

Excerpt from *The Queen Geek Social Club* by Laura Preble. Available September 5, 2006 from Berkley Jam, a division of Penguin Putnam Publishing. Copyright 2006.

Chapter 1: A Geek is Born

(or 101 Creative Uses for Silly String)

The original meaning of the word “geek” was a person in the circus who bit the heads off live chickens. Let me say up front, I’d never do this, because I am a strict vegetarian. However, in more modern terms, I guess I fit the definition.

If you say the word “geek” to people today, they think of a shlubby kind of misfit, usually young (I don’t think geeks live to a ripe old age—must check this out) and almost always single. My theory: the universe in its wisdom tries to keep geeks from mating to keep the geek population in check. In this way I sort of mess up the averages, because I date with a vengeance.

I’m actually on a date right now. It’s 10:30 at night, I’m sitting in a parked ’68 Mustang in front of my house, which is dark, but I know my dad is still awake because I can see the flickering lights of the television in his bedroom. Dustin Garrett is staring at my breasts at the moment, and if it were possible to have a small, inflatable thought bubble orbiting his head, it would be filled with the word “Yum.” For about the tenth time tonight, I mentally kick myself for going out with someone who has an IQ in the negative digits. I know better, I really do. But sometimes your hormones get the best of you. Even if you’re a geek.

“So, what about going to the dance next week?” Dustin is stretching his arms and yawning, using that classic move to put his arm around me, all the better to get a grope at my boobs. “I mean, I know you’re a freshman and all, but don’t let that stop you. I don’t care what people think.”

“That’s very considerate.” I wriggle around to avoid the grope. Dating is like a fine country line dance without the funny hats. “But I have a science fair coming up, so I

think I really need to spend some time on that next weekend. And you know, I really need to go. My dad's waiting up for me."

The mention of my dad has the chilling effect I was going for. Dustin shrinks a little and throws a cautious glance at the front door as if my father is going to appear, crazed, with a shotgun, demanding that this boy marry his daughter and make her boobs honest.

"Well, yeah, it is getting late." He changes focus and smiles his expensive-orthodontia smile. "Got a tennis match tomorrow after school. You coming?"

"I'd love to. But I have tutoring after school. Sorry." I fumble in my purse for my keys.

"Tutoring? Why? You have, like, straight As don't you?"

"Yeah. I tutor other kids." I produce the key and hold it up like a magic talisman. Begone, oh feeler of boobs! "I better go. Thanks for the movie. I'll see you at school." I lean over and give him a peck on the cheek. Sensing his options disappearing, Dustin pulls a wrestling move and I'm lying face up in his lap, the steering wheel digging into my scalp.

"Hey! That's hot!" His face is hovering above me, his eyes wide, nostrils flared with the scent of girl. "Let's do it."

"My dad is right in the house," I remind him. "He has a shotgun."

"Oh." For a nanosecond, common sense flashes across Dustin's face. Then lust takes over again. "I'll be quiet."

I sigh, pull myself up by levering my weight against the steering wheel, twist and open the door in a lightning move calculated purely with physics that would make my Honors teacher, Mr. Rich, extremely proud. "See ya."

"Shelby!" He's frantically rolling down the window, cranking the handle. "Wait!"

"What satisfaction canst thou have tonight?"

"Huh?"

“Romeo and Juliet. Anyway, thanks for the movie. I’ll see you at school, okay?”

“Shelby!” He’s yelling now. Not cool.

I go back, lean in the window. “What?”

He swallows hard, as if he has honest words caught in his throat. “I love you.”

“You do?”

“Yes. I think so.” He grips the steering wheel and concentrates on it. “It’s kind of annoying.”

“Dustin. You don’t love me. You’re just feeling desperate.”

“Don’t sell yourself short. You’re really hot.” He turns to me, smiles again, and I realize it was all a ploy to get my boobs back to the car.

“Thanks again. Gotta go.” As I scamper across the lawn, I hear scuffling behind me.

“Shelby!” I turn, and Dustin is standing next to the passenger door of the car, his shirt open to the waist, his arms outstretched across the car, his head upturned like an underwear model in a Times Square billboard. He has a great upper body since he plays tennis, and I guess he must feel like it’s his secret weapon. I have no choice.

I rummage in my purse and pull out my own secret weapon. I shake the can of day-glo pink silly string, take aim, and decorate Dustin Garrett’s gorgeous chest with sticky strands of embarrassment. “Goodnight!” I whisper as, horrified and confused, he plucks absently at the mess entwined in his scraggly chest hair. I cleanly make my escape.

Tomorrow, no doubt, he’ll have to try to explain that to the tennis team.

