

CHAD LUCAS

Gingerbread Ninja

JASON STARES OUT THE window, drumming compulsively. *Kadonka-donkadonk* go his fingertips on the glass, a tribal rhythm to ward off evil. It is barely eight a.m. but he already feels jittery, fatalistic. His body tingles with potential energy. He can feel the electrons in his brain swarming in irritated masses, conspiring to betray him. In the sickly morning haze of school bus exhaust and overapplied body spray he smells an impending train wreck.

He wonders if his mood is random or the result of waning levels of Zanifidol in his system. He has “forgotten” to ingest the generic pink knockoff of the latest ADHD treatment for thirty-six hours now—three cycles in a row. He resents the inference that without medication he is somehow defective.

“You know I’m not sick. Attention deficit disorder is a made-up disease,” he told his mother as they stood in line at the pharmacy. “It’s a conspiracy between lazy teachers and greedy drug companies. Doctors go along because they get paid, and parents follow like sheep because they’re afraid their kids won’t get into college. Seriously, the whole system is effed up, and you’re wasting good money on bogus junk that will probably just give me cancer.”

“Jason, please,” his mother said, which was shorthand for “How did you turn into such a raving weirdo?”

“All I’m saying,” he continued, “is that if you look back through history, half the world’s smartest people would have been drugged up too if they had to sit through junior high. Like Thomas Edison—he sucked at school. What if his mom made him take Zanifidol? I bet he never would have invented the light bulb. We’d still be using candles right now.”

Jason’s voice was rising. A woman in a knitted sweater stared at him. His mother gritted her teeth and handed the pharmacist her debit card.



It helps that he has gym in second period. Jason beats Shane Feist four out of six games in badminton and then, when Mr. Boudreau's not watching, they turn their rackets around and have a swordfight. Afterward Jason feels saner, less powder-keggish. But in the locker room he remembers that Science is next, and that his half-finished assignment is lying underneath a pile of Xbox games on his bedroom floor. Worse, he makes the mistake of recalling this while looking in the general direction of Cory Bennett.

"Hey, do you mind? Are you getting a good view?" Cory mocks.

Jason snaps back to the present. "Huh?"

"Don't play dumb. I saw you checking me out, Daggett the Faggot."

Jason believes certain surnames should be forced into extinction, to spare future generations a childhood of needless suffering. "Daggett" is one of them.

"I was not," he mumbles. "I was just thinking."

"Yeah, I *know* what you were thinking about, Fag-Daggett you dang faggot." Cory laughs, and so do a few other boys.

Normally Jason would let it go, hurry into his clothes and move on. But his brain-to-mouth interceptors are weak and his body commits its first betrayal.

"Actually, I was thinking about how gross your bacne is," he says. "Are you on steroids or something?"

Cory's face turns pink. Jason freezes. He's in the middle of doing up his pants and he's not sure if he should try to finish or devote all his energies to protecting himself. He settles on an ineffectual compromise, holding up his jeans with one hand and stretching out the other in a vain attempt to deflect the coming assault. Cory's two-handed shove still catches him in the chest and he trips over his sneakers, sprawling on the tile floor with his pants sagging around his thighs. For a moment he's afraid Cory will jump him and start punching, but another kid laughs and Cory relents, satisfied that Jason has been returned to his place in the pecking order. With the threat of further violence diffused, Jason realizes his elbow hurts like hell.



In the car he unfolded the Zanifidol leaflet and read the side effects aloud.

"'May cause loss of appetite, drowsiness or trouble sleeping'—What the hell? Those are total opposites, how is that possible?—'reduced sexual

desire—” He laughed. “Great. So I’ll be the only fourteen-year-old boy alive who *doesn’t* want to eat, sleep and think about sex. And you believe this crap will make me *normal*?”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake, Jason.” His mother let out a long breath. “Look, no one’s saying it’s a permanent thing, OK? We’re just asking you to try it. I mean, we’re all—everybody’s going through a hard time right now, and it might just ... make life a little easier on you, you know? Take the edge off a bit.”

“Whatever,” he mumbled. “You and Dad split up and I’m the one who winds up on drugs. Yeah, that makes *perfect* sense.”

