I nodded. “Yeah, just kinda tired, I guess,” as I faked the worst yawn

in the history of faux bodily functions.

“Hey, if you’re too tired for this, we can do it another day,” he said, his voice dropping in concern.

“No.” I answered way too fast and saw him smile as I looked back at him. “I mean, I’m cool.” He shrugged and shifted the car into drive. “If you say so.”

I was realizing I was really bad at this.

He lived in a house that exemplified everything that made him who he was. It was blindly normal in the middle of a good neighborhood on the good side of town where nothing ever seemed to go wrong. The cars were all polished and gleaming, the lawns immaculately groomed, making me wonder if any of them were ever actually played on. The suburb should have been littered with kids struggling to milk the last rays of sunshine out of the dying day, dads standing in the driveway watering the grass, waving aimlessly, but there was no one. It looked like every place I had ever wanted to live, but, as with most of the actual world, it was just a bit off from the image in my head.

“Nice house,” I said as he pulled up in the driveway. There was another Mustang parked there, this one black as night and twice as tricked out.

He shrugged as he leaned back and grabbed his bag. “It’s okay, I guess.”

I wasn’t sure if I was seeing it correctly, but it seemed like his gait changed as he approached the front door. His steps became smaller, his shoulders slumped, and the bag on his shoulder seemed to have mass for the first time. It may have been my imagination, but there was a half-second pause as he reached up to the doorknob and turned it.

As soon as he opened the door, a wave of noise hit us like a freight train. The sounds of a man and a woman screaming at each other echoed through the high ceilings and Spanish arches that made the house so much more resalable in this soft economy. The front foyer with replica Greek marble tiles was scrubbed perfectly clean, as if they’d never been walked on. Two sets of shoes were set off to the right, with a coat rack mounted above them.

“Take your shoes off,” he said in a whisper, which was completely unnecessary, since we could have walked in with a twenty-piece brass band and failed to be heard over the din of what I assumed was his parents fighting. “My mom is psycho about the carpets,” he explained with more than a small dose of apology in his tone. I step-kicked my shoes off as I watched him slip off his Converse and push them to the side. I found it amusing that, in my entire life, I had never once seen a teenage boy untie his sneakers before taking them off. We all evolve into creatures that somehow gain the ability to dance/shuffle our shoes off, taking the same if not more time and effort than stopping and untying them manually would. I pushed mine over next to his and was struck how instantly different he seemed with his shoes and jacket off.

He ceased being Brad Greymark, star jock, lord and savior of the local high school, and became another teenage boy. A flawless-looking, well-built teenage boy that never failed to turn people’s heads, but a teenage boy nonetheless. “My room’s upstairs,” he said, sliding across the floor to the large, sprawling staircase that seemingly led to the stars. “Let’s head up,” he said, trying to keep his voice down.

The screaming stopped.

“Bradley?” a woman’s voice called out. “Bradley, is that you?” Brad visibly winced as his mother called out his entire name. A muffled male voice claimed that he hadn’t heard anything as his mother cried out again. “Bradley, are you home?”

“Damn it,” he muttered under his breath. He yelled back, “Yeah, it’s me!” He turned to the staircase and then decided to add, “I have a friend here and we’re doing homework.”

The sound of someone coming out of the kitchen and heading toward us seemed deafening in the

echoing interior of the house. A man who looked like Brad twenty years older, sixty pounds heavier, and a shit-ton angrier came barging into the foyer, two buttons undone, tie hanging loose, drink in a death grip. "What kind of friend?" he demanded, stopping in his tracks as he finally saw me. "Oh," was all he said.

"This is...", there was a pause, and Brad said, "...my tutor. We're studying history."

"Kyle," I said under my breath, feeling myself shrink as we stood there.

