

Green Bench, With Chipping Paint

by Hannah Holmes

Flipping through a Seventeen filled with pictures of glistening, skinny, smiling girls, all about my age, I think that some people have a good time at life, and I wonder why I'm not one of them. At sixteen years old, I'm having a crap time at home, where dad is gone and mom cries in the evenings, and a crap time at school, where no one notices or cares. Right now I'm alone and thinking, outside the mall, on a bench with chipping green paint, but what my life usually comes down to is James, Denny, and me kicking around town, because none of us belong anywhere, mostly because our parents screwed things up.

Storms make me happy, and its early evening on a cloudy Monday, with a thunderstorm warning in the corner of the TV at JCPennys, and the mall is deserted. I look around the empty parking lot and feel like I'm in a movie about the end of the world, the one where Will Smith runs around New York City with a pack of dogs. As a kid with greasy hair whizzes by on a skateboard and kills the moment, I think to myself that skinny, pasty boys really ought to wear shirts. His jeans are sagging, just enough to reveal boxers covered in itty bitty spaceships. Now that's hardcore.

I'm shivering, even though it's not cold. I'm nervous. I'm always nervous. I'm clutching my Walgreens bag so tight my hands are sweating. I have a huge science test tomorrow, but my chemistry book, which is still wrapped in plastic, is probably under some dirty clothes or maybe I stuck it in the refrigerator. I don't remember. I'm not worried. I'll just read James's study guide on the bus tomorrow. James isn't like other smart kids, who protect their hard work. He always lets me copy his work sheets and read his notes, and he just smiles and

says its alright. Then there's Denny, who just flunks. I guess.

On the weekends, Denny, James, and I sit on plastic covered couches and watch TV shows, shows like *Friends*, which teach us life is centered around relationships, relationships are centered around sex, and if you aren't having sex, you're either a social or reject or plain stupid. When I watch dirty movies and teachers or adults who attend church tell me I shouldn't, I always laugh and say yeah right. I like to think I'm a good kid, above the influence. But that night, when James and I were alone, the lights were low and I knew I loved him. It seemed so right, even if it was so wrong, even if my stomach was churning the entire time, even if I was scared senseless. I think I'm pregnant.

I lay down my magazine and squeeze my Walgreens bag tighter. Inside is a pack of Reeses Cups and a Clear Blue Easy Digital, the expensive kind, over ninety-nine percent accurate, claims the box. I could go home to my mom and cry and spill my guts, but my mom isn't solid enough to deal with this. Every night I hear her sobbing and whispering my dad's name, and when I try to talk to her or make her laugh, it gets worse. She tells me I have my father's face, and sometimes, she won't even look at me.

I walk inside, order a large mocha from Starbucks, and stare longingly at the six dollar chocolate chip muffins, so big they must be induced with growth hormones. The coffee shop atmosphere is depressing, with business men calmly browsing *Newsweeks*, while my life is slowly being defenestrated into a dumpster. So, I return to the green bench with chipping paint, where I hug my paper cup and take long, deep drinks. The mocha is sweet and my body starts to feel warm. I put on headphones, listen to weird music, and try not to feel anything, anything at all.

I reach into my purple backpack and exchange my *Seventeen* for an *Archie* comic, some serious brain candy. I

don't want to think, but I can't stop thinking about how I'm a deadbeat high school kid, flunking math and science, doomed to teen pregnancy and a lifetime as a telemarketer or worse, a daycare worker. Shoving a Reeses Cup in my mouth, I look into the street lights and hope that maybe, just maybe, my life will be something better. God, please, I don't want to be pregnant.

Nobody wants to hear the rant of a sixteen year old girl who wears black hoodies and hates the world. I'm just another freaky teenager, combing my hair in my face and listening to hippie music. I might be wacked out, but I'm not hardcore, not really. I wear grungy t-shirts from thrift stores and jeans ripped at the knee. I hang around the mall for no reason and throw tennis shoes over telephone wires, but I'd never get a tattoo or color my hair something crazy like purple. I just say no to caffeine pills and booze, and I'd never light up, not if my life depended on it.

Well, okay, one time, sophomore year, I smoked cigars with Denny during gym. In my defense, it was track and field day—I run like a clumsy woman in high heels—I had no choice but to skip. Anyways, Denny and I walked to the Quickie Mart and bought some Black and Milds, and he insisted everything was fine, because, when you smoke cigars, you don't inhale. Then I realized, after a couple puffs, that our heads were surrounded in smoke, and we were both breathing. So, I called Denny an idiot and made it back to Creekwood in time for fourth period. Then I passed notes with James, who would never skip class, about just how awesome the new episode *Flight of the Conchords* is. I'm so not ready to have a kid.

I pull the cardboard box out of the shopping bag and stare at the cover, blue and clean but unwelcoming, like a doctor's office or a psyche ward. I glance at my cell phone. It's 8:15 p.m. That little digital clock is so unholy, because it tells me I

am not responsible— with the school bus coming tomorrow at 7:45 a.m., I should go home, take my chemistry book out of the refrigerator, and study a few hours, in time for a decent night's sleep.

I promise myself that in ten minutes, I'll take the test. I don't want to. I'm much happier in a whimsical fantasy than out in the real world, where I am forced to face all the things I'd rather ignore, like chemistry exams and my dad. I could totally blame my lack of a father figure and say it's all his fault I'm sitting here, procrastinating on a test, pregnancy, not chemistry.

In my wildest dreams, my mom never cries, and my dad is here, now, in her bed. And every night I sleep soundly, because I'm not afraid of the dark. I'm not afraid, because my dad never stumbled home late at night while smelling of cigarettes and cheap perfume. He never hit me, and he didn't spend my college money on whiskey and whores. Instead, he built me a tree house and helped me with my math homework, and my family was happy, not bruised and broken like everyone else. In my wildest dreams, I don't hate my father, and I'm not flunking chemistry. In my wildest dreams, I'm not pregnant.

But what if this baby is beautiful and I love her. If I have a baby, my life will have meaning, and I can help her become something good, better than I could ever be. But I'm just a lame high school student. I'm young and stupid. If I have a baby, her life will be just as crappy as mine. I lay my hand on my stomach and smile, though. I can't help it. Doesn't every girl just want to have a baby?

I glance at my cell phone. It's 8:45 p.m. The mall closes at nine. I get up from my green bench, walk into the food court, and buy a Route 44 cherry Sprite at Sonic, where the zit-face cashier glares at me for making an order so close to closing. I down the sprite in about six minutes, as I walk to the

bathroom, slowly. I can't describe how I feel, except to say I'm really, really empty.

The bathroom smells of bleach and pine sol, and I'm all alone, more alone than I ever have been. After I take the test, I close my eyes as I shake it. My body is shaking. The test slips from my fingers and lands with a small noise on the tile floor. I keep my eyes squeezed shut, grip the sides of the sink, and think if I let go, I'll fall through the floor into the core of the earth, where I'll be eaten alive by mutant rock monsters that only come alive when pregnant teenagers appear. I look up, into the mirror. My eyes are wide. My skin is pale. I've never felt weaker. I bend down and pick up the test. I'm not pregnant.