

CHAPTER SAMPLER ANNOTATED BY THE AUTHOR



Emergency Contact

MARY
H. K.
CHOI

*Emergency
Contact*

MARY H. K. CHOI



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AKA THE
GREATEST
OF ALL
TIME!

PENNY.

When Penny was in ninth grade, two events of great portent occurred. One, she read Art Spiegelman's graphic novel, *Maus*. Two, she figured out that she wouldn't be popular until she was a grown-up and that was fine because life was a long con.

IF THIS IS
YOUR PRISON
I SALUTE
YOU.

Penny had Amber Friedman's birthday party to thank for this wisdom. Amber Friedman was a girl from French class who famously woke up at five forty-five every morning to straighten her curly hair only to set it in differently shaped curls. Everybody figured she was well off since her dad was a music journalist for *Rolling Stone*. And while life was tough for Penny as the daughter of a MILF, having a dad with more Instagram followers than God was also a monumental suck. Amber's dad cast a long shadow. It didn't help that his daughter wasn't cute. Not that she was ugly. She simply had one of those faces where the features were crowded into the middle like a too-big room with tiny furniture.

TRUE! THOUGH
STILL WAITING
FOR THE
PAY OFF...

PAYS LESS
THAN YOU'D
THINK

IT ME.

Then there was her personality. Amber loved butting in to finish other people's sentences—even with teachers—and sneezed with a high-pitched “tssst” at least a half-dozen times. To Penny it seemed

a bid for the wrong kind of attention. Anyway, Penny hadn't been properly invited to the get-together. Amber's mom and Penny's mom were friendly from an Ethiopian cooking class they'd taken years ago and happened to run into each other at the market.

"But, Pen, Amber's going to be so disappointed," said Celeste, adding, "I got you both the new nail gel kits from Sephora." Celeste dangled two shiny black bags.

Penny was more susceptible to bribery then. She rode her bike over and figured there'd at least be snacks and cake and enough people that she could bail inconspicuously.

When she arrived, six pairs of eyes bored into her from the living room of the pokey ranch house. It smelled as if cat pee had been doused liberally with Pine-Sol, and Penny couldn't help thinking about how if you could smell anything it was because you were breathing particles of it into your body. Penny encouraged her face not to betray her thoughts as she said hi to Melissa and Christy from school and two girls Amber knew from temple. Huge silver Mylar balloons that spelled out AMBER clung to the ceiling except for the B that hung about midroom and kept sticking to the back of Amber's hair.

Over the next two hours, they made personalized pizzas that Amber's mom baked in the oven and sundaes for dessert. When clear plastic boxes of beads were presented so they could make earrings with fishing wire, Penny discovered her limit for boredom. She excused herself to go to the bathroom, listened carefully for anyone else in the house, and quietly began canvassing the area. Amber's room featured no less than five black-and-white posters of Audrey Hepburn, and atop her canopied bed lay an orange cat grooming itself. It stopped to glare at Penny before deciding the intruder wasn't worth the attention. When Penny poked her head into what she figured was Amber's dad's office, she hit pay dirt. Mike

THIS IS SO "DON'T THINK ABOUT PIZZA" BECAUSE NOW YOU CAN ONLY THINK ABOUT PIZZA.

LOL
THERE ARE TWO TYPES OF PEOPLE IN THE WORLD: SNOOPS AND PEOPLE I PROBABLY CAN'T BE FRIENDS WITH.

Friedman, music critic, had every graphic novel ever. Ever. EVER. Stacks. From **Spider-Man to Superman** to huge volumes of collected editions with shiny hard covers, organized by subject.

Penny couldn't believe it. Mere feet from the inane small talk ("isn't it, like, so awk how some people say caramel and other people say carm-el?") and bullshit pizza toppings like (gag) cubed pineapple were thousands of hours of genuine entertainment. He had everything. From *Swamp Thing* to *V for Vendetta* and **Persepolis**, from **We3** to *Runaways*.

Mr. Friedman's room smelled of new books—pulp and varnish. After a whole shelf filled with a cute, pudgy character called Bone, Penny found *Maus*.

Penny had wanted to read *Maus* ever since she learned that it was the first comic to win the Pulitzer Prize, and upon realizing that Mr. Friedman had two copies—a hardcover and a soft—Penny did what any kid would. She stuck the soft down the back of her jeans, slid her sweatshirt over it, pretended she had a stomachache, and high-tailed it home.

It was among the most shameful moments of her life. **Never mind the karma of a total non-Jew stealing a book about the Jewish Holocaust from a Jewish person.**

Except that the book changed her life.

Penny knew *Maus* was going to be formative. Not that she was going to become a career criminal, more that she felt destined to make something that made someone else feel how she did when she read it.

Penny believed with her whole heart that there were moments—crucial instances—that defined who someone was going to be. There were clues or signs, and you didn't want to miss them.

It astounded her that a comic book featuring cartoon mice and

SEE!
YOU CAN
LOVE
MARVEL
AND D.C.

THESE TWO
ARE SOOO
SWOONS.

TRULY
TERRIBLE
KARMA

cats could trick her into learning so much about World War II. Not only *learn* about it but *care* about it. She'd known about Auschwitz and how they told all the prisoners that they were going to take showers and instead, cutting off their hair, throwing it in a pile, and sending them to the gas chamber. Even kids. In history last year they'd had a quiz on the dates and significant events of the war, and she'd gotten a near-perfect score. Yet it wasn't until she read *Maus* and lived it through the eyes of a father and son mouse, that she saw past the cold facts. That night Penny read *Maus* twice and cried. She knew then that she had to become a writer.

It made what happened at school the following Monday worth it. Amber told everyone in French that Penny had left abruptly because she had **diarrhea**. After that Penny was cured of ever trying to play nice with people from school again. Penny might have been unpopular, but so was Amber. Unless you were super-popular or second-most super-popular, the difference was negligible. You were a loser. What separated Penny from Amber was that anybody could smell Amber's desperation. To Penny that was far more pathetic than simply being invisible. Penny would stop trying. Instead she'd spend time preparing for her future, living in books until the exciting part of her life would begin. Things would matter then. In fact, everything would be different.

. . .

Ten minutes in and Penny already knew her eight a.m. fiction-writing course on Thursdays would be her favorite. Notably, the class was full despite the agonizing start time. Held in a small classroom, it was incomparable to American History or regular English 301, which were both conducted in sprawling lecture halls with stadium seating and a screen suspended from the ceiling so you could see

HARDEST
WORD TO
SPELL IN
THE
ENGLISH
LANGUAGE
LOL... WOW...
LANGUAGE
EVER?

your professor's face from the cheap seats. This classroom sat about twenty, with high school desks, the kind where the chairs were attached to the table.

