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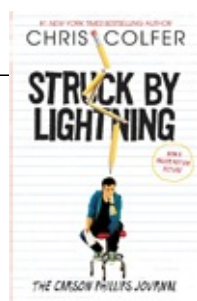
CHRIS COLFER

# STRUCK BY LIGHTNING

NOW A  
MAJOR MOTION  
PICTURE



THE CARSON PHILLIPS JOURNAL



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# STRUCK BY LIGHTNING

*THE CARSON PHILLIPS JOURNAL*

Chris Colfer



**LITTLE, BROWN  
AND COMPANY**

**NEW YORK**

**BOSTON**

To Melissa Schwolow, Mikendra McCoy, Jenny Herrick, and Maureen Bagdasarian, without whom I would have never survived my own high school experience.

---

And to every president or captain of a writers' club, drama club, speech and debate team, Destination ImagiNation team, every editor of a high school newspaper or literary magazine, and anyone overachieving in their own right and underappreciated for it...this book is for you!

Dear Journal,

One more school year with these shitheads and I'll be free. It's taken almost two decades of careful planning, but I'm proud to say my overdue departure from the town of Clover is only *days* away. Three hundred and forty-five days away, to be exact, but who's counting?

A year from now I'll be sitting in my dorm room at Northwestern University taking notes from some overpriced textbook about "the history of..." you know, something historical. I'll be living off Top Ramen and gallons of Red Bull. I'll barely be getting five hours of sleep a night, and that's only when I don't have to yell at my roommate to turn down his porn.

I know it doesn't sound like much to look forward to, but for this college-bound kid, it's *paradise*. All the suffering, now and later, is for a much bigger picture.

It's not much of a secret since I tell anyone who will listen (mostly to get them to stop talking to me), but one day I hope to become the youngest freelance journalist to be published in the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Chicago Tribune*, and the *Boston Globe*, eventually making my way to editor of the *New Yorker*.

Yes, I know that was a lot of information, so take a minute if you need one. If it sounds overwhelming to you, just think about how I feel living up to my future self every day. It's exhausting!

In a decade, if all goes according to plan, things will be much better for me. I can see it now: I'll be sitting in my New York City apartment applying final touches to my weekly *New York Times* column. I'll be living off Thai food and bottles of the finest red wine. I'll be sleeping ten hours a night, even when I have to yell at my neighbor to turn down his porn.

Granted, I still have a year to go in high school, and *senior* year at that. And I do realize I haven't actually been "accepted" to Northwestern yet, but those are just minor technicalities. Since we're on the subject, I should also mention that I'm well aware Northwestern doesn't send out early acceptance letters until December 15, but, fearing that I may apply somewhere else, I'm sure they've made an exception for me. I'm positive my acceptance letter is on its way from the admissions office and will soon be in my eager hands as I write this...right?

I wouldn't be surprised if I was the first applicant. I stayed up half the night to submit my application as soon as the admissions website opened at 6 a.m. Chicago time on the first day. Now it's just a waiting game...and waiting has never been my forte.

I can't imagine why they wouldn't accept me. When they read my transcripts they'll see I'm a very liberal-minded young man in a very obstinate world begging to be rescued by means of education: a diamond in a pile of cow shit, if you will.

That and the fact that I'm one-sixteenth Native American and one-thirty-second African American (okay, that part I can't actually prove) should make me an admissions jackpot!

Even if that doesn't work, my high school career should speak for itself. I've kept my grade point average at an impressive 4.2 since freshman year. I've single-handedly edited the *Clover High Chronicle* since sophomore year, and I've managed to keep the Writers' Club alive after school despite its apparent death wish.

Not bad for a kid in a town where the most common intellectual question is, *Will he actually eat the green eggs and ham?*

---

I'm kidding (sort of). Look, I don't mean to constantly harp on my hometown. I suppose Clover has some good qualities too...I just can't think of any off the top of my head.

Clover is a place where the pockets are small but the minds are even smaller. It's tiny and conservative, and most of the people are really set on living *and* dying here. Personally, I've never been able to hop on the bandwagon and have been publicly chastised because of it. Having aspiration to leave makes me the black sheep of the community.

I'm sorry; I just can't muster up pride for a town whose most cosmopolitan area is the Taco Bell parking lot on a Saturday night. And although I've never lived anywhere else, I'm pretty sure normal Sweet Sixteens don't consist of group cow-tipping.

When they built the first movie theater here, people lost their damn minds. I was only three, but I still remember people crying and cartwheeling in the streets. The line to see *You've Got Mail* circled the town.

I pray we never get an airport—who knows what kind of cult-sacrificial suicides might occur?

Yeah, I'm a little bitter because I'm one of *those* kids: bottom of the food chain, constantly teased, despised, an annoyance to everyone around them, most likely to find a pile of flaming manure on the roof of their car (oh yeah, it happened), but what prevents my life from being a sad after-school special is *I don't give a shiiiiit*. I can't reiterate enough, this town is full of morons!

Whenever my pen pals from the online Northwestern chat rooms and forums ask me, "Where is Clover?" I'm usually forced to say, "It's where *The Grapes of Wrath* ended up." And that's putting it nicely.

Let's be honest: Go to the corner of Nothing and Nowhere, make a left, and you'll find Clover. It's one of those cities you pass along the side of a freeway, home to barely ten thousand citizens, that makes you ask yourself, "Who the fuck would live there?" Well, if you've recently asked yourself that in a car, the answer is, *This fucker*. Hi, I'm Carson Phillips, if I haven't introduced myself formally.

I read once that all great writers have issues with their hometowns; guess I'm no exception. You can't let your origins bring you down, though. You don't get to pick where you're from, but you always have control of where you're going. (That's a good quote; I'll have to remember to say that if I'm ever receiving an honorary doctorate one day.)

But this all just fuels my fire even more. Ever since I was eight years old and got asked, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" and replied, "The editor of the *New Yorker*," the looks I'd receive after the declaration—as if I had said "dragon slayer" or "transvestite golfer"—always pushed me a little closer to a metaphoric exit sign.

Perhaps that's why my issues with Clover started at such a young age. I was constantly shot down by nitwits who couldn't think outside the box—especially in elementary school, aka the first place they try to brainwash you in a small town.

I remember my first-grade teacher was giving a lesson on subtraction.

