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ME AND EARL AND THE DYING GIRL

A NOVEL BY JESSE ANDREWS

A NOTE FROM GREG GAINES,
AUTHOR OF THIS BOOK

I have no idea how to write this stupid book.

Can I just be honest with you for one second? This is the literal truth. When I first started writing this book, I tried to start it with the sentence “It was the best of times; it was the worst of times.” I genuinely thought that I could start this book that way. I just figured, it’s a classic book-starting sentence. But then I couldn’t even figure out how you were supposed to follow that up. I stared at the computer for an hour and it was all I could do not to have a colossal freak-out. In desperation, I tried messing with the punctuation and italicization, like:

It was the *best* of times? *And* it was the worst of times?!!

What the hell does that even mean? Why would you even think to do that? You wouldn’t, unless you had a fungus eating your brain, which I guess I probably have.

The point is, I have no idea what I’m doing with this book. And the reason for that is, I’m not a writer. I’m a filmmaker. So now you’re probably asking yourself:

1. Why is this guy writing a book and not making a film?
2. Does it have to do with the brain-fungus thing?

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Answer Key

1. I'm writing a book instead of making a film because I have retired from filmmaking forever. Specifically, I retired after making the Worst Film Ever Made. Usually the goal is to retire after making the best possible thing you can make—or, even better, die—but I did the opposite. A brief outline of my career would look like this:

- i. Many Bad Films
- ii. A Mediocre Film
- iii. Some OK Films
- iv. A Decent Film
- v. Two or Three Good Films
- vi. A Bunch of Pretty Great Films
- vii. The Worst Film Ever Made

Fin. How bad was that film? It killed someone, that's how bad it was. It caused an actual death. You'll see.

2. Let's just say that it would explain a lot of things if there were a fungus eating my brain. Although that fungus would have to have been eating my brain for basically my entire life. At this point it's possible that the fungus has gotten bored and left, or died from malnutrition or something.

I do actually want to say one other thing before we get started with this horrifyingly inane book. You may have already figured out that it's about a girl who had cancer. So there's a chance you're thinking, "Awesome! This is going to be a wise and insightful story

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about love and death and growing up. It is probably going to make me cry literally the entire time. I am so *fired up* right now.” If that is an accurate representation of your thoughts, you should probably try to smush this book into a garbage disposal and then run away. Because here’s the thing: *I learned absolutely nothing from Rachel’s leukemia*. In fact, I probably became *stupider* about life because of the whole thing.

I’m not really putting this very well. My point is this: This book contains precisely zero Important Life Lessons, or Little-Known Facts About Love, or sappy tear-jerking Moments When We Knew We Had Left Our Childhood Behind for Good, or whatever. And, unlike most books in which a girl gets cancer, there are definitely no sugary paradoxical single-sentence-paragraphs that you’re supposed to think are deep because they’re in italics. Do you know what I’m talking about? I’m talking about sentences like this:

The cancer had taken her eyeballs, yet she saw the world with more clarity than ever before.

Barf. Forget it. For me personally, things are in no way more meaningful because I got to know Rachel before she died. If anything, things are *less* meaningful. All right?

So I guess we should just start.

(I just realized that you may not know what “*fin*” means. It is a filmmaking term. Specifically, it is French for “This movie is over, which is good, because it probably confused the hell out of you, because it was made by French people.”)

Fin for real this time.

HOW IT IS POSSIBLE
TO EXIST IN A PLACE
THAT SUCKS SO BAD

So in order to understand everything that happened, you have to start from the premise that high school sucks. Do you accept that premise? Of course you do. It is a universally acknowledged truth that high school sucks. In fact, high school is where we are first introduced to the basic existential question of life:

How is it possible to exist in a place that sucks so bad?

Most of the time middle school sucks even worse, but middle school is so pathetic that I can't even bring myself to write about it, so let's just focus on high school.

All right. Allow me to introduce myself: Greg S. Gaines, seventeen. During the period described in this book, I was a senior at Benson High School in lovely inner-city Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. And before we do anything else, it is necessary for us to examine Benson and the specific ways in which it sucks.

So, Benson is on the border of Squirrel Hill, an affluent neighborhood, and Homewood, a non-affluent neighborhood, and it draws about equal numbers of students from both. On television, it's usually the rich kids who assert control at a high

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school; however, most of Squirrel Hill's genuinely rich kids go to the local private school, Shadyside Academy. The ones that remain are too few to impose any kind of order. I mean, occasionally, they try to, and that tends to be more adorable than anything else. Like when Olivia Ryan freaks out about the puddle of urine that appears in one of the stairwells most days between 10:30 and 11:00 AM, shrieking at bystanders in an insane, misguided attempt to try to figure out who did it. You want to say, "Liv! The perpetrator has probably not returned to the scene of the crime. Pee Diddy is long gone by now." But even if you did say that, she probably wouldn't stop freaking out. And anyway, my point is that the freak-out doesn't have any measurable effect on anything. It's like when a kitten tries to bite something to death. The kitten clearly has the cold-blooded murderous instinct of a predator, but at the same time, it's this cute little kitten, and all you want to do is stuff it in a shoebox and shoot a video of it for grandmas to watch on YouTube.

So the rich kids aren't the alpha group of the school. The next most likely demographic would be the church kids: They're plentiful, and they are definitely interested in school domination. However, that strength—the will to dominate—is also their greatest weakness, because they spend so much time trying to convince you to hang out with them, and the way they try to do that is by inviting you over to their church. "We've got cookies and board games," they say, or that sort of thing. "We just got a Wii set up!" Something about it always seems a little off. Eventually, you realize: These *same exact sentences* are also said by child predators.

