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YOUNG ADULT COMEDY

THINGS I HATE ABOUT MY MOTHER

by

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FIVE THINGS PEOPLE HAVE SAID TO ME IN THE LAST YEAR:

1. *Why would I want to mess things up by KISSING you?*
2. *They're vodka Jell-O shots. Don't tell me you've never tried these!*
3. *You are such a tool.*
4. *Mark, if your father still lived here, even HE would back me up on this one.*
5. *Remember, Nooms: Nice Guys Finish Last.*

It's the last one I keep coming back to.

I think I'm going to try to be a little meaner this year.

THE LIST-MAKER

For the first time that I can remember, my buddy Johnny Crabtree combed his hair today, a clear sign that he was on a mission. Mission impossible maybe, but still...a mission, and this is what inspired me to change my List of the Day. I always like to start school years with a new list, and this morning, right after my mom woke me in her usual gentle way by yelling down the hallway at an ear-splitting volume, “MARK, FOR THE LAST TIME...GET UP,” I thought of one: “Reasons Why First Days of School Depress Me.” I spent the rest of my morning ignoring my teachers as they blabbered on about the ridiculous rules we’ll be expected to follow this year, and instead came up with several entries for my list (such as: having to listen to teachers blabber on about the ridiculous rules we’ll be expected to follow this year).

But then Crabtree came up to me after third period and I noticed he’d made himself presentable: that is, if you consider a black *Trigun* anime t-shirt and jeans presentable. It was the combed hair that threw me.

“Hey Nooms,” he said. “You seen any new girls yet?”

“You wasted your time with the hair,” I said. “I don’t think there *are* any this year.”

“Well, there f***ing better be. It’s the only chance we’ve got.” Crabtree keeps insisting that if he could just find a girl who hasn’t already formed an opinion about him, then he might have a chance. It’s a nice theory, anyhow.

“Speak for yourself. I’ve still got some prospects,” I said, not really believing it.

“Like who? Paula?” he said, and then laughed his ass off and walked down the hallway.

And THIS is what triggered the topic change for today's list, because I'm pretty sure Crabtree and I had this EXACT same conversation a year ago, and there's no way in hell I'm going to go through a repeat of last year. So I trashed the whole "Why First Days of School Depress Me" list and spent the rest of the afternoon racking my brain to come up with a new one. You'd think this would be no problem, because I make lists all the time. It's what I do. I like to make lists the way other people like to shoot hoops or play video games or use the F-word. I've made lists about everything on the planet: my favorite movies and musicians, the funniest YouTube videos, the greatest combination of flavors of Jell-O, and the best breakfast cereals (number one? Cocoa Krispies, by a mile). I've made very specific lists, like the best tenor sax solos in rock music from the 1970s, or the hottest animated Disney character. I've made very far-fetched lists, like if I could be an animal for one day, what would it be (number one: a squirrel. Because they rule, that's why). I even have a list of clever things girls have said to me (the winner? "Did you feel that arctic breeze? It's from my cold shoulder." Nice one, Aiesha.). I also make daily to-do lists so I don't end up forgetting something important like...oh, I don't know...maybe getting my mom to sign a permission form from school. (I mention that last example because I'm still haunted by the memory of spending an entire day at the school library in sixth grade while my friends took off for a field trip to the aquarium. Since then, I've written down EVERYTHING.)

But of all the lists I've ever made, today's is the most important. It took longer than usual to write, but then this isn't any ordinary list. This list has SUBSTANCE. This list has MEANING. After Crabtree's comment, I decided that this year is going to be different. I'm going to start setting some goals and making something of myself. Not in a lame way, like a parent giving you the "you-better-start-shaping-up-or-you're-never-going-to-get-into-college"

lecture. More like, “I can do better than this and I do NOT want to have the same conversation with Crabtree again next year.”

And here’s the best part about setting goals: you get to write them down in a list!

GOALS FOR MARK NEWMAN’S SOPHOMORE YEAR

1. *Get a girlfriend—ANY girlfriend—who is not Paula.*
2. *Join or form a killer rock band that has tenor sax.* This could be tricky, as I think the last rock band to use a sax broke up in 1985, but even if it means having to travel back in time, I’m determined to make this work.
3. *Avoid talking to my mother as much as possible, since every time we talk it ends up in an argument.* This will also be challenging. I have to talk to her sometimes, but maybe I could try to make a game of it, like speaking to her in rhyme.
4. *Learn to drive.* Since talking while driving could be considered hazardous, I might actually be able to accomplish goal number three and goal number four simultaneously.
5. *Earn enough cash to buy my share of a used car.* This will probably be the biggest challenge of all, but I turn sixteen in January, and like I said: I’m determined.