"When one thing takes another away, what do we call that?" she asked my class.

"Homicide!" I called out, so proud of myself. I wasn't technically *wrong*, but the look she gave me for the following three minutes made it appear that way.

The same year we had Founding Fathers' Day, and I remember it like it was yesterday. I walked to the front of the classroom, clutching the report I had spent hours on, and told the class everything I had learned.

"Most of the founding fathers were closeted homosexuals and slave owners," I said. Needless to

say, I wasn't allowed to finish the report.

That day after school was the first day my parents were called in for a "meeting." It was the beginning of the complex relationship I have with the public education system.

"He's eccentric, so what?" my mom told the teacher.

"Mrs. Phillips, your six-year-old son told his class the presidents who founded this nation were homosexual slave owners," the teacher said. "I'd say that's more than eccentric behavior."

"That might have been my fault," my dad said. "He asked me for a funny fact about the founding fathers, so I gave him one."

"He was asking for a *fun fact*, you dipshit!" Mom scolded him. "I told him to ask you! No wonder he's having trouble in school—his father is a moron!"

"Actually, Mrs. Phillips," the teacher said, "on the first day of school he introduced himself and told the class *you* had told him he was named Carson because Johnny Carson was on television while he was...*conceived*."

To this date, I've never seen my mother gulp so hard.

"Oh," she said. "Well, I take responsibility for that one."

That was the last time my parents were seen together in public. As you may have guessed, I'm one of those cynical kids from a broken home, too.

Until I was ten and saw a friend's parents interact, I never realized that people got married because they wanted to, because they *loved* each other. I had always thought it was more like jury duty: You got an envelope in the mail telling you when, where, and who you were required to reproduce with.

There was about as much love between Neal and Sheryl Phillips as there was between the squid and the whale. At least they had an ocean to share and not a three-bedroom, two-bathroom suburban home.

I'm pretty sure their wedding vows went something like this:

"Neal and Sheryl, do you take each other as your awfully selected spouse; to reprimand and scold from this day forward; for better but mostly worse, in counseling and in therapy, in anger and in frustration, to hate and then resent; from this day forward until death that you cause?"

Maybe at one point they loved each other, or thought they loved each other. But once you reach a certain age in Clover all that's left to do is get married and have kids. It may not have been the best idea, but it was what was expected of them, and they were victims of the pressure.

My mom was definitely in it for the long haul, always trying to make things work between them. Their marriage was a constant pattern: My dad was unhappy, my mom tried to fix it, my dad was still unhappy, my mom resented trying to fix it, there would be a massive argument, and the cycle would repeat.

Unfortunately my dad didn't want it to work; he had wanted out as soon as he got in.

At one point my mother quit her job as a receptionist at a doctor's office because my dad was, and I quote, "tired of picking Carson up from that fucking school." Not that his job as a real estate agent kept him working late; he just tried avoiding as much fatherly responsibility as a priest in a whorehouse. (I'm sorry, super proud of myself for that reference.)

Sometimes I swear I can still hear them yelling in the kitchen. Whether it was over a missing fifty bucks in their checking account or just a dish left in the sink, from nine to ten o'clock every night they were sure to be arguing. At least something was consistent in my childhood.

Our next-door neighbors used to watch from over the fence every night. I tried selling them popcorn one time but they didn't go for it.

Our *Titanic* of a family sank deeper and deeper as time went on. But in a sick way, I'm almost glad it did. In my desperate attempt to escape it, I was led to the greatest discovery ever: *words*. I was

fascinated by them. There were so many! I could tell a story, I could write about my day, I could write about the day I wished I had had instead....It was an endless power!

---

Every time I would hear my parents going at it, I would open up my crayon box and notebook and go to town. Suddenly, everything became white noise and nothing bothered me anymore. It's how I held on to sanity in a crazy house.

Things with my parents came to a peak after Grandpa, Mom's dad, passed away. Grandma came to live with us a year later when she was diagnosed with Alzheimer's.

She had always been my champion and savior. Whenever I was having trouble in school she would sit me on her lap and say, "Don't let that teacher make you feel like you're anything less than brilliant Carson. She's just pissed that the governor changed her pension plan."

It was hard to watch her slowly fade away. Even as a kid I knew something was wrong.

When she was at home she was usually in the linen closet wondering how her room had gotten so small. Our neighbors used to find her wandering the streets alone, wondering where she had parked the car she didn't have anymore.

"This is the third time she's been found wandering around town," Dad said to Mom one night at nine o'clock.

"She just gets a little confused and forgets what the house looks like," Mom said. "What's your excuse?"

"I'm serious, Sheryl," Dad said. "Either she goes, or I go!"

It was the first time I'd ever seen Mom speechless. I helped her pack Grandma's things the next day.

Although she was getting more senile by the second, Grandma knew what was happening the day we put her in the Clover Assisted Living Home. She was very quiet and kept to herself. Mom did too, feeling the guilt of it all, I suspect.

"Why are you moving?" I asked Grandma.

"Because the people here are going to take good care of me," she said.

"Can't I take good care of you?" I said.

"I wish, honey," Grandma said, and stroked my hair.

I felt so helpless, but I tried cheering her up the best way I knew how.

"I wrote you a story, Grandma," I said, handing her a paper.

"Oh? Let's see," she said, and took it from me. "Once upon a time, there was a boy." She stopped reading—not because she wanted to, that was just all I had written. "Well, it's a lovely story, but it could use some development." She smiled.

"Mom said I can visit you every day after school. She said I could ride my bike here," I told her. "I can bring you a new story every day!"

"I'd like that," she said, a little teary-eyed, and hugged me. She was sad but I was so happy I could give her *something* to look forward to. And to date, I've never missed a day.

Despite my mom's final attempts at making her marriage work, Dad eventually left when I was ten.

The whole neighborhood remembers that night. It was the series finale of *The Neal and Sheryl Show* and started at nine on the dot and stretched into the early hours of the morning.

"You can't leave now! We just started going back to counseling!" Mom screamed after him as he went to his car. He didn't even pack, really; he just grabbed as many things as he could on the way to the door, including some Aztec decoration off the walls. Not sure what he was going to do with that.

"I can't spend another second in this house!" Dad yelled back at her.



He drove off, tires screeching, into the night. Mom ran after his car, screaming, “Go! You can’t come back! I hate you! I hate you!”

