

# The Mean

by C. P. Boyko

I hate my life, nothing ever happens to me. There's no one around this summer. Nicky and her family are RVing across the country to Prince Edward Island. Trish is visiting her dad in Victoria for a couple of weeks, then going to camp, not one of those boring camps where they teach you how to fall out of a canoe or what bear crap looks like but an arts and crafts camp. You learn how to make comic books and design magazines and create storyboards for movies and all kinds of cool stuff. I wanted to go too but because you need a reference letter from a teacher Mom said it was elitist. Whenever she says something is elitist she means it's something Jack can't do, so practically everything is elitist according to her.

Lis is still around. We went swimming but all it is is little kids splashing each other and pulling each other's swimsuits off. Not my idea of a real scream.

Lis isn't my best friend. If I had to say who my best friend was I guess it would be Trish. But it's better when it's the four of us, we have more fun.

I hate Snowcap. Sometimes I wish the whole world would just explode.

People don't ski much in summer, the hotels are practically all empty. Last year Lorraine Deverich's brother Tony threw a rock through a third-storey window of the Continental on grad night and nobody working there even noticed until November. According to Nicky, anyway, rain came in through the window and caused almost a thousand dollars in damage to the floor so he had to go to jail. Supposedly if they'd noticed right away he would only have had to pay for the window. Nobody knows why he did it. He was drunk I guess. Drinking turns people into sheer fools. He was going to go to university but they won't matriculate you if you have a criminal record and

now he's delivery boy for Grossman's Groceries and dating Wendy Yarrow who is only like fifteen, barely two years older than me, which is truly Grossman.

There's no skiers so there's no one to drive anywhere and no one to cook for so even with two jobs Mom is home a lot. She sits outside and smokes and reads. She plows through another one of her Minnie Dobsons practically every day. I'm not supposed to read them, she says they're for grown-ups. I have read them anyway and let me tell you, they're a yawn and a half. They're all about women in the nineteenth century trying to get married or trying to get pregnant. I'd rather read about a rose growing out of a dead horse's nose.

To be honest I sometimes hate reading, especially when it's hot out. I still take Jack to the library because it's cool and she understands that she has to be quiet there. Of all my friends only Trish likes to read but she's practically a lacer.

The biggest lacer in our class is Guen Bertanalby, not Gwen with a W but Guen with a U. She still rides a bike, I've seen her around town on it. Someone should tell her that she's too old. So-called smart people can be pure stupid sometimes. It's different for boys. If I was a boy I could bike around like Paul Merseger, selling popsicles and ice cream. But I am glad I'm not a boy, they behave ridiculously. I do sometimes wish I had a job though, since I can't even afford an ice cream cone. Mom isn't paying me allowance unless I weed the garden but I'm not about to do it myself. I've tried to teach Jack but she always manages to get thorns under her fingernails, even with gloves on, and anyway it's too hot.

Nobody exactly picks on Guen but she doesn't have any friends either. Sometimes I think I'd rather be picked on than be totally ignored.

We're probably the only family in the whole park that doesn't have a TV. I don't care. It doesn't matter. I hate TV. We watch at Trish's sometimes and there's never anything on. I still wish we had one though.

When Mom is smoking a lot it's easier to lift cigs. I never take more than two and never from an almost full or almost empty pack. In the scrapyard, which used to be the sand lots but now is more junk than sand, there's a pretty decent mattress you can sit on and a pane of transparent blue plastic you can see your reflection in. It makes you look good, sort of smooth and soft, like you're underwater or lit by candlelight. That's where I go to practise, I think I'm getting the hang of it. The trick is to not inhale without looking like you're not inhaling. I don't exactly want black lungs.

Then again, who cares? Sometimes I wish I had cancer, or a broken arm or leg at least. People could sign my cast, they could come from miles around, they could bring gifts and food and tell jokes. Or probably nobody would come at all, I'd die alone in a hospital, surrounded by weeping nurses. Before I died they would let me eat all the green Jell-O with soft vanilla ice cream I wanted. They'd wish I was their daughter. They'd come to the funeral and put lilies on my grave.

But I have never broken any bones and none of my teeth have cavities even though I hardly ever floss.

