

Issues

TED STAUNTON

I did not know I had maturity issues until last month, when my sixteenth birthday happened to match up with the Valentine dance at school. I did something dumb that led to me throwing up on the principal's shoes. It didn't help that she was in them at the time.

The principal was pretty cool about it and so were my parents. Still, after all the apologizing and the automatic suspension and the way I felt like a dead rat in a blender all weekend (not to mention cleaning the shoes), I had a nagging feeling that maybe I needed to requalify on the trust factor.

Remember, sixteen means *driver's license*. Which means *freedom*. *Oh, yes, yes, yes*. Thinking about getting the car is right up there with thinking about the amazingly flexible girl on page forty-three of the magazine my brother does not know that I know is in the back of his closet. And getting the car is actually within reach, if I'm responsible. No way would

I let blowing odiferous chunks on the principal's shoes screw up my chances, especially since I was signed up to take my Driver's Ed. course on the March break.

So when Mom said that she and Dad were invited to Aunt Beth's for spring skiing at the beginning of that week, it was my chance to show I could do better, that I was mature and responsible.

"It's not that we don't trust you, Josh," Mom said. "It's just that you've never been on your own before."

True. Before, it was always my brother and me. He's at university now. Where he's probably very mature. *Hah*.

"That's okay. Trevor can stay over." Trevor is my best friend. We have a band called Flush Puppies. "And we wouldn't be up really late because we've got Driver's Ed. We could call his parents if we need to. We want to do some songwriting anyway, so the quiet would be good."

My parents mulled this over.

"And . . . it would give me a chance to show . . . I can be mature?" The ending wimped out, but it worked.

Which is why I'm on the porch on Sunday afternoon, waving good-bye. They'll be home Tuesday, after supper. Tonight, I'm on my own. Trevor is set for Monday night.

When the van turns the corner, I go sit in the old blue Toyota we got from Grandpa. Soon, this could be mine. *Oh, yes, yes, yes*. I just have to prove my maturity. I practice my move from accelerator to brake and back, which is not comfortable in socks. My feet get cold and I go inside.

Without my family, I can *feel* the silence. The furnace ticks. The house is gloriously empty, yet stocked with essentials: chips, microwave popcorn, hot dogs, buns, pizza pockets, ice cream, chocolate sauce, peanut butter, bread, cookies, chocolate milk, iced tea, cereal with extra sugar, and fruit and veggies for emergencies. I must watch four horror movies, play a soccer video game, and pick some tunes on the guitar. *Oh, yes, yes, yes, I'm free.* If it wasn't for driving, I might never go outside again.

I don't go out till Monday morning, when Trevor arrives to pick me up for Driver's Ed. I have a little problem even then because I've stacked the dining-room chairs against the front door. There were noises outside at three in the morning.

When I finally get the door open, a few snowflakes swirl in. Trevor is standing there shivering, in a hoodie and surfer shorts. His mom is waiting in the car.

"What took you?" he says.

"I was shaving," I say.

"What's with all the chairs?"

"Mice," I say.

Being Mr. Responsible, I have my keys and lunch money. I lock the door behind me.

Driver's Ed. is at our school. Mornings are in the classroom and afternoons are on the road. Trevor and I have agreed to be in the same car. Then I see Sarah Riley. She is right up there with driving and the girl on page forty-three. She is gorgeous,

has major brains, and a great sense of humor. This I know because she practically always laughs at my jokes. I've wanted to ask her out ever since she broke up with her university boyfriend at Christmas, but she was sick for a while, then we had exams, and then there were my maturity issues.

As we come in, Sarah is helping Matt sit down. Matt is not disabled or anything, he's *hard core*. Among other things, this means he wears girl's jeans for extra tightness. There is some definite stitch-popping as he bottoms out.

"Stink," Matt says, being Christian and not a swearing guy.

