

I READ IT OVER ONE LAST TIME.

Did I argue my point effectively? After two weeks of planning was I overthinking the whole thing? It was already the first of August, and sleeping in until noon was almost a thing of the past. The first day of school loomed like the grim reaper. I clicked SEND before time ran out and Mom's lunch break was over. Before time ran out and my summer vacation was over. Then I sat back and held my breath. Not literally, of course, even though it felt like it.

To: BigWheel@home.com
From: MomWheel@home.com
Subject: Proposal

We need to talk. I was going to say something last night but decided it's better to lay it all out for you first. I have a proposal that you probably won't like,

but please read this whole email before you answer.

I think I should be homeschooled this year.

These are my reasons:

(1) I only need two classes to graduate, and I've proved I work better on my own.

(2) Senior year of high school is a complete waste of time. Nobody pays attention, and half the kids don't bother showing up for class half the time.

(3) College isn't a requirement for becoming a graphic novelist, and there's no doubt in my mind now that's what I want to do when I graduate.

(4) Quentin Tarantino (famous film director) dropped out of school at the age of 15 and his mother didn't care, and look where he is now.

(5) I've done ALL the research. I downloaded ALL the paperwork. The only thing I need is your signature in a few places. I PROMISE I'll take care of EVERYTHING!!! I'm begging you to say YES!!!!

-Hudson

P.S. I've been thinking about this all summer so don't think it's something I just came up with.

P.P.S. And please don't think this has anything to do with a failure on your part about being a good mother, etc.

It wasn't that I was scared of Mom, who is actually a really nice and understanding person. It's just that I was scared she'd say "no," and over the past few weeks I'd managed to convince myself this was the only possible way of surviving my senior year of high

.....

school. I wasn't prepared to deal with a flat-out *No*. Couldn't even consider that awful possibility. What I *was* prepared for was a major battle that I planned on winning before the homeschool program registration deadline. So I sat in the kitchen staring at the computer screen, waiting for Mom to return fire. I checked my inbox. One new message. *Top Trending Tweets*. And then the dinosaur desktop froze. Instead of bolting for the laptop in my bedroom, I forced myself to take a deep breath and calmly reboot. In order to prevail against Mom, it was important to stay focused and maintain my composure. I leaned back in my chair while the computer clucked and the screen changed from white to blue to black to white again.

The kitchen. A huge part of my life had played out there. Mom hated it because she didn't have the money to update it. She claimed it taunted her every day of her life. Puke-yellow Formica counters; the rust countertop footprint of a can of baked beans; the floor that was supposed to look like a tile floor but was really just a sheet of vinyl curling up at the corners; the cabinets that never closed all the way; fluorescent lights that buzzed, flickered, and hummed like crazy; and the refrigerator hummed too. And rocked like it was about to fall on top of you whenever you opened it.

Taped to the refrigerator was a note. The one my fifth grade teacher sent to my parents. The one Mom refused to let me take down even after all this time.

The one that taunted me every day the same way the kitchen taunted her.

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Wheeler,

It isn't every day I'm motivated to write a letter like this, so I want the two of you to know just how meaningful this is. Hudson is one of those students who comes along very rarely, so I consider myself blessed to have had him in my class this year. When it comes to good citizenry, he has no peer, always ready to lend a helping hand. Hudson is extremely well-liked by both faculty and the student body. He is motivated, helpful, thinks creatively and unselfishly. You've succeeded admirably in your job of parenting to have produced such a fine young man. It's obvious to me that Hudson is going places!

D. Thompson

I memorized the letter, that's how many times I've read it. Every time I opened the refrigerator in the last eight years looking for something to eat (at least ten times a day), there it was. Technically it should have been addressed to Major and Mrs. Wheeler because that's what Dad was, a Major in the army. But he never saw the letter. A month after Mrs. Thompson mailed it to my house, my dad was killed in Iraq. I was the student body president that year and believed what Mrs. Thompson said. I wasn't sure exactly where I was going, but I knew it would be somewhere big. Somewhere that would make me

happy and make my parents proud, and I didn't mean just middle school.

But after Dad died, we went through our sad years where I sometimes had to act more grown-up than I was just to help Mom get through the day. After that, where I was going didn't seem so important anymore. We got through the sadness, of course. But the letter that used to feel like a promise began to feel like a dare. And there I was trying to disappear from school altogether. What would Mrs. Thompson think if she knew what I was doing?