She stiffened and he knew he had struck a nerve. He didn’t even have the heart to tease her when twenty seconds later she coasted through a four-way stop and nearly T-boned a silver BMW. The car’s driver, a man in a beret and a wireless earpiece, laid on his horn and gave them a dirty look as he rolled through the intersection. Jason glared back.

“Oooh, you’re so intimidating in your little beanie hat. Tool.”

His mom laughed, restoring a temporary truce.



At lunch he parks at an empty table second from the wall, flouting the unspoken rule that the cafeteria’s back corner is reserved for the Cool Kids. Jason waves Shane Feist and Rajiv Chodary over with a sweep of his arm, ignoring the annoyed mutters of the girls behind him. So what if they don’t want him here? The only possible defence today is a good offence. He has set his attitude to disdain, embraced a middle-finger-to-the-world mentality. If he is going to bomb, let him bomb big.

Shane and Rajiv are tentative, neither having any ambitions to challenge the social order, but Jason wins them over with his sudden burst of screw-you confidence.

“It’s a free country and I’ll sit where I want,” he says. “I’m sick of people thinking they’re better than me just because they made the Bantam AAA hockey team. Big friggin’ deal. I mean, if that’s the most important thing in your life then I actually feel sorry for you. I’m sure that’s what you want on your tombstone—‘When he was fourteen, he could skate fast and beat people up.’ Way-to-aim high.”

Rajiv and Shane giggle. Jason feels himself reaching the crest of a wave, dizzying and dangerous. He stamps an exclamation point on his rant by downing his chocolate milk and finishing with a belch. At the all-girl table, Brianne Ford lets out an actual gasp of horror.

“Jason, you are such a *pig!*” she yells, turning heads halfway across the cafeteria. “Why don’t you just grow *up?*”

Brianne is by consensus the hottest girl in the ninth grade. Jason was once as smitten as every other heterosexual boy; he entertained a particular fantasy in which she tackled him on a crash mat in the gym storage room and tore off his clothes, frenzied with desire. But after sharing a classroom with her for six months his feelings have U-turned into disgust. She is an exhausting black hole of narcissism. Even a trip to the washroom brings an entire class to a halt with her rustling and preening and centre-of-the-universe hip-wiggle toward the door. He wonders just how far down he’d have to dig to find a real person underneath the plastic persona.

“You’re calling *me* immature?” he shoots back. “Why don’t *you* quit being so dramatic about every little thing? I let out one burp and you freak out like I just took a dump in your salad.”

Brianne makes a face that Jason hopes he will carry with him for the rest of his life. Her shock at his one-two combination of scatology and audacity—No one talks to her like that! No one!—is palpable, sending ripples five tables deep. Shane and Rajiv are puddles of laughter.

When the redness in her face fades, Brianne recovers enough to stab a savage smile at Jason’s table. “I hope you three enjoy each other’s company,” she says, “because no girl is going to touch you as long as you live.”

Her tablemates laugh. Jason is unsettled. He already harbours a semi-conscious fear that what Brianne says is true. He wonders if she’s just cursed him with some sort of alpha-girl hex that will haunt him till he dies.

Brianne’s words still buzz in Jason’s brain as he shuffles into math class. He haphazardly unloads his books on his desk and watches helplessly as his binder coasts toward the edge and teeters for a moment before dropping, covers unfurling like defective wings. The binder is a ninety-nine-cent model his mother picked up in the grocery store clearance aisle, and of course it ruptures on impact, spewing its innards across three rows. Jason stares in dismay at the scattered debris of pencil-scrawled looseleaf, half-finished assignments and old tests saturated with red ink—a dismal collage documenting two terms’ worth of frustration and futility, on display for the whole class to see.

“What a spaz.” He’s not sure who says it. Not that it matters, they’re all thinking it.

“Son of a bitch!” he yells, kicking the binder across the room and launching the last of its feeble contents into the air.

At his desk, Mr. Courtemanche peers over his glasses and sighs. “Ah, Mr. Daggett,” he proclaims. “I wish I could say I was surprised. Is it

too much to ask that you at least attempt to behave like a civilized human being?”

“*Really,*” Brianne snorts, and her ducklings quack in agreement.