---

She collapsed in the front yard and cried hysterically for another hour. It was the first time I realized just how much she cared about him. Thank God for the sprinklers; otherwise she might have been out there all night.

It’s been me and Mom ever since. Well, there was that one time Grandma escaped the assisted-living home and wound up back with us for a day or two, but mostly it’s been just the two of us.

Life without Dad was very different, mostly quieter. Even though Mom did try to pick her nine o’clock fights with me for the first couple of years, the house became pleasantly peaceful.

We found ways around having a grown man in the house. Mom never figured out how to put together the Christmas tree or lights, so she just told people in the neighborhood we converted to Judaism. There’s no one here to fix things, so small things have been broken for years around the house (and I’m certainly not gonna take a screwdriver to anything).

Mom’s never really recovered from the whole thing. She never went back to work, deciding to just live off the money Grandpa left us. She never dated or remarried, replacing my dad with wine instead. (And oh, what a love affair it’s been!)

She mostly spends her life on the couch these days watching *Judge Judy* and *Ellen*. She showers weekly (if I’m lucky) and has become known in town as “that lady who grocery shops in her bathrobe and sunglasses.” Perhaps you’ve experienced a sighting?

I’ve only seen my dad twice since he left; once on my twelfth birthday and more recently at Christmas two years ago. Yeah, he’s a real winner. He makes Carmen Sandiego look super reliable.

“Where the hell have you been?” I said the last time I saw him, not able to hold it in.

“I moved up north to the Bay Area,” he said calmly, like he was telling me what he’d had for lunch.

“Why?” I asked.

“To find myself,” he said.

I tried my best not to laugh at him but a smile broke through. “Still searching?”

He never responded.

I’ve spent a lot of time being pissed at my parents over the years. I’ve never understood how someone like me could come from people like them. I guess ambition is a recessive gene.

But I suppose I should always keep in mind that, through it all, I’ve still had it much better than others...until those people’s autobiographies outsell mine in the future. Then I’ll be back to feeling sorry for myself. (Unpopular opinion: Your story is only sad until you start making money off of it. Then I no longer feel sorry for you.)

Let me put a lid on the violin playing in the background and reiterate my original point: Life has been shitty, but *I’m getting out of here*. I’m moving onward and upward and I’ve never been so excited.

Well, I think my life story is enough of an entry for one night. I was originally skeptical about this whole journaling thing, but now I see how therapeutic it can be. I seriously feel less stressed than when I started. I feel really calm and centered and—*Oh shit, it’s midnight and I still have Algebra 2 homework! Gotta go!*

What a DAY and it's not even over yet. It started this morning when I woke up at the crack of ass, like I do every day.

Can I please just say that it has been scientifically proven that teenagers learn and test better when they go to school later in the day? Which I suppose would be taken into consideration if school wasn't really just a government-funded day care meant to keep kids occupied. (I don't know about you, but I'm most prone to committing crimes between the hours of 6 a.m. and 3 p.m.! Thumbs up!)

I eventually stirred to life after the fourth or fifth time hitting the snooze button. I stumbled into my bathroom and discovered I wouldn't be going to school alone; there was a huge zit on the side of my face. Acne: God's way of reminding you that, besides all your other flaws, you aren't perfect. Thanks for the heads-up, God, almost forgot.

I got dressed, went into the living room, and, no surprise, found my mom passed out on the couch. Only my mother makes every morning look like the morning after a Guns N' Roses party when I know for a fact she was just watching *Beaches* on repeat last night.

I yanked open the drapes and let the light in. Every day I hope this will inspire her to get off the couch. Every day I also worry the sunlight will finally cause her to burst into flames.

"Mom, wake up!" I said, hitting her with a pillow. "You passed out again."

She jerked around under the blanket like a seal caught in a fishing net.

"Wh-wh-what?" she said, finally becoming conscious.

"Congratulations, you survived the night," I said. I like to greet her in the morning with supportive comments so she knows I care.

"If you were a decent person you'd just let me sleep!" she grunted.

"If I were a decent person I'd *put* you to sleep," I said.

"Oh my God, my head..." She sighed.

"You know, the morning isn't supposed to hurt." I brought her a glass of water and some Advil. She needed it.

I looked around the coffee table—or should I say, the wine and prescription bottle graveyard it has become.

"Are you sure you're supposed to be drinking with all those prescriptions Dr. Dealer is giving you?" I asked her.

"It's *Dr. Wheeler*, and why don't you just leave that to the professionals?" she said, and took the Advil. "Those warning stickers are for amateurs."

Over the last few years Mom has formed this sick relationship with her doctor. It's sick because half the time I'm convinced she thinks they're actually in a relationship. She literally makes up illnesses so she can visit him and is convinced if she doesn't call him once a week he *worries* about her.

If I had a patient taking more pills than Judy Garland and Marilyn Monroe put together, I'd be worried too. But I'm not sure she means *worry* in the same sense.

"Go to school, get out of here," she said, burying her face in her pillow. "And if I'm asleep when you get back from school don't you dare put my hand in a bowl of water again!"

I gathered up all of my school stuff and headed out the door. “Bye!” I shouted back at her. “Love you too!”

When my grandpa died he left me his 1973 Corvair convertible, which sounds really great on paper. In reality, he left me a lemon, and since the car is the most stress-inducing piece of machinery of all time and he died of a heart attack, I think it’s safe to say he left me his cause of death.

It doesn’t start unless the key is in the ignition, the left passenger window is open, and the radio is turned to a Spanish classics station. Don’t ask how long it took me to figure out this combination. If it still doesn’t start when those three things are in place, the slamming of the glove compartment and a good kick on the rear license plate usually does the trick.

I have a neighbor across the street who I’m convinced chooses this moment every day to retrieve his morning paper so he can watch the struggle. That jackass drives a Mercedes.

One good thing about Clover is that people are rarely late. Every location is about a five-minute drive from another, and it only takes about an hour to walk from one end of town to the other. Unfortunately, this also means everyone gets to the student parking lot at the same time.

Woof. *The student parking lot.* With all due respect to our veterans, I have yet to hear a war story that sends shivers down my spine more than flashbacks of the student parking lot. It’s a place where adolescents, most of whom haven’t even lived a full decade of wiping their own asses, are given keys to huge pieces of machinery than can potentially kill many in a matter of seconds.