The computer clucked a few more times while it finished updating. Finally, it was ready to go, and I breathed deeply as I signed back into my email account. One new message. Mom. I imagined her tapping out the response in that clumsy one-fingered way she did on the phone. Probably hyperventilating all the while. She'd put herself through nursing school and wouldn't be able to understand why anyone would turn their back on the luxury of being educated without having to work. To her, school wasn't just important, it was everything.

Is this about Cameron? she wrote.

I replied, *WHAT???* of course not!!!! Okay, it wasn't just about Cameron, it was about Griffin too. My two best friends since grade school until last year when Griffin transferred to the school across town after his family bought a new house. And then to make matters worse, Cameron fell into a ridiculously serious relationship with a girl I didn't even like.

When you grow up as a threesome so close you're almost brothers, there's a co-dependency that's hard to see your way out of. I couldn't wish Griffin back into his old house, and wishing for Cameron to break up with his girlfriend only made me feel evil, which I probably was.

But if I admitted all of that to Mom, she'd go on a whole rant about making new friends and joining clubs to meet new people. All the stuff that sounds so great to parents when they're lecturing you. The reality is something else. Something parents just don't get. You can't reinvent yourself when you're a senior in high school. Everyone knows that.

I was so done with school and couldn't see its relevancy to my life anymore. Homeschooling would be cool. I hadn't really thought out what I'd do with all my free time while Mom was at work, but I did have a pile of graphic novels to get through, and I wanted to write and illustrate one of my own. So maybe Mom didn't exactly like the idea of me lying around all day reading my "comic books," as she called them, much to my annoyance.

Well I think it is, she wrote back. But in any case, the way I see it is we both have our jobs. Mine is being a nurse. Yours is being a student.

She tried to reason with me, but for every point she made, I already had three counter-points ready to lob back at her. After the first week, she realized I was serious. After the second week, she actually started listening to me. After the third week (just in time,

because school was about to start) she finally surrendered. I was nothing if not persuasive when it came to Mom. I sometimes still caught her staring at the letter on the refrigerator that promised I was “going places,” and maybe she really believed it. But it wasn’t total surrender. She had her conditions, so we drew up a contract which we both signed.

Hudson Wheeler promises to take the following classes at La Costa High during this upcoming school year:

AP Art

Physical Education

He also promises to apply to two (2) colleges for which he has a reasonable chance of being accepted.

From this day forward he will pay rent on the first of the month in the amount of \$200.

Signed:

Deborah Wheeler , Hudson Wheeler

The art class was required due to the fact that my mother was worried about me having zero social interaction with my peers. Taking a class in something I loved and was good at, she thought would go down easier. She probably also secretly hoped it would help to increase my self-esteem which was something she worried about a lot.

P.E. was required because she didn’t want me to

turn into a couch potato. Her philosophy was that everyone needed to get out and do something active for at least an hour each day. But since P.E. was an elective for seniors, I had a lot of choices. I chose yoga, the main reason being the favorable female-to-male ratio. This would ensure two things: 1. No competition against guys in a physical way. That never worked out very well for me in the past. 2. I still had a wild hope of doing something (anything) with a girl (any girl) before graduating from high school.

The two college applications and the rent . . . that was Mom hoping I'd come to my senses before it was too late.

I wasn't that same kid who inspired Mrs. Thompson to write the refrigerator note all those years ago. Fate had played a couple of dirty tricks on me over the years. But in the beginning of my final year of high school, I had a renewed sense of hopefulness. I felt light. Free. As I roamed the hallways of school on my first day, I felt like an adult in a sea of children. I could leave and go home in just a few hours. And I felt something else I hadn't felt in a long time. Excitement about my future.

>>>

The first day of school arrived without the usual pit in my stomach. Only two classes meant I'd be in and out in less than two hours. I could actually wait to eat breakfast until after getting home.

Nothing was going to ruin the high I had walking

.....

into yoga class. Except maybe Gus Ligety. There he was, posed on his yoga mat like Buddha, surrounded by girls. Girls. Girls. And more girls. Girls dressed in skintight outfits—some of them really revealing. Sleepy-eyed girls. Sleek-haired girls. An ocean of girls. I tried my best to block out Gus and the two other guys in the room. They weren't exactly chick-magnet types of guys, but then neither was I. The guys those girls really wanted to be with wouldn't be caught dead in a yoga class. Later in the year, those same guys would make a point to stop and stare into our classroom, pointing and laughing at us (me and Gus) until the teacher turned around and shoed them away with a dirty look.

