

Wednesday, April 1

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## **THE MANGA ARTIST**

**Doug Henderson**

Panel 1:

The English teacher stands in front of his class. He is smiling and relaxed, leaning against his desk. Over his shoulder, the white board reads: You can go to London. You can go to Paris. But you can't go to shopping. He is blond with blue eyes, young and fresh-faced, a more idealized version of myself. He doesn't have to pluck the space between his eyebrows or lose those last five pounds. His top button is undone. His tie is loose. His shirt sleeves are rolled up, exposing his hairy forearms. Chest hair rises above his collar, sandy and golden. He is exotic to his students. They never knew blonds could be hairy. He is teaching more than language.

Panels 2–5: The teacher is speaking, but there are no word balloons. What he is saying isn't important. He is teaching in the way that American college students spending a summer abroad do, with an emphasis on charm, on telling jokes, and winning the class over. From the smiles on the students' faces, they are entranced. To watch him move, to be in his presence, is reason enough for the class to meet three times a week.

Panel 6: Of the ten students drawn, eight are women, two are men. The men are in dark suits with jackets and ties. Their ties are not loose. The women are a mix of old and young. Some are dressed for the office; some are in trendy street clothes. In the earlier panels, the students were smiling, enchanted; now they are shocked. Some look annoyed. They dart their eyes to the right, toward the back of the classroom. Above their heads floats the first word balloon. Its tail points off the panel to a speaker yet unseen. "That's not what I learned."

Panel 7: Masashige is sitting in the back of the class beside the windows. He is grinning and leaning back in his chair. He is stocky with a broad face. His hair is buzzed in an attempt to hide his receding hairline. He has a sparse five o'clock shadow and a short goatee on his chin. No mustache. He is not wearing a suit. He is wearing the baggy striped T-shirt he always wore. As he smiles, his cheeks dimple and his eyes crinkle. "In my company, we use due date, not deadline," Masashige says.

Panels 8–9: The English teacher is smiling as he sits casually on his desk. He is unfazed by Masashige's challenge because Masashige always challenges him. With a wave of his hand, the teacher says, "Both are okay." The matter is settled then. The students are relieved and smiling again.

Panel 10: Masashige and the teacher look at each other across the room while the other students chatter and collect their books. The teacher is still smiling. Masashige is still grinning within the sunbeam. Something undrawn is passing between.

Panels 11–12: The bell rings. Faceless students file into the hall. On the wall is a bulletin board with photos and profiles of all the teachers.

Panel 13: The English teacher's profile and photo are second from the left. His shirt collar is buttoned. His tie is tight. His name is Scotty James. He is an American from Cleveland, Ohio.

His favorite color: sky blue. His favorite movie: The Empire Strikes Back. His favorite food: pepperoni pizza. His blood type: AB. His motto: Adventure every day! Ganbatte Kudasai! Scotty never intended to teach English in Japan. He intended to become a graphic artist, but after graduating, jobs were scarce. When he saw a flyer offering a position teaching for the summer in Japan, he thought it was better than working retail. Teaching in Japan sounded exotic. And impressive. The kind of opportunity that could lead to anything.

Panel 14: Masashige's messy apartment sprawls across the panel, lush with detritus. Wooden beams line the ceiling, tatami mats pad the floor, and sliding paper doors stand slightly open. Empty bowls of instant ramen are stacked up like a miniature city on the kotatsu. Pushed against one wall is an angled drawing table with half-finished panels of a comic book. Beneath the desk sits an overflowing trash can. There are clothes on the floor and on the desk chair. Shelves crammed with books and manga and toys line the walls, but I couldn't possibly draw all the figurines Masashige loved to collect from vending machines and Happy Meals. Pressed against the far wall, beneath the open window, is a futon occupied by two naked bodies.

Panel 15: Scotty and Masashige lie on their backs looking content and restful. Masashige is running a hand through the hair on Scotty's chest. Their bodies are not drawn in great detail, but it is clear that Masashige is circumcised while Scotty is not. A twist that surprised us both.

Panels 16–17: Lazy word balloons hang from the top of the panels. "You don't care if they suspect us?" Scotty asks. "They won't." Masashige's eyes are closed. "They are typical Japanese." Because Masashige graduated with a degree in fine art, he thought of himself as separate from other Japanese, even though he had yet to do anything with his art and worked part-time serving drinks at a café. "By the way, I started drawing a new manga," Masashige says. "It's about a mouse named Alfonso."

Panels 18–19: An empty classroom in an elementary school. The small chairs are tucked neatly against the desks. The chalkboard has been cleaned. On the teacher's desk there is a vase with flowers. Late afternoon sun filters through the windows. A word balloon floating in the right-hand corner says: "Alfonso lives in the wall of a third-grade classroom." A mouse scurries across the floor beneath the desks and chairs, past the low shelves stocked with books. He is gray with white paws and black eyes. He stands on his hind feet and slides a book from the shelf. Its spine is thin and more than twice his height. "He taught himself to read by listening from the back of the class."

Panel 20: Alfonso is on top of the open picture book. The words are in Japanese, but the story is simple. A pig is rolling in mud on one page. A duck is swimming in a pond on the other. In word balloons pointing off the page, Masashige narrates, "Reading is not popular among the mice, but Alfonso thinks in the future all mice will need to read."

Panels 21–22: "Every evening, Alfonso sneaks into the class and reads a book, until one day..." Alfonso is running along the window sill, past potted plants and stacks of books, when he stops abruptly. In front of him is a large glass aquarium, the bottom is filled with wood chips. Pressing against the glass, standing on its hind legs, is a hamster. It is white with gray ears. "Konnichiwa," reads a word balloon written in Japanese. Underneath, a second balloon pointing off the page is written in English. "His name is Ham Sandwich."

