

TEEN ANGST? NAAAHH . . .

Ned Vizzini

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CHILDREN'S BOOKS

Be More Chill

It's Kind of a Funny Story

TEEN ANGST? NAAAHH . . .

A Quasi-Autobiography by
Ned Vizzini

DELACORTE PRESS

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To Margaret, for helping raise me.

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INTRODUCTION

I started writing this book because of my backpack. I took a bright teal, super-dork backpack to high school, a backpack my mother had ordered years earlier from L.L. Bean. It worked so great throughout junior high that I figured it had a year or two left in it.

My backpack got some looks. People would stare at it, wondering, “What kind of idiot wears an accessory like that?” Then they would see me. “Oh.”

One day, I was going down one of my high school’s escalators.* I was tired. I took off my backpack and put it next to me on an escalator step. For whatever reason, the backpack flipped over and started rolling down the escalator like a Slinky.

Many steps below stood a girl. She had one hand to her face, as if she were on a cell phone, but she had no actual cell phone. We were the only people on the escalator. The backpack kept tumbling (I watched it sort of helplessly) and whapped her in the back of the calves.

The girl stopped talking on her fake cell phone and turned to look at me. She had to take that look: I could’ve been a cute guy who’d flung my backpack at her to break the ice. She sized me up, cocked her head, and kicked my backpack as hard as she could the rest of the way down the escalator.

When I reached the bottom, I picked up my backpack and thought about the incident for the rest of the day. On the subway ride home, I pulled out a wrinkled piece of paper and wrote about the cellphone girl and my stupid bag. I wrote angrily; I used a lot of curse words. Afterward, I felt a lot better, and when I read my words the next day, I thought they were pretty good.

So I went from writing profanity-ridden rants to slightly less profanity-ridden essays. I was able to get some of them published in a local newspaper, *New York Press*. Soon I was writing on a regular basis, taking my boring, scary, embarrassing high school moments and turning them into something people could read about. It was a real comfort—if something weird or horrible happened to me, I’d write about it, and then somehow I’d be in control. A little.

A few years later, I got a piece published in *The New York Times Magazine*. That got me in touch with Free Spirit Publishing, who gave me this book contract, which I signed, and somehow I’m here, writing this introduction after polishing most of what I wrote in high school and organizing it chronologically.

I threw out that backpack when I was a junior and replaced it with a bag from the army surplus store.

I never did learn the name of the girl.

Ned Vizzini

Brooklyn, New York*

*My school had seven sets of escalators. It was a high school specializing in math and science, so I guess they figured we deserved escalators.

*If you want to write to me about my book, you can reach me at www.nedvizzini.com.

JUNIOR HIGH

NINTENDO SAVED ME

Yesterday, on a strange, sudden urge, I hooked up my old Nintendo.* Not the Super NES. The original, spawn-of-the-eighties, from-Japan-with-love, eight-bit Nintendo Entertainment System. It had been lying in a closet for years and was dusty and tough to get working. But when I plugged it in and hit that power button, I was back to being nine years old on the day we bought it.

We went on a Saturday morning after Christmas—my parents always waited for the January sales. Around 8:00 A.M., Dad loaded my six-year-old brother Daniel and me into our van. Our family never had a car, always a van, with two backseats so Daniel and I could space out and not kill each other.

Dad was convinced that Nintendos would be cheaper in New Jersey. He thought everything was cheaper and better in New Jersey, probably because he was born there, in Trenton, which he called “God’s Country.” We drove to Child World, one of those industrial-sized Toys ‘R’ Us look-alikes—silent and frigid as a hospital. We headed to the electronics aisle, pulled a Nintendo off the shelf, paid the pimply cashier one hundred dollars (exactly what we would have paid in Manhattan), and drove back to Brooklyn.*

We triumphantly stomped through the front door, shaking snow off our boots. Mom was in the kitchen having breakfast with my sister, Nora. Nora was almost three. She sat on Mom’s lap, drank juice from a cup, and scribbled all over *The New York Times* while Mom did the crossword puzzle. Mom loves the *Times* crossword puzzles, especially the ones on Saturdays, which are always hardest.** Whenever she finishes one, she writes, “100% Yea Mom” in the margins. It’s her thing.

“Daddy’s home!” Nora said, jumping out of Mom’s lap and hugging Dad’s legs. “What is it?” she asked, eagerly looking at the Nintendo box. I held it over my head so she couldn’t touch it.

