

SECOND PLACE

Abdominal Rejects



By BRICE HADGREN

You wanna know what kills me? Feelings. I can't stand those — make me sick.

I'm sixteen years old, practically a man. Never had a girlfriend and not about to. I get nauseated just thinking about the way couples hold their sweaty palms together and look for dirt in each other's eyes.

Hey, I could get a girlfriend like super easy, but I don't want to. All those feelings would be death.

Heart attack. Vampire bite. Killer infection.

The name's David. I'm in high school and I'm a little on the quiet side, which is strange because I'm also the lead singer and guitarist of the Abdominal Rejects. We play punk music and we're really terrible. Dad says we're getting better. Mom says if I spent as much time on my "musical thingy" as I did on my schoolwork I'd be getting A's.

Yeah right. The only person in my math class who even has an A is Mary Hoemley. But don't let the name fool you. She's gorgeous, wears The Clash t-shirts, lives in my neighborhood, and if I spent half as much time paying attention to the teacher as I did staring at her I'd be getting at least a B.

Guaranteed. National Honors. Future president.

The other scholars in the band are Fat Bob, the bassist, and Alex, the drummer. Fat Bob isn't really fat, he's rail thin; says he has an active pubertary gland. Whatever that means. Alex has red hair and a terrible temper. That means he usually ends practice with a fist fight with me, Fat Bob or Kenny — a friend who attends our practices, lies on the old couch, and enjoys hearing loss.

Three years ago, we started the band out of out boredom and teen spirit. Five months after that, we played our first show at the Jackson-Dobson Youth Center.

A year after that, we sorta learned how to play music.

Since then, we've spent almost every Saturday afternoon in my parents' garage bashing away at our instruments. Recently, we were trying to learn a new song I wrote. The name was "Honey Baked Hamstrings" and it was about jocks.

Thought it was some of my best work, but Fat Bob couldn't master the chorus bass line

and we'd spent the last hour fiddling with just that one part. Tensions were running high. I also sensed some mutiny brewing over some recent decisions that I'd made.

"Let's call it a day," I said, wanting to avoid any of Alex's practice-ending punches. Kenny was spaced out on the couch. Fat Bob was already putting his bass away.

"You going to kick her out or what?" Alex asked, setting down his sticks; possibly to have his hands free.

I defended myself, saying, "Everyone loves chick keyboardists."

Fat Bob clicked the clasps on his case shut and glared at me.

"She wants to change our name to 'Dragon Kisses.'"

I wanted to explain that she was joking, but it didn't matter.

Two months ago, I'd been skateboarding around the neighborhood. I was pushing up the street when, from the rear, I recognized Mary. I had 30 seconds to decide if I should go down another street or maybe give her a head nod as I passed.

We'd lived near each other for two years, we were in the same math class, but I'd never said so much as "hi" to her. Its not like I was scared, or nervous, or timid, or shy ... it was simply that the perfect opportunity had not presented itself.

On that street, with no one watching, I decided that it was probably a good moment as any, so I pushed in her direction.

I was 10 feet behind her when: "HEY, MARY!!!!" For some reason, I yelled it.

Mary spun to defend herself, and as she did my wheel hit a rock. My board stopped and I slammed into the asphalt.

I jumped up and pretended nothing happened.

"Hey, David, are you ok?" Mary said, like some kind of Florence Nightingale.

I couldn't tell if it was my heart, my ego, or my knee-caps that were melting.

"Totally, fine! What's up?!" I barked, as if she was the one who had rudely stopped me.

"Oh, I was just walking," she giggled.

My heart jumped a beat.

I asked her how she could be so beautiful, and would she date, would she marry me, would she let me write songs of my undying love?

Wait a second — what were those disgusting thoughts?

My mind raced to find something else to say.

"Yeah, I like walking ..."

Loser. Totally uncool. Attraction flatlining.

If it was possible, at that moment, I would have kicked myself in the face.

She laughed.

A small smile split the corner of my lips,...but only short distances: Like from the couch to the kitchen."

I was up to 75 pushups a day (give or take 50), so I knew she wasn't about to think I was lazy.

"You're funny. You're in my math class. David?"

I nodded and gave her my best half-smile.

I could have drunk milk from those beautiful saucer eyes.

"Oh, hey, do you eat... food?"

She looked at me, that same mocking smirk that I'd seen in class when the teacher made some kind of off-the-wall comment.

