The Perfect Guy

Bart Chaney

Everyone on the staff of the Thomas Jefferson Middle School newspaper was talking about the story idea, and as student editor, I needed to know what the buzz was about. I went over to where the two cub reporters Cathy and Miranda had pushed their desks together, and I asked to see their work. They handed me a clutch of notebook papers titled "The Perfect Guy."

It wasn't a story but a kind of survey. They'd come up with a list of categories and were going around to the other girls in the eighth grade, asking questions and calculating results. Best eyes. Best smile. Best personality. You couldn't choose a movie star or teen idol; you had to choose a boy from the class. Best bod. Best lips. These last two categories were the ones fueling all the chatter.

The idea was, you put all the separate bests together, you had the perfect guy.

"Craig Baker is in the lead for best eyes," Miranda said. She had nice eyes herself, long lashes and eye shadow with glitter in it. "And I'll bet Ricky Flynn wins best bod." She covered her mouth and giggled.

"Just one name per category?" I asked. "No . . . second or third place?"

"No, just one," Cathy said. "We thought, why clutter it up?" She wore a skin-tight T-shirt that outlined her bra and a puka-shell choker like Cat Stevens on the cover of *Cat Stevens' Greatest Hits*.

They were cute girls from the In-Crowd. One of the perks about being student editor was that it gave me an excuse to talk to them. I looked at another of the pages.

Who's hot, who rates, and in what order? Nowadays middle-schoolers

post lists like these on social websites. The lists can be shuffled and reshuffled in a matter of keystrokes. We pasted our newspaper together by hand and sent it to an offset printer. The point is this: modes of publication have changed, the practice itself of ranking attractiveness—the appeal of that endures.

Yet my first impression of "The Perfect Guy" was that it was not quite right for our paper. Too light, I thought, too gossipy—perhaps a tad out of bounds. My contribution to our last issue had been a poem titled, "What Is a True Friend?" For the upcoming issue, I was working on a stern editorial about the sorry lack of attendance at the meetings of the student council. As council Sergeant-At-Arms, I had an inside scoop. But now I had a small revelation. Perhaps I'd been wrong about the nature of our student newspaper. It was called *The Crackbarrel*—not, after all, a very serious name—and I could see now that when the next issue came out, "The Perfect Guy" was the story everyone would read first.

"So, you think you'll have this done by deadline?" I asked the girls.

"Oh, for sure," Cathy said, fingering one of the shells of her choker.

"Okay. Good." I handed back to Cathy and Miranda the pages of their draft and stood nodding a moment longer in their presence.

I suppose I might have tried to quash the story. It never occurred to me though, that this could be one of my editorial powers. I'd never asked Mrs. Vorhese, our faculty sponsor, what my powers as Student Editor actually were. They were probably very similar, come to think of it, to those I wielded as student council Sergeant-At-Arms, which I'd never thought to ask about, either.

But even if I could have, I did not want to quash the story. I wanted to be in it. When I'd run my eyes over the papers and did not see my name, not even preliminarily, it came to me in a whoosh of secret panic: not being in the story—not seeing my name listed there when it was published—would be a blow I could not endure.

WHEN WE ARRIVED as sixth graders two years before, we were divided between the east and west ends of the hall. Each end consisted of three homerooms which shared the same core of three teachers. Thus the East End and the West End rarely mixed. Within weeks an In-Crowd crystallized in the West End—an identifiable sub-group around which an aura grew. We learned their names. They were pointed out and spoken of. I would have thought that popularity—charisma or cool or whatever you wish to call it—would be distributed evenly over the entire sixth grade population. But here was the strange part: the East End had no corresponding group.

This vexed me until I realized that the original division had not been arbitrary. Distribution was skewed. All six graders had classes in English, Math and Science, but the cool kids in the West End shared in common two electives, which the simple chart below should make clear:

WEST END	EAST END
(containing popular sub-group)	(no such group emerging)
Core curriculum	*Core curriculum*
English	English
Math	Math
Science	Science
Electives	*Electives*
Choir	Band
Spanish	French

This meant if you played clarinet (as I did), and if your older brother had taken French (as mine had), and it hadn't occurred to you not to do the same (as it hadn't to me), you weren't going to be eligible for the In-Crowd. You were not to be counted among the cool.

I found this a hard pill to swallow. Back in elementary school, in the

faraway town that we'd moved from, I'd been the leader of the pack. Now I was shut out. How could that be?