“Jim?” Mom asked from the kitchen, not looking up from her crossword. “You might know this. Ah, Russian river ...”

“Ob? Volga?”

“Volga looks good.” Mom penciled in the word. (Later on, when she got even better at crosswords, she’d do them in pen.) “It might not be right, though ... we’ll see. Nora, come back here and finish your juice!”

But now Nora was intrigued. She wanted to know what was in that shiny box. I carried the Nintendo to the living room, sat on the floor, and ravenously tore off all the packaging. Daniel helped. Nora tried to help, but we pushed her away, so she sat on the couch with her stuffed animals.*

Even before she was two, my sister had invented an entire universe of stuffed animals. There were dozens—penguins, dolphins, rabbits—and they all had names that ended in *e*: Pinky, Yellowy, Mazie, Popsy. They sat on the couch in silent witness as Dad came in, took off his shoes, and announced that he would now assemble the Nintendo.

This required his full concentration, so he told Daniel and me to go play. Hopeful and extremely obedient, for once, we sat on the couch with Nora as Dad connected wires. Within ten minutes, he had the thing working. Dad was a wizard back then.

“I got first game!” Daniel and I yelled simultaneously. I got it, of course. I was the oldest and the oldest brothers get everything—that’s why we’re racked with guilt. For half an hour Daniel watched, and then he started crying, which prompted a visit from Mom.

“What’s this machine for? To make you cry?!”

“No, Mom,” I moaned.

Daniel shrieked, “Mom, Ned won’t let me play! He won’t even let me have *one game!*”

“My goodness, Jim, *how* could you buy this? It’s like having another TV!” Mom threw up her hands.

“Well, Emma,” Dad said from his chair, “it keeps them quiet. They’ll sit and gape at it a day.”

Now Daniel was playing. That made me mad. I grabbed the controller; he grabbed it back. I hit him and accidentally toppled the Nintendo. It slid behind the TV.

“*Aaa!* Dad! Get it out! *Get it out!*” I screamed. “What if it’s broken?” I sobbed.

Dad pulled out the Nintendo and hit the switch. It worked.

“Don’t ever do that again,” I told Daniel.

“Don’t you *ever* tell your brother what to do!” Mom roared from the kitchen.

Nora scampered off the couch. “My stuffed animals don’t like fighting, and they’re having *tea party!*” She picked up Pinky, Whitey, Posey, and whoever and ran to her room.

“Okay, *shhh,*” Dad said to me, putting his hand on my shoulder. “Let’s not fight over the Nintendo. We don’t need to make Mom mad, and we don’t need to scare Nora, do we? Go on, just gape at that screen and be happy.”

So I did. For the next five years.

• • •

I first witnessed a Nintendo upstairs at my neighbor Todd’s apartment. Todd, a Cool Kid, was a couple of years older than me. He always got the good toys first. I was instantly awestruck by his Nintendo; like television, it had the power to make you *happy*. Todd could plunk down in front of it anytime, play for a few hours, and be giddy when he stopped. He told me, “Nintendo’s even better than TV, ’cause you can win.”

Todd was right. Nobody wins at television. If you waste your life watching it, you’ll end up on a nursing home couch, glued to a talk show, wondering, “What’s it all worth?” But if you waste your life playing video games, you can stand up at the end and yell, “Yes! 500,000 points in Tetris!”* Video games give you purpose.

And I was a smart, purposeful kid. When adults asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up, I said, “A cartographer or a civil engineer.” Those professions were specific enough to sound smart but vague enough to conceal my real career goal: playing video games.

From ages nine to fourteen, Nintendo was my sole ambition, my prime motivation, and my best friend. I adopted a grueling schedule:

7:30—Wake up and sneak in a game before school.

8:15–3:00—Trudge through school, mumbling, “Boring, boring, boring” while walking the halls.*

3:20—Run home, place my bony butt on the living room floor, and indulge for a few

hours.

6:30—Mom gets home. Do my homework, rewarding each finished assignment with a few games.

9:30—Climb into bed and discuss game strategy with Daniel. Fall asleep.

I even dreamed Nintendo. Sometimes I was Mega Man, clad in a blue jumpsuit, with a spherical helmet and a gun for a right arm. Other times, I was in Final Fantasy, the video role-playing game, slaying and getting slain by ogres. I was never Mario: Rebecca, the prettiest girl in my class, had told me that Mario was “stubby,” and I learned early on that this was a bad thing.