I quickly corrected myself, "Want to get food sometime - with me?"

The moment dragged out. I could feel the blood rushing through my ear drums. A few houses away someone started up their lawn mower. But I didn't look away, I held the question with my eyes like I'd seen in the movies -let her know I was serious.

"Why not?" she said, smiling.

That wasn't exactly a 'yes,' but it wasn't exactly a 'no' either.

A couple of days later we went out to lunch. She found me really funny.

Surprisingly funny, so she said; which was very reassuring to my semi-fragile ego. And even more surprising, we kept hanging out after that. Actually, we hung out a lot, almost every day, but I wasn't about to get all feelings-central with her.

In truth, she was just a friend with good taste in music, both funny and smart, and was totally cool ... until she popped the big question.

"Why would you want to do that?!" I asked.

It was Saturday morning and we were sitting in my kitchen eating bowls of cereal and watching

Contest Winners

cartoons.

"Davey, I've been playing piano since I was seven! You guys don't even know how to read music."

I hated when she called me Davey. And lately I had a really hard time saying 'no'. I was suffering from a severe case of warm feelings towards her — even borderline caring.

She continued explaining what a great idea it was for her to join the Abdominal Rejects. I looked at her, so angelic and unlike anything close to what the band played. She'd heard the disastrous sound of our practices, but she'd never been. I figured she'd maybe last through one, so I finally relented.

"BUT YOU DIDN'T EVEN ASK US!"

Alex stood by his drum set and yelled at me while pointing his drumstick at the intruder, Mary, who casually set up her keyboard as if she was about to play the school pageant.

I shrugged, "Let's try it once. See how it sounds. Tons of musical groups have girls."

"Yeah, they're called choirs." Fat Bob said.

"She's already here."

Before they could say anything more, the starting notes of The Clash's "Should I Stay or Should I Go" rang out like cold pressed threats. She winked at me and as she began to sing I checked to see the response of the others. All jaws were on the floor. Even Kenny had roused himself out of his perma-stupor to look and see what was happening.

They didn't really want to, but Alex and Bob said she could be in the band until further notice. I nodded my approval and Mary smiled at the personal victory. I wouldn't admit it to the guys or Mary, but part of me was really stoked that she was in.

Two Saturdays later, Mary was absent from practice.

"Dragon Kisses isn't punk — sounds like a drama student's first date." Alex was indignant, "Call her up right now. She's out!"

Alex stood by his drum set wearing his pink shirt, he only wore one shirt, but this was the same day and scene where we entered the story.

"Help me out, FB. Why isn't it working?!"

"You haven't been the same since you started hanging out with Mary. You don't eat lunch with us in the commons. You don't even watch movies at my place on Fridays like we've done since we were like seven. You aren't the same,"

Bob said his with an unmistakable tone of rejection in his voice, "You've changed."

Alex raised his eyebrows and pointed to my jeans, which I used to wear for weeks without washing. Today they were clean. I hung my head in shame.

They were right! I'd given up all of my punk ways for this girl. This woman had come into my life and taken away my true identity. She was like kryptonite to my super-man punkness.

"I'll call her ... right now."

I stepped towards the door leading into the house and the phone.

