

Noodle Soup for Mincompoops

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Everybody else in seventh-grade honors English had groaned at the assignment, "I Am a Camera," but I thought it would be fun—three pages about anything your invisible "camera" noticed over the weekend. After spending most of Saturday at David Segal's bar mitzvah and Sunday afternoon at the mall with Liza and Harper, it didn't take me long to write "How to Flirt Without Showing Your Braces." Even Liza thought it was funny, and it was mostly about her. Actually, that's probably why she liked it; Liza is her own favorite subject these days.

I guess I notice things other kids don't. I like watching people. Most kids I know don't shut up long enough to notice anybody else; they're constantly yelling and wiggling around so *they* get noticed. David Segal's bar mitzvah party was so loud, I saw three grown-ups popping ibuprofen before they even served lunch. Liza, who's been my

best friend since birth, or possibly earlier, is always right in the middle of the action. I'm usually standing on the edge of the crowd, hoping *not* to be noticed. It's always been that way, and neither of us has ever minded.

But now, according to Liza, I do way too much watching and not nearly enough flirting. Up until this year, neither of us talked to boys. We agreed they were aliens. But ever since Harper showed up, Liza is suddenly all about the opposite sex. "Who likes who" takes up three quarters of her conversation.

When Mr. Chrisman asked me to stay after class for a few minutes, I figured he wanted to talk to me about my essay. Mr. C is always complimenting me on my writing. Sure enough, he waved it in front of me and smiled. "Maggie, I knew you were a good writer," he said, "but I had no idea until now how funny you could be!" Even if I *did* have braces, I'd smile at Mr. Chrisman, who, in my opinion, is the best teacher at South Hadfield Middle School (and also really cute).

"You're such a natural writer—why is it you've never written anything for the *Newsflash*?" he asked me. Mr. C is the adviser for the school newspaper, the *Weekly Newsflash*, and he's always trying to recruit kids to write stuff for it. I guess it's hard to fill four pages every week with sports scores, lunch menus, and articles about how much toilet paper gets stolen from the girls' bathroom.

I shrugged. "I'm not that interested in writing *facts*. You know. I like to make things up."

He nodded. "Well, your essay gave me an idea. How would you like to write an advice column for the newspaper?"

I had to laugh. "What kind of advice could I give anybody? How to be invisible?"

Mr. C's smile disappeared. "Do you really think you're invisible?"

I shrugged. "To most kids. I don't care, though."

"I think of you as quiet but certainly not invisible. Anyway, for this job keeping a low profile is an asset." Mr. C motioned for me to sit down in the chair next to his desk. "Here's my idea. You wouldn't be writing a *real* advice column; it would be funny, something to get more kids interested in reading the paper. To begin with, I'd write a few letters with silly questions, and you could come up with funny answers. We'd tell kids that if they want to ask you questions, they can leave them in my box in the main office, and I can give them to you after class. That way, no one will know who you are."

"You mean, I wouldn't be answering the questions as Maggie Cluny? I'd make up a name? I'd be somebody else?"

"That's right. Make up a name. You can name the whole column whatever you want, just so it's funny. I think if we set it up as humorous from the beginning, kids will get the idea and write you funny questions."

The idea crept around in my mind. I could say whatever I wanted to as long as I wasn't Maggie Cluny. I'd

have an alter ego, like Clark Kent and Superman. "But won't people find out it's me?"

"Well, that's the thing. In order to keep it secret, you couldn't tell *anybody*. Not even your best friends. I think the mystery aspect will add to the fun of it—everybody will be guessing who it is." Mr. Chrisman sat forward, his hands on his knees. "So, what do you think? Interested?"

"Yeah, I am. Can I think about it overnight?"

"Sure, sure. Meanwhile, I'll try my hand at a few letters, in anticipation!"

Why didn't anybody *my* age ever smile at me like Mr. C did? Sometimes I felt like I must already be thirty. I'd skipped right over the so-called "best years of my life" right into elderly boredom.

By the time I got to my locker, Liza was sitting on the floor, her head drooping over her books, her long blonde streaked hair hiding her face. She looked up when she heard me coming.

"Where have you *been*? Everybody left already. Robbie Piersall's mother picked him up, and he asked me if I needed a ride home, but you weren't here!"

"Sorry, I was talking to Mr. . . . Meadows . . . about the geography test."

"Ugh, geography." She got to her feet and dusted off the butt of her low-rise jeans, then readjusted her shirt so her belly button peeked out. You aren't allowed to have your stomach bare in school, but Liza always wears that stretchy material you can pull down or push up, depending on the occasion.

"Why did you want a ride?" I asked her, carefully changing the subject from my recent whereabouts. "It only takes us fifteen minutes to walk, and the weather's nice."

Liza sighed. "Maggie, God. I don't care about the ride. Robbie wanted me in his car! Don't you get it?"

"Oh." I hated it when Liza acted like I was the dumbest geek on earth. "Well, how was I supposed to know you liked Robbie Piersall? I thought you were crazy about David Segal—you were yesterday!" The turnover in Liza's boyfriends was hard to keep up with; she fell in love more often than most people brushed their teeth.