Mario, of course, was the short, fat Italian guy who starred in countless Nintendo games. His mission was always to save The Princess, a blond girl with a pink dress and large breasts. She looked kind of like Rebecca. In fourth grade, I picked The Princess as “the girl I would go on a date with if I absolutely had to ’cause everyone else in the world was dead.” I spent hundreds of hours saving The Princess. All that time, head aching, palms sweating, but falling asleep—I’m a little ashamed of it now.

But only a little. You see, childhood sucks. I’m young enough to remember that. Starting in first grade, there’s pressure from all sides: to be smart, to make friends, to get teachers to like you. Kids develop different ways of coping with that pressure. Some find solace in books. Some play-act or play large and expensive musical instruments.* Others draw, or sing, or do math. Some watch TV or sit and stare. I coped with childhood by playing Nintendo.

Now, it’s been a few years since I’ve curled up with a jumbo toy catalog and drooled over the video games. When Nintendo 64 (the big next-generation system) was released, I didn’t even care. Still, I have this future scene all worked out: me, age forty-plus, fat,* and balding, waiting at a bus stop or some other nondescript place. I start daydreaming and humming, and soon I’m whistling the theme to Super Mario Brothers. And the guy next to me, a lanky guy with a beard—he whistles, too.

*I had to do that whole Nintendo player’s ritual: I blew in the machine until I hyperventilated. I snapped in the game cartridges. I even cleaned the games with Q-tips and alcohol. It took an hour to finish the job.

*I lived in an apartment building in Brooklyn from ages seven to eighteen. It was a nice place, but in those eleven years, our family demolished everything: the walls had holes, the beds fell apart, and an electric pencil sharpener in the kitchen somehow became controlled by a dimmer switch in the hall.

**Early in the week, the *Times* crossword puzzles are easy, probably because the editors figure that no one wants to strain themselves on a Monday morning. By Saturday, however, those things are brutal. I can’t do one-twentieth of one.

*As she got older, Nora became extremely protective of her stuffed animals. If you sat on one, she’d make you go to “jail,” which meant you had to stand in a corner while she counted to thirty.

*Invented by Alexey Pajitnov, Tetris remains the best-loved video game of all time. It’s a puzzle game; you arrange falling blocks to score points. Dad loves it as much as Mom loves crosswords. There’s actually a whole interesting story behind the game, involving a licensing rip-off and the Soviet government. To learn more, check out <http://atarihq.com/tsr/special/tetrishist.html>.

*I was bored with school from third grade on. What I heard in class was just too far behind what Dad taught me in our one-on-one tutoring sessions. He used to sit me down at the dining room table every evening: “Tonight, son, we’re going to learn

about atoms.... ”

*I played saxophone for three years, until I left the thing on the subway. I played piano for a year, until I realized I hated it. I've played bass guitar for nine years—and counting—because it looks cool.

*I'm skinny now, but over 50 percent of American men end up overweight, so I'll probably be fat later on.

THE TEST

There's a window of time, after you've shed the pathetic dreams of childhood but before the hormones kick in, when you really can do anything. The summer I was thirteen, I wasn't worried about sex or status or pimples. I was worried about the Specialized Science High School Admissions Test.

The test (SSHSAT for short) is a New York City* phenomenon. Here's how it works: the NYC public school system has three "special" high schools for mathematically gifted students—Brooklyn Tech, Bronx Science, and, in Manhattan, Stuyvesant. Parents and students alike covet admission to these schools, because they're free and they don't suck. To separate the gifted kids from the not-so-gifted, the school system issues the SSHSAT, a sort of mini SAT multiple-choice test, scored from 200 to 800. Each school has a different cutoff grade. If you score above the cutoff, you're in. Since Stuyvesant always has the highest cutoff, it's the most desirable school. So the thousands of kids who take the SSHSAT each year call it "The Stuy Test."

Anyway, in late May of seventh grade, my class gathered in the math room to hear an announcement from our principal, Mary. (It was a small private school. We called our teachers and administrators by their first names.)

"Now, everybody," Mary addressed us. I was slouched at a table chewing a pencil; I liked the way it tasted. "Your seventh grade is almost over. It's time to start thinking about eighth grade. And when you think about eighth grade, you have to think about high school."

High school. Geez. I chewed vigorously. I never thought I'd get to high school, but now that it was in sight, I started planning. I wanted to conquer high school the way I had conquered elementary school. I wanted to be the smartest student and get the highest grade because I needed something to feel good about.

Mary continued. "High school is an important step in your life. You'll all be going to different schools, schools that reflect your interests."

