

THE LOSER LIST

written and Illustrated by

H.N. KOWITT



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* CHAPTER ONE *

To be a great artist, you need a great pen. Mine was a T-360, bought for 12 dollars at Abbie's Art Supply.

Who knew it would almost ruin my life?



We were in homeroom, doing a Free Write. For me, this was a chance to fill my sketchbook with robots and bloody axes. Every few minutes I'd sit back, hoping someone would notice my drawing. "Great X-ray monster," they'd say.

Instead, Chantal Davis poked me.

"Let me see that pen," she said. (Translation: "That pen is mine now.")

"No," I said, putting extra hairs on an eyeball.



Chantal is either a diva, busybody, or bully, depending on how you look at it. You have to watch out, because she can smell fear, and it only makes her madder. If I wasn't so scared of Chantal, I might have a crush on her.

Not the kind of crush I have on, say, Asia O'Neill, the girl in pre-alg with the amazing hair. Chantal is more like a force of nature.

* CHANTAL AT-A-GLANCE

Job: Boss of seventh grade
(self-appointed)

Plenty of: Attitude

Pet peeve: Doing her own
homework

Claim to fame: A library
book that's 6.3 years
overdue

Quote: "Don't make me
wt/OMP your sorry
butt."



Chantal's locker is crammed with stuff people have "donated." Well, I'd already given plenty to the Chantal Davis Fund, and I didn't feel like making another contribution. No way was I handing over my T-360.

Our conversation continued:

Chantal: "NO?"

Me: "No."

Chantal: "Danny, did you not hear what I said?"

Me: "I heard."

Chantal: "Give me that pen. Or I'll put your name on the Loser List. And then everyone in school will know what a sorry geek you are."

Loser List? Never heard of it.

Chantal went on, "You just drew your last eyeball. When girls see you on the List, they'll cut you dead. You and that crazy troll you hang around." That would be Jasper, my best friend. "Not that anyone talked to you before."

"So?" I gulped. "I'll just cross my name off."

"Yeah?" Chantal whooped. "Next time you're in the GIRLS' BATHROOM?"

Girls' bathroom?

Oh, crud.

Other people looked up, hoping for a fight.

Chantal turned to a guy next to us. "What are you looking at?"

I pretended to laugh off Chantal's threat, but the truth was, it sank in my stomach like a stone. At Gerald Ford, I'm about halfway down the food chain. Not president of the Mathletes, but no one's saving me a seat at the Cool Table. I can't afford a lot of slippage.

* FIVE LISTS MY NAME IS NOT ON:

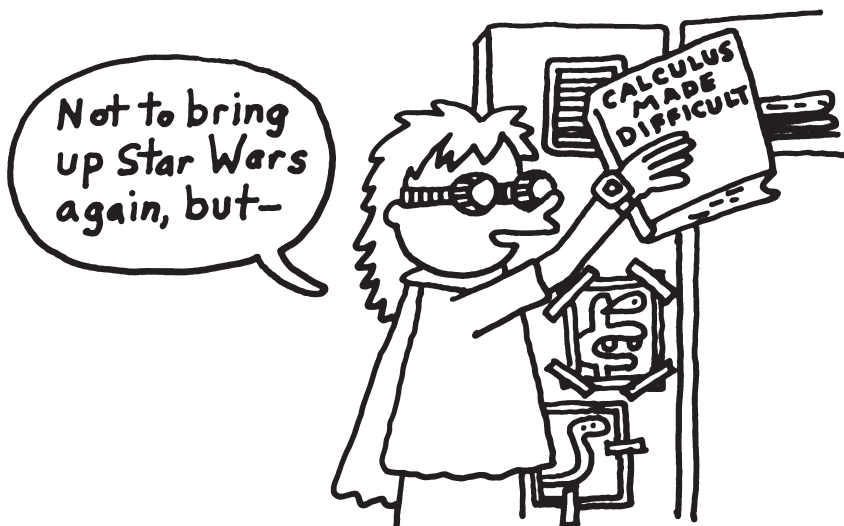
1. Teen People's Hottest Guys
2. All-City Basketball Team
3. State Science Fair Semifinalists
4. Explorer Scouts' Canoe Portage Sign-up
5. Asia O'Neill's Speed Dial

When the bell rang, I tore out of class to warn Jasper about Chantal. I found him

cramming stuff into his locker – math books, a Godzilla DVD, and a small animal carrier.

“Chantal’s putting our names on some Loser List,” I told him, panting from my sprint. “Telling people we’re geeks.”

“So?” He shrugged. To him, “geek” isn’t an insult. He does his own thing, whether it’s magic camp, karaoke chess (don’t ask), or inventing weird snow-cone flavors. Jasper is a cool guy, but not everyone can see past his DECIMALS HAVE A POINT T-shirt.



"What's that?" I pointed to the animal carrier.

