

Cursed!
My Devastatingly Brilliant Campaign
To Save The Chigg

Idabel Allen

Lowbrow Literary

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For my future award-winning girl, Bailey Bean.

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The Pygmy

“Hey, hey, Lady Godzilla, don’t burn me with your fire lizard breath.”

That’s Mr. Lan. He calls me Lady Godzilla because I am blessed with a statuesque physique, meaning I am tall and strong.

But lately I haven’t been feeling too tall, or too strong. In fact, I’ve been feeling like a pair of worn-out gym shoes stuck in sticky, grimy goo, the kind that oozes beneath theater seats. It’s like I’m stuck in a theater where the same horrific movie is replayed over and over. And that horrific movie is only my entire eighth-grade year, a year that should be erased from my memory for good, starting with my beloved Gramps’ funeral last July, almost one year ago to the day.

Just thinking about Gramps makes me feel about as low as low can go, and I’m hardly in the mood to tango with Mr. Lan. But what can I do? He’s holed up in *my* bed, in *my* room for the next month, practically half my entire summer vacation. If that’s not bad enough, my dear madre has instructed me to wait hand and foot on him like he’s some high roller from a Vegas casino.

“Mr. Lan, if you’re waiting for me to call you a gnarled-up Cambodian pygmy, it’s not going to happen. I know we’ve had

our differences in the past, but I've matured a lot since last summer, and I'm no longer interested in arguing with you," I inform him quite politely. I add, "And since you insisted on taking over my room until the week before I start high school, I would appreciate it if you would try to be a little more pleasant."

"You mind go blank-blank, dumb-dumb?" he asks as if I hadn't said a word. "Set table up for game. I not getting any younger, and you not getting any prettier."

So much for being pleasant. He's looking at me with sharp eyes, daring me to retaliate. He's waiting for it to begin - the insults, the jabs - just like the good old days.

The good old days. Summer days spent filling Mr. Lan's satin slippers full of wet sand as he and Gramps played dominoes. Dropping a bawling cat on Mr. Lan's sleeping stomach as he and Gramps lazed the afternoon away in matching hammocks. Adding pickle juice to Mr. Lan's afternoon tea and Gramps' beer.

Those good old summer days had been going on each summer that I could remember.

But the good old days are gone because Gramps is gone. So I set the card table up next to my bed and keep my mouth shut, even though a thousand invisible ants are gnawing away at my lips, wearing down my resolve, urging me to retaliate, to fight back.

Except the only fight that ever really mattered is over and done with. And when I lost that fight, I lost all my gumption. But worst than that, I failed not only myself but also the one person in the world who truly and utterly depended on me.

And now I have no one. First Gramps died, and then the bestest, truest friend the world has ever known left me.

Actually, she wasn't that great of a friend the time she turned on me. And sullied my good name. And became my mortal enemy. In that respect, she pretty much sucked as a

best friend. But other than that, she was the best friend I will ever have in a gazillion years. Even when I am a famous zombie screenwriter/director/producer and the entire world is wallowing at my feet begging to be my best friend, she will remain the truest friend I have ever known.

“Hey, you listening?” Mr. Lan smacks the table with his palm. “Or you got worms in ear again?”

I bite my lip. A, they weren’t even real worms that time, just gummy worms. And B, they weren’t even gummy worms, they were gummy bears. I could tell him all this, but I keep my saintly mouth sealed as I open the box of dominoes. I refuse to let him antagonize me.

“What happened to that big mouth?” He looks at me suspiciously. “I gone one year and now you too big-shot Godzilla girl to talk to poor Mr. Lan.” Then he looks around the room. “How big shot mature Lady Godzilla like I take down these silly monster posters?” He stretches his hand to the Night of the Living Dead poster hanging above my bed. He knows full well it is my, as well as Gramps, all-time favorite movie ever.

I say, “Geez, calm down, you old crank-case,” knowing it’s what he wants to hear, but my heart just isn’t in it. My heart is plumb worn out.

And even though I know I should keep my mouth shut and rise above his petty aggravation, I have to set the record straight. “First off, they are not silly monsters. If you knew anything about anything you’d know they are zombies. And it is a scientific fact that the walking dead may be real. If you want proof, just look in the mirror.”

I didn’t mean to add that last part, had sworn I wouldn’t stoop to Mr. Lan’s level, yet somehow he always brings out the worst in me.

“For a Lady Godzilla, you sure got Mothra manners. You be nice and I let you change my bedpan. How you like that?” he asks with his beady eyes shining meanly.