J. A. Hanson was young for a professor. She was twenty-eight. At twenty-two she'd written the critically acclaimed *Messiah*, a classic post-apocalyptic tale she'd received a Hugo Award for. The hero was a teenaged girl and the ending blew Penny's mind. That J.A. was a woman blew everyone else's mind. The reviews and fansites were convinced J. A. Hanson was a dude. Especially since there were no pictures of her at the time and nobody knew what J.A. stood for.

Penny discovered science fiction shortly after *Maus*. She began writing her own short stories as a hobby, and though her high school had a literary magazine, Penny wouldn't have dreamed of submitting anything.

It didn't help that in AP English Lit, junior year, they'd read Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery," which was basically *The Hunger Games* except it was written in the forties and had a twist at the end.

They'd spent a week in class creating a story with unpredictable endings, and Penny wrote hers from the point of view of a sixteen-year-old Swiss boy in the year 2345, who woke up knowing precisely when he'd die. The boy considered what his final acts would be and elected to spend the day doing exactly what he normally did, playing chess with his best friend, Gordy. He was cheered by the small, dependable routines most and the twist was that he didn't die, waking up every morning with the same thought in an insane asylum, where he didn't have any choice but to do what his doctors had scheduled for him.

Penny liked her story, yet Ms. Lansing gave her a B-, saying she'd been "hoping to hear more about Penny's exotic point of view." Penny couldn't believe it. As if Zurich, 2345, wasn't farflung enough.

OKAY: NOW THAT I'M "BEING A WRITER" I SUPER REGRET BEING TOO SELF-CONSCIOUS TO CALL MYSELF ONE SOONER. JUST WRITE! GET FEEDBACK. DON'T BE LIKE ME. DON'T WAIT UNTIL YOU'RE "GOOD ENOUGH!" LEGIT I WOULD STILL BE WAITING.

OH MAN. LOVE SHIRLEY JACKSON SO HARD.

S/o To ANYBODY WHO GETS "EXOTIC" AS A COMPLIMENT AND FEELS ALL THE SIDE EYE FEELS.

She knew what her teacher meant; she'd meant *Asian* despite Penny being born in Seguin, Texas, which was maybe twenty minutes away. Penny vowed not to show her work again until she respected who'd be reading it.

Over the years, Penny inhaled the classics—*Ready Player One*, *Dune*, and *Ender's Game*, though it wasn't until she was introduced to *Messiah*, ironically from a guy who was the worst dude in the history of dudes, that she realized sci-fi didn't have to be so . . . boy. J.A.'s work was like *Ender's Game*, yet where Ender was smart and getting conned 'cause he was a kid, J.A.'s hero Scan knew her worth.

A female protagonist made the stories more inspiring than voyeuristic. It was so much fun to write about who you *could* be. From then on Penny's stories centered around women and girls. There wasn't even a special trick. You wrote it exactly as you would for a guy, but you made pain thresholds higher since girls have to put up with more in the world and give them more empathy, which makes everything riskier. Plus, with sci-fi, you set up the rules at the beginning and you could blast it all to kingdom come as long as you did it in a satisfying manner. The fact that Penny could take a class from a published author made the whole communal-living college situation worthwhile.

J.A. Hanson had undeniable charisma. She was black with natural hair, dyed platinum, gathered in a pouf on top of her head. And she wore thick-rimmed white glasses to match. J.A. made nerdiness glamorous. And not in some posery Tumblr way where girls played first-person shooters in their underpants to be attractive to guys.

"Does a Chinese writer get to write about a slave lynching?" It was an intense topic for 8:11 a.m., yet J.A. lobbed the topic into the room so casually Penny couldn't be sure she'd heard her correctly. It gave the room an intimate, crackly energy, as if they were crowded

AMIRITE?

ALTHO:
WHO HAS'NT
SET A
TRAP
LET'S BE
HONEST.

@ ME IF
YOU HAVE STRONG
FEELINGS ABOUT THIS.
I WANT TO KNOW.

around a dinner table. A dinner table that was unceremoniously lit on fire.

In Penny's heart, the answer was absolutely yes. Though she also didn't know how she felt as an Asian person telling a black woman that.

Penny snuck a peek over her shoulder to see if anyone would pipe up.

"Obviously," said the other Asian kid in the class. "I read about that in the *Times* as well," he said.

The kid had boy-band hair and a clipped British accent that made sense for sentences like, "I read that in the *Times* as well."

"Why?" J.A.'s smile widened up to her canines. It reminded Penny of when Sherlock Holmes announced, "The game is afoot!"

"Well, he's not white," he said. "Which helps."

"But does it? Isn't it the license of the fiction writer regardless of their identity to characterize whomever they want?" said a girl who was ethnically ambiguous.

Penny couldn't remember ever having an honest discussion about race in a classroom.

"Well, there's also that," said the British-Chinese kid. "As long as you're not a tragedy tourist or creating racist caricatures. As long as you're . . . talented, it's okay."

"So as long as you're adept and well intentioned, you get a pass?" asked J.A.

"It's knee-jerk 'PC' garbage to say otherwise," said another guy, who used scare quotes around "PC."

"No, it's not," a redheaded girl chimed in. "It's the Kardashians getting cornrows. You can't shoplift the trendy parts of a culture and glamorize them but then not take into account the awful parts like getting killed by cops at a traffic stop."

PLS WATCH
THE INIMITABLE
AMANDA
STENBERG'S
"DON'T CASH
CROP ON MY
CORNROWS" FOR
THE FULL
INCISIVE TAKE.

DUDE
DEFINITELY
CALLS
WOMEN
"FEMALES!"

J.A. seemed pleased by the direction that the conversation was taking. It felt as though she was assessing them, coolly compiling notes on each, and Penny was sorry she wasn't contributing.

SAAAAAME
ಝ

BIGGEST
GIRL-
CRUSH ON
J.A. EVER!

"Look, I hate writing," said J.A. after the initial din died down. "And I'm the type of writer who hates it every single time. But make no mistake: It's something that you *get* to do. Especially fiction. I think of it this way." She sat on top of her desk and crossed her legs in a lotus pose. "If there was an apocalypse—zombies, the sun explodes, whatever—fiction writing as a job would be the thousandth priority behind SoulCycle instructors."

100%
TRUE

The class laughed.

"It's a privilege, and part of acknowledging that privilege is doing it honorably. Create diverse characters because you can. Especially ones that aren't easy to write. A character that scares you is worth exploring. Yet if you breathe life into a character and it comes to you too easily—say you're writing from the viewpoint of a black man in America and you're not one? Think hard about where your inspiration is coming from. Are you writing stereotypes? Tropes? Are you fetishizing the otherness? Whose ideas are you spreading? Really consider how you transmit certain optics over others. Think about how much power that is."

TO ME
WRITING
SHOULD BE
EMOTIONALLY
EXPENSIVE

J.A. locked eyes with Penny.

"It's about finding the truth in fiction," she said. "Which sounds contradictory. But the story will let you know if you're close."

Penny's brain buzzed. J.A. had called writers powerful, which meant Penny was powerful.