When I arrived (late) to class, everyone was already lotus-style on three neatly spaced rows of yoga mats. I realized two things: 1. As an unfairly vertically-challenged male, being barefoot in class did nothing to disguise my short stature. "Unfairly," I say, because my father was tall. But my mom's short, and at seventeen I was taking after her in that department. 2. The loose basketball shorts I had on weren't going to cut it in yoga class. Even Gus knew that. He was decked out in what I assumed were men's yoga pants—at least they were long and didn't slide away to reveal everything no guy wants to show at school. I did some fast thinking and made a decision to take my place all the way in the back, hidden behind two rows of girls from the teacher's forward facing view.

"Hud-man!" Gus called out, prompting a harsh

look from Ms. Senger, our youngish and semi-hot instructor. “What’s up, bro? Come sit over here with me. We dudes have to stick together.”

Ms. Senger brought a slender finger up to her pursed lips.

“Mr . . .?”

“Wheeler.” Why was I stupidly late on my first day? I was breaking my own rule of blending into the background. I’d known since middle school that you don’t call attention to yourself by walking into a classroom late.

“Mr. Wheeler, please find a space. There are mats in the back.”

I unrolled a mat and inserted myself between two girls who giggled while they moved aside to let me squeeze in.

Once seated, I could check out everyone else from the safe vantage point of the back of the room. It was a beginner’s class so I assumed everyone was going to be as bad as me, but I knew the girls had an advantage when it came to flexibility. Gus, I knew, unfortunately since preschool. He seemed to have a magic mirror that gave him confidence beyond anything he deserved. He was annoying but basically a nice guy in very small doses.

Directly to my left was a girl I knew by the name of Alana Love. She showed up in my Art History class late in our junior year with her messy dirty-blonde hair that looked like it’d never met a brush. Not in a bad way, don’t get me wrong. Definitely sexy.

.....

She also had big, expressive puppy eyes. Or maybe they were kitten eyes. The rest of her face—some of it worked, and some of it didn't. Her nose was a little crooked, her lips were a little thin, and she had a couple of zits on her chin. She also had a tattoo on one side of her neck: a flowering vine of purples and pinks. The first time I saw it I actually thought it was a bruise, like someone had tried to strangle her. Over time, I came to admire it, and my own bare neck seemed naked in comparison. Other kids at school had tattoos but none as out-there as Alana's.

Sitting next to her, I could smell Alana, and she smelled really nice. All in all, she was the kind of girl you could fantasize about, even though for me that was just about any girl with most body parts intact. A girl named Penelope was on my other side. In different circumstances, she might have been the object of my desire, but with Alana Love so close, Penelope didn't stand a chance.

Ms. Senger led us through the Sukhasana, the cat-cow pose, the tree pose, and some others I don't remember. By the time we were through I was really feeling it. And it didn't help that I had to constantly pull my shorts down over my knees. Gus groaned loudly, but I tried to suck it up for the benefit of Alana Love, not wanting her to think I was one of *those* guys. Inflexible. Looking for an easy A or an easy girl. I wanted her to respect me, so I threw myself into every pose and promised myself the next day would be easier. I'd stretch before class and

wear sweat pants instead of shorts. Were our seating assignments permanent? I hoped so.

TWENTY MINUTES IS A LONG TIME . . .

. . . between classes if you think about how much stuff happens in the regular passing period, which is only five minutes. Entire lives change during passing period. Relationships begin. People get dumped. Weekend parties are planned. With the extra fifteen minutes between zero and first period, I'd already changed out of my yoga clothes and was walking to art class while most of the seniors were still cruising the senior lot looking for a place to park.

"Wait up, Hud-man!" Gus jogged up from behind just as I was closing the gap between myself and Alana, who was about ten paces ahead.

"Do me a favor, Gus," I began. Was I being a jerk because of my empty stomach? Or the fact that Gus just ruined my next move with Alana (which wasn't exactly planned out to be honest)? "Don't call me

Hud-man and I won't call you . . .”

“Call me what?”

“Gus-man.”

“No problem.”

We walked in silence long enough for Gus to notice Alana in front of us. He nudged me in the ribs with his elbow, which succeeded in making me even crankier.

“You going to hit that?” he asked way too loudly.

“Hit what?” The hungry pit in my stomach turned to nausea.

“You know.” He nudged me again and I pushed his arm away. “*That.*” He motioned with his chin towards Alana who was possibly within hearing distance. At that moment, I was grateful the human ear points forward, not back.