I must say, bedpan got my attention. I take a good long gander at him. Although he looks about the same, there’s something different about him since I last saw him, which was at Gramps’ funeral. He’s still just as cantankerous as ever, still calling me Lady Godzilla and making remarks about me that I find downright uncharitable.

But there’s something in the way he’s trying to get my goat. It’s as though he needs our battles to keep things going the way they were when Gramps was still here, the way they’d always been every summer when he came for his annual visit.

And even though I am now a mature young woman with a promising high school career before me, I play along despite the fact it’s the last thing I want to do.

“Bedpan? You don’t even have a bedpan. What you have is halitosis.” Halitosis is chronic bad breath, and if there’s one thing Mr. Lan has it’s chronic bad breath. In fact, I’d go so far as to say it is toxic. Okay, toxic and noxious. Like having sewer vapors leak into the air each time his cranky old mouth creaks open.

“Bad breath is a sign of illness, Chicky. I’m very sick man,” he adds, pulling his red silk kimono closed at his neck. He says he is sick, but he is not. He just likes taking an afternoon siesta.

But for such a crusty old goat he certainly keeps himself groomed. His nails are always trim and clean, unlike my teeth-ravaged nails. His hair is always cut, and he even uses some old-fashioned hair gel to plaster it in place. He doesn’t even have hair sprouting from his ears or hanging out his nose like my Padre does.

“Don’t even pretend you’re sick,” I warn. “Mom already told me how you invited yourself for a visit.”

It didn't make sense him being here. But according to mom, once you save someone's life, like Mr. Lan saved Gramps in the war, it's hard to let go of that life. She thought his visiting would help his grief process. Funny, her being concerned and all for his grief process when she hadn't been concerned at all with mine.

"Oh, you tricky girl. I not invite myself. Your mama ask me babysit you so she can go back to work."

"Babysit me?" I exclaim, shocked. "I don't need a babysitter. I took care of myself all last year while she worked. I don't need anyone." Even when I said it I knew it wasn't true. Learned it the hard way. Still, in my head I kept thinking, *she called him*.

"Yes, Lady Godzilla take good good care of self. I see that," Mr. Lan says, nodding at the angry red scar running up my arm. I lower my arm so he can't see it, furious that he should even know about it. I can't believe Mom called him. I can't believe he is here when all I want is to be left alone.

He says, "So here I am, in this nice, comfortable bed," and presses the mattress a couple of time to test its springiness.

But he doesn't need to. I already know the springiness of my own bed so I say, "That comfortable bed is *my* bed. The most comfortable bed is in the spare bedroom, hint, hint."

"Other room no good. This room face east, Chicky. I most comfortable here." And, as if he has to prove his point, he sighs contentedly.

"I don't care if you are comfortable," I complain. "You can't come here and take over everything. You're infesting my room with your *being*."

Being. Something I am now very interested in. Beings and spirits and ghosts.

"Ha! You lucky, Lady Godzilla, if you get one leftover ounce of my energy." He holds one nubby little finger up. "I have very good energy. Very good." He smiles, pleased with

himself. “Now you, you baaad energy. You energy no good. Negative. In your bones negative.”

“I do not,” I answer hotly, not playing around now, but really getting aggravated at Mr. Lan. “I’ve got very good energy. Better than you.”

“What you know about energy? All you know is on the television and on the computer. That not real. Not real like what’s inside.” He touches his chest. “This real, this energy. But you don’t know, Lady Godzilla. You don’t know.”

“I know more than you think I know. I know all about bad energies”, which I really don’t, but I won’t let him know that, and even add, “and all about curses.”

At this the old man’s eyes narrow suspiciously. “Curses?” he asks in a voice that does not conceal his interest. “Yes, curses very real. Even for your people. But your people don’t believe in curses. Not like my people, not like they should.”

“What do you mean ‘your people’? You grew up on a farm in Nebraska. Gramps told me so. Besides, I do too believe in curses. I mean, I know for a fact because of my friend.”

And saying “my friend” made it all real again. My friend, gone for over three months now, since April. It weighs heavy on me, what we did, how we tried to fix things, only to fail miserably. I can’t help thinking that if Gramps had been around, things might have ended differently.

