Close to Me

by

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Class of 2013

A thesis submitted to the
faculty of Wesleyan University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Degree of Bachelor of Arts
with Departmental Honors in English

Middletown, Connecticut April, 2013
Close to Me

a graphic novella by

Jason Katzenstein
For Dr. Scott,
who is the reason
I make comics.
“There are no happy endings. 
Endings are the saddest part, 
So just give me a happy middle 
And a very happy start.”

-Shel Silverstein
You were not invited, reader. You're bothering me.

What, I'm expected to sit here like some schmuck and tell you a story?

Go fuck yourselves.
Not leaving, eh?

Well, suit your farshrinkener selves. I've got nothing to say to ya.
I always think, there’s still time to get up and scream and be thrown off before takeoff.

I think, you can still get out of this.

Then the wheels lift and I clutch the sides of my seat as tightly as possible, which I know makes zero difference except I still always feel a little better.

Ladies and gentlemen, there’s the off chance our engines are dead and the left wing fell off and this plane is plunging right into the fiery fifth circle of hell. Our in-flight movie today will be How to Lose a Guy in Ten Days...
Planes are grimy, packed with coughing, snoring drooling people and shrieking babies and all sorts of weird infections.

Next time I’m on a plane I’ll just throw a fit and get ejected before takeoff.

And by this I mean I definitely won’t, because I am a horrible coward.
I don’t want to go to Los Angeles. Not that staying in Brooklyn is a better option right now, with my parents’ separation in full meltdown mode.

Yesterday my mom drove over the watch my dad gave her for their anniversary. They both cried, and decided that I should stay with Grandpa Mordy for a week or two.

Grandpa Mordy terrifies me.
The cab driver listens to loud Christian talk radio.

I'm paying too much attention to a mysterious stain on the divider. And it's evening but it's humid and hot and the windows are open.
I haven't spoken to my grandpa since Grandma Ruby died, which was four months ago.

The day it happened I called him on the phone, and he said,

"Toughen up, kid, it's just life."

and that was it.

I am not tough. Grandpa Mordy is tough. They were together fifty years. And I cried about Grandma Ruby every night for a month, under the covers where nobody can see me.
What do I even say to the guy?

I can't imagine he wants me here.

Just touch it, come on.

Ugh.

With your hand, you baby. Like a normal person.
It's as though you knew when to ring the doorbell to wake me from my nap.

Guest room is yours. You don't disturb me, I won't disturb you. The golden rule, yes?

We eat at five.
How’s La La Land?
I can’t say I don’t want to go home.
Oh come on, we didn’t send you to Bumfuck, Hornibletown.

Don’t knock Bumfuck, I hear they’re getting a Chipotle.

There’s his sense of humor. How’s your grandpa?

Kid! Dinner!
Hates me.
He loves you and he’s reserved about showing it.

Are YOU the one with the hearing aids? Dinner!
I need to go.
So, what is...this?

Don’t ask questions you don’t want to know the answers to, Paul. Eat your dinner.

Can I please be excused?

It’s your life.
I wonder what it's like to live alone. Why should I wonder—that's where I'm headed. I can't talk to people. I live in my head.

I'm thinking about all the trash in the ocean and I can't focus on anything else.

Stop! Stop worrying about the trash.

Ha, "Don't think about the striped elephants."

When I was little I saw a therapist who told me,

The worst way to handle your problems is to hide. For instance, if I say don't think about the striped elephants, really try not to think about them. What are you thinking about right now?

Idiot.

Exactly!
To me, it feels like the moment when Wile E. Coyote realizes that he's running on nothing but air. You can't ignore that. You can't possibly stop thinking about the striped elephants.

Holy shit, that's one way.
Two moonlit girls, kissing and laughing and falling in love on the beach.

I wonder if I'll die a virgin.

Hey, shithead, enjoying the show?

I fall in this stupid kind of love at first sight that shouldn't exist for any neurotic types.

Then I remember that I'm being yelled at.

I deal with it the way I deal with all of my problems.

Whoosh.
Can’t hide from things?

Of course you can.

I’ve developed tactics to do exactly that.

Don’t think about the striped elephants.

Or my bloody hands.
"You don't disturb me, I won't disturb you." The golden rule my ass!

