



SH!

DOUGLAS EVANS

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SH!

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FOR SUSAN

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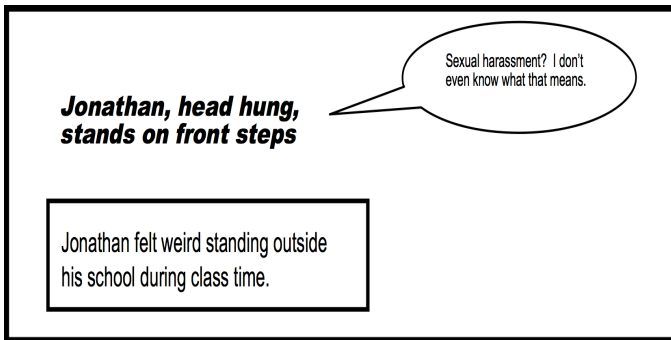
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1. JONATHAN

A thin book, *THE CRUCIBLE*, stuck out the back pocket of Jonathan's baggy jeans. Reading act three was last night's homework. English class started in five minutes, but Jonathan was not allowed to attend.



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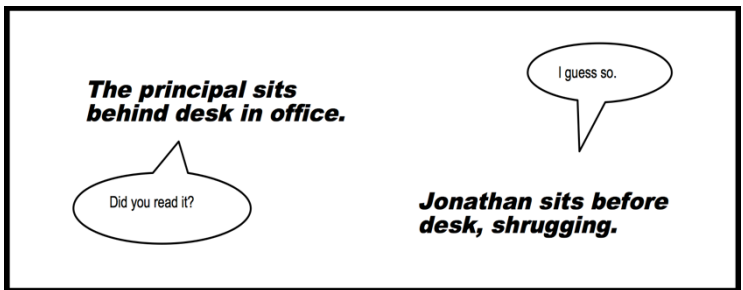
Everything happened quickly. The call to the office. The principal's odd words. The suspension.

Susan Hicks came to me this morning. She claims you have been bothering her.

"She's in my English class. She lives down the street," Jonathan said. "We talk all the time."

He had never been in the office before. His eyes wandered from the class photos on the wall to the fish tank on the bookshelf.

The principal leaned forward, hands folded on his desktop.



Every student was given a copy of the school's sexual harassment policy at the beginning of this school year.

Jonathan placed his hands between his knees.

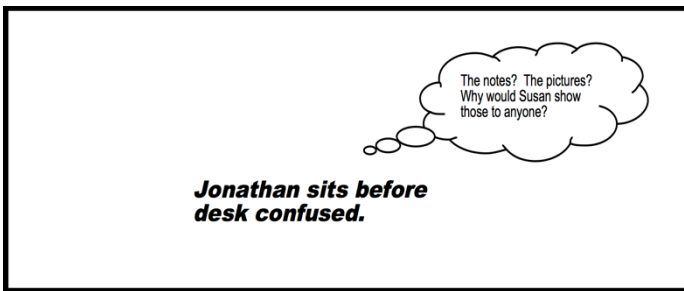
Susan Hicks made some serious allegations, Jonathan. She claims you follow her around the school. You leer at her. She's afraid to enter her English class, because you constantly bother

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her. You gave her pictures and poems that embarrassed her.

“Yes, I gave her books. She told me that she wanted to read more.” He shrugged. “I guess I wrote her letters and stuff. I was trying to be funny.”

Susan showed me your notes and cartoons. You have a mistaken idea of what an eighth-grade girl might find funny. Susan said she sent you a text message last night and asked you to stop contacting her. She said you tried calling her immediately afterward.



Jonathan shifted in his seat.

“When I called her house no one answered,” he said. “I thought something was wrong. She was always telling me things. Things about her stepdad. I was worried.”

I want you to know, Jonathan, this school district has a zero-tolerance policy concerning drugs, weapons, and, in your case, sexual harassment. I have no choice; I must suspend

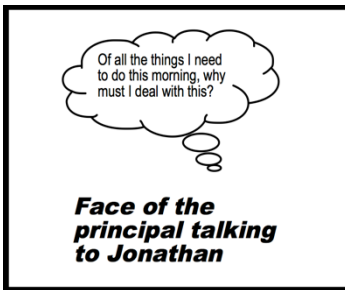
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you from school until we can have a thorough investigation of this matter.

Jonathan giggled nervously. "But I'll just go and talk with her. If she's mad, I'll say I'm sorry. We talk all the time. Everything will be all right if I just talk with her."

I suggested a conference with the three of us. Susan said she doesn't want to talk with you. She was in tears. She was very upset.

The school bell rang. Jonathan stared at his feet. The paperback in his pocket gouged his back.



I can't have you in this school when one of my female students is terrorized every time she sees you. You're to stay off these school grounds until further notice. Is your mother or father at home?

"Yes." The lie came quickly.

And there's another point I need to make perfectly clear to you, Jonathan. You are not to talk about this case with anyone outside your

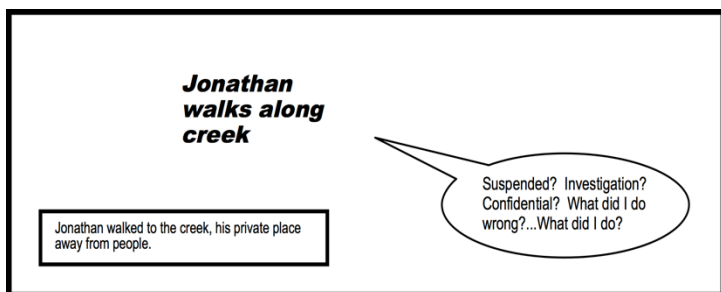
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family. This matter is strictly confidential. I've instructed Susan Hicks to do the same. Both of your reputations could be severely tarnished if word spread around the school. Are we clear about that?

"I guess. Susan asked me to stop talking to her and I talked to her. So I guess I'm guilty."

No one is saying you're guilty. This is just an inquiry about the charges. I will notify Mr. Xavier that you will not be in class today. I hope to have the investigation finished by the end of the week.

Jonathan walked down the school steps. His senses ceased to work. Something terrible had just happened to him, but he failed to grasp what it was.



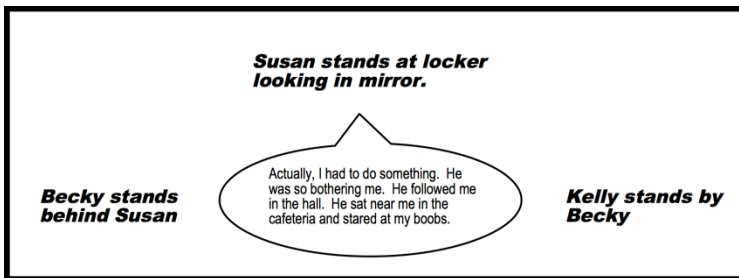
He came to the boulder. He climbed onto the granite and curled into a ball. His eyes squeezed shut, and tears flowed.

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2. SUSAN

Susan Hick's locker stood halfway down the hall. Her reflection appeared in the locker door mirror, applying pink lipstick to a lower lip. Becky and Kelly stood behind her.



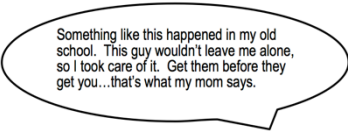
Becky hugged a notebook to her chest. Plump, with straight brown hair, she wore thick makeup to cover a cluster of pimples around her

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nose. “And you really talked to the principal today? You told him like *everything?*”

Susan nodded. “Everything. And you know how he is. So uptight. He actually blushed while quoting the sexual harassment rules to me. But I made sure he got my point. I mean, I felt like I was being stalked. *Stalked.* Remember those letters and cartoons Jonathan gave me. I showed them all to him. Every one. That creep actually called me right after I told him to stop.”

“Ohmygod! I could never go to the principal like that,” said Kelly. She caught her reflection in the mirror—braces, freckles--and looked away. “God! How did you know what to say?”



Something like this happened in my old school. This guy wouldn't leave me alone, so I took care of it. Get them before they get you...that's what my mom says.

Susan stands at locker

“So like how many schools have you been to?” asked Becky.

“Lots. Mom and I have lived all over the country. LA, Miami, Las Vegas. That’s what we do. Now Mom’s got this new husband, Robert. He’s loaded.”

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Kelly flipped the end of her braid. "What do you think they'll do to him, Jonathan Harriman?"

"Actually, what do I care?" said Susan. "I have to see him in English class next period. He'll try to sit next to me."

Becky looked out the hallway window. "There's Romeo now. Lover boy is like standing outside the school door."

Susan turned her head. *So like Jonathan. He'll stand there for a while before wandering off somewhere.*

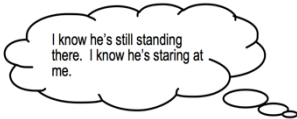
"Hide me," she said. "What's he doing? This is *so* embarrassing."

"He's just standing there," said Kelly. "Ohmygod! What a spaz. Let's smile at him. He'll stare at the ground. I'll bet you a pack of skittles he'll look at his feet. God!"

"And like, what's with those new clothes?" asked Becky. "I heard this joke about Jonathan, that's so funny. I posted it on Facebook. Check it out."

Susan pulled THE CRUCIBLE off her locker shelf. She checked the mirror again. She straightened her short tartan skirt and without looking out the window, left for class.

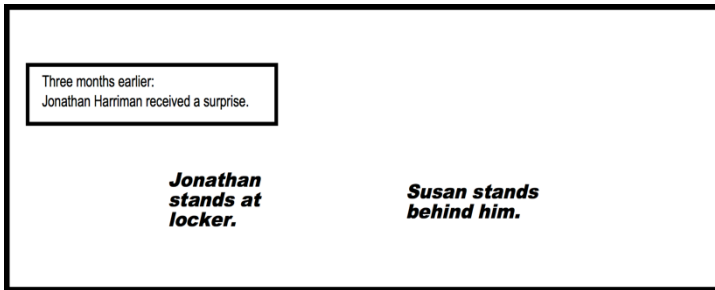
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I know he's still standing
there. I know he's staring at
me.

***Susan walking
toward class.***

3. JONATHAN & SUSAN



“Very impressive.”

Jonathan looked up from his locker. The new girl stood next to him. His face reddened; his armpits became sopped. He stared at the floor.

“You’re in my English class,” he said. “You’re new.”

“I know I am,” the girl said. “I’m Susan

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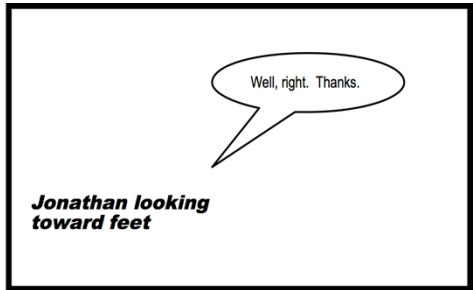
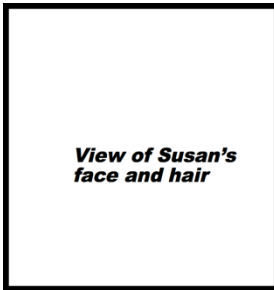
Hicks. Actually, I just wanted to say that I liked your comment in class. Of all the good books we could be reading, why is Xavier making us read that mockingbird one? Like you said, it's so old. Actually, did you know that book is so old that the movie is in black and white?"

"Well, right. Well, good. Well, thanks."

She laughed.

"You're shy. Actually, that's nice. Most of the boys I've met at this school are cocky. Rich, aggressive, and *overly*-confident."

He looked up. Her big, pink lips. Her green eyes. And the blond hair all over. His focus returned to his feet.



"We should call him Mr. XYZ," said Susan.

"Huh?"

"*Hello?*" she said. "Last English class? Mr. Xavier? His fly was open the whole period."

Jonathan blushed some more. "Oh, right. I get it. XYZ. He closed his locker. "I gotta go."

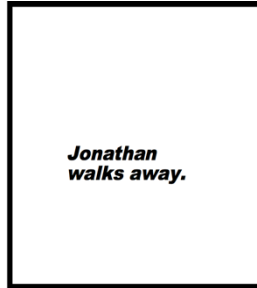
"Well, OK. Maybe we can read the

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mockingbird book together sometime. Help each other with homework. Actually, you seem like someone I can trust."

"Sure, sure."

He hitched up his jeans and hurried down the hall.



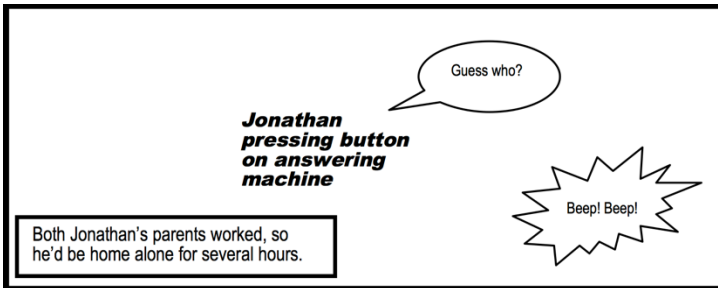
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4. JONATHAN

Parents. How long until they find out? That was the worst part. What will my parents do, think?

Jonathan fished in his pocket for the house key. Once inside, he raced to the telephone. The message button blinked.



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Mr. and Mrs. Harriman, this is, Norman Sims, the principal at Rosa Parks Middle School. We had to send your son home today. There's been a complaint by a female student at school. She claims that your son has been harassing her for the past several months. It's the school's policy to suspend a boy...ah, a person who has been accused of such matters until there's been an investigation. We urge you to supply the school with any written evidence that might help on your son's behalf. We will be sending you a written statement regarding this complaint. Please call the school if you have any further questions. Thank you.

Beep! Beep!

Jonathan shook his head. Again the sinking feeling.

Evidence on my behalf? What evidence? Evidence that we are friends? What am I supposed to do, hand them the notes Susan gave me? Should I have been recording our phone calls? Maybe someone saw me at the mall yesterday. But I doubt it.

