

Bully



by Joanna Sisk-Purvis

"DO YOUR KNEES hurt, Melissa?"

I wince at Jenn's voice piercing through the noise on the bleachers. Most of the class is already dressed for gym and waiting for Mr. Matthews. I can feel every one of their eyeballs on me as I cross the floor. Every. One.

"Your knees must hurt, Melissa. Why else would you walk like that?"

Have you ever tried to walk normally when you start thinking about *how* to walk normally? I don't think it can be done. I can't even remember which part of my foot is sup-

posed to hit the ground first. Does my knee usually bend like that when I take a step?

Giggling erupts from the flock of girls surrounding Jenn.

Mr. Matthews is talking to someone at the other side of the gym. No hope of adult rescue. I plop on the first row of bleachers and pretend I'm the last living person on earth.

Until three weeks ago, Jenn Fremont was my best friend. I still have my half of the "friends forever" heart necklace we bought at the mall for Christmas, and nearly every day my mom asks me when I want to invite Jenn

Illustrated by Taryn Gee

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IT'S HARD TO LOSE
YOUR BEST FRIEND.



MEWY
SNIFF!



.. IN CRICKET COUNTRY,
EVERYBUGGY IS FRIENDS
FOREVER!



for a sleepover. Jenn and I knew all of each others' intimate secrets and talked about our teachers in code names. Then I came into homeroom one Monday, and when I slid into my desk right next to hers, she scooted her chair over to Nikki King and started whispering. Jenn doesn't even *like* Nikki.

"Jenn! Hey!" I laughed, thinking she hadn't seen me.

She looked at me like I was something sticky she'd found on the bottom of her shoe. Then she rolled her eyes at Nikki and whispered some more.

Things went downhill from there. Jenn wouldn't talk to me. Every time I entered a room, it went quiet. I was treated like I had some horrible, contagious virus. Every other seventh-grader moved away from me in line, scrambled to find another lab partner, or left me my own private lunch table. And I had no idea why, except that Jenn decided it would be that way.

Two weeks into Operation Destroy Melissa, I was in the hall outside English class when I heard Carter ask his friends, "Who would you kiss if you *had* to do it—Jenn or Melissa?"

Jeff answered. Jeff, whose scruffy hair I'd stared at every day in math class since August, wondering what it would be like to run my fingers through it. One time Jenn caught me doodling his name in my assignment book. She'd called him my boyfriend ever since.

"I'd say Melissa, but I'm too afraid of what Jenn would do if she found out."

A few weeks ago I'd have been over the moon that Jeff liked me better than Jenn. Now I just felt worse. Nobody even cared whether I was awful or awesome. They were just afraid of Jenn.

I walked into English class and all conversation stopped.

SO HERE I AM, sitting alone on the bottom bleacher, praying that I don't have to get up and walk again until the rest of my class dies in a rare, simultaneous spontaneous combustion incident. That seems unlikely, so I scan the gym for other teachers who might provide a distraction. No luck. Mr. Matthews is deep in conversation with the visitor, like he forgot he has a whole class of seventh graders waiting on the bleachers, dressed in stupid gym uniforms and getting rowdier by the second.

When I hear someone stomping down the metal stairs I work hard to keep my head from turning. *No one is here*, I think as loudly as possible. No good. Dirty sneakers appear over the rusty metal grooves I've been staring at for the last eternity.

"Hey," says their owner.

I look up only long enough to identify her. It's Allison. She's new this year. She's tall and really skinny and has kind of a big nose. She wears her chin-length sandy blond hair in a kind of mushroom shape right on top of her head. Rumor has it her family belongs to some weird religion that doesn't celebrate birthdays or dance or read fantasy novels. You'd think somebody like Jenn would've

H'M. MAYBE
ALLISON CAN
BE HER FRIEND!



MEWY
YAY!



HA! TAKE THAT,
JENN!

chosen *her* to single out for the misery treatment. But Allison is immune. She just sits wherever she wants, talks to whoever talks to her, spends most of her time buried in her big spiral sketchbook doing goodness knows what, and always goes home alone.

