

ANNIE ZHU

Henry Chow

BEFORE THE START OF HOMEROOM, HENRY CHOW MANAGED TO FINISH THE ARDUOUS TASK OF SEALING MARNIE'S LOCKER WITH INDUSTRIAL-STRENGTH DUCT TAPE. HE DID IT FOR NO SIGNIFICANT REASON OTHER THAN THAT OF HIS GENERAL PREDILECTION FOR ANNOYING PEOPLE. HE STEPPED BACK TO SURVEY HIS HANDIWORK. HORIZONTAL STRIPS OF BLACK TAPE WERE LAYERED ACROSS THE STEEL, MAKING IT A MUMMY LOCKER. IT LOOKED GREAT. JUST AS HE WAS ABOUT TO SNAP A FEW PHOTOS ON HIS CELLPHONE TO SHOW OFF TO THE GUYS LATER, HE SPOTTED HIS FRIEND MATTHEW BUI ACROSS THE HALL AND CHARGED TOWARD HIM WITH ALL THE FEROCITY OF A BULL.

"BOOOO-EEEEEE!"

"Quiet, Mr. Chow. You're late for homeroom," hollered Mr. Kim in his best authoritative voice. Boys like Henry annoyed him, and they, sensing his delicate nature, always acted out more in his class than in others.

Henry climbed down from Bui's back and krumped his way into the classroom.

Mr. Kim's fondness for cheesy inspirational messages left no

wall unpostered. The one that declared the classroom to be GAY-SAFE and HATE-FREE never failed to amuse Henry. It took all the way up to the Ws in roll call before he noticed that a new one had gone up next to the greenboard. The caption THAT'S SO GAY was encapsulated in a bold red circle-slash symbol.

"That's so homosexual!" he blurted out, pointing at the poster. Everyone burst out laughing.

"Care to repeat that, Henry?" Mr. Kim asked.

A mad grin broke out on Henry's face. "That's so heterosexual?"

The class erupted again.

Henry looked at Charlene, who sat two rows away. He wished she would laugh with the others, but she was more of a closed-lipped smiler, always trying to conceal her shiny lavender braces. Charlene wasn't hot (no boobs yet) but she was nice. Her nose was unlike any other nose he'd ever seen. It wasn't at all punchable, but rather pinchable, honkable and perhaps even kissable. She wasn't hot, but there it was. Her head was bent low over the table, her nose almost touching the book she was wholly absorbed in.

Mr. Kim sighed and briefly considered giving Henry detention, but didn't because that would be like putting himself in detention and he didn't get paid enough to look at Henry's face and hear his stupid laugh beyond regular working hours. Instead he ignored Henry and finished roll call.

Charlene jerked her head up when Mr. Kim called her name, her ponytail swinging Henry out of his reverie. Henry slumped over his desk, burying his head in his arms.

The voices around him became garbled and distant as he waited for the bell to ring. It seemed like he was forever waiting for the bell to ring. But when it finally did, Henry didn't feel like bolting for once. He watched Charlene slowly and neatly pack her book, pencil case and agenda into her orange backpack as she listened to Marnie's cousin drone on about something boring all the way out the door.

Suddenly, inexplicably, Henry felt a helpless restlessness. He did not want to go to math, and he wasn't in the mood to goof around with Bui either. Reluctantly he picked up his own backpack, slung it over one shoulder and left.

At lunch Henry and Bui ate at the most boisterous, happening table in the cafeteria. It was boisterous and happening because Henry was there. He did a bit on Heather—an elephant of a sophomore who had a table all to herself—which got a stellar reception. Then he moved on to shovelling cafeteria food down his throat as fast as his gag reflex allowed. He snorted up the mystery meat and the unpeeled potatoes and the fluorescent vegetables, smacked his greasy lips and made loud orgasmic moans to convey his pleasure. Bui filmed him on his iPhone and vowed to YouTube it. A crowd gathered to cheer Henry on. When the food was gone, he licked the tray with his tongue, his nose—his whole face—then jumped up from his seat and unleashed a long, hearty burp to much hooting and hollering.

Only when the noise died down did he realize that Charlene

had been sitting at the next table. She was still talking to Marnie's cousin.

"You're turning red," Bui said to Henry.

Henry did feel heat burning his cheeks.

"It's the food. I think I'm allergic."

He wiped his mouth with a sleeve and snuck a glance at Charlene. She was listening now.

"Henry has diarrhea," Bui announced to the table. "Make some room."

"Gross!" Marnie's cousin giggled and wrinkled her pretty little nose to feign disgust.

"I don't have diarrhea," Henry protested.

Bui looked confused. "You always have diarrhea. You talk about it all the time."

"Not today," Henry said lamely, suddenly wishing Charlene wasn't listening after all.

"Hey, douchebag!" Marnie leaned over the table and snapped her fingers in Henry's face. Her boobs jiggled in front of him. "You think that was funny, taping my locker?" She picked up a plastic knife and pointed it at him.