I suddenly miss Gramps like crazy. It was Gramps who made me Mr. Chippy pancakes in the morning and had a cup of juicy juice waiting after school each day. It was Gramps who snuck me out of bed after lights out to watch the most zomborrific movies ever made! And when I was old enough to start making my own zombie videos, it was Gramps who played zombie number one, as well as victims two and three, and even the bumbling sheriff.

Gramps is the only person in the whole wide world that could help me now, when I need it most.

But he is gone, and I am sitting across from Mr. Lan who says, “Yes, you are troubled. I saw it the minute you came in this room. Good thing your mama call me. Very good thing.”

I want to argue, to say it isn't a good thing. It isn't a wanted thing. And for my dear Madre to suddenly barge into my life after being so uninvolved, it is all the more unbearable. If she is so concerned, why didn't she stay with me after Gramps died instead of going right back to work and leaving me to come home to an empty house every day after school?

“Tell me,” Mr. Lan instructs firmly, pulling himself upright in the bed, indicating for me to pull a chair up next to him. “I will listen. These curses, they are tricky business. I have to know everything.”

I hesitate, thinking he is making fun of me. But I see he is not. He stops speaking the broken English that he uses when trying to irritate me and now speaks using nouns and verbs and adjectives and adverbs, making complete sentences, making complete sense. He is now speaking like the lawyer he was before he retired.

I am now feeling like one of his clients, standing before him with a problem I cannot figure out or correct on my own. And that's what this is, this whole thing with the curse. It's something beyond me.

I look at Mr. Lan and he is no longer the pygmy but a wise elder waiting for me to begin.

So I pull up a chair and begin to tell the story that has been replaying in my head since that fateful night in spring.

A Triumphant Raid

Funny about beginnings. For me everything started the day Shannon and Mindy and I got kicked out of chorus for changing the words to songs. If the line was “close to you”, we’d sing “far from you”. If the line was “somewhere over the rainbow”, we’d sing “something stuck in a drainpipe”.

Of course, Mrs. Jutney, our severely beak-nosed chorus teacher, failed to see the beauty in what we were doing. Shannon, Mindy, and I, being the only eighth graders and the eldest in class, sang our versions as the sixth and seventh grade students tried to drown us out by shouting the correct words. I believe it was this struggle that led Mrs. Jutney to slam her bony fists on the piano keys, and then stand and point her Skeletor arm toward the door. Although her mouth was clamped shut, her cheek and neck muscles worked as if she were chewing on something. Then her mouth opened and that tinny voice of hers crowed, “Get out! You girls are banned from chorus. For LIFE. Especially you, Ginny Edgars.”

At the doorway I paused, then turned quite dramatically toward the piano and said, “That’s Virginia J, for Genius, Edgars, if you please.”

A puzzled voice said, “Genius doesn’t start with J.”

“Exactly,” I responded. Then with a commanding flourish, which I am well known for, I pushed my way through the doorway with Mindy and Shannon on my heels.

But we didn’t return to class. Instead we took turns giving each other piggyback rides through the halls, celebrating our freedom, committed to making it last for as long as possible. The last thing we wanted was to return to Miss Henderson’s room for study hall.

So after a triumphant raid on the boys’ bathroom to swipe all the toilet paper, we paraded into the girls’ bathroom, laughing and shouting, “Ding dong, the witch is dead, the witch is dead, ding dong the wicked witch is dead.”

Then Mindy, with her short, spiky blonde ponytail bobbing anxiously on her head, asked, “Have you ever in your life seen anything as funny as those funny little sinks in the boys’ bathroom?”

“Not I, Min-min,” replied Shannon gravely from behind her round owl glasses. “How do you think they wash their hands? Those sinks didn’t have any faucets.”

“Silly rabbit, those weren’t real sinks. They’re urinals,” I explained in my harsh, toneless Mrs. Jutney voice. “They don’t need sinks. It’s a scientifically proven fact that boys do not wash their hands.”

“That’s just gross!”

“It’s disgusting!”

“Why it’s downright revolting, if you ask me!”

Then mayhem ensued until I kicked open the first bathroom stall and declared, “I christen thee, La Toileta, Queen of the Golden Waters.” The toilet was flushed and we erupted into riotous cheers.

I found this exercise very agreeable and moved on to the next stall. But when I kicked the door open, there sat Carrie Larson. But no one ever called her Carrie, just Frecklefart

Fanny because of the big, red, splotchy freckles that covered her entire body.

But never, not once did I ever call her Frecklefart Fanny, or Frecklefart, or just Fart as others did. That's disrespectful and crude, two things I am most certainly not.

