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*When You Reach Me*



# HUNDRED PERCENT

by

Karen Romano Young



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# Two Words

(school starts)

In late August, Tink got a new name. Her best friend, Jackie, renamed her. This was after Tink realized that none of her school clothes fit and her mother took her on a hellish shopping trip involving two sizes up, three bras-for-the-very-first-time, and four arguments about style that had both Mom and Tink in tears. On the way home, Tink convinced her mother to drop her at Jackie's with all six shopping bags, so they could have a fashion show.

Jackie had already been shopping—not because she had grown, but because she had insisted, and her mother said yes because Jackie was an only child. That was what Tink's mother said. She couldn't do as much when she had three girls between grades three and six to outfit, plus a first grade boy, all growing like weeds. Tink was just grateful that her mother had found two hours to take her shopping alone, without the whole circus. You could thank the bras for that.

The differences in Jackie and Tink's appearances in their first-day outfits, viewed in the mirror, worried both of them. Jackie was smaller, lighter, and, face it, flatter. Tink was too big. Tall, and "getting a figure," their mothers said. It was awkward.

Last year on the first day of fifth grade, they'd both worn flowered, ruffled skirts and pale blue T-shirts—twinsie best friends staking each other out, as if the kids they'd been in school with since kindergarten hadn't figured out that they were a pair. But this year the best they could do for twinsies was jean skirts and red polo shirts, even if Jackie's polo was from the boys' department and Tink's was borrowed from her mother. The only way they still matched was with their curly brown hair. Side by side they stood, Jackie on her toes and Tink slumping, and neither could tell which one was the problem. Neither, you might say. Or maybe both?

That night in the dark, Jackie voiced it. "I wish I needed a bra. I mean, I'll wear one, it's sixth grade, but I wish I had—"

"—the chest to pin it on?" finished Tink. It was the punch line of the jokey insult that went, "What do you want: a medal? Or the chest to pin it on?" Bushwhack had said that last year every five minutes.

"So not funny," said Jackie, not just meaning Bushwhack, although it was him, too—a boy Tink thought was actually quite funny. "I'm immature compared to you, Tinker."

"Maybe I'm too mature."

houses in Maryland and New York (Tink) and Massachusetts (Jackie), they never got out of Connecticut, and didn't even get out of town except for occasional trips to the mall. They rode their bikes to the beach, walked to Clampett's for music magazines for Jackie and Mad magazines for Tink, and made up an elaborate bouncing game with a tennis ball against Tink's garage door, because if they just played the real handball rules Tink looked up in the library, Jackie got bored and wouldn't play.

And then Jackie had gone shopping and bumped into Maggie and Mitzie, two girls in their class, and uncharacteristically bought a pair of pants covered in tiny whales, which made Tink still more uncomfortable, since they were out of budget for a girl with a stay-at-home bookkeeper mother and a go-to-work housebuilder father. She had a vision of everybody showing up at school in clothes with tiny sea animals on them.

Into the dark of Jackie's room, Tink said, "But am I—"

Jackie said, "What?"

Tink wouldn't say until Jackie hit her with a pillow and then sat on the pillow and then tickled her, because Tink was embarrassed. But at last she opened her mouth and finished her question: "—pretty?"

Jackie considered the question for long minutes, even turned on the light to look at Tink's face, and finally said, "Cute. Maybe becoming pretty. Or maybe just going straight to grown-up gorgeous." To Jackie, grown-up was gorgeous.

Close but no cigarette.

OR

Put another quarter in and try again . . . sucker.

AND, in a nonhumorous situation:

THAT'S as funny . . .

. . . as a screen door in a submarine.

. . . as a gum machine in a lockjaw ward.

. . . as a rubber crutch.

There were a lot more endings, but they weren't what he was into this year. This year he was into insults.

In math Bushwhack sat right across the aisle from Tink. He didn't seem to have to think about math much. He sat there making up names to call people and muttering them under his breath to crack up the people who sat near him. Since sixth grade had started, Bushwhack and the Farmers had the class saying, "You eraser!" to each other, or "You combination lock!" Instead of getting mad at being called a name, the kids would just laugh.

