

MURDERBALL

Why? Why me? Brendan crouched in the middle of the gymnasium floor as Chester Dallaire wound up for the killing blow. *I'm a good person. I'm kind to animals. I even tolerate my sister! So why me?*

He had known it was going to be a bad day when he woke up with a giant, red, glistening pimple at the junction of his eyebrows. Pimples were a constant worry for him. Clustered at the corner of his mouth or at the side of his nose, they were a common occurrence. This pimple, however, was different: it was a harbinger of doom. He had tried to squeeze it but that had only made it redder and angrier. He knew then, as he left the house, this day was going to be a bad one.

“Ches-ter! Ches-ter! Ches-ter!” the crowd of students at the edge of the floor chanted. They were all excited and eager for the kill. There is nothing a crowd enjoys more than not being the one who is about to get clobbered.

Chester Dallaire was really savouring the moment, allowing Brendan to contemplate his fate at great length. Chester Dallaire was the largest boy in grade nine at Robertson Davies Academy. Chester truly was a misfit in RDA. Usually, jocks are the norm and nerds are the minority in high school. RDA, however, was a small school that recruited academically gifted students from all over

the city. In essence, one could call RDA a school of nerds where Chester was the odd man out. Physically more mature than the other students, Chester had the beginnings of a moustache, and the rumour ran that he had a tattoo of a crouching panther on his back. No one had ever seen this tattoo as Chester rarely took off his shirt and scrupulously avoided bathing. He tossed the ball playfully in the air and leered at Brendan, who trembled in terror, waiting for the blow to fall.

Brendan was on the exact opposite end of the spectrum, physically. Where Chester was already well on the way to adulthood, Brendan's body was still teetering on the edge of adolescence. He was thin and gawky. He had to wear thick glasses if he didn't want to run into walls and furniture. As an added bonus, he wore braces on his crooked teeth. Yes, indeed. Brendan had definitely won the Teenage Affliction Lottery.

He pushed his glasses up onto his nose. *Why do we even play this stupid game, anyway!* Brendan thought miserably. *Who, besides Chester, even likes it?*

“CHES-TER! CHES-TER! CHES-TER!”

Murderball¹⁸ is a game that is ideal for bullies. Why bother picking on the weaker kids in the schoolyard when you can just whack them in the head with a ball during gym class? Every gym teacher on the planet fails to see

¹⁸ Murderball (also known as Dodgeball): Before becoming the modern pastime enjoyed (or dreaded) by students the world over, Murderball was devised as a means of executing criminals in seventeenth-century Germany. Murderers were sentenced to be pelted with rubber balls until they were dead. However, the murderers became very adept at dodging the balls and so the modern sport of Murderball was born.

how humiliating and often painful it is to let these bullies have their way. Gym teachers the world over believe that Murderball is a great way to instill character in their young charges and allow the kids to blow off some steam.¹⁹ Most schoolkids would rather leave their steam where it is and live without the giant purple welts on their backs.

“*CHES-TER! CHES-TER! CHES-TER!*”

Murderball is a game for sadists²⁰ and masochists.²¹ Chester definitely fell into the former category, while Brendan liked to think of himself as neutral. How he'd ended up lasting to this point in the game he couldn't quite understand. Maybe his desire to avoid being the recipient of a smack from Chester Dallaire had infused him with some hitherto unknown agility.

Usually, Brendan could barely avoid tripping over his own feet. He was famously clumsy. All his classmates teased him mercilessly. Butterfingers, Thumbs, Trippy McFallstein—they were always dreaming up new names to mock him with. Yes, Brendan knew he was a danger to others and to himself. At home, his father had gently but firmly banished him from the basement art studio after the

¹⁹ Technically speaking, Murderball is not played the world over. Cultures where Murderball is not played have developed their own equivalents. All of them involve weaker, nerdy children being pelted, whipped, or beaten by bullies with handy objects. In the jungles of Borneo, children play Murdervine. In Afghanistan, it's Murderrock. In Turkey, it's Murderkebab. In France, it's Murdercrepe, and so on.

²⁰ *Sadist*: A person who enjoys inflicting pain. See also: Mathematics Teacher.

²¹ *Masochist*: A person who enjoys having pain inflicted upon them. Good jobs for masochists include hammer-tester, rodeo clown, and crash-test dummy.

nine-hundredth time he had accidentally crushed some delicate sculpture or piece of art. His mother said he was just growing too fast and he would eventually grow out of his clumsiness, but Brendan had his doubts.

