

THE LOSER LIST

TAKE ME TO YOUR LOSER

written and Illustrated by

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SCHOLASTIC PRESS / NEW YORK

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ISBN 978-0-545-50795-0

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Printed in the U.S.A. 23

First printing, October 2013

* CHAPTER ONE *

My heart sank when I saw the dry-erase board:



I'd been dreading it all week, ever since Coach Kilshaw had warned us there'd be an in-class competition in gym. I turned to my best friend, Jasper, who wasn't any happier than I was.

"Now guys can beat us up for school credit," I said.

"Won't they match us with someone our own size?" asked Jasper.

In my case, that meant "short." I scanned the possibilities in my gym class: Pinky Shroeder. Ethan Fogerty. Jasper. That new guy with wild black hair. None of us were in danger of being chosen "Athlete of the Year" at Gerald Ford Middle School.

"I hope you're right." I looked at the beefy jocks across the room, kids like Bruce "Bruiser" Pekarisky, "Abs" Tanaka, and Kyle Larson. They were bouncing around like restless zoo animals.



Coach Kilshaw blew his whistle.

"Today I'm assigning matchups for the tournament," he roared. "Now, you've all heard rumors about wrestling injuries – don't believe 'em. Rick Lambretta did NOT have a ruptured spleen."

Who's Rick Lambretta?

"Or spinal contusions." Coach shook his head. "Anyway, he's doing a lot better."



Jasper and I exchanged looks. Now Coach was reading off the first-round matchups: "Kirby Hammer – Quinn Romanoff. T-Bone Farrell – Luke Strohmer. Danny Shine –"

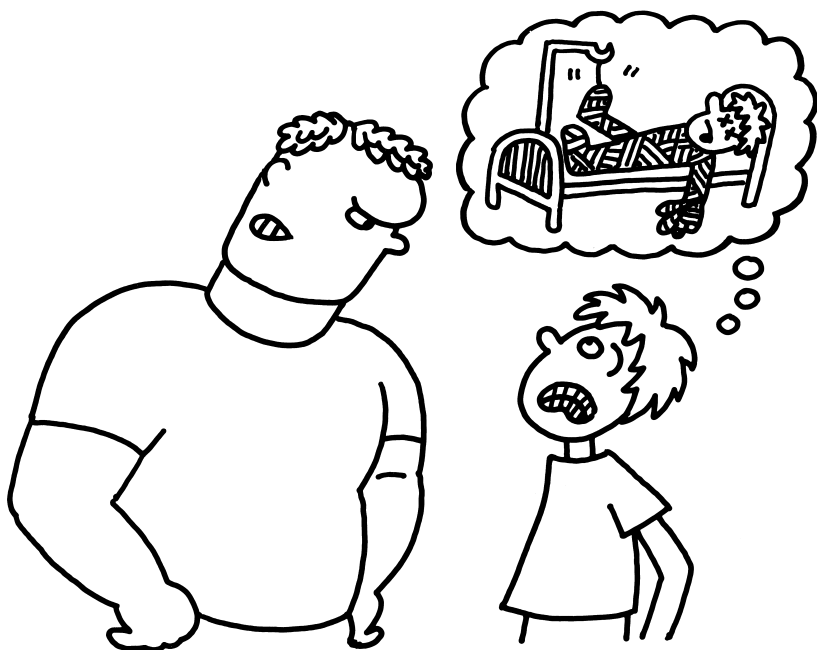
I held my breath.

"Bruiser Pekarsky," he finished.

NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!!!

My stomach dropped to my knees. The guy outweighed me by at least fifty pounds – besides, he was a Neanderthal who'd probably be out for blood! Jasper looked at me and groaned. It was the worst possible news.

For Bruiser too apparently. He frowned as he looked me up and down. "Oh, man."



When Coach was done reading off names, Bruiser and I shot over to him. "Can we switch opponents?" I asked Kilshaw. "I mean, look at us!" Kilshaw didn't look up from his clipboard. "No changes."

"Coach," I tried again. "We don't -" "There aren't enough heavyweights, so some of you are under-matched," he said. "DEAL WITH IT."

Bruiser cursed and pounded a beefy fist against his thigh. I bit my lip. We walked away in silence.

"Tough luck," Bruiser said. "See you Thursday."

"Yeah," I choked out.

At my locker, Jasper and I held an emergency meeting.

"Bruiser Freakin' Pekarsky," I spat out.

Jasper didn't have to worry. He'd gotten paired with Phil Petrokis, a skinny tech geek. Not exactly Clash of the Titans.

"How bad could it be?" Jasper asked.
"They can't let someone, like, totally whale on you. Can they?"

"I'm not doing it." I thought about Bruiser's sweaty flesh. "NO WAY."