It took Penny a moment to realize her mouth was hanging open a little. If *Maus* was galvanizing moment number one in Penny's plans to become a writer, the heart-hammering feeling in J.A.'s class was two. Maybe two *and* three. She'd been invited to a secret society.

THIS HAPPENS
TO ME. DO I
NEED TO GO
SEE SOMEONE?

It reorganized her thoughts with such intensity that she had the sudden urge to pee.

Penny had been writing all the time, for years now. She'd never stopped even if she showed no one. Stories, lists of ideas, and strange chunks of amusing dialogue that came to her while she ignored whatever else was going on in her actual life. She knew she was decent. Only she wanted more. Penny wanted to get really good. And she wanted for J. A. Hanson to recognize exactly *how* good.

I DO THIS.
AND SOMETIMES I
DON'T UNDERSTAND
MY NOTES LATER.
I HAVE A LIST
CALLED "MILK TOOTH"
WITH NO OTHER
WORDS.
WHAT EVEN?



SAM.

I LOVE
SAM SO
MUCH.

HIS EX
COMES UP
AS "LIAR"
IN HIS
PHONE.

Sam woke with a start. It was Saturday—more than a week later—and his problems remained as they were. He was still broken up with Liar. He was still in love with Liar. Liar was pregnant. It was one p.m. It was his day off and he'd fallen asleep only two hours ago. Blargh.

BOOM!

Last night, after countless texts and missed calls, Liar finally *deigned* to come by House after work. Under Sam's watchful eye she chugged gallons of water and walked back and forth to the bathroom to pee on six more sticks. It was both intimate and also very much not.

Period lateness check: four weeks and counting.

"Thanks a lot for buying the cheap ones," called out Lorraine from the toilet. She had the bathroom door cracked open, and though they'd once been that couple where one person peed while the other showered, Sam looked away. He heard the flush.

"I get pee all over my hands with those things," she said. Sam wondered how many pregnancy tests she'd taken over the years but knew better than to ask. It had taken five days of badgering to get

JUST ONE
INDIGNITY OF
BEING HUMAN.

her to come over. She'd skipped the Planned Parenthood appointment and so far had failed to make a new one.

They lined up the results on the side of the sink.

"See, the good ones spell out 'pregnant' or 'not pregnant,'" she said. "They're digital or something."

Sam hadn't known there was such a thing as a good one when it came to pregnancy tests. He'd sprung for the two-for-three deal. Sam reasoned six meant better odds so they'd know for sure, for sure.

They waited and watched. It was surprisingly hard to tell. Of the six, five were positive with faint plus signs. The last was a dud. The little white window remained completely blank. No minus sign. Nothing.

"So, you're pregnant," he said.

"I guess," she responded.

"How do you feel?" he asked.

"Pissed," she said.

He nodded glumly.

"Like, how dumb is this?"

She rubbed her eyes with the heels of her hands and groaned.

"You really want to know how I feel?" she said after a while. "I want to break shit."

"Come with me," he said. Sam went behind the bar, grabbed his backpack from under the register, then led her through the kitchen and out the screen door.

It was an airless night.

Sam unzipped his bag and handed Lorraine his laptop.

She took it and looked at him quizzically.

"You said you wanted to break shit."

He nodded at the gravelly parking lot.

"It's backed up," he said. "And broken. Put it out of its . . ."

WAIT! OMG
DID SHE WASH
HER HANDS?
I HAVE TO
MAKE HER
DO THIS IN
THE FINAL.
SHE'S A LIAR
NOT A
MONSTER.

Before Sam could say “miserable” Lorraine threw it on the ground by their feet.

Nothing happened. It lay there heavy and doltish.

She picked it back up, opened it, and this time pitched it farther.

“Fuuuuuuuck,” she yelled into the night.

It skittered yards away.

They walked over.

“You have a go,” she said, bending down to hand it to him.

Sam held the laptop above his head with both hands and threw it onto the ground, where it finally cracked. They chucked it and chucked it—working up a sweat—until the screen was totaled and the two halves came apart at the hinge. Lorraine took a photo of it and posted it on Instagram, tagging him.

After, without saying anything, they tossed the computer’s mangled carcass into a trash bag, threw in the pregnancy tests, and swung the bag into the dumpster.

“Did you get a new one?” she asked him, getting in her car.

Sam shook his head and yawned. He’d have to drop out of school and get a second job to pay child support anyway. Besides, the type of work he qualified for rarely required personal computing.

“Come by tomorrow,” she said, pulling him in for a hug. Her expression was unreadable.

At two thirty the next afternoon Sam took the bus over to Lorraine’s apartment, plugging in the pass code he knew by heart. When the gate rumbled open, he was notably relieved that not everything in the world had gone berserk.

She met him at the door, no makeup, hair up in a towel, barefoot in a pink-and-blue floral housedress. It was a punch in the gut. It was his private Lorraine. His favorite Lorraine. The Lorraine she was when it was just the two of them.

MMM...
SO
SATISFYING
I BET

INTIMACY'S
GNARLY BUT
ALSO SOOO
GOOD.

“You should’ve buzzed me,” she remarked irritably. She made him wait by the door, closing it partway so he couldn’t see in, and reappeared with a silver MacBook Air and a tangled power cord.

“Here,” she said, handing it over. The slender device struck Sam as strangely vulnerable. More expensive and aerodynamic than any computer he’d ever owned. Sam wondered if there was anything on it that he wasn’t supposed to see. Or better yet, something she’d deliberately left him to find.

“It’s wiped,” she said. “It’s got Final Cut Pro though. Photoshop, too, if you need that.”

This wasn’t what he’d expected. Not that he’d thought they’d leap back into bed if he came over, but this felt too close to charity. The worst part was that he wasn’t in a position to refuse it.

“It’ll only be for a few weeks,” he mumbled.

“I upgraded,” she said. “Keep it as long as you want.”

That was Lorraine’s other secret side. While she was all too happy to cadge free drinks off his dirtbag friends and split cheap slices of pizza, most of the time it was an act. Lorraine’s lifestyle was heavily subsidized by her parents. She moved out of Twombly after freshman year and her parents continued to pay her rent even when she landed a job. Her mother bought all of Lorraine’s clothes from Neiman Marcus with the help of a personal shopper. The first time he’d spent the night and took a shower at her house, Sam spotted the price sticker left on her shampoo—\$38. He’d put it back and used soap on his head.

Keeping up while they were dating was out of the question, and Sam had no idea what was expected from him as the father of her child. Not only was there nowhere to put a crib in his room, but he didn’t even have a car. And the prospect of walking six miles each way with a Babybjörn strapped to his chest made his testicles want to retreat into his body.

LA LA
LA.

NOT A
REAL
DORM @
UT. AUSTIN
(Hook 'em!)

After he left Lorraine's he walked home through Sixth Street to see if anyone was hiring. Calling his old friend Gunner about a barback gig would have been easy enough, but Sam didn't want to explain his absence or his sudden need for cash.