I thought about it and had to grudgingly admit that it made sense band kids would be ineligible. We had to practice, for one thing. That revealed some willingness to submit to routine. We also had to haul our instruments around, and what cool kid ever had to carry anything? Most of all, though, we stuck these instruments in our mouths and blew into them. We pursed our lips, puffed our cheeks and made our brows all red and wrinkly. All this effort, and to what result? Squeaks, squawks and small pools of spittle. All a choir kid had to do was stand there, hands free, and pretend to sing. No, the band/choir divide was self-evident. What I couldn't figure out was the French and the Spanish.

The In-Crowd loved their Spanish class and talked about it all the time. Their teacher, Señor Fernandez, let them do whatever they pleased. He was a short, middle-aged man with spiky salt-and-pepper hair that didn't sit quite right on his scalp. He had escaped Cuba on a raft and somehow wound up in the Midwest at Thomas Jefferson. His students loved to fluster him, because the more he got flustered, the more broken his English became and the funnier his accent and usage. They would shout out to each other at recess or in the hallways between classes, calling each other by their Spanish class names. "Pablito, mon! Hey! Why jew no in jew seet?!"

Stories about Spanish class and similar stories about choir filtered into the band room or into fourth period French, where we were memorizing dialogues and being drilled in verb conjugation. How was it the West Enders were having such a good time? There was no inherent difference between Spanish and French, but when the cool talked Spanish and the uncool talked French, it was clear which language was the cooler.

WHAT WAS COOL, ANYWAY? Something you were or something you did? Evidence favored the former. Clothes had no natural coolness, for

example, yet clothes gave cool expression. The same belt cinched tight around the belly of one body could rest on the pelvis of another like a crown. The cool were not hampered by awkwardness of limb, by skin that shined and sweated and broke out, by hair that fought the comb and yet always looked freshly and clumsily barbered. The cool didn't need combs or brushes. They woke with their hair either perfectly mussed, or, like Miranda's, in a state of flowing perfection. Miranda's thick and silky, ink-black hair never moved unless caressed by the breeze or parted like velvet curtains with ringed fingers. Hair! There was nothing you could do about it. Your hair was either cool or it wasn't.

Bodies, too. When Ricky Flynn sat shirtless, crossed-legged on the gymnasium floor, his lean belly elbowed like a drinking straw. Craig Baker's eyes were sky blue with a ring of gold that made them shimmer in school photos, like the eyes of some young god from outer space. My eyes were nothing special, and my body was still cushioned in baby fat. Jeans didn't fit me right. And since jeans were out, so were T-shirts. That left slacks and button-ups. I looked like an overgrown toddler dressed up for church.

Children confront early the unfairness of gifts. Physical gifts, abilities, talents. Gifts were handed out at birth; you either got one or you didn't. Those who got one often got many. Distribution was skewed. This unfairness suggested a universe that didn't care. The stutterer in my second grade class had scabs on his scalp and forehead. Sometimes I'd imagine what it would be like to be him. How would life even be worth living? Thinking this brought on a whoosh of panic akin to the one I felt over "The Perfect Guy." To be skipped, passed over, shut out.

Though I could not have grasped it clearly enough to put it into words, my only hope was that cool was not as fixed as it seemed. That if you weren't what you wanted to be, that there was something you might do about it.

Leaving school at the end of the day, I often crossed paths with

Señor Fernandez. Sometimes I saw girls—Cathy and Miranda or some of their friends—going down the hallway beside him, hanging onto his arms. There was nothing sexual in it. It was as if they were taking care of him, as if he'd forgotten where he parked his car, and they were guiding him to the faculty lot. The way the students took charge of him and of his classroom, it was doubtful he'd been a teacher back in the homeland, or maybe the passage over had done something to his head. To hear the stories, Señor Fernandez's classes were like parties for which he served partly as host and partly as entertainment—the court clown, the dancing bear.

Might I have looked past this and seen him as an inspiration? Impossible. I was too much in a mental fog to ponder very deeply what Señor Fernandez had done. Born in Cuba—placed there by God! He hadn't let that stop him. He'd done something about it. He'd risked the ocean and the raft.

CATHY AND MIRANDA wouldn't let me see their work the next time I checked in with them. Mrs. Vorhese had given them permission to keep the results secret until press day.

"Smart," I said. "That way everyone will be dying to know."