Panel 23: Scotty and Masashige are standing over the drawing table, still naked. Scotty is holding the panels of Masashige's manga and looking at them with a smile, but he is not only impressed, he is jealous. Scotty hasn't drawn anything since he arrived in Japan. "Why Ham Sandwich?" Masashige says, "The teacher bought him as a present for the class, and the students chose the name. They thought it was funny. They call him Hamuchan."

Panels 24–25: "From now, Alfonso reads a book to Hamuchan every night and they become friends. Hamuchan only knows about the pet store and his glass box." "Does Hamuchan ever get out?" Scotty asks. He skips ahead to the end of the story, but it isn't drawn yet. Masashige says, "Maybe, but I don't know how." Of course he didn't. Masashige never finishes any of the manga he draws. Straight out of college, he got a temporary job as an assistant at a manga house, but he never drew anything more than backgrounds and scenery. He talked about publishing his own manga independently. He said several times, "I'm going to rent a booth with my friend at the next Fujieda manga fair." But I don't know if he ever did.

Panels 26–30: Scotty is walking in a clean, modern downtown, past restaurants and shops. The signs on the buildings are all in Japanese except one: Fujieda Station. As he walks, Scotty talks into his cell phone. "Yes, Mom, everything is great. Yes, it's safe. No, everyone does not speak English." He stops and looks in the window of a restaurant to check out the plastic models of the food they serve. "Yes, they have grocery stores. Yes, they ride bicycles. It's like any other first-world country. Don't worry. Everything is fine. I'm like a local already. I'll send some pics." Choosing a restaurant, he bows beneath the curtains that hang in the doorway. The restaurant is packed with low chairs and tables. Customers are hunched over steaming bowls of noodles. At the far end is an open kitchen where a lone chef is cooking behind a counter. Scotty takes a seat. There are no menus. No waiter or waitress arrives to take his order. He looks confused. From above his left shoulder floats a word balloon. It is not filled with Japanese. It is filled with chicken scratch. The cook, in a dirty apron, is talking to Scotty from behind the counter. He is scowling and motioning with a spatula. "Tempura soba?" Scotty asks. The cook, shouting in chicken scratch, points toward the door.

Panel 31: A vending machine near the entrance is embedded into the wall. Scotty stands before it. The front is filled with large, rectangular buttons. All of the writing is in Japanese and there are no pictures. There is a slot for coins and bills, and at the bottom is an open area where something will drop out. A line has begun to form behind Scotty as people, bowing beneath the curtain, try to enter the restaurant. The cook is shouting. Customers are looking up from their meals and watching Scotty fumble with the machine. There are beads of sweat on his brow.

Panel 32: Scotty is at McDonalds eating a hamburger. To his right is a bag of fries and to his left a large drink. He looks satisfied.

Panel 33: An open door at the end of a long, dark hallway. On the door is a name plate: Teacher Lounge.

Panel 34: The teacher's lounge has a sofa and several tables with chairs. There are no windows. The walls are covered with bookshelves. Scotty sits at one of the tables, surfing on his phone and eating a sandwich. There are several other teachers with him, two men in shirts and ties and a woman in a blouse and skirt. They are all Westerners. They sit at a small table next to Scotty and eat with chopsticks out of plastic bento boxes. The two male teachers are

talking. “What do you think of Misako?” Thomas, the bigger one, asks. “Who?” Scotty’s mouth is full, but the word balloon is pointing at him. “She works for the travel bureau. Wants to move to Australia.”

Panel 35: An image of a woman with long dark hair and a slim face floats above Scotty’s right shoulder.

Panel 36: Scotty is working at his desk. Misako is standing on the other side, looking at him attentively. Behind her, other students file out of the classroom. Her hands are outstretched, presenting Scotty with a cellophane bag of mini chocolate chip cookies. “Scotty Sensei, this is for you.”

Panel 37: Sitting in the teacher’s lounge, talking with the guys, Scotty says: “She’s alright, but I wouldn’t do her.” The teachers throw back their heads and “HAHAHA” arches above the panel. They know Scotty is gay. He came out to them during their first week of orientation. It was never his intention to go back into the closet when he arrived in Japan. But, he hasn’t come out to the students. Masashige, who pinged his gaydar, being the only exception. The school feared teachers would steal clients by tutoring them privately, so having lunch or even a cup of coffee with a student was not allowed. Certainly having sex with them was out of the question. But in Fujieda, there are not many places for foreigners to mix with the Japanese, or for the Japanese to mix with foreigners. And the students were eager for contact. So, teachers taught in their free time. They met up with students in the bars on the weekends. They fucked the women crazy and broke their hearts. Scotty decided during his first week of orientation not to be that kind of teacher. If he met a guy, he would keep it simple.

Panel 38: Stars sparkle in the sky above a narrow street with low, wood-slat buildings. Neon signs written in English and Japanese advertise BEER and SAKE. There are no cars, only the silhouettes of people. There are no faces in the darkness.

Panel 39: One building is cleaner than the rest. Its facade is a lighter wood. It has no windows, but its door is open. A sign, like a light box, stands to the right. It reads: Fruitsbasket. There are no rainbow flags or pink triangles, but this is Fujieda’s most popular gay club.