He hit the erase button.

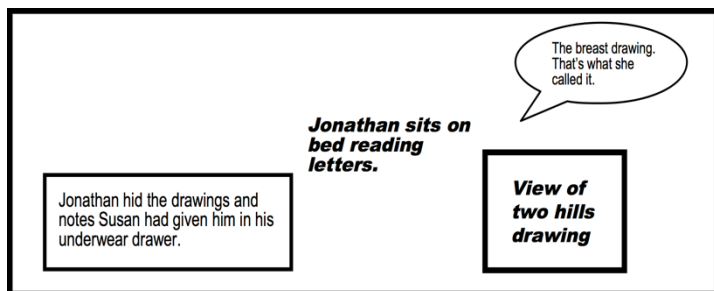
Formal charges? Legal action? Sexual harassment?

Jonathan ran upstairs to his bedroom. He booted up his computer and found the word *harassment* in an online dictionary.

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“Harassment...harass,” he read aloud. “To annoy continually; pester; to trouble, worry or torment.”

Jonathan found the notes, photos, and drawings Susan had given him. He sat on his bed to study them. One drawing showed two hills covered with flowers.



We laughed. That's when I wrote her the poems. About the breast drawing. She liked them. She even showed them to her mother and her mother liked them.

Again, Jonathan rifled through the drawer, and drew out the cheesy cell phone photos. Susan, pouting and eyes-half closed, sat posed on the boulder by the creek.

Man, she's good-looking.

He reread her notes. COULD WE MEET! and I NEED TO SEE YOU! and IOU BIG TIME, THANKS! each one signed with a little heart and her name.

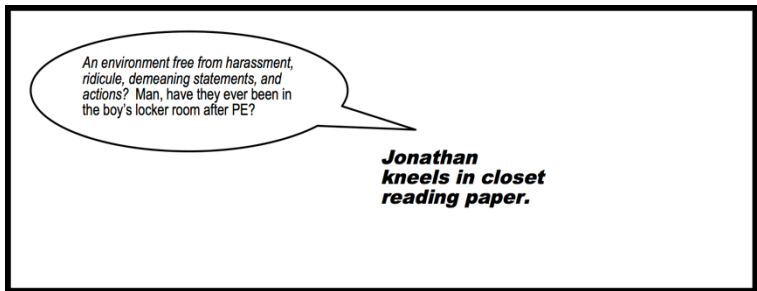
In the bottom desk drawer, Jonathan found

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the notice his principal had mentioned:

**Rosa Parks Middle School
Sexual Harassment Policy.**

Rosa Parks Middle School intends to maintain an environment free from harassment, ridicule, demeaning statements and actions, intimidation, or insult on the basis of an individual's sex or sexual orientation.



"I still don't get it."

The front door opened. Jessica, obnoxious sister, was home.

Jonathan turned on his radio.

Last person I want to talk to.

Jessica was a high school senior. Straight A's, star runner on the track team, boyfriends galore, and bound for Stanford next year.

In second-grade, Jonathan's teacher told his parents that he was different from his sister. Not to expect as much from him. Ever since, Jonathan managed to achieve what his parents expected of him, not much.

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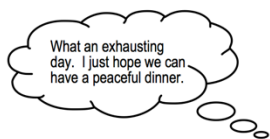
"What are you doing home so early?"
Jessica called up the stairs.

"What do you care?"

End of conversation.

At five-thirty, Jonathan's father came home from the clothing store where he worked. Pulling off his tie, he collapsed into a leather chair in the living room.

His mother, in a brown pantsuit, arrived shortly afterward. She held a bucket of chicken.



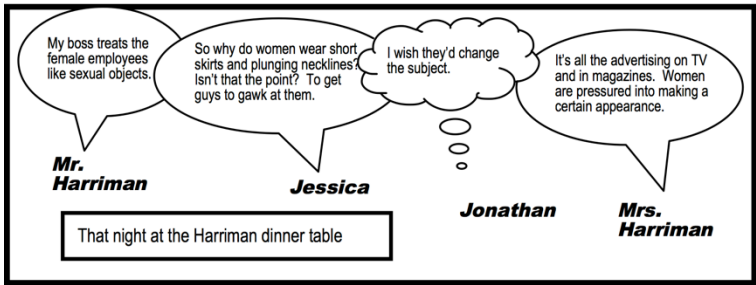
***Mrs. Harriman
stands in kitchen
with bucket of
chicken.***

"Jonathan! Jessica! Dinner!"

Throughout supper, Jonathan remained silent. He listened to his father complain about his boss.

"The man's terribly crude. Today at the staff meeting he told a filthy, sexist joke. He has a Sport's Illustrated bikini calendar on his office wall, and I've seen him pat female employees on the behind."

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“So why don’t women complain?” Jessica asked. “There are laws against things like that.”

“I imagine many women are too embarrassed to tell anyone,” said Jonathan’s mother.

“Or they keep quiet for the same reason I do,” said Jonathan’s father. “The boss could make working there very uncomfortable. Cut my hours, or stick me in the slow section of the store. With the new mortgage on this house, I can’t afford fewer commissions. I work six days a week as it is.”

“Every year in homeroom we get the old sexual harassment lecture,” said Jessica. “Do you know, according to Wikipedia *eighty-three percent* of girls in grades eight through eleven have been sexually harassed? *Eighty-three percent!* Seventy-eight percent of the boys.”

Jonathan drummed on his plate with a drumstick.

“How was school today, Jonathan?” asked his father.

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"OK"

"Much homework?"

"Not much."

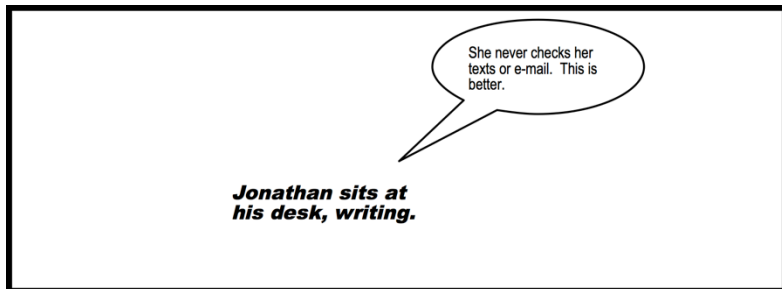
"Well, don't forget to study for your math test tomorrow," said his mother. "We expect at least a B in math this semester."

Jonathan slunk off to his bedroom. "Math test? Right."

For the next half-hour, he sat before his computer, watching videos on YouTube.

Surely, this harassment thing is a mistake. It's not the same as patting butts or telling dirty jokes. Susan couldn't have known I'd be suspended.

He ripped a sheet of paper from his notebook and began writing.



At seven o'clock, his cell phone played *Ride of the Valkyries*. Her ring tone.

"Hello."

Dead silence.

"Hello. Susan?"

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He heard whimpers. Someone was crying.

"Hello? Hello? Are you OK, Susan?"

He waited ten more seconds.

Tomorrow she'll get my letter. I can trust her.

Susan,

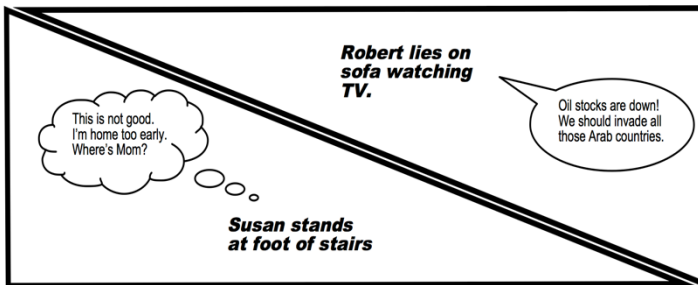
Can we talk? I care about you very much. I'll be at the boulder at 3:00. Hope you are well.

Your friend,
Jonathan

5. SUSAN

"Afternoon, Suzy-Q. How was your day?"
"Hello, Robert."

Susan's stepfather lay on the sofa, watching a blue line of stock prices cross the sixty-inch TV screen. Most likely he had slept until noon. Most likely he had been drinking red wine.



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"Hey, come over here and tell your old stepdad about your day."

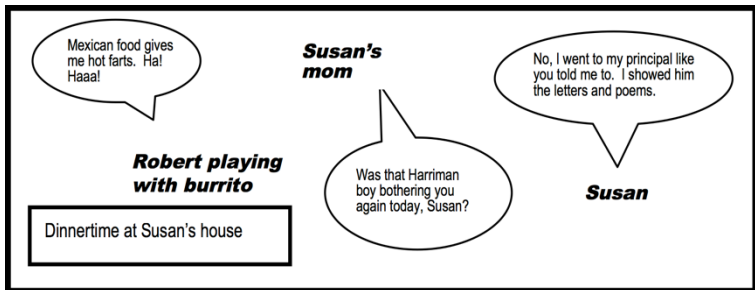
"I'm busy."

She shot up the stairs and into her room. After changing into jeans, she plunged onto her bed amidst a pile of stuffed animals. Now came two hours of doing her twenty nails, thinking, crying. Not until dinnertime would she have to go downstairs and face him again.

Why had her mother married that bastard? He was twenty years older than her. Losing his hair. Barrel-belly. Vulgar. Her mother was beautiful, so beautiful. Men gawked at her. She wore the wildest things. She could have had any man she wanted. Why Robert? Why him? Why did she even remarry?

During dinner, the three sat at the small table in the kitchen. A burrito, straight from the microwave, steamed on Susan's plate.

Robert, in shorts and Oakland Raiders football shirt, rolled the burrito side to side with his fork.



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Her mother's silky blond hair brushed against the dolphin tattoo behind her right ear. "Poor thing," she said.

Susan relished the look her mother gave her. "My principal told me Jonathan Harriman was suspended. He said he was sorry this had to happen to me at school."

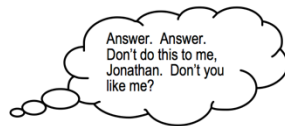
"Did you mention the XYZ video?" her mother asked.

Susan smiled. "Actually, no."

"That harasser?" said Robert. He placed a hand on Susan's thigh. "They'd better kick that kid out of your school for good, or we'll sue. No one is going to treat our Suzy-Q with disrespect."

Susan rammed her fork into her burrito. The hand remained. From the beginning, she had learned to wear jeans to the table.

After wolfing down the food, she left the kitchen. She tore up to her bedroom and grabbed her cell phone. His number was on speed dial.



Answer. Answer.
Don't do this to me,
Jonathan. Don't you
like me?

***Susan lies on
bed with cell
phone.***

SH!

“Hello.”

Susan said nothing. She waited for him to say more.

“Hello. Susan?”

She fought to hold back tears.

“Hello? Hello? Are you OK, Susan?”

She wanted to speak. She needed someone to talk to, and he was the only one who listened. Who else in the world cared?

6. SUSAN & JONATHAN

***Jonathan enters
front door with
Susan.***

Three months earlier:
Jonathan's first visit to Susan's house

"Nice house."

"Thanks, built it myself."

Jonathan removed his backpack. "I live just down the street." He waved to the man lying on the living room sofa. "Hey, hi."

"That's Robert. He's passed out and won't even know you're here."

"What's wrong with him?"

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Susan smiled. "You're *so* cute and clueless, Jonathan."

"You mean he's drunk. But it's noon!"

"Come on, I'll show you my room."

Dragging his backpack, Jonathan followed the girl up the stairs.

"Taa-daa. Here it is."

Jonathan stood in the bedroom doorway. The room was all pink and white. A menagerie of stuffed animals covered the bed and filled the shelves.

"Wow, look at this place."

Susan sat on her bed. She hugged a white teddy bear. "Come on in. Meet my friends."

"Wow, my sister's room is filled with trophies. You have all these...all these stuffed things." He reached into his bag. "Look I brought you some books to read. *The Hobbit. Chronicles of Narnia.* Stuff I thought you'd like."

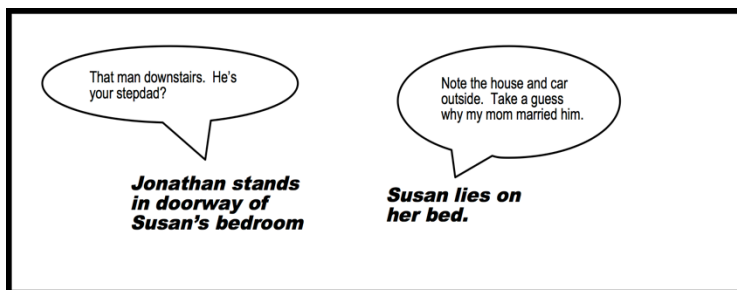
"Actually, what I should read is *TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD* for Mr. XYZ," said Susan. "Did you bring the essay?"

"Sure, I made you a copy and changed it a bit. Better than anything you could have found on the Internet."

"Then we're all through with homework and have the rest of the day to goof. Come in. Come in."

Jonathan took one step into the room.

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“So where’s...?” He gestured to the stairway.

“My real dad?” Susan laughed. “He left the scene long ago. Before I was born, so I’ve been told. Actually, Mom’s been married oh...let’s see...seven times. No Robert’s actually number eight. Have you seen my mom? She’s gorgeous. She gets all the men, any man she wants.”

“Right. I have a mom and dad. And a sister. One of each.”

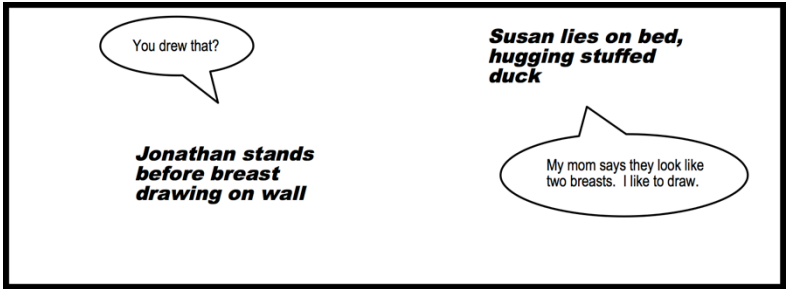
Susan hugged a large stuffed duck. “I only wish Robert would keep his hands to himself.”

