

Sadie Hawkins Day

by Noria Jablonski

It's Leap Year and my school is observing Sadie Hawkins Day, which means the sixth-graders have a dance where the girls ask the boys to dance and the rest of us get to dress up like hillbillies.

Unfortunately for me, aside from Mrs. D the teacher's aide, I am the only person in the whole school who dressed up. My perm that makes everyone call me Poodle, or Poo for short, is in pigtails. I'm wearing cutoffs with a rope belt, a plaid shirt tied at my waist, Magic Marker freckles on my cheeks, and a piece of black paper on my front tooth to make it look like the tooth is missing, which gives me character. I think I look pretty sexy.

Earlier today it rained but it's sunny by the time school lets out. In a puddle on the sidewalk I see one of those stick worms like the one Kelly Tanaka brought to school that lives in a jar of water on a windowsill in our classroom. Kelly Tanaka has some superpower that makes all the boys think she's hot, like they are all wearing Kelly-Tanaka-is-hot goggles. She's not that hot. I'm freezing in my cutoffs. I crouch down to examine the stick worm and someone comes up behind me and says, "What're you looking at, Poo?" It's Geo St. George, who chases the girls and kisses them but never chases me. I wouldn't mind if he did. I tell him it's a stick worm and he crouches down next to me and says, "That's not a stick worm, that's a stick," and snaps it in two to prove it.

We start walking and he points to a fat earthworm. "That," he says, "is a worm." There are worms everywhere. It's hard to avoid stepping on lines, cracks, and worms on the sidewalk. Geo picks up a pink worm and dangles it in my face. "This," he says, "is a worm." I sidestep him and walk away fast. He chases me and I think he's going to kiss me but he grabs the collar of my shirt and something cold and wet slides down my back. I shudder and gasp. He hooks his fingers on my rope belt, whipping me around to face him, and pulls me close, I'm in his arms, he's holding me so lovingly, and maybe

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he's going to kiss me after all. He rubs his hands up and down my back, and then I feel a juicy splat. I tear myself away and run, not caring about lines, cracks, or worms on the sidewalk.

I arrive home, breathless. My mother is in the kitchen, hunched over the Crock-Pot, blowing on a wooden spoonful of baked beans. "Worm," I manage to get out. My mother tastes the beans and gives me a funny look. "Worm," I repeat, flapping my arms. "On. My. Back." I untie my shirt and jump up and down. The worm is not coming unstuck. "Get it off me, get it off me!"

My mother rips a sheet of paper towel off the roll and tells me, "Hold still." She lifts my shirt and peels off the worm, wads it up in the paper towel and drops it in the trash. She's looking disgusted and laughing at the same time. I don't see what's so funny. I want to punch her. I want to punch somebody. She laughs, "Who did this to you?"

"Geo St. George." I go to the sink and spit out the piece of black paper that made me toothless.

Teasingly, she says, "He likes you."

"He kisses the girls he likes," I say. "A mashed worm does not equal like."

The next morning I march to the principal's office and tell him about Geo St. George and the worm. Mr. Thornbush wears a short-sleeved shirt and a wide necktie with a pattern of tiny crowns. His hair is very organized and unmoving. His clasped hands rest on the newspaper personal ads spread on his desk, fingers woven together in a basket of understanding. I wish Mr. Thornbush would give Geo St. George a bare-assed paddling with the paddle mounted on the wall, even though it's supposedly just for show.

Mr. Thornbush says, "As long as I have you here, I'd like to discuss your achievement test scores." He lifts the personal ads, revealing a blue folder with my name on it. He opens the blue folder and a sheet of paper inside has a column of numbers: 12.9, 12.9, 12.9, all the way down the page. "This means twelfth grade, ninth month," he explains. "That's as high the test goes. You tested off the charts."

My head gets big about this.

He asks, "Are you bored in school?"

"Yes, very." I nod my big head vigorously.

"What do you think about skipping a grade?"

"I like that idea a lot," I say.

"Two grades?"

"Even better."

It's settled: I will skip the rest of fifth and all of sixth grade, and tomorrow I will start school at the junior high. Geo St. George does not get the bare-assed paddling he deserves, but he does get suspended for a week. I still have to finish out the rest of today as a fifth-grader.

Unfortunately, we are playing my second-to-least favorite sport for P.E.: kickball. My least favorite sport is dodgeball, which I'm actually very deft at because I'm so scared of the ball. I'm not normally very fleet, but I am when someone is throwing a ball at me. My big head is made bigger by my correct usage of *deft* and *fleet*. Twelfth grade, ninth month, indeed.

My chest hurts. More precisely, my boobs hurt. I doubt my teacher,

Mr. Fine, who is fine, fine as in handsome, will think boobs hurting is a good enough excuse to get me out of playing kickball.