Panel 40: Masashige and Scotty are sitting together at the bar. Scotty is dressed in his shirt and tie. Masashige is wearing stripes. They are smiling, dimples out, stars in their eyes, and talking while they drink. Behind them, silhouettes dance. Musical notes float above their heads. Masashige says he has never been inside Fruitsbasket before. Scotty asks why, but Masashige says he doesn’t know. “Don’t you want to meet guys?” Scotty asks. “Don’t you get horny?” Masashige says, “This place is not interesting.” But Scotty knows what Masashige means: Masashige isn’t into Japanese men.

Panels 41–44: Scotty takes Masashige by the hand and leads him onto the dance floor. It is crowded, but they find a space. Scotty raises his drink high, closes his eyes, and tries to lose himself in the music. Masashige is dancing too, but he does not stop watching Scotty. Scotty takes off his tie and shoves it into his back pocket. He untucks his shirt and unbuttons another button. His sleeves are already rolled up. As he dances, the lights catch the hair on his forearms and the hair on his chest where his shirt is open. Soon Scotty is surrounded by dancing men. Some have their shirts off. Some whisper in his ears. They put their arms

around him. They try to reach their hands under his shirt. Scotty looks for Masashige, but he is gone.

Panel 45: Scotty finds Masashige outside by the front door. “Sorry,” Masashige says, his word balloon low at the bottom of the panel. “I needed some air.”

Panel 46: Masashige and Scotty are naked in bed. The panel shows them from the chest up. “Is this getting too serious?” Scotty asks.

Panel 47: They lie in the dark, looking at the ceiling.

Panel 48: Masashige closes his eyes and says, “The gay world is sad.”

Panel 49: Scotty pulls Masashige close, and they wrap their arms around each other.

Panel 50: They lie in the dark, pressed together.

Panels 50–55: Masashige and Scotty are walking through downtown Fujieda, near the station, past the shops and restaurants. The day is bright and sunny. They enter the restaurant with the strange machine. Masashige casually stands before it and inserts coins in the slot. Scotty watches in wonder as Masashige presses a few buttons, and two tickets fall out. Masashige takes the tickets to the cook behind the counter who nods in response, then Masashige and Scotty take a table against the wall.

Panel 56: From a black portfolio, Masashige pulls out the pages of his manga. “Alfonso reads to Hamuchan every day after school, but one day there is a girl staying late to clean the classroom. Alfonso waits for her to leave, but after she is done, she goes to Hamuchan’s aquarium.”

Panels 57–58: A giant hand reaches into the aquarium. Hamuchan is pressed against the glass, his eyes wide, but he cannot escape.

Hamuchan is lifted into the air by the giant hand. He watches from over the fingers as the ground falls away beneath him.

Panel 59: Alfonso runs into the classroom from his hole in the wall. The school girl looms over him. She is dressed in a dark blue sailor uniform with a short skirt and long white socks pulled up to her knees. Hamuchan peeks out of her cupped hand.

Panel 60: The girl screams as Alfonso runs at her feet. She clutches her chest, dropping Hamuchan, who falls in a white blur against the blue uniform.

Panels 61–62: Hamuchan hits the floor and scurries to Alfonso. Together they run for the hole in the wall. Jagged word balloons float above them as the girl shouts in thick black letters: “Nezumi! Nezumi!”

Panel 63: The cook behind the counter yells something in chicken scratch. Masashige stands up and collects a tray with two steaming bowls of noodles and broth. Scotty is reading the manga and flipping through the pages.

Panel 64: Alfonso and Hamuchan are walking inside the walls of the school, in the gap that exists between the wood paneling, and Alfonso's world is revealed. Streams of mice are bustling back and forth along the beams above and below Alfonso and Hamuchan. Some carry pieces of food in their mouths. Some carry scraps of cloth or wood. They are big and small, brown, white, and gray. They rush past Alfonso and Hamuchan without a glance. Hamuchan stands on his hind feet, taking in the scene. He is amazed.

Panel 65: Scotty looks at the pages of Masashige's manga with one hand while leaning over his bowl and shoveling noodles into his mouth. "They have some adventures together," Masashige says from the other side of the table.

Panel 66: Over Scotty's shoulder, the mice in the manga are curled up in rice bowls, sleeping, only to be woken up and chased away by a screaming teacher. In another panel, Alfonso shouts, "Abunai!" when Hamuchan chews on a wire. "Demo oishii desu," Hamuchan says, looking embarrassed, the wire still hanging from his mouth. A word balloon floats at the bottom of the page. "Alfonso yells, 'That's dangerous!' And Hamuchan says, 'but it's so delicious.'"

Panel 67–68: "This is adorable," Scotty says from over the pages. He thinks maybe he'll draw a manga someday, if he can come up with a good idea. "What are you going to do with it?" "Remember, I told you about the Art Institute in Chicago? I'm thinking to use this for my application." Scotty does not remember, but he says, "You totally should." "It's not done yet," Masashige takes the pages back. "But I have until December to apply." Scotty will return to Cleveland at the end of August, in less than two months. By December, he will be long gone. Japan and English teaching will be a memory, that crazy thing he did one summer. "I hope I get to read the ending," Scotty says, his mouth full.

Panel 69: Steam rising from the bowls, Scotty and Masashige slurp up their noodles. From behind the counter, the cook calls out another order in chicken scratch.

Panel 70: A bullet train speeds through the Japanese countryside. Green hills roll behind it. Mount Fuji rises in the distance against the blue sky.