Guen was at the scrapyard, poking around with a golf club. She didn't see us right away.

I'm not exactly supposed to take Jack to places like the scrapyard, there are too many sharp and rusty things she could hurt herself on. But it's okay, she likes it there. She has a broken hockey stick she plays with and I keep an eye on her. Jack's not exactly as delicate as some people think. Even Mom still treats her like a baby sometimes. I'm the only one who really knows.

I asked Guen if she wanted to share a butt. I showed her my ketchup can with all my butts in it. She said no, she doesn't smoke. I said neither do I, it's a dumb disgusting habit. Which is true. I told her that I was just practising, since I figure it's sort of a good skill to have for if you're ever in movies or anything and the script says you have to smoke in one of your scenes.

So we shared a butt. She was pretty good. She only coughed once.

She was looking for busted typewriters and radios. She is building a computer. She's probably a genius or something.

I like computers, I think they're interesting. I've never used one but Guen says someday they will be smart enough to do everything for us and we will only have to sit on our couches or in floating pods and send them instructions telepathically. She's probably right, if you think about it.

According to Mom, Guen's dad is an elitist. He's a famous chemist or something. He must be famous because he doesn't work. Mom heard that he's writing a book. For someone who reads as much as she does, she doesn't exactly have much respect for writers. She's not so crazy about dads either.

I don't have a dad. I have a father. It sounds worse, *faw-ther*. It makes him sound stupid. Which he is. I know because I've seen a picture. He looks like somebody who walks around with his mouth hanging open, dribbling chewing tobacco onto his undershirt. He's a truck driver. Well it doesn't exactly take a pound of brains to drive truck, just keep it between the ditches for eighteen hours.

Driving a taxi is totally different. You have to be quick. You work with people and you have to understand them, you have to be able to size them up. When Mom first started she got ripped off three times in a week. Now it almost never happens. She's probably the best taxi driver in town.

My father's name is Don, which is the perfect name for him. In all my life he's sent me maybe three birthday cards. He phoned from Whistler once but I didn't want to talk to him. That was when I was ten. You wouldn't think that for a guy who drives truck for a living it would exactly kill him to visit once in a while. But I'm glad he doesn't. I hate him. The postcards he sends have very bad spelling. I sometimes wonder if maybe he's really only Jack's father. I don't know who my real dad would be but it doesn't matter. There are kinds of bugs in the Amazon that don't have fathers, just mothers. I wish I were in the Amazon right now, I would let a tiger eat me. But I would never go there because I hate snakes, even though I know not all of

them are poisonous. But I would still rather be eaten by a tiger than bit by a snake.

I figured it out once. Don left about two months after Jack was born. She doesn't even know that he exists. Which is lucky for her, as far as I'm concerned.

I wish I had a car. I wish I was old enough to drive, I would steal a car and drive to Mexico or the Yukon. In winter it would be easy, everyone leaves their cars running when they go into the drugstore or the bank or the hotel lobby. The police could chase me, I wouldn't care. I'd let them catch up. I wouldn't even care if they shot me full of holes. I hate summer, you can't even steal a car.

Mom's bright idea is that I should learn how to fish. Mom thinks she's pretty hilarious. There aren't any fish in our lake anymore. The snow-machines they installed back in the fifties leaked gallons of oil into it. Even the seaweed looks sick. That's the whole reason why they built the pool. Anyway, I'd rather watch grass grow out of a dead horse's ass than go fishing.

There is a sign outside the pool that says No Trespassing When Pool Closed, which makes it sound like the only time you should be trespassing is when the pool is open.

Lis called but it's too hot even to go swimming, and anyway we're too old to swim.

Grown-ups either treat my sister like she's just come out of a car crash with seven broken limbs, or else they treat her like she's just won the lottery. The car-crash ones rest their hands on her shoulder and ask her if she would like some candy. They say it like it's medicine, "Would some candy make you feel better?" The lottery ones smile and nod and sometimes even wink at her, like only the two of them share the secret of how great life really is. They give her candy too. Jack prefers the lottery ones. I hate all grown-ups.

Kids treat my sister in one of two ways, they either point and laugh or they avoid looking at her. Nicky and Lis avoid looking. Trish looks but doesn't laugh, she'll probably grow up to be a car-crash type. Jack doesn't care, she pretty much likes everyone.