I only ever called her Chigger, or the Chigg, because every time I looked at her during the first two weeks of school she was furiously scratching chigger bites. Some people I could name said she had fleas, but I knew they were chiggers from experience. Let's just say, it is not a good idea to run through a field of waist-high stinkweed wearing only an itsy-bitsy, teeny-weeny Pocahontas bikini and red velvet cowboy boots in the dead of summer while pretending to be Miss America. Take it from me; such an exercise will only end in tragedy, tragedy in the form of the most obscenely thorough case of chigger infestation ever!

And did I itch like crazy?

You know I did.

Carrie sat there on the pot with that frizzy red hair puffed to extremes all over her head, her face covered in what could only be described as a bad case of being the Chigg. She wore a ridiculous blue and white ski jacket, as she had every day since school started the month before, even though it wouldn't get cold in Alabama until December.

She had a book in her hand, one of those little green pocket bibles.

And there she was, not looking at us, frozen, quiet, small, waiting for us to go away. Waiting for us to run back to class and tell everyone that we caught her praying on the pooper. And maybe we would have. Only there was something about Carrie Larson that made me pause for once.

So instead of running to class with my big mouth yapping, which in retrospect is exactly what I should have done, I threw

my arm grandly toward Carrie, did my award-winning bugle salute sound effect, and announced, “Behold, the Chigg.”

And that was when everything started for me.

Of course we ended up in the principal’s office. Our merrymaking in the bathroom did not go unnoticed. And who noticed it but none other than Queen Hagatha herself, Mrs. Jutney. Before we could swap bible verses with the Chigg, Mrs. Jutney poked her beaklike nose into the bathroom and immediately raised a big stink.

She was really good at that, raising big stinks.

Her long, gangly ostrich legs carried her into the bathroom where she squawked, “What’s going on in here?”

I told her we were just washing our hands, but she wasn’t having any of it.

“Washing your hands? Likely story. Would you like to explain this...this mess? She flapped her birdlike arm around to indicate the streams of toilet paper that flowed from stall to stall and sink to sink, and the hefty wads of dripping-wet toilet paper stuck to walls and ceilings.

Did I mention we made use of the boys’ toilet paper? Well, we did. It was a complete mess and it was marvelous. And I must add it was quite a thorough job, one that I took immense pride in.

Of course, being of a more humble nature, I did not take credit for any of it.

The end result was a trip to Principal Lewis’ office for not only Shannon, Mindy, and myself, but for Chigger as well.

I should explain that I did not know the Chigg at all. The county had closed the old rural middle school at the end of the previous school year. Students from the closed school were now bussed to other schools throughout the county. That’s how Chigger ended up in my eighth-grade class at Locust Fork Middle School.

Other students from the closed school ended up in my class as well, but right from the beginning it was obvious they didn't want anything to do with Chigger. They did not speak to her, and she did not speak to them. As I mentioned, she just sat there scratching chiggers for the most part.

In fact, she did not speak to anyone that first month of school other than to mumble "here" when roll was called. She just sat at her desk wearing that ridiculous blue and white coat while the rest of us were wearing shorts and flip-flops.

And she was always alone. Even in a crowded group she seemed on her own. She had a talent for isolation. In class, she never seemed to be listening to the teacher, but instead stared at her desktop as if her very life depended on it. Every now and then she risked a peek out the window, holding her sad eyes steady for a brief moment. Then her eyes trailed back to her desktop. If she even heard the teacher or knew what was going on in class, I could never tell.

Of course, I saw all this because I wasn't in the habit of listening to Miss Henderson, or any of my other teachers, for more than ten minutes before my attention strayed. I couldn't help it, I swear. There was just something about the steady droning of voices reading aloud from history books or reading books or any book that had the worst effect on me. It was in these moments I wanted to jump on top of my desk and break into song and dance, *hello my honey, hello my darling, hello my ragtime gaaaal*. Or better yet, snatch Miss Henderson's stuffed basketball from the reading area and bounce it off someone's unsuspecting head. Nothing like a vicious round of dodge ball to break up a boring social studies lesson.

I'd been down this path many times before and it always led to the same thing for me, T-R-O-U-B-L-E! After excruciatingly active sixth and seventh-grade years, I swore to my parents that, now that I was older and in better control of my impulses, I would be the model student. No more outbursts

in class. No more wrestling boys to the ground and forcing them to apologize for saying that I smelled like a big mustard turd (the unfortunate result of my affinity for mustard sardines). No more trips to the principal's office.