As usual, I'm the last one picked and a collective groan comes from the team that ends up with me. When it's my turn to kick, the pitcher, or should I say the *roller*, Newton Chin, yells to his team, "Poodle's up—everybody move in!" The outfielders move into the infield and the infielders all huddle around Newton the Roller. Newton rolls the ball towards me very slowly, which seems unfair, like I will have to kick that much harder to make the ball go farther. I kick with all my might and nick the ball with my toe. It spins cockeyed off to the side, a foul ball. Newton rolls again and I kick another foul ball. The third time the ball rolls at me I picture it as Geo St. George's head and draw my leg back—this is happening in bionic slow-motion, or it could also be *Chariots of Fire*—and as I drive my leg forward I tell the head of Geo St. George to kiss...my...foot! *Whoosh!* Nothing but air. For a moment I wonder if I should run to first, and then it hits me that I struck out. At kickball.

Mr. Fine claps and says unconvincingly, "Good effort!"

I pull out several hairs as punishment for my good effort.

At the end of the day I empty out my desk and turn in my textbooks, sincerely apologizing for the condition of my Language Arts book. I was reading it in the bathtub and it was cumbersome, which means heavy, in my wet soapy hands and I dropped it into the bath by accident. When it dried the pages went all wavy, like it had gotten a perm. On my way home I try something new: stepping only on lines and cracks. Mario Marquez, who supposedly frenched Kelly Tanaka at the roller rink, rides by on his dirt bike and says, "Smell ya later, Poo!"

Nobody calls me Poo in junior high. The irony of this is that it makes me feel sort of sad and invisible. *Irony* is when you expect something

to happen (such as not being called Poo producing a feeling of happiness in me) and the opposite of what you expect happens (such as me feeling sad and invisible). I wonder how Tiffany the Albino Girl feels when we are going over dominant and recessive genes in Science class. Being able to curl your tongue is a recessive trait. They say that everything you need to know in life you learn in junior high, but what is the point of plotting the coordinates of positive and negative numbers on an X-Y graph? Or diagramming sentences? How will this help me in life?

I eat lunch by myself in a toilet stall. The period after lunch is P.E. In the locker room all the girls are wearing bras except for me in my undershirt. Tiffany the Albino Girl informs me that undershirts are for babies. Do babies test off the charts and skip two grades? I think not. We do jumping jacks, chanting: "S-U-C-C-E-S-S, that's the way you spell success!" and "Victory, victory, that's our cry! V-I-C-T-O-R-Y," so we exercise our spelling skills along with our bodies. My boobs are absolutely killing me.

My final class of the day is Social Studies. I skip the beginning of class to see my guidance counselor. Mrs. Lasky's lipstick is bright orange, bleeding into the lines around her mouth, and she sits under a poster of Mahatma Gandhi. Her office smells like gravy, but not in a good way, not like Thanksgiving. She clasps her hands in a basket of understanding and asks me how my first day was.

"Boring," I say. "Very."

"Perhaps seventh grade is not challenging enough for you. Perhaps you should consider accelerating to eighth grade," Mrs. Lasky says sagely, like a sage, a wise person. Like Gandhi.

"Why not ninth? Just to be on the safe side," I say.

When I come out of Mrs. Lasky's office, I give myself a high-five, or a

clap, same thing. In Social Studies we play Constitution Bingo. I have to pull out some hairs because I don't know what amendment requires electors to vote separately for president and vice-president. Who cares? It's not like free speech or abolishing slavery or anything. If I'd known the answer, Amendment Twelve, I would've had a bingo. Finally the bell rings and it's goodbye junior high.

At home my mother looks at me pop-eyed and says, "When did you get *those*?"

"Get what?"

She gestures at my chest. "Breasts."

"Sometime yesterday," I say.

So we go bra shopping. We go the Lingerie & Lace Boutique belonging to a once-famous topless dancer. My mother reads *My Secret Garden* while she waits on a leopard-covered bench. In the dressing room, the topless dancer grabs each of my boobs and stuffs them into a bra. I've never been to first base but now I've been to second.

My lab partner in high school Biology has a black pompadour and a leather jacket that says NO CLUB in flames on the back. His name is Ace. We are dissecting an earthworm. Mid-slice, I freeze up: I'm in fifth grade again, running from Geo St. George and the horror movie of worms. Over and over, I relive that awful splat on my back. Geo St. George's arms are around me and I try to wrestle free, as someone says very soothingly, "It's okay, kid, it's okay. It's just a worm. No one's gonna make you cut it." I come to and Ace has his leather arm around my shoulders. He says, "Are you, like, a vegetarian?"

"No," I say. "I was having a flashback."

Ace nods like he knows all about flashbacks. He takes the scalpel from me and finishes the incision, exposing the earthworm's five hearts. In English class we read *Romeo & Juliet* aloud, and when it's my turn to read I choke—as in my throat is jammed but also choke as in I fail to perform: “As is the bud bit with an envious worm/Ere he can spread his sweet leaves to the air,/Or dedicate his beauty to the sun.” There's no escape from worms today.

I knock on the door of the school psychologist. I don't know if Andy is Dr. Andy's actual last name or if he goes by his first name because he wants to *rap on my level*. I tell him I had a flashback and I keep seeing worms. He suggests that I might have ingested LSD. “You could be having a”—finger quote—“bad trip.’ Are you hearing colors or seeing sounds?”

