

THE LOSER LIST

JINX OF THE LOSER

written and Illustrated by

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* CHAPTER ONE *

I began the day as Danny Shine, invisible seventh-grade comic book geek. When it ended, I was the Guy Who'd Destroyed Everyone's Hopes and Dreams. I was booed, jeered at, even spit on — kids hated me so much, I needed a security guard just to walk down the street.

It started at the All-City Baseball Championships.

My best friend, Jasper, and I were in the front row at Hartman Field, a baseball stadium across town, watching beefy jocks high-five each other. For the first time in twenty-five years, Gerald Ford Middle School had a shot at clinching the city baseball title. GF had never seen a winning season, much less a championship.

All week, the whole school was breathless, asking, "Is the 'Curse of the woodchucks' finally over?"

Jasper and I couldn't care less.

"Why are we here again?" Jasper asked.

"Asia O'Neill gave me tickets." I wanted to keep explanations short. My crush on her was so secret, even Jasper didn't know about it. "She couldn't use them."

"Why didn't you just say we were busy?" Jasper asked, turning the page of his comic book. To get him to come, I'd had to bribe him with a rare first edition of Rat Girl. I didn't think he'd read it during the game.



"I just thought it would be a goof." The truth was too embarrassing. A few days ago, Asia had come up to me at lunch.

"Hey, Danny," she'd said. "Want to go to All-City on Sunday?"

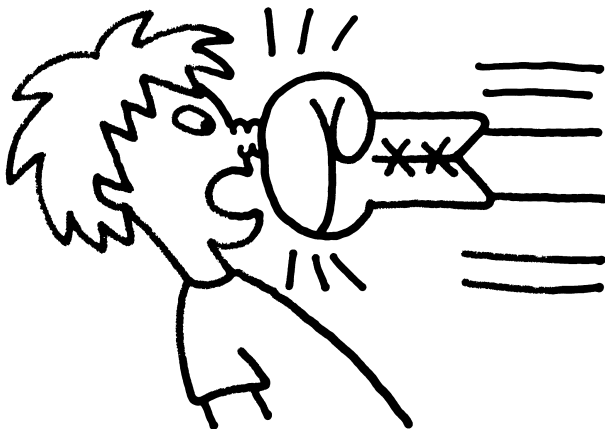
The coolest girl I knew was asking me to do something! This was so off the charts, I didn't know how to process it.

"Y-yeah. Sure. Absolutely."

"Oh, good." She sounded relieved. "See, Jenna and I are going rock climbing Saturday and can't use our tickets."

WHAT?

CRUD! I felt like I'd just been punched.



"I didn't even know if you liked baseball," she said.

"Uh..." I didn't want her to think I'd said yes only because I thought she was going. "Yeah. Totally. Big fan."

"Good."

"Can't wait to see those stupid... other guys get pounded," I added.

"Highland, you mean," she said.

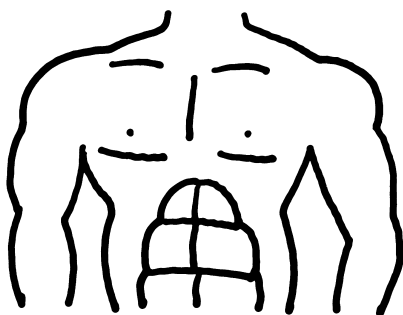
"Right."

Just remembering that conversation made me cringe. Now Jasper and I were sitting behind third base, surrounded by a sea of Woodchuck fans wearing orange and blue. Across the field, maroon and silver flags waved for the Silver Hawks, the defending champs from snooty Highland Middle School. The stadium was a neutral site, but both schools had tons of fans there.

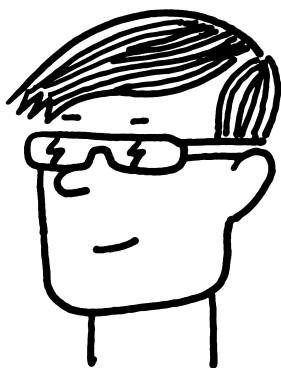
"All this hoopla," I said, turning to Jasper.
"What's the point? It's just a bunch of overgrown
freaks hitting a ball around." In my opinion, the
wrong things in life got all the attention:



Sports



Ripped abs



Good looks

"Right now we could be having a James Bond marathon," Jasper pointed out. On Saturdays, we sometimes watched back-to-back movies or hung at our favorite store, Comix Nation. "How long does this go on for?"

"It's only the first inning," I said.

"So, what, two more to go?"

"More like eight." I don't know that much about sports, but next to Jasper? I might as well be the commissioner of baseball.



"In that case..." Jasper opened up his bag to show a stack of comics. "Want some reading material?"

Jasper didn't care what people thought, which I admired. He just did his own weird thing, whether it was turtle racing, designing robots, or whatever. But I was too self-conscious to sit in the bleachers and read, so I shook my head.

"I guess we could stay until halftime," Jasper said.

"Baseball doesn't have -"

I didn't get to finish. Someone elbowed me to stand, and suddenly we were swept up in "the wave."

Behind us were a bunch of obnoxious, face-painted jocks from school. There was Tank Friedman, a football player whose head was

shaped like a canned ham. Next to him were his friends Kyle Larson and "Abs" Tanaka.



"HIGHLAND REEKS!" Tank yelled, his face half blue, half orange. Tank represented everything I didn't like about jocks. Rude, loud, and cocky, he acted like he owned the school. He and Kyle were throwing French fries at each other.

I tried to focus on the field. A Silver Hawk batter came to the plate. "That's Dex Van Zandt," someone behind me said. "He's their best hitter."

