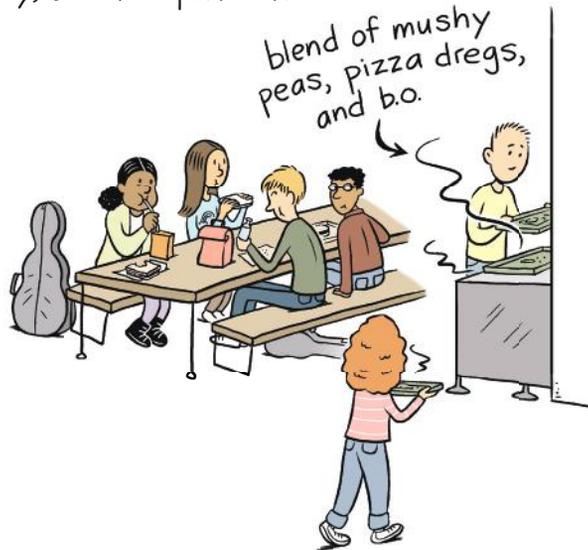


PROLOGUE

Sometimes I look around the cafeteria at lunch and wonder why everything is set up the way it is. Why the jocks sit near the front. And the Science Club kids sit in back. And the manga kids sit near the ice cream freezer. Why the volleyball team sits near the windows and the orchestra kids sit near the tray conveyor belt. Which, by the way, is kinda unfortunate.



I guess I'm lucky I'm into sports. Otherwise I might end up here:



It's not that my friends aren't smart, too. Okay, maybe not smart-smart. But there are times I think...

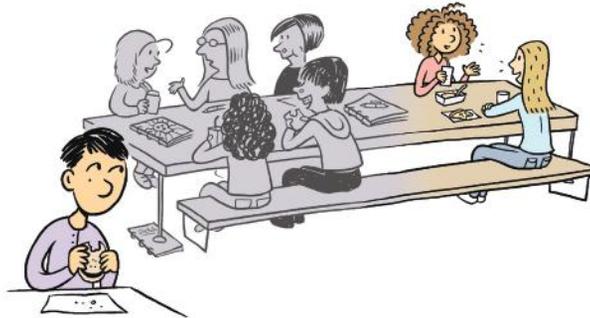


I doubt anyone else in my group thinks about this stuff. They probably don't see the point of being friends with anyone else. Not sure if that's good or bad.

All I know is, more and more, I kinda like getting to know different kinds of people.



I just wish ...



... we weren't so divided.

TYLER

I'm sure lots of kids are sad when winter break is over. Like the ones who get picked on at school. Or the kids who go away with their families to Florida and have to come back to the cold and snow. Even the ones who stay home during break and do regular stuff (playing video games, watching movies) probably hate it when they return to school.



Me? I'm the opposite. I love going back. I know that sounds weird, but if you lived in my house, you'd understand. It's not exactly an amusement park.

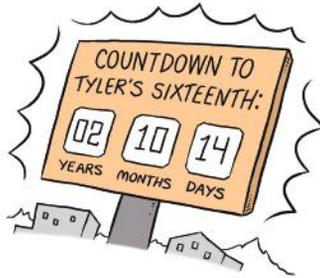


Things haven't been the same since Zach—that's my big brother—went to high school. Now he always goes out with friends or to practice or work. When he is home, he stays in his room and plays bass guitar or talks to his girlfriend. Zach stopped playing Fortnite with me a while ago.

And all my mom wants to do—when she's home—is play Scrabble.