Trevor calls, "Hey, Matt, did you just enter the *rrr-i-ip zo-o-one?*" Trevor always bleats like a sheep for his punch lines.

"Stink, I hope not." Matt angles up his butt; it's Boxers on Parade. "Stink."

"Don't worry," Sarah says, "no one will notice. I had that happen to me once, with the same jeans," which just goes to show how nice she is. She smiles at me, ignoring Trevor. "Hi."

I smile back, maturely. "The perils of hard core," I banter, thus showing I am sensitive and cool enough to rise above silly trends. I am also floating six inches off the ground, thanks to her smile. *I have to ask her out.*

Sarah laughs and sits down beside Matt. I sit down beside her. Trevor parks it beside me. "Incoming," he announces, and farts.

I spend the rest of the morning veering between the rules of the road and wishing I'd been there to help when Sarah split

her jeans. She keeps turning to Matt, clearly to avoid Trevor, who is panting all over her. Much as I hate to, I'm going to have to ditch him for the afternoon.

And Sarah, *oh, yes, yes, yes*, makes it happen. At lunch, while Trevor is showing how he can fit an entire pizza slice in his mouth, she whispers to me, "I asked if you and Matt and I could be in the same car. I don't want to be mean or anything, but Trevor keeps saying he wants to drive with me and I don't think that's such a good idea."

"No problem." I give her a sympathetic nod and take a small bite of my own slice. A mature, polite, small bite. I make sure to wipe my hands, on my jeans.

Our time together does not start well. I've forgotten my learner's permit. It's Trevor's fault really, because he rushed me this morning. Our instructor says we'll drive over and get it.

We get there and I run into the house. I head for the den, making a mental note to turn off all the lights later. I'm going so fast, I don't see the magazine on the carpet, still open to page forty-three. I step on it and shoot forward, catching the toaster cord with my shin. I'd brought the toaster into the den for easier toast-making. There is a blue flash as the plug yanks from the wall outlet and the toaster topples off the coffee table. I, meanwhile, plow a sensitive area of my lower self into a corner of Dad's recliner chair. My wallet is on the seat.

I limp back out to the car.

"You okay?" everyone asks.

"A-1," I flute.

During the afternoon, there is a lot to concentrate on, while my crotch is still feeling as if it lost an argument with a cement mixer. Plus, Sarah is watching as I adjust the seat, check the mirrors, fasten the seat belt, shift to DRIVE – *no, wait – press the brake, shift to DRIVE – no, wait – start the car, press the brake, shift to DRIVE*. . . . Freedom is complicated.

Still, by the time Trevor and I get back to my place, I'm feeling better. I have driven around town without hitting anything. My only mess-up was pulling out the cigarette lighter instead of turning on the windshield wipers. Plus, I have spent time in the backseat of a car with Sarah Riley. We were ten inches apart and restrained by seat belts, but still. I could feel the chemistry. Tomorrow, I'm definitely going to ask her out; tonight is PFGT: Parent-Free Guy Time.

We squeeze in past the chairs. Trevor puts down his guitar case and bleats, "I hereby declare this a *pa-a-nts-o-o-optional zo-one*." Since he is already wearing shorts and his boxers hang to his knees, it doesn't make much difference, but I understand. In a PF environment, the just-boxers approach to life is way more sensible.

"Cool," I say, and take my cords off. In fact, it is cool. I crank the thermostat.

"Excellent," says Trevor, padding into the kitchen. "I must have *he-ee-at*. Did you get iced tea? As your attorney, I advise you that we need iced tea." I hear the *ca-snk* of a can being opened. "Ah . . .," Trevor says, then, "man, I gotta whiz."

He's off. Being majorly hungry, I scarf a quick six cookies before cracking a tea for myself. The sound of a flush rolls down the hall.

"How come all the lights are on?" Trevor asks, heading into the den.

"To keep the house warm," I say. "When the bulbs get hot, it saves the furnace." I wonder if it's true. "Get your guitar," I call. "Mine's in there."