Knowing all this, it was hard to believe that he was the last person in the game, backed into a corner, waiting for Chester to pulverize him. *How?* he asked himself. *Why?* But he knew the reason. The reason was Marina Kaprillian, a ninth-grader of surpassing beauty who was currently leaning coolly against the wall with a tittering group of her friends watching the action. The students who had been eliminated from the game early watched with relish as the humiliation continued, relieved to escape relatively unscathed. The audience grew as more were knocked out and so did the humiliation. The added opportunity for embarrassment was the fact that gym classes, due to the small number of students, were co-ed. Unlike most high schools, gym class and sports were a low priority compared to academic pursuits at Robertson Davies Academy. As a result, physical education suffered from funding shortfalls in favour of Chess Club and the Debating Team. Brendan was desperate to impress Marina or at least make her notice him. Staying in the Murderball game seemed like the way to catch her eye. So, despite all his physical shortcomings, he had made a superhuman effort and here he was on the verge of devastating personal injury.

There's an old saying: be careful what you wish for. Now he was standing in the middle of the gym, wishing she would look anywhere else. Chester was going to cream him and he would look like a total goof.

Brendan looked to the sideline where his friends gathered, faces screwed into varying expressions of

horror on his behalf. Harold's chubby hands half-covered his round face as if he couldn't bear to look but at the same time couldn't pass up a chance to witness such exquisite carnage. Dmitri, small and blond, shook his head and motioned for Brendan to just play dead. Beside Dmitri, Kim gave Brendan a thumbs-up. The expression on her face suggested she wished she were in Brendan's place. She was a true tomboy and loved physical contests. Of all his friends, she was the only one who was at home in the gymnasium: her shorts and T-shirt actually fit, and she stood with one hip cocked, looking quite sporty. She kept her hair cut in a trim little bob that framed her oval face neatly. One graceful eyebrow was arched as she slowly shook her head in disbelief. Apart from Kim, Brendan's little gang of nerds lived mainly in their minds and found physical activity difficult at best and distasteful at worst.

“*CHES-TER! CHES-TER! CHES-TER!*” The chanting of the crowd took on a feral edge.²² They sounded less like high school students and more like a pack of hyenas baying for blood.

Brendan looked away from the little knot of supporters and back to his inspiration. His eyes sought out that

²² *Feral* is a word that refers to an animal that once lived in a domesticated state but has returned to the wild. Housecats become feral, recovering their hunting instincts when returned to the wild. Same with dogs. I once had a tame snail who ran away and turned wild. When I found him, I knew he'd gone feral. His behaviour was the same but there was a dangerous glint in his eye.

special face ... her face. There she was! She was looking at him! In spite of his pimple, she was looking at him.

“I am so gonna smear you all over this floor, Brendan Clair!” Chester’s heavy voice cut through Brendan’s daze. Brendan turned to see Chester sneering at him from across the floor.

“No need for taunting, Chester.” Mr. Davenport, the gym teacher, his voice nasal and piercing, chided over the noise of the crowd. “That’s poor sportsmanship.” Mr. Davenport was thin and wiry with a horrible comb-over. He wore a red sweatsuit with “Robertson Davies Academy Magicians” stencilled on the front. Mr. Davenport was a physics teacher but he doubled as a phys. ed. teacher because he had a secret desire to be an athlete, a desire that had no hope of ever being fulfilled. As a result, he took grim pleasure in inflicting physical exercise on his students.

“Whatevs.” Chester shrugged and wound up his massive arm. The inflated rubber sphere was clutched in Chester’s banana-like fingers, the surface dimpling as he reared back to launch a massive throw at Brendan as he squatted, cornered.

Suddenly, Brendan felt a surge of anger. He was tired of being sneered at. He was tired of having a giant pimple on his forehead. He was tired of being afraid. How dare this big guy humiliate him in front of his friends and, more importantly, in front of the girl of his dreams? He shouted in his mind, *NO!* He gritted his teeth and clenched his fists. Gathering himself like a panther, he let loose with a feral cry.

“Graaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!” Brendan launched himself across the floor at Chester, driven by all the pent-up frustration

of being a nerd. Chester's eyes opened wide in surprise. At first, the lunge was quite impressive. The onlookers held their collective breath as Brendan surged forward. Unfortunately, Brendan was unaware that his shoelace was untied. He stepped on the offending lace and tripped himself spectacularly. He face-planted on the hardwood and slid with a skin-erasing squeak on the waxed surface, ending up spread-eagled at Chester's feet.

Brendan rolled over onto his back, blinking up at his adversary. Chester grinned evilly and cocked the ball back for the *coup de grâce*.

"Nice one, dorkmaster!" Chester said with relish. He slam-dunked the rubber orb squarely into Brendan's upturned face.