My dad usually stays up until at least 3 in the morning working on various hobby projects. By day, he is a well-paid researcher for some company you’ve never heard of, and he gets to do a lot of his work at home, which is nice. They even built him a lab in back of the house so he could have all the equipment he needs. At night, though, he

works on his eccentric ideas that the Company wouldn't necessarily want to fund.

On the night of Dustin's humiliation, Dad is in the lab, as I suspected. He leaves the TV on in the house so it looks like we're sort of normal. He never watches it. Okay, except for the old *Star Trek* episodes.

I go through the dark house and out the sliding glass door in back, to the steel door with a keypad. I key in the password, and it swooshes open with a satisfying *Star Trek* hiss. Dad didn't really need this; he paid extra for it himself so he could feel like Mr. Spock hunting for Klingons or something.

"Hey." The room is dim, as usual, except for the glow of computer screens and some equipment radiating green neon in the corner under a huge portrait of Mom. It makes Mom sort of look like that princess from *Shrek*.

Dad is wearing goggles and is staring at something through a huge magnifying glass on a hinged arm. It makes him look like a big-eyed insect. He doesn't look up. "Oh, hey Shelby. How was the movie?"

"Okay."

He hears the catch in my voice, looks up and slides the goggles up into his wild nest of salt-and-pepper hair. "What? Wasn't he nice?"

"Hmm." I perch on a tall stool and swing my legs back and forth. It makes me feel little again. "He was a jerk. Just in it for the boobage."

"Hmm." He's back to the magnifying glass again. "I found some really intriguing properties on this—"

"I'm going to bed. See you in the morning." I kiss him on the forehead. "Don't stay up too late."

He doesn't really notice I'm leaving. Dad is literally the absent-minded professor if he's on a project. He does care about me, he really does; but if I disappeared while he was working on something juicy, I don't know that he would notice for, like, a week. When my mom died three years ago, he threw himself into work, and that helped him

deal with the loss, I guess. Now, it's just a habit.

"Night," I hear him say as the *Star Trek* door swooshes behind me. Well, nothing left but to go talk to Euphoria.

Euphoria is the robot my dad built for me. She (I call her a she, but actually, she has no real gender) is sort of a combination diary, best friend, playmate, nanny and baby monitor. She's about five feet tall, with a brushed-nickel finish. Dad gave her sort of a face, but it's kind of like the robot maid on that old cartoon, *The Jetsons*. She's a very simple machine, really, but he did program her to be able to talk to me and respond. She's also sensitive to temperature and humidity, so if I'm angry or crying, she knows it, and she knows the proper response to make. I know this is all fake, the right combination of zeros and ones, but I have pretended that Euphoria is really a person for years, like most kids pretend their teddy bears are real, or that the imaginary friend in the couch cushions is real.

"Good evening, Shelby," she whirs as I walk into my bedroom. "How was your date?"

"It sucked." I kick off my black Vans and dig my toes into the carpet.

"Oh. Sorry to hear that, baby." Her voice is kind of like a grandma, but also kind of Southern sounding. I think this is because Mom was from Georgia, but Dad claims it was totally accidental. Her green eye-lights blink in the darkness.

"Yeah, well. That's what I get for dating a jock."

"A jock?"

"Yeah. He's a tennis star." I sit on the bed and click the remote for my stereo. Classical music. Ahhh. "I had to silly string him."

"I think you need to find someone who thinks like you do."

"You mean, someone who thinks too much?" I pull off my plaid knee socks, shimmy out of my black pleated mini, and pull my red sweater over my head, which leaves me in my underwear. "Check it out." I stand in front of a full-length mirror

attached to my closet door. “I’m attractive, right? I’m smart, right? And yet, I have no real friends and boys bore me.”

The image looking back at me isn’t bad. I have long auburn hair, straight as a stick, and huge eyes that look like aggie marbles swirled with shades of blue. And there are those darned boobs. They get me in so much trouble. I mean, in 7th grade, I had nothing. Suddenly this year, they’ve puffed out like rice cakes in water. I have to constantly watch my posture, Euphoria says, because I tend to hunch over to hide these huge monstrosities. Okay, well, they’re not *that* big, but they feel pretty obvious, and when guys look at your chest instead of in your eyes, it sort of makes you feel like the dollar-a-pound special at the butcher shop. Anyway, moving on... high cheekbones, delicate lips, a slim but curvy figure...all pretty good. So why am I so miserable? Isn’t this supposed to make me happy?

“You are a pretty girl, but you are way too picky.” Euphoria rolls to the stereo and changes the channel to a rock station. “And you’re just too much of an egghead, if you’ll pardon my opinion. You need to get in touch with your rebellious teenager side.”

I punch a button and change the music back to Mozart. “Time for bed, Euphoria. Goodnight.”