“What do you mean?”

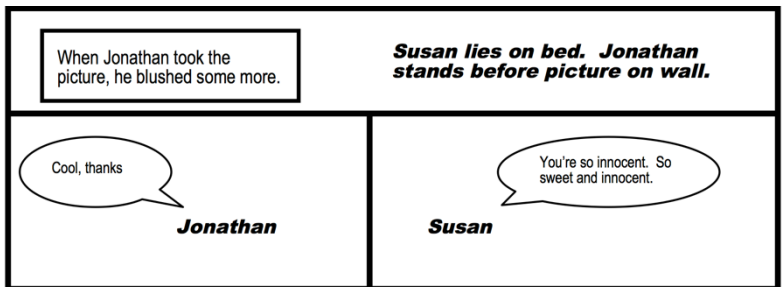
“What do you *think* I mean?”

Jonathan blushed and looked toward the wall. He studied a drawing of two hills covered with flowers.

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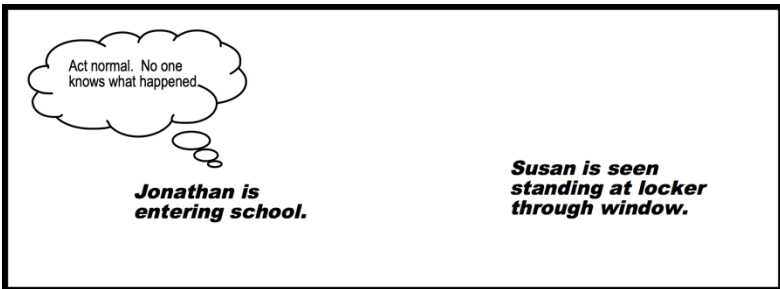


Jonathan looked toward the white carpet.
Susan rolled over on the bed and pulled the drawing off the wall. "Want it. It's yours. One essay for one drawing."



7. JONATHAN

Jonathan's heart hammered in his chest. Why did he feel like a criminal entering his own school?



Hands in pocket, eyes fixed on the front steps, he refused to look through the window. She would be standing at her locker. Becky and Kelly would be with her. They would wave and

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smile at him. But today he would not look up.

*Pretend this is an ordinary school day.
Walk straight to your locker.*

Earlier he had gotten dressed, thrown books into his backpack, even packed a lunch as though nothing was different.

*Keep going. You're doing nothing wrong.
It's confidential. Sh! No one knows.*

Jonathan walked down the long hall, speaking to no one. Meeting no one's eyes. At his locker, he spun the dial, but he was too nervous to remember the combination.

Behind him came voices.

"Hey, perv."

"What're you doing here, weirdo?"

The two boys were unfamiliar, but Becky and Kelly walked with them, giggling into their hands.

Jonathan waited for the bell to ring. When the hall cleared, he pulled the letter from his back pocket and headed for Susan's locker.

This is suicide. This is stupid. But I gotta know what's going on.

The hall by her locker was vacant. Without stopping, he shoved the letter through the door slot.

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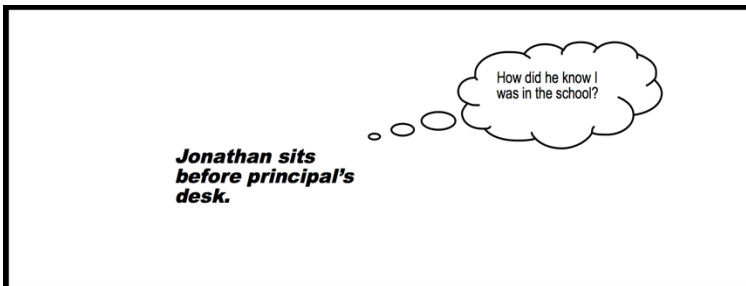
If Susan needs help, she can call me. Now with a few quick steps I'll be out the door and good-bye school.

The principal appeared in the office doorway. Susan Hicks slipped past him and headed down the hall in the opposite direction. The sweat under Jonathan's T-shirt turned cold.

The principal gestured with a finger.

I need to see you in my office?

Jonathan followed the man. For the second time in his life, he sat before the large desk.



Being suspended means you are not allowed in this school. When Susan Hicks heard

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you were in the hall she raced into this office very upset. You have no business being here today.

“But I needed to talk to her,” said Jonathan.

This persistence you have in contacting Susan, when she explicitly told you not to, makes the harassment case against you even worse, Jonathan.

Jonathan thought of the letter. “But how could things be worse? I mean, I’ve already been kicked out of school.”

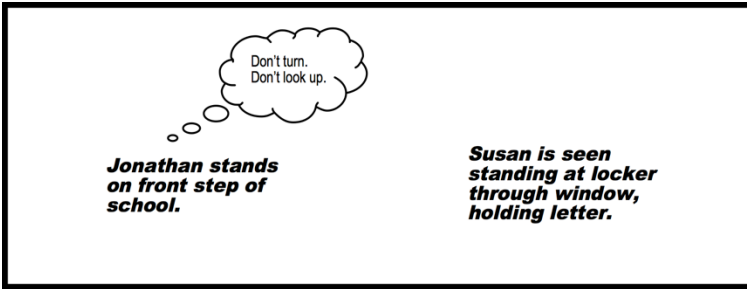
I was on the phone with the school district lawyer for hours last night. We’re just beginning to put the pieces together. Frankly, I’m already tired of this whole matter. We didn’t hear from your parents yesterday. What did they say?

“They were mad. They’re waiting for your letter. They’re collecting evidence on my behalf. But I still don’t know what I did wrong. Not really.”

You’ve just gone too far, Jonathan. You’ve been accused of a very serious thing--sexual harassment. Right now, everything is in the young woman’s court. Now I suggest you go straight home and don’t return to school until we call you and your parents in. And remember, not a word about this case to anyone. Good day.

Jonathan trudged from the office. Without looking anyway but down, he headed for the front door. On the steps, he stopped.

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He turned and saw her through the window.
She held the letter.

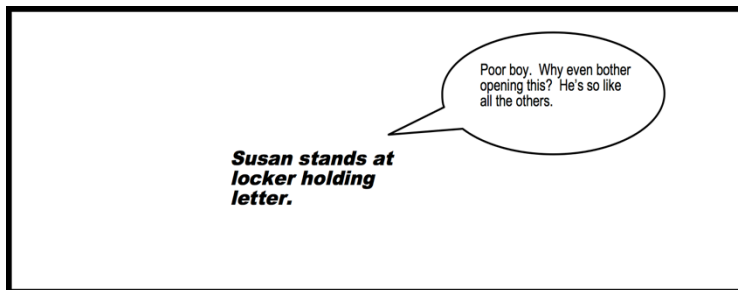
“What’s this all about?” he called out. “Are
you OK, Susan? Let’s stop this.”

SH!

SH!

8. SUSAN

Susan stood at the window by her locker. Two pink fingernails held Jonathan's letter.



She had seen him enter the school. After informing the principal, she sent text messages to Becky and Kelly. Now she watched the front door of the school.

SH!

Too much. Too much. Why always me? Again. Why don't they leave me alone?

Jonathan appeared. He shuffled out the front door, head bent, hands in pocket.

"He'll turn. He'll turn. I know him. He'll turn."

He turned.

Fingering the letter, she watched his face. Their eyes met.

What's he saying? Something angry. Something degrading. Verbal abuse. That's what my principal called it.

Susan spun toward her locker.

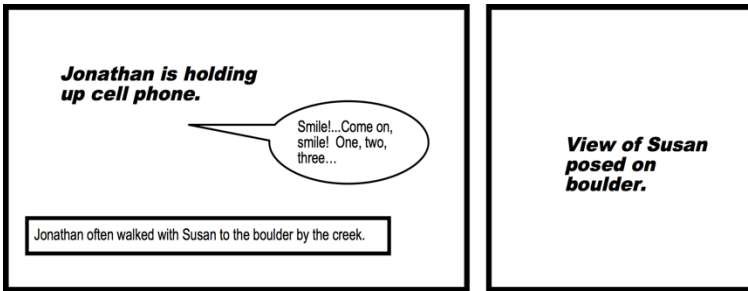
"Yes, yes. I knew it," she said aloud. "Jesus, he won't leave me alone. He's stalking me. *Stalking* me. This is scary."

She found a pen and scrawled the time and date on the letter.

***Susan is walking
toward office
with letter.***

Susan returns to office for the second time that day.

9. JONATHAN & SUSAN



Susan lay back on the boulder, hands behind her head. Bare shoulders and belly. Navel ring. Her mini-skirt hiked up her thighs.

"I suppose you're posting these pictures on Facebook," she said. "Show off."

Jonathan crammed the smart phone into his pocket. "I wouldn't do that."

SH!

He sat on the ground cross-legged and studied her.

Eyes closed; sunlight played upon her face and ignited her hair.

“So what does your mom do?” he asked.

“Do?” Her forehead furrowed. “She does yoga. Also, lomilomi, that’s Hawaiian massage. She does clay sculptures; she does everything.”

“Wow.”

“But mostly she shops. She’s very beautiful. She has a great sense of fashion.”

Jonathan pegged a stone into the creek.



Her eyes opened. “Actually, some of them, Ted, were...was nice. It’s switching schools all the time that’s a hassle. And finding new apartments. But Mom and I get along.”

“You said something before about this guy Robert. You said he...doesn’t keep his hands to himself.”

Susan laughed. “You sound like a second grade teacher.” She looked toward the water.

DOUGLAS EVANS

"Listen, it's no big deal. Actually, my mom will dump him as soon as she can."

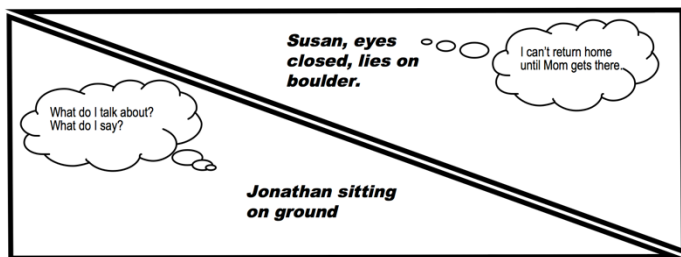
"Dump him?"

"Hey, if you're going to keep on with the interview, I'm going home."

"No, OK. I really like being here with you."

She closed her eyes again and smiled. The sunlight danced over her.

Long pause.



"It's just that *my* family is so boring," Jonathan said. "My mom is a real estate agent. She sells houses, and I only have one father. My sister is pitiful."

"I see you with that Margot Golden girl in English class sometimes," said Susan.

Jonathan tossed a stone into a small eddy spinning by the mud bank. "We go way back."

"Why?" She wore an expression of pain. "I mean, the way she dresses. Like a guy. The way she shows off in class. Miss Who-Does-She-Think-She-Is. Such a dike."

SH!

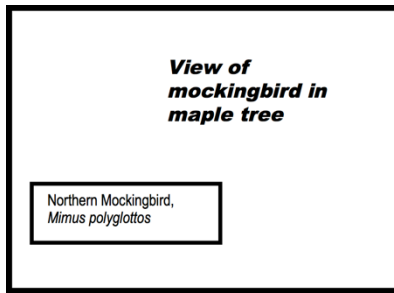
Jonathan nodded. "I guess you're right."

Above him, a bird fluttered from branch to branch.

"Hey, look!" he said, pointing. "A mockingbird. No kidding, it's a mockingbird."

"A what?"

"A bird like in the title *TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD*. Remember? I bet it's building a nest up there."



"Oh," she said.

Long pause.

"Actually, I gotta get home," said Susan. "Mom's taking me to this new French bistro."

"*It's a sin to kill a mockingbird,*" Jonathan quoted.

He took picture of her sliding off the boulder. "You know, this has been one of the best days of my life."

Susan shook her head. She straightened her skirt.

"Whatever."

DOUGLAS EVANS

Jonathan reached into his pocket and pulled out a sheet of yellow paper. "Remember that drawing you gave me? That picture of two hills."



SH!

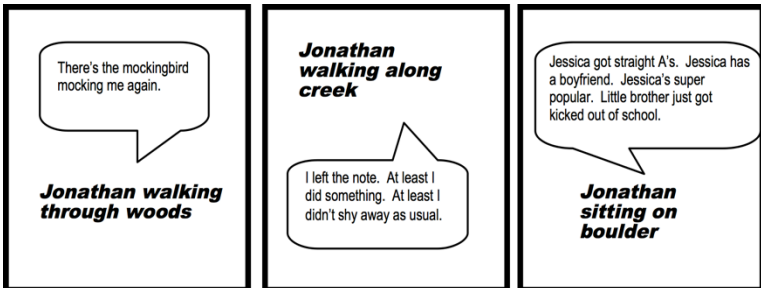
SH!

10. JONATHAN

Safest alone.

Jonathan preferred to play, hike, and study alone. He was awkward around people. People made him nervous. He thought that they thought that he was weird.

After leaving school, he walked to the woods. He ambled up the creek, rousing frogs that shot into the water. Rays of morning sun found their way through the maple trees, dappling the damp ground.



SH!

