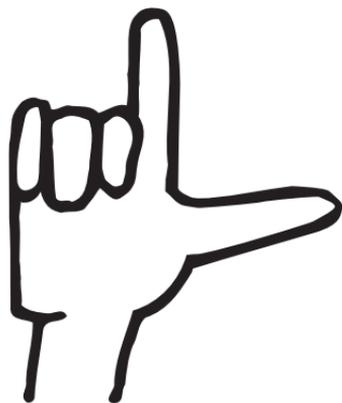


Losers



Matthue Roth

PUSH

SCHOLASTIC INC.

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ISBN-13: 978-0-545-06893-2

ISBN-10: 0-545-06893-2

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Printed in the U.S.A.

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First printing, October 2008

1. SPEAK MY LANGUAGE



lost my accent over a long weekend in ninth grade.

It started on a gray Thursday in September, the first day of school. All morning, I'd been feeling like a total alien. My passport might say *NATURALIZED* and my accent might sound Russian, but I'm not talking foreigner status here — to everyone at North Shore High, I was a genuine, bona fide alien, three eyes and eight tentacles. While everyone else was giving each other once-overs, offering up shy smiles at prospective friends and potential crushes, people were shooting me baffled looks, as though I'd landed from the planet Koozbob instead of just Russia.

It wasn't like I was fresh off the boat, either — like I couldn't speak English or I was still dressed in geeky Russian sweatpants or something. I'd lived in this country since I was seven. But while most of these kids had known each other for years, through the downtown prep schools and science clubs that normal smart kids attended growing up, I'd gotten into North Shore by dumb luck. Everyone else had been together for eight years — the

same schools, the same teachers, the same cliques — and I was the newbie, trespassing on the natural order of things.

Witness this: My head slammed against the locker door.

The fist that was currently attached to my head, its nails digging into my hair, turned ninety degrees to the right. My head turned along with it. I gave a short moan, more from instinct than protest. The locker's air grates dug into my eye, and I squelched it shut, just as a precautionary measure.

Jupiter Glazer, I told myself, *you have got to find a better way to make new school friends.*

“Like I said,” my attacker said, blubbery and full of spit and bile. “You went and got real lucky. This new locker of yours is prime real estate. So I guess *your* locker is *our* locker now, right?”

Somewhere behind him, a crony of his belched up a laugh.

I decided that the path of least resistance would be to simply agree. Although my shoulder blades were currently at angles which I didn't think were possible, I did my best attempt to shrug them.

“Okay,” I chirped as amicably as I could muster.

I just need to tell you: I was not new to this.

I was new to this school, this neighborhood, this life. But I'd been getting tossed around since I was a baby. I was born in Zvrackova, a city so small even its own suburbs had never heard of it. And then, on my seventh birthday, I flew to America. My parents told me it was a birthday present. I didn't entirely believe them — fleeing our home country under the cover of night, cramming all our earthly possessions into a couple of suitcases,

it wasn't the kind of surprise party that most kids my age got. But when my parents called me into their bedroom that night and told me to pack everything, that's what they called it. A surprise party. I'd never even had a non-surprise party before.

I was flown all the way from Russia to Newark International Airport with just a single change of underwear. For other people, America was where you could practice religion freely, start a million-dollar enterprise, or buy as many cartons of cigarettes as you wanted. For my parents, it mostly meant the freedom to work, not wait in lines all day. As my mom tells it, I was just as eager for the land of free and plenty as she was, where she could buy as many multi-packs of generic allergy medication and Kleenex as she needed.

When we finally landed in America, my parents became our new country's biggest fans. They bought CDs of the worst country music and the out-of-date '80s hard rock they were never allowed to listen to in Russia when they were younger, hair bands like Poison and RATT. They ate at McDonald's every chance they got. They watched TV like addicts, borrowing liberally from sitcom punch lines the way other people quoted Shakespeare. And they taught me to appreciate the gifts that America gave us — gifts like free business enterprise, voting for president, and going to public school.

There were other lessons I learned on my own in my fourteen years of life on this planet Earth, spanning two continents, ten thousand miles, and countless school bullies. For example, when two hundred pounds of man-flesh comes at you with an attitude and an agenda, it is the ideal moment to start adjusting your point of view.