Just like there was no more Gramps to make excuses for me. No more Gramps to take me out for ice cream afterwards. No more Gramps to stick up for me when my parents got wind of some minor infraction.

Without Gramps around I felt about as deflated as an old bicycle tire. I guess that's why I'd held to my promise to be good pretty so well. But all that changed when Mrs. Jutney stuck her unwanted beak into the bathroom and spoiled everything.

Of course, parents were called. My real estate agent of a mother wasn't pleased about having to cancel a house showing. I tried to point out that being called to the office once a month was much better than once a week, but that woman who calls herself my mother wouldn't even let me get the words out of my mouth. Instead she told me to "shut it", and that it was time for me to start acting like a "young lady" instead of an immature baby who can't be left alone for two minutes.

Talk about being rude.

I pointed out that I was, in fact, quite mature for my age. Since Gramps was gone, I did my own laundry and made sure the fish were fed at least once every week or two. I even made my own suppers when I was home by myself, which was pretty often, and in fact was quite an accomplished noodle boiler. Truth be told, I was practically the most self-reliant person on planet Earth.

But she wasn't hearing anything I said. Instead, she went on and on for like thirty two billion years about growing up, being responsible and blah, blah, blah. Then she told me how disappointed Gramps would be in me.

Such an unnecessarily low blow might have crushed someone else. But my dear Madre had outfoxed even her foxy self. Anyone who knew anything knew Gramps was the last person in the world to be disappointed in my behavior. I mean, this is the guy who used to soak his bare feet in the fountain in the middle of the mall as he scrounged up change. Sometimes he even scrubbed his socks while he was at it.

As dismayed as I was in my mom's very uncosmopolitan view of the situation, I was appalled at Shannon and Mindy's parents' reaction to our harmless hijinks. Using some weird, distorted logic, they blamed me for everything and requested that Shannon and Mindy be transferred to another class, away from me!

Now why would anyone want to do that? Surely they understood that their little ploy would never, ever, not in two hundred and forty-two thousand years, ever break the bond of our friendship. Did these parents not understand that we were blood sisters, inseparable and unconquerable? The very idea of putting us in separate classes elicited a hearty yet derisive laugh from me, which I admit did not seem to help matters.

Not only were my friends banished from my class, they also were assigned two weeks of kitchen duty during breakfast for their roles in the bathroom festivities.

For our punishment, the Chigg and I lost recess for two weeks and picked up kitchen duty during lunch. So while everyone else headed out to the playground after lunch, Chigger and I cleaned tables and washed dishes.

Other than my friends being moved to another class, I thought the incident ended rather well. To start with, we had access to all the leftover cake from lunch. Also, although it was punishment, working the industrial dishwasher was kind of fun. Or could have been if Chigger allowed herself to have any fun.

But she was too scared for fun. Too scared to breathe, just about. But that's what I learned, not what I knew at the time. So each time I sprayed her with the sink hose she wilted a little, but she never came after me in a vengeful fury like I hoped. And each time I threw my dirty dishrag at her head she just accepted it as if such treatment was expected.

But she never, ever, not once, tried to squirt me with a bottle of ketchup or dump Jell-O down my shirt. Never even slapped me in the face with a slice of pepperoni pizza.

Now I ask, what was wrong with this girl?

The answer: plenty.

But again, I didn't know that at the time. Sure I knew she was pretty much a freakazoid, what with that red clown hair and those freckles, and then there was her being friendless and that tacky coat. And the praying on the pooper, can't forget that one.

But that was just the tip of the iceberg.

Now that Shannon and Mindy were forbidden to be friends with me, I found myself as alone as Chigger. Well, maybe not so alone as her. People still spoke to me. People still chose me for their team in gym. People still stood by me in line.

But now when I played "Guess What's in My Mouth" at the lunch table no one joined in. I was left with an open mouthful of refried beans, beets, cottage cheese, and chocolate milk before my frowning classmates. Now, when I drew fantastic renditions of Mrs. Jutney in a variety of costumes: a chinless Potato Head with a large slicer dicer nose and mullet hair, brandishing a bloody meat cleaver before the horrified chorus; or Mrs. Jutney as a homogenous opera singer in a beautiful evening gown, decked out in diamonds and rubies, sneezing the world's most powerful snot-nose sneeze onto a crowd of horrified opera patrons, there was no one to pass these to.

All my art was laid to waste, unappreciated.