Absolutely no traffic laws apply in the student parking lot. It’s every man for himself.

Signaling? Don’t worry, I’m psychic and know where you’re going. Speed limit? No need, the pedestrians should have heard you coming. Red zones? Don’t worry, girl on the volleyball team, that means it’s reserved just for you! Parking spots? Take yours and mine! Take several! Take as many as your Toyota Corolla needs!

And if this daily war zone wasn’t enough, survivors then make their way inside to an even more hazardous environment: high school, society’s bright idea to put all the naïve, pubescent, aggressive youth into one environment to torment and emotionally scar each other for life. Way to go, society! Best idea ever.

When I stop to think about it, there aren’t many differences between a public high school and a state penitentiary. It’s paid for by taxpayers. No one wants to be there. It’s overpopulated. You make alliances in the yard. Shanking is frowned upon.

At least in prison, you get out sooner for good behavior. Maybe if I could graduate earlier I would filter what I say more; I’m sure my peers don’t like being called “cattle” as I walk past them in the hallways. But if the hoof fits, *get the hell out of my way—you walk slower than a turtle on crutches!*

Luckily for me, I made it out of the trenches alive today (I say “trenches” because if the smell in the hallways after lunch on burrito day isn’t gas warfare, I don’t know what is) and into homeroom safely. Tragically, homeroom is Algebra 2.

My algebra teacher, who coughs every twenty seconds for no reason and who I suspect plays with Barbies on the weekends, wrote an equation on the board:

$$x^2 = -19$$

$$x = \sqrt{-19}$$

$$\sqrt{19 \times -1} = \sqrt{19} \times i = i\sqrt{19}$$

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” I said, not able to stop myself. “What’s the *i*?”

“The *i* is an imaginary number,” he said, and coughed.

“There are *imaginary numbers* now?” I said in disbelief. “Are there *unicorns* in the next lesson?”

Don’t get me wrong, I’m a great student. If I’m having trouble with a subject I stay after school and get the proper tutoring I need for it. Given that, I do believe I have the right to say, *What the hell is Algebra 2?*

I understand we have to compete with China and Japan, but we also have to compete with Iran, and you don’t see us in classes learning to drill oil or make nuclear weapons. (Although I would take that class in a heartbeat!)

What grinds me the most is that we’re sending kids out into the world who don’t know how to balance a checkbook, don’t know how to apply for a loan, don’t even know how to properly fill out a job application, but because they know the quadratic formula we consider them prepared for the world?

With that said, I’ll admit even I can see how looking at the equation  $x - 3 = 19$  and knowing  $x = 2$  can be useful. I’ll even say knowing  $x = 7$  and  $y = 8$  in a problem like  $9x - 6y = 15$  can be helpful. But seriously, do we all need to know how to simplify  $(x - 3)(x - 3i)$ ??

And the joke is, no one can continue their education unless they do. A student living in California cannot get into a four-year college unless they pass Algebra 2 in high school. A future psychologist can’t become a psychologist, a future lawyer can’t become a lawyer, and I can’t become a journalist unless each of us has a basic understanding of engineering.

Of course, engineers and scientists use this shit all the time, and I applaud them! But they don’t take years of theater arts appreciation courses, because a scientist or an engineer doesn’t need to know that *The Phantom of the Opera* was the longest-running Broadway musical of all time. Get my point?

The board of education should sit down with universities and high schools alike and create *options* for students. Let us take *business classes* that substitute all the same credits as algebra. I guarantee a semester learning how to start a small business would benefit people much more than knowing:

$$ax^2 + bx + c = 0$$

$$x^2 + \frac{bx}{a} + \frac{c}{a} = 0$$

$$x^2 + \frac{bx}{a} + \frac{b^2}{4a^2} - \frac{b^2}{4a^2} + \frac{c}{a} = 0$$

$$\left(x + \frac{b}{2a}\right)^2 - \frac{b^2}{4a^2} + \frac{c}{a} = 0$$

$$\left(x + \frac{b}{2a}\right)^2 = \frac{b^2 - 4ac}{4a^2}$$

But perhaps my proposal makes *too much sense* for the board of education. (I know they’re aware of it; all my letters have to be going to someone.) Then again, if they were actually interested in making the education system work, they’d probably have adjusted school hours when it was *scientifically proven students do better later in the day!* Sorry, that one still gets to me.

I feel sorry for the class of 2020. By that time, every student will most likely have to pass *differential calculus* just to graduate from high school. Good luck, kids!

Crap, Barbie-man has spotted me. I think he knows I'm not doing my homework; he coughed in my direction. I'll write more later. Until then, I'll keep mental tabs of other world solutions as they come to me.

There I was in the trenches, minding my own business, walking from English to chemistry, when out of the corner of my eye I saw something pink emerge from the counseling center.

“Hey, you!” a prissy voice shouted. “Smart guy!”

It was probably a little cocky for me to instantly turn around, but let’s be honest: Who else would they have been talking to? It was my counselor, Ms. Sharpton.

“Come see me in my office!” she said with a large, overly white smile.

“I’ve got English,” I said.

“Don’t worry, I’ll write you a pass!”

I rolled my eyes and sighed; I was a tiger cub caught by a hawk.

How do I describe Ms. Sharpton? Imagine if Sarah Palin, Paris Hilton, and Princess Peach had a love child of sorts. Now add even more pink and a splash of bleach. Get where I’m going with this? The former 1989 Miss Clover decided to become a high school counselor only after she flunked beauty school.

There was a rumor she bought property in Nevada and tried becoming a Real Housewife of Las Vegas, but the show never got picked up.

I usually try avoiding her office as much as I can. That much pink is unhealthy.

She sat me down on a couch in a little area next to her desk that she called her “sitting room.” She was in every framed picture displayed, alone or with a small rat-sized dog. And since some of the photos were taken three decades ago, either she has a thirty-year-old dog at home or she trades it in every so often for a new one.

“Welcome to Career Day here at the counseling center!” Ms. Sharpton said happily.

*Oh, screw this.* I seriously would have rather been having a colonoscopy.

“I’m sure you saw our flyer,” she went on. “We’re calling all you kiddos in today to talk about your future career options. You know, like what you want to do—”

“I know the exact career that I want,” I interrupted.

