

ONE

This is the spring break that changed my life.

It officially began with the conclusion of conspiracy Friday, when evidently all my teachers got together to plot a miserable day. The History test and English presentation were bad enough. But then during final period, when the only numbers I wanted to think about were the minutes remaining until I was out the door, Mrs. Glenn, the math teacher with the frozen scowl of a face, throws a pop quiz. We work, she sits around until class is over. Talk about unfair.

Finally the bell sounded, and joyfulness rushed through me as soon as I heard that wonderful clanging. Not only did I nail the quiz (I have mad math skills), but now serious nothing time awaited.

Unfortunately, that feeling of blissful nothingness lasted all of maybe five seconds--the time it took to realize that this was me, Erin, the high school sophomore whose life has no down time. Even during break.

Take my Saturday schedule. Eleven o'clock, tennis lesson. One o'clock, car wash for the school philanthropy club. Three o'clock, helping Mom with spring cleaning around the house.

Luckily I spotted my best friend Caitlyn before I got too gloomy. She's usually good for a few laughs, or some juicy gossip. What's the first thing she says to me? "Let's go to the mall tomorrow."

"I can't." I told her everything I had to do.

"Can't you get out of that cleaning thing?" she asked.

"I don't think so. I've already put it off twice. Mom will go ballistic if I try to cancel again."

And an angry Mom is not a pretty sight.

"Erin, you have way too many responsibilities."

Thanks for reminding me.

Kids were piling on to their buses. But not me. It figures, break comes and my stupid bus is late.

"Don't look now," Caitlyn said, "but here comes your boyfriend."

The way she said it, with that teasing tone of voice, I knew who she was talking about. And he definitely was N-O-T my boyfriend. But I looked anyway.

"Wasup, Erin." It was Sonny Mulrooney.

How could anyone name their son Sunshine? That was strike one against him. Strike two--a big head of black curly hair, like a poodle gone wild. Strike three--tie dyed shirts, every single day.

Way uncool.

Not that I really cared if Sonny wanted to look like a sixties wannabe. Maybe that's how his parents raised him. The problem was, he had a thing for me, probably because I was practically the only girl in school who didn't openly ridicule his hippie act. I kept my ridicule internal.

"Hi, Sonny," I said. This was not an enthusiastic hi. It was an it's-polite-to-return-a-hi hi.

"Groovy Mulrooney," said Caitlyn, using his nickname. "Heard any good records lately?" Typical Caitlyn slam. No one buys records, of course.

"I just got a Jimi Hendrix," he said. "You like him?" If Sonny caught the slam, he wasn't letting on.

“Who?”

“Only the greatest guitarist ever.”

Caitlyn shook her head, more times than necessary to make the point. “Never heard of him. Look, I gotta go talk to Leigh Ann. See ya Erin.”

“Bye.” I knew she didn’t have to talk to Leigh Ann. She just couldn’t be seen talking to Sonny.

Actually I wasn’t crazy being seen with him either. I didn’t want the rep of hanging around with losers. But I also didn’t want to hurt Sonny’s feelings. The thing is, he really wasn’t a bad guy. He was one of the happiest, most upbeat people I knew, despite his having practically no friends. It was like he knew he was strange, but didn’t care what others thought. Which I found somewhat admirable.

“You gonna be at the car wash tomorrow, Erin?” he asked. I got to know Sonny at the philanthropy club. We basically collect money for worthy causes in the community. Except I’m not sure Sonny totally grasped the concept. He’d often ask me to run lines with him for whatever play he was in at the time. The latest one was a sixties play called Hair. He helped pick it out, he proudly told me.

“Yeah, I’ll be there.”

“Cool, Erin.” That was another thing about Sonny. He called me Erin practically every chance he got. My name’s okay, but it’s not one of those beautiful, flowing names like Elizabeth or Alexandra. I don’t need to keep hearing it.

Where was that darn bus already?

“Say,” he continued, “how about coming over to my house after the car wash? If you’re not into Hendrix, we can listen to my Woodstock album.”

“Who’s Woodstock?”