The light goes off. Daddy has rigged it to Euphoria’s central control, so she can turn it off and on all by herself. “Night night, Shelby. Don’t let the bedbugs bite.”

“Wouldn’t you kill them if they showed up?” I snuggle up under my covers.

“Absolutely.” Her lights blink off too.

Green Pines High School, in beautiful San Diego’s north county, has some of the best test scores in the country. It also has a huge amount of teenagers who think they’re better than everyone else. I suppose I’m one of them.

I don’t have a lot of friends at Green Pines. I’ve gone here for nearly a year, and I’ve made some acquaintances, but nobody I’d consider a best friend. I don’t know if I’ve

ever had one, to be honest; I hung out with a girl named Jane in junior high, but she and her family moved to North Carolina or some other state with a North in it, and I haven't heard from her since last summer.

Here's the thing about friends, I mean *real* friends: you can't just put up a poster at school and advertise for somebody and hope you find the perfect one. It might work, I guess, but you'd look so pathetic and desperate that no one would want to be your friend, and so it would be kind of pointless. And if you're somebody like me—smart, witty, charming, humble—it's even more challenging to find that special someone who becomes your Best Friend. Plus, it's even harder than finding guys, because Best Friends are much more important. You can date anybody, but you can't just tell anybody about the time you threw up milk through your nose at the seventh-grade honors lunch, or about the time you got your period in the middle of the baseball game wearing white jeans and a tank top, sitting in the front row.

It's February, it's Friday, and it's the middle of my freshman year, so I'm pondering what I'll do this summer, all alone, with no Best Friend. Dad wants me to go to a summer science camp, and I guess I might, but I don't know. I could also try out for a play, write a book, or about half a dozen other things. The bottom line is: whatever I do, it will probably be alone.

First period English, I sit next to Jennifer Crist on one side, Taffy Burton (her name is really Taffy) in front of me, and Ted Trinidadario in back of me. He kicks my chair all the time and smells like firewood. The seat next to me is empty. At least, it was until today.

The class is, as usual, engaged in trivial conversation, this time about the upcoming dance. Dustin is in this class too, and across the room I see him talking to some friends; he says something, looks over at me, and they all laugh. I wish Euphoria was here.

While we're waiting for Ms. Napoli to start our fascinating discussion of British

boys who mount pigs heads on sticks for fun, a new girl walks into the room. I can't hear what she's saying over the din, but she shows the teacher a paper, Napoli points to the seat next to me, and the girl walks down the row toward it.

What a poser. She's tall, unusually tall, freakishly tall really, and to make her seem even taller, she's wearing those high platform sneakers in shocking green. Her ridiculously short blond hair has green streaks in it that match her shoes, and she's styled it so it sticks straight up in about 50 little points. It looks like a microscopic close-up of one of those Biore pore strips.

Her outfit, not that I care: pink gauzy shirt over a knee-length tight black skirt, pierced ears with Celtic crosses, a whole batch of silver bracelets wound around her forearms. As she glides into the desk, her long preying mantis legs fold up under her in the cramped space.

Napoli starts class. "I'd like to introduce you to a new student," she says, squinting at the paper. "Becca Gallagher. Becca, could you tell us a little about yourself?"

I get a good look at her profile, and she looks kind of intriguing. "We just moved down here from Los Angeles," she says.

"Swimming pools, movie stars!" Dustin yells from across the room. I wonder if he got all the silly string out of his chest hairs.

"Thanks for that, Dustin." Napoli shoots him a look. "Go on, Becca. You're from L.A.?"

"My mom and I just moved here two weeks ago."

"Well, welcome. I'm sure you'll find Green Pines a great school. Let me get a you a book. We're reading *Lord of the Flies*..." I tune out at that point because I am fixated on Becca Gallagher's leg tattoo. Now, lots of kids have tattoos and piercings. But hers goes from ankle to knee in this intricate design, a dragon or something entwined with a feather. It is in multiple colors, and there is some sort of metallic ink in it that makes it sparkle when she moves. I spend pretty much the rest of the period studying that tattoo,

wondering how her parents let her get it, wondering what it means. Even when Napoli asks me to explain why the British boys went savage, I make something up about dragons and get laughed at. Dustin laughs the loudest. Big shock.

The day goes by as it usually does, and it's finally lunchtime. As usual, I have no one to sit with, and neither does Becca Gallagher, whom I spot parked against a window in the cafeteria, sucking on an iced latte.

"Hey," I say casually. "Can I sit here?"

"Free country." She sips loudly on the remainder of the crushed ice. "Aren't you in my English class?"

"Yeah." I park my tray and start to open a yogurt. "Aren't you eating?"

"Already did. I don't have a fourth period yet, so I came over early to avoid the crowds. I hate crowds."