But she really likes Guen. Guen's about the only person I know other than Mom who doesn't talk to Jack like she's a puppy. And she's the only person, other than teachers, who uses Jack's real name. The teachers only call her Ruby because they don't realize that everybody else calls her Jack. Most of our teachers are sheer fools.

I hate Mrs. Sloban the most. She is always way too cheerful, and she speaks very slowly and repeats just about everything she says three times, and she is always putting her hand on your shoulder or the top of your head as though you were a handrail. Her hair looks like one of those metal scrubs for washing dishes that Mom brings home from the hotel, only it's bright white instead of grey.

Mr. Bearden says you can spell "grey" with an E or with an A. I prefer to spell it with an E because "gray" looks like "day" or "play" or "gay" which are all happy words and I don't think "grey" is an especially happy word. I like the fact that there are words that it is correct to spell more than one way. Another word like that is traveller, which it is perfectly okay to spell with either one L or two. Unfortunately, according to Mr. Bearden, you must choose one way of spelling the word and stick with it. You can't write "the sky was grey and the kitten was gray," for example, which I think is too bad. Skies are grey and kittens are gray, if you ask me.

Mr. Bearden is the teacher Guen hates most. He is actually my favourite, but I agree with her that he can sometimes be annoying, I guess. For instance, if someone forgets their homework (usually Joann Romplin or Stacey Walsh or Teddy Mollibeau or James Wu) he will pretend to be deeply saddened and say something sarcastic like "With rue my heart is laden." And it is true that all his pantlegs are too short and his socks have holes in them. Of course the most obvious thing about him is the gigantic mole just under his left ear which I admit is pretty gross, but I don't think it is fair of Guen to call him Moleman like a lot of other kids do behind his

back, because I have heard some kids call Guen Goon or Goonie behind *her* back. I guess she doesn't know that. I guess no one knows what they're being called behind their back, because otherwise it wouldn't be behind their back. Maybe I'm being called names behind my back. But I doubt it, because I am friends with Nicky and Trish and Lis and nobody ever says anything bad about them, at least as far as I know.

But I like Mr. Bearden because he uses big words and approbates my spelling. And unlike Mrs. Weinraub used to do, he never makes us take turns reading out loud from the text, which I hate, because most kids are not good readers, and they are slow, and if you enjoy the book and want to read ahead you lose track of where the rest of the class is, so when it's your turn the teacher thinks you have been daydreaming or that you are stupid, which is not necessarily true.

Guen asked me what my IQ was. I don't know what it is because Mom wouldn't let me take the test at school. According to her, IQ tests are elitist, the whole idea of intelligence is elitist. In fact, she doesn't even believe there really is such a thing as "intelligence." She thinks that the only reason people came up with the IQ test was so that they could find a sneaky way to justify being mean to people who scored worse on it. She doesn't even let me use the words *smart* and *stupid* because they're prejudiced against people (like Jack) who have a harder time learning. When she heard they were giving us IQ tests at school she got super angry and I had to sit with her in Principal Gromby's office while she gave him a piece of her mind. And that's why I never took the IQ test, though everyone else in the school still did.

I guess I agree with her about the word *stupid* but I don't see what's wrong with *smart*. Mom says *smart* wouldn't have any meaning if everyone was smart, just like the word *tall* would have no meaning if everyone was the same height, so by calling one person smart you're calling everyone else stupid by comparison, I guess. Just like if you call one person tall you're im-

plying that they are taller than most people, which is another way of calling other people short.

Only it's different because there's nothing wrong with not being tall but for some reason there is something wrong with not being intelligent. You can call someone "short" without hurting their feelings (unless you're *really* short, like Teddy Mollibeau) but you can't call them "stupid" without being mean. But the weird thing is there aren't really any words you can use that *aren't* mean. Mom says that Jack is a slow learner or sometimes that she has special challenges but I don't see how it's a whole lot better to be called slow or challenged than to be called stupid. I don't know, maybe that's my mom's point. Because if you compare the intelligences of different people at all you're going to end up with some people who are more and some who are less intelligent, that's just the way it is. But then the less intelligent ones are always going to be made fun of, no matter what, because that's just the way people are. For some reason people are always mean to whoever is different because nobody wants to be different. You'd think they'd be *nicer* to them because they would feel sorry for them but that's not the way it works. And nobody wants to be unintelligent, even though there's nothing exactly wrong with it, and it's not your fault if you're stupid just like it's not your fault if you're short. Unless you cut off your own legs, or have bad posture and slouch, like I sometimes do.