"History?" his dad said, not weaving or slurring in the slightest, but I had the distinct impression he was well on his way to being smashed. I had lived through more than a few drunken episodes with my mom, and I knew a drunk guy when I saw one. This man was dangerously intoxicated. He stood there, silent, for a long pause; I wasn't sure if he was waiting for us to say something or had just lost his train of thought, but after a few seconds he said, "Well, God knows you need some help," before he turned around and made his way back to the kitchen. "Just keep it down," he added.

Seconds later he screamed, "*I can talk to my fucking son if I want to, Susan!*" "Come on," Brad said, climbing the stairs to his room. I followed, trying to remember how normal the house had looked from outside.

There was a *Do Not Enter* street sign nailed to the front of the door. From the pockmarks and chipped paint, it looked like an actual sign, pulled down from somewhere. Brad pushed the door open, stepped inside, and kept his hand on the door, making it obvious he wanted to slam it shut as soon as I crossed the threshold. His parents' fight echoed upstairs as well, the acoustics of the house carrying the sounds perfectly to his room. "Come in," he said impatiently.

I hadn't even realized I had paused until he said something; every particle of my being was telling me I should leave and leave now. I hated conflict of any kind and drunken conflict doubly so. Like a vampire invited into his room, I crossed the threshold, feeling a slight chill when the door closed behind me.

Like everything else in life, his room was everything mine wasn't.

Where the walls of mine were covered with a patchwork collection of images torn from magazines and a few tattered posters I had bought over the years, his looked like those of a poster gallery. Two framed images of cars in motion, a movie poster with five teenagers leaning over each other and staring intently out, and a trio of athletes, each frozen in mid-victory. A wide dresser supported a parade of goldcolored people all mounted on sports trophies, enough to populate their own country, it seemed, each one another log on the fire of differences between us.

I walked around, marveling at the maleness of the entire space. A small bathroom sat off the bedroom, the vanity counter full of hair products, cologne... a smorgasbord of goods devised to ameliorate teenage male insecurity. The room was an alien planet to me; there was nothing that was not male, jock, butch, alpha male guy in or around it. Even the baseball-shaped alarm clock on the end table next to his bed shouted, "I'm a dude!"

"So, what do you think?" he asked, sitting down on the weight bench on the other side of the bed. The clothes draped over the bar indicated how much it was used.

I knew what he was asking, of course. I don't know how it is with girls, but with boys there is very little as sacred as their room. It is the only area that they are allowed to make their own, within reason; therefore it is a direct reflection of their personality. There is nothing more telling than a boy's room in saying who they are as a person. But only if you know how to read it. The cars were not indications of wealth but desires of getting out, movement, and speed; they were horses that could carry us out of town as soon as humanly possible. That, and, most of the time, they were metallic red, and metallic red was badass.

The sports figures were, of course, his desire: his drive to do better and the people he wanted to become someday. I noticed that the three of them were all white, good-looking, and built like brick houses, much like Brad. They were the same sports figures I would have picked if I had to pick three posters based on sports and put them up on my wall. I noticed that even though they were superstars, not one of them was a celebrity outside of sports; unlike some people who used it as a springboard to be something more, these people were known for sports and sports only. But it was the movie poster that had me puzzled.

I mean, sure, everyone has seen that movie. Didn't matter what year it came out; that movie defined what being in high school was about. Though a complete fairy tale, it spoke of different people forced to spend a day together and realizing they had more in common than they ever knew. Real life never worked like that, of course, and even if it had, the spell would have been broken by Monday and no one would have ever admitted anything out loud. That movie represented what every single high schooler wanted life to be, but it meant even more for those of us who didn't have a voice.

To find that movie's poster in the room of one of the school's most popular people, and to see it hanging above his bed—the prime real estate in any boy's room—shouted there was more to him than what everyone else saw. He could have come to school naked tomorrow and would instantly become more popular before someone offered him a towel. He could proclaim water to be uncool, and there would be hundreds of people who went thirsty the next day. To think that he had watched the same movie and wanted his real voice to be heard....

Well, it was puzzling.

"I love that movie," I said, pointing at the poster.