I say I'm pretty sure I'm not on LSD.

Dr. Andy slides open the drawer of a filing cabinet and walks his fingers across the tops of the files. He pulls out a blue folder with my name on it. “It says here your father passed away when you were three. That must have been very difficult for you.”

I shrug. “Not really. I don't remember.”

“Do you remember your father?”

“I remember a mustache,” I say.

“Mustache,” he echoes, twirling the ends of an imaginary moustache of his own. “Like a caterpillar. Which is not unlike a worm. Aside from the worm's obvious phallic connotations, we also tend to associate worms with death. And with feces.”

“In fifth grade my nickname was Poo,” I say.

“Aha,” he says all-knowingly. “And while some worms represent death, others—say, the earthworm—are more symbolic of life. Earthworms till the earth and make it fertile. An earthworm cut in half can regenerate itself and grow a new tail. Earthworms make lemonade out of lemons, so to speak. What kind of worms do you see?”

“Earthworms.”

“Aha,” he says again. “Perhaps you are seeing worms because you subconsciously desire to regenerate your father.”

“Or perhaps I’m seeing worms because of the worm Geo St. George put down my shirt and mashed on my back.”

Dr. Andy gives me a diagnosis of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. He says, “In light of your delicate emotional state, I recommend that you continue your studies at home, where you are less likely to encounter”—finger quote—“‘triggers’ that cause you to feel ‘freaked out.’”

It seems like only yesterday I was a hillbilly fifth-grader, and look at me now, I’m doing an independent study because of my mental illness. Plus I have boobs. I’m like my Grow Up Skipper doll: wind up her arm and her chest grows out. Not that I play with dolls anymore. Now I play with polygons and polynomials and I crunch on Wint-O-Green LifeSavers in my closet to demonstrate *triboluminescence*. I do an analysis of *Alice in Wonderland* using quantum physics, Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle, and string theory. I study the mating habits of dragonflies, I read *Faust* in German, and I re-enact the assassination of JFK outside on the patio because of the mess: First I am Oswald with a squirt gun, then I light one of my mother’s cigarettes and blow a puff of smoke from the grassy knoll. I toss some leftover baked beans/Kennedy brains over my shoulder, and I

put on my pink-construction-paper pillbox hat and try to climb out of the back of the limo. A Tootsie Roll is the supposed single bullet. An ant colony re-enacts the Trail of Tears when I step on their hill by accident.

When I was little I had a pop-up book about a girl who baked a cake that grew and grew. My boobs are like that runaway cake. I'm outgrowing my mother's bras.

I go to the high school principal and ask her to sign my request for early graduation. She does, in tall spiky letters that look just like her. Super-skinny Ms. Crane has a very small white feather in her hair. She puts a purple pill in her mouth, swallows it down with V8, and asks me if I plan on going to college.

"Yes, eventually," I say. "But for now I want"—finger quote—"life experience' in the 'real world.' I want to get a job."

Normally I read the funnies first but today I open the paper to the want ads. The obituaries are on the opposite page and it seems disrespectful not to read about who died before I begin my job hunt. Who died is Mrs. D the teacher's aide. She choked on a breath mint. Unfortunately for her, it wasn't a Wint-O-Green LifeSaver—the hole in the middle might have saved her life. I chuckle to myself, remembering the time Mrs. D wore one black shoe and one navy-blue shoe by mistake and I inhale the fruity-chemical smell of fresh dittos I associate with her. I squeeze out a tear. Then I telephone my old school and ask them if they are looking for a new teacher's aide.

My first day of work I wear cutoffs and a plaid shirt tied at my waist. I'm early, alone in the classroom. I say hello to the stick worm in the jar on the windowsill. I say hello to the picture of Mrs. D on the wall, where she's dressed up for Sadie Hawkins Day, in overalls and a straw hat, Magic Marker freckles on her cheeks. I don't know why freckles equal hillbilly but they do. The picture frame is made of

cardboard and masking tape, darkened with shoe polish, and decorated with a few gold-painted macaronis. Underneath the picture, construction-paper letters spell out IN MEMORY OF MRS. D.

Mr. Fine comes in and says welcome back and tells me to call him Mike. Mike gives me a pile of papers and I go over to the office to make dittos. Cranking the ditto machine, drunk on fumes, I feel as if I am breathing in pure concentrated Mrs. D.

By the time I'm done, class has begun. I pass out dittos, going from desk to desk, and when I come to Geo St. George, who has just returned from his week of suspension, he scrunches down in his seat and says softly, "Hi, Poo."

I say, not softly, "That's Miss Poo to you."

Kelly Tanaka may have superpowers that make all the boys think she's hot, but she's hopeless at long division. I give her a gold star anyway for good effort.

When kickball teams are picked during P.E., the teams come out uneven. So I volunteer to play, expecting the usual groan from my team. This time it doesn't happen. And when it's my turn to kick, Newton the Roller yells to his team, "Miss Poodle's up—everybody move back!" Everybody heads into the outfield. The ball rolls towards me and I spread my arms like leaves and my toe smacks the ball, sending it up, up, up and out, like a kiss blown to the sun.