On the other hand, nobody really wants to be too intelligent, either. I don't know. It's all very complicated.

They're not supposed to tell you what your IQ is but they told Guen's dad that hers is 144 and he told her. Not because he was proud but because he said she was not living up to her potential and he thought she should be working harder, which is a laugh and a half because she already gets practically straight A's. Which makes her a lacer and a brainiac. If you are a lacer you are automatically a brainiac, but you can be a brainiac without being a lacer, like Stacey Walsh's brother Trevor Walsh, who is a whiz at math. You can ask him to multiply 153 by 542 (for example) and he can do it in about

fifteen seconds, all in his head, and you can check his answer on Mr. Vygotsky's calculator. But he gets bad grades on tests, even though he gets the right answers, because he never shows his work. I don't think that's fair, but on the other hand I don't understand why he doesn't just show his work.

I am bad at math. I've never liked the way numbers fit together. Some go together just fine, like 6 and 6 making 12 or 8 times 8 making 64, but others don't seem to go together at all. For example, you would never guess that 7 times 7 equals 49, and there is something funny about 6 plus 7 equalling 13. It just doesn't look right, I don't know why.

I am better at other subjects. I am a good speller. I know the entire periodic table of the elements by heart. And I know a lot about what happened in World War II and World War I, which used to be called the Great War because before World War II they didn't know there would be another one and it would have been kind of pessimistic to call it the *First* World War. However, I think that "Great War" sounds almost too *optimistic*, because although "great" means "large" it can also mean "wonderful." So sometimes I imagine people in 1920 going around saying to each other, "Wow, wasn't that a *great* war?"

If your IQ is 144 it means that you are almost three standard deviations above the average, which is 100. A standard deviation is 15, and if you are three standard deviations above the average it means that only one in a thousand people are smarter than you. The chances of any *two* people having IQs of 144 is about one in a million. Guen figures my IQ is probably the same as hers or close to it, but I don't know about that. I'm not even sure I would want to be 144. I'd rather be 115 or so. One standard deviation is enough for me.

Still, it's neat to think that the odds of our being friends is one in a million.

At night we pretend we are blind. We close our eyes and walk as far as we can down the middle of the street until we bump into something. We would hear a car coming long before it ran us over but it is still kind of frightening.

Jack can't go more than half a block before she has to open her eyes. Guen can never keep moving in a straight line and veers off to one side. I think she does it on purpose.

I once walked all the way from the cemetery to the auto wreckers before I nearly lopped my head off by crashing into a tow truck's side mirror. Guen had to lie down on the road, she was laughing so hard. I sat on top of her and gave her a wet palm. She was screaming and Jack was screaming and a light came on in a nearby house and we ran away, singing in tongues.

We practise our glossolalia when it is really hot. We tried it out on Mrs. Grossman at the grossery store once when we were buying hamburger meat for supper and Mrs. Grossman called my mom because she was worried that I might have come down with heatstroke. She didn't call Guen's dad.

Sometimes I wish I did have heatstroke. Sometimes I wouldn't mind if I was in a coma, because it would be like dreaming all the time. Nobody knows why we dream, not even Sigmund Freud. So maybe dreams are really the real world and this one is really the dream world and we're all just wasting our time here.

We are writing a letter to Mr. Bearden. It was Guen's idea but I am doing most of the work.