Panel 71: Scotty and Masashige are sitting side-by-side on the train. Masashige is asleep, his head on Scotty's shoulder. Scotty is wearing sunglasses, his sketch pad on his knee as the rice paddies go by. This is his first time outside of Fujieda since he arrived in Japan. He has only seen rice paddies in photos. He wanted them to be more interesting, but coming from Ohio, he is used to seeing the countryside, and he can't get excited over long swathes of nothingness. He has not sketched a thing. Who lives out here? he wonders. Who takes care of all this rice? He is thankful he didn't end up in a town more rural than Fujieda.

Panel 72: Scotty and Masashige are lost and confused, dragging their luggage through a hastily drawn sea of people. Every square foot of space is taken up by another person. There is no chance to stop, there is barely time to breathe. In English, above their heads are the words: TOKYO STATION.

Panel 73: Scotty and Masashige are looking out of their cab as it sits in traffic. The neon lights of Tokyo reflect off the passenger windows: SONY, MASSAGE, LIVE SHOW, and TOSHIBA.

Panel 74: Scotty and Masashige are in a crowded clothing store. They are trying on silly hats and jackets and looking at the price tags with shocked expressions.

Panel 75: Scotty and Masashige are eating crepes rolled and stuffed with fruit and cream. Behind them, girls in black frilly dresses and top hats walk arm in arm beneath their lace parasols.

Panel 76: Scotty and Masashige are sitting on a sofa in a small square room and belting into a microphone. Music notes rise above their heads. The walls are decorated like an ocean beach, but through the window, sparkling skyscrapers reach toward the moon.

Panel 77: Scotty and Masashige are wandering down a dark, narrow side street. There are doorways on either side with men smoking in the shadows.

Panel 78: Scotty and Masashige have come to an open intersection with a bar on every corner. One of the bars has a large open patio, and men have spilled into street. The men are laughing and smiling. Some hold drinks. Some hold each other. Most are Japanese, but a good number are Westerners.

Scotty and Masashige exchange hungry smiles.

Panel 79: Scotty and Masashige are dancing. They have stripped off their shirts and are surrounded by musical notes and bare-chested men. Lights flash above them and music pounds out of the speakers in squiggly lines.

Panel 80: Scotty stands at the bar and watches while Masashige dances with a bearded, muscular man. Curly, red hair covers the man, front and back. Masashige keeps his eyes lowered, trying to play it cool. But Scotty is smirking. He knows what Masashige likes.

Panel 81: Their arms around each other, Scotty and Masashige stumble out of the bar and flag down a taxi as the bearded man waves goodbye. Their cheeks are pink, their eyelids are heavy, asterisks spark around their heads, but they are smiling with satisfaction.

Panel 82: Scotty and Masashige are in their hotel room having sex. Masashige is lying back on the bed, his legs are over Scotty's shoulders. Scotty's hairy butt fills the bottom left corner of the panel as he thrusts into Masashige. "AH AH AH" sprinkles the page.

Panels 83–84: Scotty collapses on top of Masashige. They are both huffing and puffing, but eventually their heartbeats slow down. Their bodies press together. "I love you," Masashige whispers. "I love you too," Scotty says. Their word balloons are small and perfectly round. These two panels are sketched in pencil. I never inked them. Heavy black lines cross through them.

Panel 85: Scotty and Masashige are back on the bullet train leaning against each other. This time they are both asleep.

Panel 86: Large, black crows sit on a power line and "KAW KAW KAW." Below them, a trash bag they have torn open spews garbage into the street.

Panel 87: Scotty is sitting behind his desk wearing his shirt and tie. Afternoon sun pours through the windows. The classroom is empty of students except for Masashige, who stands on the other side of the desk. “How have you been?” Masashige asks. “I’m good,” Scotty says. “Why don’t you answer your phone anymore?”

Panel 88: This is the conversation Scotty has been dreading since he arrived. He looks at Masashige with regret. A word balloon floats at the top of the page. “I’m leaving in a few weeks.”

Panel 89: “So, you don’t want to see me?” Masashige asks in the center of one small panel.

Panel 90: “Of course I want to.” Scotty looks out the window as he speaks.

Panel 91: “Just one more time,” Masashige says.

Panel 92: Still Scotty looks out the window. His eyes are lowered. There is no word balloon.

Panel 93: “How about tomorrow night?” Masashige asks. “I’ll cook dinner. Meet me in front of the conbini at seven.”

Panel 94: Scotty continues to look out the window, his eyes still lowered. “Okay.”

Panel 95: Two men are smoking in front of Fruitsbasket as Scotty walks into the darkness of the open doorway. It is night, and a few stars are visible in the sky. There are no cars passing, and no people walking by.

Panels 96–98: Scotty sits by himself at the bar and drinks. In each successive panel, his eyes become heavier, his posture more slouched. “Konnichiwaaa,” he says when a man sits beside him.

Panel 99: Masashige is waiting outside of a brightly lit convenience store. He holds a plastic bag filled with groceries. He is looking at his watch.

Panels 100–102: Scotty is on the dance floor. His shirt is open, and his tie is gone. Japanese men are dancing around him, touching him. Scotty takes one of the men by the hand and leads him off the floor. He pulls the man into the restroom and into a stall. The walls of the stall run from floor to ceiling. There are no gaps above or below. This allows for privacy.

Panel 103: Scotty’s head is back and his eyes are closed. A hum of pleasure escapes his lips. The man’s head bobs as it blocks Scotty’s crotch from view. Above Scotty’s right shoulder floats an image of himself. He is looking at a small toy bear from Masashige’s collection. Masashige watches from behind.

Panel 104: Scotty stands in Masashige’s apartment, the toy bear in his hand as he studies it. “Just so you know, this is only a summer fling.” Masashige, nodding, asks, “Fling wa nani?”

