



SCHOOLED

#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BEST-SELLING AUTHOR

gordon korman

SCHOOLED

GORDON KORMAN



LITTLE, BROWN AND COMPANY

New York Boston

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Copyright © 2007 by Gordon Korman

Original cover design by Ellice M. Lee, updated by Christian Fuenfhausen.

Cover photo credits: Shutterstock/RedKoala, Joy Brown and Anyunov.

Cover copyright © 2007 by Hachette Book Group, Inc.

Hachette Book Group supports the right to free expression and the value of copyright. The purpose of copyright is to encourage writers and artists to produce the creative works that enrich our culture.

The scanning, uploading, and distribution of this book without permission is a theft of the author's intellectual property. If you would like permission to use material from the book (other than for review purposes), please contact permissions@hbgusa.com. Thank you for your support of the author's rights.

Little, Brown and Company
Hachette Book Group
1290 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10104
Visit us at LBYR.com

Originally published in hardcover by Disney • Hyperion, an imprint of
Disney Book Group, in September 2007
First Trade Paperback Edition: August 2008

Little, Brown and Company is a division of Hachette Book Group, Inc.
The Little, Brown name and logo are trademarks of Hachette Book
Group, Inc.

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are
not owned by the publisher.

Library of Congress Control Number: 2009275921

ISBNs: 978-1-4231-0516-9 (pbk.), 978-1-4231-4122-8 (ebook)

Printed in the United States of America

CW

30 29 28 27 26

1

NAME: **CAPRICORN ANDERSON**

I was thirteen the first time I saw a police officer up close. He was arresting me for driving without a license. At the time, I didn't even know what a license was. I wasn't too clear on what being arrested meant either.

But by then they were loading Rain onto a stretcher to rush her in for X-rays. So I barely noticed the handcuffs the officer slapped on my wrists.

"Who's the owner of this pickup?"

"It belongs to the community," I told him.

He made a note on a ring-bound pad. "What community? Golf club? Condo deal?"

"Garland Farm."

He frowned. "Never heard of that one."

Rain would have been pleased. That was the whole point

of the community—to allow us to escape the money-hungry rat race of modern society. If people didn't know us, they couldn't find us, and we could live our lives in peace.

"It's an alternative farm commune," I explained.

The officer goggled at me. "Alternative—you mean like *hippies*?"

"Rain used to be one, back in the sixties. There were fourteen families at Garland then. Now it's just Rain and me." I tried to edge my way toward the nursing station. "I have to make sure she's okay."

He was unmoved. "Who is this Rain? According to her Social Security card, the patient's name is Rachel Esther Rosenblatt."

"Her name is Rain, and she's my grandmother," I said stiffly. "She fell out of a tree."

He stared at his notes. "What was a sixty-seven-year-old woman doing up a tree?"

"Picking plums," I replied defensively. "She slipped."

"So you drove her here. At thirteen."

"I drive all the time," I informed him. "Rain taught me when I was eight."

Sweat appeared on his upper lip. "And you never thought of just dialing 911?"

I regarded him blankly. "What's nine-one-one?"

"The emergency number! On the telephone!"

I told him the truth. "I've talked on a telephone

a couple of times. In town. But we don't have one."

He looked at me for what seemed like forever. "What's your name, son?"

"Cap. It's short for Capricorn."

He unlocked my handcuffs. I was un-arrested.

How could an able-bodied teenager allow his grandmother to scale a plum tree? Simple. She wasn't my grandmother at the time. She was my teacher.

I was homeschooled. That was the law. Even on a tiny farm like ours, you had to get an education. No school bus could ever make it up the rutted, snaking dirt road that led to Garland. But transportation wasn't the only problem. If we'd been serviced by an eight-lane highway, Rain still would have handled my schooling personally. We wanted to avoid the low standards and cultural poison of a world that had lost its way.

So that's what I was doing when Rain fell—working on a vocabulary lesson. Most of the list came from the state eighth grade curriculum: *barometer*, *decagon*, *perpendicular* . . .

I could always spot the extra words Rain threw in: *non-violence*, *Zen Buddhism*, *psychedelic* . . .

Microprocessor? I frowned at the paper on the unpainted wooden table. Was that Rain or the state? I'd never heard that term before.

I stepped out of the house, careful not to disturb my science project—the Foucault pendulum suspended from the porch roof. The tester from the education department thought it was good enough to enter in the county science fair. Too bad we didn't believe in competition—all that emphasis on trophies and medals, the shiny symbols of an empty soul. Anyway, Rain said the whole thing was a trick to get me to go to regular school.

"If your project is excellent, it only proves that you're getting a superior education right here with me" had been her reasoning.

I spotted her up in the tree, reaching across a limb to pick a plum. "Rain," I called, "there's a word I don't under—"

And it happened. One minute she was on the branch; the next she was on the ground. I don't even recall seeing her fall. Just the faint cry followed by the dull clunk.

"Aaah!" *Whump*.

"Rain!"

She was lying on her side amid the scattered plums when I pounded onto the scene. Her face was very pale. She wasn't moving.

My terror was total. Rain was everything to me—my teacher, my family, my whole universe. Garland was a community, but *we* were the community—the two of us!

I knelt beside her. "Rain—are you okay? Please be okay!"

Her eyes fluttered open and focused on me. She tried to smile, but the pain contorted her expression into a grimace. “Cap—” she began faintly.

I leaped back to my feet. “I’ll get Doc Cafferty!”

Doc Cafferty lived a few miles away. He was technically a veterinarian. But he was used to working on humans, since he had six kids. He’d given me stitches once when I was eight.

She reached up a tremulous hand and gripped my arm. “We need a real doctor this time. A people doctor.”

I stared at her like she was speaking a foreign language. Doc Cafferty had filled all of Garland’s medical needs as long as I could remember.

She spelled it out. “You’re going to have to take me to the hospital.”

Rain always said that anger upsets the balance inside a person. So when you yell at somebody, you’re attacking yourself more than whoever it is you’re yelling at.

Falling out of the tree must have made her forget this. Because when the nurses finally let me in to see her, she was screaming at the doctor at top volume. “*I can’t do eight weeks of rehab! I can’t do eight days!*”

“You’ve got no choice,” the doctor said matter-of-factly. “You have a broken hip. It has to be pinned. After that you’ll need extensive physical therapy. It’s a long

process, and you can't ignore it just because it doesn't fit in with your plans."

"You're not listening!" Rain shrieked. "I'm the caregiver to my grandson! The *only* caregiver!"

"What about the parents?" the doctor asked. "Where are they?"

She shook her head. "Long dead. Malaria. They were with the Peace Corps in Namibia. They gave their lives for what they believed in."

That sounds worse than it is. But I never knew my parents except from old pictures. They left when I was little. Besides, the rule at Garland back then was that we all belonged to each other, and it didn't matter who was related by blood. I have a few vague recollections of other people in the community when I was really young. But whether they were my parents or not, I can't tell. Anyway, it's impossible to miss what you never had.

I rushed to my grandmother's bedside. "Are you okay? Is your leg all fixed up?"

She looked grave. "We've got a problem, Cap. And you know what we do with problems."

"We talk it out, think it out, work it out," I said readily. It had been that way since the very beginning of Garland in 1967, long before I was born. Now that there were only two of us, Rain still gave me a full vote. She never treated me like I was just a kid.

The doctor was growing impatient. "How about cousins? Or maybe a close friend from school?"

"I'm homeschooled," I supplied.

The doctor sighed. "Mrs. Rosenblatt—"

"That name hasn't applied to me for decades. You can call me Rain."

"All right. Rain. I'm admitting you now. We'll operate in the morning. And I'll call social services to see what arrangements can be made for your grandson."

That was when I started to worry about what was going to happen to me.