“Not who. What. A big rock concert in the summer of 1969. With some incredible performers. Jefferson Airplane, Canned Heat, Country Joe and the Fish.”

“I don’t really know them.” But Country Joe and the Fish, that was a cute name.

“I’m telling you Erin, that stuff will blow your mind.”

“Actually, I prefer my mind intact. But maybe we’ll do it another time. After the car wash I need to get home and help my mom around the house.”

“That’s cool.”

It was most definitely not cool. But it was true, so at least I didn’t feel guilty about making up a lie that could get back to Sonny.

Finally my bus pulled up. Sonny lived across town from me. Different bus.

“See ya tomorrow,” I said.

“See ya, Erin.”

I took my usual seat, fifth row from the back. I looked out the window, and Sonny was staring at me, a goofy grin on his face. I’m not sure why--reflex I guess--but I smiled back at him, before I caught myself. The last thing I wanted was for Sonny Mulrooney to think I was flirting.

Caitlyn sat next to me. “Is Groovy still protesting the Vietnam War?” she asked as the bus pulled out.

“You know, the world would be a dull place if we were all the same.”

“He can be as weird as he wants. But why does he have to do his thing around us?”

“Because he’s a guy. And we’re guy magnets.” We cracked up.

In the perfect timing department, that's when Corey Billings--the hottest guy in school--got out of his seat and moved to the one in front of us.

Normally this would be a very good thing. But the night before, Caitlyn and I played truth or dare, and she dared me to call him. After a serious case of sweaty palms I accepted her dare, only to hang up as soon as he said Hello. Which was totally pointless, since he'd know it was me from the caller ID. If he was here to confront me, I'd die of embarrassment, and I'd have to kill Caitlyn. Wait; how could I die first, then kill her?

Corey turned to face us. "Hi ladies."

"Hi Corey," Caitlyn and I said at the same time. We giggled.

"Are you guys going to see Moving to Dakota tomorrow night?" That was a hilarious new movie about a popular high school girl whose family moves to the middle of nowhere.

So much for perfect timing. Naturally I had another commitment--babysitting for my neighbor the Hunters. And I desperately needed the money, because I owed Mom half the cost of these cool but really expensive boots I got a few weeks earlier. Lately she'd been threatening to take the boots away, all because I hadn't yet paid her back. Totally unfair, seeing how she had a lot more money than me. But she was big on the teaching responsibility stuff.

"Yeah, of course I'm going," Caitlyn said.

"Me too," I blurted out. You can't say no to a Corey Billings invitation.

"Cool. A bunch of us are going to the seven o'clock at the Royal. After the movie we'll all get something to eat."

"Cool," Caitlyn said.

"See you then," Corey said.

"See you Corey," I said.

I was already thinking ahead. Plan A--make up a story for the Hunters, explain the importance of the movie to Mom, and have a great time. Plan B--earn money, pay off my uncaring bill-collector of a Mom, and make Corey so mad that he never talks to me again.

I liked Plan A way better.

Once Corey left, Caitlyn looked at me and smiled. "How cool is that," she said. We'd been on the fringes of the Corey group, so his invitation was definitely a big deal. I wondered if my hanging up on him was somehow a good thing. It's hard to know how guys think.

"Awesomely cool," I said. "But..."

"But what?"

"I'm not sure I can go."

Caitlyn stared at me. "Are you crazy? This is Corey and his friends we're talking about. The coolest guys in school."

"I'm supposed to babysit. But I'll work on it."

"Babysit? C'mon, Erin. You seriously need to have more fun."

"I have lots of fun."

"Oh yeah? What's the last fun thing you did?"

I thought. And thought. I'd had a tennis lesson on Wednesday. Supposedly, tennis was fun. But practicing serves for forty-five minutes was more like punishment. "Does reading a good book count?"

"Erin, you're way more hopeless than I thought. I expect you at that movie. Looking good. Or you're in big trouble."

So there it was. I'd received the invitation of the year, something every girl at school would die for. But I was teetering on the uncool with both my best friend and the most popular guy in school.

I hate obligations.