Panel 105: “It’s just for fun,” Scotty says, putting the bear back on the shelf amongst the other toys. “Just for right now. Let’s not get serious.”

Panel 106: “Wakarimashita,” Masashige says, smiling. “I got it.”

Panel 107: Masashige is sitting on the curb in front of the convenience store. The bag of groceries sits beside him. He is looking to his left, down the street, in the direction Scotty usually walks from.

Panel 108: Scotty steps into the panel. His clothes are disheveled. His head is down. His word balloon is small. "Hey."

Panels 109–110: Scotty and Masashige are having sex on Masashige's futon. The room is dark. Their bodies are drawn in thick, curving lines. Their expressions are pained. Afterward, they lie back-to-back. Their eyes are open. Neither one can sleep.

Panel 111: Hanging from a flag pole, several colorful windsocks shaped like fish blow in the breeze.

Panel 112: It is a bright sunny day. Scotty and Masashige are hugging in front of Fujieda station. On the curb behind them are two suitcases. "Take care," Masashige says. "Let me know about Chicago," Scotty says, but he doubts Masashige will really apply for grad school. He doubts they will ever meet again. In a few months the whole experience will be a memory, something Scotty will look back on and try to make sense of.

Panel 113: On the airplane, Scotty sits beside a window. He is talking to a Japanese woman sitting to his left. He is smiling, all charm. "I was an English teacher."

Panel 114: Clouds pass by outside, but Scotty isn't looking. On his tray table is the manga Masashige drew.

Panel 115: Alfonso and Hamuchan have left the school. They are running down the wide front stairs, fear and excitement in their eyes. Before them a field of wild grass stretches tall and terrifying beyond the final edges of the page.

## **Friday, April 3**

<https://classic.esquire.com/article/2003/6/1/full-house>

### **“Full House” – David Sedaris**

My parents were not the type of people who went to bed at a regular hour. Sleep overtook them, but neither the time nor the idea of a mattress seemed very important. My father favored a chair in the basement, but my mother was apt to lie down anywhere, waking with carpet burns on her face or the pattern of the sofa embossed into the soft flesh of her upper arms. It was sort of embarrassing. She might sleep for eight hours a day, but they were never consecutive hours, and they involved no separate outfit. For Christmas we would give her nightgowns, hoping she might take the hint.

“They’re for bedtime,” we’d say, and she’d look at us strangely, as if, like the moment of one’s death, the occasion of sleep was too incalculable to involve any real preparation.

The upside to being raised by what were essentially a pair of house cats was that we never had any enforced bedtime. At two A.M. on a school night, my mother would not say, “Go to sleep,” but rather, “Shouldn’t you be tired?” It wasn’t a command but a sincere question, the answer provoking little more than a shrug. “Suit yourself,” she’d say, pouring her thirtieth or forty-second cup of coffee. “I’m not sleepy, either. Don’t know why, but I’m not.”

Every night was basically a slumber party, so when the real thing came along, my sisters and I failed to show much of an interest. “But we get to stay up as late as we want!” the hosts would say.

“And . . . ?”

The first one I attended was held by a neighbor named Walt Winters. Like me, Walt was in the sixth grade. Unlike me, he was gregarious and athletic, which meant, basically, that we had absolutely nothing in common. “But why would he include *me*?” I asked my mother. “I hardly know the guy.”

She did not say that Walt’s mother had made him invite me, but on seeing her turn away, I knew that this was the only likely explanation. “Oh, go,” she said. “It’ll be fun.”

I tried my best to back out, but then my father got wind of it, and that option was closed. He often passed Walt playing football in the street and saw in the boy a younger version of himself. “He’s maybe not the best player in the world, but he and his friends, they’re a good group.”

“Fine,” I said. “Then *you* go sleep with them.”

I could not tell my father that boys made me anxious, and so I invented individual reasons to dislike them. The hope was that I might seem discerning rather than frightened, but instead I came off sounding like a prude.

“You expect me to spend the night with someone who curses? Someone who actually throws *rocks* at *cats*?”

“You’re damned right I do,” my father said. “Now get the hell over there.”

Aside from myself, there were three other guests at Walt’s slumber party. None of them were particularly popular—they weren’t good-looking enough for that—but each could hold his own on a playing field or in a discussion about cars. The talk started the moment I walked through the door, and while pretending to listen, I wished that I could have been more honest. “What is the actual point of football?” I wanted to ask. “Is a V8 engine related in any way to the juice?” I would have sounded like a foreign-exchange student, but the answers

might have given me some sort of a foundation. As it was, they may as well have been talking backward.

There were four styles of houses on our street, and while Walt's was different from my own, I was familiar with the layout. The slumber party took place in what the Methodists called a family room, the Catholics used as an extra bedroom, and the neighborhood's only Jews had turned into a combination darkroom and fallout shelter. Walt's family was Methodist, and so the room's focal point was a large black-and-white television. Family photos hung on the wall alongside pictures of the various athletes Mr. Winters had successfully pestered for autographs. I admired them to the best of my ability but was more interested in the wedding portrait displayed above the sofa. For one thing, I knew who these people were, and for another, the photograph actually told you something—that the union had been blessed and supported. While the newly wed Winterses danced and ate cake, my parents had eloped. Rather than a wedding gown, my mother had worn a suit, and in the one existing photograph she resembled a secretary receiving instructions from her boss.

In her wedding photograph, Walt's mother looked almost frighteningly happy. The bulging eyes and fierce, gummy smile: It was an expression bordering on hysteria, and the intervening years had done nothing to dampen it.

