

# Cursed

by Karol Ruth  
Silverstein

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TEEN

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~~For The Disaster Formerly Known As My Parents,~~  
~~aka Mom and Dad, with love~~

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## the me I am now

I have a perfect mouth. That is, according to my dentist, aka my dad, aka *Dr. Dad*.

Straight white teeth. Healthy pink gums. Zero cavities. Perfect.

The rest of me is *anything but*. It's irregular. Damaged. Cursed.

Here's the basic info on me (the me I am now anyway):

1. I currently live with my dad in his one-bedroom bachelor pad, aka Dr. Dad's Batch Pad. He obviously wasn't thinking about me—or my older sister, Dani—when he rented this place. All there is for us to sleep on when we visit is the lumpy pullout couch in his poor excuse for a living room. Right after Thanksgiving, the Disaster-Formerly-Known-As-My-Parents decided I should live here. For my own good, they said. Now I'm riding the Sofa-Bed-From-Hell full time and Dani's so busy at college studying every second she's not burning up the basketball court, she hardly ever visits.

2. I'm fourteen and I'm in middle school. I kid you not. I was in high school, like a normal fourteen year old, back at the beginning

of the year, before I got shipped to my dad's. Now I'm enrolled in Glorious Grant Middle School, the only seven-eight-nine school left in Philadelphia, maybe the only one left in the country. It was the only school close to the Batch Pad that the Disaster-Formerly-Known-As-My-Parents could get me into midyear.

3. Speaking of Glorious Grant Middle School, I haven't actually attended classes since the last week of December, which was about six weeks ago. No one knows. Not Mom. Not Dr. Dad. Not even Dani. Soon enough my secret will be out and, if I'm lucky, my parents will just kill me. If I'm not, they'll force me to go back to Glorious Grant Middle School, where I may or may not still be able to pass ninth grade.

4. My life seriously sucks (in case you haven't picked up on that yet). And it's not just living with Dr. Dad and going to middle school even though I'm fourteen or some other bullshit, like the boy I'm crushing on isn't crushing back. Trust me, my particular *life suckage* is on a whole different level. (For the record, the boy I was crushing on *was* totally crushing back—until I got sick.)

5. About that—I have this pathetic disease. Never mind what it's called. If I told you, you'd laugh and think I was joking. That's what Crush Boy did—right before he ghosted me. I did an internet search three months ago when I was first diagnosed, and what it turned up was so depressing I decided the less I knew, the better. Worse yet, pretty much no one gives a crap about this boring-ass disease. It's not something that would prompt my classmates to shave their heads in solidarity or have a bake sale for me. I doubt it's ever trended on Twitter. It's just this embarrassing, painful, fucked up *thing* I have.

6. And, yeah, I curse. Deal with it.

That pretty much sums up life here in Rickyville, as I call it. Technically, my name's Erica, but everyone calls me Ricky,

except Dani, who calls me Roo. (She was obsessed with playing Kanga as a kid and wanted her own Roo. Dani marches to her own badass drum.)

## 2

## my going-to-school charade

Here's how The Charade goes: It's simple, really. While Dr. Dad gets dressed for work, his bedroom door shut, I go through the motions out in the living room, pretending that I'm getting ready for school. Pretending everything's rainbows and unicorns.

I tug on a pair of jeans. I say *tug* not because my jeans are butt-flatteringly tight, but because my knuckles are so stiff and sore, I can barely bend my fingers.

I have to stand to pull the jeans up, of course, and that means pain. My feet are probably the worst part of my body. Ever see one of those skeleton illustrations of a foot? It has a stupid number of bones and they're little bones, all connected with joints. That's the key to my misery—*joints*. A joint is basically anywhere one bone meets another, and all of my joints burn with pain. Like I'm on fire. Think about that skeleton illustration again, but zoom out for the whole-body view. See all those bones-connected-to-other-bones? Now imagine each connected place ablaze with hot, red flames.

Yeah. Now you're getting it. Plus, an added bonus of my delightful disease is that I'm tired all the time. Like, can't-keep-my-eyes-open tired. All the time.

Even so, I usually get ZERO sleep on the Sofa-Bed-From-Hell. It seems to be getting even more hellish, if that's possible. Last month, Dani stayed over one night and pulled a muscle in her back sleeping on this thing. Her basketball coach had to sit her for a week. The Temple Owls went 1–4, and Dani hasn't slept over since.