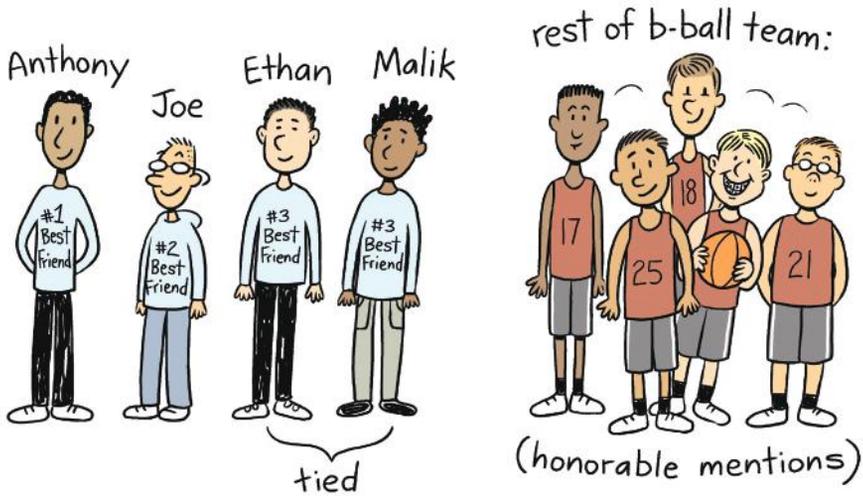
But I understand Zach. If I had a driver's license and my own car (bought with money from a tae kwon do assistant's job), I'd be gone, too. But that's not happening for:



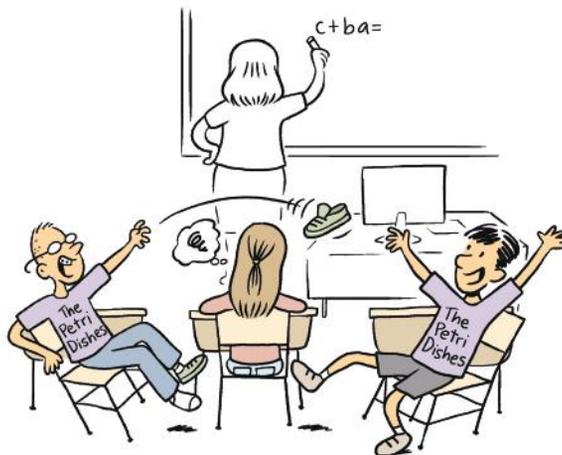
I did try to make the most of being home. I played video games and pickup basketball at the Y with Anthony Randall and Joe Lungo the first week. But a huge blizzard kept us home the rest of break. All I did was practice my trumpet and draw.



I did get special permission (think: begging), to go to Anthony's house for Christmas Eve. He's my best friend (don't tell Joe!).



Anthony and I have known each other since preschool. I've only known Joe since last year when we came to Lakefront Middle from different elementary schools. We were put on the same team in sixth grade (our school is so big, they divide the classes into "teams"), and that's when we became friends.



Anyway, back to Christmas Eve, which was awesome. Anthony's parents made this whole spread, and nothing was from a frozen bag. Anthony has two little two sisters who talked nonstop and fought over the butter rolls. His huge shaggy dog, Phineas, was under the table the whole time, taking turns licking crumbs and my big toe.



His dad asked me lots of questions, which totally mortified Anthony but didn't bother me. My dad usually asks me the same two things on the phone when we talk:



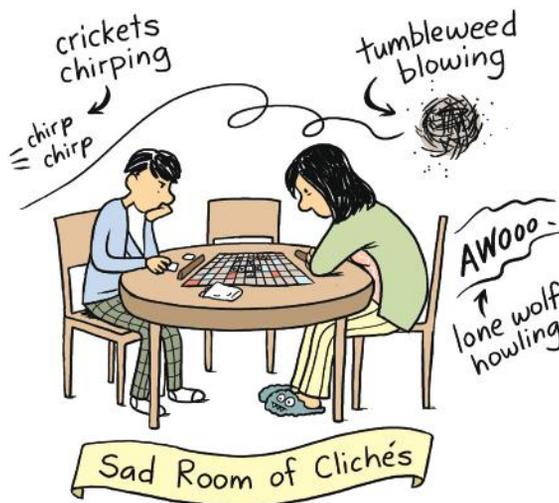
Maybe he'd ask more, but he's always interrupted by Michelle.*