"Um," said Henry, trying to think of a lighthearted comeback. But everything he thought of sounded pathological.

"Sorry," he finally said, then smiled at her.

She smiled back, sweetly.

"Drop dead!" Marnie swiped the half-empty bottle of orange juice from Henry's tray and dumped the contents over his head.

Everyone was laughing at him now. Even Bui was slapping a knee, dissolving in tears.

Henry felt the blood starting to boil beneath his cheeks again, but a glint of something bright distracted him. Charlene was laughing too. Her braces caught the sunlight glinting through the windows and shone, almost blinding him. The sticky orange juice trickled down his neck and onto his shirt, but suddenly his anger receded. Charlene was looking at him and her eyes were all lit up. Maybe she thought he looked cute with wet hair.

He grinned back. Everyone at the table made a show of passing him all their napkins.

All through science class, then gym, Henry thought about how softly Charlene had laughed. She had seen the mechanics behind his antics and would be the kind of girl who would hold his hand when other, cattier girls did things like throw orange juice at him and laugh in his face.

He thought about her running gym laps, the way she tilted her head and how the low rumble of a laugh escaped her throat.

When the last bell of the day sounded, he stuck around, but people were buzzing around her. From a distance, he watched them fall away one by one, like petals being plucked, until she was alone.

He didn't want to approach her on school grounds—it seemed wrong somehow—so he followed her out to the streets to where all the biggest houses were, where the other students were heading if they weren't home already. He pursued her orange Jansport

backpack like a horse chasing after a dangling carrot, not knowing where he was going. After several twists and turns through the streets, after the other kids had disappeared behind doors, it was just the two of them, one still walking behind the other.

Charlene came to an abrupt halt, and Henry, dazed, almost crashed into her.

She turned to face him. "Are you following me?"

"No!" Henry sputtered. "I'm not—I live here."

"Where?"

"I don't...I can't reveal the secret location of my lair."

She smiled, but shot him a curious look.

"I'm not following you," he said firmly.

"Sure," she said.

"I live in that house over there."

"Which house?"

He pointed vaguely ahead of them. "That...green one."

Charlene took a good look at the house at the end of the block.

It was the same size as the others, but it was the only one around without fake stone cladding. A bright house with a country flair, the wood panels painted a pistachio pudding green.

She nodded. "I'll walk you there."

Henry had no choice but to keep walking. Neither spoke. Henry rummaged in his mind for something to say. He thought up plenty of topics, but none that seemed appropriate.

He unlatched the front gate and pretended to walk toward the house. "Okay. I'm going home now. See you tomorrow."

"Okay," said Charlene.

"Well." He cleared his throat. "Thanks for walking me."

"You're welcome."

"See you tomorrow."

"See you."

"Bye."

"Bye." She didn't budge.

As Henry slowly walked up the porch steps, Charlene was still standing by the fence watching him. He made a big show of patting his pockets for his keys, then acted like he'd forgotten them.

"Shoot!"

"Ring the doorbell," Charlene suggested. "Maybe someone's home."

"Right," Henry muttered. He rang the bell and peeked through the window. A fat cat sat on a floral sofa, looking bored. The lights were off. He felt confident enough to ring again. The cat yawned and curled up into a ball.

No one came to the door. He was lucky.

"My parents are still at work," he said, walking back to her. He shrugged with his palms facing the sky.

Charlene nodded. "Sure."

"I can walk you home since I have some time to kill." He was already sidling up to her before she could respond.

Charlene sighed and continued on her way.

"It might rain soon," Henry commented.

Grey clouds were fattening and gathering over their heads. If

she lived far away, he would suggest that they duck into a café until the sky cleared.

Charlene stopped and looked at him sharply. "I know you don't live in that house," she said.

Henry shook his head. "Yes I do."

"No you don't. Why don't you just admit it? Admit you were following me."

Henry scrambled to stretch a shocked, innocuous look across his face. "What? You're paranoid."

"I'm not paranoid!" Charlene had stopped smiling. "I know who lives there, and it's a couple of old ladies. They're my neighbours."

"Oh."

"I'm not stupid, you know."

Henry was speechless.

"So admit it," she said.

"It's just a coincidence..."

"I made sure to turn a lot of corners to see if you'd follow me, and you did."

Henry shook his head and kept quiet.

"The answer is *no*, Henry." Her tone softened. "I'm sorry. But please don't follow me."

He watched Charlene cross the street and continue down the next block. She didn't turn around once.

Where did he ever get the idea that she was nice? She was a bitch, like Marnie, like Marnie's cousin, like everyone. He looked up at the clouds and wished they would squeeze out some rain.

He wanted the fat drops to hit the top of his head over and over like Chinese water torture, to cleanse him of his orange juice and stickiness and stupidity. But they just hung above him, not doing much, just loafing along. There was nowhere to go but home now. He would have to take the bus.