I chewed harder, flattening the eraser. Interests, whatever—I wanted to go to the best school.

"Getting into these schools is a complicated process. What you have to do over the summer is think about where you'd like to go, why you'd like to go there, and how you can get yourself admitted. Yes, Josh?"

The questions began. Every kid had some request: where should I go if I like acting? or movies? law? I had only one question. After class, I caught up with Mary in the hall.

"Mary, do you think I should take the Stuy Test?" I'd taken standardized tests before, and they'd all been easy. I always broke the ninety-eighth percentile; I never had to study. I wanted to know if the Stuy Test would be any different.

"Sure, Ned," she said. "Buy a book on it. Take a look at it over the summer."

I wrote on a piece of loose-leaf, "Buy Stuy book."

"Ned," Mary leaned in close. "You don't need a list, and you don't need to worry. You'll do fine."

Those words weren't a comfort—they were a challenge. I thought I could do fine; Mary thought I could do fine; I'd damn well better do fine.

So began a summer singularly devoted to getting into Stuyvesant. It started with the book. That evening, I trotted into the living room and told my parents I needed it.

“The Stuy Test? Neddy, you’ll do just fine. You don’t need a book,” Mom said.

“He wants a book, I’ll get him a book,” said Dad.

The following weekend, he took me to a mega-bookstore and we headed for the test-prep section. There it was, sitting low on a rotating display case, light gray with blue lettering: *Preparing for the SSHSAT: 8 Practice Exams Included!*

“That the one?” Dad asked.

“Yup.” I smiled, stowed the book under my prepubescent armpit, and walked to the cashier past some blurry-eyed high school kids scanning SAT books. “That’s me in four years,” I thought.

I went home and cracked open the book, eager to start on the problems. I read the first one: “A circle with diameter 4 has an area of ? Use $\pi = 3.14$.” I reread it. Was this some kind of joke? I hadn’t *done* pi before. I ran to show Mom.

“Mom! Mom! How do you do this?”

My ears were hot. My stomach was knotted around my throat.

“Calm down, Ned, calm down.”

She sat me down at the dining room table. “Ned, I saw this coming. Ever since you heard about this test, you have been *too worried*. Understand? You are *not allowed* to obsess about this test. Understand?”

“Yeah.”

But it was too late. I was already obsessed. The test had offended me by giving me questions I couldn’t answer. I intended to kill it.

“Now, as for this problem, it’s just pi. Do you want me to show you how pi works?”

I nodded. She showed. I’m a fast learner.

I got some index cards and wrote on them in clear seventh-grade print: “Area = πr^2 ” and “Circumference = $2\pi r$.” I taped the cards to the wall near my bed. When I fell asleep that night, the cards were the last things I saw.

The second day, I worked on vocabulary. *Abject* and *knoll* were words I didn’t know, so I dug up a book called *The Words You Should Know: 1,200 Essential Words Every Educated Person Should Be Able to Use and Define* and I started with A. I worked through *abnegate*, *abrogate*, *abstruse*, *amortize*. I put them on cards, too. I closed my bedroom door. Family was no ancillary to the test.

On the third day, I started making tables. Fractions and decimals. I made two little columns. One read from $\frac{1}{2}$ to $\frac{1}{20}$; the other, .5 to .05. For each fraction, including the weird ones like $\frac{1}{17}$, I wrote the appropriate decimal. I hand-calculated everything in the warm air of my room.

It was mind-numbing work, but that was the point. Studying is mind-numbing. There’s information on paper, and you shove it into your head. It doesn’t involve people, or feeling good, or getting others to like you. As I continued to prepare for the Stuy Test, afternoon in, afternoon out, I realized that despite the propaganda, I *liked* studying. I didn’t care about what TV told me, and I didn’t care what my friends thought—studying was *fun*.

When I went to summer camp,* I took the book. I spent four weeks with wanna-be tee-ball rebels. I was a rebel, too, participating in routine camp activities but in the back of my mind

thinking, " $1/13 = 0.0769$." At night, if I wasn't too tired, I would turn on my flashlight and quietly test myself. Then I'd slip the book under my pillow, so the information would diffuse into my head overnight.

I worked on triangles, memorizing formulas for base and height. I thought, "Parallelogram, trapezoid, rhombus, rectangle." I put myself far above my campmates, deciding smugly that I wasn't "confused" or "different." I didn't listen to loud music or salivate over girls. I had a test to study for. I was focused on a single, attainable goal.