*more on her later

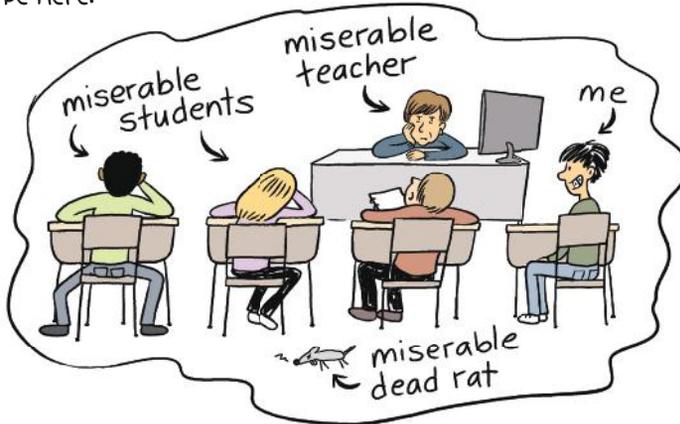
As you've probably guessed, my parents are divorced. Which is no big deal, I know. So are every other kid's. But my mom works a lot, and even though she's a good parent and involved and all that, she's pretty tired out by the end of the day.



And since she had to work most of break and only wanted a few low-key Scrabble nights, that just added to the boredom.



I just got back to school. Guessing I'll be the only one happy to be here.



Definitely will be happy to be around my friends.

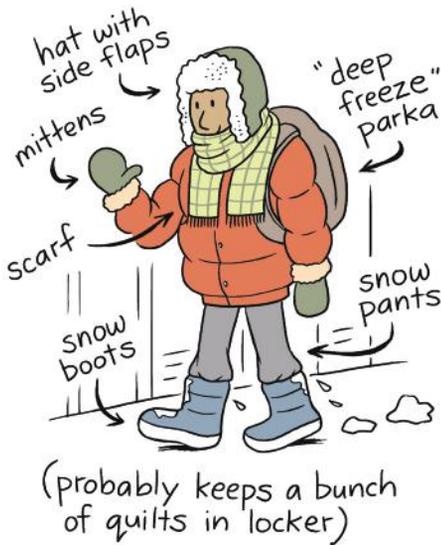


And pumped for my favorite classes, like PE and Ms. Laurie's art class. I started taking art this year, and I'm hooked. After our winter Zentangle project, I went home and made, like, five more Zentangle* drawings.

*a form of meditative doodling using structured patterns



I'm at my locker before homeroom. Anthony, in full winter gear, walks over. That's what I love about the guy—he never cares what anyone thinks.



Technically, we can play apart and talk on our phones, but it's way more fun in person. I love playing at his house, mainly 'cause of my gaming partner:



Anthony unloads about forty pounds of outerwear in his locker while I dump my slushy coat and hat in mine and grab my binder.





Anthony and I make our way through the jungle—aka main hall—trying to dodge a couple of scary-looking eighth graders (fourteen-year-olds with beards just isn't right).



Before winter break, Emmie Douglass wrote me a really mushy love letter that I wasn't supposed to see. Joe found it and showed it to me (and half the school). I guess he thought it was funny, but it was totally uncool of him to do that.

Even though she said she wrote it as a joke, I felt really bad that she was embarrassed. So I started talking to her. And didn't mention the note again. Now we're kinda friends and hang out in art.



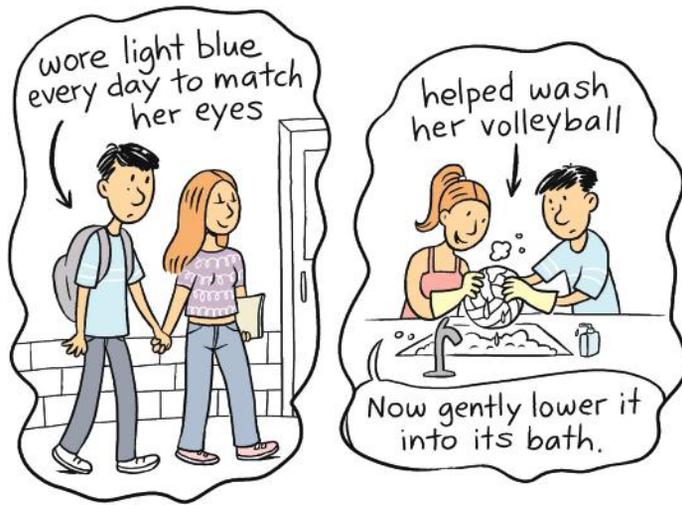




We all crack up. I pretend to vomit, and that's the exact moment Celia walks by with her girl posse.