2

NAME: **MRS. DONNELLY**

The instant I saw him standing there with all that hair and all those beads, I just knew.

Garland Farm. It had to be. Nobody else looked like that. Nobody *had* looked like that since 1970. Except at Garland.

He seemed terrified, and with good reason. No one knew what lay ahead for him better than I did.

I held out my hand. "I'm Mrs. Donnelly."

He made no move to take it. "Capricorn."

Capricorn. Wasn't that just classic? My own name, Flora, was short for Floramundi—a world of flowers.

I'd been out of that place more than thirty years, but one sight of this kid, and it all came roaring back in a tsunami of Day-Glo ponchos and organic lentils.

I was five when my family joined the community—too young to remember any life before that. For six long years, that place was my universe. I ran around barefoot, wearing peasant dresses, shared my parents with the other kids, protested the Vietnam War, did farm chores, and listened to a whole lot of sitar music.

So help me, I didn't know how weird it all was until my parents decided they were too old to be hippies anymore, and we rejoined the real world. That part I remember like it was yesterday—this little flower child, who barely knew how a doorknob worked, suddenly dropped in the middle of a society several centuries ahead of the one she'd just left.

I looked at Capricorn Anderson, and that's what I saw—not a case, but a time traveler, about to step into a world that had forgotten the sixties except for J.F.K. and the Beatles.

In my right hand was a piece of paper with the address of the foster home the Department of Child Services had assigned for this boy. I crumpled it up and tossed it into the nearest trash can.

"Well, Capricorn, it looks like you're going to be staying at my house for a few weeks."

"Absolutely not!" he exclaimed. "I have to get back to the community. The plums aren't in yet. And after that the apples. Everything has to be ready for when Rain comes home."

I remembered Rain. She was one of the founders of Garland, the queen bee of the place when I lived there. I was always afraid of her. I thought she was a witch.

“Wait a minute—” I put two and two together. “Rachel Esther Rosenblatt is *Rain*? Your grandmother?”

He brightened. “You know her?”

That’s when I figured out the key to Capricorn’s heart, so I could do what needed to be done for his own good.

“I used to. Way back before you were born, my family lived at Garland. Rain would want you to be with someone who understands.”

I had a reluctant houseguest.

3

NAME: ZACH POWERS

I high-fived my way off the school bus, slapping hands on both sides of the aisle.

“Hey, Zach!”

“How’s it going, man?”

I jumped down to the tarmac of the school’s driveway. It was a beautiful September day. This was my time—eighth grade, captain of the football and soccer teams, Big Man on Campus. After two years of looking up to other people, I’d finally made it to the point where there was nobody to look up to but me.

Everything was perfect.

I frowned. Well, not quite perfect. I noticed that the sign on the front lawn read:

WELCOME TO CLAVERAGE MIDDLE SCHOOL

They'd fixed it again. Unacceptable.

I did a quick scan to confirm there were no teachers looking on. Mr. Sorenson's eyes were on the buses, so his back was turned. I reached up and snatched off a letter. The sign now read:

WELCOME TO C AVERAGE MIDDLE SCHOOL

Much better. I stuffed the *L* behind the bushes and walked on, enjoying the admiration of some seventh grade girls. It was a dangerous job, but somebody had to do it. At C Average Middle School, the buck stopped with me.

Not that I was nobody last year. I was still probably the most happening seventh grader in the place. But it isn't really your school until you're a senior. I wasn't going to drop the ball on any of it.

For example, the election for eighth grade president was coming up. Not that I was running myself. God forbid. The tradition at C Average was to nominate the biggest loser in the building. No one runs against him, of course, and he wins automatically. Then, for the rest of the year, you get the pleasure of watching President Bonehead giving speeches, running assemblies, and making a complete idiot out of himself.

It's top-notch entertainment—*if* you nail exactly the right guy.

I was pretty sure I had the front-runner all picked out. Ever since kindergarten, the primo nerd, bar none, had been Hugh Winkleman. Over the years, the doofus had been on the receiving end of so many wedgies that he had elastic waistband material fused to the top of his head—pardon the exaggeration.

In a million years, there could not have been anyone more perfect for this job than Hugh. Or so I thought.

I was on my way to homeroom when Mr. Kasigi, the assistant principal, flagged me down. Standing beside him was the strangest-looking kid I'd ever seen. He was tall and skinny as a rake. I swear he'd never been anywhere near a barbershop in his life. His long blond flyaway hair stretched all the way down to the middle of his back. His clothes looked like pajamas—*homemade* pajamas. And his shoes were something out of a social studies project on the pioneer days. They were sandals woven out of corn-husks, and rustled when he moved.

Kasigi introduced us. "Zachary Powers, meet Capricorn Anderson. Cap just transferred here."

Yeah, from the planet Krypton.

"Show him to locker 743 and make sure he gets to homeroom." He rushed off in the direction of the office.

The weirdest thing about Capricorn Anderson was this: *he* was looking at *me* like *I* was the freak. Like he'd never seen another kid before!

"Come on, Cap. Follow me."

We walked down the hall, picking up more than our fair share of attention.

"New kid," I said aloud, just in case anybody thought he was actually *with* me. "Kasigi asked me to show him around."

Locker 743. "Here it is," I told him. "You've got the combo, right?"

He just stared at me blankly.

"The combination," I prompted. "There—printed on top of your orientation form."

"But what does it mean?"

I would have sworn he was putting me on, except he looked so bewildered.

"Here—I'll show you. Seventeen . . . thirty-three . . . five." There was a click, and the door swung wide.

He peered in as if he expected to find a mountain lion lying in wait. "It's empty."

He was beginning to rile me. "Of course it's empty. It's *your* locker. It's empty until you put something in it."

"What do *I* have to put in there?" he demanded.

"How should I know? It's *your* stuff."

"When we lock things away," he said with conviction, "we're really imprisoning ourselves."

Now, that was definitely something you didn't hear every day. "What school did you go to before this?"

“I’m homeschooled,” he informed me. “I’m only here because Rain broke her hip, and they won’t let me live alone at the community.”

Hugh Winkleman, you’re a lucky man. With the arrival of this new kid, all the losers in school were bumped down one space. Never before had anyone screamed for the job of eighth grade president like Capricorn Anderson.

This was my year!

4

NAME: **CAPRICORN ANDERSON**

“What are you looking at, jerkface?”

“What are *you* looking at, buttwipe?”

The first boy swung his book bag around and slammed it into the side of the other’s head. *He* responded by punching the first boy in the nose, and soon the two were rolling on the grass, grunting and raining blows on one another.

I was horrified. I’d read about physical violence, but this was the first time I’d witnessed it in real life. It was sudden and lightning fast. Wild, vicious, ugly.

In seconds, a ring of spectators formed around the brawlers. Their gleeful chant echoed all around the schoolyard.

“Fight! Fight! Fight! Fight! . . .”

"Break it up!" A teacher burst into the circle, a brawny man with a whistle around his neck. He squeezed himself between the combatants and pushed them apart. "All right, who started it?"

"He did!" the two chorused, each pointing at his opponent.

The teacher gazed around at the spectators. "Any witnesses?" Nobody said a word. "Come on, who saw what happened?"

"I did," I volunteered.

"Well?"

"Buttwipe wanted to know what jerkface was looking at, and jerkface wanted to know what buttwipe was looking at." I turned earnest eyes on the bloody and dirt-smeared brawlers. "You were barely three inches apart. Couldn't you see you were both looking at each other?"

The teacher reddened. "Who do you think you are, Jerry Seinfeld?"

"You must have me confused with another student," I told him. "My name is Capricorn Anderson."

"Are you talking back to me?"

I hesitated. The whistle-teacher had asked me a question, and I'd answered by talking. "Yes?" I ventured uncertainly.