Especially when that two hundred pounds was shrouded in a T-shirt formerly owned, according to its insignia, by a band called the Thrill Kill Kult, and the fists were garlanded by two (allowed in school, but only barely) bracelets studded with metal spikes. Add to this a (definitely, totally not allowed anywhere near school property) metal spike collar, and a goatee slicked with enough oil and hair gel to render it as sharp, pointy, and lethal as any knife he could have smuggled in.

So, yeah. In the moment, agreeing with him did not seem like a bad idea at all.

Bates was so surprised, he un-crunched his fingers from my head immediately. “What did you just say?” he demanded in a roar that sounded like a lion accidentally swallowing a small frog.

I chose that moment to enact my denouement.

I ducked beneath the arch framed by the bodies of Harris Bates — the owner of the fist — and his best friends-slash-sidekicks, Nail and Anarchia, the pillars of said arch. Between them, there was enough metal on their clothes and in their bodies to set off the school metal detectors two floors away.

I dived between their bodies and onto the floor, skidding an elbow on the linoleum. I slid to a stop, hopped up, and leaped straight into a run.

I made the mistake of turning back to see if I’d lost them. They were right behind me. They exchanged glances, which turned slowly into evil smiles. Then they started after me, foot darting over foot, one after the other.

My first steps were clumsy stumbles.

In seconds, they had turned into a full galloping run.

I shot down the basement corridor, feeling the sudden slap of recycled air against my face. My chin-length hair beat in my eyes, then flew back as I gained speed. The hall soared past in a blur of *You Can Do It* posters featuring cute animals and rock stars that hadn't been cool for at least seven years. I fainted to the left, then dived right, dodging the girls' soccer team, who had chosen that moment to congregate in the hall and talk about the championships, or the captain's date last weekend, or something else to do with scoring. Only one thing was on my mind: the need to *get out*.

Then I felt the tiny, sharp pull of an inhumanly small hand affixing itself to my collar.

I spun around, finding myself face-to-face with a girl in a soccer-team uniform. Her smile was like a daytime TV commercial. She talked too fast for me to get nervous. "Hey," she said. "Are you the guy that Bates is chasing?"

"What?" I glanced back over my shoulder. Bates and his compatriots were standing in the main doors of the hallway, looking left and right, hungry predators in the midst of a hunt. "Oh . . . yes. This would be me."

"Then get in here. We can hide you. He's an asshole."

With her hand still on the scruff of my collar, she threw me down and into the circle of soccer girls. I crouched low, my knees pressing against the linoleum floor. I looked up at my newfound friend, flashing her a quick smile of thanks. She scowled down at me and, the next thing I knew, I felt a sharp crack on the back of my head.

After that, I didn't pick up my head for a while.

For a second — just a second, I swear — I'd caught a glimpse

below her skirt. She was wearing standard white underwear, slight traces of a lace pattern on the edge where it met her thigh — nothing like what I had imagined girls' underwear to be like.

But — on the other hand — I had actually seen panties.

Guilt began welling up in my head. I wondered if she was feeling violated. I wondered if she knew it was an accident.

And then I realized: Right now, I was surrounded by girls in miniskirts. And their legs were all at the level of my eyes. It was like some bizarre dream that's about sex but isn't sexy at all. A solid, unbreakable fortress of girls' legs, every shade of the spectrum from post-summer tan to solid black, quivering and twittering in time with the uninterrupted giggles of gossip that came from above. "No way, really?" said one girl, and her legs crossed, hugging each other at the knees. I tried to listen harder, as if, now that I was a foreigner in jock girls' country, I should maybe learn the language.

But, no. After a minute or two had passed, my original savior yanked me up. "They're gone," she whispered.

As I stood, still glancing around to calm my red-alert nerves, the constant conversation seemed to fizzle out. The girls started looking at me. It seemed like, for the first time, everyone else had noticed that they were acting as my firewall. And they did not look happy to be doing it. The bell rang and, like a ring of dancers in a Broadway show, the circle dispersed, each girl prancing off in a different direction to her respective class.

God. I hadn't even opened up my mouth.

I hadn't even *met* them. They'd barely seen my face long enough to decide whether I was ugly or not. How did they already know to write me off as a nerd? What is the invisible secret mark that makes popular kids intrinsically recognize their

equals, and makes them rope off the rest of us into the dim and dreary purgatory of normality?