Sweat slid down the back of Sam's denim-clad legs. He would've loved to wear basketball shorts and flip-flops, resembling every care-free numbskull roaming the streets with status headphones, but he couldn't bring himself to do it. **Shrimping man-toes were an insult to nature.**

STRONGLY
AGREE.

Sam was tired. Lorraine's laptop hit the base of his spine with every footfall.

The computer probably cost more than his life. Which made a kind of sense since it was decisively more capable than he'd ever been. The most money he'd ever made was eleven dollars an hour. He tried to enjoy the afternoon air and the meditative qualities of walking and failed.

Instead he considered the cost of diapers.

One time Liar sent him to the store to buy tampons and he was stunned by how expensive they were. Diapers had to cost about the same. Except that a **period was a week a month,** so you could space them out, but a baby needed diapers pretty much constantly for years.

SERIOUSLY
HOW ARE
TAMPONS
NOT FREE?

UGH
SOMETIMES

Christ, he had to relax. Sam let his mind drift and panned out to orient himself on Planet Earth and reassure his brain that things were going to be fine.

His brain had other ideas.

Okay, so if Lorraine *was* pregnant, it could also mean . . .

SHE COULD HAVE HERPES. WHICH MEANS THAT EVEN IF SHE'S NOT PREGNANT SAM COULD STILL HAVE HERPES BECAUSE **PAUL** DEFINITELY HAD HERPES.

LIAR'S
BIG LIE.

Thanks, brain.

He walked past the old Marriott, where his mom used to work. It consistently struck him as funny that his mother spent any time in the hospitality business. Brandi Rose Sidelow-Lange was a piece of work. She had what in the old days they'd called moxie. Sam inherited his smart mouth from his mother, and like a snake eating its own tail, it only served to drive her crazy.

Once upon a time, though Sam never knew it, Brandi Rose had been a different person. Infinitely less pissed off. This was evidenced by a photo in the living room. The frame was blue and white with a sunflower on the bottom corner and featured his mom at sixteen, grinning with a Texas Elite Princess Pageant sash draped over her shoulder. Her hair a shiny brown and wearing a knee-length navy dress, Brandi Rose waved. It was a beautiful photo made more so by how happy his mother appeared. Mostly, though, it was displayed in the front room as a trap. Anyone who mentioned it would get the same bitter rejoinder.

"Well, that sash ain't first place," she'd point out, ice cubes clinking in her Long Island Iced Tea. "Bitsy Sinclair won. Her daddy, Buck, owned nine car dealerships from here to El Paso."

According to Brandi Rose, rich people got everything.

"Second place is just about as good as first loser," she'd continue. "I only did it for the state scholarship anyway. Fat lot of good that did me." *Clink. Clink.*

His mother's response to Sam's happy addition would be more of the same. Tirades about how shit rolled downhill and how she had to be the one to take care of everything. The accusations would then turn to his father, which led right back to her dissatisfaction with her son. The rejection stung on all counts. Sam was a carbon copy of his father. Though despite the evolutionary wisdom that

I PICTURE
LYLA'S DAD
FROM
FRIDAY NIGHT
LIGHTS.

babies resemble their dads so they'd stick around, Caden Becker was immune to the charms of his tiny doppelgänger.

As much as it broke his heart, Sam knew his old man was a loser. Granted, he was handsome, tall, dark, with a gleam of wicked about the eyes and Sam had inherited his father's ease around strangers and his rangy bearing, but that's where he wanted the similarities to end.

The last time Sam saw his dad, the elder Becker was stumbling right in front of Tequila Six, looking alarmingly well preserved for his lifetime of hard partying. Rumor had it that he and the old bass player of his band had gotten an apartment in the rundown town houses off Mo-Pac favored by Austin's newly divorced bachelors, but to Sam his father looked homeless. He was wearing a torn **ThunderCloud Subs** sweatshirt and appeared to be muttering at a couple of sorority girls, who swerved from him without interrupting the flow of their conversation. Sam walked briskly in the opposite direction. He hadn't considered the inevitability of running into his old man if he got a second job at a bar. Sam knew he wouldn't deny his father money if he asked for a loan he had no intention of paying back. If anything, Sam figured his dad was a step up from his mom, who stole it.

Thinking about his parents upset him, and when he blinked he felt the horizon lurch abruptly. He took a deep breath. He should have eaten something before leaving. Or else he should have gotten some sleep instead of obsessing about whether or not he and Lorraine should get married.

Marriage was useless anyway. Nothing more than a bogus contract to ensure all parties wound up disappointed. At least that had been the case for his mother. Before this talk of houses with pools and good school districts with Mr. Lange, Brandi Rose had known better than to expect anything from the world. The rash of

AUSTIN
NATIVES
CAN ONLY
EVER SING
THESE
WORDS

SWT CHECK:
SAM IS
ACTUALLY WAAAY
TOO EMO TO
BELIEVE THIS
IN HIS TRUEST
HEART.

I MISS
BONUS
FEATURES

consolation prizes didn't help. It reminded Sam of a military air-drop, except instead of humanitarian aid with food or cash, both of which they lacked and needed, a sixty-inch flat-screen TV would appear at their door. Or a Blu-ray player without any of the overpriced discs they couldn't afford to buy. There were designer clothes, two boxes labeled ARMANI, containing a white cashmere coat and sweaters. For his fourteenth birthday Sam received a pair of pajamas from Calvin Klein, that was missing only a big, fat Cuban cigar to complete the cartoon tycoon Halloween outfit.

Then came the weepy phone calls behind closed doors. Brandi Rose removed her emerald wedding ring. It was around the time she ceased communicating with her son, as if it had somehow been his fault. A wall of radiant rage was erected between them.

Sam pulled at his T-shirt. Good Lord, it was hot. The only shade was directly in front of the bars, and he didn't want to get close enough to smell the tang of dirty bar mops and the sweet oakiness of whiskey. Sam's head swam. He didn't want to drop out of school and become a washout like his dad. This was a terrible idea. He had no business working at a bar or near one. Whatever swirl of ingredients that made both his parents such devout drinkers hadn't skipped a generation.

He peered down the road. Miles to go. Sam's vision wobbled violently and his knees hitched beneath him. Sam had passed out once, in fifth-grade gym. He'd hung slack in Coach Tremont's arms and could hear her talking about his bird bones though he couldn't lift his head. It was humiliating.

His arms felt leaden at his elbows, and when he formed fists to prove to himself that he could, the effort unnerved him. His hearing became muffled, sounds dropping out completely before returning. Sam examined his surroundings unsteadily. So many strangers. His

I HAVE
FAINTED
IN PUBLIC
4X
ASK ME
ANYTHING!
IT'S A NEW
YORK RITE
OF PASSAGE
TBQH.

heart pounded. A sharp pain pierced through his chest as his breath caught in his throat. He pictured himself as a voodoo doll being pierced by a large spike. There had to be somewhere for him to sit down. Cars. Banks. Bars. Restaurants. Food trucks.