“No, I’m not going to *hit* that,” I whispered hoarsely.

“Mind if I do?”

He didn’t wait for my answer. “How’d you like yoga today?” he bellowed at Alana’s back. The vine on the side of her neck twisted as she turned to look behind her. “Bet you’re feeling pretty sore.”

“Oh hey,” she said. I desperately wanted to protect her from his lunacy without identifying myself as his friend but saw no way out. “It was fun,” she smiled. “Easy. I’ve been doing yoga since I was ten.”

“I thought this was a beginner’s class, didn’t you, Hud-man . . .” he trailed off, warned by the fierce look in my eye. “Hud?”

.....

“It fits with my schedule,” she said. “I talked to Miss Senger before class, and she said I could go at my own pace. Your name’s Hud?” She instinctively reacted the same way most people do when faced with a conversation with Gus. Change the subject and pivot away from him as quickly as possible. I felt a sudden wave of sympathy. It couldn’t be easy being Gus, no matter how much confidence he dripped.

“Hudson, actually.”

“You were in my Art History last year.”

“Yeah. You came at the end.”

“My father has a wacky job. We move around a lot.”

“Wacky?” Gus reinserted himself into the conversation. “What does he do?”

“Auditing for a bunch of big companies.”

Neither one of us knew what that meant, so we scrambled for a follow-up. Conversation would have been easier without Gus breathing down my neck, but to be fair, he probably felt the same way. Maybe I *should* have claimed Alana when he asked me. Should have told him I was going to “hit that.” I just couldn’t imagine those words coming out of my mouth.

“Heard you’re homeschooling this year.” How is it that Gus always knew everything about everyone? “Did you suddenly get religious or spend time in the slammer over the summer?” He laughed hard at that and then turned to Alana whose blank face demanded an explanation. “The only people who homeschool are religious kids and incorrigibles.”

Alana beamed her saucer eyes on me. “If you’re homeschooling, why are you here?”

“I’m only taking two classes. I leave after art . . . next period.”

“AP Art?”

“Yup.”

“I guess we’re in the same class again.”

“So why are you homeschooling?” Gus insisted.

“Senior year’s a waste of time. I’m trying to start a few businesses and need time to work on my novel.”

I didn’t feel the need to mention college was not in my future. I also wished for a trapdoor to suddenly open and swallow up Gus.

“Novel?” Alana’s wide eyes opened wider than I thought possible. “You’re writing a novel?”

“A graphic novel.”

I wasn’t exactly writing one but was sure thinking about it, and I had been ever since I’d discovered the genre and been swept up in it. There’d been some false starts and stops, but they hadn’t led to much.

“I’d love to see it sometime. What’s it about?”

“What kind of businesses are you starting?” Gus interrupted, and I was grateful I didn’t have to explain the graphic novel that didn’t yet exist.

“I have two.” This was true. I’d gotten the idea for my dog-walking business after listening to my neighbor’s dog bark all summer long. I had three clients. My neighbor’s one-eyed Chihuahua, driven to near-psychosis by long, endless days of boredom. A three-legged Labrador whose owner had emphysema.

.....

And a snow-white, perfectly-coiffed poodle that wanted nothing more than to go outside, but lacked the delivery system to get him there until I came along. I'd printed some cards and knocked on doors of houses where I'd seen or heard dogs before. "One's a dog-walking business."

"Dog walking?" Gus guffawed. "Give me a break. Your mom lets you be homeschooled so you can walk dogs? Dude, you must have her twisted around your little finger. What a scam!"

"What's your other business?" Alana asked.

This one was tricky, but I was proud of the idea even though I only had one client. It seemed to me like an easy way to sit back and collect money with little or no expended effort, not that walking dogs took much. "You know those commercials on TV where an old person falls down and calls for help by pushing a button they wear around their neck?"

"You're the guy who runs over to their house to pick them up after they fall down?"

If there was any doubt, I knew then that Gus was determined to make me look bad in front of Alana. It was all part of the "guys trying to impress girls" thing. If we were reindeer, we'd be butting horns. If we were beta fish we'd be fanning our fins at each other. But we were just two awkward guys trying to outwit each other. Or at least Gus was trying to outwit me, and I was trying to out-class him.

"So I started thinking," I talked right over him, doing my best to ignore his last dig. "There are prob-

ably a lot of old people living by themselves who have problems that aren't exactly emergencies but fall just under the level of emergency."

