

# Let $x$

*by* Chad Simpson

Let  $x$  equal the moment just after he tells her he's starting a club for people who know something about computers.

It is summer, 1984, and this is their grade school playground. She is idling on a swing over a patch of scuffed earth. He stands just off to the side, one hand on the chain of the swing next to hers.

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Let  $y$  equal her laughter. Her laughter sounds like a prank phone call at three a.m. It sounds a little evil.

She throws her head back, and even though he is hearing the  $y$  of her laughter in the wake of that moment  $x$ , he can't stop staring at her hair. He can't believe how black, how shiny, how perfect it is. She stands up out of the swing and asks, "What do you know about computers?"

It is 1984. Nobody at this elementary school—or in Monmouth, Illinois, in general—knows all that much about computers.

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Let  $z$  equal the face he makes. The face is not a reaction to her question but to her laughter.

He was trying to impress her with this computer club. He knows she is smarter than he is. He knows that she was, in fact, smarter than everyone in the entire fifth grade, and that next year, when they start pre-algebra, she will be the smartest person in the sixth grade, too.

He can't help the  $z$  of his face. He feels humiliated. His ears are tiny fires, and her hair and face, both of which he finds beautiful, has always found beautiful, are beginning to blur together. She has stopped laughing, but he can still hear the ghost of it as he searches for a variable that might make it as if none of this ever happened.

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In a moment she will step closer to him, recognizing in some way his humiliation, and wanting to make him feel better, but he will think she is about to say or do something even worse than she's already done, and he will misinterpret her gesture. When she gets close to him, he will kick her in the stomach—harder than he has ever kicked anyone.

He will regret this before she even begins to cry. She will double over, gasping for breath, and look up at him with dry eyes, and he will know that the hurt he has just inflicted upon her is at least equal to but probably greater than the hurt caused to him by the  $y$  of her laughter.

He will feel terrible, and he will immediately think back to  $x$ , the variable that started this whole rotten equation.

Let  $x$  equal not the moment just after he tells her about the computer club, but the moment just before it.

Let  $x$  be his saying nothing about this club and instead telling her something he has always wanted to say.

Let  $x$  be a different gesture altogether. Something honest. Tender.

Let  $x$ .

