

SUGAR DADDY

By Larry Gilman

It began on Saturday in my best friend's basement. Razz is skinny, has really bad teeth, bosses his mother, and eats mostly candy: Red Hots and Smarties to keep him going, and a Three Musketeers bar when, as he likes to say, he needs fiber. He prefers to wash his fuel down with Strawberry Yoo-Hoo. The kids call him Sugar Daddy and don't talk to him much, so I'd like to be able to tell you that he has some secret power that makes up for his being skinny and freaky, and for his sewer breath and greasy hair and shaking hands—like that he's a computer god and can log on to the school computer remotely and change your grades, or retarget submarine-launched missiles on East Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania, or something, but he doesn't, so I can't.

Razz and me, that's Marcia, hang out a lot in his basement. He's not my boyfriend or anything, but I figure now's the time to hang with Razz, because he can't have very long to live. People like him don't live long enough to grow all the way up—not that I know what *will* happen to him. I see people sleeping on park benches, which seems like something he could do, except that Razz wouldn't last till lunch on a park bench in winter. It's another one of his things—he's always cold, and he wears a heavy sweater all year round. It's always the same sweater, too, so Razz smells like a dead mouse. But I'm used to it.

Razz held out his Pez dispenser with the Nixon head. I kid Razz that Pez candies are just pink sugar cut with Comet and that if you keep on eating them they'll build up in your appendix so that a couple of months down the

road your guts go off like a bomb while you're on line at the movies and you crawl around hooting with your intestines dragging on the sidewalk and the whole neighborhood stares in horror. Anyway, I popped a Pez and chased it with Strawberry Yoo-Hoo, which is a kind of watery pink syrup that tastes as much like strawberries as Tang, which I've seen Razz eat straight with a spoon, tastes like oranges. I guess teeth are overrated. Razz gets along fine with fewer all the time.

We'd been sitting there all morning.

"Game of ping-pong?" asked Razz.

"Nah," I said.

"Marsh, you look down."

"That's because I *am* down. I can't believe we've been sitting in a *basement* all morning."

Razz stared at Nixon. "Is it because Tracy Martino is going with Clashman?"

I felt a lump in my throat like too many pills swallowed all at once.

"They were feeling each other up in the hall yesterday after fifth period," I said around the lump, "and Mr. MacDermott gave them a warning slip for P.D.A. and I wanted to *kick* his perfect ass."

"I don't think Mr. MacDermott's ass is *perfect*, Marsh," Razz said. It was well-meant, but stupid, so I didn't say anything. In a shaking hand, Razz held up Nixon and made his Pez-dispensing jaw snap open and shut, saying in a deep voice, "I am not a crook!" I didn't laugh. He tried again: "Well. That's the story of, that's the glory of, love, a-huh a-huh a-huh." I still didn't laugh. In fact, the lump in my throat suddenly expanded and started to ascend like a balloon. I turned my mouth down and squinted like somebody

who's about to cry and is still trying not to, which I was. "Oh, damn it," I said dramatically.

Then I did start to cry.

Before I tell you how Razz cheered me up, maybe I should say who Clash-Man and Tracy are and why my feelings were a problem. Clash-Man is our school's perfect person—cute, funny, and totally popular. His name comes from his old leather jacket, which says "The Clash" across the shoulders. Lots of girls are hot to be with Clash-Man, including Tracy, who is much taller than me and has a voice like warm custard being poured into your ear and smells faintly like cinnamon and soap. She wears her hair in a bun held by a chopstick stuck through the middle, and plays guitar and sings Melissa Etheridge covers, which I heard her do at a party once. She is *totally scrumptious*.

The problem was that I had a million-ton crush on Tracy and couldn't stand the fact that Clash-Man, Mr. Has Everything, got to have her, too. What did she see in him? I couldn't imagine. But I know what I saw in Tracy. If I watched her jeans while she was writing on the board or getting onto the bus, melted wax would shoot down into my legs. And when I heard her whisper or laugh I would think all sorts of sticky, gross stuff that felt wonderful. I couldn't live without Tracy, and I couldn't have Tracy, and I didn't want to die, so I was depressed.

Maybe I should also mention that I am below average height, potato-shaped, and really, *really* plain. If faces have flavors, mine is fat-free tofu. My Dad says I'll grow out of it, or into it, or something, but Dad just says that because he thinks it's true, and he's wrong about a lot of stuff. My Dad is a very decent human being but you can't go betting money on most of his predictions.

Many times, Razz said: “Ask Tracy out. You’ve got about one chance in ten of getting a Yes, and nothing to lose.” But he was wrong.