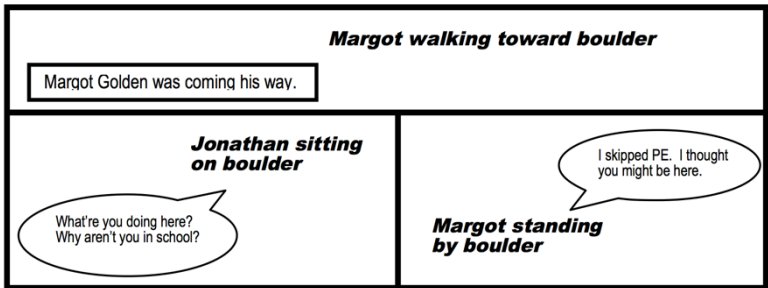
A single boulder, deposited millenniums ago by a receding glacier, sat out of place in the green world. Jonathan climbed onto the granite and pulled off his backpack.

How many Saturdays had he sat there with Susan? Talking. Goofing. Taking pictures. Her stories fascinated him. He felt special. One mother, one father, one family. That's all he ever knew.

So what happened? She liked me a lot? That's what she said. At least I left the note.

By the muddy bank, an eddy spun behind a fallen tree branch. Around and around.

Leaves scuffled, and Jonathan turned. Not Susan, but someone else.



The girl, short-cropped brown hair and blue overalls, stood by the boulder. "You missed English yesterday and today," she said. "We talked about THE CRUCIBLE."

Jonathan ran a hand across the rock he sat upon. "I couldn't go. That's all."

DOUGLAS EVANS

She glanced at his backpack. "There are rumors going around school. I'm getting odd text messages. Kids say you attacked Susan Hicks in the girl's bathroom. Some say you've been writing her pornography. You should read what's showing up on Facebook about you."

Jonathan shook his head. "I just wrote some dumb letters. That's all. I was trying to help Susan. That's all. She showed the letters to our principal, and said I was bothering her. Sexual harassment, he called it."

He saw the look of surprise.

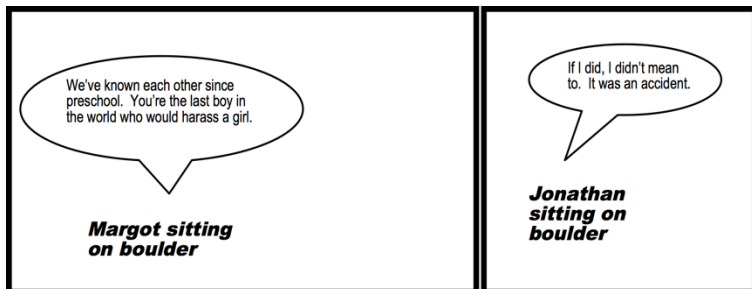
"*Sexual harassment?* Oh, come on," Margot said. "You?"

"That's what they said I did."

"Jon, that's serious."

Jonathan shrugged.

"Susan Hicks? She's dangerous," said Margot. "Sounds like she wants attention by getting you in trouble. Such a first-grade thing. Why do you care about a mixed-up flirt like Susan Hicks?"



SH!

Jonathan shrugged again.

"You have the softest heart of anyone I know," said Margot. "But I also know teachers. If they think there's a problem at school, they *must* react."

Jonathan's throat tightened. At least the whole world wasn't against him. How had Margot figure things out so quickly?

"Funny, but Susan got pissed when I told her I hang out with you sometimes," he said. "She called you names...a dike."

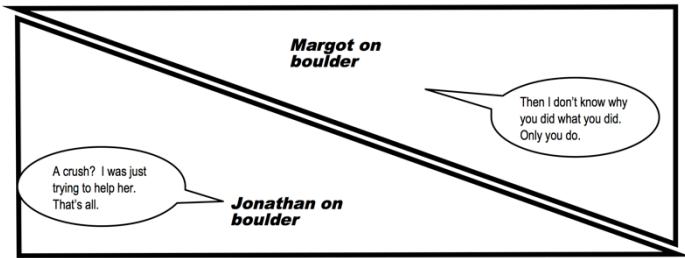
"Oh, that's such a fifth-grade thing," said Margot. "Besides being called a dike isn't really an insult."

Jonathan looked at Margot. Here was a girl who was smart and honest. You could trust Margot. If you said something Margot didn't like, she would just come and tell you. Not complain to the principal.

"This morning I did something else," he said. "I left another letter in Susan Hick's locker. Why'd I do that? That's going to get me into bigger trouble."

Margot placed her hand on Jonathan's sneaker. "I don't know. Sounds like you have a crush on that girl. Lots of boys do. Fess up. Crushes make you do stupid things. Like taking that video of Mr. Xavier's open fly in English. That was stupid."

DOUGLAS EVANS



SH!

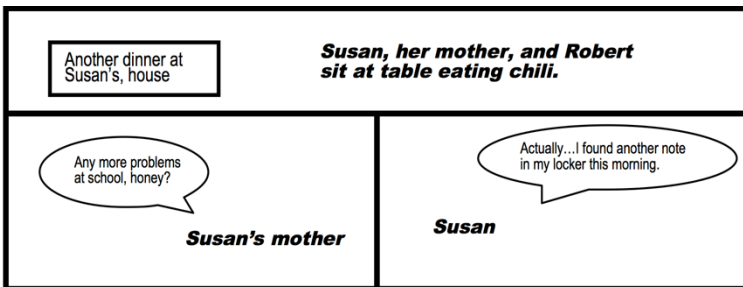
SH!

'11. SUSAN

Susan Hicks sat down at the kitchen table.

The stepfather crunched some crackers in his fist. He sprinkled them onto his bowl of chili.

“You’re late, Suzy-Q. Chili’s getting chilly.” He laughed with a snort. His eyes fixed on the front of her white T-shirt.



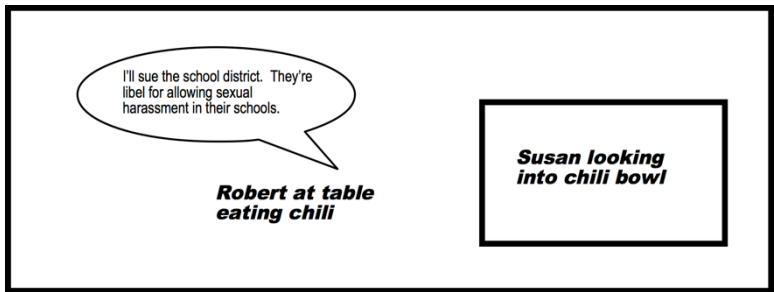
SH!

Robert dropped his spoon. "This morning? Your principal told us that kid's been suspended."

"He was there this morning," said Susan. "Nothing to stop him."

"Poor thing," said her mother.

"Unbelievable," said the stepfather. "Well, this pretty much does it. If the school can't keep that boy from bothering you, I will."



"Did you show the note to your principal?" asked her mother.

"Right away. I put the date and time on it as you told me to do."

"Poor thing," repeated her mother. "I was going to call the Harriman's last night, but I didn't have time. You'd think they'd teach their children more respect for others."

Robert placed his hand on the girl's thigh and shook it. "Remember, Suzy-Q, you can trust your mother and your old stepdad here. We won't be satisfied until that Harriman kid is in a reform school far away--some place where they'll

DOUGLAS EVANS

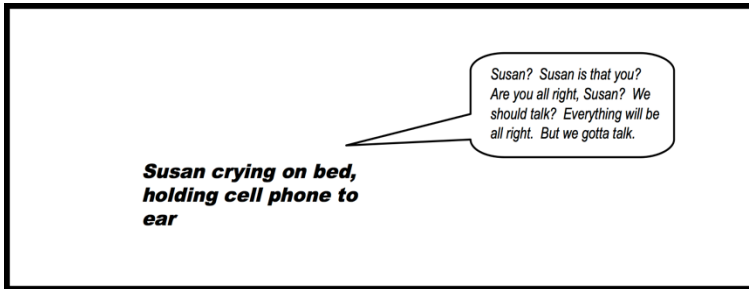
teach him manners.”

Susan said nothing else throughout dinner. The hand felt like fire on her knee. The chili made her gag.

Afterwards she ran to her room and picked up her cell phone. Finally, he answered.

“Hello.”

She waited to hear more.



She threw the phone at a teddy bear and burst into tears.

SH!

SH!

12. JONATHAN

Jonathan's mother was practically screaming. "You've been out of school for *two* days, and this is the first we've heard about it. What have you been *doing* all day? Where have you been *going*?"

His father shook the letter in his hand. "The instant we received this in the mail we went straight to your school. Your principal said he called us on Monday and left a message. Obviously, we never got that message. Your principal also said that despite your suspension, you returned to school and left another note for that girl."

Jonathan sat on a hassock in the living room. His parents, still in work clothes, paced the floor in front of him.

SH!

“At first we couldn’t *believe* any of this...this sexual harassment nonsense,” said his mother. “But then your principal showed us the notes...the *notes* you wrote to the Hicks girl. The school district lawyers had highlighted the vulgar parts in yellow. How could you write those things, Jonathan?”



Jonathan shrugged. “That’s how Susan talked to me. I was trying to be funny.”

His father threw his hands into the air. “Trying to be funny? Is that all you can say? Trying to be funny?”

Jonathan’s sister entered the living room. She sat on the sofa, pretending to read Time magazine.

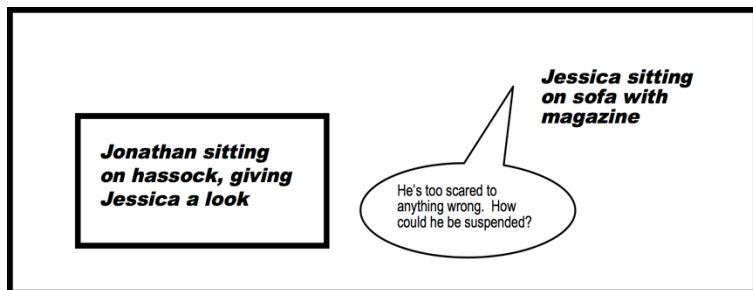
“Did you know anything about this, Jesse?” asked his mother.

“About what?”

His father held up the letter. “Your brother was suspended from school two days ago.”

DOUGLAS EVANS

Jessica's eyes widened. She rolled forward, laughing. "Suspended? Jonathan? What did he do? He's never done anything wrong in his life?"



"He wrote *pornography* to a girl," said his mother.

"They're accusing him of sexual harassment," his father said.

More laughter from Jessica. "Sexual *harassment*? Shy Jonathan? Jonathan can't even look at a girl without going red. He wouldn't even know *how* to sexually harass a girl."

Jonathan made a face.

"That's enough, you two," said his mother. "This is very serious."

Jonathan's father turned toward his son again. "Your principal said you even admitted your guilt."

Images of the swirling creek water played in Jonathan's head. The water whirling down, down.

SH!

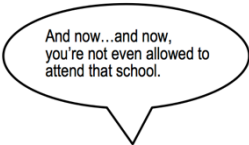
“My principal said that once I contacted Susan after she told me to stop I broke the law. I was being honest.”

Mr. Harriman	Jonathan
Jonathan	Mrs. Harriman

His mother walked forward. “I *never* know what’s going on in your mind, Jonathan. I’m sure people are already beginning to talk. You must remain quiet about this whole affair. *Sexual harassment?* If people in this community learn about what you did, you’ll be a *laughing* stock.”

“More than you already are,” said his sister.

“Enough, Jessica,” said his father. “Listen, young man, I work six days a week at the clothing store to afford this house in this suburb. As a result, you children can go to the best school.

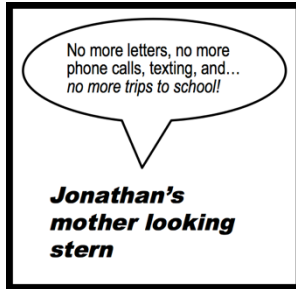


And now...and now,
you're not even allowed to
attend that school.

**Jonathan's father
looking stern**

DOUGLAS EVANS

"We *both* work very hard, Jonathan," said his mother. "Remember, I have to sell houses in this town. Stay away from that Hicks girl. Do you understand? No more letters, no more phone calls, texting, and *no more trips to school.*"



Jonathan nodded.



His father said, "The school board is meeting tonight to hear the results of the investigation. Tomorrow morning we will all meet with your principal again. Tonight you will stay in your room and study. No TV. No cell

SH!

phone. No computer.”

“And wash that gunk out of your hair,” said his mother. “And those clothes. Where’d you get those jeans? This new Jonathan isn’t the boy I know.”

Jonathan watched his parents stormed from the room.

Jessica looked over the top of her magazine. “Oh, brother, you really did it this time brother.”

Jonathan ignored her.

Jessica leaned forward. “Listen, I know you’re in trouble, and I hope it blows over. But nowadays schools are very touchy about this sexual harassment thing. In class, we even read about a second-grader who was kicked out of school for teasing a girl on the playground. Can you believe that?”

Jonathan nodded, although he had quit listening.

“You know, I think the sexual harassment laws are good,” Jessica went on. “I mean no girl *or* boy should have to tolerate unwanted sexual advances at school or work. But, I mean, an eight-year old on a playground? That makes the law seem silly. It weakens the intentions.”

Jonathan gave no reply, but ran upstairs to his bedroom. He checked the clock.

Five to seven. She’ll call soon. I know she’ll call.

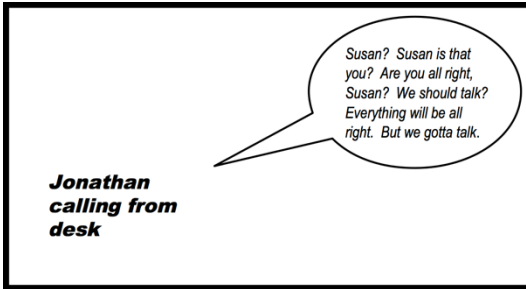
Still, when the phone played *Ride of the*

DOUGLAS EVANS

Valkyries, Jonathan jolted. He whipped the smart phone to an ear.

"Hello."

Silence.



SH!

SH!

13. SUSAN

Susan lay under the pink comforter, clutching a stuffed bunny to her chest. The moon stared through her bedroom window. She wore white earbuds, listening to her Nano with the volume on high. Still she could hear the row downstairs, her stepfather's shouting and cursing, her mother's pleading and crying.