“Okay!” She clapped. “What is it, munchkin? An astronaut?”

“I want to be the editor of the *New Yorker* and the youngest freelance journalist to be published in the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Chicago Tribune*, and the *Boston Globe*.”

“Well, you’ve had some time to think about this, huh?” Ms. Sharpton said. I don’t think she knew what all those publications were. “Okay, what about college? I can help you decide what college to go to!” She reached for some pamphlets by her side.

“No, I’ve got to get into Northwestern,” I said.

“All right,” she said. “Where is that exactly?”

She wasn’t kidding.

“Illinois,” I said.

“Never heard of it,” she said. “But why do you need to leave so badly? You know Clover has a community college right here in your own backyard—”

“Look,” I said, feeling a migraine coming between my eyes (I’m allergic to stupidity). “I’ve put seventeen good years into this town. People spend less time in prison for murder sentences—”

“Is that true?” Ms. Sharpton asked, but I went on.

“I’ve been the editor of the school newspaper and president of the Writers’ Club since sophomore year just to better my chances of getting into that school—”

“Wow, that’s so smart.”

“So I’ve already applied and meet all the requirements; I just haven’t heard back from them yet. I’d appreciate it if you could find out why,” I finished, not sure if she was qualified for the task.

“Okay, and that is something *I* would do? *I* would call them?” Ms. Sharpton said. She seemed nervous, like the phone might bite her if she tried to use it.

“Yes,” I said. “I will do anything to get into that school. *Anything.*”

“Okay, I am on it!” She gave me a thumbs-up. “But since you’re here, would you mind filling out one of these application forms for Clover Community College? With every application, I get a point toward a Clover College juice cup and I only need three more.”

And that’s when I got up and left. I was afraid my migraine would turn into a cerebral hemorrhage if I didn’t.

I wish I could say the day got better—I also wish I could say I have amazing abs—but neither is true.

My final class of the day was journalism. It’s the only class I feel that’s preparing me for life—*my* life at least. I love journalism. I just hate the people in journalism class.

The journalism class is in charge of putting together the weekly school paper, the *Clover High Chronicle*. When I was a freshman, the students in the journalism class were considered gods. The seven seniors it consisted of and I were the people of the *know* and the *now*.

Students used to beg us to write or not write about their school activities. I had a cheerleader slip me a fifty once to leave out the fact that she forgot to wear underwear during a home football game.

Unfortunately, like a medieval plague, graduation swept through Clover High and I found myself the only one left in the class the following year. Even the journalism teacher, who used to take the most devoted naps during class, just stopped showing up one day. The school couldn’t afford substitutes, so I was forced to take charge wholly. (Come to think of it, I’m not sure if this is even legal, but whatever.)

I tried recruiting new members but no one wanted to join. I even went to the special ed class but they just pointed and laughed at me. Teenagers don’t want to write unless it’s 140 characters or less these days.

The school ended up sticking people in the class who didn’t have enough credits to graduate (which I’m half thankful for, half convinced they did out of spite). So the former Clover High hotshots have been replaced with the cast of *Freedom Writers*.

The *Clover High Chronicle* is made up of myself, assistant editor Malerie Baggs, movie reviewer Dwayne Michaels, weather reporter Vicki Jordan, and El Salvadoran foreign exchange student Emilio López.

We’ll get to them in a second.

“Last week’s edition of the *Clover High Chronicle* was yet another disappointment,” I said at the start of class. “We did have new material for every section, but once again, it was all written by me. This has to stop.”

I eyed them all with intense disapproval. Vicki yawned.

“This is the *Clover High Chronicle*, not the *Carson Phillips Chronicle*,” I reminded them. “Hopefully, this week will be different.” And with a clap I directed the room’s attention to Dwayne. “Dwayne, do you have your review of *Manslaughter III* ready?”

Dwayne may be the most useless human being I've ever encountered. He usually wears beanies, even when it isn't cold, and probably just pisses liquid weed at this point.

"Yes!" he said.

"Yes?" I said, trying to hide my surprise.

"Oh wait ... *no*."

"No?"

"I went but I passed out," he said. "You didn't tell me it was in 3-D."

"It wasn't," I said.

"*Whoooa*," he said quietly to himself.

I could barely stomach the situation. One day I swear an ulcer is gonna rip out of me like *Alien* and I'm going to name him Peer Incompetence.

"Vicki, do you have your weather report ready?" I asked.

She looked at me, clueless—correction, she took an iPod earbud out of her ear and then looked at me, clueless.

"What?" she asked.

"Your weather report?" I repeated.

She half-consciously gazed out the window for a second. "It's cloudy," she said, and put the earbud back into her ear.

"Great," I said. "Thank you, Vicki." At least it was progress.

Vicki Jordan is one of those "goth" students. Sometime during the eighth grade she ditched everything she owned that made her look alive and became the walking undead. She dyed her hair, smeared on some black lipstick, and discovered SPF 110.

Personally, I don't buy "rebellious phases." I think they're just dramatic ways of saying, "I have *real* problems, so I'm going to dress differently and hurt myself so people think I'm more complex than I really am." I'm sorry; you can kiss my ass with your "inner turmoil."

You want to be "left alone"? You don't want to be "understood"? Then stop dressing up every day like it's Halloween, you whiny little bitch. Get over yourself, get some Zoloft, and stop being a fucking eyesore to everyone around you.

Apparently I feel strongly about that topic. Anyway, moving on...

"Emilio, do you have a section you'd like to tackle this week?" I asked. I might as well have been talking to a picket fence.

"I love America," he said in his thick El Salvadoran accent. I think that's the only English sentence they taught him before he was sent to the States. At least Emilio has a real excuse for disregarding me.

Language barrier or not, that guy gets around. I've lost count of how many American girls I've caught that El Salvadoran Frenching. He's traveled across many borders just to put his hands below other borders. I'll stop with the metaphors; you get it.

"That's great, Emilio, we'll create a special patriotic section just for you," I said, looking over my notes. "Now what about creative writing? Does anyone have any essays or short stories or—"

"I've written a short story for the *Chronicle*," Malerie said, raising her hand.

"Let's hear it!" I said.

Malerie nervously stood up and made eye contact with everyone before reading.

"This is written by Malerie," she made clear, and began. "'It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of—'"

"Malerie," I cut her off.

"Yes?"