My foot was propped up on a chair, and I was resting my elbow on my knee, with the other hand on my hip. I'd spent hours calculating the pose. The others on the staff were behind me in the room, busy at their own tasks.

"Have you turned the story in yet?" I asked.

"Not yet," Cathy said. "Mrs. Vorhese told us we have to ask everyone."

"That makes sense," I said. "Smart lady."

Mrs. Vorhese had recruited me as student editor of *The Crackerbarrel*. She was a middle school veteran who wore big plastic-rimmed glasses and polyester pants suits and had college-age children of her own. I was in her English class. While she led the others in the daily lesson, she

had me working independently at a desk in the back. I was making my way through an advanced series of self-study grammar books. I'd hear her "boys-and-girls"-ing my classmates as if they were first graders, and then once she got them going on a worksheet, she'd pull a chair up to mine and complain how her shoes were pinching her. I was not so naive as to think that this special treatment improved my social standing, but I was practical enough to know that you led with your strong suit.

"I had this idea," I said to Cathy and Miranda, "but I thought you two were finished. Maybe you can use it, after all."

"Oh, yeah?" Cathy said. "What is it?"

"I mean the story is cool—it's great as it is—but what if you added another category?"

Miranda frowned. "Like what?"

"Well, you have the physical covered. Eyes, smile, body. That's cool, that makes sense, but is that really all there is? You're headline is 'The Perfect Guy.' Doesn't perfect mean more than just looks?"

"We have 'Best Personality.'"

"Yes, that's good. But what does that really mean? Friendly?" I readjusted the elbow on my knee. I was beginning to feel a strain in my neck.

"What, then?" Cathy asked.

"I don't know—it's just a thought." I made to leave but then paused. "Where'd you get the idea in the first place?"

Miranda blinked her long lashes. Her sister was on the paper at the high school, she said. "They did the same thing there."

"Smart," I said. "Really smart."

I gazed into the middle distance, my hand on my chin. "Hey, maybe that's it. 'Most Intelligent'?"

The Crackerbarrel met last period, Tuesdays and Thursdays. When the bell rang that day, I headed down the hall, thinking about the conversation. The girls weren't crazy about the idea, but they didn't

dismiss it, either. I probably pushed a little harder than I should have. But if they saw through the stratagem, they hadn't let on, and I was watching carefully. What was it I'd said? "You could have the best-looking guy in the world, but if he was dumb, would you really want to be with him?"

It made me cringe to think of it. Sheer desperation.

I reached the bottom of the steps as Señor Fernandez was starting up them. Seeing him always made me wonder about him. Something in his face, some little kid lostness, as if he did not quite understand where he was. If I'd been one of his students, I might have called out to him, as they so often did. But I wasn't one of his students, and he didn't know me.

From the archives of *The Crackerbarrel*:

What Is a True Friend?
By Bart Chaney, Student Editor

A true friend is always around
And won't laugh when others cut you down.
A true friend does not care
What brand of jeans or gym shoes you wear.
Whereas others make promises that are only pretend
You can tell your secrets to a true friend.

MANY SCHOLARS ARGUE that the text is the whole story and most rewarding when read without reference to the writer's biography. But "What Is a True Friend?" probably calls for the opposite approach. When he wrote it, the poet was at an age of difficult transition, and time he might have devoted to his craft was divided between his work as a journalist and his obligations as a student, which included studies in music and

foreign language. We also know that his particular curriculum resulted in a lack of social opportunity and that that this was vexing to him.

He had two friends, both cornet players, Mark Ellington and Kevin West. West was an African American with a well-developed physique, but he was alienated from what might have been a more amenable social group because he lived in a white neighborhood and was extraordinarily short. Ellington shared the poet's Anglo heritage and endomorphic body type. Were Ellington, West and the poet the true friends depicted in the poem?

Certainly, they valued the friendship. But this may have been due less to mutual affection than to the invisibility they afforded each other. It must be kept in mind that the social milieu they inhabited was one in which they enjoyed no distinction. Thus they and others like them were forever in danger of being caught alone, as if in a spotlight, wearing a shirt that didn't fit right or socks of the wrong color. Isolation evokes fear in middle schoolers. When they see it, they are liable to attack. A group—any group—offered a measure of protection. Only members of the popular clique were truly safe.