"I *am*. I don't think I even like Robbie, but maybe he likes *me*. Now I'll never know."

"I don't see how one car ride would have proved anything," I grumbled.

"That's because you just don't *get* stuff, Maggie. Honestly, sometimes you don't even seem like you're really thirteen!"

I guess she hadn't heard the news that I was actually thirty in disguise. "Well, sometimes you don't either," I said. "Sometimes you seem like you're about eighteen!"

Liza's pout turned up at the corners. "You really think so? Because of my hair?" She hooked her arm through mine and turned into my best friend again. "Wait till you hear what David said to me after math today. . . ."

"How's this?" I said, handing Mr. Chrisman a sheet of paper. I'd been working on the idea since I left school the day before, and I was proud of the final product.

"Noodle Soup for Nincompoops; by Faustina Intelligentsia. No question too stupid to answer." He gave me his big, full-of-teeth smile. "You're going to do the column!"

"Do you like the name?" I asked.

"I love Faustina Intelligentsia—it's silly and pompous—perfect for a humor column. But I'm not sure I get 'Noodle Soup—'"

"I was trying to think of a name that would get people's attention, so I checked the paper to see what books were on the best-seller lists. There were all these books for 'dummies' and 'idiots,' and then there were a couple of Chicken Soup books, so I thought if I combined both of them . . ."

He threw his head back and laughed, his brown hair falling in his face. If only there were *boys* as cool as Mr. C. "Noodle Soup for Nincompoops! It's great. You're going to be good at this, Maggie. I can tell already." He handed me some papers. "Take a look at these and see if you can come up with funny answers. You don't have to do them all, just two or three. And remember, don't let anyone see what you're doing!"

If popularity at school had anything to do with how much teachers liked you, I'd have a posse. Unfortunately, it seemed to work the opposite way. Liza and Harper were both standing in the hallway when I came around the corner. As I said, Liza has been my friend forever, but Harper was a new addition. She was really Liza's friend more than mine, although I didn't hate her or anything.

She hung around with more of the popular kids than Liza and I did; it was because of her we got invited to David Segal's bar mitzvah. But sometimes I felt like Liza and Harper were the best friends and I was just a dark, silent shadow following them around.

At least Liza looked happy to see me today. "There you are. Harper's mom is going to drive us to the mall."

"How come? Wasn't Robbie Piersall's mother available?"

"Ha-ha. Let's go—she's waiting."

I hung back. "You're really going to the mall again? We were just there on Sunday."

Liza narrowed her eyes and stared at me as if she was trying to send me a coded message. "So? It's *fun*."

"Oh, yeah, if your idea of fun is watching boys pick out jeans at Abercrombie."

Harper was studying the white crescents of her curls, staying out of the debate.

Liza sighed. "Come on, Maggie. We'll go to the food court and get sweet-potato fries."

"Can we go to the bookstore?" I asked.

Harper looked up. "No! When you go into the bookstore, you want to stay forever, and we have to wait for you!"

"Oh, like I didn't wait half an hour for you two to try on fifty shades of nail polish!"

Liza gave me a tight smile. "Maybe we could meet you someplace if you want to go to the bookstore."

I shook my head. "That's okay. You guys go. I don't feel

like being inside this afternoon anyway. I might go home and rake leaves."

Harper rolled her eyes. "You're kidding. *Rake leaves?*"

"I like doing it. It's relaxing."

"So is going to the mall!" Liza said.

"Don't beg her," Harper said, heading for the stairs.

Liza looked disappointed. "Okay, go do your chores.

Maybe you can come over tomorrow or something."

"Yeah, maybe," I said. Liza ran to catch up with Harper, which I hated to see. When had Harper become so very important?

Robbie Piersall set two boxes of the *Weekly Newsflash* on a table in the hallway outside the Little Theater, where kids usually picked up their copies. I tried to be nonchalant as I sauntered over and reached into a box. Several other kids were right behind me.

"This is a really good issue," Robbie announced. I had the feeling he was looking at me, so I didn't look up. Actually, I almost never look at Robbie; he's the kind of person who looks you right in the eyeballs, even if you hardly know him. It makes me so nervous, I can't think straight.

"You're the editor; you have to think it's good," some eighth grader said as he walked past without grabbing a copy.

"No, really. There's a new column on page three—it's really funny."

I took my skinny newspaper and stood back against the

wall, where I could see people's reactions without them noticing. Not that they ever noticed me anyway. This morning, though, my heart was beating so loud, I was afraid they'd look around to see where all the noise was coming from.

I opened the paper to page three, like everybody else. There it was:

Noodle Soup for Nincompoops

by *Faustina Intelligentsia*

"No question too stupid to answer!"

"Ha! Did you read this?" Jillie Randolph said. "Listen!" And she began to read my column out loud to the assembled group:

"Dear Faustina,

I am madly in love with my boyfriend, but my mother keeps calling it 'puppy love.' I hate that!

How can I get her to stop?

—Teenager in Love

Dear Teenager in Love,

Poor you. Have you considered chewing up her bedroom slippers?

—Faustina Intelligentsia"

As Jillie was reading the column some kids had come up to look over her shoulder while others stood nearby,