“You didn’t write that.”

~~She looked at me very confused, as if I was telling a child she didn’t actually come from the stork.~~

“But it’s in my handwriting,” she said. “But if you don’t believe me...” She didn’t finish the thought and just sat back down.

If the Pillsbury Doughboy had a sister, I imagine Malerie would be her look-alike. She’s short and round and a little...*different*. I wouldn’t say she’s *slow*, I’d just say other boats make it to the island before hers. She struggles a bit with concentration, metabolism, and plagiarism...but who’s perfect?

Malerie has also carried an old camcorder around for as long as I’ve known her. She films *everything*. I used to find it intriguing when she first joined journalism class, sensing there might be the potential for a strong reporter in her, but now that I know creative writing is her passion it just worries me. What does she do with all that footage?

I eventually reached my favorite part of class: *my assignment*.

“As you may have guessed, I’ll be tackling another *local issues* piece this week,” I informed them. “My article last week, ‘Small-Town Sex Scandal,’ was a huge hit on the *Chronicle*’s Facebook page. ...It was about Mr. Armbrooster, the health teacher who was fired after using Gumby and Play-Doh to teach lessons about the female reproductive system.”

Crickets. Statues in the Louvre would have been more interested. The bell rang and, like dogs at feeding time, everyone ran straight for the door.

“Don’t forget there’s a Writers’ Club meeting after school if any of you changed your minds about joining!” I called out after them. “Or changed your personalities...”

I went to the board and erased *Clover High Chronicle, editor, Carson Phillips* and wrote, *Writers’ Club, president, Carson Phillips*. There’s something about doing this that gives me satisfaction every time. Even with all the bullshit I put up with, I still take pride that these clubs are still around.

I usually spend lunch replacing old “Join the Writers’ Club” posters with new ones, as they’re pretty much always the first targeted by vandals. I find it painfully ironic that those illiterate bastards tag *YOU SUCH COCK* on posters trying to attract writers.

The Clover High club system is intense. There’s really nothing to do in this town, so students basically have no choice but to join after-school clubs for their own sanity.

## THE CLUBS:

**The Cheerleading Club:** Also known as the Future Trophy Wives and Soccer Moms Club. The cheerleaders travel around campus in a vicious pack, emotionally scarring innocent bystanders they encounter. Warning: They do everything as a team, including menstruate.

**The Athletes’ Club:** Jock central. They don’t just play sports and measure each other’s organs; they also practice character-building exercises like “Smell My Finger.”

**The Yearbook Club:** Freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors alike gather here and put together pictures and memorable quotes that totally rewrite history so the lies they tell their grandchildren will appear truthful.

**The Drama Club:** A place where boys can freely dress up and wear makeup and girls can spend years afterward wondering why those boys never loved them.

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**The BSU:** The Black Student Union is for our one black student. He may be alone, but the school has convinced him it's important to represent his community. (And by having a BSU, the school gets a major tax credit! Score!)

**The FBLA:** Thinking about becoming a business owner or entrepreneur? Well, then don't join the Future Business Leaders of America; that's not what it's for! This is a place to fight over who has the best cell phone and whose daddy makes the most money.

**The Clover High Choir:** It's where all the most talented singers at Clover High go to sing backup for the choir teacher's tone-deaf daughter.

**The Debate Team:** If you're fortunate enough to have been born knowing everything, join the debate team and argue with kids just like you. You can't correct an opinion, but these kids sure as hell will try.

**The Celibacy Club:** A coven of very unattractive girls who find it easier to "stay pure" and "save themselves" than admit that no one wants to sleep with them.

**The FFA:** The Future Farmers of America. I don't have a joke for this one, this shit is real!

**The Clover High Band:** Do you like playing instruments? Then join band so you can play for an unappreciative choir singing backup for the choir teacher's tone-deaf daughter.

**Detention:** I'm not sure it's considered a club, but they have by far the most devoted members.

And of course:

**The Writers' Club:** A place students can express their thoughts and creativity through the power of words. But ask anyone else and they'll tell you it's worse than detention and we apparently "SUCH COCK."

I sat at a desk in the journalism classroom after school today for forty-five minutes staring at the door. I knew today would be the day; the day when someone finally saw one of my posters and would be compelled to join the Writers' Club.

The door handle started to move and I sat up in my seat. I felt like an astronaut finally discovering life on another planet. The door swung open.

"Hi, Malerie," I said, a little disappointed. In the three years I've run the club, Malerie has been the only other member. The club was even *her* second choice; she only joined when she got kicked out of the BSU.

"I wrote another short story for the *Chronicle*," she said. "And this one I think you're gonna like!"

“Great. Let’s hear it,” I said, bracing myself for whatever I was about to hear.

Malerie cleared her throat and began to read from her notebook. ““Call me Ishmael. Some years ago, never mind how precisely—””

“Malerie,” I cut her off. “Did you actually write this?”

“No,” she said, and slumped—well, slumped more than usual. “I’m a complete disappointment.”

“Don’t be so hard on yourself,” I told her. “Writing takes time. Using your own words would help too.”

“But I can’t think of any ideas myself. I have zero imagination. All God blessed me with was this flawless complexion and really good table tennis skills.” She lowered her head and looked at me helplessly. “Carson, how do you do it?”

I opened my mouth to speak but nothing came out. The question had caught me off guard; no one had ever asked that before. What was my process exactly? Where did it all come from?

“Don’t try to find the ideas, let the ideas find you,” I said, unsure if I even knew what I was talking about. “It’s one of the most amazing experiences, finding something to write about, or realizing something for the first time. It comes out of nowhere and just hits you. Then it’s all you can think about and it goes through your body and tries to escape and be expressed in any way possible....It’s a lot like...like...”

“Lightning?” Malerie asked me.

“Yeah,” I said. “Like lightning.”

I let it sink in for both of us. Even *I* was surprised by my answer. It may have been the first time I’ve ever talked about writing in the Writers’ Club. Usually our meetings are spent talking about schemes to recruit new members or looking up the species of insects Malerie finds on the school bus. I’ve always spent so much time trying to inspire others to write I had forgotten what inspired me.

“Don’t worry, you’ll find something to write about someday,” I told Malerie, and she smiled at me.

Malerie has really grown on me over the years. Her wheels may not spin as fast as those of the average car, but at least she has a pulse. She may be the closest thing to a sidekick I’ll ever have.