“Hey,” I say. Someone giggles behind me. I stare at the gym floor.

“Anybody sitting here?” she asks.

Duh, I think, but I just say, “No.”

She plops down. Then she’s quiet. So is everybody else. *An outcast and a weirdo walk into a gymnasium. . . .*

I jump a little when she finally speaks.

“You can sit with me.”

“What?”

“At lunch. You can sit with me.”

“Oh! Oh, OK,” I say stupidly.

She looks embarrassed. “I mean, you don’t have to. I just . . . I don’t know if you see me. I thought you might like . . .”

“No! I mean, yes! That’s really nice. I will. Sit with you. Thank you.” Great. Now I’ve

forgotten how to talk, too. Soon I’ll be drooling down my gym shirt.

“OK,” she says, and goes back to sitting silently, hands in her lap.

AT LUNCHTIME I grab my cafeteria tray and scan the long rows of tables for Allison—quickly, before Jenn and her new friends can spot me. I find her sitting alone at the end of a table near a window. She has a pencil in one hand, held out over her sketchbook, and a sandwich in the other.

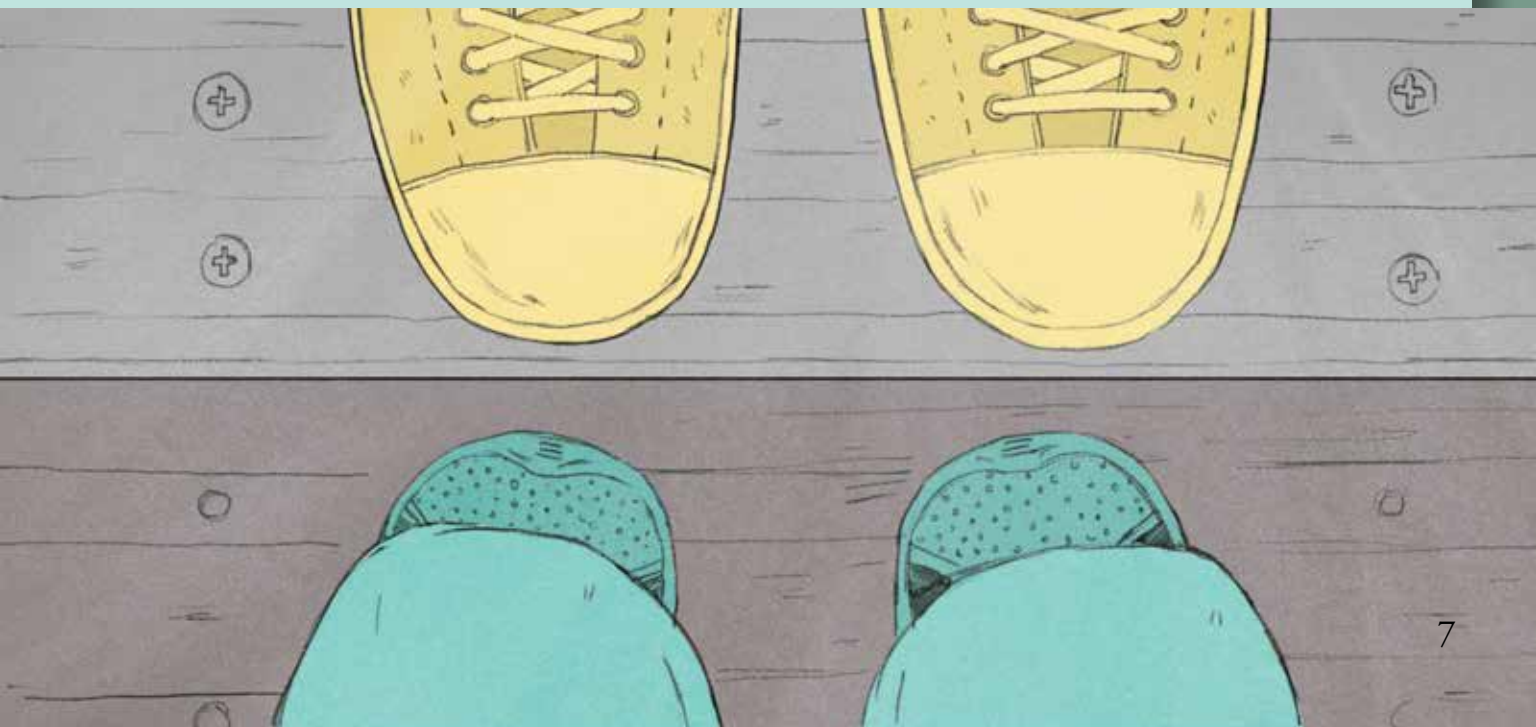
I hesitate. The old me, the me with Jenn by my side, would’ve said she looked like a dork.