Can twenty-one-year-olds have heart attacks?

Sure.

Babies have heart attacks.

Babies.

Could his unborn baby have a congenital heart condition? Yes. Would Sam have to wait for the bus at three a.m. to rush it to the hospital while it died? Most definitely.

Don't call it an "it," he reminded himself.

The pain in his chest was unbearable. He had to call someone. But who? Sam's list was pathetic, starting and ending at Al and Fin. The list of who he absolutely couldn't call was more impressive—Lorraine, his mom, Gunner, everyone else in the world.

Sam peeled off from the marauding, day-drinking pedestrians, staggered to the nearest curb, and collapsed.

There were other people on the curb, and the bespectacled red-head he'd almost crash-landed into glared and scooped as if he were a plague-stricken hobo. He went to pull out his phone to call 911, but his jeans—his stupid hipster jeans—were too tight. He saw stars and then he died.

STRUGGLE
TOO REAL.

PENNY.

When it came to perspiration, Penny had a problem. Not that she stank of BO or anything. It's that from March to around October she was invariably damp. She could feel the pool of moisture collecting in each underboob, and her sweat mustache beaded up no matter how urgently she wiped it away.

It didn't help that she was dining al fresco in 100-degree heat downtown where the good shady patches had been staked out by the pushy and hyper-vigilant. Penny scanned the crowd. Hell really was other people.

Other than her car, Penny had no sanctuary. When Jude was out or at Mallory's, she couldn't relax, knowing that the two-headed monster of "best friends since we were six" could turn up as soon as Penny got comfortable. Penny wasn't a covert crack addict or a compulsive masturbator, but she didn't have an appreciation for privacy until she shared a room with a girl who could go to the bathroom with the door open while naked and eating pretzels dipped in hummus. Penny had to get away. She hopped into her Honda and headed downtown, paying five bucks for parking to

I AM
AFFLICTED
WITH A
SIMILARLY
WINSOME
GLANDULAR
ISSUE .

MY
FIRST CAR
AND FIRST
TRUE LOVE .

sit on a splintery bench in the blazing heat for a disappointing seven-dollar Korean taco and a six-dollar blended “horchatalatta.” She wondered if the rest of early adulthood would be like this—avoiding roommates, getting ripped off for bad fusion food, and the peculiar loneliness of being smothered by people she didn’t want to spend time with.

SPOILER
ALERT
BUT
YES?

Penny got up to toss her soggy paper plate in the garbage. There were an unseemly number of bars on either side of her—a Disneyland Main Street for day drinkers. The snack had been a bust, but the people watching was stellar.

A scrawny kid peeled off from the masses and almost ate it. Penny reached for her phone but was too slow on the uptake. She could never grab it in time for good snaps. Sweat ran down her back and seeped into her underwear elastic. The kid staggered over to the sidewalk and planted himself under a tree. He was gulping for air, a marooned fish on dry land, and his face was blinding white. Maybe it was heroin. Penny rubbed the inside of her elbow where she thought her heroin vein would be and then poked her forearm, leaving red circles. She should have worn sunblock. She watched the boy, slumped against the trunk, pull up his black T-shirt sleeves to fashion a sort of tank top. Man, he was skinny enough to be a junkie, and his arms were covered in tattoos.

AS AN
AZN LADY
I WEAR
SPF 45
EVERY
DAY.
NAMASTE.

The kid shoved back his hair, revealing his face. Except it wasn’t a kid. It was Jude’s uncle. Uncle Sam. Hot Uncle Sam. Hot Uncle Sam who was possibly OD’ing on opioids right in front of her. She had to do something! Oh God, she was in no state for altruism. Penny quickly pulled her hair into a bun and grabbed a breath mint from her go bag.

Priorities, Penny. Save the man from dying. Nobody cares about your breath.

She glanced back at Sam to see if he had stirred. He was probably in the throes of brain death now, drawing his final breaths while she was faffing.

What do I do? What do I do?

How to save a dying man:

1. Call the **Texas Hammer.** *What?* How was her only readily available resource an outdated local ad for a personal injury attorney?
2. Ignore him. Christ, he's not your uncle! Ugh. But he was Jude's. And Penny liked Jude even if she talked way too much.
3. Go see if he's dead already.

CRUCIAL
LOCAL
AD

Penny ran across the street to his lifeless body and peered into his face.

She hoped she wouldn't drip sweat on him.

He certainly seemed dead.

And, for the record, the tattoo on his biceps wasn't a chess piece. It was the head of a stallion with its eyes covered in a piece of fabric. What did it mean?

Focus, Penny. Shit.

"Sam?" She kicked his heel gently. They both still had on the same shoes.

SAM .

It was a face he knew and couldn't place. He stared and tried to focus.

Friend or foe? Friend or foe? Do I owe you money? Are you friends with Lorraine? Please don't be friends with Lorraine.

Sam closed his eyes again, embarrassed. Her voice was gentle. It was a nice voice.

"Sam, are you alive? It's Penny." She sounded far away.

Sam felt another kick on his foot, and he groaned.

"I'm Jude's friend," said the shiny face with the **bright red lips.**

"Who's Jude?" he croaked.

"Your cousin."

"Niece," he corrected.

"Are you dying?"

He nodded and tried to slide his phone out of his pocket without passing out.

"Is Jude coming?" He didn't want her to see him like this. He hated the thought of anyone seeing him like this.

"No."

Thank God.

I ALWAYS
DO A RED
LIP WHEN
I'M SCARED
OR ANXIOUS.
IT WARDS
OFF
PREDATORS.

A Biggie lyric teased the corners of his brain.

Something about heartbeats and Sasquatch feet.

“Sam, WHAT’S happening? YOU look HORRIBLE.”

His hearing kept coming and going.

His heart was fit to burst.

Thudthudthud.

I’m dying, dead.

Deaddeadddead.

“I think I’m having a heart attack.” He closed his eyes.

“Shit, shit, shit,” she said. “Shit.”

And then.

“Hello? 911?”

Sam thought it was funny how everybody greeted the three-digit number they’d called. As if they had to ask.

“My friend’s sick. I don’t know. Yeah, I’m here with him.”

Sam felt a wave of nausea. He hoped he wouldn’t have to puke in public.

“Sam . . . um.”

“Becker,” he told her.

“Becker,” she said. “Twenty-one I think.”

Sam nodded.

“No,” she said. “I don’t know. At least I don’t think so . . .”

He felt her cold hand on his arm. He opened his eyes.

“Sam, are you on drugs?”

I wish.

He shook his head.

“No, no drugs. Um . . . shortness of breath, cold sweats . . .”

“Stabbing pain in my chest,” he said.

“Stabbing pain in his chest,” she repeated.

“Like a knitting needle,” he said.

“WHO SHOT YA.”

VERY REASSURING
THING TO SAY
TO A PERSON...