I left camp with some friends and some enemies, and carried the test-prep book home to the city. These were the worst two weeks of the summer, the real hot, soggy ones in late July. By now, I was up to the *Ds* in *The Words You Should Know*. *Deign, demagogue, dereliction, discomfit*. I started writing a little book that I never finished, offering advice for students taking the Stuy Test.* Flash cards littered the house.

And all the time, I was getting smarter. I knew pi; I knew graphs. I knew mean, median, and mode. I knew $1/12 = .0833$. I knew the vocabulary through *E*. There is a movie called *Stand and Deliver* where an overachieving teacher shows underprivileged high school students calculus in six months. Whenever those students had to get some work done, you'd see clips of them improving, as pop music played in the background. My summer was like *Stand and Deliver* without the pop music.

I took the book with me to Lake George, in upstate New York, on our family vacation. A flabby** old woman was reading on the beach. The presence of me with a test book annoyed her. She glowered and said, "Whaddaya studying for? This is a beach! Enjoy yourself!"

I grinned. The information was flowing from the paper to my head. Life had never seemed so simple or so right.

When that test finally rolled around, it wasn't even an issue. I took it and got into Stuy. It was like building a sand castle—the work was the fun part; the end result was sort of a letdown. As a force of habit, I continued reading *The Words You Should Know* in my freshman year, eventually getting to *S*. I studied very hard throughout my four years at Stuy, but I never approached the superhuman weirdness of that summer.

*New York City has five boroughs: Brooklyn, The Bronx, Manhattan, Queens, and Staten Island. Manhattan is the New York of the movies, Queens is where the airports are, Staten Island is at the other end of the ferry, The Bronx has Yankee Stadium, and Brooklyn is where I live. Hope that helps.

*This was the same camp that's detailed on [this page](#)–[this page](#).

*Also during this time, I wrote a very bad short story about an old man named Arnold Adams, who didn't need women, a family or anything, and lives on his porch shooting at passing cars. It's around somewhere.

**Don't tell me you don't know what *flabby* means. It's that look old people get when their neck hangs down, and their arms hang down, and they appear to be melting in their own skin.

HIGHWAY TO HELL

My family takes cheap vacations. Any trip that involves an airplane, we avoid—too much money. Any trip that involves a resort, we shun—too many people. Disney World, Busch Gardens, camping, Europe? We'd never consider them. What we do for vacations is pile in our van and drive to weird East Coast destinations, like Binghamton, New York, hometown of *The Twilight Zone* creator Rod Serling. (Seriously. I've been in the Rod Serling *museum*.)

On one of these jaunts, we ended up at the Allentown, Pennsylvania, county fair. We had meant to go to the Poconos, but Dad decided at the last minute that we needed some redneck culture, so we headed for "The Largest County Fair in Eastern P.A."

The place was full of suburban guys my age, traveling in groups, chatting up girls, and smoking cigarettes. I was being led around by Mom and Dad, with Daniel and Nora in tow. I tried walking fifty feet ahead of my family or trailing far behind them, but the suburban kids were onto me no matter what. They gave me dirty looks and snickered as I passed by.

"Hey, Ned?" Dad asked at a particularly low moment. "How would you like to see that?" I looked where he was pointing—a stadium marquee with red letters:

●
● 6 P.M. TONITE COME SEE THE WORLD'S ●
● LARGEST DEMOLITION DERBY!!! \$5 ●
● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ● ●

Destruction can really cheer up a thirteen-year-old. I wasn't sure what a demolition derby was, but it sounded violent and it would give me a chance to stop walking around with my parents. I told Dad, "Sure."

Here's how a derby works: some redneck with a car so screwed up that no one will buy it decides to have fun and compete for prize money. He pays about fifty bucks; his vehicle gets a paint job, and its engine is "modified" so it'll run for a few more hours. On derby day, he drives to a stadium where he slams into other cars until he totals them all, or just his own. When his is the last car running, he gets a big check.

We bought our tickets. "It's just like a baseball game," Mom announced, but she would soon learn.

We entered the stadium—a racetrack used for derbies every other week—through a Colosseum-like stone arch. We went to our seats in the very back of the stands, right in front of two young mothers holding toddlers. We were such tourists: Dad kept checking our tickets ("6Y, 6Y, where is 6Y?"), and Mom read off events from the county fair calendar ("Look, kids, tomorrow there's a pig judging!") as we sat down. I rolled my eyes.