Also this year, Bushwhack made up saying bushwah. It was such a spectacular word (and almost rude) that everyone in the sixth grade picked it up, even Jackie. It was so almost-rude that Ms. Cho and Mr. Bergman, the other sixth grade teacher, had already outlawed it, saying the kids couldn't use any words that weren't in the dictionary, so

whistles and smells of fall and grass and leaves and horse chestnuts. She is lying in bed, almost asleep, wearing a long white nightgown, with her long red hair in a long silky braid. (Just so you recall, Tink didn't have long red hair. Tink's hair was short and brown and curly.)

The window opens, and someone comes in. It is a second-floor window, so how does this happen? The boy who comes in can fly, that's how. He flies around Tink's room bumping into things, making the wind chimes chime, trying to wake her up. He needs his shadow sewn back on, and only she has the magic to sew it. It has come loose from his body, and he's lost without it. If she sews it, he'll take her flying to Neverland.

So she gets up out of bed and takes a needle from her pincushion. (She's the kind of girl who sews, which Tink is not.) She threads it with a strand of silver-gray thread, and she begins to sew. With her fingers she touches lightly along the back of the boy's head (she pictures Will's gold-brown hair), the back of his neck, his shoulders, down the backs of his legs to his feet. Somehow she doesn't hurt him sewing his shadow on. All those needle pricks, and not a drop of blood.

"Bushwah, Chris," Jackie would say to Tink, if she knew.

It was not the word Tink's mother would say. She'd have two words of her own for it, two words she said often lately. "Boy-crazy," she'd say. "This is when it all starts. Sixth grade."

Jackie was pretty, while she, Tink, was something else. Cute, Jackie had said, because she loved Tink, but was that really true?

Tink wondered how it felt to hear whistling, now that she knew how it felt to hear barking. She kept thinking of all the things she could have done: yelled back “Bushwah!” or barked back or given the bus the finger. But she hadn’t had the nerve. At the time it happened, she had been too busy pretending she hadn’t heard to do anything at all. Anyway, she didn’t want those boys to think she minded being barked at, any more than Jackie minded being whistled at. Even if she did mind, more than she wanted to admit.

What she wanted was a boy coming in her window at night, a hazel-eyed boy, someone who would say, “Only you. Only you have what I need.” And she guessed something like that had happened today after recess when Will hit his mouth on the water fountain and was bleeding, a private moment when she alone could help him. She ran fast past everyone else into the girls’ room—it was right there, next to the fountain—and grabbed paper towels and wet them under the faucet and brought them out and held them to his mouth. Anyone else could have done it, but he asked only her.

Hazel was a word she’d read in one of her romance novels. Her mother said it described those kinds of eyes that were half green, half brown. In Will’s case it also meant speckled with gold. Hazel was what Tink thought—and

Keith or Will—was barely willing to hold on to Tink’s pinky finger. That loose hand on the non-Jackie side let Tink turn, so she could see the outsiders. Sometimes things happened to make her want to let go of Jackie’s hand and step out of the ring, such as the antics of the Farmers, who were in some wacky parallelogram, a clump of other boy dots—six or seven on any day—that Bushwhack had magnetized and named.

Tink—no, Chris—didn’t want to be a dot of any kind. She wouldn’t let go of Jackie’s hand. And Jackie couldn’t help it if the circle kids liked her. Why would Jackie, or anybody, step outside if she didn’t have to? Tink wouldn’t. She really wouldn’t. And what would Jackie do if she did?



The “Roll Over” game had started today with Brave New World. That morning some of the elevated readers (they switched to Mr. Bergman for language arts) got to read this stupid book about this weird futuristic world. Tink didn’t get much out of it except page 146. On page 146 this guy is standing over this girl watching her sleep. She’s wearing a futuristic Star Trek sort of outfit with a zipper that goes all the way up.

“Or,” Jackie said to the group, “all the way down.” Everybody sat and read page 146, about this guy imagining things about that zipper. Then they went to recess and

why she was there; she was just glad she was, part of this wonderful we with Jackie and the rest.

