



Also by Rob Harrell

WINK

ROB HARRELL

POP CORN



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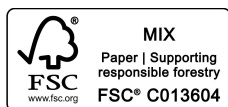
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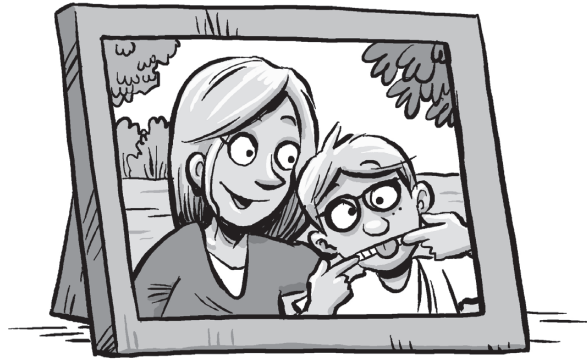
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Northwood, Santry, Dublin 9, D09 C6X8, Ireland
compliance@bonnierbooks.ie

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***Dedicated affectionately
to the anxious, the worried, the stressed,
and the generally freaked out***

1

FINAL PREPARATIONS



Okay. Let's start this awful, one-for-the-books day at the beginning. That's where most stories start, I guess.

I'm looking in the bathroom mirror, and what I see is decent. A bit gangly and skinny, but not terrible. Inside, I have the regular stew of butterflies and worries and some irritation that a certain someone's nasty, yellowed

nighttime mouthguard was leaning on the bristles of my toothbrush this morning—but I take a couple of deep breaths. I actually feel halfway all right about what the mirror is showing me for once.

I clean up okay, as every adult likes to say when a kid puts in the slightest effort.

I wash my hands one more time—I'd used a tissue to move the mouthguard, but who knows if that's at all effective. Gross stuff can probably pass through a tissue like air through a screen door.



I walk out into the kitchen, and my mom is there, waiting excitedly.

“Oh. You look absolutely perfect.”

She says that, but then she must see something wrong, because she does that disgusting mom move where she licks her thumb and wipes at something beside my mouth. A stray bit of scrambled egg? A toast crumb?

“Gross.”

AUTHOR'S NOTE:
IT'S MORE THAN GROSS.
I HATE GERMS.
IT'S A THING.

As I wipe any residual spit away, she sits back, grabs my shoulders, and holds me at arm's length.

"Look at this. Yes sir. That's my handsome man." Her eyes dart around from my new shirt to my fresh—one day old!—haircut. She smiles.

I haven't seen much of that smile lately. I've seen a lot more of the stressed side-frown. The Susan Yaeger Chewing-Her-Lip Worry Face—which typically gives me the Andrew Yaeger Worried Stomach.

She pats my shoulders twice. "Mika and Jonesy'll be here any minute, and I need to get to my Big First Day." Today is her first day as executive assistant to some big important business guy, and we're both stomach-churningly aware of how much she needs it to go well.

My grandmother, G, shuffles into the room in her neon-pink housecoat. She's been living with us for the past year and a half or so. She stops in the middle of the kitchen and looks around, confused. Her graying hair looks like she got in a fight with her pillows.

My mom turns on her caregiver smile. "Hi, Mom. Can

I get you anything?" She pulls a few cinnamon graham crackers—G's favorite—out of the cupboard. G takes them, scratches her butt, and stands there staring at me like she's not quite sure who I am.



"Doesn't Andrew look nice, Mom? You always said looking nice for school photos was super important. It's Picture Day!"

At the words *Picture Day*, my grandmother's face lights up a bit—like the old G I used to know. She holds up a finger and croaks a quiet "Oh, yes, yes, yes." Then she hurries (as much as she can) out of the room.

That's the most excitement we've seen from G in weeks. "You can't take the teacher out of the lady," my mom says. "She used to get so worked up over school photos. Said 'Those photos are how people will remember you

forever.’ She wasn’t completely wrong, either. Somebody I went to school with friend-requested me the other day. I had no idea who she was until I got out my yearbook, and BOOM. Her school photo brought it all back.”

G walks back into the room—her arms full of middle school yearbooks. They’re from *my* school, but they’re ancient.

