

**DIFFERENT
FOR BOYS
PATRICK
NESS**

illustrated by **TEA BENDIX**

TWO-TIME CARNEGIE WINNER

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or, if real, are used fictitiously.

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LOVE

THE LIST

All right then, if we're starting out honest, here's pretty much everything I've done (it's not as bad as it sounds):

1. I've [REDACTED], of course. Everyone [REDACTED]. They're lying if they say they don't, but [REDACTED] doesn't count, obviously. You can't lose your virginity to yourself.
2. And leading on from that, I've been [REDACTED] by someone else, but who's been to a freshman year party and not gone home without doing *that* in the coat pile? It's only someone's hands.
3. Getting a bit heavier, I've [REDACTED] and [REDACTED]. Still not really a shocker.
4. A bit more strangely, I've [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED], (Okay, I'm not

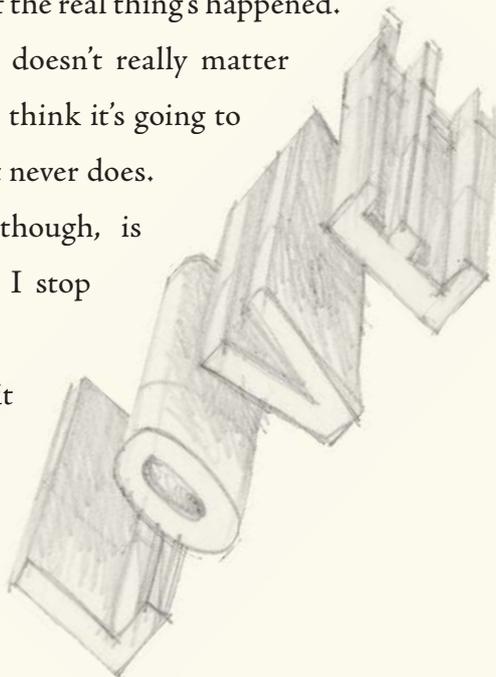
allowed to even hint at the strange stuff. Not that kind of story. Fine.)

5. And of course we wouldn't be talking about this if I hadn't actually [REDACTED]. You know, actually [REDACTED], which is pretty much the definition of losing your virginity if you're a boy.

And just so we're clear, it's not like I've done #5 once or twice either. I'm not one of those chess club virgins who goes into a closet and wonders if the real thing's happened. It has. Trust me. Although it doesn't really matter how many times you do it: you think it's going to make your life less lonely, but it never does.

I suppose my question, though, is where exactly on that list did I stop being a virgin?

Is it obviously #5? Or can it happen sooner, like on #3? Or even #2?



Are there degrees of virginity? Is there a points system? A league table?

And who gets to say?

Because maybe it's not as clear as all that, maybe there's more to it. Maybe there are people who'd *still* say I'm a virgin, even after doing numbers 1 through 5.

In fact, I might be one of those people.

WHERE IT STARTS

There are lots of places this story could start, but it might as well start on the first day of junior year, when Charlie and me are sitting in AP history, waiting for Mr. Bacon to get his seating plan finished.

“Well, this is taking [REDACTED] forever,” Charlie says, then he blinks, surprised. “What the [REDACTED] just happened? What are these [REDACTED] black boxes?”

I shrug. “It’s that kind of story. Certain words are necessary because this is real life, but you can’t actually *show* ’em because we’re too young to read about the stuff we actually do, right?”

“Teens swear in stories these days.”

“Not anything like we do in reality,” I say. “It’s the difference between shooting a bullet and throwing it.”

Charlie nods solemnly at the truth of this. Then he gets a smirk.

“[REDACTED],” he says. His





VIRGIN

“Josh ██████ Smith!” Charlie says, standing up and punching Josh on the shoulder, even though Josh is now twice his size. Josh, in fact, is even bigger than me, not in any fat way, but like he just stepped off the Super Bowl plane to buy a pack of cigarettes. “Where the ██████ have you been keeping yourself?” Charlie asks. “It’s been ██████ ages.”

“Watch your language, Charlie,” says Mr. Bacon from the front. “That’s your first warning. Now, sit.”

“But it’s blacked out, sir,” Charlie says. “It’s like I’m not swearing at all. ██████. See?”

“Sit,” Mr. Bacon says.