Those are the biggies. Throw a 3.0 in there and I’ll consider it a Banner Year.

So strap yourselves in, hold on tight and don’t forget to wipe down the sink after you brush your teeth or my mom will throw a fit. I know this from personal experience because I got the lecture from her this morning, and even *after* I wiped it down like she told me to, I then had to go *back* to the bathroom to put the toilet seat down.

In three more years when I live on my own, I'm going to leave the toilet seat up, ignore the toothpaste caked on the faucet and pay no attention to the gobs of hair piling up in the drain.

And I'm going to like it.

A DIFFERENT SORT OF LIST

I wish I could tell you that the whole sink/toilet incident was unusual, just a blip in an otherwise perfect relationship with my mother, but it wasn't. And look, I know that practically everyone complains about their parents sometimes, but this is different. My mom takes the whole psycho-nagging-suck-the-fun-out-of-life routine to a whole new level. Some moms are good at yoga or baking. Mine is good at nitpicking and nagging and accusing and attacking and demanding and demeaning and generally making life miserable, and it's gotten worse since my father left three years ago. It's gotten so bad that I've decided to start tracking all the ways she's ruining my life with a new list: "Things I Hate About My Mother." I figure that by the end of the school year I'll well over a thousand entries.

A tiny part of me feels guilty about keeping this list, but rule number one of list-making is "Write it down." Mental lists just don't cut it, as my sixth-grade field trip incident illustrates, and there have been a couple of other times in my life when a pen and paper would have been useful, like when my mom reminded me to do a bunch of chores, including feeding our pet hamster, Spotty.

Spotty's buried in the back yard now.

So you have to write these things down, otherwise they're just a bunch of thoughts that you'll never remember when you need them.

So, here goes the first entry...

THINGS I HATE ABOUT MY MOTHER

1) My mom starts ragging on me before I even wake up. My day usually starts like this: my alarm goes off, I press the snooze button, and I dream about playing an epic song in front of thousands of adoring fans, and then...from down the hallway, my mother yells in that crazy voice of hers, "Mark, get up now! I'm not telling you again..." But then what does she do? She goes ahead and tells me again...and again...

This might seem like a lame thing to complain about, but it sort of sets the tone for all my other complaints because it starts before I even open my eyes. When I was little she'd come into my room and let me wake up slowly. She'd open up the blinds to let a little light in, then sit on the bed and rub my head or my back or something and sing softly to the tune of "Happy Birthday,"

Good morning to you

Good morning to you

Good morning dear sunshine

Good morning to you

Now, I don't want my mom singing to me anymore, and I most definitely don't want her touching me. But it would be nice to not have to start my day being yelled at, because some days that's all it is from morning to night: just one big YELL.

Also, what moms don't seem to understand at all is sometimes guys need a little time in the morning to settle down, because for reasons unknown, I often wake up with a boner, and I'm not about to go downstairs when that happens. A couple of years ago this worried me so much that I thought there was something wrong with me, and I was relieved to learn that I wasn't the only one. Crabtree and I have gotten to calling them NRBs—No Reason Boners.

If NRBs were limited to the bedroom, this would be fine, but they pop up unannounced ALL DAY LONG. Just when I think I'm safe, I'll be sitting on the bus on the way to school, and the bumps and vibrations will start it up again. I try to focus my mind on something, ANYTHING other than the motion of the bus or the image of pretty girls. I try not to think of my classmate Kelly Ames and the way she wears short blouses that show off the arch of her back. I try not to think of that Carrie Underwood video when she struts in front of the spotlight. I try not to think about last year's swimsuit issue of *Sports Illustrated*. But when you try not to think about something, it's hard to focus on anything other than that particular something. Like if I told you right now not to think about a pink elephant. Well, what are you picturing in your head right now?

Yeah, I thought so.

So the whole idea of blocking my thoughts when I have an NRB is sort of hopeless. This morning I had to take a book out of my backpack and casually hold it in front of me so I could make it to my locker. Just when I thought I was in the clear, Kelly said hi and asked why I was holding my book like that. I said I'd been cramming for a history quiz on the bus, which I thought was pretty quick of me.

"So if the quiz is in history, why are you holding your geometry book?"

Not so quick of me, after all.

"Oh, I had to..."

"Don't worry, Nooms. I won't tell," she said and then turned around and shook her hips the way she does, and then I got excited all over again!

Will there ever be a time when I don't think about girls every hour of every day?

Well, will there?

THE GIRLS IN MY LIFE

Aiesha, who sits behind me in Chemistry class, taps me on the shoulder and says, “Hey, Nooms.”