I barely slept at all last night so it's a good thing I'm not really going to school. Of course, Dr. Dad *thinks* I've been going to school all this time. And really, he's made it *way* too easy to ditch. Once he's gone, I go right back to sleep (in his bed because it's loads more comfortable than the Sofa-Bed-From-Hell, which he folds up before he leaves anyway). Trust me, if you had my aching feet, you'd do the exact same thing.

I struggle into a sports bra (*much* easier than bras that close in the back) and pick out a T-shirt—color doesn't matter (for the record, today's is dark blue). Most of my clothes are still back home (back at Mom's anyway), but it's not like that matters either. Even if I had access to every piece of clothing I own, I'd still never look all put together like the girls I dubbed the Center City Barbies at Glorious Grant in their trendy clothes from Teen Heaven or wherever the hell it is they shop.

*I could never look like them. Ever. I'm not like them.*

*I hurt, and they don't.*

*I'm weird, and they're not.*

I push that from my brain. It's whiny, and I can't change it. So . . . *whatever*.

I check myself out in Dr. Dad's gaudy mirror with the swirly-gold frame. It's hideous but it does its job as a reflective surface, so it works for Dr. Dad.

My hair's a spiky catastrophe, like Einstein and Edward Scissorhands had a baby and she's having a bad hair day. I do my best to make it presentable—for The Charade. My aching fingers struggle to hold onto the brush. I take a few stabs at the sides, my elbow doing a jolt-of-pain thing with each brushstroke, and manage to get the hair to lie flat against my head so at least I don't look like a punk-rock porcupine. When I try to lift my arm and get at the back, my right shoulder just plain refuses. So I make a pathetic attempt with my left arm and quickly decide to just face forward when Dr. Dad breezes through, which will be any minute now.

Later, after I sleep, I'll wash my hair during my heavenly/hot bath. The hotter, the better.

The only useful piece of advice Dr. Blechstein (not his real name) has given me is to take baths, which I do daily. Sometimes more than once a day. If I wouldn't end up looking like a giant raisin, I'd spend all day soaking. In the water things are different—almost normal. *Almost*. My joints loosen up, and I can move a little bit. I can pretend I don't feel like I'm ninety years old.

As I cram my swollen feet into my too-tight Converse Chucks, I decide today will be a giant fizzy bath bomb day. Even my greasy/gross hair is excited.

I hear the bedroom door handle jiggle, and Dr. Dad comes out. "Good morning, Ricky Raccoon!" he chirps—his nickname for me since I was two. Never mind that I'm *not fucking two* anymore.

I grunt something like *hey* back. (Not that he really notices.)

He's wearing a suit, like he always does. Only the tie changes. Today's is burgundy with dark-green diamonds.

"How are you feeling?" he asks, as he folds up the Sofa-Bed-From-Hell with one seamless tug. "Having much pain?"

"I'm fine," I tell him quickly, automatically, because I don't want him to know that every bone in my body hurts and that I

miss Dani terribly and that I'm terrified about what'll happen when he and Mom find out I've been cutting school, because I know they'll find out eventually, probably soon, and then, and then . . .

*Screw him. He's not worthy of knowing any of that.*

Dr. Dad accepts my answer, no questions asked. I wait for him to try to tousle my hair or make some other classic dad move, so I can flinch away from him, just to hurt his feelings. But he doesn't give me the chance.

He gathers a few of his things, says, "Have a great day!" and then there's just the door slam. Breakfast at the office, I guess.

I slump back down on the Sofa-Bed-From-Hell (sofa mode) and wait to make sure he didn't forget an umbrella or a bag of dry cleaning he meant to drop off. I give him three minutes. Statistically, that'll mean I'm in the clear.

I let the minutes pass. *Tick, tick, tick*—there's no sign of him. He's left for sure now, on his way to drill teeth and tell people to spit.

After a quick pee, I kick off my too-tight Chucks, grab the extra pillows from the Sofa-Bed-From-Hell and crawl onto his bed.

Dr. Dad always leaves the blinds closed—says the brick wall view of the building next door is too depressing—so it's nice and dark in here. The bedspread is soft and warm and smells like the lemony-fresh laundry detergent I made him buy when I moved in so it would smell like home—my former home, anyway. I shift my body around, trying to find a comfortable position, propping up the most painful parts of me with pillows. My right ankle is stinging like crazy, but I'm out of pillows. So I hang that foot off the side of the bed an inch, letting it dangle. That does the trick. I close my eyes, exhale.

*Relief. Alone. All alone.*

In the yummy/comfy dark, I wonder what's happening at

school today. Will that guy Julio with the wild corkscrew curls be jamming in the music room after school, like he was that first day I spotted him and all the days after that, when I casually cruised by the music room, hoping to get a glimpse of him? Did he even notice me? Would he notice me if I started going to school again?