By the time he was finished yelling, both fighters had

boarded their buses and gone home. *I* was the one who got sent to Mr. Kasigi's office.

I was waiting on the bench when Mrs. Donnelly appeared.

I leaped up. "Is Rain going to be okay?"

"That's why I'm here. Let's take a ride over there and find out." Her brow furrowed. "What are you doing in the hot seat?"

"I have a smart mouth," I replied honestly. "It's against the rules."

She began leading me down the hall. "Come on, we've got a long drive. I'll straighten everything out with Mr. Kasigi."

It took more than an hour to get to the hospital, but it was worth it. Good news—Rain's operation was a success.

"So we can go back home?" I asked anxiously.

Rain smiled sadly. "The doctor was right. This is going to be a long recovery. And because it's only the two of us at Garland, they're not going to release me early." She held my hand. "I know you're upset, but we're just going to have to be strong."

"I don't like it out there," I complained. "It's too crowded. People dress funny; they talk too fast; and all they're interested in is *things*! Cell phones and iPods and Game Boys and Starbucks. What's a starbuck?"

She looked upset, and older than I'd ever seen her before. "I want you to listen to me, Cap, and try not to blame me."

"Blame you?"

"I believe in the community," she began, "and I believe in the life we've built together. But I was fooling myself to think that you were still so young that you wouldn't have to learn about the world outside ours. It's not a nice place, and I didn't want you tossed into it without a little more preparation."

I'd read about depression, but this was the first time I'd actually felt it. It was like a stone pressing down on my chest. I couldn't lift it off because I didn't have the strength.

"I'm kind of scared, Rain."

"Well, don't be," she said firmly. "All you have to do is focus on who you are and what your values mean to you. You've passed every state test—always in the top five percent. You're as smart and capable as anybody—more than most."

"What I saw in school today wasn't on any test," I observed grimly.

She gave me a sympathetic smile. "True, information isn't the same as experience. You know what television is, but you've never watched it. You know what pizza is, but you've never tasted any. You know about friendships, but you've never had a friend."

"*You're* my friend."

"Of course I am," she agreed. "But I'm not exactly a teenager."

"I'm already finished with other teenagers. I've been in real school for one day, and that's plenty. People are constantly screaming at each other. Two boys actually resorted to physical violence! I thought violence only happened in crimes and wars, but this was over—" I shrugged helplessly. "I can't even explain it."

"You have to feel sorry for them," Rain said with a sigh. "Nonviolence isn't something everyone understands."

"They've got these things called lockers," I raved on. "The halls are lined with them. And you won't believe what they're for! They're for locking stuff away—so other people won't steal it! Why can't everybody just share?"

Rain must have agreed with me, because she looked really worried.

I poured it on thick. "They don't have regular time at school, you know. They have *periods*. All of a sudden an alarm goes off and you're supposed to drop what you're doing and rush off to a different room with a different teacher to do something completely different! How can anybody learn like that?"

There was a knock at the door, and Mrs. Donnelly poked her head into the room. She lived at Garland for a while when she was a kid, so she understood how

great it was and how much I wanted to get back there.

“Hello, Rain. How are you feeling?”

“It’s been a long time, Floramundi.” Rain looked her up and down. “It’s wonderful to see that you’ve done well since your family abandoned the lifestyle and value system they believed in.”

They talked about her parents and a few other people. Some of the names were familiar, but I didn’t remember anybody. The days of Garland as a thriving commune were over long before I was born in 1994.

It was a friendly conversation, but every time Rain called her Floramundi, Mrs. Donnelly got kind of tense. Maybe that was because her family left Garland, so she couldn’t live there anymore. I knew how that felt.

Anyway, we were soon on our way home—her home, not mine, unfortunately.

Her house was pretty nice, except it had too many stairs. There didn’t seem to be any more purpose for them than there had been for the fight at school earlier in the day. The living room was a few steps down; the bedrooms were a few steps up; and the kitchen was in the middle. Mrs. Donnelly called it a split-level. But what was the point of splitting a house when you could just make it flat and not have any stairs at all?

Everything was more complicated in the world outside the community. The buildings at Garland were made of

wood, period. Here there was wood in some places, but also brick, stone, and aluminum. Inside, there was carpet and tile, white walls and other colors, and hundreds of pictures, curtains, tassels, clocks, figurines, and a million different things that might have been useful, but might have been just for decoration too. Who could tell? It seemed like an awful lot of stuff for just one house.

Mrs. Donnelly lived here with her daughter, Sophie. And, of course, me, now.

Sophie was sixteen. She went to the high school. *I* didn't much like it that I had to be here. Multiply that by fifty, and that's how much Sophie didn't like it that I had to be here.

"Mother—are you on drugs? How could you bring that—that *freakazoid* into our house?"

"Shhh—Sophie. He'll hear you."

"I want him to hear me!" Sophie shrieked. "How else is he going to get the message to clear out?"

"He has nowhere else to go," Mrs. Donnelly pleaded.

"And that's *my* problem? Just because he comes from the same hippie-dippie flea circus where you grew up doesn't mean we have to adopt him!"

"Lower your voice," her mother ordered sternly. "It's only for six weeks—two months at the outside."

"Two *months*? I have to live my life! Do you know how long it took me to get Josh Weintraub to ask me out?"

What's he going to think when he drives up and sees this tie-dyed streak of misery draped across the porch?"

This whole conversation went on before either of us had spoken a single word to the other. I didn't actually talk to Sophie until later that night when I accidentally blundered into her room. She was in her pajamas, speaking on the phone while smearing pale green cream all over her face.

She threw down the handset. "You. Out. *Now*."

I stood frozen, staring at her. "What—what's on your face?"

"Oh, right, you've never heard of moisturizer. You were just looking for an excuse to come busting into my room!"

I was mystified. "What are you moisturizing?"

She stamped a slippered foot. "My skin, genius! It's a beauty product, okay? Scram!"

I backed out into the hallway. She slammed the door with such force I'm amazed the wall didn't crumble. The one at Garland probably would have.

There I stood, still facing her door, paralyzed with discovery. Beauty. That was precisely the word that had been haunting me. Sophie Donnelly was beautiful. I had seen beautiful girls on book jackets, and even noticed some from a distance when Rain and I had gone into town for supplies. But this was the first time I'd ever really met one.

I never could have imagined how strong the effect would be. Just standing near her—even when she was yelling at me—made me feel . . . nice.

It sure was a strange and complex world outside Garland.

5

NAME: **HUGH WINKLEMAN**

Adults are always trying to figure out what makes kids tick. They send professors into middle schools to do research and run tests; they publish thousand-page studies.

Know what? They don't have a clue.

If you want to understand middle school students, there's only one way to do it: follow the wedgies. Wedgie-givers and wedgie-receivers. Take it from someone who's been down that road before.

Sad to say, I'm one of the receivers. Zach Powers, Lena Young, and their crowd ride roughshod over a lot of people. But if statistics were taken, I'd be victim number one.

Until Capricorn Anderson showed up.

Even *I* could pick on a guy like that. Not that I'd ever do such a thing. I'd never lower myself to the

level of those nitwits. But what a kid.

He wasn't nerdy in a typical way. He wasn't a computer geek or captain of the chess club (that was me). He couldn't speak Klingon; in fact, he'd never even heard of *Star Trek*. But just one peek at the guy and you knew that, dweebwise, there was a new sheriff in town.

A lot of eyes were on him as he sat down in the cafeteria. God, it felt good to have them staring at someone else for a change. I walked over to him. A guy like this was going to need all the friends he could get (one).

"Capricorn, right?" I set my tray down across from him. "I'm Hugh—from social studies class." I stuck my hand out, but he just stared at it. It wasn't a snub. Believe me, I could teach a college course on snubs. This was cluelessness. He honestly didn't know what to do.