“Like a knitting needle,” she repeated.

“Mm-hmm,” he heard her say. Followed by, “Yeah, I guess the knitting needle is going through his chest.”

Exactly.

Sam nodded again.

“Okay, thank you. Bye.”

Sam thought about how people on TV never said good-bye. And then he wondered why people only thought about the dumbest things as they lay dying.

Sam felt Penny sit down next to him.

“Sam, wake up.”

“I am up,” he whispered.

She was staring at him intently.

“Are you sure you’re not on drugs?”

He glared at her before realizing—inappropriately—that she was kind of cute when she made eye contact. Cute enough that he was bummed out that she was watching him die on the street.

“Positive,” he said.

She wiped his wet brow with her T-shirt sleeve, which was already damp. He saw a flash of bra and glanced away.

“Sorry,” she said. “I don’t know why I did that. I’m supposed to keep talking to you until they get here.”

The cogs in his mind picked up steam.

“Wait, shit. Did you call an ambulance?”

She nodded. “Knitting needle?” she reminded him. As if 100 percent of knitting-needle-related incidents (imagined and otherwise) justified an emergency vehicle.

“Call them back!” he ordered. His heart hammered harder. “Call them back!” he repeated. “I can’t afford an ambulance.”

AS A
FREELANCER NOTHING
SCARES ME MORE.

She stared at him for a beat, grabbed her phone, and marched away. A thousand years later, she returned.

“I called them.” She crouched in front of him with her hands on his shoulders. “Though yours is an incorrect response.”

Despite his stupor, Sam bristled at her word choice. “Incorrect”? Was it “incorrect” to be broke?

“Wait, can you do this?” She stuck her tongue straight out.

He stuck his tongue out.

“What’s the thing with the tongue and heart attacks?” she yelled impatiently, as if he were deliberately keeping diagnostic information from her. “**Shit, I think that’s for a stroke.**” She pulled out her phone and searched helplessly.

He drew his tongue back into his mouth.

“Okay,” she said, breathing deep. “Don’t die, okay?”

He nodded.

“**Promise me,**” she said.

He nodded again.

“You know what? Try to slow your breathing . . . **one Mississippi** . . . **two Mississippi** . . . Say it in your head.”

He focused on breathing.

“Did you eat today?”

He shook his head.

A Styrofoam drink container was thrust into his face. The straw smelled cinnamony and was covered in red lipstick.

“It’s not very good,” she told him.

He took a sip.

Horchata. Cold. Sweet. And she was right—it was kind of gross.

“Did you drink a lot of coffee today?”

He nodded. Same as every day.

MY BESTIE
AND I ALWAYS
PROMISE NOT
TO DIE. IT'S
WAY TOO
IRONIC TO
DIE AFTER
PROMISING
NOT TO.

SWEETENED
RICE OR
TIGERNUT
MILK. IT'S
SO GOOD

PS: IT IS.

SOME PEOPLE
SAY "PSTATO"
OR "PICCADILLY"
WHICH IS
SO CUTE.

“Do you have radiating pain?”

He shook his head. She read off her phone.

“What about numbness?”

He shook his head.

“Sam?”

Sam nodded. He was Sam, it was true.

“We’re going to take a walk now.”

He shook his head.

He felt her grab his arm and sling it over her shoulders. She was soaking wet, and where his sweaty bare arm met her neck it was slippery. He put weight on his legs so he, a grown man, wouldn’t have to be carried by some lady again.

“I’m going to take you somewhere so someone can examine you, okay? I’m parked real, real close. Walk with me. Please?”

“Okay,” he said.

. . .

Fifteen minutes later, they were in front of a MedSpring Urgent Care.

The AC was blasting and Sam was soaked though otherwise calm. He wanted badly to go home and take a nap.

Penny was silent. Even in his peripheral vision, she seemed agitated. Her hands were clutching the steering wheel so tight her knuckles were white. He couldn’t believe that Jude’s mute, macabre roommate had saved his life. He wondered if he’d have to get her a small taxidermied spider or something for her efforts.

“I’ll be right here,” she said, staring straight ahead.

Sam didn’t want to explain to her that he couldn’t afford ambulances, hospitals, or the cheaper emergency clinics in crappy strip malls.

MEN MAN
ENOUGH TO
BE CARRIED
BY A LADY
ARE KINDA
RAD THO.

WHEN I
PICTURE THIS
SPIDER HE’S
WEARING A
TOPHAT.

"I'm fine," he said.

"No you're not."

"I don't have health insurance," he admitted.

"Oh."

"I swear to God I'm fine now," he said after a moment. "I don't know what that was. Probably heat stroke."

"Have you had heat stroke before?"

He shook his head.

"Did you know that if you've had heat stroke once, your brain remembers the circuitry so it's easier for you to get heat stroke again? Maybe way easier than before?"

He shook his head and recalled Penny's earlier jokes about apps making apps. She was apparently a huge nerd.

"So . . .," she said. Penny's dark eyes were shiny, and pink bloomed on her cheeks. "Wait, did you have a panic attack?"

"What? No. I don't have panic attacks. Never in my life." Jesus, give a girl WebMD and she starts thinking she's a physician.

"You had a goddamned panic attack," she said, turning away from him again. "The sweatiness, the heart-attack feeling. Oh my God!" She slapped the bottom of the steering wheel with her left hand. "It's obvious. *And* you didn't eat today. Caffeine. So dumb!"

"Okay, hold on." He threw his hands up. "Why are you so angry?" Sam reached out to touch the back of the hand closest to him, but she jerked away, exhaling noisily.

"I'm sorry," she said, shoulders slumping. "It's adrenaline. Rage is my usual fear response."

"That," he said, "is a nifty quality."

Nifty?

"I know," said Penny. "Everybody just loves it. Ugh." She groaned, rubbing her face and smearing lipstick across her chin.

THEY'RE
REALLY
GOOD
JOKES.
PLEASE
BUY THIS
BOOK.

ALSO ME.
WHY ARE
WE LIKE
THIS?

He nodded. He didn't know what to do about the lipstick. Maybe he'd get away with not saying anything until he got home.

Penny handed him a bottle of water. He took it gratefully.

Then she grabbed her black and gray camouflage backpack from the backseat, plopped it onto her lap, and rummaged through it. She handed him a small bag of raw cashews from a blue zippered bag filled with other small, compact snacks.

"Uh, sometimes it's triggered by caffeine or low blood sugar with me," Penny said, explaining the snack.

Okay, he had to tell her.

"You've got lipstick everywhere," he said, pointing toward her chin.

She angled the rearview and sighed again.

In another compartment of her bag, this time from a black zipper bag, she pulled out a small packet of moistened wipes. A green, plastic cable tie sprang out of it and onto her lap.

"EDC," she said, quietly putting it back.

"EDC?"

"Everyday carry," she said. "Stuff I have on me at all times. Go bags, for emergencies."