Jason doesn’t mind when teachers yell at him. After ten years the phenomenon is so familiar that it’s almost comforting, like he’s some rascally neighbour on an eighties sitcom and the laugh track will kick in any second now. But Mr. Courtemanche’s acid sarcasm makes him want to slash tires. He has never had a teacher so aggravatingly loathsome, with his fake-professorial brown sport coat and mane of shaggy grey hair, his bitter air of put-upon-ness, as if he is the central figure in a Greek tragedy, cursed by the gods to expend his brilliance in vain upon an endless succession of thick-skulled, hormone-jacked teenagers. “You are a giant phony,” Jason wants to shout. “You are the hollow, middle-aged version of Cory Bennett and Brianne Ford. Underneath that superiority complex you know damn well that you’re not nearly as awesome as you pretend to be, and so you dump all over other people to feel good about yourself. Except you’re *worse* than Cory and Brianne, because you’re a full-grown man abusing your authority to bully a kid who can’t even defend himself without getting in trouble. You’re pathetic. You make me sick.”

This is what Jason means to say, the monologue he has been crafting in the dark hours when Zanifidol and pent-up rage keep him from sleeping. But again his speech-to-thought circuit suffers a breakdown and his mouth acts unilaterally.

“That depends,” he shoots back at his teacher. “Is it too much to ask that you stop being such a smug bastard every time I make a mistake?”

The classroom titters, giddy with rebellion, but Jason derives no pleasure from the fact that they’re actually laughing *with* him for once—even Cory, who has fallen out of his chair in hysterics. With the exception of Shane, he hates everyone in the room.

Mr. Courtemanche pales. “Pick up your *mess* and get out,” he hisses.

“Gladly,” Jason retorts. He’s planning to leave his debris scattered in one final act of insurgence, but he hears a rustling behind him and turns to see that Shane is on his knees, gathering the loose papers. The self-effacing act sobers the whole class and drains all the fight out of Jason. He takes his binder from his best friend and mumbles an embarrassed thanks without meeting the other boy’s eyes.



In-school suspensions are the laziest form of discipline, Jason thinks. Cloistered in a meeting room across from the vice-principal's office he feels pardoned, not punished—spared from human interaction for the rest of the school day.

He lays his head on the long executive table and is almost asleep when a rap on the door startles him upright. The vice-principal frowns through the window and shakes her head. Sighing, Jason scavenges for a pen and digs out the least challenging of his back-logged assignments, a 500-word essay for health class. The topic: Imagine Your Future.

Jason smirks at this fancy recycling of the question teachers have asked every year since the first grade: *What do you want to be when you grow up?* It's not even worthy of forethought.

My Glorious Future

By: Jason Daggett

Class: 9C

What is it with teachers asking us to think about the future? Can't I wallow in the misery of my youth for a while without worrying about getting a job and meeting a girl who doesn't think I'm gross? The present sucks enough on its own.

Honestly, I have no idea about the future. I'm nearly failing Grade 9, so it's not like I'm going to get into university. I'm pretty good at drawing, and I'd maybe like to make comic books or design animation for video games, but everyone seems to think that's a waste of time and I'm not exactly holding my breath on becoming rich and famous.

I'll probably end up at Wal-Mart or a call centre, getting yelled at by idiots who make five times more money than me but can't figure out how to send a text message. That or I'll become one of those troubled kids you see on TV, the ones who play too much Grand Theft Auto and listen to too much gangsta rap and then go out and steal cars and sell drugs. This might actually be my best career move. After I do my time in juvenile hall, if I don't get shanked, I can write violent songs about my hard-knock life and become a hip-hop superstar who drives a Cadillac Escalade filled with beautiful women. Yeah, that's the life for me. Like a famous rapper once said, "I'm just trying to get that gingerbread."

Jason loves this phrase, though he's not sure what "gingerbread" is, exactly. He guesses it's slang for money, or drugs, maybe a part of the female anatomy. Perhaps it's more philosophical and elusive: peace of mind, happiness, the ability to make it through a weekday without suffering or wanting to inflict bodily harm. We're all just trying to get that gingerbread.

Whatever. Jason counts words: he's at 245, not even halfway there. He pauses for a moment.