"STRIKE 'EM OUT!" our cheerleaders yelled. I spotted an enormous coil of hair with orange and blue feathers in it and recognized Chantal Davis, the bossiest diva in seventh grade. The cheering squad leaped around while Chantal browbeat the fans by megaphone.



"Are you people dead?" she yelled. "I can't hear you!"

"Woodchucks are number one!" the crowd chanted.

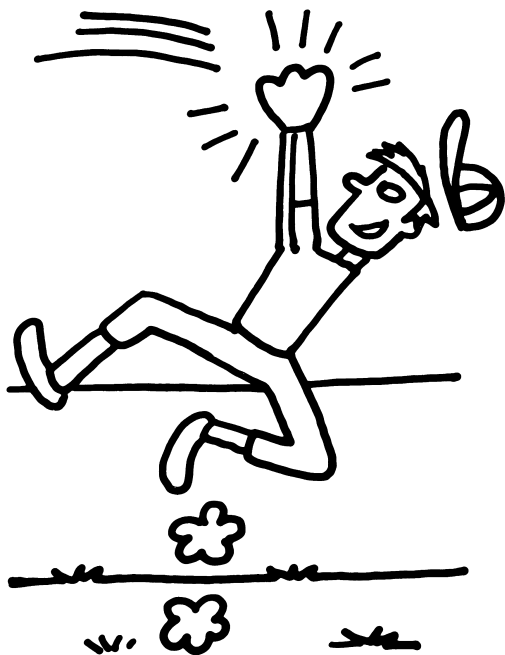
"People," Chantal shook her head. "Show these Highland clowns we got the skills to pay the bills. You feel me?"

"WOODCHUCKS ARE NUMBER ONE!"

"Got that right," Chantal said. Being a cheerleader was the perfect job for her. She got to bully people on a mass scale.

As if to prove Chantal wrong, Dex hit a long line drive into deep left field. "OOOOOH," everyone gasped. It looked like a sure triple, but Luke Strohmer, our left fielder, made a spectacular running catch. Even Jasper looked up.

People screamed, jumped, and woo-hoed. "AWESOME CATCH!!" yelled Tank, practically in my ear. "Gold glove, dude!"



Luke was one of the school's best athletes. He was always breezily rolling down the hall, accepting high fives, girls trailing after him.

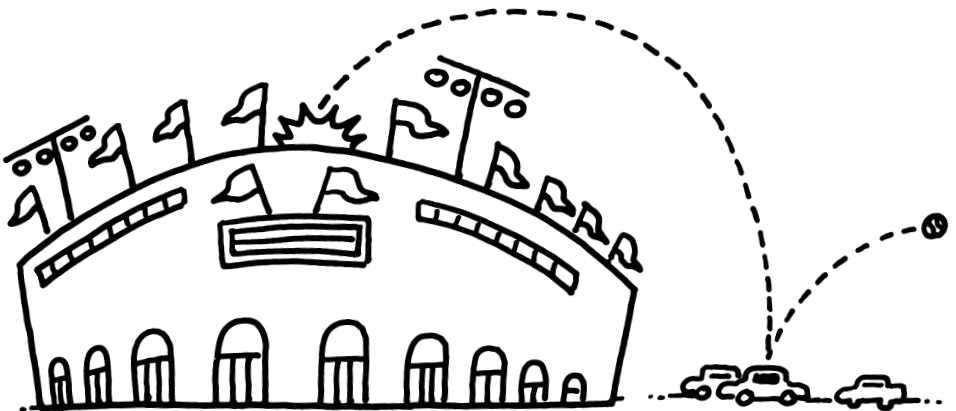
Now the whole stadium was cheering like crazy. I wondered if I should join in, but I didn't want to act like a dumb sports fan. I looked at Jasper.

He had put away his comic book.

* * *

Whenever I caught a baseball game on TV, it droned on and on. But this one was different. There were stolen bases, diving catches, even a screaming argument at second base.

And then something amazing happened. The Silver Hawks were beating us 3-2, when our first baseman, Bruce "Bruiser" Pekarisky, came to bat. He hit a home run so far, it cleared the right-field bleachers and bounced off a car in the parking lot. Everyone's jaw dropped.



It was so cool, Jasper and I were both yelling as Bruiser crossed home plate. I didn't even mind the jocks behind us.

"Sweet!" they howled, bumping chests.

The air smelled like wet grass and root beer, and the mood was enjoyably tense. I'm having a good time, I realized with surprise.

After that, the woodchucks were flying high. Heading into the ninth, we were leading 6-3. By coin flip, we were officially the home team, so we'd bat last. The way things were going, though, we probably wouldn't even need our final turn.

The crowd was going crazy. After twenty-five years of losing, the championship was just three measly outs away.

Three measly outs!

The game wasn't over yet, but people didn't care. They were already planning the

victory party, pouring soda on each other and high-fiving.



Highland's first batter struck out.

"The Curse of the Woodchucks is finished!" Chantal shouted. "Dead! Gone! Six feet under!"

Their second batter grounded out to second. One out to go...

"Hey, Highland!" Kyle yelled to the other team. He turned around and pulled down his pants.



Talk about Woodchuck Pride. Even Jasper laughed.

"One more out," someone whispered. "One more out..."

That's all it would take, and then the woodchucks would be All-City Baseball Champs.

But then Dex Van Zandt walked up to the plate, the Silver Hawks' best hitter. Woodchuck

fans groaned. The whole stadium held its breath as Dex fouled off two pitches.

"One more strike!" I burst out.

The pitcher wound up and threw. The batter swung. CRA-A-A-A-CK! The ball soared high above the third base line... reached its peak and started down... heading straight at us!

Two seconds later, I made the biggest mistake of my life.