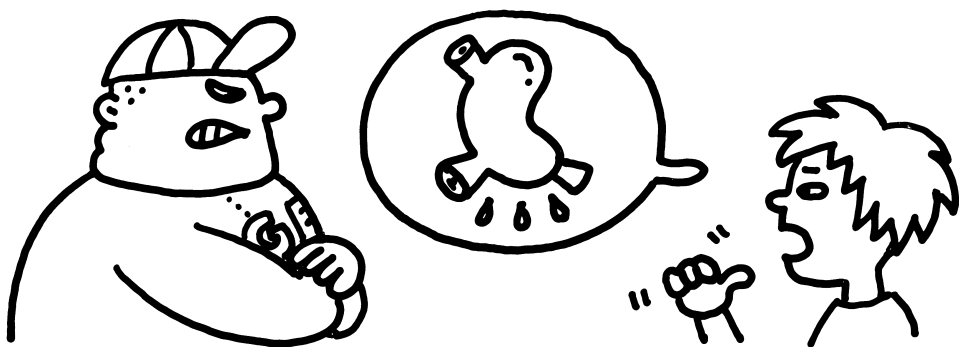
"Yeah, but —" Jasper shook his head. "How're you going to get out of it?"

"I'll think of something I have to do Thursday," I said. "Doctor's appointment. Religious holiday. Organ donation."

* TOP THREE WORST EXCUSES FOR GETTING OUT OF GYM

1. Foosball Finger
2. Allergic to sweat

3. My brother really needs my kidney



As we passed a bulletin board, my eyes scanned the flyers. "Hold on," I said, slowing down to look. Suddenly, a word jumped out at me.

"Want to run for student council president?" I read out loud. "Info session THURSDAY, FIFTH PERIOD."

Gym was fifth period.

"That's it!" I shouted, pounding the bulletin board so hard a couple flyers came unpinned and fluttered down. "That's my excuse!"



"Perfect, except for one thing," Jasper said.
"You're not running."

"It's just an info session," I said. "I could say I'm thinking about running." Another image of Bruiser flashed through my mind.

Jasper squinted at the poster. "It says 'serious candidates only.'"

"It also says you can get out of class." I scribbled down the info on a Taco Dog napkin.
"YESSS!"

I reached for a high five, but Jasper only tapped me.

As I walked to lunch on Thursday, someone called, "Hey, Danny." I turned around and groaned. It was Axl Ryan, the school's biggest bully.



"I heard Bruiser's going to waste you today." Axl's tone was conversational. "Wish I could see it."

"I won't be there," I shot back. "Student council info meeting. Got a written excuse."

"Really?" he asked. "That works?"

I started to feel uneasy. "I've got to go."

"You da man!" Axl shouted as I hurried away.

When the school's biggest bully compliments your deviousness, it's probably not a good sign.

The fifth-period bell rang, and I walked

into the info session like it was no big deal. As if I were a student-government type, not a comic book geek who couldn't care less about the seventh-grade class gift. Finding a desk in the back row, I dumped my backpack.

Right now I could be pinned under Bruiser Pekar'sky. I remembered the look on Kilshaw's face when I went to tell him I'd be absent.

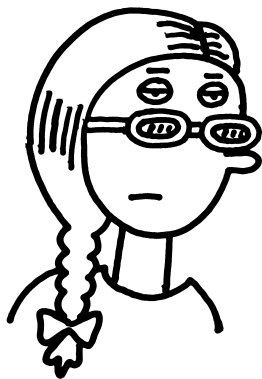
"What is it this time, Shine?" he'd said with a sigh. "Sprained eyebrow? Underwear's too tight?"

Thinking about that conversation made me squirm, but it was worth it. I looked around the room to see who else was there.

* MALIBU NUSSBAUM

Reputation: Political activist

Last crusade: School Mitten Drive

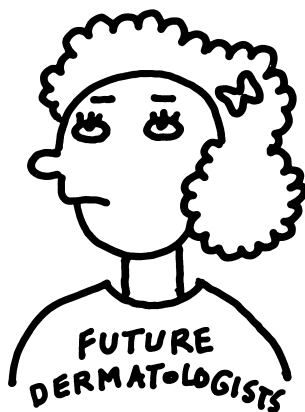


* KENDRA

MAXTONE-COUSINS

Reputation: Butt-kisser

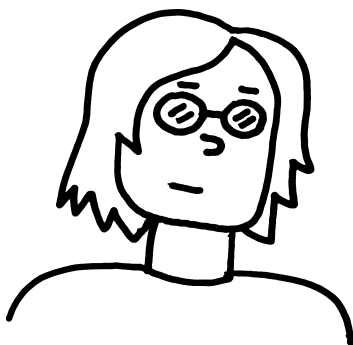
Last speech: "Why the
School Day Should be
Longer"



* TY RANDALL

AKA: "Mr. Perfect."

Last seen: On skateboard,
delivering meals to
homebound seniors.



"Raina! Da'Nise! Sit there." It was Chantal Davis, the class diva, walking into the info session. If she was running, that meant it was a cool thing to do. She had a lot of power; kids liked

her sassy personality, great singing voice, and who-cares attitude. Plus they were just plain scared not to like her.