Mr. Bearden does not have a wife. He is probably over thirty years old and he has never been married and possibly has never even had a girlfriend. I think this is kind of sad. When I said that, Guen thought I meant pathetic. But I meant depressing. I think he must be lonely. Even I am sometimes lonely and I'm friends with Nicky Robbins and Trish Warman and Lisa Beddington. And I live with a sister and a mother but Mr. Bearden doesn't live with anyone and I don't think he has many friends. I don't think people should have to be alone if they don't want to be. There are enough people for everyone, it is just a question of bringing together the ones who are by themselves. But I don't know, maybe Mr. Bearden wants to be alone, he often eats his lunch at his desk instead of in the staff room. I guess except for Miss Taylor the girl's gym teacher and Mrs. Williams the teacher's aide

most of the teachers are old fogies compared to Mr. Bearden. And I know Miss Taylor has a boyfriend and is kind of a loudmouth, but she is pretty. Maybe Mr. Bearden's mole bothers her. I could never marry Mr. Bearden, not because of the mole, but because I'm too young and I am never getting married or having children, but maybe Miss Taylor is more superficial than I am.

Guen thought we should write a letter to Mr. Bearden, pretending to be a woman that he knew a long time ago who was secretly infatuated with him.

So far we have decided that our name is Léonie McTavish. We are thirty-three years old. We live in a small town called Songbrook, where we teach science. We have no brothers or sisters. Our parents are both dead, though we haven't yet decided how they died. Guen wants a train wreck or plane crash but I would prefer something like cancer or accidental carbon monoxide poisoning. Anyway, they died when we were young, so we were raised by an aunt but she is dead now too. We live alone in a one-bedroom apartment with our Siamese cat whose name is either Meow (Guen's idea) or Dog's Breakfast (my idea).

We work part-time in a bookstore. We love the smell of books. Our favourite authors are Katherine Anne Porter and Thomas Hardy. Mr. Bearden is teaching *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* to the grade elevens this year, so I checked it out of the library. I am on the third chapter.

We like drinking milky chai tea and putting hot water bottles under our pillow on cold rainy evenings. We enjoy crossword puzzles, swimming, and French films. We have no boyfriend but we are not exactly "a mere vessel of emotion untinged by experience" either, to quote Mr. Hardy.

We have lustrous dark brown hair which we keep trimmed to chin-length. We have deep hazel-coloured eyes. We have thick, shapely lips. We have pale, faintly freckled skin which sunburns easily. We have long, smooth legs and often wear skirts to show them off. We have a tiny tattoo on the small of our back that is either a dove with an hourglass in its beak or the Mandarin character for "Love." I think Mr. Bearden would admire an inter-

est in foreign languages, and I think Guen's drawing looks like a chicken taking a bite out of an egg timer.

Guen says we should have huge breasts but I disagree. I think they should be small. I think we should be flat as a board.

Sometimes Guen and Jack and I sit in Guen's dad's car and Guen and I make up stories to tell Jack. For example, Guen will say that once upon a time there was a little fox, and I will say that the fox's best friend was a bottlecap, and Guen will say that the bottlecap's name was Monsieur Flubblebum, and I will say that Monsieur Flubblebum was a distinguished theoretical physicist, and Guen will say that all the other theoretical physicists wanted to beat him up because he had come up with all the good ideas first, and so on. It doesn't much matter what we say, Jack loves any kind of story.

The best story we have made up so far is about Windy the Friendly Tornado. We even wrote it down:

Windy was a tornado unlike other tornados. She didn't want to hurt or destroy anything. She just wanted to meet new people and have new experiences. She was really very friendly in fact.

But no one gave her a chance to prove it. As soon as people saw Windy coming, they hid in their basements or ran away screaming, before she could even open her mouth.

And even though she was always very careful, whenever she got too close to where people lived she would accidentally blow apart their homes or knock over their telephone poles.

She couldn't help it. She was clumsy. And the more careful she was, the more clumsy she became.

And Windy thought, "That is why everyone hates and fears me. Because I'm a stupid clumsy tornado." So she went to be by herself in the middle of a field where she couldn't hurt anyone or knock anything over. And she sat down under the rainy grey sky that followed her everywhere she went, and she wept quietly for a long time.

But one day she saw a truck full of people coming towards her. They were heading right for her. They were coming to visit!

She stopped weeping and put on her friendliest smile. The truck came to a stop a few hundred yards away. Two men and a woman got out. They were very excited. The woman pointed a video camera at Windy and one of the men took pictures. Windy felt flattered and a little embarrassed.

Windy said, "Hello. May I ask why you're taking pictures of me?"

The woman said, "We're stormchasers, and we think you're beautiful."