This is how I know:

I’ve read most of the Young Lesbian fiction that there is, these books that start with the birth of a painful, hidden crush at summer camp. Sheila and Zoe, say, the typical heroines, are freckly and shy but beautiful. The book always makes a point of claiming that neither of them is beautiful, but you know it’s lying because on the cover they both look like models for *Seventeen*. They hate each other on the first day of camp; Zoe’s into stockings and heels while Sheila’s into buzz-cuts and eyebrow-rings. However, they’re sure to fall for each other while playing in the pond like wet otters in their one-piece bathing suits or while singing the Meatball Song at the dining hall. And just as they’re exchanging a shy first kiss in the boathouse, the fattest, meanest, most fundamentalist counselor of all walks in on them and starts screaming in tongues. And so, after a poignant coming-of-age August marked by persecution and misunderstanding, Zoe and Sheila’s affair is over, but their love and newfound self-awareness live on (I’m paraphrasing).

However—and here’s my point—life is not like this. Ugly ducklings grow up to date other ugly ducks, not swans. So I’ve always had lots to lose—like being able to at least *hope* for a shy first kiss. Maybe in the darkroom.

I should have kept these facts in mind, but that’s not what I did.

Like I said, it was Saturday. Next Wednesday was Valentine’s Day, and Valentine’s Day is the darkest day of the year for potato-shaped dyke teen nonentities, and my mind was weakening. That’s when Razz decided to cheer me up.

“Marsh, look,” he said, “I know that you won’t ask Tracy out, but why not just send her something for Valentine’s Day?”

“Don’t be stupid. I’d be the luh—the luh—the laughing-stock of the school. Better to be invisible than to be a total *mock*.” A tidal wave of self-pity rose within me. My hopes fled screaming like doomed Krakatoans. I put my face down on the vinyl and leaked fluids.

“No, you *feeb*, I don’t mean send something with your *name* on it. Send something *anonymous*.” Razz popped a Pez. “You’ll at least have expressed your feelings, even if Tracy doesn’t know whose they are and would freak if she did. And maybe it would piss off Clash-Man.”

The thought of pissing off Clash-Man, of actually being an object of his jealousy, really perked me up. It was almost as good as being an actual contender for Tracy’s attention. I raised my head to look at Razz, leaving a sort of snot-print on the table.

“Yeah. That’s not bad. I could put a note into her locker or something. But what if someone saw me? I would *die*.”

Razz shrugged. “I could put it in there for you. If anybody just saw me, they’d think it was my idea.”

“Oh, Razz, you’re a *god*,” I said, and grabbed his free hand with both of mine and shook it. I think he was embarrassed. He stuck Nixon’s head in his mouth and rolled his eyes up.

We talked over what to send Tracy and settled on sending her a poem signed Anonymous. I tried writing a poem myself, called “’Twas the night before Valentine’s,” but it sucked, so we decided to steal. Like my English teacher Mr. Brennan says, mediocrity imitates, but genius steals. Now, we’d been doing Shakespeare in English and I knew that the Sonnets are about the most poetic poetry there is. More than once, I’d even heard Mr. Brennan get

a little carried away and compare Shakespeare to God. “Where else is there a vision like this, looking down on the earth, seeing *everything*, like *God Himself!*”

We needed a textbook, so I ran upstairs to get my backpack from the front hall. Razz’s dad was watching women’s volleyball in the kitchen and he gave me a little wave as I went by. His mom was watching Pat Robertson in the living room and drinking a Pink Squirrel and she didn’t so much as look up.

I came back with my pack, and after going over sonnets for awhile we picked the one that begins: “Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?” Maybe I was thinking of Sheila and Zoe’s summer of love. I decided to copy it on notebook paper in disguised handwriting. Razz found some felt-tipped pens on a shelf, mostly dry, and I copied it drew a red flower at the bottom and signed it “From An Admirer.” We got an envelope from Razz’s Mom’s desk and wrote “TO TRACY” on the front and agreed that on Tuesday, we’d stay after school so Razz could slip it into her locker while I kept lookout.

We waited until the last bus had gone, and the only people left in the building were in sports practice, detention hall, and prayer club. Having spied, I knew that locker 543, the one with the unicorn stickers on it, was Tracy’s. When we did the deed, I was stationed on lookout at the intersection with the main hall, and I came this close to peeing in my pants. Razz ran down the row of lockers to number 543 and pushed the Valentine in through the vent. Easy as pie—if pie leaves you shaking and paranoid.

I guess we weren’t paranoid enough, though. Neither of us saw anybody, but there must have been someone watching, because later that day, in lunch, sitting at a table as close as possible to Tracy’s, I heard her talking with some friends of hers. She was telling them about getting a Valentine from Razz.