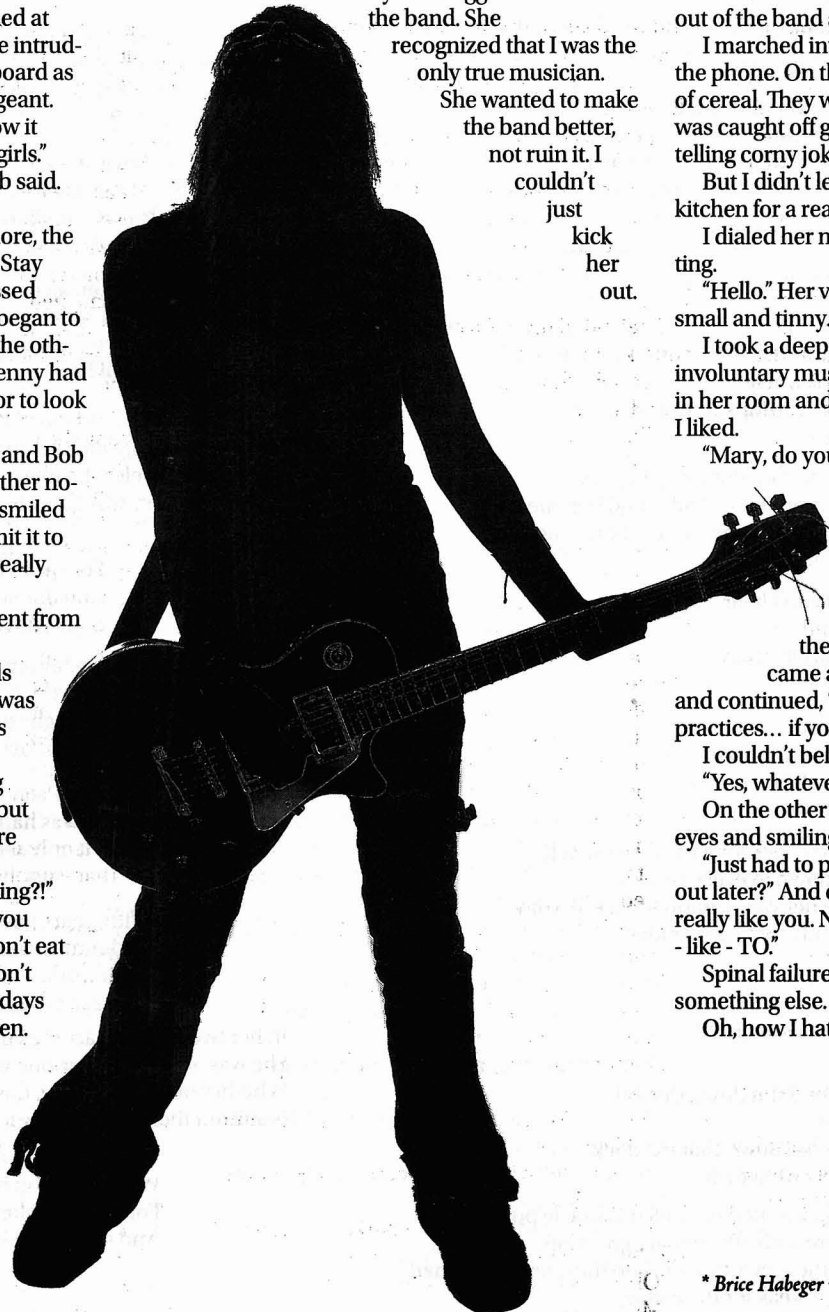
Was I about to make an epic mistake?

Mary had begged me to be in the band. She

recognized that I was the only true musician.

She wanted to make the band better, not ruin it. I couldn't

just kick her out.



But looking around that garage I saw a group of friends playing music (loose interpretation), not for fame or anything, but because they really loved it.

Alex and Bob glared back, their eyes betraying their true feelings. Kenny's eyes were squinted shut and I could never tell what he was thinking, but the fact was that I had stabbed them all in the back. I had neglected my two best buds, and Kenny too, our biggest fan.

And for what?!

A female.

NO WAY. I needed to march into that kitchen, pick up that phone, and tell that girl that she couldn't take me away from my friends. She was out of the band and possibly out of my life.

I marched into the kitchen, but stopped short of the phone. On the table were two half-eaten bowls of cereal. They weren't even mine and Mary's, but I was caught off guard by the sweet memory of her telling corny jokes between mouthfuls of cereal.

But I didn't let that last long. I came into the kitchen for a reason.

I dialed her number. She was at home baby-sitting.

"Hello." Her voice came through the phone small and tinny.

I took a deep breath — then, like some kind of involuntary muscle spasm, imagined her sitting in her room and listening to the same music that I liked.

"Mary, do you want to be in the band, with me?"

"Why wouldn't I?"

But she had to go — she was getting way too attached. I could tell. She liked me way too much.

"Yeah, um, I was just talking to the guys. We were a band before you came along and we all agreed," I faltered and continued, "That you can't miss any more practices... if you want to be in the band."

I couldn't believe what I was saying.

"Yes, whatever you say, Davey."

On the other end, I knew she was rolling her eyes and smiling.

"Just had to put that out there. So, can we hang out later?" And out of nowhere I added, "cuz I really like you. No, wait! Meant to say: I'd kind of - like - TO."

Spinal failure. Temporary insanity. Maybe something else.

Oh, how I hate feelings.

* Brice Habeger was never in a band. www.bricehabeger.com