"I remember you," he said finally. "There are so many people here. It's hard to keep track."

"I can help you with that." I pointed to the table where Zach and Lena were holding court. "That crowd thinks they own the place. They think that because they do. Stay away from them. They'll chop you up and press you into salami. Now, anyone you see hanging around their crew falls into one of two subgroups—the jocks and the wannabes. Stay away from both. And you definitely don't want anything to do with goths, burnouts, skateboarders, hip-hop kids, environmentalists, or anybody who has a

baseball cap on backward." I took note of the blank expression on his face. "You know, standard survival skills. I'm sure it was similar at your old school."

"I was homeschooled before this."

"No kidding." I'd heard of that, but I'd never met anybody who did it. "What's it like?"

"Wonderful," he said wanly.

"I'll bet!" My enthusiasm was genuine. "It must be nice to wake up in the morning and not have to worry about walking into a hostile environment, with your next wedgie a matter of not *if* but *when*."

"What's a wedgie?"

Wow. Homeschooling must be heaven! I didn't answer the question. He'd find out soon enough.

My eyes fell on Cap's lunch, which consisted of salad, carrot sticks, and two slices of whole wheat bread. He must have noticed, because he was looking just as curiously at my hamburger.

"What part of the animal does that meat come from?"

"I don't know." I chewed thoughtfully. "The lips, probably. Want a bite?"

"I'm a vegetarian."

At that moment, I heard an all-too-familiar *thpoot* coming from behind us. Maybe one kid in a thousand would have recognized the sound. But I'm that kid. It was an incoming spitball.

I tensed, waiting for impact. But it wasn't aimed at me. Instead, I watched the tiny projectile land and lodge itself amid Cap's cascading piles of long hair. He didn't even feel it. Hermits could hole up in all that hair, and no two would ever meet.

At Zach's table, a celebration was going on, with lots of backslapping and high fives. Darryl Pennyfield, Zach's football buddy and co-Neanderthal, was horsing around. Deadeye, I called him, but never to his face. When his face was too close, mine was usually being stuffed into a locker. Then I caught sight of the straw in Naomi Erlanger's hand. I guess Cap's mop was an irresistible target for amateur spitballers, not just the professionals.

The PA system came to life with the voice of Mr. Kasigi. "Just a reminder—the election for eighth grade president will be held on Tuesday, September twenty-sixth. The position is open to all eighth graders. So far, only one name has been placed in nomination—Capricorn Anderson. Thank you."

I was blown away. "You're running for president? In your first week here?"

Cap scanned the ceiling. "Who *is* that? If he wants to talk to us, why doesn't he just come into the room?"

"But why is he talking about *you*?" I persisted. "*Are* you running for president?"

"Of course not. I don't believe in government. I come from an autonomous collective."

"But Mr. Kasigi said—" And suddenly, I just knew.

The triumphant grins on the smug faces of Zach and company told the whole story. Cap hadn't placed his name in nomination. Zach had done it for him. I'd heard something about this last year. The eighth graders had picked this computer genius, Luke Simard, and got him elected president just so they could make fun of him. By the end of the year, the poor kid was so crazy that he skipped graduation and applied to an alternative high school so he wouldn't have to face four more years with the people who'd made his life so miserable.

Now we were the eighth graders, and it was our turn to do the same thing. Only, instead of picking the smartest guy in school, Zach had zeroed in on somebody who didn't even seem to know what a PA system was.

I opened my mouth to issue the warning. The words were forming on my tongue: *Cap—get over to the office this minute and take yourself out of nomination! Do it now, before it's too late—*

And then it hit me. If Cap Anderson had never been born, the name announced to the whole school would have been mine. My strange and hairy new friend was the only thing preventing me from being the next Luke Simard.

I shut my mouth and kept it shut, trying to keep my eyes off the spitball still lodged just above Cap's left ear. I felt bad about it, but I felt something else too:

Better him than me.

6

NAME: **NAOMI ERLANGER**

The time was coming. I could almost smell it.

One day Zach Powers was going to be my boyfriend. Sure, he was sniffing around Lena—everybody knew that. But sooner or later he'd see that she lacked the depth and sincerity of yours truly, and that, besides, she had the hots for Darryl, or maybe Grant Tubman, if only he'd get rid of that ridiculous tongue stud that looked like a pimple. Enough said—especially about Lena, who was my best friend.

It was tough to compete with Lena, who was so naturally pretty and had a very strong personality. To be honest, she was kind of a bulldozer when it came to getting what she wanted, but I don't say that in a mean way. People did what she told them to because they liked

her—not just because she'd make their lives miserable if they didn't. And since I was more shy than Lena, and not quite so willing to squeeze into size-zero jeans and apply makeup with a snow blower, I had to try a little harder to get Zach's attention.

Who would have thought that the equalizer would turn out to be the biggest dweeb in school? No, not Hugh Winkleman. Capricorn Anderson.

The minute I shot that spitball in the cafeteria, I could feel Zach noticing me. He said, "Nice trajectory," and he asked if he could finish my Tater Tots. I knew it was the turning point in our relationship. The road to Zach went straight through the new hippie kid.

Example: Zach wanted to make Cap eighth grade president. Sure, the rest of us had our hearts set on Winkleman, but I quickly volunteered to work on Cap's election campaign. Not that anybody was running against him, but we still had to make it look real so Mr. Kasigi wouldn't get suspicious.

We made posters. My favorite was: CAPRICORN ANDERSON—THE PEOPLE'S CHOICE, because while I was painting it, Zach said, "It doesn't have to be perfect, Naomi. It's not like anybody's going to have to vote for him." And while he was talking, his hand brushed my hand.

Lena was a little suspicious when I told her we didn't

need any help with the election. You definitely didn't want to get on her bad side. But by the time Zach and I started going out, she'd probably be hot and heavy with Darryl (or Grant Tubman, minus the tongue stud). So I was safe.

Zach was so cool. It was almost like watching the plan beamed straight from his brain onto the screen of a blockbuster movie. We put up the posters, scared off two dummies who wanted to run for the job, and presto! Capricorn Anderson was elected eighth grade president, unopposed.

"The best part is the doofus has no idea what just happened to him," Zach chortled.

"Who knows what's going on under all that hair?" snorted Lena.

I personally got the impression that Cap thought all new students had to go through this. Like being president was part of registering and choosing electives. But I kept my mouth shut and laughed along with the others. Zach had a great smile.

When they made the announcement at the all-school assembly, Zach and Darryl hoisted the new president up on their shoulders and marched him onto the stage. He'd been around C Average for a couple of weeks, and people knew his name from our posters and had seen him in the halls. But this was the first time the entire student body made the connection. Eleven hundred kids took in the

sight of a genuine middle school hippie—this tall, skinny, longhaired boy in tie-dye, toes poking out of those home-made sandals. He looked so silly, so goofy, so *weird* that he was almost cute. Not attractive, but adorable in the sense that you can't help pitying him—like a wet puppy rolled in sand.

Zach started shouting, "Speech! Speech!" and some other people took up the cry.

Mr. Kasigi handed over the microphone, and we all quieted down to listen to what Cap had to say.

He stared at us for a long time, until I was almost wondering if Zach had chosen someone who was so nerdy he was *too* perfect for the job.

Then he announced, "I shouldn't be president."

"*Why not?*" Darryl heckled.

Cap struggled with that one. But when he finally spoke, his answer was as bizarre as his appearance: "I—I don't know anybody's name."

Like the president had to be able to rattle off the names of all eleven hundred of his constituents or else he wasn't qualified. Peals of laughter rolled through the gym. Even the sixth graders could see how dopey that was.