“Mom and Dad got back together,” Josh explains as we all sit down. “After seven years, if you can believe it.” His eyes stray across the crowded classroom. “Hey, don’t tell me the fourth is going to be little Jack Taylor.”

“Aw, ██████,” Charlie says, as we see Jack Taylor already being directed over to our quad by Mr. Bacon.

“What?” Josh says to me, confused. “It’ll be just like old times.”



Because the thing you need to know is that the four of us, me and Charlie and Josh Smith and Jack Taylor, used to be inseparable. All through elementary, anyway. Besides always sitting next to each other because of our names, we lived on the same few streets, and for a while there, we were always together. Birthday parties and Little League teams and just plain old stupid hanging around.

Then Josh left and a few years later puberty hit and I suddenly got way bigger than everybody, like linebacker big, and Charlie got a foot taller without gaining any weight, and Jack, well, Jack didn't grow all that much, and though me and Charlie stayed friends, Jack kinda went his own way when we all went on to high school. And while Charlie and me just did the usual – soccer, skipping class, more soccer – Jack, well . . .

Jack got a little . . . *dramatic*, if I'm honest.

He joined drama club. And choir. And wrote opera reviews for the school newspaper. And he always picked Mark Ruffalo as best out of the Avengers, when, I mean, come on. Hemsworth is standing right there.

I don't mean any of that in a bad way, though.

Because you don't really notice when it happens over time, do you? Jack's your friend. You like him because you've always liked him. And maybe one day you think, yeah, okay, he's gone a bit pink, but so what? He's Jack. And most of the time, you don't even notice.

Unless you're Charlie, and one day, you start noticing. Even in this day and age. When we're all supposed to be beyond all that.

From about last Christmas, Charlie's started noticing. And he isn't handling it well.

"Jack's a little [REDACTED] homo now," he says as we watch Jack come over. "Hey, you can say *homo* without the box. That doesn't seem right."

Josh raises his eyebrows. "Jack turned out gay?"

"No," I say. "He went out with Georgina Harcourt all last year. He's just kinda flamboyant."

"He's [REDACTED] gay," Charlie says. "He was caught [REDACTED] [REDACTED] to a bunch of seniors last year."

"No, he *wasn't*," I say. "Claudia Templeton spread that

story to stop people from talking about how her boyfriend texted around all those pictures of her [REDACTED].”

“Oh, yeah.” Charlie laughs. “That was *cool*.”

“If it isn’t Josh Smith,” Jack says, dropping his bag on the fourth desk in our quad.

“Hey, Jack,” Josh says. “Heard you’ve gone all Neil Patrick Harris on us.”

Jack shoots a glare at Charlie. “I see you’ve been talking to [REDACTED] here.”

“Hey!” Charlie says. “What was behind the box?”

“Hey, Jack,” I say, nodding a greeting.

“Hey, Ant.” He nods back, a little carefully.

“Neil Patrick Harris is a rich man, Jack,” Josh says, still smiling. “Nothing to be ashamed of.”

“Please,” Jack says. “He’s shaped like a scarecrow. Plus, his face makes me angry.” He gives Josh a look up and down. “And where’ve *you* been? Eating your way through eastern Washington?”

“Aw, hell, don’t even start,” Josh says. “I wasn’t on school grounds five minutes this morning before the football

coach grabbed me.” He nods my way. “You’ve gotten pretty big yourself, Ant. You should try out for the team with me. Be nice to have an old friend around.”

“We play soccer,” Charlie says, before I can even answer.

“Quiet in the back,” Mr. Bacon calls over to us, finally ready to start class.

“So who’s this guy?” Josh says, lowering his voice.

I shrug. “Just Mr. Bacon.”

Josh frowns. “He looks familiar.”

“Nah,” Jack says. “He just looks like if Eddie Redmayne was a serial killer.”

“God, Jack,” Josh says. “That’s it exactly.”

Despite ourselves, we all see it. You could totally picture your sister dating Mr. Bacon, but then you could totally see him strangling her, too. I’m about to say so, but then Charlie sneers, “You want to *date* him, Jack? You want him to ██████ you right there on his desk?”

Jack looks fake surprised. “Are you *flirting* with me, Shepton?”

Josh snorts under his breath. I laugh a little, too.

And then I see Charlie giving me a look that could
poison a whole tank of fish.