Windy said, "Why thank you."

The man with the camera said, "You are nature's fury unleashed."

Windy said, "I'm actually very friendly."

The man with the camera said brusksly, "Well, we like you, whatever you are."

Windy was so happy to have at last found people who were not afraid of her, who liked her and appreciated her even though she was a tornado, that all of her troubles melted away.

But as everyone knows, troubles are what make tornados spin and blow. Windy was so happy that she stopped spinning. She just disappeared into thin air.

The stormchasers were very disappointed. They drove home slowly, in silence, not even bothering to turn on the radio. The end.

Trish should be back from camp by now. I wonder why Lis hasn't called. I can't believe that school starts again in only ten days.

Guen told me that if you ever don't want to go to school you can take Vitamin B6, because it turns your skin red and makes it look like you are allergic to something.

Guen told me that she always thought I was a Miriam. I told her that I always thought she was a straight lacer. She said that she has to act like one because you need good grades to get into a good university. When she grows up, she wants to be a) a biologist, b) a mathematician, c) a computer scien-

tist, d) a lawyer, e) an electrical engineer, or f) a theoretical physicist. She does not want to be a chemist.

When I grow up, I want to be a) an actress, b) a policewoman, or c) a taxi driver. I do not want to drive a truck or an ice cream cart or be a maid or a cook or a librarian or a lifeguard or a famous painter or a ski instructor.

Guen told me that her dad has scales on his back like a lizard. I told her that my mom was born without toenails which is why she never goes swimming or wears sandals. I told her that Nicky Robbins can't say SP-words, so instead of "spit" or "spaceship" she says "stit" or "staceship." I told her that Lisa Beddington is such a fool that she thinks that if you get head lice they burrow into your skull and eventually into your brain, which is only true if you never shampoo your hair and if you scratch your head too much, because that pushes them down inside your scalp. And I told her that Trish Warman smells like my granna's basement. It's not a bad smell really, wet and woody and kind of fruity, it's just weird for someone to smell like that. She'll have to marry some boy who works in the canning industry so he won't notice.

I asked Guen what a Miriam is. She said it is someone who is completely average, someone who doesn't deviate at all from the mean.

Miriams stay in Snowcap all their lives and get married to boys who are twice their age and have babies with fetal alcohol syndrome.

Instead of asking us to write about our summers like he's done on the first day back every other year, Mr. Bearden wrote a sentence on the board and told all of us to copy it down, word for word. When we were done he told us to sign our names at the top and hand our papers forward so he could collect them. He put them in the middle drawer of his desk without even looking at them. James Wu asked if we were going to be graded, which people laughed at but I'm not sure he meant it as a joke. He is such a lame rag he probably thought it was a spelling test or something, even though the sentence was written right up there on the blackboard for us. Mr. Bearden mut-

tered something about how only one of us would be graded on it, and people laughed at that too, because they probably thought he meant James.

Then Mr. Bearden made us open our copies of John Steinbeck's *The Pearl* to page one, and Trish pushed her desk next to mine because she's always forgetting her books, and then Mr. Bearden had us take turns reading out loud, starting at the back corner by the door where Josh Tolman always sits so he can carve dragons and werewolves into the desktop without being bothered.

This is the sentence that Mr. Bearden wrote on the board:

I am not exactly, to quote Mr. Hardy, a mere vessel of emotion untinged by experience.

At lunch Guen came poking around the old baseball diamond with her golf club. She didn't see us right away.

Trish whispered, "What the hell is she looking for?"

I said, "Beats the hell out of me."

Lis said, "Maybe she lost a golf ball."

Nicky said, "Probably bugs or something."

I said, "Yeah, maybe she forgot her lunch."

Finally Guen noticed us, but she pretended not to. She kept poking around in the grass for a while, then turned around and headed back in the direction of the school. Jack stood up and watched her go.

"What a goon," I said. I considered telling them that Guen was afraid of the dark, and that she had to sleep with the hall light on and her bedroom door half open. But I didn't, I was afraid they would want to know how I knew that.

Then Jack called Guen's name. Guen ignored her, pretended not to hear, just kept walking, thank God.

Lis said, "A friend of your sister's?"

Again Jack shouted, "Guen!" And again and again, "Guen! Guen!"