SD GAY TWISTIN'
You might know my grandpa as beloved, Eisner award-winning cartoonist Mordy Green. You probably didn’t want the image of him illustrating these books in his underwear. That makes two of us.

Good, you’re up. You can drive to the grocery store.

I don’t have a license. Walk to the grocery store.

The only grocery store here is a mile away.

Here’s the keys. Money and list on the kitchen table.

You want me to walk back here with all the bags?

Toughen up, kid.
Okay, it’s hard to complain about a morning walk down the Pacific coast. I’ll find a way to do it, but it’s hard.

Watch it, ya shithead!

Everybody’s calling me that lately.
And in the twist of the century, I'm not a big fan of grocery stores.
What the hell is this?

Don't nothing me. I see you dykes in here all the time stealing shit.

Call me that again.

Hey, I don't think anybody here wants me to show the cell phone video I just took to my grandpa the lawyer.

Unless you'd like to be the perpetrator of a hate crime?

How about this,

You get the fuck out of my store right now,

and I'll consider not killing you.

I agree to your terms.
What did I just do? Why am I always running away from these girls?

Freeze! Police!

Holy shit I am going to jail, I am going to jail and Grandpa Mordy is not going to bail me out and I won’t graduate high school and my parents will disown me and I’ll be a cautionary tale for nice Jewish boys and I can’t even pee in public so I can’t go to jail and—
Wait, calm down.

Oh my god, he's shaking.

What a little deer in headlights. Get in, Bambi.

I'm Carly and this is Julia. Are you stalking us?

I wish I could talk to other people without my throat tightening and my heart pounding. I wish the words came out even remotely close to what I meant.
And, back in my brain...

Thanks for the ride. I promise I'm not a weirdo, and I'd love to get to know you.

You're gonna say that?

What's wrong with it?

Don't listen to this jackass. He's crazy. Say, "The elephants have boarded my pantsless space ship."

What's cooking, good looking?

Booooooring. Say this!
You're a great talker, Paul.

Don't be mean!

Can we just drop him off?

Where do you need to be dropped off?

Um, at my grandpa's. I'm staying at my grandpa's. And I'm not a pervert, I just keep running into you and I don't know why.

Bad luck.

Listen, Paul, if that is your real name...

Whoa!
Sweet beach house life!

Got any snacks?

Wait!

Carly, are you coming?

In a sec.
Hi Paul's grandpa. We're his new best friends.

And are you all just going to stare at my manhood? Come in, lunch is on the table. And it's borscht.
And thus begins the most excruciating hour of my life.

This kid! Once when he was little he said, “AMPA!”—he called me Aampa—“AMPA! Did I come from a bagina?” So I tell him straight, yeah kid, like the best of us. And he says, this is true I swear to you, “Can I go back?”

That’s incredible.

Bye Paul! Bye Mordy! You’re the greatest old man I’ve ever met.

Delightful girls.

You’re so fucking ugly.

You’re so fucking ugly.

You’re so fucking ugly.
Okay, fine! Fine, reader, if it'll shut you up then I'll tell you a little something.

I haven't exactly left the house since Ruby died. I don't know why. I just...can't.

And so sometimes it isn't the worst thing, having Paul around.

Paul! Take out the trash!
Why would you buy a fish?

So you can have some company after I die. We can call her Ruby Two.
I can’t explain to Grandpa. Mordy how much it hurts me to be around garbage.

He doesn’t understand irrational fear.
Here I'm safe.
It’s sweet that I’m a giant disembodied face in your dreams, Paul. But you still don’t know anything about me.

Then tell me something.
Right now I'm just an extension of your unconscious desires and neuroses. What is there to tell?

Anything.

Stop using me to learn about you--I'm not your manic pixie dream girl! I'm not going to make you less introverted, inspire you to make your art, kiss you in the rain...
In your dream we fly around like Chagall lovers?

Carly, wait!

Bye now!
Paul! PAUL!

WAKE UP. WAKE UP, PAUL!
Come on...

Let's go somewhere.
It's always the same dream.
To see you like this.

You're as beautiful as the day we met.

You remember that day, in central park?
Get yer humorous portrait drawn! See your face lampooned!

But don't ask me not to draw yer big schnozz if ya got one. I'm a caricaturist, not a magician, hear?
That's not worth a buck.