I had thought I'd seen the arsenal of his smiles since he'd talked to me in the hallway, but as he nodded, he flashed me a new one that put all the other smiles to shame. It wasn't until later that I realized that was the first time I ever saw him *really* smile. "So, which one are you?"

Another popular question in high school, and though it seems simple, it was a complex formula to figure out. You say the jock, you're trying to say you're in better shape than everyone else. If you say the princess, you're a bitch. If you say the criminal, you think you're cooler than you really are. If you say the nerd, you think you're smarter than everyone else. And if you say the basket case, you are hiding something that everyone else will want to know. There was no right answer.

"None of them, I guess," I lied, putting my backpack down on his bed. "So, you wanna get started?"

Long seconds of nothing passed as I pulled my history book out and began to flip through it. When I looked up at him, I could see his wry grin was back, that "I know more than you" smile. He shook his head and moved over to the bed. I moved over and knelt by the side, knowing that was as close as I dared to get to him. "Whatever you say," he said, lying down on the bed, his head toward the foot of the bed. "Where do we start?"

WE STARTED at Lincoln winning the presidency, moved through the Civil War, and rounded out with a little Reconstruction, all in about ninety minutes. That was a lot of material to cover in half a semester, but in a cram session like this, it was almost impossible. At the end of the first hour, we both knew two things. One, there was way more he didn't know than he did, and two, neither one of us had the concentration to go for more than an hour like we had. The last thirty minutes began to unravel, until he began asking random questions as he flipped through the book.

Like my own personal sun, not only was he too radiant to look at directly, but I found myself more and more drawn into his orbit with each minute. He had decided to lie back on the bed, book in his hands, as he leaned against the pillows propped up on his headboard. This by itself was staggering, but in moving, his T-shirt had ridden up as he shifted. The tan skin that had been exposed was just

devastating to my ability to continue talking. The band of his white underwear was barely visible, and it was quickly becoming my own personal Waterloo.

“You know a lot about this stuff, don’t you?” he asked, the words barely penetrating the fog that had descended on my brain as I saw the ridges of what had to be his abs move with each breath. I had a stomach, a flat, skinny-ass stomach, but I had never once had abs. I wondered what it was like.

And then I wondered what they felt like.

And then what they tasted like....

“Kyle?” he said, waving a hand in front of my face. I jerked back as if burned, which was when I realized

my legs had fallen asleep under me.

I had been kneeling at the side of his bed for over an hour, and blood had long ceased to flow where it was supposed to, and now was flowing where I definitely didn’t want it to be. I went over onto my side as I stifled a sound by sinking my teeth into my bottom lip. The pins and needles that exploded throughout my legs as I rocked on the floor were as excruciating as any torture I had imagined. Seconds later a head popped over the side of the bed, his bangs falling down into his face. “You okay?”

My eyes were clenched shut as I nodded. “Peachy,” I said, half-grunting.

“You know, you could have sat up here with me.” He settled in, resting his hands on his arms as he watched me try not to cry. “It’s a big bed.”

“I’m good,” I replied, which was about the most I could say.

“Ooookay.” And I could just hear that damn grin in his voice. “So what’s your deal, anyways?” My heart stopped suddenly. “Deal?” I asked, suddenly faced with a far greater agony than anything my body could throw at me.

“Yeah, deal,” he said casually, like we were long-lost friends just catching up instead of relative strangers on either side of the social strata that made up high school. “I mean, you’re not ugly.”

Which might have been the nicest thing anyone had ever said about the way I looked.

He was right—I wasn’t ugly, at least not in the traditional sense. All of my damage was carefully concealed by a thin veneer of normalcy that, at times, barely felt like it covered my entire body. Like a blanket two sizes too small, it could only cover one flaw at a time, leaving something else exposed to the general populace against my will. If I could get past my crippling fear of talking in public, then my inability to avoid staring at people better looking than me was revealed. If I covered that flaw up by keeping my head down, then the glaring reality that I had absolutely no friends whatsoever flashed like a neon sign. I had learned that the best I could do was to adopt a duck and weave strategy. I never stayed in one place long enough for someone to figure out my secret identity as the Hunchback of Foster High School, which I just knew would be followed with torches and pitchforks.