Fifteen minutes later, Brendan was assuring the nurse, Mrs. Barsoomian, that he was fine. His nose had stopped bleeding and the ringing in his ears had subsided. His face, normally somewhat pale and spotty, was an angry red welt from ear to ear. He looked like the recipient of an intense and localized facial sunburn. His glasses hadn't broken but they had been mashed into his skull, leaving a welt around his eyes. He held up his hand to ward off another cold compress. "I'm fine, really, Mrs. Barsoomian."

"Are you sure? You can lie down and rest a while longer if you wish." The thin dark face of the nurse was full of concern. "I can put some lotion on your face. Or a bag of ice, maybe." Mrs. Barsoomian was a sweet little woman with dark hair and kind brown eyes. Brendan felt embarrassed by the attention.

"No thanks." Brendan smiled and winced at the sudden pain. "Really, I'll be fine."

“I get more patients from Murderball than from any other source.” Mrs. Barsoomian shook her head in irritation. “It should be outlawed.”²³

“Yes, ma’am. In a perfect world, I’d never play again but Mr. Davenport wants to make a man out of me.”

“Someone should make a man out of Mr. Davenport,” Mrs. Barsoomian said darkly.

Brendan pushed himself off the examining table and stood, woozily. “Can I go now?”

Mrs. Barsoomian eyed him critically, then nodded. “All right. Come back if you feel any dizziness.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Released from the nurse’s office, Brendan walked out into the hall to find Kim, Harold, and Dmitri waiting for him.

“Holy tomato face!” Harold said in awe. “That is, I don’t mean to say your face is juicy and a great source of lycopene. I mean that your face is the exact shade of a ripe tomato!” Harold fumbled in his bookbag and fished out a crimson crayon. He held it up to Brendan’s face. “See? I was right! Tomato Red!”

“Thanks for your sympathy, Harold,” Brendan growled, batting the crayon away from his face. He tried to arrange his glasses so that they didn’t irritate his sore face.

“Nice technique.” Kim shook her head. “You jumped right into that ball. You got a death wish?”

²³ Indeed, Murderball has been outlawed in a number of countries around the world. The United Nations has tried to institute a universal ban on the sport but the Russians have used their veto to block the motion. Many believe the powerful Ball Manufacturers Association of Kamchatka to be behind the veto.

Brendan shrugged and started walking down the hall toward their next class, chemistry with Mr. Bowley. “I dunno. Just got tired of waiting for him to cream me, so ...”

“You decided to attack him with your face?” Kim scoffed. She hitched her green kilt up even higher on her hips, accentuating the long coltishness of her legs. She tended to roll her waistband over to inch the kilt into miniskirt territory, technically against school policy. Not even the teachers had the courage to call her on it. Kim didn’t take kindly to rule-quoting. “Super-dumb.”

Brendan had given up wondering why Kim hung around his little group of losers. She was sporty, confident, and cool. He’d overheard lots of boys who’d called her cute but only when they were sure she couldn’t hear them. Her fierce brown eyes would burn holes in anyone who tried to chat her up. Kim tolerated Brendan, Harold, and Dmitri for some unknown reason. Maybe they were just so hapless that she didn’t have to worry about them asking her out or behaving like normal high school boys. She could be quite abrasive even if she did count you among her circle of friends. “What possessed you?”

“I don’t know,” Brendan said, “I just felt tired of being scared of guys like Chester. I just ...” He trailed off. Marina Kaprillian stepped out of the cafeteria doorway flanked by two of her girlfriends. Brendan stopped short with his mouth slightly open. “I uh ... uh ...”

Kim followed his gaze and stopped at his side. “Oh brother.” Kim frowned and tugged at his sleeve. “Come on, Brendan. Marina Kaprillian is not for you.”

Marina and her friends saw Brendan standing in the middle of the hall as students passed on either side and they immediately erupted in fits of giggles and went off

down the hallway still giggling about something one of them had said with a glance in his direction. Brendan felt himself blush, but he doubted it would be visible over the redness of his face.

“Can you hear me, Brendan?” Kim said, rapping him on the head with her knuckles. “Anybody in there?”

“Ow,” Brendan yelled. “That hurt.”

“I’m telling you,” Kim insisted, jerking her thumb toward the retreating gaggle of girls. “You and that girl ... not gonna happen.”

Brendan was suddenly angry. He turned on Kim. “Why not? Am I such a loser that she could never like me? Huh? Is that it?”

Kim was taken by surprise by the outburst. She opened her mouth to say something but caught herself.