The old me isn’t here anymore.

“Hi,” I say, taking the chair across from her. There aren’t any other kids over here yet.

She smiles at me, big. “Hey! Look, did I get him?”

She uses her sandwich to gesture at the sketchbook and scoots it around to face me. There on the page is Mr. Shaw, our pre-algebra teacher. A perfect cartoon, with





his spiky hair, crazy wide eyes, shirt half untucked, whiteboard marker in his hand. There's a speech bubble with his trademark word, "Gah!" Next to him a student sleeps on her desk, math papers falling on the floor.

I laugh and laugh for what feels like the first time ever.

"That's really, really good," I finally gasp. Allison looks relieved. I wonder if she thought I was laughing at her. Did I used to do that? I can't remember.

"Is that what you're always doing in that book?" I ask, finally breathing normally and unwrapping my plastic fork.

"Yeah, mostly," she says, flipping through the pages. "I write, too. A lot of it's private."

"OK," I say quickly, hoping that she'll show me more. For now, though, she closes the book.

"So what did you do to her?" Allison asks bluntly.

I suddenly feel heavy. It seems like ages ago I was laughing at that picture.

"Nothing," I answer. "I don't know."

"Really?"

"Yeah, I just came to school one day, and Jenn hated me."

"Wow, I figured it was lame, but that's just stupid." She pauses to chew her last bite of peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich. "I guess she'll do anything for attention."

"I guess," I say, poking at my vegetables with the flimsy fork. "So why are you talking to me?"

"I'm invisible," she answers matter-of-factly. "Nobody cares what I do. They don't

even try to figure out what I'm doing in my sketchbook." She picks it up and ruffles through it. "Here," she says, pushing it toward me again.

I look down. It's Jenn. Well, it's Jenn's head—flowing blond hair, wide eyes, baby cheeks—on the body of a fat ant. The queen ant. Little worker ants with heads that look an awful lot like her new giggling friends surround her on the page.

I don't laugh this time.

"You're really good," I say. "You should, I don't know, enter a contest or something."

"Unlikely," she says.

"Have you drawn me?"

Allison just smiles and closes her sketchbook.

I WAS RIGHT, Allison *is* weird. She doesn't let anything the other kids say get to her. She just draws it, or writes about it. The other kids have no idea how talented she is. But I know someday she'll be famous. And someday I'll be free from Jenn and all her worker ants.

"Pssst, Watchdog!" I whisper across the lab table.

Allison answers with a hiss. "Watch out, Batgirl, kittens at two o'clock!" I look to my right, and sure enough, a pair of Jenn's friends are snickering and watching to see what we'll do next.

I roll my eyes. "Do you want to come over before the dance tomorrow?" I whisper, pretending to check the instructions in my lab notebook.

"No can do," she answers. "Not going."

“What?” I blurt too loudly. I have to wait for Mrs. Benton to turn back around before I continue. “But everybody’s going, it’s the Valentine’s dance!”

“I’m not allowed to dance. Or do valentines. I’ll probably have to go to church.”

A month has passed since we first had lunch together. A month is a long time to get to know someone when neither of you has any other friends. It turns out the stuff about fantasy novels and birthdays is true, but Allison never wants to talk about it. Her parents seem perfectly nice, and they let me come over all the time, even though my family’s not very religious.