I knew how this movie ended, and it wasn’t with me walking across a football field, one hand raised in victory as Simple Minds played.

“Um, thanks,” I said as I began to regain the ability to move my lower half.

“No, I mean you aren’t ugly, and no one has ever said anything bad about you. To my knowledge, at least.” I could see his legs crossed, white socks just hovering there, somehow making him even more attractive. “So then why the Harpo Marx routine?” His green eyes bore down on me, and I felt my stomach plummet.

And then my brain caught up with my ears.

“People talk about me?” I asked, completely ignoring the auburn eyebrow that arched in surprise. “Who?”

This was news to me. I mean, as a recipient of the Claude Rains scholarship for the Recognized Impaired, I assumed no one knew who I was. I had imagined myself invisible, wandering the halls unnoticed, a not-so-short-norfat Bilbo Baggins without the foot hair, darting from class to class without engaging as much as a sideways glance. Who were these people that not only knew who I was but actually discussed me?

He shrugged and rolled over onto his back. "Lots of people, I guess. I asked around about you," he added, reaching over to grab the baseball-shaped alarm clock with one hand. "It was all good, I assure you." He tossed it skywards with a casualness that I knew would merit me a busted lip as gravity took hold of it and my own stunted reflexes tried to react. I have no idea why something so minor as tossing a ball could be so erotic, but it was.

"You asked around about me?" My shock was so great that I found myself quickly descending into a bad Jerry Lewis impression as I simply stammered his own words out loud.

Another toss. "Of course I did. You think I just invite anyone over to my house?" Toss.

If blood had begun to flow back into my legs, it was must have been draining from my face, because he glanced over his head at me, and whatever he saw shocked him enough to forget the falling piece of plastic that was hurtling toward his face. The sound of something striking flesh followed by a loud "*Fuck!*" was like a crack of thunder as his hands covered his face instantly.

If my legs were still weak, I was unaware of it as I rushed toward him, real fear in my chest. Logically, I understood the baseball-shaped alarm clock couldn't do any real harm to him, but the overwhelming burst of panic was akin to a gunshot wound for some reason. I hovered over him, sitting on the bed next to his shoulders. "Are you okay?" I asked like an idiot. Of course he wasn't all right; he had just taken a line drive by a piece of plastic to his face, that was pretty far away from okay.

"Hit my goddamned nose," he said, the two huge paws that passed as his hands cupping his nose and mouth protectively.

"Let me see," I asked, not quite daring to move his hands aside myself.

"I'm okay," he said, his hands not moving an iota. "Well then, let me see," I reasoned.

Pause. "No, I'm fine," he insisted

"Brad." I sighed. "Move your hands."

A weaker and muted, "No," followed by an almost whispered, "it hurts."

"Move your hands," I said, taking hold of his hands and beginning to pry them off.

"Stop it!" he exclaimed, his eyes wide.

"Let me see," I said, bearing down.

"Let go!" he tried to demand, but it came out more whine than anything else.

"Let me see your nose, you big baby." I could see blood between the cracks of his hands and knew it must be swelling. Finally I stopped and looked down at him. "Seriously, Brad, let me see."

His hands refused to cooperate at first but then slowly moved aside. I hadn't noticed that he had grabbed my hands now. "How's it look?" he asked, as if inquiring about a missing limb.

It looked bad.

"It's okay," I lied, trying not to react to the sheer amount of blood that was gushing out of his nose and down his face. "Just put your head back here," I said, pushing his head over the side of the bed so it was upside down.

"Why?" he said, trying to sit up.