I felt proud and exhilarated. I felt like the woman that's behind every great man—the one behind Zach, I mean. "That was fantastic!" I congratulated him when the assembly was over.

He grabbed me by the arm and began towing me to the front. "We're not done yet."

"Where are we going?"

His oh-so-blue eyes gleamed. "If the hairball thinks it's his duty to learn eleven hundred names, who are we to burst his bubble by telling him he doesn't have to?"

"You mean—?"

I didn't get a chance to finish the thought, because he was already flagging down a very dazed eighth grade president. Poor Cap! I honestly felt sorry for him. Freshly inaugurated to an office he never ran for—well, what would you be thinking? He just wanted to get out of there and be left alone.

"Remember me, Cap? I'm Zach and this is Naomi," Zach greeted him. "Now you know us. It's only a matter of time before you get the chance to meet everyone else in the school."

Cap's haunted eyes took in the sight of the entire student body, more than a thousand strong, streaming through the gym exits. If it hadn't been so funny—if Zach's eyes hadn't been almost turquoise—I would have confessed that the whole thing was a gag.

"I'm not good at remembering names," he told us. "I don't know a lot of people."

"We're sure you can do it," I assured him.

"One," he persisted.

“One what?”

“One person. I *see* other people—when we’re in town for supplies. But Rain does all the talking.”

“Rain?” I queried.

“My grandmother. She’s the person I know.”

That was the thing about Cap that I would never dare say to Zach. I could never escape the suspicion that *he* was putting us on even more than *we* were putting *him* on. But if that was the case, he had to be the greatest actor on the face of the earth. Because he didn’t crack a smile. Not for a millisecond.

Zach pressed on with his plan, and I pressed on with mine. We put a suggestion box in the guidance office, for students to bring their concerns to the president’s attention. Cap never suspected that the entries were all fake, and that we were writing them in the equipment room after Zach was done with football practice.

We spent too much time laughing for any serious romance to develop, but it was fun. We were convulsed with hysterics at the thought of our hippie asking Mr. Kasigi to convert the water fountains to Gatorade, and to erect a bullfighting stadium in the parking lot.

Surprisingly, Mr. Kasigi seemed to be kind of going along with the gag. It was one thing for him to keep out of student matters, like he did last year with that Simard kid.

But when someone asks you for a bullfighting ring in an American public school, you have to know you're being pranked. Mind you, when you've just heard that same kid express the belief that a president has to know every student's name, you can never be one hundred percent sure.

Whatever the reason, our assistant principal never took Cap aside and explained to him that someone was yanking his chain.

And we really yanked. Zach told him that he had to hold weekly press briefings for reporters from the school newspaper. The reporters? Us. We didn't work for the paper, but how was Cap going to know that?

"What about the real newspaper staff?" I asked uncertainly.

"They're not invited," Zach said decisively. "Those dweebs should be happy we didn't make any of *them* president."

The first of these conferences was held in a room that didn't exist. Cap wandered the halls like a lost soul in search of the fictional geography lab. Zach planted students out there to give him bogus directions: "Make a left at the music room, down the stairs, through the double doors, then two rights and a hard left at the furnace. . . ."

We rescheduled for Friday, after telling him how disappointed we were that he'd stood us up. He apologized and promised to do better.

This briefing was held in room 226, which did exist but was locked. While he wrestled with the doorknob, Zach sent the football cheerleaders to form their human pyramid right beside him. They chanted: "*Cap, Cap, he's our man! If he can't open it, nobody can!*"

To tell the truth, I wasn't super-high on this idea, since Lena was not only a cheerleader but also the apex of the pyramid. It was impossible to compete with anyone in a cheerleading outfit, especially at our school. Over the summer, the basement got flooded and the uniforms all shrank.

I felt better when the real press briefings began. Lena traded her pom-poms for a reporter's notebook, and we all spoke up for the people's right to know.

"Cap, what are you going to do about the terrible state of cafeteria food?"

"Cap, the boys' locker room is a cesspool! What are your plans to improve it?"

"Cap, have you thought about air-conditioning the school buses in light of global warming?"

"I don't have the answers to any of those things," was his grave reply. "Maybe you picked the wrong person to be president."

Which only proved that we'd picked exactly the *right* person to be president.

Now that Lena was back in the plan, I had to come up

with something good, in order to stand out in Zach's eyes. I invented a secret admirer for Cap named Lorelei Lumley, a seventh grade student-government groupie, who slipped perfumed love notes through the vents of his locker.

"These are perfect," Zach enthused. I could tell that he hadn't overlooked the bright-red lip imprint that I had kissed onto every piece of stationery.

Zach had Cap's combination, so we made it our mission to see that he never opened the door without finding something bizarre and/or gross. It became my favorite part of every day—pressed against Zach in the drinking fountain alcove, waiting to see what Cap would pull out of there next—a rotten banana with a greasy black peel, a goat's brain from the science lab, a Ziploc Baggie of Pepto-Bismol, a dead bird.

Cap didn't react very much to any of these things, except the bird. We watched, amazed, as he wrapped the small body in a paper towel and marched it straight out the door. He got as far as the flower bed. There he knelt and began scrabbling with one hand in the soft dirt.

Zach peered through the floor-to-ceiling window. "What's he doing? Digging worms?"

"That's not it," I said in a tremulous voice. "He's burying the bird."

Zach was mystified. "Why?"

Cap placed the shrouded little corpse into the hole and covered it tenderly with earth. Then he plucked a couple of daisies and placed them across the tiny grave. He stood up, removed his psychedelic headband from that haystack of hair, and bowed solemnly.

The smart move definitely would have been to hang back with Zach and make fun of the performance. But something came over me—I still can't explain it. I walked out and stood beside Cap. I wasn't a bird lover. I didn't know a canary from a condor. But the look of sympathy on the hippie's face was so honest, so pure, that it planted the emotions inside my heart. Suddenly, I had to pay my respects to this innocent creature, cut down in the prime of life.

It wasn't much of a funeral. We stood there like junior undertakers while the wind turned Cap's unbound hair into a reasonable facsimile of a rain forest.

"Death is a part of life," he said simply. "This is just another part of your journey. Fly well."

I noticed that quite a few kids were looking on—trying to figure out if we'd gone crazy, probably. One seventh grader took off his baseball hat in reverence. I caught a disapproving look from Zach on the other side of the window, and silently cursed myself for making a mistake Lena never would have made. Yet it seemed so *right*, and I couldn't be sorry for that.

When Zach became my boyfriend, I hoped I could make him as sensitive as Capricorn Anderson.

Afterward, some of the spectators went up to Cap to say a few quiet words. He asked all of them their names.

7

NAME: **MRS. DONNELLY**

As Cap's caseworker, part of my job was to check in with the school from time to time to make sure he was doing well. That's how I wound up having lunch with Frank Kasigi, assistant principal at Claverage Middle School.

"Oh, don't worry about Cap from an academic standpoint," he assured me. "He's right up there with our brightest and best. Commune or no, he's been very well educated by someone."

I thought of Rain and shuddered, even after all these years. She had always been the teacher at Garland. For someone who rejected all forms of authority, she was a major tyrant in the classroom. If she hadn't adopted the hippie lifestyle, she would have made a terrific Marine drill sergeant.

Then Mr. Kasigi let the other shoe drop. "Yet socially—in my entire teaching career, I've never met a student who knows so little about ordinary everyday living. Have you worked with any other students from this Garland Farm?"

"Only one," I replied faintly. "She had a very difficult adjustment." I didn't bother to mention that "she" was me.

"Adjustment is one thing. But Cap is like a space traveler who just landed on Earth and left his guidebook on the home world! Is it possible that he honestly believes bullfighting is a sport we play in middle school?"

"*Bullfighting?*" I repeated. "How did that subject come up?"