"What is she on?" my mother would whisper whenever we passed Mrs. Winters waving from her front yard. My father complained that the woman talked too fast, demanding of her listener a passion equivalent to her own. I thought he was being too hard on her, but after ten minutes in her home I understood exactly what he was talking about.

"Pizza's here!!!" she chimed when the deliveryman came to the door. "Oh, boys, how about some piping-hot pizza!!!" I thought it was funny that anyone would use the words "piping hot," but it wasn't the kind of thing I felt I could actually laugh at. Neither could I laugh at Mr. Winters's pathetic imitation of an Italian waiter. "Mamma mia. Who want anudda slice a dipizza!!!"

I had the idea that adults were supposed to make themselves scarce at slumber parties, but Walt's parents were all over the place: initiating games, offering snacks and refills. When the midnight horror movie came on, Walt's mother crept into the bathroom, leaving a ketchup-spattered knife beside the sink. An hour passed, and when none of us had yet discovered it, she started dropping little hints. "Doesn't anyone want to wash their hands?" she asked.

No one looked at her.

"Will whoever's closest to the door go check to see if I left fresh towels in the bathroom?"

You just wanted to cry for people like her.

As corny as they were, I was sorry when the movie ended and Mr. and Mrs. Winters stood to leave. It was only two A.M., but clearly they were exhausted. "I just don't know how you boys can do it," Walt's mother said, yawning into the sleeve of her bathrobe. "I haven't been up this late since Loren came into the world." Loren was Walt's sister, who was born premature and lived for less than two days. This had happened before the Winterses moved onto our street, but it wasn't any kind of a secret, and you weren't supposed to flinch upon hearing the girl's name. The baby had died too early to pose for photographs, but still she qualified as a presence. She had a Christmas stocking the size of a mitten, and they even threw her an annual birthday party, a fact that my mother found especially creepy. "Let's hope they don't invite us," she said. "I mean, Jesus, how do you shop for a dead baby?"

I guessed it was the fear of another premature birth that kept Mrs. Winters from trying again, which was sad, as you got the sense she had an idea of a lively household, and that the slumber party and the ketchup-covered knife were all part of that idea. While in her presence, we had played along, but once she said goodnight, I understood that all bets were off.

Mrs. Winters and her husband lumbered up the stairs, and when Walt felt certain that they were asleep, he pounced on Dale Gummerson, shouting, "Titty twister!" Brad Clancey joined in, and when they finished, Dale raised his shirt, revealing nipples as crumpled and ruddy as the pepperoni slices littering the forsaken pizza box.

"Oh, my God," I said, realizing too late that this made me sound like a girl. The appropriate response was to laugh at Dale's misfortune, not to flutter your hands in front of your face, screeching, "What have they done to your poor nipples! Shouldn't we put some ice on them?"

Walt picked up on this immediately. "Did you just say you wanted to put ice on Dale's nipples?"

"Well, not me personally," I said. "I meant, you know, generally. As a group. Or Dale could do it himself if he felt like it."

Walt's eyes wandered from my face to my chest, and then the entire group was upon me. Dale had not yet regained the full use of his arms, and so he sat on my legs while Brad Clancey and Scott Marlboro pinned me to the carpet. My shirt was raised, a hand was clamped over my mouth, and Walt latched on to my nipples, twisting them back and forth as if they were a set of particularly stubborn lug nuts. "Now who needs ice!" he said. "Now who thinks he's the goddamned school nurse!" I'd once felt sorry for him, but now, my eyes watering in pain, I understood that little Loren was smart to have cut out early. The guy was an animal.

When finally I was freed, I went upstairs and stood at the kitchen window, my arms folded lightly against my damaged chest. My house was located in a ravine. You couldn't see it from the street, but still I could make out the glow of lights spilling from the top of our driveway. It was tempting, but were I to leave now, Walt and the others would chalk the whole thing up to my nipples, tweaking the facts and telling everyone that I had cried. *The baby had to go home*. Life at school would be unbearable, and so I left the window and returned to the basement, where Walt was shuffling cards against the coffee table. "Just in time," he said. "Have a seat."

I lowered myself to the floor and reached for a magazine, trying my best to act casual. "I'm not really much for games, so if it's okay with you, I think I'll just watch."

"Watch, hell," Walt said. "This is strip poker. What kind of a homo wants to sit around and watch four guys get naked?"

The logic of this was lost on me. "Well, won't we *all* sort of be watching?"

"Looking, maybe, but not *watching*," Walt said. "There's a difference. Watching is what you do when you're not doing anything else."

"Like watching TV," Scott said.

"Exactly," Walt said. "Watching is like watching TV and looking is like . . . driving a car and looking out for the other driver. Get it? You're doing two things at the same time."

I guessed he had a point, but still I was damned if I was going to go along with it. "What about looking out the window? That's just doing one thing at a time."

Walt made a twisting motion with his fingers, and I took my place at the table, praying for a gas leak or an electrical fire—anything to save me from the catastrophe of strip poker. Semantics aside, whether I played or not, the truth was that I would be watching. To the rest of the group, a naked boy was like a lamp or an extension cord, something so familiar and uninteresting that it faded into the background, but for me it was different. A naked boy was what I desired more than anything on earth, and when you were both watching and desiring, things came up, one thing in particular that was bound to stand out and ruin your life forever, following you even to the grave. "I hate to tell you, but it's against my religion to play poker."

"Yeah, right," Walt said. "What are you, Baptist?"

“Greek Orthodox.”