"Lay back!" I said, pushing him back down with a hard shove to his chest. I'm not sure if it was

the shove or the tone, but he seemed shocked into compliance and lay back down slowly. “Just stay there,” I said, as if addressing a willful dog or stubborn child. I got up with the intention of finding a wet cloth in his bathroom when I noticed his hand still grasping my own. I looked down my arm to his and followed it back to his face, as if I couldn’t quite grasp where this extra appendage had come from.

“Is it okay?” he asked, this time real emotion in his voice.

“It will be,” I said, smiling. “Let me get a washcloth,” I asked, not willing to let go first.

With great deliberateness he released my hand and brought his own back to his side. I didn’t trust myself, so I turned quickly to his bathroom and began to search it for clean towels. Normally, being this close to a place where I knew he showered would have been at the very least a curiosity, but we had wandered out of the places that made me clumsy and awkward and maneuvered into a place where I was very sure of myself.

I had seen blood before, more than I cared to admit.

The key to a swollen nose or lip was applying ice to it within the first few minutes, or it would swell at an alarming rate. If your nose and/or mouth swelled past a certain point, then certain people would notice. If those certain people were teachers, then they tended to contact school officials. If school officials found out, they asked a lot of questions. If they asked a lot of questions, other people could end up angry.

And then you get hit again.

I didn’t see any ice, but a cold, wet cloth was a good start. I brought a wet and a dry towel back over to him; he had been watching me upside down as he lay there.

“You’ve done this before,” he said as a fact and not a question.

“Hold still,” I said, sitting down and wiping the blood away. Without the gore, it looked better than I had originally thought—no bruise, no cut skin. Most likely he’d hit his nose just the right way. I cleaned his face completely with the wet washcloth and then put the dry one under his nose. “Hold it tight, it’s still bleeding.”

His hand grabbed mine and held the towel there by holding my hand still. His eyes seemed to sparkle as he looked up at me. “You saved me,” he said, the wry grin evident even muffled by a towel.

“It’s a bloody nose,” I said, enjoying the way his hand felt, grasping mine. “Hardly think I saved you from anything.”

“Hey, this is my moneymaker,” he said, with his free hand making a circular motion around his face.

“You know how much trouble I’d be in if this got hurt?”

Chuckling, I shook my head. “And how much money have you actually made with your moneymaker?”

“It’s a work in progress,” he said, his fingers moving down the length of my hand with a stroke.

I pulled my hand back rapidly, rubbing where he had touched me as if I could dispel the effect his touch had that easily. “Well you’re okay now,” I said, beginning to stand up.

He sat up in a burst, scooting over until his face was level with mine. “I asked about you,” he said, moving his hand away from his nose.

“Why?” I asked in a whisper. It was like looking at a cobra and becoming mesmerized.

“Cause,” he said in the same whisper and leaned forward. “I wanted to know you.”

“You’re bleeding again,” my mouth said abruptly— completely against my will, I assure you.

A trail of blood seeped down his nose and over his lips as he pushed his mouth onto mine.

My eyes closed, and I tasted lust and blood as my tongue moved between his lips. I was shocked to find his moving back into mine. My arm slid around his back, and I could feel the hard muscle just beneath the thin cotton shirt slide up as he leaned in.

“Been wanting to do that all night,” he said, resting his forehead against mine.

“Why?” my mouth asked, my eyes still closed.

I heard the chuckle move through his whole body as he pressed his mouth closer and whispered in my ear. “Because maybe I like you?” he said, his breath warm against my skin.

“Maybe?” I asked, not even aware I was holding my breath.

“Maybe with a strong chance of certainty,” he said, kissing the nape of my neck. “You like me?” he asked, stupidly.

“What do you think?” I asked, smiling like an idiot.

“I think you need to get a bigger history book if you’re gonna sport wood in the hallway from now on,” he said, his tongue moving against the side of my neck for a moment, making me shiver from head to toe.

I could feel myself turning red as I took the compliment. “You noticed that,” I said rather than asked.

“Oh yeah,” he growled more than said as he began to move back up toward my mouth. “You’re not ugly,” he repeated, this time as a solid fact instead of an opinion. We kissed again, the copper taste of his blood reminding me of licking the tip of a battery.