I didn’t really like it when people started called me Nooms back in middle school, but then last year a senior named Donny started calling me gay. He kept saying, “Mark Newman is looking for a New Man, because he sucked the last guy dry.” And, well, that unfortunately caught on for a while. People would come up to me and say, “How’s it going, NEW MAN.” When that finally wore off and people went back to calling me Nooms, I wasn’t just okay with it; I was *thrilled*.

I turn around and face Aiesah.

“When are you going to ask Paula out?”

“I’m not.”

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t want to.”

“But she likes you.”

“So?”

“So you should ask her out.”

That’s exactly what I *shouldn’t* do. Won’t do. Won’t come close to doing.

There are a lot of girls at Ellswood High School. I’m practically surrounded by them, but of course that doesn’t mean they’re exactly standing in line to go out with me. If I had to narrow

down all the girls in high school to just the key girls in my life, I'd come up with the following four:

THE GIRLS IN THE LIFE OF MARK NEWMAN

1. *Aiesha (whose last name is impossible to spell)*
2. *Kelly Ames*
3. *Natalie Becker*
4. *Paula Meyer*

I should also mention the four categories of girls that Crabtree and I have come up with, because each category relates to a particular girl. Crabtree and I have decided that thesauruses don't really capture the subtle differences between girls, and we're on a mission to rectify this.

CATEGORIES OF GIRLS ACCORDING TO CRABTREE AND NOOMS (AND THE GIRL WHO BEST FITS EACH CATEGORY)

1. *Cute (Aiesha)*
2. *Hot (Kelly)*
3. *Pretty (Natalie)*
4. *Annoying (Paula)*

I should also mention that Crabtree prefers more direct words to describe the different categories. He's not opposed to the term "Cute," but for the other three categories he prefers "F***able," "Goddess," and "Skank." I'm going to stick with my labels, mainly to avoid the consequences if the list is ever found.

First, there's cute. Cute as in, "she's so cute I'd like to wrap her up and give her big hug." Aiesha from Chemistry class falls into that first category. She also has a last name, but it's Indian and has so many syllables it's impossible to pronounce, much less spell. Aiesha is

short with dark skin and even darker hair and eyes, and she has this really wide smile that puts you in a good mood even when everything else in your day is going lousy. I got to be friends with her last year when she moved to Ellswood. Aiesha plays violin, so we talk a lot about music, and she has this weird retro-infatuation with the musician, Prince. Also, she gets all decked out just to go to school—she’s always wearing these fancy skirts and blouses and jewelry—and I like to make fun of her and tell her to wear a sweatshirt for a change. “Just once,” I say. “Live on the edge.” Aiesha is also number two on my list of clever things girls have said to me: “Stick that in your juice box and suck it.” Something about the way she said it made it sound sexy, though I’m not sure I can explain why.

The second category is hot. Hot, as in, well...I think you know what hot means. Kelly, also in my Chemistry class, is hot and wears clothes that show off her hotness. She’s got short dark hair and long legs and all the other essentials, and she’s sort of burnout, but in a good way. She wears lots of leather and makeup, and she’s built in a way that makes it hard to get through a class without getting all excited. I’d never want to date her, but I’d love to explore what’s underneath that cowhide, if you know what I mean.

Is it a good sign that two girls I’m interested are in my chemistry class, as in “we have good chemistry?” I don’t know, but in chemistry, I’m surrounded by girls, except for Steve Willard who sits in front of me, though he acts like a girl sometimes. Our seats are situated like this:

	<i>Steve</i>	
<i>Wanda</i>	<i>Me</i>	<i>Kelly</i>
	<i>Aiesha</i>	

Wanda *also* happens to be hot, but she's "junior-hot," and therefore completely off limits to a guy like me (not that Kelly is exactly a realistic fantasy, but it's a fantasy that's at least on the same continent of reality; Wanda is in a different universe). Once in class, Wanda hugged Steve just to be funny, and she was standing and Steve was sitting in his seat, and if you could've seen the look on Steve's face—it was probably closest he'll ever get to second base in his life. And don't think I'm dissing him, because if a hug from Wanda counts, then he's gotten further than I have.

Since there are so many girls to look at, chemistry seemed okay at first. That is, until Mr. Bornack started telling us endless stories about his wilderness trips in northern Wisconsin and how he once spent two nights in the forest with nothing more than a pocket knife and a box of matches or something ridiculous. He's really into himself, and he flirts with Wanda and Kelly all the time (I guess Aiesha isn't built enough for his tastes), and this drives me absolutely nuts. It's as if all male adults are compensating for the losers they were in high school (and still are). This scares the hell out of me, because I'm not exactly Mr. Popular myself, and I'm worried that in twenty years I'll be a band director or something and hitting on teenagers. God, that's a depressing thought.