Do you ever find yourself in those *dear God in heaven how did I get here* situations? The kind that make you think *please kill me now death couldn't be any worse than this* type of thoughts? Me too.

Twice a week for an hour after school I have to suffer through a student council meeting. While the other members of the council have all been “elected” to their positions, being the editor of the school newspaper entitles me to join in on the discussions.

They've tried to get rid of me countless times, and even though I would rather be in the Gaza Strip with a target strapped to my back, I fight them every time. It's called “freedom of the press”; look it up. Besides, if I don't sit in on those meetings I never know what's going on, and I've got to write my expository editorials on *somebody*.

What's the nicest way I can describe the student council members? They're the kind of people who come from good families, have never had to deal with any major problems, and will most likely never have to *work* for anything in their lives. That's strike one against them. The fact that they're also ornery, uppity half-wits is strike two.

One of them stuck a tampon on my back last week after the meeting. I walked around after school for hours and no one told me it was there. I'm still not certain who did it.

The student council is led by student body president Claire Mathews. She's pretty, popular, petite, a proud cheerleader, and I suspect she also shits cupcakes.

Her parents are queen-bee-breeding machines. Every Clover High class since 2007 has had to deal with the wrath of a Mathews girl.

Claire is the youngest of five (and hopefully the last). There's a rumor she had a younger sister, but she wasn't born as perfect as the previous girls, so they axed her like a runt, à la *Charlotte's Web*. I started this rumor.

Also on the student council is vice president and yearbook editor Remy Baker. Not that I would ever admit to having an intellectual equal at school, but Remy is probably the person closest to it. She's smart, ambitious, and driven (sound familiar?). The difference is, Remy drank the high school Kool-Aid. So naturally, we clash like two horny goats fighting over a mate.

She uses her power for evil. Sophomore year, Remy “forgot” to put me in the yearbook. How the hell does someone “forget” to put a student in the yearbook?! She was just mad because my History Day project beat hers.

Physically, Remy stopped growing around the fourth grade. I'm not saying she's a hobbit—I'm above name-calling. I'm just saying if someone was missing in Middle Earth she'd fit the description.

Justin Walker is the sports commissioner and also the head of the Athletes' Club. He's so dumb if you handed him a box of rocks he'd probably stick one in the ground and say he planted a mountain. His older brother Colin Walker, who graduated when we were freshmen, is now the football coach, and Justin sort of lives in his shadow...if he's not chasing it.

I should also mention that Claire and Justin are dating. Yup, the head cheerleader and the head jock are *together*! Don't freak out, I know it's shocking! Totally not cliché at all! I'm sure it's true love.

The other student council members are Scott Thomas, the performing arts commissioner and president of the Drama Club, and Nicholas Forbes, the Student Council treasurer and president of the

FBLA.

Scott Thomas has hated me since I reviewed him in *Les Misérables*. I said his performance was “shallow and unrealistic,” because it *was*. I’m sorry, low-budget production or not, Jean Valjean would not have highlights or sneak onstage to sing the backgrounds to “I Dreamed a Dream.” It was crap and I didn’t sugarcoat the truth, so he can suck it.

Nicholas Forbes is the oldest son of the richest man in Clover. His family owns pretty much everything in town: the strip malls, the farmland, and I think a few of the citizens. His parents gave him an Escalade at his sixteenth birthday party, and although I wasn’t invited, I heard there were iPods in the gift bags.

I doubt their real last name is even Forbes. I think they had that legally changed to piss everyone off. We get it, you guys hemorrhage silver dollars.

Just to review, the student council consists of Claire Mathews (queen-bee bitch), Remy Baker (yearbook twat), Justin Walker (shit-for-brains jock), Scott Thomas (dramatic prick), and Nicholas Forbes (rich mo’fo). There may be a test and/or murder trial later and I just want you to have the facts straight.

“I have some really great news!” Claire began today’s meeting. “I’m happy to report there will be enough trucks and trailers for all the clubs to have floats at homecoming.”

They all gave theatrical sighs of relief. I twirled my finger.

I have a special notebook for student council meetings. It mostly has illustrations of various torture and execution mechanisms I daydream about experiencing rather than listening to Claire’s biweekly power trips. This week I’ve been working on a guillotine/boiling water/electric chair combo.

“As excited as we all are for homecoming, we need to choose a theme for the Sadie Hawkins dance—it’ll be here sooner than we think,” she informed us. “Any ideas?”

“Fun Under the Sun!” Remy pitched proudly.

“That screams skin cancer to me,” I said.

“It would be fun,” Remy said.

“It’s an excuse to wear flip-flops and bikinis to school,” I added.

They began shifting in their seats.

“What about One Night in Paris,” Nicholas suggested. “My family and I went over the summer and it was beautiful!”

“Ab fab idea!” Scott chirped.

“That’s great!” Remy said.

They all nodded in agreement.

“If we go all out it might run us over budget,” Claire said. “Nicholas, do you think your dad can cover it?”

“He’s never turned us down before!” Nicholas said with a sleazy smile.

I mentally vomited and then said, “One Night in Paris? Like the *sex tape*? Come on.”

The shit-wads all slumped in their seats. But come on, seriously? One Night in Paris? Were they out of their minds?

“Okay, fine, let’s go with something a little more generic like Under the Sea,” Claire added to the possibilities. “It was the theme of my parents’ school dance.”

“Well, if you aren’t going for *originality*,” I commented.

“We aren’t!” Remy said.

“Great,” I said. “Everyone can bring their *crabs*.”

The shit-wads all became incredibly irritated with me. I don’t know why they always get so bent

out of shape—they're lucky I insult their ideas before another school does.

"I hate you more than I hate the Holocaust!" Remy fired at me.

"Bite me, hobbit," I fired back. (Guess I'm not above name-calling.)

"We don't have to listen to him; he's just here because he's the editor of that stupid paper," Remy told the others.

"Dude, why do you care?" Justin asked me. "It's not like you go to them anyway."

"Because they're stupid!" I said.

"Fine, then you choose a theme, Carson!" Claire challenged me.

All the shit-wads turned and looked at me with menacing glares. Scott even snapped a formation in my direction.