So the church kids can never be the alpha group, either.

Their tactics are just too creepy. At many schools, the jocks would be a good bet to ascend to the throne, but at Benson, they're pretty much all black, and many of the white kids are afraid of them. Who else is there to lead the masses? The smart kids? Please. They have no interest in politics. They're hoping simply to attract as little attention as possible until high school is over. Then they can escape to some college where no one will mock them for knowing how an adverb works. The theater kids? My God, it would be a bloody massacre. They would be found beaten to death with their own dog-eared *The Wiz* songbooks. The stoners? Too lacking in initiative. The gangbangers? Too rarely on the premises. The band kids? It would be like with the theater kids, except somehow even sadder. The gothy dorks? Impossible even as a thought experiment.

So at the top of the Benson social hierarchy, there is a vacuum. The result: chaos.

(Although let me also note that I'm using overly simplistic categories here. Are there multiple separate groups of smart kids/rich kids/jocks/etc.? Yes. Are there a bunch of groups that don't have easy labels because they're just loose collections of friends without a single defining characteristic? Also yes. I mean, if you wanted, I could just map out the entire school for you, with geeky labels like "Middle-Class African American Junior Sub-Clique 4c," but I am pretty sure no one wants me to do that. Not even the members of Middle-Class African American Junior Sub-Clique 4c [Jonathan Williams, Dajuan Williams, Donté Young, and, until he got really serious about the trombone midway through junior year, Darnell Reynolds].)

So there are a bunch of groups, all jockeying for control, and consequently all of them want to murder each other. And so the problem is that if you're part of a group, everyone outside of that group wants to murder *you*.

But here's the thing. There's a solution to that problem: Get access to *every* group.

I know. I know. This sounds insane. But it's exactly what I did. I didn't *join* any group outright, you understand. But I got access to all of them. The smart kids, the rich kids, the jocks, the stoners. The band kids, the theater kids, the church kids, the gothy dorks. I could walk into any group of kids, and not one of them would bat an eye. Everyone used to look at me and think, "Greg! He's one of us." Or maybe something more like: "That guy's on our side." Or at the very least: "Greg is a guy who I am *not* going to flick ketchup at." This was a brutally difficult thing to accomplish. Consider the complications:

1. Infiltration of any one group must remain concealed to most, if not all, of the others. If rich kids observe you chatting amiably with goths, the gated community closes its doors to you. If church kids notice you stumbling out of a stoner car, cloaked in smoke as though exiting a sauna, your days of conscientiously not blurting out the F-word in the church basement are over. And if a jock, God forbid, witnesses you hobnobbing with theater kids, he will immediately assume you are gay, and there is no force on earth greater than the fear jocks have of homosexuals. None. It's like the Jewish fear of Nazis, except the complete opposite with regard to who is beating the crap out of whom. So I guess it's more like the Nazi fear of Jews.

2. You cannot become too deeply enmeshed in any one group. This follows from point one, above. One must instead be at the periphery at all times. Befriend the goths, but do not under any circumstances dress like them. Participate in band, but avoid their hour-long jam sessions in the band room after school. Make appearances at the church's ridiculously decked-out rec room, but shun any activity wherein someone is actively talking about Jesus.

3. At lunch, before school, and at all other times in public, you must keep an insanely low profile. I mean, just forget about lunch. Lunch is where you are asked to demonstrate your allegiance to one group or another by sitting with them for all to see—or, God forbid, being asked to sit with some poor sap who's not even *in* a group. It's not that I have anything against group-less kids, obviously. My heart goes out to them, the wretched bastards. In the chimpanzee-ruled jungle of Benson, they are the cripples, hobbling along on the forest floor, unable to escape harassment and torture from the others. Pity them, yes; befriend them, never. To befriend them is to share their fate. They try to hook you by saying things like, "Greg, d'you wanna sit with me." What they are really saying is: "Please hold still while I stab you in your legs, so that you cannot run when we are overtaken by the Biting Ones."

But really anytime you're in a room with a bunch of groups mixed together, you have to disengage as much as possible. In class, at lunch, wherever.

At this point, you may be asking: "But what about your friends? You can't ignore your friends if you're in class with them."

To which I say: Maybe you haven't been paying attention. The whole *point* is that you can't be friends with anyone. That's the tragedy and the triumph of this whole way of being that I'm talking about. **You can't lead a typical high school life.**

Because here's the thing: The typical high school life sucks.

You may also be asking: "Greg, why are you talking trash on the group-less kids? It sounds like *you're* basically a group-less kid." You have a point, sort of. The thing is, I was in no group, but I was also in every group. So you can't really describe me as group-less.

Honestly, there's no good word for what I was doing. For a while I thought of myself as a practitioner of High School Espionage, but ultimately that was too misleading of a term. That made it sound like I was sneaking around having illicit sexual liaisons with voluptuous Italian women. For one thing, Benson doesn't *have* any voluptuous Italian women. The closest thing we have is Ms. Giordano in the principal's office, and she's kind of lumpy and has a face like a parrot. Also, she does this thing women sometimes do with their eyebrows where they just completely shave them off and draw new ones in a different weird place with a Sharpie or something, and the more you think about it, the more your stomach starts churning around and you want to claw your own head.

That is literally the only appearance Ms. Giordano is going to make in this book.

Let's just move on.