Except there was Chigger. Our seats were not that far from each other. Did she appreciate art? I didn't know. Was I daring enough to find out?

You know I was.

So one afternoon, I made my way casually toward the pencil sharpener at the back of the class, pausing long enough to drop a folded piece of paper on Chigger's desk. As I did this, I noticed that she still had coleslaw in her hair from kitchen duty. Being a charitable person, I pointed this out.

The Chigg's hand jumped to the back of her head, she knew the exact spot.

Stacey "Tub-butt" Tubman, who sat across from Chigger in the next row, overheard what I said and saw Chigg's hand go to her hair. It was at this point that Stacey pointed at the Chigg's red head and snickered, "Frecklefart's got slaw-head. Gross!"

Well, the response was to be expected. The rest of the class began laughing at the Chigg and shouting things like, "Sick!" and "That's nasty!"

Even my old flame, Toby Pendergrass, lover of grasshopper dissections and former Frisbee aficionado, threw in his two cents worth. "Got a dog to go with that slaw?"

"Frecklefart is the dog!" Tub-butt cleverly answered with a short, barking laugh.

Chigger's entire body slumped in her seat. When she looked at me, her face so unhappy and yet so resigned, I began to feel responsible, well, maybe just a little, like a microscopic amount. Sure, I dumped coleslaw on her head in the cafeteria; it seemed like a perfectly natural thing to do at the time. But for that hideous fiend Stacey Tub-butt to twist a harmless little joke into unbearable humiliation before the entire class was unforgivable.

It was enough to make me want to incinerate that bean-brained Barbie with my Lady Godzilla breath. And I would have just then, but Miss Henderson was at the Chigg's desk studying my artwork. From the expression on her face, I would say she found the subject to be quite controversial, but I like to think that she appreciated the talent behind the work. At least, that's what I told Principal Lewis a short while later.

But Principal Lewis did not seem too concerned about the artwork, not too happy about it but not too concerned either. Instead, he said, "What do you know about Carrie Larson?"

This question was not what I expected. In fact, it seemed downright tricky, so I played it safe and said, "I know she has slaw in her hair." Safe, but true.

He continued as if I hadn't mentioned the slaw. "She's new here and doesn't have many friends. And I have a feeling Carrie could use a friend or two. Can I count on you to help her out? Be a friend to her?"

Okay, there it was. I was supposed to buddy up to the weird new kid no one liked. That would make me weird old kid, and I wasn't sure I cared for that. My brilliant creativity had given me a certain reputation among my peers. While it might not be the best reputation in the world, it was still better than being Slaw-head Frecklefart Fanny.

I said, "I don't know."

"You see," he began, "her daddy died when she was seven and she's had a hard time of it. Understand?"

Well now, I'd never known anyone to lose a mom or a dad except on television, but that doesn't count because it's fake. Thinking of Carrie sitting in class with slaw in her hair and people laughing at her seemed pretty low-down, what with having a dead dad and all. It seemed like the lowest of the low, and right then and there I vowed a blood-oath to befriend the Chigg until my dying day.

“You can count on me,” I said. “If we were in the burning desert, at the hottest part of the day on the hottest day of the year, sweating like pigs, I’d give her the last swipe of deodorant. If Chigg and I were captured and forced to be slave-janitors aboard a luxury cruise ship from the Netherlands, I’d clean all the toilets, she wouldn’t have to scrub a one. If zombified space-aliens from the planet Juptar swept down to suck our brains, I’d let them have mine first.”

“Well, let’s hope it doesn’t come to that,” was all Principal Lewis said.

That was it for me. Chigger and I were going to be bosom buddies by hook or by crook. But after the fifth day of kitchen duty we hadn’t so much as exchanged phone numbers, despite all my efforts to be friendly. Somehow, Chigg had managed to resist all my charms. It was obvious I would have to amp up the friendship vibe.

As I thought this, I saw her face again in class, that sad misery, that resignation to endure whatever cruelty came her way. It was like she was zapped of all spunk, like she’d given up before she’d even begun to fight.

I was determined. If spunk was needed, I was the spunkiest chick there ever was. And if there was a fight to be fought, I was the welterweight champion of the eighth grade, or would be if there was such a thing.

Although Chigger did not know it, she had just recruited the most powerful and dangerous ally on the face of the earth. There was no enemy I would not confront, no terrain I would not travail, no stank funk I would not endure for those fortunate enough to be my friend.

But did Chigg care?

You know she didn’t.