I wanted to say thank you, but my mouth was already full.

I THANKED God for automatic transmissions, because he held my hand all the way home.

We had stopped after hearing his parents’ fighting begin to scale up the stairway with greater and greater intensity. He had scrambled off the bed and fled into the bathroom as I tried to collect my books before they made their way to his door, like a pair of fairy-tale trolls. The voices passed by after a few seconds, but my chest was tight with the same familiar fear I had lived with each night my mother and her boyfriend du jour had fought.

“You ready to go?” he asked, suddenly kneeling next to me. My eyes were wide for a moment before I could regain my composure. I simply nodded and packed my stuff up.

He took my hand out of my lap as soon as we cleared his driveway; his palms were callused from baseball and weights. My fingers traced the rough pads absently as he drove in silence. My hands were soft, disgustingly so compared to his, in my mind. I almost pulled my hand back, but his moved around and began to stroke the same pattern on mine.

“Your hands are so smooth,” he said. I needed a second to realize it was a compliment. His touch felt incredible after what seemed like a lifetime of neglect and solitude. I squeezed his hand back, and his smile widened. He opened his mouth to say something and then closed it again as we continued to drive through the night.

The silence was a wedge forming between us as he turned the corner to my house. I was so stuck in my own private wave of misery that the need to be ashamed of where we lived didn’t even register for once. We lived in a set of rundown apartments in a bad neighborhood on the shady part of town, next to the local welfare tenement, a place where you had a better chance of getting shot than borrowing milk. I wasn’t even aware we were in front of my building until he said, “I never knew anyone who lived over here before.”

Fuck.

“Yeah, sorry about that,” I said, grabbing my backpack off the floorboard. “I can’t imagine your car is safe around here.”

I tried to pull my hand back, but he refused to let it go, stopping me from leaving the car. I looked back, and he said, “I’m not worried about my car.”

And I understood where this was going—had known from the moment we walked out of his house, in fact. “Look, Brad, I don’t expect you to talk to me tomorrow.” He looked over at me,

confused, and I amended my words with, "I know this isn't for real." I looked down at my feet, knowing there was no way I could get through this if I was looking at him. "I mean, you're you and I'm me, and there is no way this is anything but... well, what it is. I don't want you to think I am going to go nuts on you or bug you at school or whatever. I mean I get it, it's cool."

He said nothing, which I took as a silent acceptance, so I continued. "I know how this movie ends. We don't become fast friends on Monday morning and just forget everything that comes before. I'm not going to be a spaz and come up and try to talk to you in the hallway in front of your friends or anything. I'm not that guy." I took a deep breath as I forced myself over the emotions that threatened to get caught in my throat. "So don't worry, you're safe."

He stared at me, unblinking. "Okay."
"I mean it." And I did.

In my mind, I had already thought about liking him, fallen head over heels, been blown off, and then hounded him relentlessly before he finally confronted me, telling me angrily that it never happened and he didn't like me that way. Followed by long weeks of me listening to emo music and crying my eyes out while thinking about killing myself. All in the matter of a seven-minute drive back to my house. "I'm not that type of guy." Even though I was completely that type of guy. More not blinking followed by, "Okay."

"I'm not stupid, you know," I said, fighting back tears. "I know you can't go out with me." And it was true; even if I woke up tomorrow possessing a vagina and breasts, there was no way we could date in any high school know to man. Besides the fact I would make a hideous-looking girl, there was no way a guy like him dated a person like me.

"Okay," he said again, confirming everything I already knew.

"So don't worry, I'm not going to be standing there wishing you'd walk over to my locker and say hi to me tomorrow." I slipped my hand out from under his. "But I'll help you study for the midterm."

A good ten seconds now, and then he sighed; the car was too dark for me to see his face completely, but from what I saw, he didn't look happy. "Thanks."

I clicked open the door. "And you don't have to kiss me for me to do it."