His reply posed far more questions than it answered: apparently, Cap had asked about it as part of his duties as eighth grade president.

Eighth grade president? How could a brand-new student, who didn't know a soul in the place, get himself elected president?

It made no sense to me. But later on, my sixteen-year-old daughter acted like it was the most obvious thing in the world.

"Duh—eighth grade president isn't an honor, Mother. It's like being elected village idiot. Every year they pick the biggest wing nut in the building. It must have seemed

like the freakazoid dropped straight from heaven to fill the post."

I was horrified. "Sophie—that's awful!"

She shrugged. "What's really awful is that you're a social worker—with power over kids' lives—and you have no clue about what's common knowledge at that school."

"Did this happen when you were in eighth grade?"

"Remember Caitlin Tortolo? She didn't really win a semester in Europe. She left school early to have a nervous breakdown."

"And you participated in it?"

"Everybody did," she retorted. "At least, we did nothing to stop it. If you don't go along with the gag, you're next." I must have looked disapproving, because she added, "Grow up, Mother. The world's a big, tough, scary place—like you don't know that."

Actually, I *did* know that. I didn't realize *she* knew it.

I felt terrible for poor Cap. It was hard enough for him to come out of total isolation at Garland without having to be dropped into the snake pit that was middle school. Worse, I couldn't even warn him about it—not without poisoning his one-and-only experience of the real world.

My sole consolation lay in the fact that he would have to suffer this abuse only for a few weeks more. His grandmother was recovering well. I'm sure he would have liked

to visit her more often. But the facility was an hour away, more with traffic, and there just wasn't time to take him during the week.

Anyway, deep in my heart I believed that a genuine school, nasty and merciless as it could be, was still better than Garland Farm.

Besides, nastiness was relative. After school, Cap had to come home to my house, where Sophie was there to demonstrate the true meaning of nasty. She hated Cap Anderson with a passion that I wouldn't have believed her capable of—and I was her mother.

Even when he did things that had nothing to do with Sophie, she took them personally. His healthy vegetarian diet she considered a slap in the face to her own eating habits. His neatness was a deliberate ploy to make her appear messy. She couldn't bear that Cap woke up early to practice tai chi on our front lawn.

"But, Sophie," I tried to reason, "why would it matter to you? You're barely awake at that hour."

"It's humiliating!" she raged. "We might as well put a sign on the roof that says 'Warning: Mutant on Premises!'"

The next morning, when Cap was performing the dancelike martial arts moves by the dogwood bushes, my darling daughter emptied an entire wastebasket full of water down on his head. This she followed with a string of language that would have set fire to the sidewalk. All

from the girl who was so concerned about what the neighbors might think.

He looked up at her and he smiled—instead of heaving a rock through her window, which is what I would have done. Oh, what a sight he was, with all that hair hanging limply around his shoulders. He looked like a weeping willow in soggy sandals.

According to Sophie, the entire incident was my fault. By bringing Cap into our home, I had left her no choice but to take matters into her own hands.

Since Sophie was never going to apologize to Cap, I did it myself.

"I'm so sorry, dear," I said, handing him a towel that wouldn't have dried one tenth of his abundant hair. "You have to forgive Sophie, although I can't think of a reason why."

He looked sad. "She doesn't like me."

I smiled. "Sixteen-year-old girls don't like anybody."

His answer brought me straight back to my Garland days. "When you're unkind to others, it's usually because you don't believe that you, yourself, deserve kindness."

"Don't be so nice," I said. "She can be pretty mean. In her defense, she's been through a lot in the last couple of weeks. Her father—my ex-husband—his heart's in the right place, but he makes a lot of promises he can't keep. And Sophie ends up caught in the middle. Just yesterday,

she was waiting for him to pick her up for her first driving lesson. He never showed. That's him—doesn't come, doesn't call, dead air. She won't admit it, but she's devastated."

He looked thoughtful. "I guess when you have a lot of people in your life, there's more of a chance that someone will let you down."

I laughed. "You're right. But it's a risk most of us are prepared to take."

Cap looked dubious. He had grown up with exactly one person in his life—Rain. And regardless of what I thought of her, to him she had been as constant as the rising sun.

How terrifying must it be to lose that?

8

NAME: **CAPRICORN ANDERSON**

I really missed Rain.

My whole life, whenever I got confused, there she'd be to explain it all to me. One time I remember, we were in Rutherford, laying in a supply of tofu. We grew our own fruits and vegetables at Garland, but everything else had to be brought in from outside. Then we stopped at the hardware store to stock up on duct tape, which was just about the most useful thing on earth for a farm commune. It repaired roofs, walls, pipes, cars, furniture, and boots. At least a quarter of Garland was held together with the stuff. It made an instant cast for a broken finger, and even pulled splinters out of your skin. Before I was born, when there were lots of young children growing up in the community, all those diapers used to be fastened by squares of duct tape.

But when we got to the store, there was a group of people blocking the entrance. They were carrying signs and chanting. They seemed to be really angry about something.

Rain explained that the employees were on strike, standing up for fair treatment. She thought it was an excellent idea. She refused to cross the picket line, so we drove twenty miles out of our way to buy our duct tape. We came back, though, and marched with the strikers for a couple of hours. Rain even let me unscrew the knobs to let the air out of the tires of the boss's car.

Rain said the trip was the purest form of education—learning by doing. I sure could have used that kind of wisdom now, with so much going on in my life and so many things I didn't understand.

Like bullfighting. I asked Mrs. Donnelly about it, but the subject really seemed to bother her. She advised me to ignore anyone who mentioned it again. So I looked it up in the encyclopedia, and I figured out why Mrs. Donnelly was so upset. Bullfighting is a cruel sport where innocent animals are tormented, tortured, killed, and have their ears cut off.

I needed Rain more than ever to ask her why a school would have anything to do with that. But she was out of the picture. This was a decision I would have to make on my own.

And I did. The next time I saw Zach Powers, I put my foot down. "I'm not going to ask Mr. Kasigi about bull-fighting anymore. I object to it on moral grounds."

He said, "I respect your honesty," and shook my hand. As he walked away, I noticed his shoulders shaking. Overcome with emotion, I guess.

I was beginning to see that growing up knowing only one other person had some serious disadvantages. Without Rain as my mentor and guide, I was lost.

The school made me dizzy. I spent half my time wandering the halls, asking people directions to rooms they'd never heard of. Students were constantly peppering me with questions I didn't have the answers to. And now a girl named Lorelei Lumley was writing me notes about how she'd love to run her fingers through my hair. Why would anybody want to do that?

The closest thing I had to Rain was Hugh Winkleman—hardly a replacement, but at least he was willing to help. We ate lunch together every day, and I found myself honestly looking forward to that regular meeting where Hugh could explain things to me.

"It's obvious," he said. "She's in love with you."

"I don't even know who she is!" I hadn't learned more than fifteen or twenty names at that point.

Hugh was disgusted. "Typical. I've spent my whole life in this dumb town, and I've never gotten a girl to give me

a second look. And here you have someone named Lorelei throwing herself at you. You can't let that slip through your fingers. Ask her to the Halloween dance."

"What's the Halloween dance?"

"Only the most important social event of the school year! Not that I've ever been to one." His eyes narrowed. "If you're eighth grade president, shouldn't you know about it?"

"I hope not," I said worriedly.

Hugh looked dubious. "Well, you probably shouldn't go by me. I'm not exactly Mr. Popularity around here. But I think the president plans the whole shindig—refreshments, decorations, music—"

Something tingled directly beneath the peace sign I wore around my neck. I was developing a sixth sense for when trouble was coming my way. But what good was advance warning? Advance warning of *what*? I wasn't going to understand it anyway.