G used to teach Social Studies at my school. Waaaay back. She taught there for years. I can’t count the number of times we’ve been stopped by former students at restaurants, thanking her and telling me what a great teacher she was. It’s kind of cool, I guess—although sometimes you just want to eat your mac and cheese bites in peace, y’know? It’s like living with a minor celebrity.

G thumps the books down. The stack spills over a bit, but she grabs the top one and opens it with a shaky hand. A number of individual photos—the kind you buy to give to friends—tumble out. Maybe fifteen of them. All students. I look up and G has a huge, proud grin on her face as she pages through to the faculty page. When she finds it, she spins the book around and points at her black-and-white photo. It’s a great picture—she’s a lot younger, her hair is darker, and she’s wearing some kind of a vest that looks like it came out of an ancient sitcom.



Mrs. Hanley - Social Studies

“Pretty good, huh?” I look up and she’s waggling her eyebrows. “Huh?” It’s so good to see her happy that my mom and I both laugh. She nods and grabs another year-book. While she’s looking, I pick up a few of the student photos. They all have writing on them:

For Mrs. Hanley—You are the best! Kaitlyn

Thank you so much Mrs. Hanley! Marcus

Have a great summer, Mrs. H! Jennifer

I can’t thank you enough.—Bob

Seems like they liked her a lot, which doesn’t surprise me. She was super fun and cool—before she started getting sick.

She shows me a couple more of her photos, where

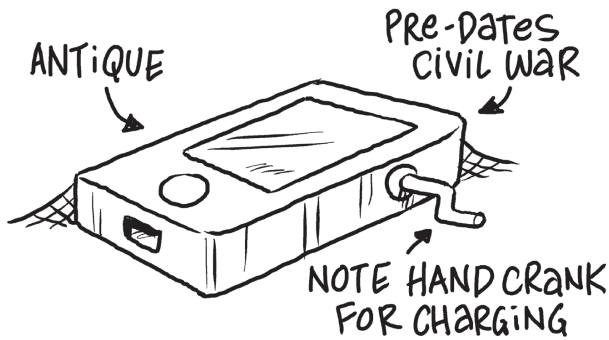
she's wearing different but similar vests. Vests must have been her official yearbook photo look. Then she puts her hand on my shoulder and gives it a faint squeeze.

"You look good." She smiles, but then straightens her back and pats her chest, looking me in the eye. "Up straight." Then she pulls a second graham cracker out of her nightgown pocket and takes a bite. (The woman would eat them all day long if my mom didn't keep them out of sight.) She looks down at the pile of yearbooks and back up at me, then turns around and starts shuffling back to her (my old) room. As she goes through the doorway, she lets out a fairly impressive burp.

Unfortunately, G isn't "all there" these days.

I grab my backpack. I packed it last night—perfectly, as always. Everything in its proper compartment. (I have a system.) I put both straps over my shoulders, careful not to wrinkle the new shirt. I can't remember the last time I had a Brand-New Shirt. One that isn't a hand-me-down from my weird cousin in Des Moines. And this sucker has a collar, no less!

"Wait. Wait. Let me get a picture." My mom grabs her iPhone—maybe the oldest iPhone still in circulation—and waves her hand for me to get over in front of the plants.



I watch her struggling to get the camera app to come up.

“You sure you don’t want me to skip today?” I ask. “I could ride along. Give moral support. Maybe a pep talk over lunch?”

“No way, pal. I’m riding solo today and YOU are gonna go get the best school picture of your life. Your sixth-grade photo looked like you were kidnapped or raised by wolves or something. But not this year, my well-put-together friend.”

She’s nervous. Which makes me nervous. She needs this job to work out. It could change things—and we really need things to change. And yep, as she aims the phone she’s chewing at that lip again—right on schedule. I feel something in my stomach twist. It’s nerves. Anxiety. But it feels like there’s a fussy iguana in there.

THE ANXIETY FILES A. Yaeger

≡ ANXIETY 101 ≡

GOT A FUSSY
IGUANA IN YOUR
STOMACH?



Hey! ANXIETY!

FEEL NERVOUS
ELECTRICITY IN
YER SHOULDERS?



YEP! THAT'S IT!

SWARM OF
CAFFEINATED PELS
IN YOUR HEAD?