Now it's my turn to go Flamin' Cheetos. Celia is the queen bee of our class. We dated for two weeks in the beginning of seventh grade. Two of the longest weeks of my life.



After that, I gave up on dating in middle school. Which, by the way, is just holding hands in the hallway and surrendering half your french fries.

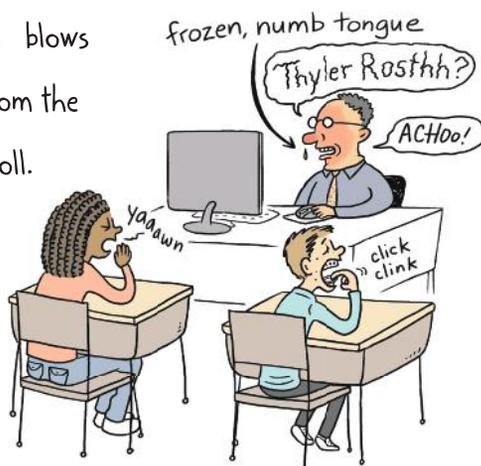


The three of us head to our homerooms—Anthony and I in one direction, Joe in another.



We walk in and see some guys from basketball. The season started last month, but we didn't have games or practice over break. We're so ready to get back to it, and we talk about our upcoming big game with Valley Bottom Middle. We've gotta beat them so we can go to the playoffs.

Mr. Fazekas blows in, red-faced from the cold, and takes roll.



I sneak-text Joe a meme of an evil-looking chipmunk in a popcorn bowl and label it:



Joe sends me:



I've missed these stupid sneaky school texts. I put my phone away and breathe in that familiar combo of textbooks, floor cleaner, and body spray.

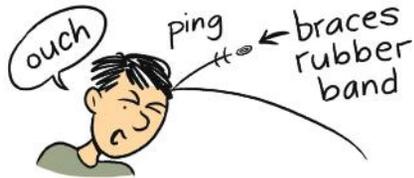


I'm not worried about getting sick, and I'm excited about getting back into practice and stuff. But for some reason, Ethan's words give me a funny feeling.

The bell rings.



We laugh and walk into science. Yeah, it feels good to be back.



Emmie



MEANING AFTER TWO WEEKS OF WINTER BREAK AND NO ART CLASSES...





What, did he say hi or something?

Yes. *And* we talked. About butt clouds.

Ohhkay.



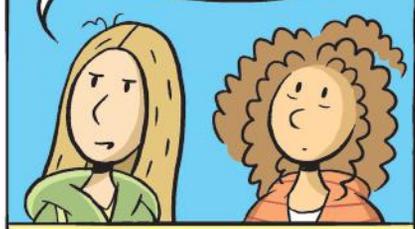
Anyway, I'm so excited to be back.



Wow. You must be happy if you're excited to be back here.



Where's Sarah? Doesn't she come by your locker, too, now?



I NOTICE A LITTLE SARCASM. "TONE", AS MY DAD CALLS IT.

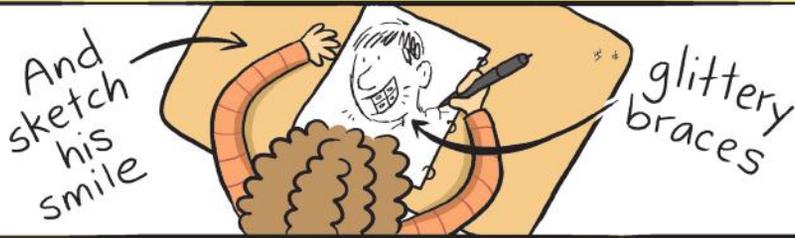


She's sick. I feel bad, especially 'cause we're getting a new art assignment.

Well, that's just more time with Tyler...
all/loone.

Shhh!

WE WALK TO HOMEROOM,
WHERE I DAYDREAM SOME
MORE ABOUT TYLER.