***Susan lies in bed,
hugging stuffed bunny.***

Susan lay in her bed, listening to
the row downstairs.

CRASH!

CRASH!

SH!

The numbers on the TV blue tape must have been low. Robert had been drinking more wine than usual. His words slurred as he ranted.

"All you do is play tennis, shop for clothes, do that whacky massage, spending my hard-earned money. I give you and that spoiled daughter of yours a beautiful house, a fancy sports car, but you can't even cook me a decent meal."

"Lower your voice, Robert. Please. She'll hear."

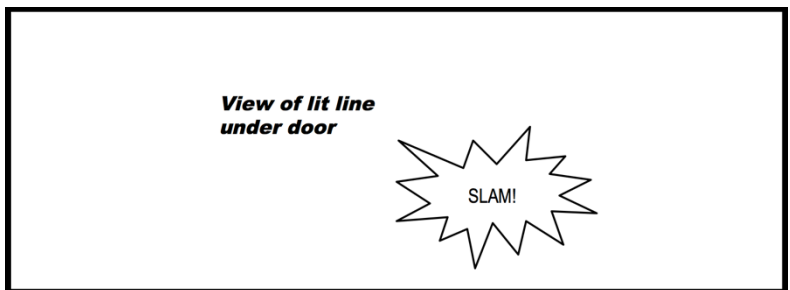
"I *want* her to hear. You're *both* a waste of time. Worthless."

"Please, Robert. Don't."

A crash followed. Maybe a dish this time? Or one of her mother's clay sculptures.

"Stop! Please, stop!"

Susan turned up the music. "Jesus, have some strength, Mom. Have strength."



The line under her bedroom door lit. Susan heard the *thump, thump* of her mother mounting

DOUGLAS EVANS

the stairs.

Slam!

The bedroom door down the hall shut.

Ten minutes later came the uneven thud of Robert's steps on the stairway. Not until the space beneath her door turned black again did Susan breath easier.

She removed the earbuds and rolled onto her side. Silence. Peace.

Yet hardly had her eyelids closed, when they shot back open. Had the doorknob clicked? She sat upright. Moonlight shone upon the doorknob. Yes, it was turning.



***View of turning
doorknob in
moonlight***

*Bedroom locks are for untrusting families,
he told me. Bastard. Bastard. Bastard.*

The door cracked opened, and she heard his voice. "Suzy-Q? It's only me."

"Go away," she whimpered.

"Step daddy wants to know about your day. Tell me how you are."

SH!

Robert stumbled into the room and knelt by her bed. She lay back, silent, staring at a spot on the ceiling.

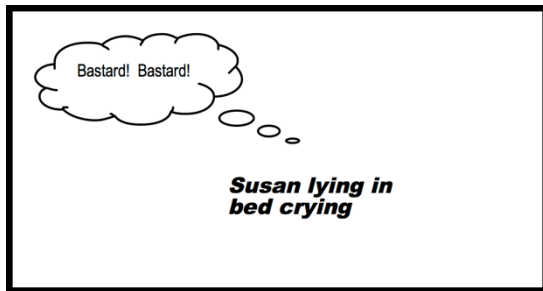
"We'll take care of that nasty Harriman boy. No more worrying about him with the old step daddy here."

He had entered her bedroom before. *I want us to be a happy family. Close,* was his explanation.

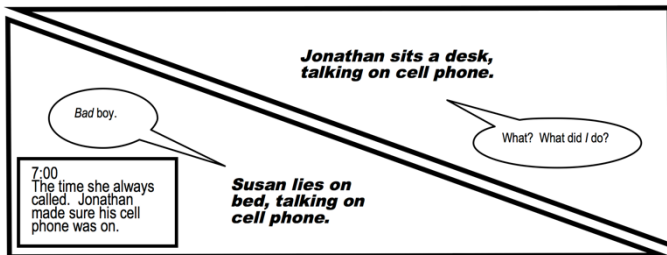
Now he stumbled toward her bed. He lifted the comforter and grabbed through her cotton nightie.

"Hey, Suzy-Q, you like me, don't you?" His sour breath poured into her nostrils.

She waited for it to be over. When she whimpered, a hand pressed over her mouth. She waited and waited and waited.



14. SUSAN & JONATHAN



Susan laughed. She cradled her cell phone under her cheek.

"The poem, stupid," she said. "I didn't know you had it in you."

Jonathan tapped his pen on the desktop.

"What do you mean?"

"*So risqué*," said Susan.

SH!

“Oh, right. Glad you liked it. I’m writing some more.”

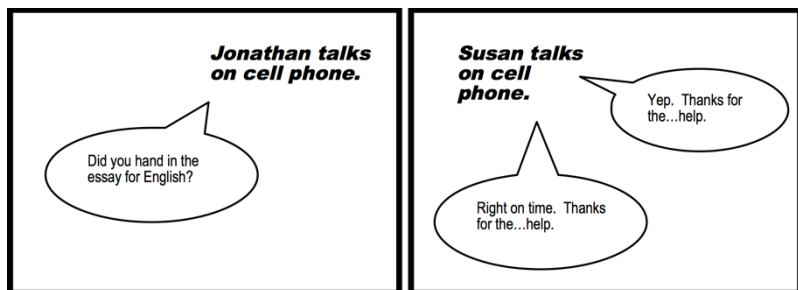
Susan examined a fingernail. “Do send.”

Jonathan crossed out a line of poetry with his pen. “Sure, check your e-mail in a bit.” he said.

Susan hugged a stuffed giraffe. “Actually, I hate e-mail. Too much junk. Stuff for Prozac and teen porn.”

“If you had Skype on your phone we could see each other right now.”

Long pause.



Pause

“Jesus, did you see that Mr. Xavier’s fly was open again?” Susan asked

“Hard not to notice.”

Susan laughed. “Actually, *that’s* what you should use your iPhone for. Take a clip of Mr. XYZ during English.”

“Now *that’s* what could get someone in big trouble.”

DOUGLAS EVANS

"Not if you don't get caught. I dare you."

Jonathan looked toward his bedroom door and saw Jessica walk by.

"What do you mean?"



"Triple dare," said Susan. "And...if you put the flick on YouTube, you get a big prize."

Jonathan fiddled with his earphone. "Prize? What sort of prize?"

"I've seen how you look at me on the boulder."

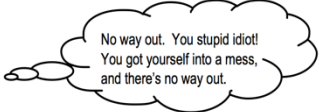
SH!

SH!

15. JONATHAN

Jonathan lay in bed, thoughts preventing sleep. Silvery moonlight spread across the bedroom rug. The room was silent. No TV whispered or dishwasher whirred downstairs. No furnace wheezed under his bed. But battles raged in his head.

Jonathan lies in bed in moonlit room.



No way out. You stupid idiot!
You got yourself into a mess,
and there's no way out.

That night, Jonathan found it impossible to sleep.

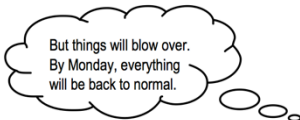
SH!

Yes. Yes, there is. Why can't we just arrange a meeting? Me, her, the principal, her parents, my parents--we can get together and talk this over. That's what the teachers tell kids to do, talk things over. We'll shake hands. I'll just say I'm sorry.

But I don't even know what I could apologize for. What did I do wrong?

You did nothing wrong. Taking the XYZ clip was stupid, but I took it off the net, so who knows? You got the shaft. That's what Margot said. You were being kind. You were caring for someone. What's wrong with being kind and caring?

Kind and caring. Sure. So why am I not kind and caring to everyone? Only to Susan Hicks, the best looking girl in the school. The world. You stupid idiot. What did you expect to get anyway?



But things will blow over.
By Monday, everything
will be back to normal.

**Jonathan lies
in bed.**

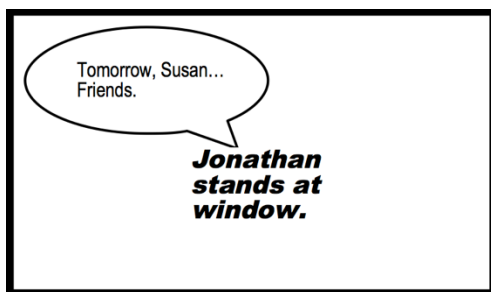
DOUGLAS EVANS

But so far nothing has gone right. My parents don't even believe me. They said I shamed them. No way out. Being kind is a waste of time.

He glanced toward the window. What had he heard? He rose from bed and stood before the illuminated glass. Moonlight glistened on the front lawn, on the bare-footed figure standing there. Her golden hair, tossed, appeared to be on fire. A white bathrobe flowed about her body. Sparkling wet eyes peered upward.

Jonathan combed his fingers through his hair. He backed away. He adjusted his pajama bottoms before returning to the window.

She still stood there, her lips moving. Should he go downstairs? Open the window and call down? No, that would spoil this perfect moment.



SH!

SH!

16. SUSAN

Get out. Go. Leave. How could she remain in that bedroom, in that house? The man had left and she lay there shaking, sweating. His odor lingered. She wanted to scream out, but who would help her? Who would believe her?

***Susan sits on edge of
bed, crying***

Susan couldn't stay in that house.

SH!

She rolled out of the bed and pulled on her bathrobe. Barefooted, she rushed out of her room and down the stairs. Outside the front door, she threw up in the bushes.

The moon lit the way. She walked along the sidewalk, cold cement beneath her bare feet. Too numb to cry. Hands clawing at body, as if pulling off crud.


***Susan walks
down street.***

As if in a trance, she walked.

Now she stood on Jonathan Harriman's front lawn. His was the window second floor, far left. She had stood there before. Here was a real home, with a real family. A whimper escaped her lips before she could stop it.

Jonathan appeared at the window. She tightened the bathrobe around her neck. A breeze swept through her hair. When he moved away she waited for him to return. She knew what he was saying.

DOUGLAS EVANS



Friends...you're the
only person who
cares about me.

***Susan stand on lawn
in nightgown, looking
toward window.***

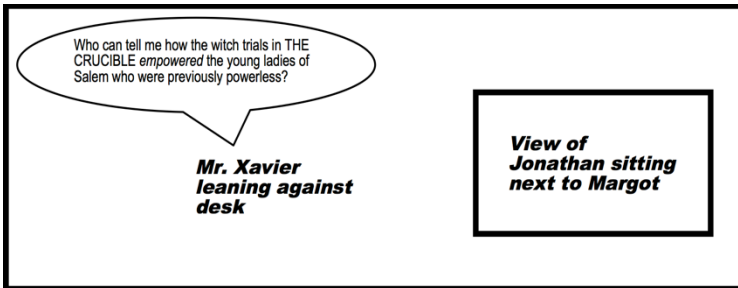
SH!

SH!

17. JONATHAN & SUSAN

Mr. Xavier's fly was open. The English teacher—baby-boomer, with only a fringe of white hair left on his head--leaned against his desk. He held up a dog-eared copy of THE CRUCIBLE.

"*Empowerment.* That's a major theme of this play," he said.



SH!

No hand went up.

“OK, Margot, you tell us,” said the teacher.

Margot talked.

Jonathan slumped in his seat next to her. He had tried avoiding her, but she followed him into the room.

Susan Hicks sat in the far corner. Usual spot. Far from Jonathan.



Jonathan reached into the pocket. He removed his smart phone and held it under his desk.

Susan looked over. Saw it. Smiled. Made the OK sign

The teacher asked another CRUCIBLE question. He turned toward a boy by the door.

Jonathan slid the phone onto his desktop. Under a notebook. Lens aimed at teacher's crotch. Record.

“What are you doing?”

Jonathan ignored Margot's whispers. He held the phone steady.

DOUGLAS EVANS

"Stop, Jon. That's rude."

Jonathan lowered the phone into his lap.



Cut it out. That's
not like you, Jon.

**Margot at desk,
looking toward
Jonathan.**

**Jonathan holds
iPhone in lap.**

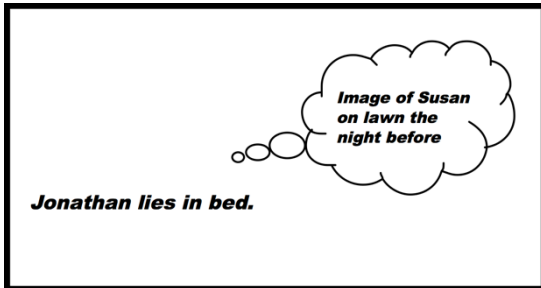
For the first time in his
life, Jonathan felt
empowered.

SH!

SH!

18. JONATHAN

When the alarm rang, Jonathan rolled over. Eyes shut, he recalled the details of last night.



A knock on his door.

"It's locked, Jonathan. Let me in."

Jonathan slid out of bed. He opened the door.

"What are you doing not dressed?" his

SH!

mother said. "We're meeting your principal at eight."

"I had a hard time getting up," said Jonathan.

"You're just down, honey. You'll get over it. Now put your clothes on. We're having breakfast as a family."

Jonathan pulled on his jeans and a gray T-shirt. He ate breakfast without a word. As soon as he was back upstairs, he grabbed his smart phone and pressed Margot Golden's number.

Her voice, rising in question, answered. "Jon? What's the matter? Have you heard from the principal yet?"

"We're meeting with him this morning. But that's not why I called. I think she's in trouble. She needs help."

"What? Who?"

"You know, Susan...Susan Hicks."

He heard a groan.

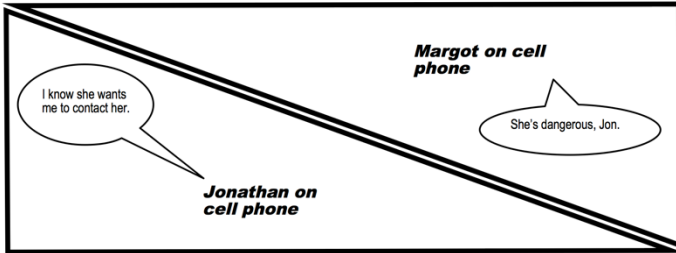
"What do you mean she's in trouble? What sort of trouble?"