Maybe that was my mistake—even *trying* to understand. Garland was so simple—seven acres of land containing exactly one house, one barn, a vegetable garden, fruit trees, a pickup truck, and only one other person. Maybe in a place as complex as C Average Middle School, it was impossible to analyze every single thing that happened.

Like what were those little white paper balls that I kept

brushing out of my hair every night? Was there so much paper in a school that the molecules eventually clustered and fell like precipitation? And how did a pickled brain and all those other weird objects get into my locker? I thought the whole point of a lock was that no one could open it but me. *I* sure never put pink goo and a dead bird in there.

Rain always recommended meditation for stress and confusion. But if you meditate in front of your locker, someone might steal your sandals while your eyes are closed.

I had to go home barefoot on the school bus that afternoon. I know complaining is a negativity trip, but it was hard to stay positive about the floor of a school bus. It's a collecting place for the filthy, smelly, sticky, and often sharp and jagged castoffs of a society run wild.

If I'd ever questioned why Rain and her friends gave up on city life in San Francisco and founded Garland back in 1967, five minutes on that bus explained it. The dark underbelly of the human animal was turned loose on that vehicle. It was crowded, noisy, dirty, rowdy, and uncomfortable. People fought, shrieked, threw things at one another, and tormented the hapless driver. It was an insane asylum on wheels.

By the time I made it to the Donnelly house, my bruised and bleeding feet were decorated with lollipop

sticks, chewing gum, hairs, broken soda-can tabs, straws, buttons, and some things I couldn't even identify.

To make matters worse, Sophie caught me in the backyard hosing off my feet at the outdoor tap.

"Nice," she muttered. But the thing is, her expression said she didn't think it was nice at all. Lately, every time I talked to Sophie, she looked like she had just eaten some turnips that had been harvested a week too late. Her face twisted into an unpleasant contortion that made it hard to see how beautiful she was. But I tried my best, because I knew about her disappointment over her father and the driving lessons. I realized my good fortune at being raised by Rain, who never broke a promise and never let me down in any way.

The more I thought about it, the more I wanted to do something nice for Sophie, to make her feel better. But how could that ever happen? Every time I went near her, she practically bit my head off.

9

NAME: **SOPHIE DONNELLY**

My mother is the most generous, caring, good-hearted, sympathetic person in the world. She even chose a career devoted to helping people. She's a saint.

I always knew that lousy attitude was going to get us in trouble one day. Still, never in my wildest nightmares could I have imagined myself living with a refugee from Bizarro World.

The stuff he scraped off his feet alone would have been enough to get the house condemned by the board of health. God only knew what was living in his hair! And his clothes—I was amazed they didn't get up and walk away on their own.

Mom insisted he was very clean. I told you about her—generous to a fault.

"He's been wearing the same stuff for the past three weeks," I accused.

"They just look the same because they're all cotton tie-dyes," she explained patiently. "He has plenty of clothes. I drove out to Garland myself to pick up his things."

"I hope you brought extra shoes too," I put in. "Somebody hung a pair of corn husk sandals on the high-voltage wires by the commuter line. I wonder who they belong to. I called Brad Pitt, but he's wearing his."

"Don't be unkind," she told me sharply. "The way those kids are teasing Cap is inhuman. Have a little compassion."

"Have a little compassion for *me*," I said sulkily. "Josh was just dropping me off while the freakazoid was scraping a third-world country off his feet. You know what he said? 'Is that your brother, Sophie?'"

"What did you tell him?"

"What *could* I tell him? I said it was a homeless guy. A person can dream."

My solemn vow: should Capricorn Anderson put the kibosh on my chances with Josh Weintraub, not even Mother's social worker training could save him.

If Josh and I started dating—are you there, God? It's me, Sophie—there'd be no way to keep that space alien off the radar screen. I could have sworn there were six of him. Wherever I wanted to be, that's where he was—

squeaking the porch swing, or hogging the kitchen table, eating those organic soy nuts Mom bought for him. He'd even started watching *my* favorite show, *Trigonometry and Tears*, the high-school soap opera. Because he had never seen TV before, he was a total addict who barked out warnings and advice to the characters on the screen.

"Will you shut up?" I yelled, not for the first time.

Even though he was embarrassed, he still defended himself. "Nick doesn't know that Alison found out he's been seeing Corinne on the side!"

"They're actors! It's a story! They can't even hear you!"

And he understood. Sort of. But he didn't stop talking to the TV. It was just too new to him. How would I ever explain *that* to Josh?

I needn't have worried. That relationship was over before it started. I probably should have told Josh that Cap *was* my brother. Or maybe my husband. It would have saved me the most boring date of my life.

To think that I pulled strings and called in favors just to meet him! What a letdown. He talked about video games for three hours before telling me he was getting back together with his ex-girlfriend from Indiana. Rock on.

So I wasn't in the best of moods when Josh took me home after the ordeal. There was only one thing that could have made this night any worse—face time with My Favorite Martian.

He was waiting for me on the porch. "Hi."

"Where's my mother?"

"Around the corner at the Peabodys'," he told me. "Quick—we should have just about an hour."

I was wary. "For what? To pick a few more staples out of your feet?"

He held up the car keys and jingled them in front of me. "Driving lessons."

I stared at him. "Driving lessons? From a little squirt like you?" Then I remembered what Mom had told me—that Cap had been arrested and released for driving without a license. At that lawless flower-child Camp Day-Glo, they probably let you drive when your foot could reach the pedal without breaking the moisture seal on your training pants.

"I know your other lessons got canceled," he went on.

Oh, thanks, Mother. Someday I'll repay you by telling *your* personal business to every passing hobo.

I felt betrayed, furious—and intrigued. My father was a total flake. He'd probably get around to giving me a lesson one day, but it would be pure random chance when and if it ever happened. And Mom's killer schedule didn't leave a lot of windows of opportunity.

I wanted to drive. I *needed* a teacher. Even if it had to be the freakazoid.

I did a lot of things I'd promised myself I'd never do. I

got in the car with him. I listened to him and did what he told me to do. That idiotic Zen-hippie style of his turned out to be just right for a driving instructor. No matter what mistakes I made, it didn't seem to faze Cap—not even when I thought someone's driveway was a side street and turned onto it.

“Honest mistake,” said Cap, but, rattled, I stepped on the gas instead of the brake.

The Saturn burst forward. Suddenly, a white-painted garage door loomed out of the darkness, coming up fast.

I lost it. I didn't even have the sense to take my foot off the gas. I was in mid-panic when Cap reached over and yanked on the steering wheel. We swung around, the tires of the Saturn churning soft earth as we plowed into a flower bed. The rough ride slowed us down long enough for him to reach over and shift into park. The car lurched to a halt.

“Abdominal breathing,” he ordered quietly. “In through the nose, out through the mouth.”

“But I almost—”

“There's no almost,” he lectured serenely. “Only ‘happened’ and ‘didn't happen.’ This didn't happen.”

“Get us out of here!” I whimpered when my lungs refilled with air.

“You'll do that. It's a circular driveway. Just continue around.”

I was really panicking. Visions of an angry homeowner coming at us with a shotgun were whirling around my head. "I can't! It's too narrow, and there are trees on both sides! I'll hit something!" At that point, I didn't care if I never drove again. I just wanted to make it home alive in something that still resembled a Saturn.

He was endlessly patient. "This is a philosophy Rain passed on to me when she taught me how to drive our truck."

I very nearly hit him. "This is no time for your hippie-dippy wisdom!"

But there was no stopping Cap when the subject was the immortal Rain. "She said, 'If the front gets through, the rest will drag.'"

I stared at him. "That's philosophy?"

"Rain used to drive a taxi in San Francisco before she formed Garland."