I tried to sink low into my seat so Chantal wouldn't see me. She'd only give me grief, like always. Once I wouldn't let her "borrow" my good drawing pen, and she put my name on the Loser List in the girls' bathroom.

"Danny Shine?!" she shrieked. "I can't believe it. You? Running for president?"

Her friends giggled.

"I don't know," I muttered. "Maybe."

To my relief, Mr. Amundson walked in. Our trying-to-be-cool vice principal stood in front of the classroom, pointing his fingers at us. "As stu co adviser, I'm totally jazzed to see such a large turnout!" he said. "I count fifteen solid citizens."



Then he launched into the president's responsibilities: Lead meetings. Speak at assemblies. Attend fund-raisers. Oversee committees. Go to more meetings.

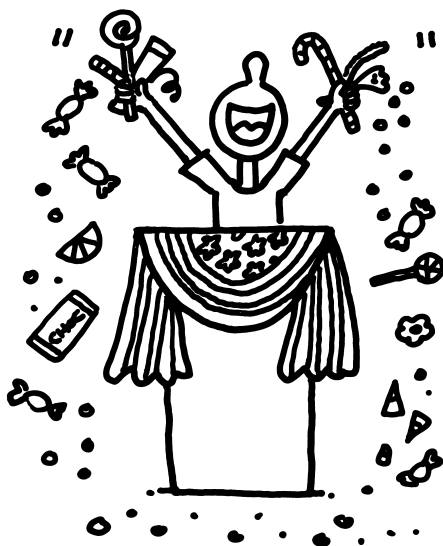
It sounded deadly.

Student council member Malibu Nussbaum read a list of campaign rules:

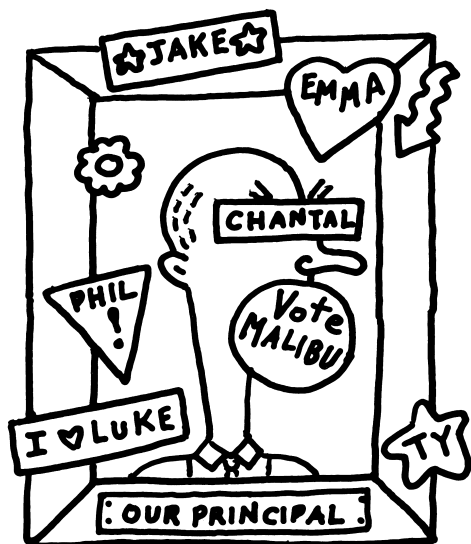
"No negative wording on campaign materials."



"No bribing people with candy to get votes."



"No stickers."



"The most important things to ask yourself are..." Amundson paused. "Do I have outstanding leadership skills? Am I a positive role model? Do I have what it takes to represent Gerald Ford Middle School?"

No, no, and no.

"Questions?" asked Amundson.

"You didn't say what the perks are," said

Chantal. "Extra-big locker? Front-row basketball seats? Private bathroom stall?"

"Hall passes? Free food?" shouted the crowd.

"Uh, no," Amundson said. "Being president is about what you do for other people. It's fighting for things you want, like bike racks, or a vegetable garden, or —"

Suddenly, there was a commotion at the door. I looked over and saw Mrs. Lacewell, the school administrator, arguing with Axl Ryan.

Oh no. What was he doing here?

"I can go — it's a free country!" snapped Axl. He turned to his best friends, Boris and Spike, nodding for them to follow. The three of them formed the Skulls, the school's only gang.

"Smells like you just want out of English class today," said Lacewell.



"No! I swear! I'm really interested in -"

"Running for president?" Lacewell arched her eyebrow.

Everyone snickered.

"Maybe." Axl sniffed.

"Cause that's the only way you can be here," she said. "IF. YOU. ARE. TRULY. RUNNING."

"He's not running!" Axl's arm shot out.

Crud! He was pointing at me.

"Danny's just here to get out of the wrestling tournament!" Axl shouted. "He said so!"

Holy crud. Lacewell glared at me.

"Mr. Shine, may I see you for a moment?" she snapped. "Out in the hall."

Out in the hall was never a good thing. Lacewell let Axl go and ushered me out of the room, planting me in front of some lockers.

"Danny, what's all this about you missing a wrestling tournament?"

"Um -"

"You are here because you are running for president, aren't you?"

Crud.

"I'm - I was thinking about it, but -"

Lacewell's eyes fixed on me like a laser beam.



"But what?"

Choose your words carefully. "But after hearing more about the job, I don't think I'm, uh, cut out for it."

"NOT CUT OUT FOR IT?" Her eyes were blazing. "Danny, you better run, or I've been played for a fool. Together we'll go to the principal and tell him what you've been up to."

No, no, no!

Not Dr. Kulbarsh! He'd devour me like a mini-egg roll! He loved to make "examples" out of

kids; his briefcase was rumored to be filled with medieval torture instruments.



I'd get his "I'm Very Disappointed" speech; he might even call my parents. NO!

"Don't go to Kulbarsh," I burst out. "I'll run."