I managed to learn a few facts about Julio in my brief time at Glorious Grant: He plays the drums (I'm not sure anything else really matters), he's best friends with a guy named Lex (who's in all honors classes and is some kind of guitar genius who started playing while he was still in diapers), and they both live in one of those fancy buildings on Nineteenth Street, off Rittenhouse Square.

Julio's last name is Sánchez and he has beautiful light-brown skin. He's tall and lean, like maybe he'd be a good basketball player if music weren't his first and only love. (I'm guessing at that last part since, even in English class, he always has a pair of drumsticks sticking out of his back pocket.) But his crazy corkscrew curls are the most delicious part of the whole package. They're dirty blond and frame his gorgeous face in a way that makes me simultaneously weak in the knees and tempted to run my fingers through his hair without an invitation.

That's all I know for sure. The rest is a fill-in-the-blank scenario.

But my blanks are exceptionally fun, like . . .

*I start going to school again, after some doctor cures me, even though they said I couldn't be cured, and Julio is all, "Hey, I remember you. Where you been?" And I'm feeling good and strong and pretty and normal, and I say, "Miss me?" with a shrug, like "I'll bet you missed me!" And I walk past him and down the hall, all straight and slick, but slowly, so he can check out my butt, which looks exceptional in my new jeans from Teen Heaven. And he searches his brain, trying to remember if we have any classes together and when he'll get to see me again. Because he really wants to see me again. He can't wait. We*

*have English together third period. I know that, but I don't tell him.*

*I let him suffer.*

It's a nice filled-in-blank, but I'm still not going to school. Not today, anyway. Not until I get caught and they force me to go back and I have to face the possibility that my mostly As from West Mount Airy High might not be enough for me to squeak by and pass ninth grade. Have I mentioned that I consider having to repeat ninth grade the Absolute-Worst-Imaginable-Fate-In-The-Known-Universe? Considering that, I should really *force* myself to go to school—the jerks at Grant be damned—and just get through it.

But I can't. I just . . . *can't*.

My brain's restless with all that dread swirling around and I can't get to sleep, even though I'm tired. So tired.

On the bedside table, Dr. Dad has a picture frame with us in it, most of us anyway. I'm there next to Dad and beside him is Dani and her girlfriend Noland. They've been dating since high school and both got basketball scholarships to Temple University. Now they live together off-campus. Noland's basically family since Dani's being gay is No Big Deal for us, but Noland's parents are still "working through their feelings" three years later. Totally our gain, because she's awesome.

I pick up the frame and stare at the picture. I remember when it was taken. We'd all gone out to Dani's favorite restaurant in Chinatown to celebrate her seventeenth birthday. It was a couple years ago, before everything went to hell. Before Dad decided he didn't want to be married to Mom anymore and my parents started hating each other. Before the vicious fighting began anytime they shared the same space, which I had to listen to but was powerless to do anything about.

Then it dawns on me—Mom's supposed to be in the picture.

I grab the frame, open up the back. He's folded the picture,

folded her out of his life. I smooth the crease on my mom's side of the picture and fold him away instead.

*Take that Dr. Dad.*

I'm tempted to fold them *both* out of the picture. Mom's really no better than Dr. Dad. They both decided to banish me to the Batch Pad. They said living in our three-story house had gotten too hard and that I needed to go to a smaller school, one with an elevator, now that my body doesn't work right anymore (not her exact words but it's basically what she meant).

No one bothered to ask me how I felt about it. The Disaster-Formerly-Known-As-My-Parents just *decided*.

*UGH. Don't think about them. Shut that out, shut down, shut off.*

*Focus on sleep. Sleep so I can dream about Julio with the wild corkscrew curls. Sleep until the afternoon when I don't hurt as much.*

*Sleep it away.*

*Sleep.*

*we interrupt this glorious nap . . .*

The phone jolts me awake after *who-knows-how-long*, several hours by the height of the sun peeking through the cracks in the blinds. I lie there, not hurting so much, not at the moment anyway, listening as Dr. Dad's ancient answering machine picks up. That thing's so old it has one of those tiny cassette tapes in it.

After the beep, I hear:

*"Um, yes, Dr. Bloom, it's Patricia Perdanta calling from Grant Middle School. Again."*

I attended classes long enough to learn her nickname—*Principal Piranha*.

*"The work number we have on file for you doesn't seem to be correct. . . ."*

My handiwork. Serves them right for leaving me alone with my school records file, even for a millisecond.

*"We really must discuss your daughter, Erica. Please call me at your earliest convenience."*