"I don't know. I have a feeling something happened in her house last night. Something bad. Something with her stepdad. Last night she was standing on my front lawn. She had no shoes on. Only a bathrobe."

"Weird," said Margot.

DOUGLAS EVANS

"But you know I can't call her," said Jonathan. "I can't text or anything. But I'm sure she was asking me for help. She was saying something." I know she wants me to contact her."



"She knows who put the XYZ clip on YouTube, and she can make things much worse," said Margot. "Why trust Susan Hicks?"

"It's important to trust people," said Jonathan.

"Blind trust, a kindergarten thing. So what do you want from me."

"Talk to her."

"What? What do you mean? When? Where? I don't even *know* her."

"Will you talk to her at school today? Something's wrong and I need to know what it is."

His mother called from downstairs.

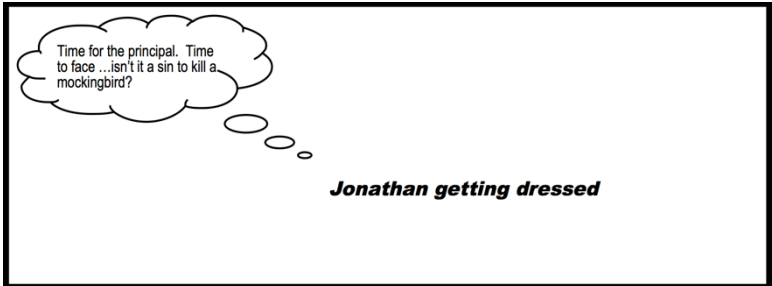
"Gotta go, Margot," Jonathan said to the cell.

SH!

“Are you going to be all right? With the meeting and everything.”

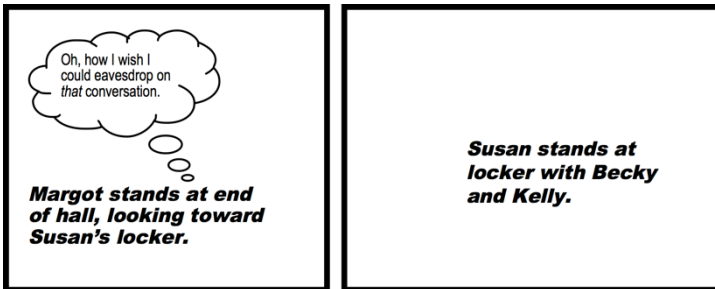
“Everything will work out fine. Just help me out. Just this once. Call me later. Send a text.”

He crammed the phone into his pocket.



19. SUSAN

Margot Golden looked down the hall. Susan Hicks stood before her locker mirror. Becky, hugging books, and Kelly, flipping the end of a braid, stood by her sides. The trio broke out in giggles.



SH!

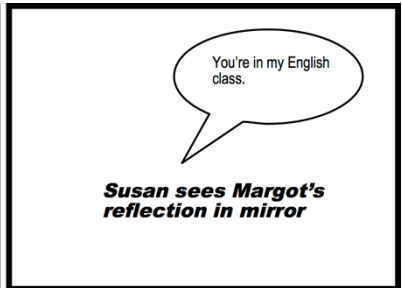
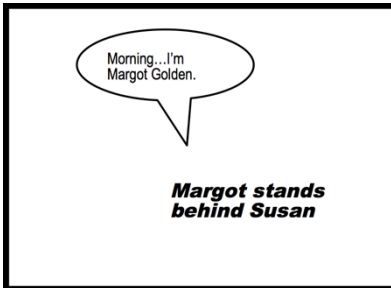
Margot pulled THE CRUCIBLE from her backpack and pretended to read. Again, she wondered why she was doing this. Getting involved. The reason was more than to help a friend. An injustice had been committed.

Jonathan Harriman is no sexual harasser. He's just awkward around people. He thinks too much. He's sensitive. So what if he flipped out over a flirt in a skirt. Isn't that part of being a teenager?

Margot turned a page and checked the locker again.

And look at Susan Hicks. Miss confident. She has it all. Looks, hallway smarts, and oodles of friends. Maybe not too bright, but she's been around. Would anyone listen to Jonathan's side of the story at the meeting today? Nope. All sympathy would go to that good-looking girl down the hall. Pretty girls get everything.

After her friends left, Susan Hicks started combing her hair in the locker mirror. When she saw Margot's reflection, she didn't turn.



DOUGLAS EVANS

"So is... *was* Jonathan Harriman. I'm a friend of his."

Susan's eyes narrowed. She spun around, pointing her comb at Margot. "He sent you to talk with me. Didn't he?"

The swift deduction surprised Margot.

"This might seem weird," she said. "But Jonathan Harriman said you were in trouble. He said you might need help."

Susan's voice trembled. "Jesus, that creep is still not minding his own business. He's still harassing me. What did he actually tell you?"

"Very little. He said you might be having problems at home."

"That's a lie."

"He said maybe things would be better if you talked to someone. If you sought help."

Susan's mouth went funny. Her eyes watered. "And you actually believe that pervert?"

"I have no reason not to believe him."

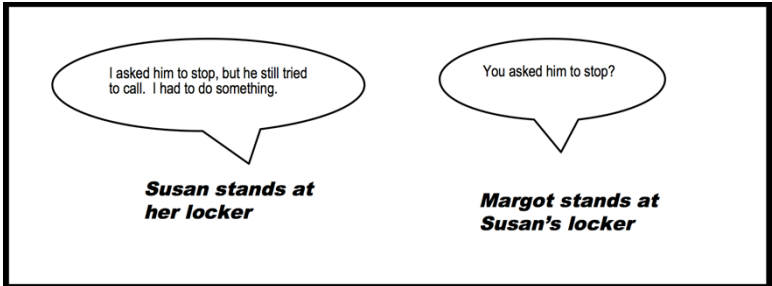
"But can't you see," said Susan. "He's using you to get to me. He's has this thing with me. He won't let me *alone*."

Margot paused. The truth in the statement hurt.

"But why get him in all that trouble," she said. "Why didn't you just talk with him instead of going straight to the principal?"

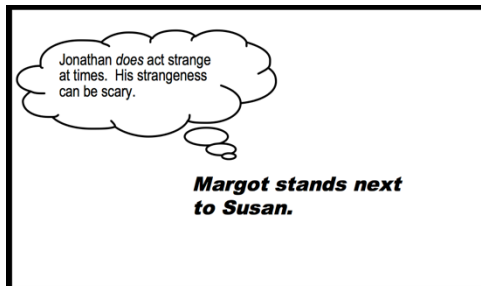
SH!

Susan dabbed her eyes with a tissue. “You know Jonathan. He’s very smart. It’s hard to talk to him. And he always acts weird around me. He gawks at me, follows me, and writes me sick notes. That scares me a lot.



“Yes, *yes*. And now look what he’s doing,” said Susan. “He’s having *you* contact me.”

Margot gave no reply. Perhaps she was mistaken about this girl. She certainly appeared real, nothing fake about her.



Margot recalled an article she had read about sexual harassment in schools. Intimidation

DOUGLAS EVANS

was a major problem. She wondered how many cases go unreported because girls were too scared to speak up.

Maybe Susan Hicks was the brave one, she thought. This girl took action. Maybe I judged her too quickly. She asked Jonathan to stop bothering her and he kept on doing it. That's sexual harassment.

The bell rang.

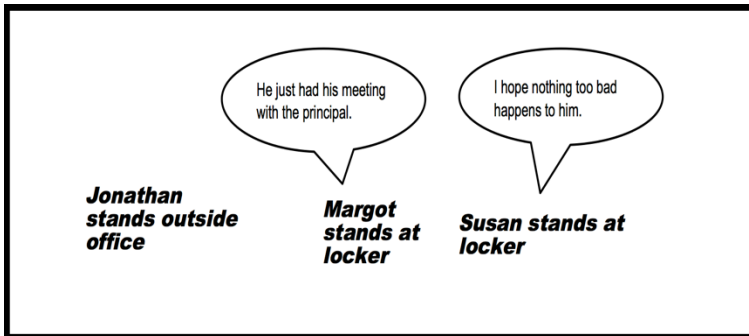
Margot smiled. "Maybe I owe you an apology. Maybe I had you wrong."

"Actually, I didn't know I'd been had," said Susan.

Together they laughed.

Down the hall Jonathan Harriman, his father, and mother had emerged from the office. The adults huddled, were reading papers. Jonathan, hands in pockets, stood beside them. He glanced down the hall.

Susan and Margot quickly turned away.

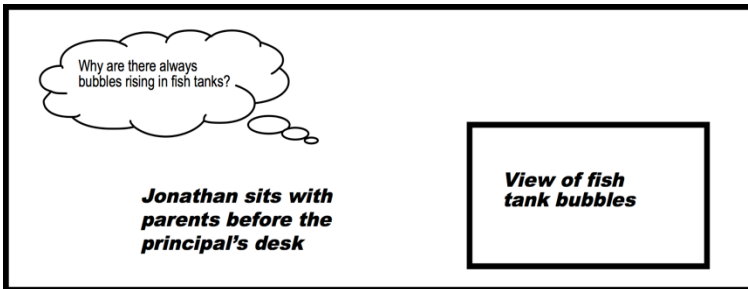


SH!

SH!

20. JONATHAN

Jonathan and his parents sat in the school office. Jonathan stared into the fish tank. Bubbles floated up from a plastic clam.



Jonathan's father sat with his legs crossed. He checked his watch and shook his head. Jonathan's mother sat stiff and straight, picking lint off her pantsuit.

SH!

The principal folded his hands on a thick manila folder.

I called you all in here today to discuss the findings of the investigation regarding Jonathan's case and the decision of the school board during their meeting last night. I must ask you to read this report and sign it.

The principal withdrew a seal envelope from the folder. He handed it to Jonathan's father.

"Well this certainly looks official," his father said.

The three adults laughed nervously.

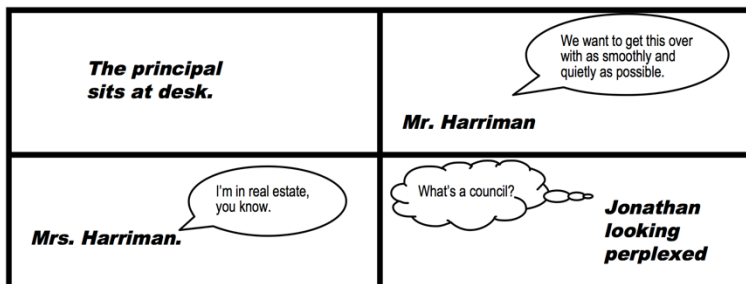
The principal leaned forward, palms flat on his desktop.

Everything has been done in strict accordance with the lawyer's guidelines. I'm afraid what you will read is not pleasant. I also asked you if you wanted your family lawyer present when you read this and you opted to come with council. Is that correct?

His father nodded. "No council is necessary."

"Imagine if this news ever got to the papers," said his mother. "Once your name gets mixed up in something like this, it's hard to clear it."

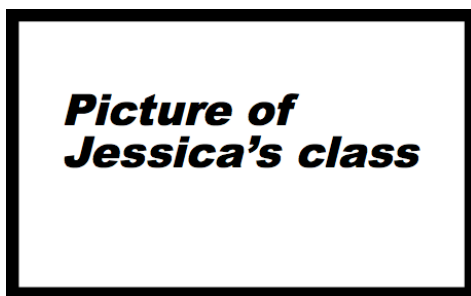
DOUGLAS EVANS



I feel that's what the school board was also considering in their decision. But things don't look good. First, please read over the report. Then I'll go over the options the school board is offering to Jonathan.

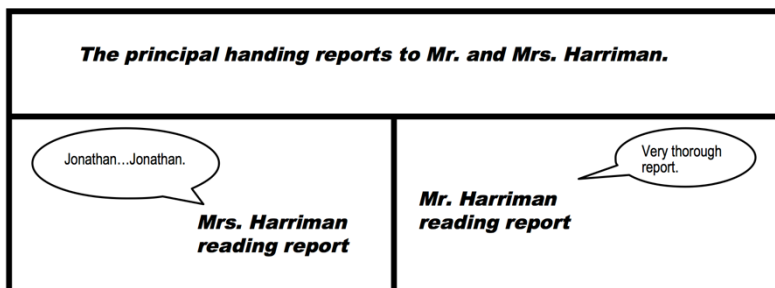
The mother slid her chair over. The father opened the envelope. The parents read the report together, his father with a wrinkled brow, his mother with lips moving slightly.

Jonathan studied the pictures on the wall. Graduating classes going back ten years. Jessica Harriman, class president, beamed down at him.



SH!

It's a given that they'll say I'm guilty. Big question is punishment. When two sixth graders were caught drawing graffiti on a gym wall, they had to spend a whole Saturday cleaning up the school grounds. Two girls smoking in the Girls' Room received a weeklong detention. So, what's the punishment for writing letters?



Both parents stared at him.

As you have read, everything fell into Susan Hick's court. I asked you to supply us with any written evidence to support Jonathan's side of the story, but he had none.

"We understand," his father said.

I've been principal for thirty years at this school. I've seen many things. But never have I seen a girl so shaken as Susan Hicks was when she came to me and complained about your son harassing her.

"So what can we do about this?" asked his mother. "What are the options for Jonathan."

The principal pulled his chin.

DOUGLAS EVANS

The school board offers you two. First, Jonathan can agree to leave this school voluntarily. He can transfer to another school in the city. I have already talked to Susan's parents. They agreed not to press further charges against Jonathan if he chooses this option.