"Alec's dinner." Jasper has some exotic pets, including a python named Alec Baldwin.

I looked closer. It was a live mouse.

"Miley Cyrus," Jasper said. "Where is this so-called Loser List?"

"Girls' bathroom."

"This is suboptimal?" Jasper stuffed a gerbil wheel on the top shelf.

"What do you - of course!" I sputtered. "You want your geekdom announced to every girl in school?"

Jasper paused. "It's not, like, a secret condition I'm trying to hide."

Well, I'm no geek. I have a wide range of interests:



Reading comics



Drawing comics



Trading comics



Buying comics

In comics, you find a world that's wild and weird, but where the rules are very clear – unlike middle school. Superman knows he can't mess with Kryptonite. My school is weird too, but there's no rule book. You just have to stumble through, hoping you're not committing some crime you were unaware of – wearing the wrong sneakers, say, or liking bluegrass music.

* A FEW THINGS THAT CAN MAKE YOU COOL AT GF:



Sports injury



Your own band



The "right" basketball shoes



Parent with
impossibly cool job



Giant-screen TV



Frontal lobotomy

As the day wore on, I started to think Jasper had the right attitude. We didn't know anything about the list. People might not read it. It could be hard to find, or sloppily written. When I checked out the graffiti in the boys' bathroom, I was reassured by its stupidity.

Ethan G. BUTT HEAD
Stink
Darrell is a LUZER
Eat DIRT
Yeah
KISS
My Andy REEKS
Your Sister is so DUMB, she

I went to class and put the Loser List out of mind.

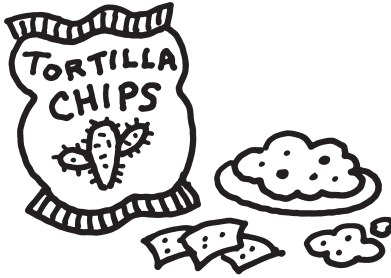
At lunch two hours later, there was an air of Something Going On. An extra-long line snaked around the juice machine into the hall. When I saw a piñata, my heart sank.

Mexican Day.

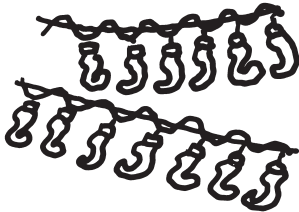
On theme days, there's always the danger of adults showing up in costume. Sure enough, Mr. Amundson, our desperately trying-to-be-cool vice principal, was dressed like a matador. I tried to avert my eyes but I was too late. "What up, hombre?" he asked.

* MEXICAN DAY *

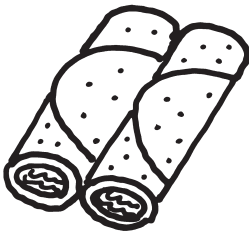
Pros:



Salsa and chips

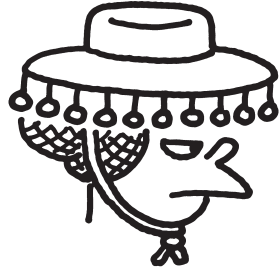


Chili pepper lights



Bean burritos

Cons:



Cafeteria ladies
in sombreros



Hot sauce



Bean burritos

"I'm fine," I said quickly, joining the lunch line. Reaching for a taco, I heard a girl's voice behind me.

"Hey, loser!" she said. Another girl laughed.

Who were they? I didn't dare look.

I quickly got in line at the condiments table. The girl ahead of me had a leather jacket and long, black hair. My palms began to sweat. Her back was turned, but I knew who it was.

Asia O'Neill.

What's so great about her? She's cool looking – long, dark hair and blue eyes. I don't always understand her clothes, but I like them. The stuff she carries hints at an interesting life: drumsticks, a skateboard, a graphic novel. She always looks slightly exasperated, which I take as a sign of intelligence.

And she is so, so out of my league.

* ASIA AT-A-GLANCE [NOT PICTURED]*

Position: Coolest girl in school

Owens: Paintball gun

Accessory: Zebra-striped skateboard

Political affiliations: Malibu Nussbaum for student council

Hair smell: Cherry Twizzlers

*I'm not a good enough artist to do her justice.

Sorry.

I'm barely on her radar screen. In homeroom, she's never turned around to compliment my drawing of a skeleton or a pizza slice. I almost never see her outside of class. The line moved forward. As I squeezed the hot-sauce bottle, I wondered what I could possibly say.

* BRILLIANT OPENING LINES:



But before I could toss off one of these gems, Katelyn Ogleby shoved a taco under the dispenser. I knew her from class – an airhead who stuck to her best friend like a scented sticker. Sure enough, Ginnifer was next to her. They saw me and started whispering.

“So, Danny.” Katelyn’s voice was mocking.
“Who put you on the Loser List?”

