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IRA BLOOM

**HEARTS
& OTHER
BODY
PARTS**

A
NOVEL

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THREE SISTERS AND NORM

“Oh. My. Goddess,” said Katy as all the noise in the cafeteria suddenly died.

Veronica, her younger sister, looked up from her compact, in which she'd been studying her reflection with a great deal of fascination. “Wow,” she affirmed. “That's just . . . wow. Did you see him, Esme?”

Esmeralda, the oldest, did not look up from her book. “His name is Norman. He's in two of my classes so far,” she said. “Don't gape, Ronnie, you're being rude.”

Veronica attempted to avert her gaze, but it was like looking away from a wall: He took up most of her line of sight. “That's the most horrible . . . I mean, what happened to him? It looks like he got all mangled up in some farm machinery or something.” She tried to appear interested in her salad but her fork shook noticeably as she raised it to her lips.

The three sisters made every effort not to gawk. The other students in the cafeteria weren't as polite. What started as a hushed, shocked silence at the boy's appearance and almost comical attempts to look away soon became a low murmur with clandestine glances in his direction, and finally escalated into overt

ogling and chatter. Unkind words were heard over the cafeteria cacophony. Some students even brandished cell phones, taking pictures and posting them.

The new boy waded through the tide of ridicule and hostility with remarkable dignity, Esme observed. He was carrying a lunch tray and looking for a place to sit. Students were hunching their shoulders and spreading out, circling the wagons around their tables. Esme tried not to look but was as guilty as anyone else of stealing glances.

It wasn't the boy's face that drew so much attention. He had dysmorphic features within a frame of ghastly scars, a bulging brow, and a large, square jaw. But that wasn't why people were staring. He had one green eye mismatched to a walleyed brown one, and the odd pallor of his skin made him look like a walking corpse, but that was hardly even worth mentioning. He walked with a pained, shuffling gait, a complex contraption of a brace on his left leg, and his left shoe was orthopedic, two inches thicker than the other, his legs entirely asymmetrical. But even that wasn't his most freakish attribute.

It was the sheer immensity of the boy, the impossible scale of him, which would have earned him top billing at any carnival sideshow in the land. He was easily seven and a half feet tall and probably closer to eight, Esme estimated, because he hunched himself over and drew in his elbows, like he was trying to make himself appear somehow smaller, somehow less visible. As if he could. His hands were enormous, his legs like trees. Esme did a quick calculation and decided there was easily over four hundred pounds to him.

The giant shuffled toward three sophomore girls occupying a table for eight, knapsacks scattered over the empty seats. There

was fear in their eyes, that he would ask to sit there, of social ostracism by association, humiliation, cooties, and possible dismemberment by a monster in their own school. He bent low and made a quiet request of one of the girls. She gathered up her knapsack to give him space. He placed his lunch tray down and hoisted one enormous leg over the bench. The table looked like doll furniture under him. Before he could sit down, all three girls had bolted, taking their trays and bags and books with them, as if they'd all suddenly remembered somewhere else they urgently needed to be.

“Disgusting,” Esme declared. “Absolutely revolting.”

“Esmeralda Silver!” Katy said. “You don’t know a thing about him.”

“Not him, Katy. Us. Everyone. But especially us—we should know better. We’re all so judgmental and intolerant. Somebody has to do something.”

The sisters observed the new student in quick glances. He was picking at the food on his tray, a ludicrously small serving for a boy his size. Esme discerned the mortification in his expression despite the false bravado.

“Don’t look at me,” Veronica said. “This is my first week of high school, I can’t be seen . . . I mean, maybe if we all went . . .”

“We’d overwhelm the poor thing,” Katy supposed. “I guess . . . it should be me, right? I mean, weird is my department.”

Esme stood. “No, I’ll go,” she said. She gathered her book bag. “He’s in my grade.”



“Do you mind if I sit here?” the girl asked.

An attractive girl with horn-rimmed glasses slid onto the bench opposite Norman Stein and proceeded to unpack her lunch.

Which was rather unanticipated. Norman hadn't exactly come into a new school in a new town expecting to be welcomed with open arms. He knew what he looked like.

"Not at all," he replied. He was self-conscious about the fact that his legs took up the entire space beneath the table and pressed up against the opposite bench, so she was forced to sit kitty-corner from him. He drew his elbows in closer to his sides. "Did you draw the short straw?" he asked, regretting it almost before the words were out of his mouth.

The girl's lips tightened, then a faint blush of embarrassment came to her cheeks, followed closely by an eyebrow raised in acknowledgment. "Fair enough," she said. "You saw me with my sisters. You knew we were talking about you. You don't know me. But the fact is, we all wanted to come and sit with you. We just didn't want to overwhelm you."

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't be so cynical about people's motivations."

The girl smiled at him. "I'm Esme Silver. We have AP calculus and biology together. Welcome to Middleton High. Go Timberwolves."

"Norm," he replied. He smiled back at her. "Short for 'normal brain.'"



Esme thought he looked a bit less freakish when he smiled, the teeth good, the asymmetry wry but earnest. "On behalf of the rest of humanity, I'd like to apologize for my fellow students. They're all jerks, obviously."

Norman shrugged his immense shoulders in a rolling motion like tectonic plates shifting. "I'm not fussy. As long as they aren't

coming after me with pitchforks and torches.” His scarf slipped a bit as he shrugged, and he was quick to readjust it, but not fast enough.

“Oh,” said Esme, embarrassed for him. “Are those . . . ?”

“Yeah,” he confessed, a bit bitterly. “As if the rest of this weren’t bad enough, I have bolts in my neck. I’m getting them out in November, though.”

“I-I know, right?” she stammered. “I just got my braces off last summer, and I swear I didn’t smile for two years.”

He nodded. “You must have felt hideous.”

Esme surveyed the remains of her sandwich, alternating between self-loathing and indignation. Was he mocking her? Was that sarcasm? Around them, other students were still discussing him, and she picked up words like “monster,” “Halloween mask,” and “Frankenstein.” Except, now, she heard her own name added to the mix.

“You know,” she said, when she became so self-conscious about her silence she felt awkward, “you’re actually not half bad-looking.”

“Really? Which half?” he asked.

It was somehow reassuring, that he could joke about his condition. “It’s not all in one place. A little bit here, a little bit there, but all put together . . . not half bad-looking.”

“Good thing you didn’t see me before it was all put together,” he said.