The rest of the day didn't go much better. My Bio teacher thought that Jupiter was a girl's name, my Spanish teacher tried to pronounce my name in Spanish, and my history teacher couldn't find my name at all, and insisted that I wasn't actually registered to go to school at North Shore. Just as she was about to send me to the principal's office for rerouting or deportation or something even more sinister, I told her to let *me* have a look at the roll, grabbed it out of her hand, and found myself listed under *J* for *Jupiter, Glazer* instead of *Glazer, Jupiter*. I guess I said it a little more aggressively than I absolutely needed to. From behind me — and I was standing right in front of the classroom, at the teacher's desk — I heard someone go “*daaaamn*,” followed by a low whistle. A murmur spread among my fellow students.

The corners of my teacher's mouth twitched. From the back of the room, Devin Murray and Vanessa Greyscole and all the not-ready-for-prime-time sorority girls made sounds like stuck noses, just aching to laugh out loud at me.

After school, totally deflated, I wrestled with my new role of being the most well-known kid in school — for all the wrong reasons. Between Bates, the teachers, and my own social awkwardness, I had made my reputation for the next four years. If I went home now, that would just be like admitting total defeat. Instead, I moped around the hallways, watching the population dwindle to a few stray students. Finally, I found the computer corridor.

A good fifteen minutes after the last bell rang, Vadim V. Khazarimovsky, my only friend in the world, ambled out from

the Mac lab. He opened his mouth, the familiar Russian syllables flowed out, and it felt like the non-brain-damaging equivalent of snorting crack straight into my brain. Just hearing Russian, the language that I'd grown up with, the language that actually sounded like a language instead of a movie soundtrack, set me at ease. It was like the Saran Wrap that had been wrapped over my mouth all day had just been peeled away, and I could finally, actually breathe.

"How did you know where to find me?" he said in Russian, blushing a little. Whenever we were together, we slid back into Russian.

"How long have we known each other?"

"Point taken. Jupiter, this school is the mark of utter insanity. Advanced coursework, my ass. I can't even tell you how *basic* the work in —"

"Hey, Vadim. Not to interrupt your own sob story, but I almost got pummeled into submission third period by this guy the size of Long Island."

"Yes, I know. But have you been to —"

"You *know*?"

"Yes, this news was all over school. In my social studies class, everyone was like, 'Are you related to that other Russian kid, the one Bates pummeled?' Jupiter — *comrade* — you need to watch out for yourself. My reputation can't take much more of this before I become a prime target."

"Excuse me? Vadim, have you noticed, I'm *already* a prime target?"

He gulped. He looked around nervously, to his right, then his left, and took two giant steps backward.

"Look," Vadim said, glancing at his watch, "sorry, man, but I

have to go to this meeting with Mayhew. He wants to talk to me about possibly skipping me out of Decanometry.”

“Mayhew?”

“Yeah, you know who —”

“*Doctor* Mayhew, you mean? The current principal emeritus of our school? You have a *meeting* with him?”

“Yeah. Anyway, my Deco teacher was talking to him, and he thinks experimental maths might be holding me back from —”

“Decanometry.”

“Yeah. It was in last month’s issue of *SciAm*. It’s similar to Trig, only polydimensional. Anyway, you should catch up with me later. Come over after school?”

My eyes bulged, trying to keep up with him. *SciAm*, I knew from hanging out with him too much, was *Scientific American* magazine. Decanometry, I could only guess. I slid all that to the back of my brain.

“I will if I survive,” I promised.

“Don’t worry, Jupe. Just relax. Keep a low profile, and Bates will forget about you completely. He wouldn’t want to run you down before Freshman Day, anyway.”

“What in the hell is Freshman — oh, damn, Vadim. I really have to go,” I said, patting his shoulder and moving him aside in the same motion. I’d just caught a glimpse of human flesh, heavy-metal hair, and black T-shirt, turning the corridor in the dwindling after-hours crowd. “Catch you soon.”

“Come over later!” Vadim called down the steps at me.

“Can’t!” I called back, already a set and a half of stairwells below him. I could only imagine what anyone overhearing would think of the loud Russian words cutting through their American air. “My parents want to take me out for dinner.”

“After your first day of school? Why would they do a thing like that — as a consolation prize?” Vadim’s heavy voice was amplified and accentuated by its echo in the stairwell, but I didn’t answer him.

I just kept running.