"Yeah," Alana stopped outside our classroom. This would be where I hoped to get rid of Gus. "I'll bet there are. So what exactly would you do?"

She didn't go inside so we all just stood there. Five minutes before class started.

"I give them a prepaid cell phone and program it with my direct number. Then they can call me anytime if they need me for an emergency right below the level of a 911 call."

"*Hah!*" Gus snorted. I purposely avoided looking at him.

"Cool." Alana smiled, and a tiny dimple formed in the middle of her chin. Right in between two of her three zits. I'd never noticed it before, probably because I'd never been that close. "Like, what would that be?"

I truthfully didn't know, and, actually, I was hoping there wasn't such a thing as an emergency right below the level of a 911 call. My plan was to charge a monthly rate and not have to do any work.

"Wow. So much stuff," I said as seriously and mysteriously as possible.

Alana looked a little skeptical. "How many customers do you have?"

I looked down at the ground, wishing lying came more easily to me. "So far I only have one," I said. "But my mom's a nurse, and she has some leads. There're a lot of upsides to the business since my costs

.....

don't increase much as new business comes in. Same with the dog-walking."

"But you can only walk so many dogs at one time," Gus challenged.

"I can take different group of dogs out at different times if more business comes in."

Gus's mouth opened then closed silently like a fish. I'd finally succeeded in silencing him.

"I love dogs," Alana said. "But I never got to have one since we moved around so much."

"Maybe you can come with me to walk the dogs sometime." It came out before I could stop myself. *Idiot!* And with Gus right there as an eyewitness . . . "If you want," I added foolishly, like she didn't know she had a choice in the matter.

"Yeah, maybe," she said. "Bell's about to ring. You going in?"

There were four chairs to a table, and I spotted two empty seats side by side. I moved quickly to claim them, assuming Alana was right behind me, and set my backpack down before noticing she was already across the room sliding into another chair obviously reserved for her by the looks of the jacket hanging over the back. And the guy next to her . . . I knew who he was. A nice enough guy. Decent artist. Okay-looking if you like that clean-cut, athletic kind of look. Tall. Bryce Something. Not the kind of guy I'd picture with Alana, but then again, neither was I. All right, maybe she had a boyfriend, and that wasn't the worst thing in the world. There were still nineteen

other girls in yoga class, including Penelope. There was still a whole school year in front of me. Or was Bryce Something maybe just a friend?

Alana glanced across the room and gave me one of those four finger fluttering type of waves. The kind that little kids use. And old ladies. And pretty girls.

>>>

THINGS TO DO TODAY:

1. Start art project
2. Walk dogs
3. Work on graphic novel for real
4. Do a little homeschool homework every day so I don't have to cram for bi-monthly meetings
5. Empty dishwasher and wash dishes

The cell phone ringing two inches from my right ear rattled me back to consciousness. How was it already noon? Caller ID showed Mrs. Dickinson, my one and only emergency contact client. I coughed a few times and cleared my throat to get the sleep out of my voice.

“Mrs. Dickinson, are you calling for help?”

“Why, yes dear. Is it okay to call now?”

“It's okay anytime you need me.” This was my first ever call, so the adrenaline was pumping. I hadn't expected to get a call so soon, or actually even at all. Mom took the car to work which left me only with my bike, but Mrs. Dickinson was just four blocks down the street.

“I know you said I was only supposed to call for emergencies but . . .”

“No. Actually, for emergencies call 911. Call me for anything just less than an emergency.”

How well could I market this business if my one and only client didn't even understand its purpose? But in fairness, neither did I.

“Well, that's what I meant. This isn't really an emergency, but it's just less than one. I need help with my email. I've tried and tried to get onto my account, but it keeps saying . . . wait a minute, I wrote it down . . . *invalid password*. I know I'm typing it correctly because it's my name.”

“Mrs. Dickinson . . .” The clock on the wall showed twelve, and I still hadn't eaten breakfast. My stomach was growling, and nothing on my list had been checked off. The list I so optimistically created when I got home from school that morning. Was it only that morning? Alana? Gus? *That* morning?

“Mrs. Dickinson. Just give me twenty minutes and I'll be there.”

“Please hurry,” she said.

Mrs. Dickinson did have a dog that, as far as I knew, was never allowed further than her mailbox. A chubby but mellow cocker spaniel that would be a perfect addition to my existing team of three dogs. All I needed was to slowly work Mrs. Dickinson into the idea, convincing her the dog needed socializing and exercise.

“I'll be there in fifteen.”

“Can you make it in ten?”