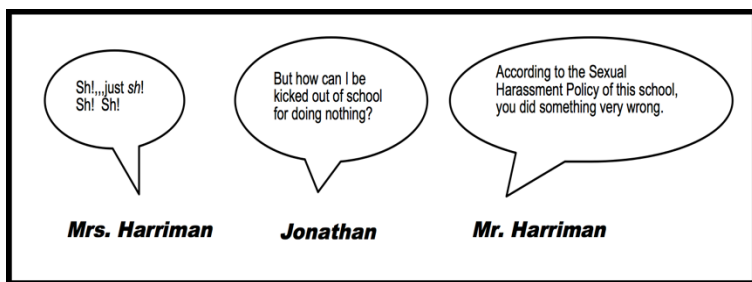
"And the second choice?" asked his father.

I'm afraid option number two is even more severe. If Jonathan chooses not to leave this school, then we will have to expel him. If that is the case, we would have to have a formal hearing and then surely this news would end up in the local paper.

His mom lowered her head.

Jonathan's father closed his eyes. "And the lawyer's cost."

Jonathan looked from face to face to face. "But I didn't do anything wrong."

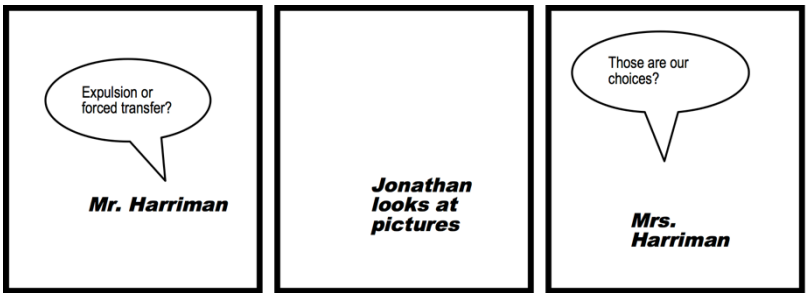


SH!

Tears flowed from his mother's eyes. "We tried to teach our children to respect everyone," she said. "We can't apologize enough for the time and trouble this has caused you. Will this incident go into Jonathan's school record?"

Yes, I must include a full report. I'm sorry. I remember your daughter, Jessica, fondly when she attended this school.

More nervous laughter.



"They'd never let Jonathan into a private school, not with this on his record," said his father.

"It's best to get this thing over with quickly," said his mother.

"We'll enroll him into another middle school," his father said.

That could be arranged quickly and quietly. Let's see, today is Thursday. Jonathan could begin a fresh start at Kennedy Middle School on Monday.

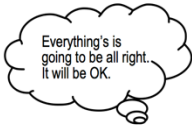
DOUGLAS EVANS

"We'd greatly appreciate that," said his mother. "You've been a big help."

His father nodded. He pulled a pen from his sport coat and signed the report.

The morning bell rang. The parents shook hands with the principal, and the three Harriman's stood to leave.

Coming out of the office, Jonathan glanced down the hall. Susan and Margot Golden stood there. His first impulse was to wave, but he checked himself.



**Jonathan
coming out of
office**

**Susan standing
at locker**

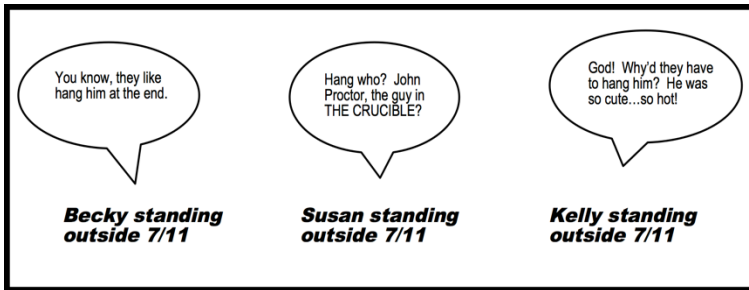
**Margot standing
at locker**

SH!

SH!

21. SUSAN

After school, Susan, Becky, and Kelly detoured to 7-Eleven, before heading home. They stocked up on Skittles and liters of Coke.



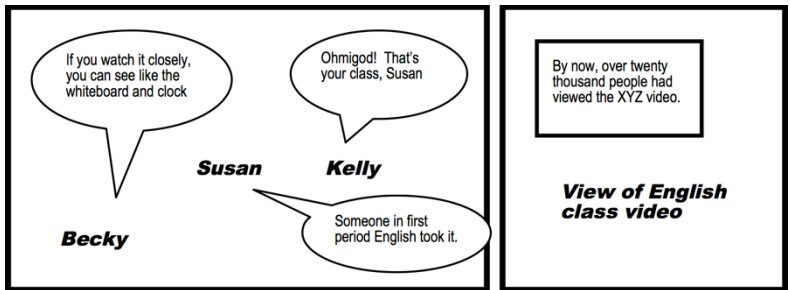
“For being a witch,” said Becky. “You know, this was like Salem, Massachusetts a few-hundred years ago. No one in Salem really believed John Proctor was a witch, but no one

SH!

would like fess up to it. And really all John Proctor had to do to save himself was like confess being a witch, but that would have like gotten other people in trouble. He was really honest and brave. So the town big-wigs hanged him."

Susan shook her head. "Clueless."

Kelly checked the text messages on her cell phone. "Oh...my...god! Get this. The XYZ YouTube video. Someone posted a clip of Mr. Xavier's open fly. It's already been viewed fifty thousand times."



Susan grinned. "Actually, I kind of feel sorry for Mr. XYZ. Imagine, people all over the world viewing his open fly."

"I feel more sorry for whoever posted that video," said Becky. "Now *that* person should get hanged."

Susan draped her arms around the necks of both girls. "Actually, ladies, I *do* know who took the video."

Both girls looked at her, smirking.

DOUGLAS EVANS

"Guess."

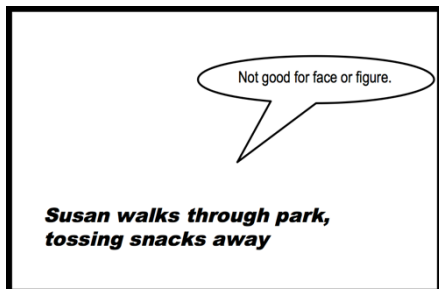
"Jonathan Harriman?" they said as one.

Susan nodded. "And that girl Margot saw him do it, too. I didn't tell the principal yet....but."

"God! He is *so* busted," said Kelly.

"Why'd he like do something so cruel?" Becky asked.

The friends parted at the corner. Susan cut through a park, a route she often took to make the trip home longer. As she shuffled along the dirt path, she tossed her junk food into the bushes.



Now what? Soon she would have to face Robert again. She shivered.

Margot Golden said to seek help. But who could help her? The school counselor? She was a woman with no looks and never married. A teacher? No, they were even more fruitless. Teachers either looked at her funny or talked to

SH!

her as if she were an eight-year-old. And if she told her mother, they would soon be living in a cheap apartment again. Best to keep silent.

Not until sunset did Susan enter her house.

He was lying on the couch. "There's Suzy-Q. Where've you been?" His eyes never strayed from the moving stock prices on TV.

Susan heard pots clanging in the kitchen. She found her mother standing at the sink. Her eyes were red, her smile tight.

"Everything OK, Mom?"

"Yes, yes, your principal called this morning. He explained that the Harriman boy will be leaving Rosa Parks Middle School for good."

Susan sat down at the table. "He was expelled?"

"He'll be attending another school."

"Expelled?" Susan repeated. "God, did they have to get rid of him?"

"I thought you'd be glad he was out of there. You've been complaining about how he pesters you for months. Now it's over."

Susan sniffed. "Yes, but... Yes, but, why that?"

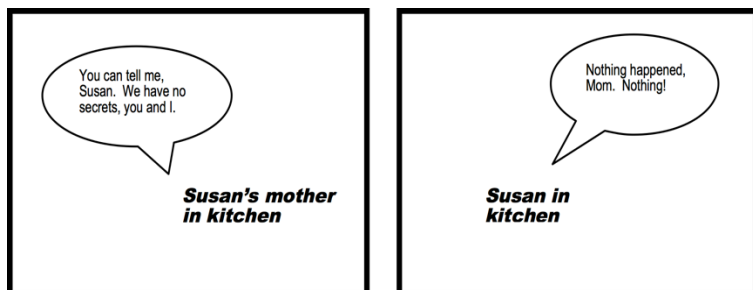
A shout came from the living room. "When's dinner?"

An awkward smile. "And something else," said her mother. Voice lowered. "Be honest with me. Something happened last night, didn't

DOUGLAS EVANS

it?" She gestured toward the next room. "With him."

Susan ran a finger through her hair and said nothing.



"I found muddy footprints on the front steps this morning," her mother went on. "You left the house last night, Susan, didn't you? In bare feet. Tell me why. What happened?" Pause. "Did he go into your room?"

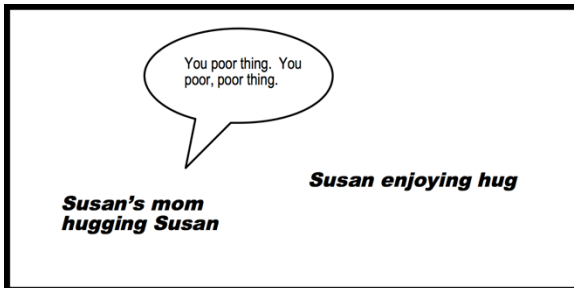
Susan pulled at a strand of hair. Her mother knew.

Now what would happen? Now everything would change again.

Again, she pictured Jonathan at the window. Warmth, family, security. Tears welled up in her eyes, and she nodded.

Her mother hugged her tightly.

SH!



22. SUSAN & JONATHAN

Susan's mom's convertible zooms down highway.

Days earlier:
Susan and her mother took
Jonathan to the mall.

"So you're the naughty boy who took that XYZ video," said Susan's mother.

She drove with the top down. Susan beside her. The pair wore black baseball caps and sunglasses. Blond hair fluttered behind them.

Jonathan sat in back. He caught glimpses of the mother's dolphin tattoo behind her ear. "Susan *told* you."

SH!

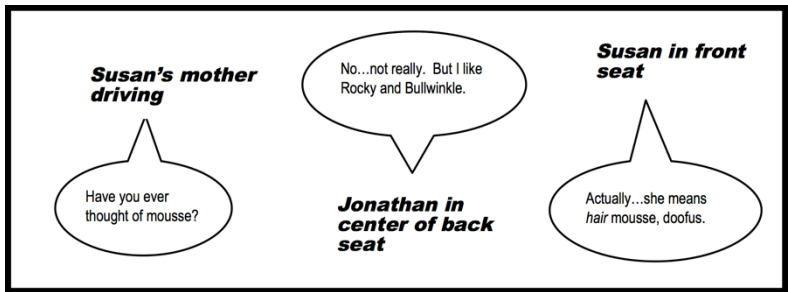
"Actually, I tell Mom everything," Susan called over her shoulder. "But mum's the word with Mom."

"And, you're quite a poet, Jonathan," said her mother. "Naughty. Naughty."

"My *poems*. You read my *poems*?"

Jonathan saw her wink in the rearview mirror.

"Relax back there," she said



Both females laughed.

"Oh, what I could do for you, Jonathan," said her mother. "The girls won't stay away. New hair, new clothes. Pump up those muscles, and you'll be quite a stud muffin."

Both females laughed again.

"Sure.

"We're going to get you fixed up. I know the perfect jeans and T-shirt."

"Mom wanted to be a fashion designer."

"What happened?" Jonathan asked.

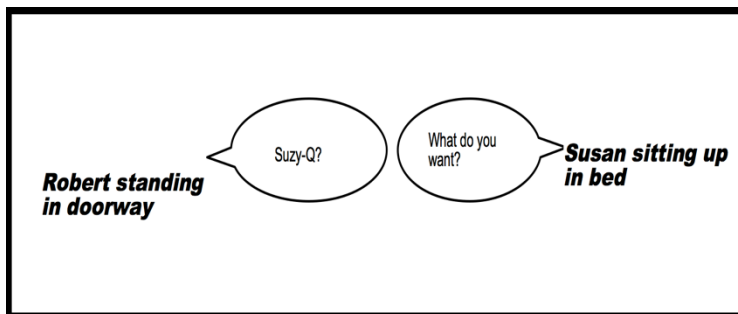
"Had a kid. Puts a stopper in ones plans."

DOUGLAS EVANS

Her mother's cell phone chirped. She talked to it the rest of the way to the mall.

7:00

Susan lay on her bed, turning her nails blue. A knock on the door and a slurry voice.



"Suzy-Q?"

"What do you want?"

"Can I come in?"

She picked up a stuffed snake. "No!"

He entered nonetheless.

"I want a lock," Susan shouted. "I want a lock on my door."

Robert stepped forward. "Bedroom locks are for untrusting families," said Robert. "We trust each other."

He sat on the corner of her bed.

"What do you want? What are you doing in here?"

SH!

"I just wanted to talk," he said. "Get to know my stepdaughter. I want you and your mom to be happy here."

Susan hugged her snake tighter. "Fat chance. Where *is* my mother?"

He placed a hand on her bare foot. "Loony-loony. So I'm cooking dinner. Pasta and my special clam sauce. Straight from the jar. Ready in ten."

"I'm not hungry." She pulled her foot away.

He stood and stepped to the doorway. He turned.

"I'm trying to make an effort, Susan. I want us to be a close family. Don't keep your distance."

After Robert left, she found her cell phone. Still shaking, she sent a text-message to Jonathan.

She sent him a text. The text told him to stop bothering her.

View of cell phone text message

Do not contact me again. A3.

A minute later, the phone chirped. Caller ID. Jonathan Harriman's number.

"Poor, boy. Poor, poor, boy."

She made sure his call went to voice mail.

DOUGLAS EVANS

Caller and time would remain in the phone's memory. If she needed it.