NOW YOU'RE
GETTING IT!

WANT TO LEAVE
YOUR BRAIN SOME-
WHERE AND GO HIDE?



THAT'S THE
STUFF!

“Okay, Chin up. Up straight. Big smile. Million dollars!”

I do it as best I can, but I’m in my head.



“Good luck, Mom. I know you’re gonna slay.” She’s been playing that song where Beyoncé sings about slaying on a loop for a couple of days. Psyching herself up.

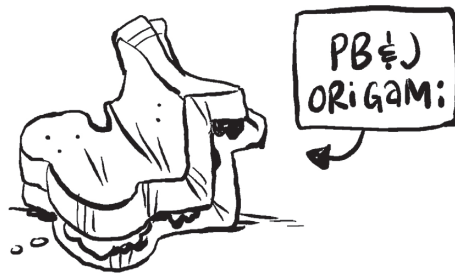
She sips her coffee. “Thank you. I *intend* to slay. But don’t worry about me, okay? I mean it. Just focus on having a good day and try not to mess up that shirt or your hair or whatever. I won’t be available to bring you a replacement, so don’t spill anything on it. What period are you getting your photos?”

“No idea.”

“Well, I hope it’s early.” She stares at me, but I can

tell she's not actually looking at me. She's thinking. She darts off and comes back with my nicest T-shirt—the blue one—and hands it to me. “Put this in your backpack. Just in case. I really do want your photo to be nice this year. For you, but also for me. And for G! Oh, and I put some of those stain remover packet things in with your lunch.”

I slide the shirt into the back pocket by my ancient school-provided laptop. It irritates me, as I had everything just how I like it, but I don't say anything. Adding the shirt bunches up my sack lunch, and I just know my PB&J is going to come out looking like smushed-up bread origami.



I put the pack on again and it doesn't feel right. I'm a weirdo when it comes to my backpack, I'm aware. I tap the kitchen table five times without thinking about it. I fight the overwhelming urge to take everything out

and repack it. Well, more than an urge, it's a little voice telling me I need to. Or something might . . . happen. But there's no time, and I don't want to make my mom more nervous. Maybe I can repack on the bus. Not fixing it makes my chest feel tight.

There's a knock on the apartment door as it swings open. "Hallooooo?" It's my best friend, Jonesy, and her mom, Mika (my mom's best friend). They step in as my mom shushes Jonesy.

"Shh shh shh. I'm hoping she's going back to sleep." Meaning G. Mika has a stack of *Peoples* and *Us Weeklys* under her arm. She's going to watch G for the day while my mom goes to work. (I should have said: My grandma has Alzheimer's disease and it's gotten pretty bad, pretty fast—some days she forgets who we are or why she lives here. And she kind of likes to wander. That's part of why my mom needs this new big job—so we can get her more help.)

"Whoa. Who's this fancy person, and what have you done with my friend Andrew?" Jonesy gives me a dramatic look up and down. "Combed hair? Ironed shorts? Nice!"

I roll my eyes. Normally I'd meet Jonesy on the bus after she catches it in her (much nicer) neighborhood, but today Mika brought her, so she gets to hang with me

at my bus stop. Speaking of which, we need to hustle if we don't want to miss it.

I give my mom a bear hug. "Okay. We gotta go. Good luck today. Be awesome. Break a leg."

She laughs. "No, YOU break a leg! Be awesome! Love you!"

"Love you." I kind of mumble it as I turn—all too aware of Jonesy. I mean, I love my mom, but in front of other people it's just kind of weird saying it. I give Jonesy another little eye roll as I pass her, just to keep my street cred.

Then Jonesy and I are in the hallway. It smells like Mrs. Partridge is cooking broccoli in 3G—again—and I'm a little embarrassed for Jonesy to smell it. So gross. Who cooks broccoli at this time of the morning? Old people, I guess. Or maybe they make broccoli Pop-Tarts for older people?



We fly down the stairs. As we go by, Mr. Benchley is in the vestibule. He looks up over his glasses, perched on the very tip of his nose. (I swear he must glue them there.)

“Holy cow! Looking good, Andrew! What’s the special occasion?”

I look back as I push through the glass front door. “Picture Day. Gotta look our best, y’know?” I shrug and we head out.