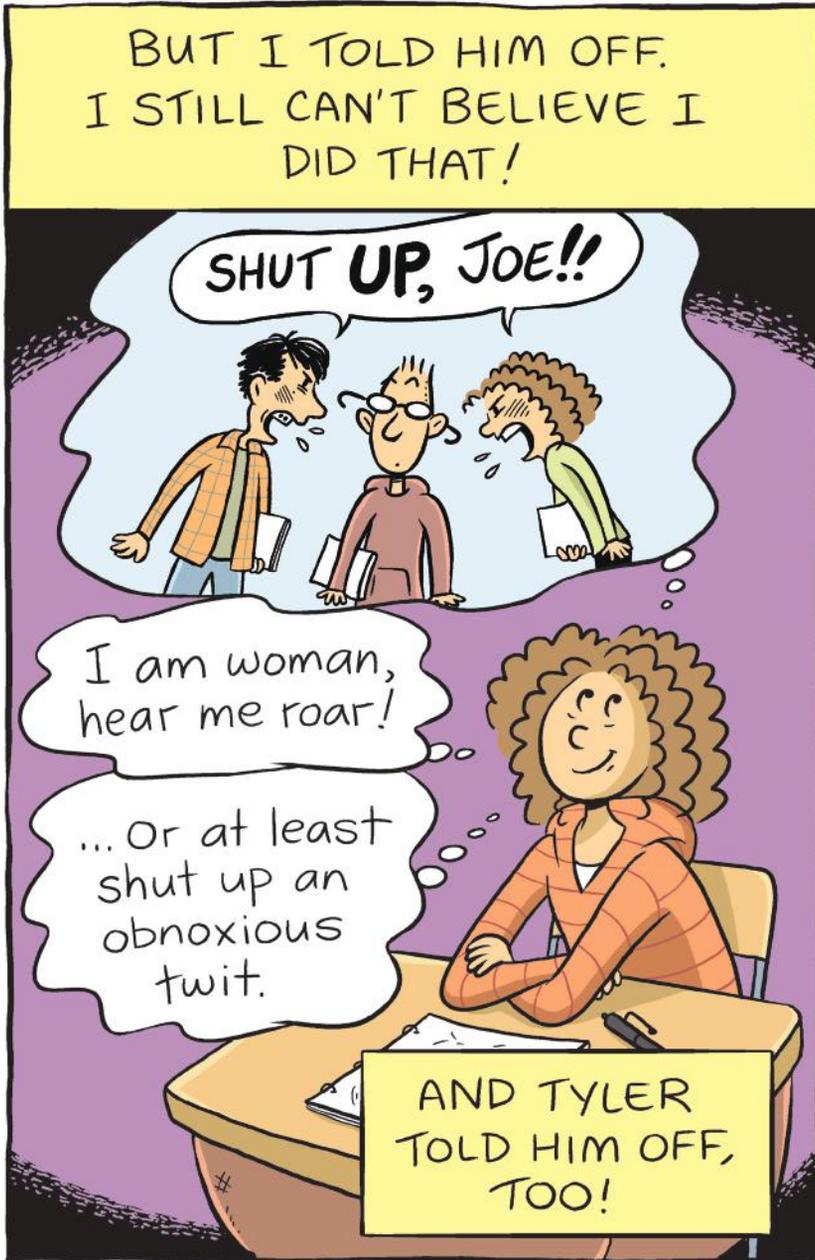


HE AND I HAVE BECOME
SORT-OF FRIENDS.
IT STARTED LAST MONTH
WHEN BRI AND I WERE
GOOFING OFF AT LUNCH.

Let's write love notes to
our crushes. The cornier
the better!

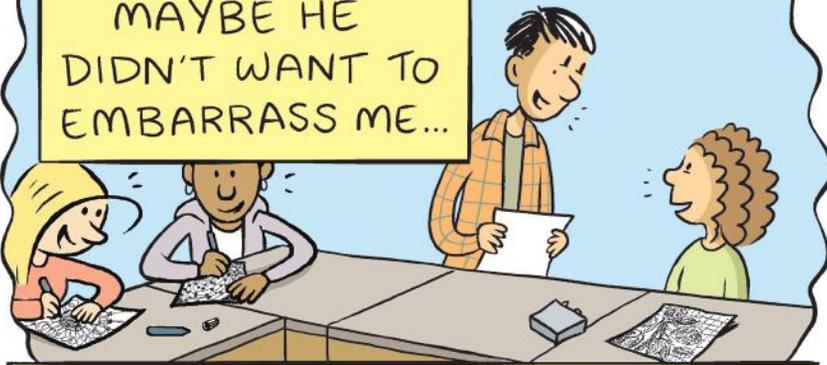






WE STARTED TALKING ABOUT ART AND NEVER ONCE BROUGHT UP THE NOTE.