“What? What were you going to say?” Brendan saw that she was sorry, but he didn’t feel like stopping. He had to vent at someone. “You think I’m not good enough for her?” Brendan demanded. “She’s out of my league. Is that it? I’m a pimply, goggle-eyed, tinsel-toothed loser. Is that it?”

“No. I wasn’t going to say that.” Kim looked at him. For an instant, Brendan saw something other than disdain in her eyes: a glimmer of ... what? Sympathy? Then it was gone. “Forget it!” She snorted in disgust and set off down the hall toward the chemistry class. The knapsack on her back swung back and forth to match her strides, her field hockey stick poking up out of the top like the arm of a metronome.²⁴

²⁴ A *metronome* is a device used to help musicians keep a proper tempo while playing music. It is not a very stylish garden dwarf.

“What’s with her?” Dmitri asked.

“I should apologize,” Brendan said, starting after her. He stopped. “But I’m not going to. She was kind of mean, too.”

“I’ll talk to her,” Harold offered. He was her lab partner and they shared a desk in the next class. “I’ll soften her up.” Harold shook his head and lumbered after her.

Brendan and Dmitri started walking. “Why was she so down on me liking Marina? I mean, sure, I haven’t got a chance but a guy can dream, can’t he?”

Dmitri shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe Kim has a crush on you. Have you ever thought of that?”

“The word is crush, not crash.” Brendan often had to correct Dmitri’s English. Brendan frowned. “And no, I don’t think that’s it. It’s something else ...” He felt a hand on his shoulder. He turned to see Dmitri looking up at him. Dmitri had a gentleness about him that came from always being too small to rely on brute force. His family had immigrated from Poland and they were not very well off. He was an outsider in more ways than one. Brendan had gravitated to the smaller boy for that reason. Dmitri’d had to learn English on his arrival and so had had a hard time making friends. He and Brendan had hit it off almost immediately when they had been assigned seats beside each other in homeroom. Nerd magnetism, Brendan called it. Dmitri was a whiz at math and science, which was a good thing since Brendan was practically useless at both. Brendan helped him with the language, concentrating on the slang words that the other kids used in the halls.

Dmitri smiled, more of a lopsided smirk. “There are worse things to be brave about than a pretty girl.”

Brendan grinned. “Thanks, D. I don’t know why I bother. She thinks I’m a joke. If she thinks about me at all.”

The bell rang to announce the start of class.

“Uh-oh,” Brendan gasped.

The two boys took off at a dead run. Mr. Bowley was a tyrannical old man. They called him Bowelly Bowley but never to his face. Mr. Bowley was a stickler when it came to punctuality. He would stand with his pocket watch in his hand and if you arrived even a second late, he would close the door in your face and point you toward the office to get a late slip.

When they arrived at the door, miraculously it was still open. Not believing their luck, the two boys hurried into the room, taking the assigned workbench that they shared at the back of the room. Brendan checked to see if Kim was still angry. She sat at the front of the room beside Harold. She had her back turned to him. She was looking at the front of the class and though he couldn’t see her face, he could sense by her rigid posture that she was angry.

Brendan followed her gaze and was surprised to see that Mr. Bowley was not there in his customary place at the front of the class glaring at the students. The chemistry teacher, in his pristine white lab coat and polished spectacles, never missed a day of school. He was never sick, never late, and never absent. The students were all certain he was an android programmed by the Board of Education to torture young minds.²⁵

²⁵ Though it sounds far-fetched, recently an android teacher factory was discovered in the former Soviet Union. They were manufacturing android science teachers completely devoid of human feelings. Studies revealed that they were completely indistinguishable from human science teachers.

Today, however, Mr. Bowley was nowhere to be seen. Instead, another man leaned casually against the desk. Dressed in a well-tailored sleek grey suit with a pale green silk vest, the man was tall and thin. His face was ... there was no other word but perfect—high cheekbones, a long powerful nose, and expressive grey eyes. He smiled at the class.

“I’m sure you are all wondering where our dear Mr. Bowley has got to. I am happy to say he is perfectly healthy, safe, and sound. Better than sound, truth be told. Mr. Bowley has won the lottery. Understandably, he has decided to take a little time off to absorb his good fortune.”

A buzz of whispering erupted from the students. Everybody was busy consulting with their neighbours. Everybody but Kim. She crossed her arms and glared at the man as he raised his hands for quiet. The man seemed to sense her disapproval and, as he turned his head slightly to meet her gaze, he winked. Brendan found the gesture so odd, almost as if they knew each other. He would have to ask her after class ... if she was talking to him. At last the buzz subsided. The man spoke again in his beautifully modulated voice.

“Until he returns, I am your substitute teacher. My name is Mr. Greenleaf. I think we shall get along very well indeed.”