“Well, that’s a load of crap, because the Greeks invented cards.” This from Scott, who was quickly identifying himself as the smart one.

“Actually, I think it was the Egyptians,” I said.

He dealt the cards, and I looked from fact to face, exaggerating flaws and reminding myself that I disliked these people. The hope was that I might kill any surviving atom of attraction, but, as has been the case for my entire life, the more I dislike someone, the more attractive they become. The key was to stall, to argue every hand until the sun came up and Mrs. Winters saved me with what she had advertised as a “four-star flapjack breakfast with all the trimmings.” At the time she had said it, I’d bitten the inside of my cheek—anything to stop myself from laughing—but now those flapjacks meant the world to me, and I tried to picture them and to hold that picture in my mind: the buttery goodness, the cascade of syrup overtaking everything in its path, the eggs and sausage and whatever else the Winters household considered to be a viable trimming. They could be fried in Vaseline, but when those flapjacks were finally presented, I would fork them into my mouth and savor the sweet taste of freedom.

On the off chance that stalling would not work, I stepped into the bathroom and checked to make sure I was wearing clean underwear. A boner would be horrible beyond belief, but a boner combined with a skid mark meant that I should take the ketchup-smearred knife and just kill myself before it was too late.

“What are you, launching a sub in there?” Walt shouted. “Come on, we’re waiting.”

Usually, when I was forced to compete, it was my tactic to simply give up. To try in any way was to announce your ambition, which only made you more vulnerable. The person who wanted to win but failed was a loser, while the person who didn’t really care was just a freak. Here, though, surrender was not an option. I had to win at a game I knew nothing about, and that seemed hopeless until I realized we were all on an even keel. Not even Scott had the slightest idea of what he was doing, and by feigning an air of expertise, I found I could manipulate things in my favor.

“A joker and a queen is much better than the four and five of spades,” I said, defending my hand against Brad Clancey’s.

“But you have a joker and a three of diamonds.”

“Yeah, but the joker *makes* it a queen.”

“I thought you said poker was against your religion,” Walt said.

“Well that doesn’t mean I don’t understand it. Greeks invented cards, remember. They’re in my blood.”

At the start of the game, the starburst clock had read 3:30. An hour later, I was missing one shoe, Scott and Brad had lost their shirts, and both Walt and Dale were down to their underwear. If this was what winning felt like, I wondered why I hadn’t tried it before. Confidently in the lead, I invented little reasons for the undressed to get up and move about the room.

“Hey, Walt. Did you hear that? It sounded like your mother calling.”

“I didn’t hear anything.”

“Why don’t you go to the stairway and check. We don’t want any surprises.” His underwear was all bunched in the back, saggy, like a diaper, but his legs were meaty and satisfying to look at.

“Dale, would you make sure those curtains are closed?”

“Why do I have to do it?”

“Well, because you’re closest.”

He walked toward the curtains, and I ate him alive with my eyes, confident that no one would accuse me of gaping. Things might have been different were I in last place, but as

a winner, it was my right to make sure that things were done properly. “There’s a little gap down by the baseboard. Bend over and close it, will you?”

It took a while, but after explaining that a pair of kings was no match for the two of hearts and a three of spades, Walt surrendered his underpants and tossed them onto a pile beside the TV set. “Okay,” he said. “Now the rest of you can finish the game.”

“But it is finished,” Scott said.

“Oh, no,” Walt said. “I’m not going to be the only one getting naked. You guys have to keep playing.”

“While you do what—sit back and *watch*?” I said. “What kind of a homo are you?”

“Yeah,” Dale said. “Why don’t we do something else? This game’s boring and the rules are impossible.”

The others muttered in agreement, and when Walt refused to back down, I gathered the deck and tamped it commandingly upon the tabletop. “The only solution is for us all to keep playing.”

“How the hell am I supposed to do that?” Walt said. “I mean, in case you haven’t noticed, there’s nothing more for me to lose.”

“Oh,” I said. “There’s always more. Maybe if the weakest hand is already naked, we should make that person perform some kind of a task. Nothing big, but, you know, just a token kind of thing.”

“A thing like what?”

“I don’t know. I guess we’ll just have to cross that bridge when we come to it.”

In retrospect I probably went a little far in ordering Scott to sit on my lap. “But I’m naked!” he said.

“Hey, I’m the one who’s going to be suffering. I was just looking for something easy. Would you rather run outside and touch the mailbox? The sun will be coming up in about twenty seconds—you want the whole neighborhood to see you?”

“How long will I have to sit on you?”

“I don’t know. A minute or two.”

I moved onto the easy chair and wearily patted my knee, as if this were a great sacrifice. All my life I had dreamed of this moment, and now that it was within my grasp, I was already imagining the next level. Scott slid into place, and just as I pulled him closer, there came the sound of footsteps padding overhead. It was that damn Mrs. Winters, rising early to embrace the day.

“Go back to bed,” I whispered, but she was beyond the reach of my mental powers, and nothing could stop her progress.

Scott leaped off my knee, and in that instant the evening was officially over.

“Get back here,” I said. But I was no longer considered a winner, and neither he nor the others had any reason to listen to me.

“It takes a good half hour to make flapjacks. C’mon, guys, what’s your rush? One more hand. What do you say?” I pleaded to their faces as they scrambled for their clothes and then again to their backs as they charged up the stairway, moving, it seemed, almost as if they were running from something.

## “In Defense of Graphic Novels”

Liesl Shurtliff

<https://nerdybookclub.wordpress.com/2019/10/13/in-defense-of-graphic-novels-and-those-who-read-them-by-liesl-shurtliff/>

It happened at a school visit.