"Me too."

She turns to really look at me, and I notice she has eyes that are almost identical to mine, except they're green. She's looking through me, with that kind of intense gaze that freaks people out when I do it to them. No one's ever done it to me before, so now I know how it feels. Weird. "What's your name?"

"Shelby Chapelle." The look is making me feel kind of blushy and embarrassed, because she never takes her eyes away. "I was born here."

"Oh, yeah." She finally looks out the window. "San Diego. Must be nice."

"Not so much."

She turns her eyes back to me. "Why not? It's so much more laid back than L.A., and there aren't as many posers. Plus, you have some killer beaches. Everybody loves it here."

"Not me. If I could get out, I would. Nobody here likes to think."

She laughs. Now, this laugh was really out of character for her, because she looks kind of gazelle-ish and elegant, but her laugh is like this donkey honk. It makes me

immediately bust up too. My mom used to tell me I sound like a chicken, so I guess we have a regular barnyard symphony going on.

“Yeah, that’s the way it is in Los Angeles too. It’s all about the movies. I always felt like I was the only person who’d ever read a book for fun. You like to read?”

“Sure.” I finish up the yogurt and turn around to face her. “Who’s your favorite author?”

“That’s tough.” She takes another long slurp from the cup, pops the lid and starts to tip it toward her to get at the ice, but it sticks and then comes tumbling out in a big chunk all over her pink gauzy top. “I’ve got a drinking problem.”

“Let’s go outside. You’ll dry faster.”

Our school is on some huge bunch of acreage, and there are lots of trees and shrubs everywhere, nice landscaping, even a big patch of roses that are blooming. Becca walks toward the middle of the campus, where most of the other kids hang out on benches and under trees. She’s going toward the panther sculpture.

“Now, I’ve never heard of a school having a big art project in the middle of the campus.” She touches the nose of the one of the panthers. “Although since we were so close to Hollywood, we had a great theater at my school.”

“Theater? Were you in drama?”

“I had the lead in *Romeo and Juliet* in the fall. And I’m only a freshman.”

As we walk past the panthers, I notice that Dustin and his pack of boob-addled friends are stalking us. “Oh no,” I mutter.

“What?”

“That guy. I just had a date with him last Saturday night. He went all octopus on me, so I had to take him down.”

By this time Dustin and his gang had caught up with us, and I was expecting the worst.

“Hey, Shelby. How’s it going?” They had casually surrounded us, Dustin and five

of his tennis star buddies, chests rippling. “Thanks for Saturday. I had a blast.”

“Yeah, me too. Thanks.” I try to walk past him, but he blocks me. Not cool.

“I was wondering about something, though.” I see him wink at Jeremy Friend, a sophomore on his team who is standing behind me. “I just thought I’d ask you about it.”

“Yeah?”

Through all of this, freakishly tall Becca Gallagher just stands, arms crossed, watching everything play out. I glance quickly at her, and even though we’ve just met, I feel anger brewing under those 50 green little spikes on her head. I have a feeling you wouldn’t want to be in the way if those little spikes blew.

“Yeah, I just wondered. Is it true what they say?”

“I don’t know Dustin. What do they say? And who are *they* anyway?”

The boys snicker. Dustin’s eyes are checking the reactions of his friends, unaware of the ticking time bomb that is Becca Gallagher. “That you’re a lesbo. That’s what I heard.”

The guys cackle. I guess the fact that I didn’t plow helplessly into Dustin Garrett’s pants made me gay. “Actually, no. That’s not true.”

I turn to go, trying to brush past Dustin, but again he blocks my path. “See, because I heard that rumor, and I asked you out anyway. Because lesbos are hot, you know?” He turns to give Becca a long appraisal. “In fact, if you’re the new resident lesbo, maybe we could all get together—”

It happens so fast that I don’t consciously see it. Later, Becca would teach me the trick, her own personal move she had dubbed the Titillating Tit Twist, but just seeing it for the first time was an amazement, a thing of beauty. Because what she does is lunge forward quick as lightning, grabs Dustin’s right nipple, twist it in a 360-degree turn that nearly rips it off his chest, and then takes her original position as if nothing has happened.

Dustin is so stunned he just stands there and blinks, unconsciously rubbing his abused nipple. Becca pounces then, sidles up to him slowly, towering over him by at least

three inches in her green platform sneakers. “If you’re an example of what there is to pick from in the dating pool,” she whispers in his ear, “what choice would a poor girl have, sweetheart?” She licks his ear, stands back and gives him a grin that reminds me of an overly-enthusiastic Wal-Mart greeter on massive doses of caffeine.

From that moment on, I know that Becca Gallagher and I will be Best Friends.