I let out a nervous giggle, and it relaxed me. I put the car back in gear and aimed the hood between the two trees. May Mother never find out that I was piloting her precious Saturn on instructions from Rain, the face of so many of her childhood nightmares.

When we reached the road, I was panting with pure relief. The freakazoid made me pull over while he went back and replanted all the flowers I'd spun up. I was so grateful, I didn't even kill him.

Surviving my first brush with disaster must have boosted my confidence, because I was a better driver after that. In short order, I was tooling around the neighborhood with something approaching skill. Pretty soon I even forgot that my learner's permit probably wasn't valid when I was in the car with someone even less qualified behind the wheel than I was.

I was so wrapped up in the experience that it took me a few seconds to recognize the female pedestrian we'd just passed.

"My mother!" I rasped. "Oh, man, we are so busted!"

He didn't seem to understand. "Why?"

"Think, for once in your life! What does neither of us have? A driver's license, maybe?" This was more serious than a few uprooted chrysanthemums. We were doing something highly illegal. "If she catches us, I'll be grounded till I'm forty, and you'll be sleeping in the street!"

For the first time, he seemed to realize that we weren't playing by hippie rules. Obviously, Mom hadn't noticed her car, because she wasn't sprinting after us, yelling. Hands trembling, I turned off the block, and we switched drivers. I may have been bugging out, but I have to say Cap was totally cool under pressure. We had to go out of our way to avoid passing Mom again. But he whipped that car around corners, through darkened streets, and up into our driveway. We sprinted in the back door, and were on

the couch in front of *Trigonometry and Tears* when she came in.

She regarded me suspiciously. "What?"

I immediately grasped the weak spot in our cover. Mother had left two teenagers at war, only to return home to a peace treaty.

So I turned to Cap and snarled, "Keep your split ends off my side of the couch!"

That seemed to mollify her. It was exactly the kind of thing I'd been saying to Cap ever since he'd arrived at our house three weeks before.

But my heart wasn't in it that night.

10

NAME: **NAOMI ERLANGER**

The bad news: Lena said she didn't have the hots for Darryl *or* for Grant Tubman—at least not until the infection in his tongue stud cleared up.

The good news: she didn't come out and say she was interested in Zach. But how could she not be? He was by far the coolest guy at C Average, totally adorable, and the mastermind behind making Cap Anderson eighth grade president. Although, I have to admit I thought stealing his shoes went a little too far.

Zach didn't agree. "Come on, what kind of person sits in front of his locker, with his eyes shut, barefoot, and mumbling in some foreign language? He was practically begging for it."

I consoled myself with the fact that they weren't even

shoes. They were made out of some kind of dried leaves. Technically, we did Cap a favor, because the next day he showed up in real sneakers.

"We're bringing him into the twenty-first century," Zach insisted.

His eyes looked so sincere and so *blue* that I just had to go along with it. I couldn't help myself. I kept on writing love notes from Lorelei Lumley to slip into Cap's locker.

*Dear Capricorn,
I waited all day and was heartbroken
when you didn't come. You must have
thought I meant storeroom B-376 of the
middle school. Silly me, I was in store-
room B-376 of the high school. There is
no storeroom B-376 at the middle school.
But I guess you already know that.
Please, please, please give me another
chance. Meet me at—*

The rest was a giant tomato soup stain. I don't know about Cap, but it would have driven *me* crazy.

Another note contained directions to a small courtyard off the library. There was only one door, and it locked as soon as it closed behind you. Poor Cap spent two hours in there, until a custodian found him and set him free. I felt pretty awful about it, but my hands were tied. I was with Zach.

We watched from a spot on the roof, expecting him to go berserk. He never did. He called for help a few times, but mostly he spent the day in the lotus position, with his new sneakers off, meditating.

I could sense Zach was a little frustrated that Cap wasn't putting on more of a show. "Why isn't he yelling? Or crying? Or at least banging on the windows, begging for rescue?"

To be honest, I couldn't explain it either. Cap was weird, but there was more to it than that. There was something inside him that nobody else understood, something mysterious and strong. Not muscle strong or fighting strong—a kind of strength that gave him the self-control to meditate instead of falling apart, or to ignore what other people thought, and find meaning in a dead bird.

I couldn't say that to Zach, of course, so I tried to be supportive. "Look on the bright side," I offered from our vantage point on the roof. "He didn't go nuts, but he was down there a really long time."

Zach was not consoled. "Yeah, and we were up *here* a really long time! What's the point of pranking someone if the prank's on you as much as on him?"

He had a point. Cap Anderson was the ultimate eighth grade president. He fell for every gag, hook, line, and sinker, more than a Luke Simard or a Hugh Winkleman ever would. There was only one problem: he wasn't

reacting. You could harass him; you just couldn't upset him.

Even when Zach told him that he was expected to plan the entire Halloween dance, he was mellow about it. Last year, that was what had put Luke over the edge.

Cap just said, "I've never been to a dance."

He didn't even refuse to do it. But we knew he wasn't going to.

That made Zach mad. "We should have hung *him* off the wires, not just his sandals."

I only had one class with Cap—Math. He never opened his mouth, yet whenever the teacher called on him, he always came up with the answer. Zach claimed Cap was the dumbest kid in school, but he was really smart.

He had no friends, except maybe Hugh Winkleman, who had to be worse than nobody. Or maybe not—those two ate lunch together every single day. It looked like Hugh did most of the talking, but that made sense. Cap was new, and surely he had questions about everything that was happening to him. He had no way of knowing that the person he was using as a guide was an even bigger outcast than he was.

"So he's friends with Winkleman, big surprise," Zach sneered. "Nobody *normal* would ever hang out with him. The stuff he does—what kid in a million years would ever want to do it with him?"

He had a point. Meditation wasn't big in middle school. When Cap wasn't in the lotus position in front of his locker, he was usually in the music room, strumming a guitar and singing to himself. It was always sixties music too—I recognized the Beatles and some of the folksier stuff you hear on the classic rock stations. And every morning, he was out in the school yard, performing these slow-motion, dancelike martial arts moves. Zach called it hippie ballet, but I thought it was kind of graceful and athletic.

I asked Cap about it.

"It's tai chi," he explained. "It develops balance through a blending of mental and physical energy."

"Yeah, but why are you doing it *here*, where everybody can see you?" Zach demanded.

"Because if I do it where I live, somebody pours water on me."

You could depend on that kind of comment from Cap. It might have made sense, but only to him.

The whole thing was really starting to get on Zach's nerves. "I'm going to break this kid if it's the last thing I do."

I had to speak up. "Is this really necessary? Can't we just switch to Winkleman or something?"

"Winkleman isn't president," Zach insisted. "It's too late to go back and change that."

Anger didn't suit Zach. His jaw was stuck out, his skin flushed and taut. This wasn't the future boyfriend I'd always envisioned.

"We're eighth graders," he went on. "This is supposed to be *our year*. I'm not going to give that up because some hairy Sasquatch stepped through a time warp from the sixties!"

We went to see Lena. She was the authority when it came to spreading the word. And what Zach had in mind amounted to calling the entire eighth grade down on Cap.

He was not to walk through a crowded hall without his feet being kicked out from under him. The cafeteria line was to become an obstacle course of tripping legs. He would be a living, breathing bull's-eye for spitballs, rubber bands, apple cores, and flying soup. It was open season on the eighth grade president, especially on the school bus, where there were no teachers, and the only rule is anything goes.

Cap's reaction? He floated through it all like he didn't even notice anyone was messing with him. No, it went beyond that—he *didn't* notice anyone was messing with him! He wasn't happy, but he didn't look unhappy either.

And here's the part I'd never admit to anyone, certainly not Zach: deep, deep down, I was rooting for Cap to stick it back in all our faces. For sure we deserved it.

Especially me, because I was starting to know better.