"Okay," I said, and thought about it, but not too hard, as any idea I pulled out of my ass was going to be better than their asinine recommendations. "You all like TV, right? Why not do Famous Television Couples? People could be Fred and Wilma, Mulder and Scully, or Lucy and Ricky..."

They glanced at each other coyly. They knew my idea was the best, and it *sucked* for them.

"Heidi and Spencer!" Scott shouted excitedly.

"What?!" I said. "No...no, that's not what I meant—"

"Jon and Kate!" Remy said.

"Snooki and the Situation!" Justin said, and pulled up his shirt to show off his abs.

"Are you serious?!" I said. "That's reality television—that's ridiculous!"

But the damage was done. Tomorrow morning, they'll be announcing the theme for the 2012 Clover High Sadie Hawkins dance: Famous Reality TV Couples. And I am totally to blame for it.

Bastardizing my brilliant idea is strike three! I officially hate them.

I realize I hate student council meetings because they make me doubt myself: If I can't get *them* to listen to me, what makes me think someday I can get the world to? But then I convince myself that is a perfect example of how high school exists in a dimension of its own and does not reflect the real world.

I looked down at my notebook and added spikes to my execution/torture device before the meeting was over. It was soothing.

I spent quite a bit of time with Grandma after school today, more than I normally do. Usually I just sit with her for an hour or two and get my homework done while she talks nonsense to herself.

“And that’s why I’m not voting for Nixon,” she’s declared a couple of times. “That man is so crooked he has to screw on his boots in the morning! Mark my words!”

But for whatever reason, today she said something that really struck something in me.

It started off like any daily visit. I drove to the Clover Assisted Living Home right after school; thankfully I made it out of the student parking lot alive. I waved at Kathy, the home’s receptionist, as I walked past the front desk and down the hall to Grandma’s room. (Kathy has never waved back. I’ve never even seen her blink. She just stares at the front door all day long. I’m thinking her title of “employee” may change to that of “patient” very soon.)

“Hi, Grandma,” I said when I walked through the door. She was sitting on her bed, knitting a creation of some kind.

“Who are you?” she asked me with big eyes. Hearing this hurts every time.

“It’s Carson,” I always say back to her. “Your grandson.”

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “My grandson’s just a little boy.”

“I got bigger,” I said with a shrug.

For a split second I could have sworn she recognized me, but I may have just been hopeful. She got out of her bed and headed out the door.

“I’ll be right back,” she said.

A few minutes passed and I sat down and started my homework. I could hear her talking to one of the nurses outside.

“I need to use the oven,” she said.

“You can’t use the oven,” the nurse said.

“But I have a guest—he might be hungry,” Grandma insisted.

A couple more minutes later Grandma returned with a paper plate full of Oreos.

“Here we are, fresh from the oven,” she said, smiling, and handed me the plate.

I couldn’t help but grin. “Thank you.” I reached into my bag and handed her last week’s *Chronicle*. “I brought you the latest edition of the *Clover High Chronicle*.”

She took it and glanced down at it for only a second and then back at me.

“My article is called ‘Small-Town Sex Scandal,’” I said. “It’s just like ‘Janitorial Genocide,’ the other article you liked so much—”

“Do you know my grandson?” she asked me.

She’s asked me this a million times, but I don’t think you can ever get used to a family member asking you who you are.

“I think so,” I said.

“I miss him,” Grandma said, and her eyes became sad. “He never comes to visit me anymore. He used to write me stories.” Her face began to light up again.

“Did he?” I asked.

“I remember the first story he ever wrote me,” she said with a big smile. “‘Once upon a time, there

was a boy.” She let out a long chuckle.

“I remember too,” I said. ~~As weird as this feels to say, I was really happy the memory had survived the crash.~~

“I told him it could use a little development, so the next day he brought me another story,” she said. “‘*Once upon a time, there was a boy who wanted to fly.*’”

I had completely forgotten about that.

“I’m worried about my grandson,” Grandma said, and her face became sad again. “He’s changed over the years. I think his parents are about to divorce, you see. He used to be so happy, but now he walks around with so much negative energy. Sometimes a personal rain cloud can be deadly, you know.”

She walked to the window, nodding her head, and looked at the garden outside. Even with Alzheimer’s, she still had poignant things to say. She looked back at me, about to add something else to her point, but I could tell it was lost when she made eye contact with me.

“Do you know my grandson?” she asked me again.

“I thought so,” I said.

Grandma shrugged and went back to her knitting.

I finished my homework but stayed until it got dark; I didn’t want to leave her. It’s a rarity to actually see *Grandma* when I visit Grandma, so I wanted to soak up the visit for all it was worth.

She eventually fell asleep and I decided it was time for me to go, but I thought about what she had said the entire way home. I know I’m bitter and a little jaded, and mildly enjoy it, but am I a sad person? Am I happy?

I plan on being happy in the future for sure, but it isn’t here yet. So what does that make me, exactly? I’ve never been someone who could live in and analyze the present *moment*.

I got home at about a quarter to ten. There were fresh prescription bottles from the pharmacy on the kitchen counter, so I was happy to see Mom had made it outside, even if she was lured by drugs. She was sitting on the back patio, looking up at the stars, drunker than a skunk.

“Where have you been?” she said.

“Munich,” I said.

She rolled her eyes. “Some people get to go home to wonderful fiancées and sonograms, and I get a smart-ass kid I never even wanted in the first place.”

This may seem like an incredibly harsh thing for her to say to me, but I’m used to my mother’s drunken laments. I’m guessing she had seen someone pregnant at the pharmacy and it had sent her over the edge. Anything that reminds her of my dad is a sore subject.

“I was unwanted, huh?” I said.

“Never have a kid to save a marriage—it doesn’t work,” she went on. “I could have been something! I could have been a *pharmacist*! But I settled for settling down because I thought that’s what I wanted, because that’s what I thought *he* wanted.”

“It’s never too late to change your life, Mother,” I said to her.

“It was too late years ago,” she said—or slurred, rather. “You’re lucky, Carson. You’re young and naïve. All those dreams you have about getting out of this town and becoming something still seem reachable. You should hold on to that for as long as you can.”

And after she said that, her eyes became watery.

“Good night, Mother,” I said, and went back into the house. I was afraid if I listened to her grumble any more I might believe her.

I guess Grandma’s not the only person in my life who talks nonsense. Luckily for me I’ve learned



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