“So what’s this about you getting some note in your locker?” That was Sequoia Spelman, only child of two flower children and first girl in the grade to have her own Web site.

“Oh, yeah, would you believe? Sugar Daddy put a *poem* in my locker. Someone saw him put it in.”

Giggles from friends.

“Oh, gross!”

“Whatsit say?”

“Omigod, a *poem*?”

“Eeeiuw!”

“Shugah Daddy in *love*!”

Then Tracy got out the poem and read it to them, making fun of it all the way, you know: “Thou art more lovely and more temperate,” ha ha. I sat there with my tuna sandwich in front of me and listened. When she’d read the whole note, they passed it around.

I wanted to pull Tracy’s chopstick out of her perky little chignon and stick it into her back. My crush was gone, alright. Now I just wanted to crush her and all her giggling airhead friends with a steamroller. I imagined how good it would feel to smash a tuna sandwich down onto Tracy’s beautiful glossy hair. I imagined getting up out of my chair, walking over to Tracy’s table, and telling her off beautifully. “Oh, excuse me, you pea-brained bitch,” I would begin.

Well, there may be more important things in life than invisibility, but I couldn’t think of even one at that moment. I chickened, big-time. I sat there and didn’t do anything, and eventually the bell rang, and Tracy and her friends went off to fourth period and I threw my lunch in the trash and went off to fourth period too.

There was no chance to see Razz till that night. I went over to his house first thing after supper. His parents let me in, telling me that he was down in the basement.

Razz was at our table, reading old comics. I couldn't believe what I was seeing; he was drinking milk and eating an apple. That was weird; you don't see Razz eating normal, healthy food like that. You just don't.

"Hey, Razz."

"Hey, Marsh."

"I guess you know about what happened with the note."

Razz glanced up, but I couldn't look at his face. There was a dribble of milk down the front his sweater.

"Well, it's OK, you know," he said. "I took some shit for it at school, but that's alright. Same old same old."

"I guess we were stupid to think that it would be no big deal if someone saw you."

"Yeah, well."

"Look, Razz, I'm really sorry about that. I wanted to kill Tracy at lunch today, but I was too much of a coward to even pour milk on her head. I'm really sorry."

"Hey, that's OK."

We talked a little more, but not really about anything. Except for eating real food, Razz didn't seem to have been bothered by what had gone down in school that day. I futzed around for awhile, pretending to look at comics. I felt used-up and thought that I would like to go home and talk to Dad before going to bed and crying myself to sleep. So after a few more minutes, I said I had homework, and Razz said fine, so did he, and I got up to go.

I'd gone all the way to the front door before I remembered that I actually did have homework, Act I of *Julius Caesar* to read by tomorrow, which I hadn't started yet because my book had been in Razz's basement since Saturday. So I went back through the kitchen and pulled open the basement door, which hadn't latched, and was about to go down the stairs when I heard Razz's voice coming up.

It sounded funny. Big. I'd never heard it like that before. Then I realized that he was reading out loud the sonnet that we'd picked for Tracy:

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
 Thou art more lovely and more temperate:
 Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
 And summer's lease hath all too short a date:
 Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,
 And often is his gold complexion dimm'd;
 And every fair from fair sometime declines,
 By chance, or nature's changing course untrimm'd.

I stood and listened. Razz was reading beautifully, more beautifully than I'd ever heard anyone read, even Mr. Brennan.

But thy eternal summer shall not fade,
 Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st,
 Nor shall death brag thou wander'st in his shade,
 When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st.

Though I'd read this poem several times over and copied it out by hand, I realized, hearing Razz, that I didn't understand that part about "to time thou grow'st." Not at all. And probably Razz didn't understand it, either, but it didn't matter. And when he got to the last two lines, I felt a real chill at the back of my neck:

So long as men can breathe, and eyes shall see,
 So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

I knew, just listening to Razz reading down in the basement, that he was *saying* that poem, you know? Saying it from the heart. Saying it *to* somebody. *So*, I thought—*Razz has a crush on Tracy, too, the shallow bimbo-goddess with buns of steel*. I felt like I'd walked in on him with a magazine or something, like I couldn't back out fast enough. I even blushed.

But then I thought, Razz has never even *liked* Tracy—hadn't he tried, early on in my stupid star-crossed crush, to tell me that maybe she had more heat than heart? And would I listen to him? No.

And then I thought, and the thought was so strange and old that it felt funny, that maybe—maybe I'm not the only person who has ever had something to say that they *couldn't* say.

I didn't make a sound or go down the steps, and I don't think Razz knew I'd heard anything.

I went home, and I didn't feel like talking to my Dad when I got there, and I didn't cry in bed after all.

But I did lie awake, for awhile, in the dark.

Comparing my friend to a summer's day.