Trevor doesn't answer.

I look into the den. Trevor is standing over the toaster, reverently turning the pages of my brother's magazine. "Sweet," he says, without looking up. "I don't have this one. Too bad it's wrecked."

We get out the guitars. Sometimes we can write five or six tunes in a single night, and good ones too, like "Self-Destruct Button" and "Amps at Eleven," which are pretty much our theme songs. This time, though, nothing is happening.

"Why are you finger-picking minor chords?" Trevor finally complains. He adds an iced-tea can to the empties pyramid we've started on the coffee table.

Because they're moody and romantic is the answer. My secret plan is to write a song for Sarah. Then I can somehow, just by accident, have my guitar with me tomorrow and get it out at lunch and start picking quietly, as if I don't want to bother anybody. She'll ask what I'm playing, and I'll say, "Oh, just something I wrote last night," and she'll want to hear it, and be totally blown away.

I go, "Maybe we should write a ballad for a change."

"What for?" Trevor hits some power chords. "Emo sucks. Hey, what are we having for dinner, anyway?"

We select a balanced junk-food menu of chips, dogs, and cereal, with a side of popcorn and ice cream for dessert. We agree a predinner cocktail is in order. Not booze. We're being responsible; what we have in mind is a Flush Puppy.

We invented Flush Puppies back in grade nine, when we formed the band with the other guys. Everybody agreed they were the perfect initiation. You start with club soda and milk, then you freestyle with anything you can find. This time we put in salt, mustard, relish, olive oil, anchovy paste, lemon juice, cayenne pepper, curry powder, maple syrup, and soy sauce.

I get out two shot glasses and plug in the blender. "Ready?"

"Wait, we forgot the puppy!" Trevor pops in a hot dog. "Now."

I don't remember the lid until after I start the blender, but it doesn't spray that far. There's enough left for two shots. I pour, we clink glasses, and give the Flush Puppy toast, which is tipping your head back and howling *awooooo*, then, *whammo*, we sock the stuff back as fast as we can. Speed is important because the less you taste, the less chance there is that you'll hurl.

"Ah!"

"Ah!"

We slam our glasses back down on the counter.

"We must have tunes!"

Trevor leaps into action. The phone rings as the first notes explode from the speakers. I let the answering machine pick up, while I fiddle with the microwave.

Trevor comes back in, twirling a CD. "Hey, do you think this thing would *me-e-elt* in there?"

It's the start of a busy evening, but we don't kick into high gear until halfway through the third movie, when we crack open the second carton of iced-tea cans. I happen to be wearing the first empty carton on my head as Trevor announces an incoming, so naturally I pull it down for protection. The handle hole turns out to be right at eye level.

"Hey," Trevor says, "that looks just like a *jouussting hellmet*."

I check in the mirror; *he's right*. Clearly, to be fair and have two helmets, we must unload the other carton by drinking our way through several more cans of iced tea. I get the swimming noodles from the basement for lances and we use the sofa cushions for shields. It's decent, but tough to run with all that iced tea sloshing around inside, and the noodles are too floppy. We stop.

"We need toast," Trevor pants.

"Have some more chips." I straighten a couple of pictures.

"Not to eat. For *targets*. We tape toast to the ends of our lances, then we have to knock it off."

It's brilliant, but there's a problem: something seems to be wrong with the toaster.

"What happened to it?" Trevor asks.

"Beats me."

I find an equally brilliant solution in the kitchen. I almost miss it because there is so much stuff on the counter, but there, in a small puddle of soy sauce and Flush Puppy, sits the iron. My mom used it to press something yesterday afternoon. And if I'm not mistaken, a spare is in the broom closet. *Oh, yes, yes, yes*. I plug them in and hand one to Trevor. Then I position a piece of bread on the bottom of my iron and delicately hold it against Trevor's, making sure not to squish the bread.

