



GINA KELLY

BE TRUE TO YOUR SCHOOL

a short story by ANTHONY VARALLO

J.,

Well, I finally got the last e-mail you sent me. Sorry it took me so long to get back to you. They only let us use the “lab” three days a week now (I don’t know why they call it that) since the seniors complained that the underclassmen were hogging all the “lab time.” They keep saying that we’re going to get more computers, but who knows? It still smells like band-aids in here, in case you were wondering.

OK, it’s been two days since I wrote that last paragraph. Sorry. I had to close out of e-mail because like three million people came in and started using the lab for no apparent reason. Plus I kept deleting the paragraph that used to go here. It was about how guilty I feel when I make fun of people (like Liz) even though it’s the only way I can make friends anymore. Do you ever feel that way? I mean, that’s the way we became friends, when you think about it. Making fun of everything. I want to stop, but how?

Plus I still get angry. Like when you told me about all your new friends in Florida, and I didn’t write back for two weeks.

I'm such a baby. Sometimes I can't believe you're still friends with me.

Some senior just sat next to me. Right now he's saying, "Rob, give me one of those, man. No, I didn't. YOU did." Now he's opening a Hershey's Kiss.

Did I tell you that my mom had to have surgery for that mole on her neck? I went with her to the hospital. She wasn't even nervous. She kept making jokes and stuff. We heard that commercial for Rogie's Steakhouse on the way over, and she kept doing the little pig grunt they do at the end. Remember? I mean, it *is* pretty funny, but come on. I was too nervous to even crack a smile.

I felt better in the waiting room. You wouldn't believe how nice it was. It had this plush sofa with tiny green pillows that was more comfortable than our sofa at home. It was like the nicest sofa I've ever sat on. Seriously. Plus they still had a Christmas tree in the corner (real) with gifts underneath (fake — I tested) and all these nice brass ornaments and blinking lights doing their thing for no one but me. I just sat there with a stack of magazines on my lap and really got into it. The lights and the sofa and the magazines. Don't make fun of me for saying this, but I felt like I was going to cry. Right there in the waiting room. Then my mom came out with this huge square bandage on her neck, smiling like nothing was out of the ordinary, and all of a sudden I was mad at her. Like she'd ruined my little Christmas. I didn't even talk to her on the drive back.

God, I can't believe I just wrote that! I didn't mean it like that. I don't know what I meant.

J . ,

Thanks for writing back so soon. I feel less terrible now. *Danke.*

Yes, I know exactly what you mean about haircuts. I feel the same way. Like I'm on display. All that looking at yourself in the mirror. I get nervous. Same thing happens to me at nice restaurants when the waitress has to recite all the specials. Where are you supposed to *look*?

Too bad about your sailboat. (I can't believe you have a sailboat.) Maybe you can spend the winter fixing it up? Ooh, then there could be a Big Race between you and the Rival Sailboats. Your crew would be a bunch of underdogs, determined to win against incredible odds, fighting to speed ahead of the Rival Sailboats. . . . (OK, I'll stop.)

Did I tell you? I ended up going over to Liz's the other night. It was weird. We didn't have much to talk about. She's got this new habit of closing her eyes when she says something she thinks is significant. I don't know when this started. Like she told me how Mr. Berg wrote some encouraging comments on her last English paper. "He told me it was one of the best papers he's ever read," she said, "and [CLOSED] he can assure me he's read quite a few." I wanted to put my arms around her and say, "Come back, Liz!" but I didn't. I told her that was great. She closed her eyes and said, "Thanks."

Her parents are still the same. Mrs. Lawrence is as frantic as ever. She kept going on and on about you being in Florida.

"Oh, what will they do without Jennifer?" she said. Then she hugged me and kept saying it. "What will they *do*?" (Remember the time she thought there were mice living inside their Christmas tree? I've always sort of loved her for that.) Mr. Lawrence still parts his hair in the middle. He shook my hand like I'd won a prize.

They just got a DVD player, so we ended up watching a movie with her parents and Toby, whose forehead still puckers when Liz tells him to shut up. The movie was *Jurassic Park II* — ugh. There was so much stuff to make fun of, but I couldn't say anything because of her parents being around. But God, was it awful. Like all the dinosaurs were sooo overdone, all these ridiculous details that were supposed to make you think, *Wow, how lifelike!* when all it was was a bunch of drooling and blinking. I don't know much about dinosaurs, but personally I don't think they drooled all over everything or spent the better part of their day blinking like they'd just been poked in the eye. (You would have loved this one moment when Toby kept freeze-framing Jeff Goldblum's face over and over and saying, "I'm Jeff Goldblum, and nobody cares!" until Mr. Lawrence told him to cut it out. Sometimes I swear the only person in that family who gets what's funny is Toby. The poor kid.)

Anyway, after that we hung out in Liz's room for a while. Liz showed me pictures of this guy she met last summer, Glen. Has she told you about him? He sort of looks like a cookie jar. I mean, he's not fat or anything, but he has this glazed, peaceful look, like he wouldn't mind if someone came along and pulled a pecan sandie out of his head. He wears wire-rimmed glasses: —o—o—. Hobbies: likes to play his acoustic guitar in the mountains (I maintained a straight face) and write poems in cafes. "Villanelles," Liz said, her eyes closed.

Later she showed me some e-mails he'd sent her. I sat next to her and pretended to laugh whenever Liz read something she thought was clever. I mean, some of it was sort of funny (at least he makes fun of things) but most of it was him just talking about himself. Plus he uses all that dumb e-mail abbreviation you know I hate, like "how r u?" and "what's nu w u?"