The line about secrets suggests the sort of social intrigue we might associate with a clique privileged by popularity. Thus in the mind of the poet, the line may have served as wish fulfillment. Did the three friends tell each other their secrets? Were their lives interesting enough to *have* secrets? If the poet had a secret at all, it was one he could barely admit to himself: that he was willing to jettison everything for a place among his social betters—French, the clarinet, even poetry. In time, he'd shed himself of West and Ellington, too, with barely a backward glance.

On press day, *The Crackerbarrel* was delivered by Mrs. Vorehese's third period class. Sometimes staff members could help if their third period teachers permitted it. I was in gym class during this time, and the boys' P.E. teacher, Mr. Griggs, was a stickler. Time might have passed quickly

if we'd been doing something fun, like dodge ball, but today he was updating our charts on test items: push-ups, chin-ups, sit-ups, and the rest. This meant plenty of waiting in line and plenty of time to ponder. Had Cathy and Miranda added the new category? For days, I'd been longing to ask them but was afraid I'd already overplayed my hand.

"Chaney!" barked Mr. Griggs. It was my turn on the rope.

Chin-ups were bad, but the rope climb was torture. The rope was too thick to get a good grip on it, and it hung from gymnasium rafters so high, I couldn't have hit them with a basketball. Kevin West climbed to the top in fifteen seconds without using his legs, but I stalled three quarters of the way up while my classmates stood below me, shouting.

"Keep going!"

"You can make it!"

"Let go!"

I finally gave up and slid down too fast, rope-burning my inner thighs, then skittered to the end of the next line, patting them as if to put out the fire.

By now the box of *Crackerbarrels* was likely out in the hall. I wondered again about Cathy and Miranda. Had they? Hadn't they? And if they had, who was I up against? Sure, there were eighth grade boys who were smarter than I was—a couple of whiz kids, real brains. All intellect and no people skills. One of them had won the state mathematics competition but had a head too large for his body. Scary smart. No, if "Most Intelligent" existed as a category, I was a shoe-in for it.

Mr. Griggs blew his whistle. "Showers!"

How I hated the locker room and the showers! The closeness, the smell, the furtive changing of clothes. Mr. Griggs had noted that most of us avoided showering after gym class, so now he stood with his clipboard at the shower entrance and checked off our names while we trotted past him in a line, holding towels around our waists. Boys' Middle School P.E. Teacher – was there a worse job imaginable? But at least he got to wear shoes. The tepid pools of standing water, the bits of

unidentifiable slime—I hated being barefoot on the slick shower floor almost as much as being naked in public. There were always a couple of boys who lathered up like grown men in shampoo commercials, but most of us stepped in and stepped out, barely touching the spray. I sweated more pretending to shower than I had climbing the rope.

In the hallway outside the locker room was the box of Crackerbarrels. I took one off the top of the stack, tucked it in with my other things and hurried on. I didn't want to look at it with other people watching. Between third and fourth period classes, I had time to stop at my hallway locker. Using the open locker door as a shield, I pulled out the paper and tucked it into an open folder, with my back to the noisy stream of students going by. There on the cover was my student council editorial, under the headline "Participate!" My cheeks prickled with embarrassment. I'd already decided the piece was a bad move, but I hadn't had time to write another.

On the inside front page was "The Perfect Guy." I ran my eyes down the column. So far, there were no surprises: Best Eyes: Craig Baker. Best Bod: Ricky Flynn. And all the other categories followed by the expected, well-known names. But then at the bottom—the very last on the list—there it was. Cathy and Miranda had taken me up on my suggestion, after all. "Most Intelligent: Señor Fernandez."

MANY LESSONS might be drawn from this experience. How situations that seem readable turn out to be opaque, how anglings boomerang on the angler. Most of all: how the pursuit of distinction is vanity, a race that can never be won, an addiction no less insatiable than any other and no less destructive to the soul. I didn't draw any of these lessons myself, but they certainly would have been good ones.

Yes, I would like to be able to say that I gave up my quest, but it was too late to turn back now. So the lesson I learned was more about street smarts than wisdom. Had Cathy and Miranda seen through me from the beginning and played on me some kind of a joke? More than likely,

I had been transparent to them, but whatever was meant by their selection just as likely had nothing to do with me.

Yet Señor Fernandez—how perfect!

There was a joke on me here, a private one—one only I could understand. The character of its humor was something new, complex like a certain kind of taste: one I wasn't sure I liked but might learn to appreciate in time.