"Right," I say, twisting my dial. "Iron's on high. Arm's length." Presto, the PF PressToaster is born. Works like a charm. We start on another piece right away. You can never have too much toast while watching bad movies. We are toasting contentedly when Trevor says, out of the blue, "Girls wouldn't like this, would they?"

"Some of them might," I say, hopefully. I imagine Sarah facing me with an outstretched iron, wearing, say, plaid pajama bottoms and a way-too-short T-shirt. *Oh, yes, yes, yes*.

"Nah, they wouldn't."

Care is needed here. *Why are we talking about this? Is Trevor thinking about Laura, his ex-girlfriend? She broke up with him by pouring a medium drink into his lap at the movies, after he made a bad choice about where to put his hand. Or is he ticked about losing out on Sarah? Oh-oh.*

I say, "Maybe they would. Maybe some of them would call this madcap revelry. Like, um . . . Sarah, say."

Trevor shrugs. "Aw, who cares about Sarah?"

I would fall over if I were not part of the intricate PF PressToaster. Trevor has acknowledged defeat. Even he can see that Sarah likes *me*. I am golden. *Oh, yes, yes, yes.* Tomorrow for sure.

Trevor plucks the last slice from between our irons. I unplug and flex my arm. An iron gets heavy at one in the morning. He says, "Anyway, she wouldn't like it either. You know what girls'd call it? Immature. We are *im-ma-ture*."

He has a point. Behavior is a right place, right time thing. Which is why I am not a guy who gives out fart bulletins. I am the guy Sarah Riley wants to be in the same car with. I have matured. Still I try to be kind; Trevor has already faced his limitations today.

"Some girls just like older men. Not all of them. You'll see."

"Yeah, well, I get so *fruuuu-straaaated*."

Whew, we are back to goofing. "So, let off some steam."

"How?"

"I don't know. Why don't you run naked up and down the street?"

So he does. I, being more mature, do not. I watch from the front window, strumming my guitar. The way Trevor said "I get so *fruuuu-straaaated*" had a beat to it. It has a definite punk feel. By the time Trevor comes back in, I have two other lines: "I'm not mot-i-vated" and "I just mastur-bated." (Okay, that one's a maybe, but it's *punk*.) I need another to finish

the chorus. I decide not to play it for Trevor till I get it. I am mature enough to write on my own now.

When I wake up next morning, I'm still on the couch. Over the pyramid of iced-tea cans, I see Trevor playing video soccer. A piece of toast is balanced on his knee.

"You'd better get up, Josh," he says, still clicking. "My mom just called. She'll be over to pick us up in ten minutes."

I roll off the couch. Crumbs prickle my feet. In the kitchen, there is one clean glass left for juice. The bread and irons sit by the ice cream.

"And if you're making toast," Trevor calls, "I have a suggestion: don't put the peanut butter on till after."

I look blearily at the irons. The bottom of one has a shiny brown coating. I have a cold hot dog instead.

Trevor's mom honks while I am pulling on my pants. Since I was up till four in the morning, this is harder than it sounds. Also, a jousting noodle is in one leg. I clear it, toss it over the chairs, grab my coat, jam my toes into my runners, and swing the door open in one graceful motion.

Trevor bustles down the hall, hopping over the sofa cushions and out into the cold morning. I take a last quick look around. The place definitely has that PF lived-in look. *Why are bath towels all over the stairs?* Oh, yeah—to soak up the iced tea. Fortunately my parents won't be home till late. We have plenty of time to clean up. I notice the answering-machine light flashing. I hit PLAY. It's Mom, from last night.

"Hi, hon, just checking that everything is okay, and to let you know that we're skiing again tomorrow . . ."

"That's great, Mom. Thanks for telling me." I set the door lock.

" . . . and then after that, we'll be heading str—"

"You bet. Have fun." I slam the door and run. Sarah Riley is waiting.