The next category of girls is pretty, and it's a little harder to define. Pretty is sort of an upper-class cute. Pretty is nice just to look at, the way you might think a painting is pretty or a sunset is pretty. When you see a girl who's pretty, you don't mess up your image of her with sexual fantasies. You just admire. When it comes to the pretty category, Natalie beats out every other girl in every way. She's got these piercing blue eyes and reddish-brown hair and she wears these goofy clothes that look like they belong in the 1970s, but somehow they look good on her. Natalie is so pretty, she's practically in a category of her own: worship-worthy. I can't say I

exactly know her very well, but we were both in a woodwind ensemble last year and she was really cool, very down to earth, and well, when you find someone who's both amazing looking *and* down to earth, it's an unbeatable combination, like a peanut butter and Cocoa Krispies sandwich.

The finally category is annoying, which is Paula. Paula is a tall blondish girl who has a thing for me, but I'm not interested in her. What can I say? Even guys like me can be choosy. Paula is like gnat that hovers over a damp dog (I just realized that I'm the dog in that analogy). She doesn't go away. She just lingers there.

I'll give you an example of Paula's gnat-like qualities. At my locker today she came over and said hi, only she never just says hi. She always says, "Hiya, Nooms." It sounds like she's about to give me a karate chop. I said hi just to be nice because I keep forgetting that I'm supposed to be meaner this year, and of course Paula took my "hi" as an invitation to stick around. That's what gnats do.

"So we don't have many classes together this year, huh?" she said.

"Nope."

Pause.

"That's a bummer."

"Yep."

Pause.

"But at least we'll always be in band together, huh?"

"I guess so."

Then her eyes got all big like she was about to say something important, but this is what she said instead: "I thought of a funny name for a dessert."

And seriously, what was I supposed to say to THAT.

“E-le-MEN-o,” she said.

“What?”

“E-le-MEN-o, like when you say the alphabet...L, M, N, O, P.” When Paula talks, she does these quick little breathes in between sentences, like little zips. I wish I could just zip her mouth shut. “Every time I get to L, M, N, O I think it sounds like a dessert.”

I closed my locker and patted Paula on the shoulder. “You’ve been practicing your alphabet. That’s good news, Paula.”

Her face turned red. “I’m just saying, it’s a good name for a dessert, because it sort of sounds like lemon. You say, e-LEMON-o. Get it? So the dessert could be something like lemon and marshmallow.”

“Or Jell-O,” I said, and immediately kicked myself for keeping this lame conversation going.

“Yes! Lemon and Jell-O. Wouldn’t that be great?”

I’ll tell you what would be great—if The Gnat would go fly to some other guy and tell *him* about her lame ideas. I’ve got other things to think about, like how I’m going to get through the day without talking to my mom.

Speaking of which, when I got home today from cross country practice, it was basically impossible to not talk to my mom, because she was already at home making dinner. So instead of just talking, which I was in no mood to do, I decided to try out my rhyming idea.

“Mark, can you set the table for me?”

“I am able to set the table,” I said, and slid a few plates from the cupboard.

“Huh?”

I didn't really know what to say to that, so I started setting the table, and of course my mom can't tolerate not talking—silence is like some evil curse or something—so she asked me how school was today, and I said, “I guess today, school was okay.”

She kept chopping celery, but she looked at me with a sideways glance like I was creeping her out, which creeped *me* out, because I was afraid she might chop off her finger and we'd be left with bloody celery for dinner. “What about geometry?” she said. “You said you thought it was going to be your hardest class. Is it going okay so far?”

“Geometry has got the best of me,” I said. I was really getting into this. I could probably talk to my mom all day long without getting bored if I could do it in rhyme.

“Mark!”

“What?” I thought I'd break my new rhyming rule, just this once.

“Will you please stop doing that?”

Well, I sort of froze on that one, because I couldn't think of a rhyme. I just stood there with my eyes staring at the ceiling, but after a few seconds, it finally came to me.

“Did I do something bad to make you so mad?”

She set down the knife she'd been using to chop celery, which was good, because for a split second there I thought she might use it on me. But really, I thought she'd end up smiling and getting a laugh out of all this. That's what any SANE MOTHER would have done, but of course, my mom has to suck the fun out of everything. She got this hurt look in her eyes.

“I don't like what you're doing,” she said.

“What am I doing?”

“You're mocking me. You think that by rhyming you'll be able to get me to stop asking questions.”

Yeah, but I didn't actually think she'd figure that part out.

"So will you please stop?" she said.

I grabbed a few utensils out of the drawer and said, "Fine. School was FINE, okay? I'm doing FINE in my homework. Happy? Was that actually better than rhyming?"

"Yes. In fact, it was."

I continued to set the table, and though I wasn't stupid enough to say it out loud, in my head I kept the rhymes coming:

In fact, it was

Because, because

Because of the annoying things she does