"As in, an apocalypse go bag, go bag?"

"Correct," she said.

There was that incorrect, correct thing again.

"But I have this on me every day. Usually, the EDC community are guys with concealed firearms and flashlights, which I think is dumb since we have phones with a flashlight function. . . ." Penny trailed off. Sam had wondered why chicks had such big bags. He figured it was their makeup, not soft cases filled with doomsday rations and zip ties of varying length.

THERE IS
A VERY
GOOD
YOUTUBE
VIDEO ON
HOW TO
ESCAPE
FROM
ZIPTIES
USING ONLY
YOUR
SHOELACES.
THIS IS
MY BRAIN
AT NIGHT.

“Snacks are important,” he said. “And you can never have enough plastic cables.”

“Are you making fun of me?” she asked.

“No.” He shook his head vehemently and took another handful of cashews. “Not at all. I respect the shit out of it. Your EDC saved my ass.”

She had a small scar above her left eyebrow and he wanted to ask about it. Maybe she’d had some bizarre things go down in her life. It would explain her whole style.

“Did everything sound all underwater?” she asked after a second. Her lips were wiped clean, and Sam noticed they looked better without all that gunk on them.

“Underwater?”

“When you were passing out.”

“Yeah, muffled.”

“Yeah, I get that.”

“My girlfriend’s pregnant,” he said suddenly, startling himself.

Penny tilted her head.

“Well, she’s my ex.”

“Whoa,” she breathed.

“Yeah. I still love her though.”

“Ugh.”

“She cheated on me.”

The confessions wouldn’t stop. He wanted to show his gratitude for the ride and the snack and the not making him feel like a headcase when it was clear that he was. **Except at no point did his vocal chords just step in line and say thank you.**

“Wow,” she said

Penny’s fingers inched toward his. Sam thought for a fleeting

I GRATITUDE
WORD-VOMIT
ALL THE
TIME.
IT'S SO HOT.

moment that she would hold his hand, but instead she went for a couple cashews and was extra careful to avoid touching him.

“The first one is the worst. By a lot,” she said, crunching. Sam wasn’t sure if she was talking about panic attacks or pregnant ex-girlfriends. Not that it mattered.

PENNY.

On the drive back Penny snuck glances at Sam. His eyes were closed. Penny couldn't believe Sam had told her about his girlfriend, MzLolaXO. And that MzLolaXO was pregnant! Jude would lose it when she found out. Penny could only imagine what Dr. Greene had to say about it in their weekly Skype therapy calls. Penny couldn't get enough of how bizarre the sessions were. Literally their last one had been about boundary issues while Penny was in the room trying to do her homework.

ALSO
"WAR!"

Sam's slight chest rose and fell. She wondered for a second if she could lift him if she needed to.

"Take me back to House."

"Please," he said then, catching himself.

Penny fought the urge to check his temperature. Maybe this was more than a panic attack. He was *so* vulnerable. She knew she should be keeping her eyes on the road, but the way his Adam's apple bobbed was mesmerizing. It was as if something were struggling to get out. She just wanted to reach over and stroke it. Just once. Or lick it. *God, what is wrong with me?*

“I don’t know where you live,” she said, forcing an even tone and changing lanes. Maybe she’d get to see where he slept.

“Not my house—House, where I work,” he said.

“Are you sure?”

“There’s no food at home,” he explained, his eyes still closed. Penny was enjoying that she could survey him with unsupervised access.

“How are you going to get home after that?”

“I’ll figure it out,” he said.

She wanted to press him. He had no business driving. Plus, she wasn’t sure if the MzLolaXO predicament meant she’d be helping him out or not.

Sam opened his eyes. Penny froze.

“Why don’t you want to be a documentarian anymore?” she asked abruptly.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

Penny had been dying to ask since that first day. She wanted to know what made him quit movies to bake. Or barista, or whatever it was exactly that he did now. Curiosity fizzed in her head, but she restrained herself. Penny knew she had a habit of jumping all over the place in conversations without warning. Her mom called it “speaking Penny.” Nobody but Penny spoke it fluently.

It’s just that Penny didn’t know a lot of documentaries beyond the one about the tightrope walker guy and the sushi guy and the one about Sea World, and she certainly didn’t personally know any documentarians. She was willing to bet Sam’s would be good. Honestly, between the panic attack and the pregnant ex-girlfriend, if Sam were making a movie out of his own life, Penny would watch the hell out of it.

SAME .

MAN ON WIRE (2008)

BLACKFISH (2013)

JIRO DREAMS OF SUSHI (2012)

SAM .

When they pulled up in front of House Sam felt as if he'd left weeks ago. He couldn't wait to strip off his clothes and collapse into bed.

"Thanks," Sam said, unbuckling his seat belt. He considered leaning over and hugging her. Not that he was a hugger or anything. But when he turned to say good-bye, she eyed him warily, as if she'd burst into flames if he did.

"Do you live far?" Her brows were furrowed and the scar was white again, as if it were pissed at him.

"Nope," he said.

"Want me to get Jude to bring you anything?"

"That's okay," he said, attempting a smile. "Actually, do you mind not telling her that we bumped into each other?"

Penny cocked her head. "You want me not to tell her about seeing you or everything that followed?"

"Both," he asserted. "I don't want her to worry." The last thing he needed was Jude knowing that his life was a **stereotypical redneck mess**.

"Um," she said, frowning slightly. "Sure." Penny gave him her "incorrect response" look again.

UGH
POOR
SAM.
I LOVE YOU.
WE WILL
GET
THROUGH
THIS.

"I just really need to get some rest."

She nodded.

"Thanks again," he said, and opened the car door. "For everything." He got out and steadied himself.

"Wait!" Sam heard the pop of a door. Penny waved her phone at him from the passenger side.

"What's your number?" she asked. Penny's face was bright red. "So you have mine. For emergencies."

He told it to her.

His phone buzzed in his pocket.

"Got it," he said.

"Okay."

Penny reached over and slammed the door. "Text me when you get home?"

"Yes, Mom, I'll text you when I get home."

She scowled then, which made him smile.

"Sorry. I promise I will. I'll get some food and go straight home and into bed. And I will call you because you are now my official emergency contact." Sam turned to go.

"Wait!" shouted Penny again through the window. He turned around.

"Isn't the whole concept of an emergency contact that you're too dead to call them?"

Sam laughed. She had a point.

"Don't forget!" she called out before driving away. He pulled out his phone.

The text read:

This is penny

IF YOU'RE
FRIENDS
WITH ME
YOU MUST
HONOR
AND
RESPECT
THIS
DEAL.

He smiled, trudged up the stairs, and immediately fell asleep in his clothes for the next ten hours.

• • •

When Sam woke up he had a pounding headache. He stuck his head under the bathroom faucet and chugged until he thought he was going to be sick. He checked his phone. Almost two a.m.

No calls from Lorraine. Or texts. In fact, the last thing he got was “This is penny.”