She fell in line behind Will, watching Jackie sing “Roll Over” with Keith, when Bushwhack and one of the Farmers and some other kids who had been playing kickball came up. “Hundred Percent,” Bushwhack said.

“My name is Chris,” Tink said in her most dignified voice. She laughed in a way that was supposed to include Mitzie and Maggie, Jackie and Keith and Will, all ahead of her in the line. Her cool friends. Her new name.

“Christine Gouda,” Bushwhack said cheerfully. “Gouda cheese. Hundred Percent fat!”

“I’m not fat,” Tink said. But she wasn’t thin and cute, either. Not like Jackie.

“I know,” said Bushwhack, high-fiving her. “That’s what makes it funny.” He wasn’t being mean.

Will and Keith nudged each other in the ribs. “Bushwhack,” Keith said. “Why don’t you go back to the farm?” For a second Tink thought they were standing up for her.

Bushwhack ignored them. “How’d you get all covered in grass?” he asked Tink.

“Maybe she was rolling in the grass at your farm,” teased Will.

“Bushwah,” said Bushwhack. His eyes were mad. When he leaned toward Will, Tink saw for the first time that Bushwhack was taller. But not cute like Will and Keith.

“Oh, Bushwhack, don’t worry.” Will shook his head. “Everybody knows you haven’t been rolling with any girls.”

Keith and Mitzie and Maggie laughed in an insulting way. Jackie gave Will a dirty look, but then she laughed, because everyone else was laughing. Then she stopped, with a guilty glance at Tink.

Tink wasn’t laughing. She was watching Bushwhack. He seemed confused. Normally he would have said Bushwah, or even You know . . . but he said instead, “Two words.”

Bushwhack picked the grass off the back of Tink’s shirt and threw it at Will. He missed, because the grass hit the air and went dead, drifting down, so he threw it harder and more dramatically, making Tink snort with laughter, which embarrassed her. She subsided, and moved up closer to Will.

Bushwhack stared at Will. “Big Wheels, you’ve been rolling with girls?” Will acted as if he hadn’t heard. Bushwhack’s eyes narrowed. “What girls?” he asked.

Will didn’t look at Bushwhack. “Jackie, Mitzie, Maggie . . .” He named all the pretty girls.

He didn’t name Tink. He didn’t even look at her. Bushwhack did. He frowned, and walked away. Tink could have shrugged, but instead she just stood completely still.

One by one, kids finished drinking and went back to flirting and insulting each other in the big, noisy hallway, waiting for the second bell. Then Will and Tink were last in

line at the fountain, with everyone else just milling around. Keith and Maggie and Mitzie started giggling again and singing “Roll Over.” Jackie stood against the wall near them, maybe waiting for Tink. Maybe waiting for Tink to do what she, Jackie, would do.

“Hey Will,” Tink said, sidling closer to him as he bent and took a drink. “Did you like that game?” And again she sang “Roll Over,” although she felt weird singing it just to him. Why hadn’t he named her?

“Yeah,” he said, wiping his mouth on the back of his hand. But he didn’t move away from the fountain. He stood there waiting for her to stop talking so he could take another sip. Jackie and the other circle kids started to move off down the hall.

“Who do you like most in that game?” Tink dared to ask.

“Maggie,” he said. “Everyone else in our class is a dog.” But he said it looking right at Tink. A dog. Was he calling her that? They were the only two left in the hall. He turned around, turned his back on her. And then he bent over to take his second drink.

Tink looked at his shoulders, at the way his dark green T-shirt stretched over them as he bent to drink, at the tawny back of his hair, the wet edge of it soaked with perspiration against his neck. She moved closer. She moved a little too close. She reached out her hand.

He jumped. Or did she push?



A second later Will Wheeler turned, blood pouring down his chin, gushing from his mouth, streaming out from between his fingers. He took one hand away from his face and stared at it, appalled. His hand glistened red with blood. In the middle of all the blood was a little white thing like a pebble—part of his front tooth. Somehow he spoke two words, looking desperately at Tink. “Paper towels!” he said.

Will Wheeler had the most beautiful hazel eyes.