"Why are you embarrassed?" Dad asked quietly. "Look around—do you really care what these people think of you?"

I did look around. The stadium was filled with burnt-out blondes, dirty drunks, and thirty-year-old guys with their mothers, but somehow, my family stuck out the most.

I tried to concentrate on the track below. In the middle, on a big concrete island, stood a podium and mike. A bald announcer came out and intoned, "Thank you, folks, for coming to our Saturday evening derby."

The crowd booed. The mothers in back of us booed loudest. Disgusting.

“Ah ... tonight,” the announcer continued, “we have something special for you. Our own Miss Kate Daugherty will sing our national anthem.” A tiny girl in a flowered dress minced up to the podium, planted her face too close to the mike, and in a cute but somehow terrible way croaked out “The Star-Spangled Banner.”

Without hesitation, the crowd hissed and jeered. Some people even threw soda cans and Styrofoam cups at Miss Daugherty. They didn’t hit her—they were too far back in the stands for that—but the girl looked ready to flee, and the announcer quickly hustled her offstage after her song. Mom and Nora were shocked. So was I, outwardly, but part of me sort of liked the booing, and when my parents weren’t looking, I did a little myself.*

As the announcer droned on about derby “rules,” the cars emerged. There were about thirty of them—two-doors, mostly, with a few four-doors and station wagons. Each car was painted with a number and a name like, “#92, The Avenger.” Everyone chose a car to root for. I liked an orange station wagon that had gigantic faces of Beavis and Butt-head** on its side.

The cars formed a circle, front ends facing in. The announcer began the countdown. “Five ... four ...”

Engines revved, kicking up smoke. “Three ... two ...”

Three rows down, a fat guy lifted his chin to the sky and shouted, “*Yeehah!*”

“One ... Go!” The screeching of cars and fans melded in a roar.

That Beavis and Butt-head station wagon was the first to die. While the other vehicles charged forward, it vroomed *backward*, smashing into the stadium wall. It was quickly sandwiched by a Pontiac. The Beavismobile’s driver jumped through his windshield—the glass had been removed “to prevent injury”—and yelled at his car as it burst into flames. The blaze licked the stadium wall, obscuring other cars, spreading a stench of burnt-rubber and smoke.

Derby clowns—like rodeo clowns, except with hoses—ran out and extinguished the fire. Everyone cheered. In another corner, two cars were going at it like mechanical elk: backing up, smashing into each other, backing up again. Each confrontation produced a metallic groan and thick black fumes. Six-year-old Nora was going through her environmental phase. She stood on her seat and yelled, “This is pollution!”

The crowd around us told her to sit the hell down. The mothers in back of us showed especially fiery looks.

Mom had had enough. “Jim,” she said. “This is not an appropriate place for children.” She grabbed Nora’s hand and left the stands. Dad said we’d see her when the derby was over.

By now it was clear: the two best cars were “Dickhead” and “Bonehead.” Bonehead was a big old black station wagon, covered with decals of skulls and crossbones. He was a brute; he smashed smaller cars easily. Dickhead—that’s what it said right on the side in huge brown letters—was a gray two-door with oversized wheels. The driver was wily; he didn’t do much smashing, but he avoided hits and outlasted his competitors. Dickhead and Bonehead seemed to have a pact that they wouldn’t clash until all the other cars were out.

There was so much to watch. Number Forty-one lost all its tires and was driving on hubcaps. Number Twenty-two leaked so much oil that it couldn’t move—no traction.* Suddenly the announcer called, “Halftime!” The still-mobile cars were driven to a pit-stop area, where the

drivers got out and daintily stretched. Nonmoving cars were towed away to become scrap metal cubes in a Pennsylvania junkyard.

Halftime began. Two derby clowns, dressed as firemen, drove into the stadium in a little red fire truck. They circled the racetrack, tooting a shrill horn and drenching each other with a hose. For a really big laugh, they stuck the hose between their legs and pretended to pee on the crowd. The patrons were not amused. They yelled, "What the hell is this? *Sesame Street*!" and threw empty food containers. The clowns flipped them off and continued their act.

As the clowns did their thing, I muttered something to Dad about how AC/DC* would have made a much better halftime act. This attracted the immediate attention of one of the mothers behind us.

"AC/DC! I love them!"

"Yeah?" I said, turning around. "So do I. I have all the CDs with Bon—"

"Highway to hell!" she began singing, rather well actually, bouncing her toddler on her knee. ** "Highway to *hell!* I love that song! Highway to hell! That's my favorite!"