Crap. Penny. Penny who he’d promised to text ten hours ago. He felt awful.

Still, it was way too late to text someone. Or was it? From what little he knew of her, she seemed the type to wait up. He was embarrassed about his panic *experience*—he remained reluctant to label it a full-on attack—but it was way worse to make her worry.

Ugh. Why was he so worthless?

He saved her number as “Penny Emergency” and texted her one word:

Home

Penny’s text bubble popped up immediately with the little ellipses. Then it disappeared. Then it popped up again. Only to be deleted again.

Finally, she wrote back:

ok

Sam wondered if she was angry with him.

HA HA .
THIS IS ALWAYS
A BAD TEXT.
"FINE." WITH A
PERIOD ON THE
END IS OF
COURSE THE
WORST .

He texted her again:

I'm sorry. Fell asleep

She texted:

*Sleep's the best. HUGE FAN.
Hard to do it when your
emergency contact's dead so . . .*

Shit. She *was* pissed. Still, he smiled. Was he her emergency contact too? Maybe nobody knew how emergency contacts worked.

Sry

Srsly

TY!

I'm a dick

ugh

Good night

Night

He sent her the frowning emoji. **The extremely contrite one with no eyebrows.**

It wasn't his style, but the moment required it.

**THIS GUY
BREAKS
MY
HEART**

PENNY.

Penny was in the shower when Sam texted again.

GOOD MORNING

Just like that.

All caps. No exclamation.

It sounded so sunny, so smiley. In fact, the text bubble seemed happy to see her. So much so that she went back to the conversation to make sure it was actually Sam from yesterday. She'd saved his number as "Sam House." The jerk. She couldn't believe he'd fallen asleep before he'd texted her. It was irresponsible and inconsiderate. She didn't want to sound fussy and overbearing, but a text wasn't asking too much.

As if the text bubble could read her mind, it spoke again.

IT'S UR EMERGENCY CONTACT

I REALLY AM SRY S2G

And then:

*I'LL STOP YELLING NOW
FML
I feel HORRIBLE
hope u didn't lose 2 much sleep bc of me
I won't ask u 2 forgive me but hope
u will*

Wow.

It was fascinating. The dispatch made her heart do a crazy dance. Not even a cute dance. More an erratic flailing, like **those windsock things you see at car dealerships**. She thought about his hot armpit again. And his cowlick. And the tattoos she didn't entirely understand. It usually irked her when people wrote "u" instead of "you" and "2" instead of "to"—especially "too"—but telling people things like that was probably why she only got texts from her mom. And Mark. Crap, Mark. She had to call him.

Penny attempted to respond, *hey*. Her hands were covered in lotion and her stupid phone wouldn't register her fingers as humanoid and that's when Sam texted again . . .

Did I wake u?

And then:

*I hope I didn't wake u
O NO DID ME NOT WANTING
2 WAKE U RN WAKE U RN?!!*

THESE
ARE SO
GOOD FOR
MORALE.

She closed her eyes and held her phone to her heart like a big dumb girl in a movie.

Then she wiped her hands on her towel and wrote back.

please stop yelling

He texted back:

((hi)) <- denoting indoor voice of normal vol

THE PARENTHETICALS
SERVE AS SOUND
INSULATION OBVI.

Penny smiled. She typed:

I hope you feel better

And then:

You didn't wake me

Penny padded quietly back into her room and got dressed. Her phone lit up again.

Did you get any sleep?

I can't believe I did that to you

Penny smiled. Then she bit her lower lip. She noticed him noticing the “to/you” thing. Shit. He was so great. Penny thought of pregnant Lola. And then about her roommate’s **Ironclad Friendship Ask**. Jude was dead asleep in her bed a few feet away. Her eyelid twitched,

THAT NO
ONE DATE
SAM.

detecting a disturbance in the force. Penny knew Jude would bug if she discovered Sam was in this much trouble, but these weren't her secrets to tell.

Penny texted him:

Yes

Good

Have a good day

You too

Penny placed her phone facedown on her bed and allowed herself a tiny swoon.

LIKE, A
BABY GROOT-
SIZED SWOON .
X

TAKE A SNEAK PEEK AT THE BIGGEST YA BOOK OF 2018!

FOR PENNY LEE, HIGH SCHOOL WAS A TOTAL NONEVENT. HER FRIENDS WERE OKAY, HER GRADES WERE FINE, AND WHILE SHE'D SOMEHOW LANDED A BOYFRIEND, THEY NEVER MANAGED TO KNOW MUCH ABOUT EACH OTHER.

WHEN PENNY HEADS TO COLLEGE IN AUSTIN, TEXAS, TO LEARN HOW TO BECOME A WRITER, IT'S SEVENTY-NINE MILES AND A ZILLION LIGHT YEARS AWAY FROM EVERYTHING SHE CAN'T WAIT TO LEAVE BEHIND.

SAM'S STUCK. LITERALLY, FIGURATIVELY, EMOTIONALLY, FINANCIALLY. HE WORKS AT A CAFÉ AND SLEEPS THERE TOO, ON A MATTRESS ON THE FLOOR OF AN EMPTY STORAGE ROOM UPSTAIRS. HE KNOWS THAT THIS IS THE GOD-AWFUL CHAPTER OF HIS LIFE THAT WILL SERVE AS INSPIRATION FOR WHEN HE'S A FAMOUS MOVIE DIRECTOR BUT RIGHT THIS SECOND THE SEVENTEEN BUCKS IN HIS CHECKING ACCOUNT AND HIS DYING LAPTOP ARE REALLY TESTING HIM.

WHEN SAM AND PENNY CROSS PATHS IT'S LESS MEET-CUTE AND MORE A COLLISION OF UNBEARABLE AWKWARDNESS. STILL, THEY SWAP NUMBERS AND STAY IN TOUCH—VIA TEXT—AND SOON BECOME DIGITALLY INSEPARABLE, SHARING THEIR DEEPEST ANXIETIES AND SECRET DREAMS WITHOUT THE HUMILIATING WEIRDNESS OF HAVING TO SEE EACH OTHER.

INTRODUCING DEBUT AUTHOR MARY H.K. CHOI

MARY H.K. CHO IS A WRITER FOR *THE NEW YORK TIMES*, *GQ*, *WIRED*, AND *THE ATLANTIC*. SHE HAS WRITTEN COMICS FOR MARVEL AND DC, AS WELL AS A COLLECTION OF ESSAYS CALLED *OH, NEVER MIND*. SHE IS THE HOST OF, "HEY, COOL JOB!", A PODCAST ABOUT JOBS AND IS A CULTURE CORRESPONDENT FOR VICE NEWS TONIGHT ON HBO. *EMERGENCY CONTACT* IS HER FIRST NOVEL. MARY GREW UP IN HONG KONG AND TEXAS AND NOW LIVES IN NEW YORK. FOLLOW HER ON TWITTER @CHOITOTHEWORLD.

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