I told her to shut up and sit down and stop behaving like a retard.

She sat down and cried a little but she's always crying, she can be such a goddamn baby sometimes.

My cig had gone out, so I lit it again and inhaled the smoke deep into my black lungs.

I hate school, it's the most boring thing on earth. I especially hate gym class. I am not good at sports. There is something wrong with my heart, if I overexert myself it loses its rhythm, some of the beats come too soon. When I was young my mom took me to a doctor and he told me that I was very lucky, I had a precocious heartbeat. But Mom didn't like that, she prefers to call it "premature." It is not really dangerous, it just feels weird, like there is a giant moth flapping around inside my chest.

Miss Taylor is always making us run laps around the gym. She makes us run laps when we don't hustle enough, she makes us run laps when we forget our gym shoes, she makes us run laps when we cheat or play too rough. Her solution to every problem is making us run laps, that's about the limit of her imagination. I hate running laps, it is literally just running in circles. At least if you're running in a straight line you'll eventually end up somewhere different than where you started. Not that I can think of anyplace I want to go, except maybe Honolulu or the Yukon.

I guess driving a cab is like running in circles. At least when you drive a truck the place you end up in is not the exact same place you started from. But I will probably never drive a truck either, because no matter how far you go you'll have to come back someday.

Don sent me a letter from Poughkeepsie, which is in the state of New York in the U.S. My fourteenth birthday is not for three months. I haven't opened it yet, I might never open it, I might put it in the stove or bury it in the scrapyard or eat it one little piece at a time. Once a guy ate an entire airplane by grinding up a little bit of it at a time and sprinkling it on his toast like cinnamon.

Mr. Bearden never did talk to me about the letter from Léonie Mc-Tavish. Maybe he didn't recognize my handwriting after all. If he did, he

can't be too mad about it because he gave me an A on my last assignment. However, he did circle the word *grey* and write it with an A in the margin, and even though I misspelled the word *brusquely* he didn't circle *that*.

The lights in the gym take a long time to warm up. Sometimes one of us will turn them off while Miss Taylor isn't looking and it takes almost five minutes for them to come back on. And for five minutes we run around in the dark, screaming like crazy and bumping into each other. We used to do it all the time before Shelly Moscovich got knocked over and sliced her forehead open. We never found out whose fault it was, maybe the girl who plowed into Shel never even realized what happened. But it made Miss Taylor and Principal Gromby angry enough that when Joann Romplin shut off the lights a couple weeks later she was suspended for three days.

I don't care if I get suspended. It doesn't seem like such a terrible punishment to make someone stay home. I wonder what happens if you are in jail and you turn out the lights, do they make you leave the prison for three days?

I waited until I saw Miss Taylor kneel down to tie her shoe. I stopped only for a second. Then I was running again, running in circles around the gym and screaming my head off in the dark like all the other girls.

Last summer Guen Bertanalby, who is in my class, told me that if people were radioactive atoms our half-life would be about 52 years. The average person would still live to be about 75 years, like now, but more people would die young and a few people would live to be very very old. One quarter of everybody born would live to be at least 104 years old. One in every sixteen people would make it to 208, and one in 64 would live to 312. A few, about one in 4,000 I think, would even make it to 624. But only about one in a million would live to be 1,000.

That almost doesn't sound too bad, a one in a million chance of living to 1,000. But the odds that you'd die on any given day would always be about 1 in 28,000. That means of course that the odds that you would *live* another day would be about 27,999 in 28,000, but the odds would never

change, no matter how long you lived. Even if you were a thousand years old, the odds of you kicking the bucket the next day would still be 1 in 28,000. No matter how old you got, you'd never really be any closer to death, and no matter how young you were, you'd never be any farther from it.

So if people decayed like radioactive atoms, you just might live forever, but you might not want to. Because I think it would probably feel less like living forever than forever not-quite-dying.

Miss Taylor opens one of the gymnasium doors to let some light in, but I just close my eyes and keep on running, keep on racing forward into the darkness. At any moment, at any moment, at any moment I could collide with someone or something. But I might not. I might never stop running, might never open my eyes, time might continue to spill out of the blackness in front of my face forever. The only thing against it is the statistics.