After our late night, the morning is kind of blurry. I sit by Sarah again and she tells me how she helped Matt sew his jeans back together, which just shows she is even nicer than I thought, doing that for someone who is not even, like, a close friend. I don't say a lot because I'm pretty bagged, but that's okay. Laid-back is good. It will be more private talking in the backseat anyway.

After lunch there is more classroom stuff to do, so it's quite late when we head out. We go to the street just around the corner from my place. It's quiet there, so we practice three-point turns. The backseat is not exactly private with everyone looking back. Still, I'm cool; there will be time.

Our instructor gets three orange cones out of the trunk and sets them up for us to try parallel parking. It's my turn. I get behind the wheel and pull up beside the cones. I'm supposed to park behind them. I flick on my turn signal, put the car in REVERSE, and check my mirror. I lift my foot off the brake, easing us back. Now I cut the wheel—more, a little more—flick a glance forward to make sure the front of

the car is going to clear the cones, and see a van turning at the corner.

I say, "Aaah!"; everyone else says, "Wha →?" and I hit the gas. Bam. We shoot backwards. There's a bump, a *grrrrrrrrich*, and the back of the car lifts off like a rocket. Everybody screams, and, at an impossible angle, we stop.

When my stomach catches up to me, we are hanging forward against the seat belts, balanced on the front bumper. We are looking straight down at someone's lawn, which is yellow and soggy, it being March and everything, and there is this intense roaring noise all around us.

The instructor says, "I think you can take your foot off the gas now."

Right. It gets much quieter. In the back, Matt is muttering, "Stink, stink, stink."

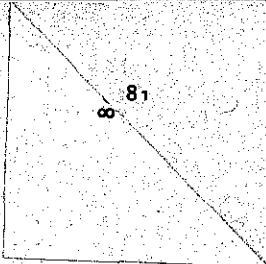
Sarah isn't saying anything. I am cool with this. I know I won't be asking her out for at least a month, anyway. I now realize why Mom called last night—to tell me they were coming straight home from skiing. I don't floor a car in reverse when just any van turns a corner, only my parents'. They ought to be squeezing past the chairs to the sofa cushions by now. The towels and the cushions and the crooked pictures ought to keep them out of the den and the kitchen for a while. They might never even notice the microwave; the CD melted so smoothly on the glass turntable thingy, you can hardly see it. On the other hand, with all the lights on, it'd be hard to miss anything.

I sigh. It hardly matters; I'm majorly grounded – assuming we ever get down. We seem to be quite stable, but I crane my neck up to the rearview mirror and spot a black streak. It's a cable. It seems to be running out of the trunk, straight up past bare tree branches. I see more black streaks and clouds. Ah. I have cleverly parallel parked up one of those wires that anchor telephone poles.

As I look away, I also understand I will not be asking Sarah out at all. The rearview mirror has shown me that she and Matt are holding hands. *Have I missed something?* I feel like running naked up and down the street.

Maturity, I think, as the instructor carefully opens his door, is *overrated*. *Hey . . . maturity is . . . dum, dum, dum, dum-dum-dum. . .*

All is not lost. I have the first line for my song.



First Time Never – Holding Hands

RICHARD SCRIMGER

I'd been living next door to Aluka for a couple of weeks before I found out she was a zombie.

I guess you're wondering how I could miss something like that. Zombies are noticeable – what you might call a visible minority. But Aluka's not your typical zombie. It's hard to tell that she belongs to the realm of the undead. Among other things, she's a vegetarian. She doesn't smell like an open grave, or lurch around with her arms outstretched. I'm pretty sure I'd have noticed stuff like that early on. Maybe even during our first conversation.

"Hi," I'd say. "My name's Petey. I live next door. We're neighbors now."

"Uuugggh!" she'd say.

"Beg your pardon?"

"Brains," she'd say, lurching towards me. "Eat . . . brains." Drool would be pouring from her open mouth. And I'd know.