Not waiting for a response, I opened the door and got out as fast as I could. I slammed the car door and practically sprinted for my door like I was a blonde cheerleader being chased by the monster of the week. My key felt like it was purposely dodging the keyhole as the door began to blur from the stinging tears in my eyes.

The door flew open and my mom stood there, her words slurring as she asked, "Where the fuck have you—" And then she saw Brad's car pull off and into the night. "Who do you know that owns a car like that?"

I pushed past her, knowing she would never notice how upset I was in the middle of a date with Jack Daniels. The sound of my door slamming shut was as familiar as an alarm clock was in other houses. I tried not to throw myself on the bed, burying my head in a pillow like a twelve-year-old girl. I tried, but I know I failed pretty badly.

As I arrived at school, I prayed I wouldn't see him. As I arrived at school, I looked everywhere, trying to see him.

I moved quickly to my locker in hopes that I could get to first period without being seen. I meandered toward my locker in hopes he could find me before first period.

This schism continued as I crept farther and farther down the hall. Part of me wanted so badly never to see him again because it would remind me of the fifteen-minute relationship I seemed to have imagined in my mind. The other part of me wanted to see him so much it was all I could think about.

Somehow I had discovered a whole new level of hell. If you had asked me yesterday whether high school could get any worse, I would have bet you everything I had that I had sunk to the lowest I could get. Yet here I was, at a whole new sublevel I had never imagined.

No one talked to me, no one glanced at me, same as yesterday, same as every day I had gone to school. Yet today, being ignored hurt on a frequency so high my self-imposed walls were starting to crack.

I wished that my locker were some kind of Narnian-type structure so I could just climb inside and never be seen again. It wasn't fair to go so long unnoticed, get noticed by what in my mind was the center of the universe, and then metaphorically gnaw my own arm off to avoid being caught in a no-win situation, all within twenty-four hours.

If I had been a baby, concerned parents would have said I had had a long day and needed a nap.

That wasn't wholly true; what I needed I would never get. I slammed my locker door, wishing I could channel all of my pent-up sorrow and frustration into one physical blow, causing the metal door to fly off, ricochet down the hall, and cut nameless people in half, leaving them begging for a quick end to this misery called life.

Because I wanted them to feel just like I did right now.

But because I had not been irradiated with gamma radiation or bitten by a radioactive spider, all the locker did was slam shut without the least bit of fanfare. That just pissed me off even more, and I turned to head toward first period. And I froze in place.

He was standing there, that small grin on his face. He had his backpack on one shoulder, his letterman jacket open to the waist, and his arms were crossed across his chest. He was leaning against the wall, waiting for me to notice him. There was a laughter in his eyes that seemed to look straight through me, bathing me in a warmth that, until that moment, I hadn't realized I missed. I could see the glint of his class ring under the florescent lights that did nothing at all to diminish the radiant quality that seemed to just follow him wherever he went. I felt my mouth go dry as my heart literally skipped a beat.

We stood there for what seemed like an eternity as my mind locked up. I had no idea what to say. I wanted to turn and run. I wanted to throw my arms around him and kiss him. I wanted to melt into the floor and just fade away. I wanted to do all of that and not say anything to shatter the moment. And then he opened his mouth and, with a huge grin, said, "Hi."

I don't remember the moment I knew I was broken... but I do recall the moment when I started to understand it might be okay to be so. It was the moment I fell in love with the boy with the green eyes.