“Wow, that sucks,” I whisper. I hope I don’t show quite how crushed I am. “Maybe I won’t go, then. I’ll just end up stuck to the wall the whole time.” I think of Jeff and his messed-up hair. I think of how Allison isn’t afraid of anybody, and she won’t be there. I think of how I can’t remember how to walk in front of Jenn.

“You should totally go,” she says. “They don’t hate you anymore.”

“Yeah, right,” I mumble. “They just act like I’ve got the plague.”

ALLISON CATCHES ME at my locker after school, out of breath.

“Here, I made this for you. Open it at home. Have fun at the dance.”

“I’m not going to the . . .” I start, but she’s gone. I’m holding a manilla envelope.

I can’t wait until I get home. As soon as the guy sitting next to me gets off the bus, I



open the envelope and slide out a single sheet of paper.

It’s one of Allison’s drawings, but it’s different. It’s in full color—oil pastels, I think. It’s not a cartoon. It’s beautiful. It’s of me. I’m standing on a grassy hill with my arms in the air, maybe dancing. The sun is setting in a burst of bright colors, and at the top of the page the stars are coming out. I look joyful, powerful, free.

I GO TO the dance.

My mom drops me off, and as soon as I get into the gym I head straight to concessions. It’s easier to hide behind a cup of punch.

I don’t see Jenn yet, so I test out Allison’s theory that they don’t hate me anymore. Nikki King is standing near the wall watching a group of eighth graders. I walk over to her.



“Hey,” I say. “Having fun?”

“Yeah, it’s OK,” she says, smiling. “Is the punch any good?”

I guess I don’t have the plague anymore.

It doesn’t take long for Jenn to find me. I’m just finishing my punch when she comes strutting up to me, alone. Jeff and Carter and a bunch of the seventh-grade boys are huddled in a circle that’s barely dancing just a few feet away, but none of Jenn’s girlfriends are around.

“Hey, Melissa,” she says.

I don’t answer. I glare at her. I hope I’m glaring at her. I’m not very good at glaring, and she’s not giving me much to work with. She looks like old friendly Jenn, actually. I feel a pang in my gut. I thought I was over that hurt.

“Melissa, I . . .”

I wait, glaring pathetically.

“I guess, I mean, I want to start over. Like, you know, could we start over?”

I’m so shocked, I lose the glare completely.

She sounds nervous when she speaks again. “So, I hear you live in my neighborhood . . .”

That was the first thing Jenn ever said to me, when she was new at our school. I’m surprised she remembers. Something prickles behind my eyes.

“Jenn, I . . .”

I close my eyes for a second, and I see Allison’s picture of me. Strong. Free.

“No,” I say, opening my eyes. “No,” I repeat, louder.

Jenn looks like she’s been slapped.

“You can’t *do* that to people, Jenn,” I continue. “I’m not afraid of you anymore!”

The second I say it, I know it’s true! I laugh out loud.

Jenn looks at me like I’m insane. She gathers herself up, and I see the new Jenn face. The mean one. I don’t care.

I march over to Jeff and tap him on the shoulder. Right in front of Jenn.

“Wanna dance?”

His buddies elbow each other. Suddenly I don’t feel so strong. My face feels hot.

“Sure, OK,” Jeff stutters.

It’s the most awkward dance ever. I feel like a zombie with my arms stuck out in front of me. I don’t know where to put my hands. Jeff and I try to talk a little, then we give up. I don’t run my fingers through his hair. I swear to myself I will never ask another boy to dance ever again. But all the seventh grade girls are watching, wide-eyed. All of them except Allison.


“Thanks,” I say to Jeff when the song ends. He actually blushes. “Sure thing.”

I do dance with another boy. Two more actually, both of whom ask me to dance after they see me dance with Jeff. It doesn’t get any less awkward.

“What was it like?” Nikki asks me excitedly after my last dance.

“Sweaty,” I answer truthfully. “And my arms are tired.”

She giggles. I wish Allison was here to draw a picture of all the zombie couples.

But I’ll see her tomorrow, and I’ll tell her all about it. 

EVERYBUGGY
DANCE!



“I WILL SURVIVE...!”



THERE ARE LOTS OF
FRIENDS OUT THERE!

MEWY
YAY!



... BOOGIE DOWN!