Says you. I do great work.

How about this. You draw my portrait, and if it makes me smile then you get the money.

Mmm...

You've got a deal.
Tonight, I would love to
make you spaghetti and
meatballs. Tomorrow I would
love to walk in the park.
Tuesday? Maybe we get
married.

Mandy Green
"Toughen up, Moredcai..."

"It's only life."
Who in the--

I have ONE lousy golden rule...

It's four in the morning.

Okay, yeesh, come in.
What happened?

You know, what always happens. Stupid shit.

She feels not good enough for me. And then she takes the offensive, and she just, you know, screams at me. Screams. Because she's going to miss me after the summer.

Are you leaving?

She is. For Barnard. And that's the thing, is that she's the one leaving. I'm not going anywhere. You can't get mad at the person who isn't leaving.

So I broke up with her.
You’re not, but that’s okay. I’m not sure we loved each other. I’m not sure I’ve ever loved anybody. It’s so hard to tell. Like, what you feel toward me right now? That’s attraction. It’s so easy to be attracted to somebody. What you aren’t doing is “falling in this stupid kind of love at first sight that shouldn’t exist for shy neurotic types.”

But the writing is nice. And I’m flattered.

Here we are.
You're teenagers and you got in a fight. She'll be back.

She's tried to kill herself twice! And I broke up with her. What the fuck do you think she's doing?

You want me to call the police?

I want you to put on your bathrobe, wake Paul and help me find her!

Where is that shirthead anyway?

Paul! Wakey wakey! It's time to—
Oh...

You motherfucker.
This is my favorite place in Los Angeles.

All these graff artists know this place, so they come in and tag and draw and it’s the best little art museum nobody hears about.
I hate your grandson right now.

Well, are you coming or what?

No.

Excuse me?

I'm not coming. I'm going back to sleep. You find them.

I rode my bike here! How do you suggest I find them?

Pedal hard.

YOU'RE COMPLETELY USELESS!
This one's my rag.

Is everything okay?

You know what? No.
Trash. Airplanes. Pee wee Herman, the unknown, venereal
disease, heights, death, my grandpa, snakes, horror movies,
enclosed spaces, burglars, roller coasters, mysterious stains,
swimming, handshakes and that I'll die alone in a sad
apartment and nobody will notice until it starts to smell.

I like to think I'm not afraid of anything, but
that's not really true. Because some days I wake
up feeling awful for no reason. And then I feel
like I want to die, Paul, and as much as I tell
myself that it isn't real, it doesn't change the
feeling. And the more I try not to think about it,
the worse it gets. And then I come here.
F**k everyone in the ass!

Stupid f**king old man.
Get in.
Do you have a condom?

No.

That's okay.

Heh. That's okay.

I guess you really like me.

Here...
Paul Isaac Green you get your fucking tuchas in this car right now!

You’re a nice boy, Paul.

That’s what I was afraid of.
I love you.

I know.

I'm an idiot.

Oh, I know.

Do you hate me?

I don't hate you, I got in the car, didn't I?

You can hate me and still want a ride home.

Are we broken up?

I don't know.

Did you fuck that boy?

He came in his pants.

I love you.
You really messed up there, kid.

Thanks, grandpa.

You fucked up royally.

And I'm proud of you.

Chuck Jones, the Looney Tunes animator, said you've got a hundred thousand bad drawings in you, so you might as well get started.

So many people to meet. So many mistakes to make. So many opportunities to fall in love.

So many people to miss.
And when you really love somebody, you love them forever. You love them when they're gone. And it makes every stupid thing about your day harder.

You miss her.

Only always.

Don't push your luck.
And in this moment I feel safe, like we're engulfed in an impenetrable force field.

Nothing can touch me.

It's only a minute, but it's a minute I'll take.
You’re still here, reader? What have you been doing this whole time?

Jesus, did you watch me shower?
The End.
Acknowledgements

Thank you to my family who has given me unwavering love and support, to my extended family at 66 Home who makes me excited to come home every day, to Ally who makes me want to be a better artist, to Anna who makes me want to be a better writer, to Eden who just makes me want to be better, to the Wesleyan English Department for reminding me for four years why I love to read and write and to Amy Bloom for the tea, talks and inspiration.