I was between presentations, sitting in the library. A few students were quietly searching for books. A boy, maybe nine or ten-years-old, came into my view, scanning the shelves. He seemed a bit lost and overwhelmed. One of my greatest joys is helping children find books they will love, so I asked him what he'd read lately that he enjoyed. He named some book I can't recall, but it inspired me to recommend the *Amulet* series by Kazu Kibuishi.

“My own kids love that series,” I told him.

Suddenly a teacher appeared from between bookshelves and shot me a withering glare. “He needs to read a *real* book.”

The boy's shoulders slumped. The teacher steered him away from me like I had a highly contagious disease.

This experience inspired me to include the following passage in the first book of my latest series, *Time Castaways: The Mona Lisa Key*.

*“I like comics,” he said. “But I know that’s not real reading.”*

*Wiley raised his eyebrows. “Who told you that?”*

*My teacher,” said Corey. “She said there are too many pictures and it’s not enough of a challenge for my brain.”*

*“Well with all due respect to your teacher, who I am sure is a fine educator, I disagree,” said Wiley. “Pictures are no less powerful than words, and words no more powerful than pictures. They each tell us a story. And what happens when you put the two together? A symphony of the mind, like lobster and butter. People who read pictures and words at the same time are smart people in my book, yes, sir.”*

This passage has been shared and passed around online multiple times, usually with praise but sometimes with censure. I read a review once that was otherwise glowing, but the one “disappointing moment was when a child is praised for reading comics.”

The animosity some adults have toward graphic novels is nothing new to me, and yet it continues to baffle me. I am convinced these adults all have good intentions. Just like me, they want what's best for their children and students. They want them to be *readers*. But I'm equally convinced the way they're going about it is wrong and their methods will inevitably backfire. I believe their negativity toward graphic novels is result of the complete misunderstanding of graphic novels themselves as well as a misunderstanding of the fragile ego of a child, and the ways in which they develop a relationship with books and reading. I'll address the graphic novel first, the child ego second.

I have a theory that one reason adults look down their nose at graphic novels is because they have the word “novel” attached to them, as though we're somehow trying to compare it to Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*. We have to look at graphic novels and comics differently. Comparing a graphic novel to a straight novel is like trying to compare the opera to the ballet or a sculpture to a painting. Would you say the *Mona Lisa* by Leonardo da Vinci has less artistic merit than Michelangelo's *David* simply because it is only two-dimensional? Is the ballet less worthy than the opera because there are no words? Most people, while they may prefer the *David* to the *Mona Lisa* or the opera over the ballet or vice versa, would never

make this comparative mistake, because most people understand they are completely different mediums. Likewise, graphic novels and comics cannot be so closely compared to straight literature. They might contain similar ideas, information, and stories; they might both be in book form, but they are, for all intents and purposes, different mediums. Graphic novels and comics convey the information in their own unique fashion, combining visual text with written language. Indeed, comics are seen by many as a “visual language.” (*Comics, Linguistics, and Visual Language: The past and future of a field*, Neil Cohn)

There’s some excellent research being conducted in the field of graphic novels and young learners. What researchers are finding is that graphic novels can engage and challenge *any* reader in both visually and linguistically complex ways. The combination of text and illustration require an entirely different level of focus and concentration. In some ways graphic novels are *more* challenging than straight novels. In fact, if you haven’t read a graphic novel recently (or ever), please give it a try. Maybe start with *Nimona* by Noelle Stevenson, a National Book Award Finalist among many other prestigious *literary* awards and accolades. I have a hunch that some adults who poo-poo these books actually find graphic novels more challenging than they would assume, and that subconsciously factors into their reasoning for not liking them. I will admit, I struggled with graphic novels when I first started reading them. It was hard for me to focus and comprehend what was happening in the story. It was almost like I was trying to decode a *new language*. I’ve heard many other adults admit to the same.

But my defense of the graphic novel goes deeper than their literary or educational merit. At the end of the day, it doesn’t matter if graphic novels are more, less, or equally challenging than a straight novel. What matters most is the child, their identity, and their relationship with books and reading. Shaming any child for their reading choices, no matter what it is, is a death sentence to the child’s budding and delicate passion for reading. It will shut them down, and it will be ten times harder to lure them back. I speak from personal experience. I’m sure that’s not anyone’s intent when poo-pooing graphic novels, but that will nevertheless be the result. Encourage them to try a wide variety, sure. Use the famed improv “Yes and...” philosophy. “Yes! *Guts* by Raina Telgemeier is a great choice, *and* you should also try *The Miscalculations of Lightning Girl* by Stacy McAnulty. I loved them both!”

Give them graphic novels *and* novels. Give them poetry and short stories and picture books and magazines. Give them fiction, non-fiction, contemporary, historical, fantasy, and sci-fi. We want kids to read widely, to grow and expand their horizons, and we adults should be the best examples of these reading practices. But for the love of all that is holy, please don’t tell them the books they go to again and again aren’t worthy. That’s basically saying **THEY** are not worthy, that they are not a real reader. And if you pass on that message, it will surely become the truth. I certainly want my children to be strong readers and have an expansive vocabulary, but always my first priority is to nurture their reading identity and a positive relationship with books. This is the most important thing. If I can accomplish that the rest will follow.

It’s time to embrace graphic novels. It’s time to lift the stigma, stop the lies. It’s time to show our kids we can be just as open-minded as they are. It’s time we adults read graphic novels, too, not just for the kids, but for ourselves. I promise it won’t kill your brain cells or lower your vocabulary. It might even enhance it.