FIRST TIME FOR EVERYTHING



Dreamspinner Press 2011 Daily Dose

Get the whole package at
<http://www.dreamspinnerpress.com>

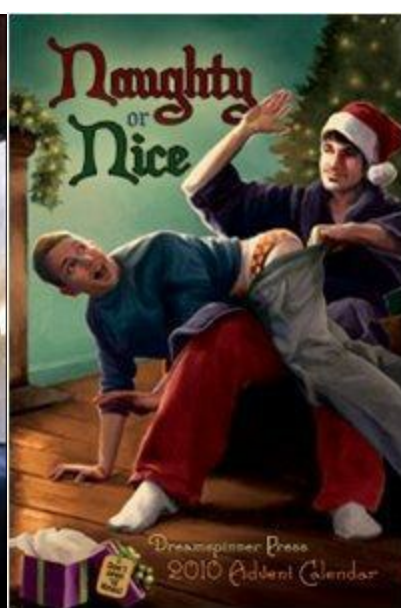
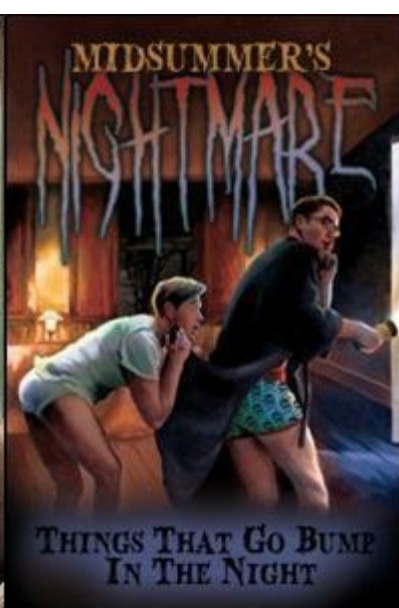
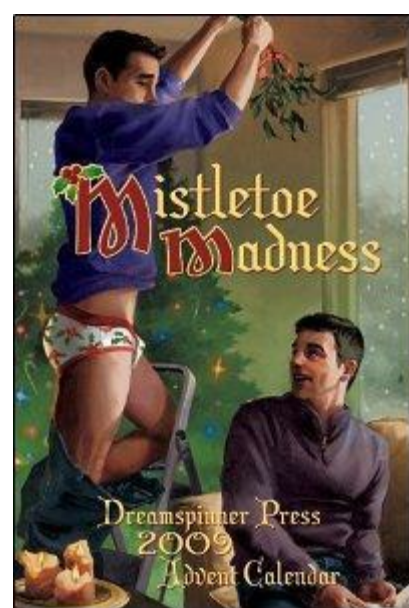
About the Author

JOHN GOODE was found in the back of a garden shed

originally, and lured out by candy, he was raised on Elm Street before moving due to a rare sleep disorder. After taking off with a few friends to find a dead body, he attended Sherman High School majoring in absenteeism. Dropping out of college to work at the Gap, he struggled on perfecting his karaoke version of “Conjunction Junction” before moving on. He worked several odd jobs, first as a clerk at a record store that was open till midnight, moving to garbage collector with his brother, and then he finally decided on being a convenience store clerk who complained a lot that he wasn’t even supposed to be there that particular day. He lives with a talking cartoon dog or cat or three squirrels and has possibly ingested far too much pop culture over the years. Or he is this guy who lives in this place and writes stuff he hopes you read. John discovered M/M erotica when he heard himself describing what he had done the previous night.



More Daily Dose and Advent Calendar packages



<http://www.dreamspinnerpress.com>

Copyright

Maybe With a Chance of Certainty ©Copyright John Goode, 2011

Published by
Dreamspinner Press
4760 Preston Road
Suite 244-149
Frisco, TX 75034
<http://www.dreamspinnerpress.com/>

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the authors' imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Cover Art by Catt Ford

This book is licensed to the original purchaser only. Duplication or distribution via any means is illegal and a violation of International Copyright Law, subject to criminal prosecution and upon conviction, fines, and/or imprisonment. This eBook cannot be legally loaned or given to others. No part of this eBook can be shared or reproduced without the express permission of the Publisher. To request permission and all other inquiries, contact Dreamspinner Press at: 4760 Preston Road, Suite [244-149, Frisco, TX 75034](http://www.dreamspinnerpress.com/) <http://www.dreamspinnerpress.com/>

Released in the United States of America June 2011

eBook Edition

eBook ISBN: 978-1-61372-032-5