"You know what would be really cool?" Daniel chimed in. I smiled. My little brother looked like a smaller version of me, and he tended to come up with warped ideas like me as well. "It would be really cool if AC/DC was playing on little harnesses, like, flying over the derby as the cars crashed into each other."

"Wow," one of the mothers said. The other one was still bouncing her child and singing. "That is a really, *really* cool idea."

"Not exactly," I said, challenging my brother. "How are you going to suspend the drummer over a demolition derby?"

"They could suspend the drums, too!"

"Or they could use electronic drums." This from my dad.

"It wouldn't be the same," the singing mother said. "Highway to hell! Dun, dun! It would be a lot better than these clowns, y'know?"

The second half of the derby was the same as the first but drunker—more rowdy cheering, more mangled autos. Four cars remained. Number Twenty-three got blind-sided and whipped around, slamming into Number Sixteen. Sixteen revved his engine too fast, and a piece of tire ripped off and flew across the stadium.

Then, finally, Dickhead and Bonehead faced off. I decided to root for Dickhead—the underdog, the sly trickster, constantly running from danger. Except he didn't always run successfully. Bonehead gave him a few good hits, tore off his bumpers, and crumpled up his hood like a mountain range.

Front end skewed, engine dragging, parts trailing, Dickhead gave one last gasp as his engine fell out. By then, it was no longer even a car—just a heap of metal with three wheels. The announcer thundered, "We *haaaave* a champion!"

A dinky recorded version of the national anthem played over the loudspeakers. The clown rushed out and presented Bonehead's driver with a nine-hundred-dollar check and a medal. He gave the audience a grimy smile.

The two mothers walked with us out of the stadium, back through that stone archway, rehashing the details of our AC/DC Demolition Derby World Tour.

Daniel: "You could have the whole band playing on a see-through net, like, above the derby."

Mother #1: "I don't think you can stand up or play drums on a net."

Me: "Forget about the drums. We already said electronic drums."

Dad: "I hate electronic drums."

Me: "Who cares?"

We found Mom and Nora, and on our way out of the county fair, I bought a T-shirt that read "35th Annual Destructo-rama Derby." The suburban kids eyed it jealously as I walked behind my family.

*Miss Daugherty was much younger than me, and she was doing something better than I ever could do it—that's why I was booed. Even in junior high I was hypercompetitive, and I loved it when other people failed. Sorry.

**Beavis and Butt-head were the animated stars of the *Beavis and Butt-head* television show, one of humankind's most accomplished satires. They made fun of teenage television-addicted wasteoid culture by analyzing music videos and setting things on fire.

*A car was officially out of the derby if it didn't move for fifteen seconds. When that time had elapsed, the announcer would pipe up from his booth, "Number Sixty-four, turn off your engine. Don't even try to move. It's *aaaall* over."

*An Australian rock band. What I love most about them is that after their first singer, Bon Scott, met his "death misadventure" (aka alcohol-related stuff—but seriously, that's on his death certificate), they found another singer who sounded *just* like him and went on to play for three decades and counting.

**AC/DC's best song.

ARE WE ALTERNATIVE NOW?

When I was thirteen, I went to my friend Ike's house and formed a band called Wormwhole. I provided percussion (I banged some drumsticks together) and Ike, who thought up the name, played acoustic guitar.

A few things about Ike: First, he's a cool guy, one of my best friends, and I'm privileged to know him. Second, he's a big, buff Mayan dude—he was born in Central America, where, I learned, the Mayans were conquered by the Spanish in 1519,* but he *swears* he has full-on Mayan warrior blood in him. That probably accounts for his workout schedule: Ike's room is a mini gym full of punching bags, weights, and rowing machines, and he constantly uses them. His biceps are as thick as my neck.

Ike is also a vampire enthusiast. He owns a huge collection of vampire books; he has dark robes, teeth, and vampire figurines strewn all over his room. He once told me he really *was* a vampire—he claimed he'd been abducted as a baby and taught "the ways of the night" in Costa Rica.

To complement his vampire fixation, Ike has a large collection of knives, which he buys from catalogs and keeps in his "Weapons Locker." He also collects more exotic weapons: *bolas*, *sai*, and *nun-chucks*.* I started hanging out with him because he was just too weird to pass up. But as I came to know him, I discovered a genuinely kind person with a twisted sense of humor. We've had some fun times.