I sat there and got angry. But not at Glen. I was mad at Liz. And I was mad at myself. I don't know how to explain it. I was mad that we were reading e-mail from a boy, thinking that was a fun thing to do. Then I was mad at myself for being mad at myself, since that's one of the things I've been trying to fix about myself lately, along with not making fun of everything.

But I couldn't help being angry. I wanted to stand up and say, "This is stupid, Liz. Let's go downstairs and play pool with Toby," but I couldn't. I wasn't supposed to want that. I was supposed to be mooning over boys. I wondered if Liz felt the same way.

Do you know what I mean?

It's like this: Remember when Liz used to carry an aluminum-foil "vase" inside her lunchbox, stuffed with dandelions? How she'd put it on her lunch tray for "atmosphere"? God, Liz used to be so funny sometimes. That's what I wanted to say to her. I wanted to say, "Liz, Glen has no idea who you really are, because

Glen doesn't know about the aluminum-foil dandelion vase." But she wouldn't have gotten it. She would have just thought I was being "overcritical" (her word for me) and told me to grow up. (I HATE when people say that.) But the truth is, Liz was more Liz in sixth grade. I was more me in fifth.

Fifth grade forever!

My new slogan. No, my new slogan is — I don't know what my new slogan is.

I've got to keep myself from rereading these when I'm done. I always want to delete them. A bad sign. I barely mean anything I say. Really. If anyone else is reading this, I'd just like to say that Liz Lawrence is a fantastic human being full of love, sympathy, and kindness, and I am a total whiner. So there.

One last thing: next week is Spirit Week.
Adios.

J . ,

Report in real time:

I'm writing to you. A senior to my left (boy) is reading his e-mail. Now he's typing. He can't type. I'm looking at him without really looking. I'm sort of good at that. He has a watch on, but not a "cool" watch, the kind you know I hate. It looks like something someone's dad would wear. Gold and clunky. I like it.

The moment before I started my "report," he came in and sat next to me. (I was writing you an e-mail about Mr. Ellio's new "deluxe" chalk set.) He looked over and said, "Great American novel?" Bad joke, I know, but it made me embarrassed somehow. So I closed out of e-mail and started surfing Amazon instead.

He opened his book bag and fished out a Ziploc of dried apricots and put them between us. They looked like tiny, gnarled fingers.

"Want some?" he said.

I took two (but didn't call him in the morning, ha-ha, etc.). I said something clever, like "I've never had a dried apricot before." He said something understanding, like "Oh." I ate my apricot. He ate his apricot. We didn't say anything. He went to Yahoo Sports. I scrolled for negative customer reviews of *The Country of the Pointed Firs* — the book we have to read in English. There are some really funny ones, by the way. Here's one:

Let's Build a Time Machine. . . .

Reviewer: Jason, from Skokie, IL

Our class was forced to read this for summer reading. I found it pointless, stupid, and a total waste of nine dollars. Nothing happens, unless looking for herbs and thinking about pine trees 24/7 counts. Thank God we also had to read *The Time Machine*, which wasn't all that great either, but at least it wasn't 150 pages about making "spruce beer." *The Country of the Pointed Firs* made me wish that I had a time machine so I could go back in time and tell myself not to be born so I wouldn't have to read this book.

I thought about showing it to the senior, but I didn't. After a while he said, "It's funny." I asked what was. He said, "It's funny how we're eating dried apricots."

!?

Pretty good thing to say, huh? What do you think?

OK, he just stood up. I'm going to go now, but please write back and let me know if you think I'm being dumb. Have you ever had dried apricots? They're sort of not bad. Chew-ee.

I guess this wasn't in real time after all.

J . ,

It was good to finally talk to you last night. Now I have nothing to say. My cupboard has been emptied. *Wah!*

In the meantime, here's that e-mail I never sent you (the one about Mr. Ellio). Friday we're having Spirit Assembly. You know how I get about Spirit Assembly.

Hope all is swell.

. . . Mr. Ellio got this new deluxe chalk set. It's this long tin that opens like a container of Altoids. Inside there's two rows of colored chalk, arranged rainbow-like. You can tell he's sort of nervous about using it. He's still nervous about everything. The other day he blushed so hard I thought he might pop. He was taking attendance and asked if anyone had seen Cathy Nyberg, and Jenna Purvis said, "Yeah, I saw her in the bathroom a few minutes ago. She said she'd be a little late. I think it's, you know, that time of the month." Mr. Ellio nearly stapled his tie to the roll book.

Anyway, he has this new habit of standing in front of the room with the chalk tin in hand like a painter's palette, trying to decide which color to use. It takes him forever.

"Now, for line A-B," he'll say, "I'll use, let's see, ultramarine." Then he'll draw his ultramarine A-B across the board, making it nice and straight.

Sometimes, from the back of the room, Larry Webb will say, "That's a beautiful color, Mr. Ellio." But Mr. Ellio will just ignore him. "Now, for tangent G-B," he'll say, "I think I will try —"

"Magenta, Mr. Ellio," Larry will say. "Make it magenta."

Yesterday Mr. Ellio was drawing a triangle when Larry said, "Mr. Ellio, I'm feeling a little ocher this morning." Mr. Ellio stopped drawing, but kept his hand up to the board. I could see the tension in his knuckles.

"Larry," he said, "would you please stop making fun of the colored chalk? I'm getting a little tired of it."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Ellio," Larry said. "I just thought ocher might look festive."

I felt my breath get stuck in my chest. I wanted something to happen. But Mr. Ellio just finished the triangle, and then class was over.

(end of excerpt)