"Geeks are okay," Ginnifer said. She's the nicer one. "It didn't say you were psycho."

"Well, I'd hate to be on that list," said Katelyn.

Asia walked by, reaching for a straw.

NO!





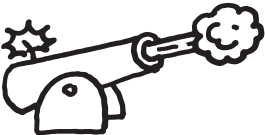



I couldn't let her hear I was on the Loser List! Panicking, I spun around to face Katelyn — but she was closer than I thought, and our trays collided. A splattered bystander jumped out of the way, and his salad went flying.

"FOOD FIGHT!" someone yelled.

The whole cafeteria went on red alert. A guy to my left fired the first official shot, throwing an open bag of tortilla chips. A burrito sailed by.

"Un momento, por favor!" Mr. Amundson shouted. But once the first burrito has been launched, little can be done to reverse it. In seconds, the fight was in full swing.

* FOOD FIGHT WEAPON CONVERSION CHART

WEAPON	SUBSTITUTE
 Grenade	 Potato
 Rocket	 Salsa-filled Baggie
 Cannon	 Squeeze bottle
 Police club	 Turkey club

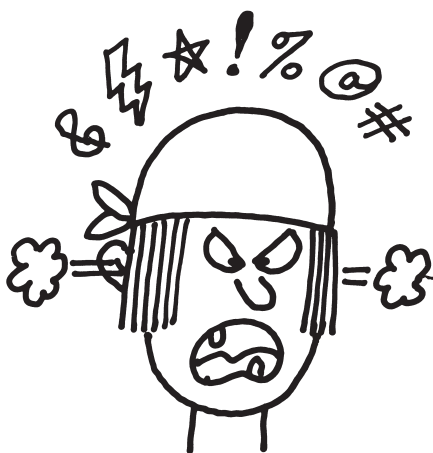
A guacamole missile struck Asia's leather jacket with a thwop! She needed protection. Looking for a weapon, I realized I was

standing next to the mother lode: five gallons of spicy goop.

I held the bottle like an Uzi and laid down some covering fire. A guy pointed a squeeze mustard bottle at Asia, and I blasted his whole head with red slime. He stopped and turned toward me, really slowly. Under the goop, I made out a studded wristband and Death Trawler T-shirt. My stomach dropped.

It was Axl.

I had just signed my own death warrant. Axl "Don't Call Me Morris" Ryan is the school's biggest bully, known for his do-rag, red face, and vacant



glare. He buzzed like an angry hornet and grabbed my collar.

"I - (gasp) -" My breath was cut off. Wristband studs pierced my neck as he choked me.

"How does that feel, punk?" he whispered.

"Hold it right there!"

Mr. Robinson, the school security guard, peeled Axl off me. Silence fell as Robinson scanned the room. Through narrowed eyes, he gave all of us his "You Are One Sorry Excuse for a Middle School" look. With his height and shiny bald head, he alone had the chops to stop the bloodbath. "Everybody sit down and finish your lunch. NOW."

He grabbed Axl's arm. "You're coming with me, son."

"wHAT?" Axl pointed at me. "It's his fault!" As Robinson dragged him away, he turned

to me, dripping hot sauce. "You. Are. Dead. Meat." His angry blue eyes made my scalp freeze.

I gulped. Getting on Axl's bad side was a serious mistake. But Asia's gushing thanks would make it all worth it. "S nothing," I'd say, as if defending beautiful girls was a routine event. When I headed back to her, she was picking corn kernels out of her hair.

That hair!

She turned to me with blazing eyes. "Thanks for starting a food fight," she said bitterly.

WtHAT?

"This jacket is trashed," she said. "Are you happy?"

"Asia, I didn't -"

But she tossed her head and stormed off. I was stunned. On her behalf, I had just given Axl a hot-sauce facial! In the space of ten minutes, I had managed to antagonize the

school's most attractive girl – and its most dangerous bully.

All because of that stupid Loser List.

I stomped back to our table. Jasper was reading, oblivious to the battle that had raged just inches from his head.



"You have taco meat in your hair." He turned a page.

"Jasper." I grabbed his shoulder. "We need to get off the Loser List. Now."

Jasper drained a juice box noisily.

"I'm serious. Girls are saying stuff. We need to go to the girls' bathroom and erase it. Today." I brought out the big guns. "If people think we're losers, you might not get sent to Quiz Bowl. It's by popular vote, remember?"

"Hmmm." Jasper frowned. Quiz Bowl was a contest for seventh-grade eggheads, and he was hot to go. "Interesting point. Can't we get someone to do it for us?"

"Who?" My voice squeaked. We slowly scanned the cafeteria, looking for any girl we knew well enough to ask. Out of 300 girls, there was . . . no one.

"I guess we're meeting after school," Jasper relented with a sigh.

"My locker," I said grimly. "15:30 hours."
Operation Bathroom Raid was on.