Once, in eighth grade, Ike and I cut school to protest something called Take Our Daughters to Work Day. We were irked—how come the girls got to visit their parents at work while we toiled over algebra? We made our own signs (mine: "Stop Reverse Sexism!" Ike's: "Help! Un Oppressing Me!") and walked down to Seventh Avenue—the main street of our neighborhood, Park Slope.**

We positioned ourselves in front of a coffee shop and paced in circles, yelling, "Equal rights now! Hey, hey, hey!" Not many people were sympathetic to our cause. In fact, almost everyone ignored us, although some women rolled their eyes, and one said, "Yeah, like you guys know jack about sexism."

One guy was supportive—he drove by in a pickup truck, leaned out his window, yelled "All right, fellas! Keep on truckin'," pumped his fist, and drove off. Just when I was starting to think the whole Take Our Daughters to Work Day protest was a big success, our school principal, Mary, showed up. She had come down to Seventh Avenue *in her own car*. She personally drove Ike and me back to school, and then gave us detention for the next several weeks, until graduation.

In detention, we had to compile a report on the mental health of adolescent girls. I read *Reviving Ophelia*, and after sifting through accounts of bulimia, anorexia, and sexual abuse, I decided that teenage girls have it plenty rough; if they wanted to spend a day hanging out with their parents' jobs, more power to them.*

But back to Wormwhole. We recorded two songs in Ike's bedroom, "Pants in the Mail" and "Lumber." They were both instrumentals, because there was no way I was banging the drumsticks together and singing at the same time. Ike was a terrific guitarist. For one thing, he actually had a guitar. For another, he had an instructional video, *How to Play Guitar with*

Dean Hamill, which I borrowed and later lost. He could even tune. He couldn't play chord but who needs them?

As for percussion, I was solid on those drumsticks. Never missed a beat. I could even solo with them. Each of the songs had a good hook, a development, a solo, and a concluding section. I figured we could make a single, send it to radio stations, and be famous in a few weeks.

For some reason, though, nobody liked our music. I played it for my parents, and they hated it. I played it for my music teacher, and she said, "Don't quit your day job." I played it for other kids, and they gave me a look.* Eventually (i.e., after a couple days), we had the same face facts: Wormwhole was a failure.

A few weeks later, though, while watching a music video and feeling misunderstood, I realized something: Wormwhole may have been a failure, but it wasn't bad. And it isn't bad to this day. It's just *alternative*. There's a fine line between the two, and nobody knows where it is. Wormwhole was an alternative to alternative—our music was so alternative it would blow your mind.

First, we had no amps. Only conformists use amps. Second, we had no vocalist. Everyone else got a vocalist; our lyrics were telepathic. Third, we had only two songs. Why write more? Fourth, parents, teachers, and (conformist) youth hated us—so we must have been good. Fifth, look at the name! Who knows what it means?

For all these reasons, and many more that I'll think up later, you need our demo tape, *Crowd (and Lots of It)*. It features "Pants in the Mail" and "Lumber," with five extra-special bonus tracks of me playing bass guitar and singing. The first five people who contact me by any means possible will be allowed to buy a copy. Just think: your parents won't understand your music, your friends won't understand your music—you'll be the most alternative person ever.*

*See? I had to do a little research. Don't let anyone tell you it's easy writing a book.

*A *bola* is a piece of rope with a heavy ball on each end; you throw it, and it wraps around your target's leg or neck. A *sai* is a three-pronged Japanese dagger. A *nunchuck* is two pieces of wood connected by a short chain. (You may know those last two from *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*.)

**I grew up in Park Slope, Brooklyn. When we first moved there, it was a lesbian neighborhood—I saw more lesbian couples than straight ones. But after a couple of years, the lesbians moved out and the yuppies moved in. By the time I was in eighth grade, it was all coffee shops, video stores, and liberal ideals.

*Although I shouldn't have been so wimpy. A few years later, Take Our Daughters to Work Day became Take Our Daughters and Sons to Work Day! Coincidence? Well. Probably.

*I saw this look a lot in junior high, elementary school, and all the way back to kindergarten. It was the "Ugh, Ned's talking" look people gave me when they wanted me to shut up.

*As it happens, several people contacted me about this after the book was originally published. I had to tell them that I lost the demo (it was on cassette). But years later, I popped a blank tape into my tape player to see if it had music on it—and heard some medieval-type chanting, followed by the Wormwhole demo! It was put there by God! I transferred it to a computer and now it is available at nedvizzini.com/fun/#music.

FRESHMAN YEAR

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