MAYBE HE DIDN'T WANT TO EMBARRASS ME...

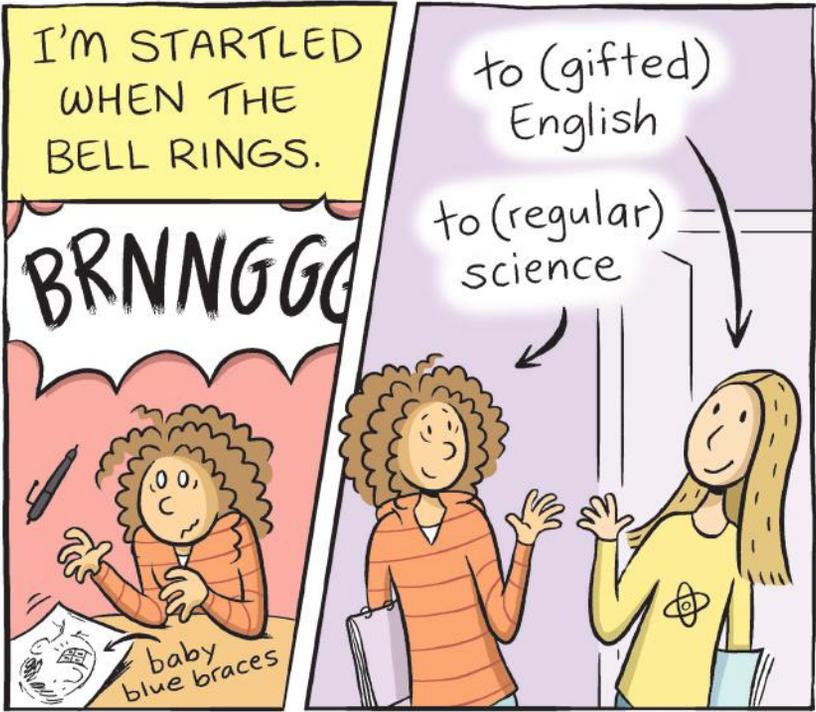


... OR MAYBE HE WAS EMBARRASSED, TOO. EITHER WAY, IT BROKE THE ICE.

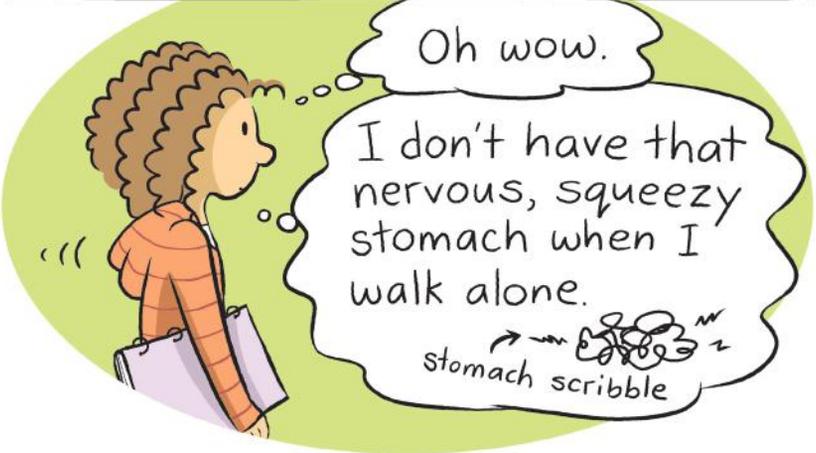
AND AT THE SAME TIME...



... I MADE ANOTHER FRIEND!



I REALIZE SOMETHING.





IT FEELS SO GOOD.

I want to feel like this all the time.



And why shouldn't I? I have more friends now. I stood up for myself.



Things have changed.