7:00

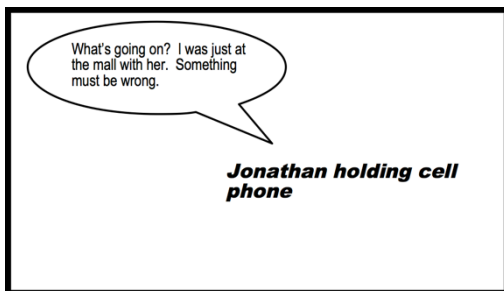
Jonathan stood at his bedroom mirror. He nodded at the new image, slicked-back hair, low-slung jeans. He waited to hear *Ride of the Valkyries*.

Instead the text message beep.

A text message? No one ever texts me. Probably more cyberbullying.

He checked his phone. The message was from Susan Hicks. He read it and shuddered.

What's going on? I was just at the mall with her. Something must be wrong.



He speed-dialed her number. The smart phone chirped until the voice mail greeting.

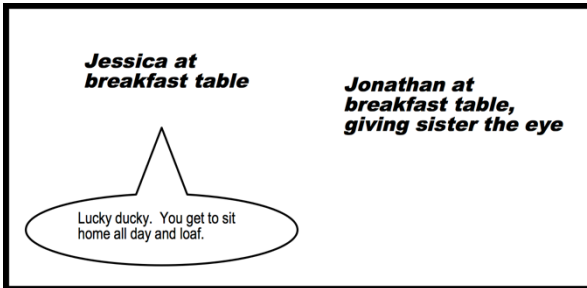
"Susan? Are you there? Susan, I got your text. I don't understand. What do you mean don't contact you? Forever? Why? What's

SH!

wrong? Let's talk. Is something wrong? I'm here in my bedroom. Call me."

23. JONATHAN

Jessica smirked as her brother sat down for breakfast.



“Enough, Jessica,” the parents said as one.
Jonathan picked up a spoon and sunk it into his bowl of Lucky Charms.

“Since this is a school day, we expect you to read and keeping up on your studies,” said his

SH!

mother. "You are not to leave this house under any circumstances. Understand?"

Jonathan nodded with the spoon in his mouth.

His father added, "On Monday we'll enroll you in the new school. That's sixteen miles from this house, Jonathan. That means we'll be driving you thirty-two miles there and back each day."

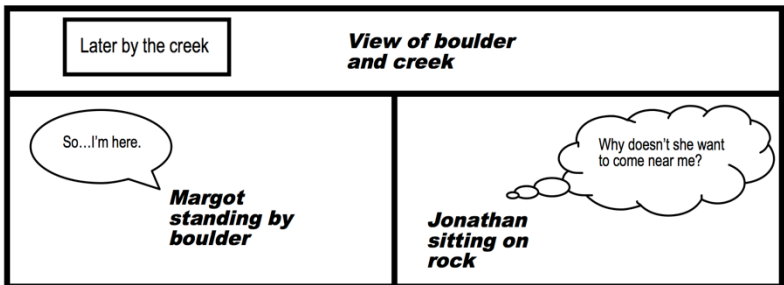
Jonathan nodded, agreeing with the addition.

He spent the morning watching talk shows on TV. People with all sorts of problems. Weight, divorces, weird phobias.

At three o'clock Jonathan left the house. Margot Golden had agreed to meet him after school. He was sitting on the boulder when she arrived.

She wore a black stocking cap. Her hands were stuffed in the pockets of her overalls.

Jonathan scooted over, but she came no closer.



DOUGLAS EVANS

"Well, I sure had an educational day," Jonathan said. "I watched a woman talk about her husband's snoring and a guy talk about his six-pack abs."

"What happened at the meeting yesterday with our principal?"

"He kicked me out of school. I'm going to Kennedy on Monday."

Margot kicked at the leaves. "It's been kept hushed. I don't think anyone knows."

"How's Susan?"

"Talked to her yesterday. I saw her again in English today. She's OK."

"What did she say? What did she tell you?"

"She told me a lot, and I listened. She seems for real, Jonathan. I believe her."

"What do you mean?"

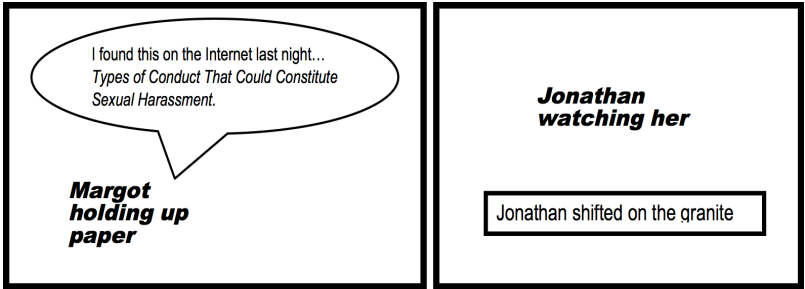
"I believe what she said, that you were bothering her. She asked you to stop, and you continued to bother her. That's harassment, Jonathan."

The words sent shivers throughout his body.

"Yea, but..."

Margot pulled a sheet of paper from a pocket.

SH!



“A. Offensive or unwelcome conduct, verbal or physical. Check. B. Visual conduct such as leering, making sexual gestures, or displaying sexually suggestive objects, pictures, or cartoons. Check. C. Making derogatory comments or using epitaphs, slurs, and jokes. Check. D. Physical conduct such as touching, or blocking movements... I could go on.”

His head swam. What was happening here?

“Listen, Margot. She calls me all the time. She came to my house. I didn’t do anything bad.”

“You said she was standing on your front lawn. Why would she do that, Jonathan? You have no proof.”

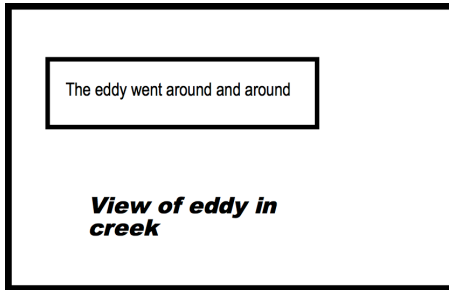
“She was there, Margot, and she calls me every night. Believe me.”

“I *don’t* believe you, Jonathan. Why should I? You don’t just have a crush on that girl you’re obsessed with her. You’re different now. I still can’t believe you took that cell clip in English. Then, even more stupid, you posted it on

DOUGLAS EVANS

YouTube. Susan could have used that as ammunition against you, gotten you in *real* trouble, but she didn't. You've changed, Jonathan. Not just in the way you look. Those stupid jeans and the hair. But you're a different person. It's like I don't know you anymore. You're *mean*."

Jonathan slid off the rock. "I'm not mean. I'm not." Voice pleading. "I thought you understood. I thought you knew me."



Margot stepped backward. "Just stay away from me." She kicked at the leaves again and left.

Down, down, down. Every part of his body seemed to be sinking, sinking.

Not even Margot.

Down, down, down.

Jonathan walked to the water's edge. Around and around. How far down did that eddy go?

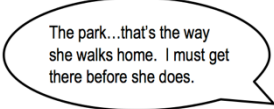
What can I do? Who can I talk to?

SH!

He turned. His breathing hastened.

I must talk to Susan. I just want to clear things up. I'll say I'm sorry and clear things up. She'll listen. We'll be friends again and everything will be back to normal. She'll understand.

He took off running.

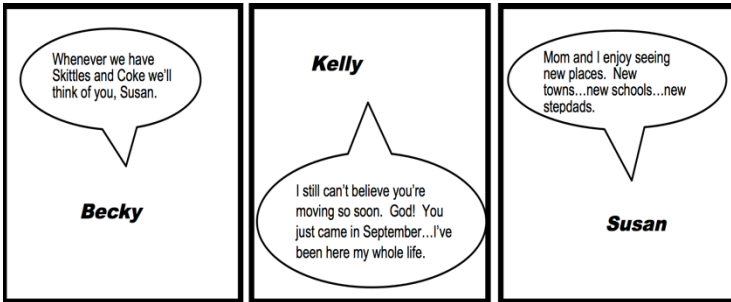


The park...that's the way she walks home. I must get there before she does.

Jonathan running toward park

24. SUSAN

The three girls exited 7-Eleven. They carried packs of Skittles and liters of Coke.



The girls laughed.

SH!

“But I guess like you didn’t have like the best time a Rosa Parks,” said Becky. “Good thing you took care of that Harriman creep like you did. When you did.”

Susan chomped on a Skittle.



“God! I’m glad all the boys at school aren’t like Jonathan Harriman,” said Kelly. “God!

“I should shave my head,” said Susan.

“But why are you moving so suddenly?” Becky asked.

“We’ve been planning this for weeks,” Susan lied. “Mom will have everything packed by the time I get home. We’re taking off to Orlando.

“Ohmygod! *Florida!*” said Kelly. “That’s so cool!”

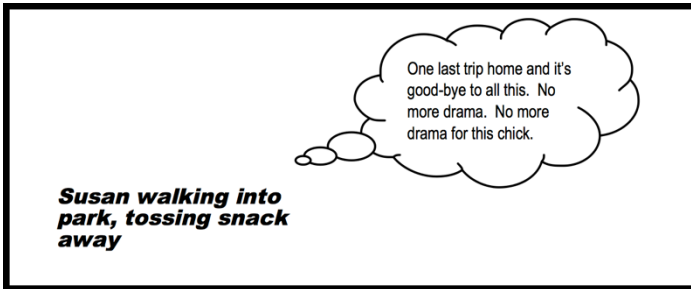
Susan nodded. “Mom wants to start a massage business. Moving is our hobby.”

Again they laughed.

At the corner, the girls hugged and parted. Susan wouldn’t miss them. She never attached.

DOUGLAS EVANS

Without looking back, she turned off the sidewalk. She tossed the candy and cola and started up the park path.



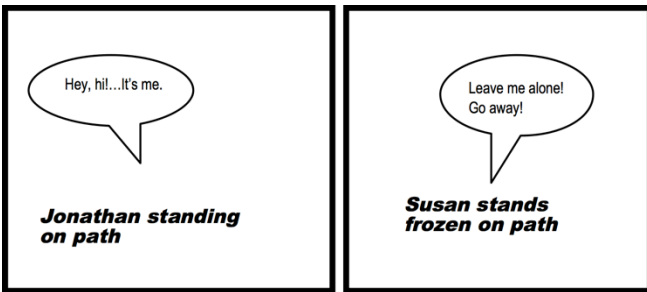
SH!

SH!

25. JONATHAN & SUSAN

Jonathan Harriman stood on the path, panting, waiting. His T-shirt damp; his heart racing.

Susan Hicks saw him and froze.



He ran up to her. "Hey, we gotta talk. OK?"

SH!

Susan lowered her head. She stepped to the left and started forward.

He blocked her way.

"Go away."

Jonathan flapped his arms. "Wait. Just wait, Susan. I just want to talk."

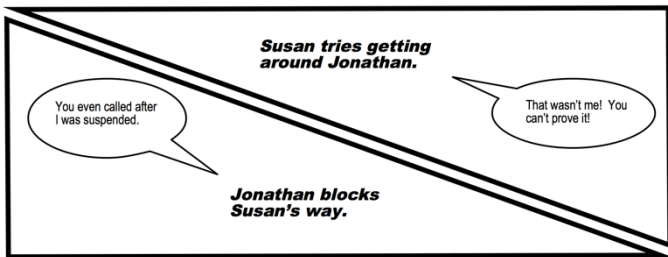
Susan grabbed the cell phone in her pocket. She pointed the lens at him. Pressed record.

"You're scaring me, Jonathan. You scare me a lot."

"But we were friends."

"We...were...never...friends. I only actually talked to you to get help on my homework. Why would I be a friend with *you?* Now *leave* me alone."

The words cut through him. "But you called me all the time. Your mom bought me these jeans."



She stepped forward again, this time bumping his shoulder. As she tried slipping by, he grabbed her wrist. The cell phone dropped on

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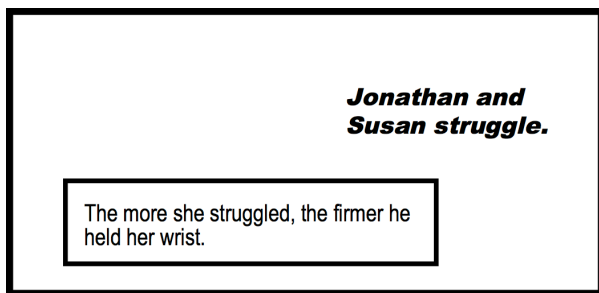
the cement.

"Wait a minute. You called me sweet. I have your drawings. Your notes."

She pulled at his grip, but he held tightly. She twisted and whipped her arm back and forth, up and down.

"Let me go! Let me go." Screaming.

The struggle became comical. He, clinging to her wrist; she, nearly on her knees.



She broke out in sobs and he released her. She tumbled onto the dirt. Her face was twisted with rage. She cried hysterically.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry. It's OK. Sh! Sh! You can go. It's OK. Shhh!"

Susan stood, brushing her bottom. Her hair hung over her face. Blood oozed from an elbow scrape.

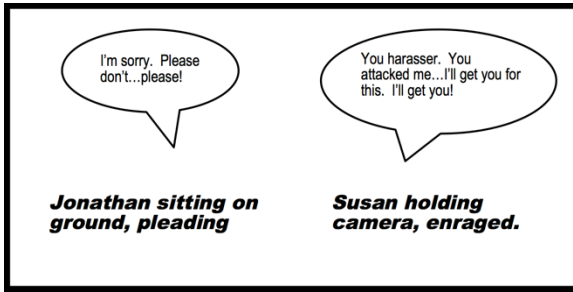
"You *hurt* me. Look, I'm bleeding. You *hurt* me."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean it."

She picked up the cell phone

SH!

He sat on the ground.



Susan pointed the lens at him again. "Smile. One, two, three."

DOUGLAS EVANS

SH!

SH!