Actually, I wish I could go backward, not forward. If I had a time machine I would travel to ancient China or Japan and become a warrior like in the movies, the kind where people can defy gravity and fight in mid-air and stuff like that. I love those movies, not because of the special effects (though they are pretty awesome) but because the characters are these noble ninjas and samurais who fight for their country, or for love or honour, and they don't care about anything else. They're not afraid of death.

I went to a movie last summer where Jet Li was an assassin who went to kill the king of China, who was a tyrant. But in the end he changed his mind because this other warrior convinced him it was better for the whole country if the king lived. So he gave up and just stood there while the king's army shot him with a thousand arrows. And the king gave him a hero's funeral even though he'd just had him executed, because the king realized the assassin gave up his own life so the whole country could have peace. It's the first movie that ever made me cry. Not because all the best characters died, but because of the way they died. With honour.

Here's all I want from the future: I want to live a noble life and die a heroic death and have people remember me when I'm gone. I don't want to go through life feeling as useless as I do right now.

Jason reads his essay over a couple of times, then sighs and crumples it into his pocket. There's no way he could hand it in to Mrs. McCarthy. She would either give him a bad mark for being a smartass or get creeped out and call the guidance counsellor, who would call his mother, who would try to drag him off to therapy again.

She'd made him go once, just before school started, when things were still unravelling. "There's no shame in seeing a counsellor," she told him. "Your father and I are both doing it, trying to work things out."

She was the only one trying to work anything out at that point, Jason knew. His session was forty-five minutes of tedium. He gave two-word answers to a large man with a beard who greeted his sullenness with an inexhaustible display of professional patience. As their time ticked down, the counsellor gave Jason a placid smile.

"I can see you don't want to be here, and that's OK," he said. "But I can only try to help you if you want to be helped."

Jason examined the man's bookcase for a minute. "You know what I think would help me? If you let me punch you in the face."

The counsellor coughed.

“Not that I have anything against you personally,” Jason said. “It’s just, sitting here and telling some stranger how much my life sucks isn’t going to make me feel better, no offence. But if I could just hit someone without, you know, worrying they were going to kill me afterward, that might actually help.”

“So you’re saying that you think inflicting pain on someone else would make you feel better?” the man asked.

Jason laughed. “Please. I’m 110 pounds. You weigh more than twice that, right? I’d probably hurt my own hand more than I’d hurt your face. Come on. Just one punch, I promise.”

The counsellor gave a wry smile. “Maybe next week.”

But there was no next week. When his mother asked him how the session went, Jason shrugged. “He kept asking me if I dream about sex. Is he supposed to do that?”

The lie served the purpose. She cancelled his next appointment and hadn’t gotten around to finding a replacement. He doesn’t want to give her a reason to look again, so he recasts for Mrs. McCarthy a future in which he lives a quiet life harvesting maple syrup in the woods of northern Quebec with his trusty chocolate lab, Nunchuk.



Ten minutes after the last bus pulls away, Jason stands outside the school alone, hands crammed in his pockets to fend off the rawness of March. He knows his father will not show up. The man has been better lately; it’s a good six weeks since he forgot their Wednesday arrangement. But it’s inevitable he’d have a relapse today. Jason is not surprised, or overly disappointed. He rarely enjoys their dinners. His father seems distracted as ever, bored by his son’s stupid little life. “Jason, please,” he sighed two weeks ago, “I really don’t need to hear the entire plot of ... whatever video game it is you’re talking about.”

“God of War,” Jason finished quietly, out of spite.

His father flicked his eyes around for the waitress and Jason knew he was counting down the minutes until he could ditch his son in favour of his new girlfriend. “The little ho,” his mother calls her, which sends Jason into hysterics every time.

He has met her twice. She seems nice enough, but she’s unnervingly young and gorgeous. Jason wonders what she sees in his father, a government policy wonk in grey suits and metallic ties. He wonders just how warped it is that he daydreams about his adulterous father’s girlfriend touching him, teaching him he is capable and worthy of being loved.



Jason briefly considers going to Shane's house. He adores the Feists; they are a Flanders-like group of impossibly kind Christians who collect their loose change for Rwandan missionaries and publish a family newsletter, *Feist Monthly*. Back in November Jason was the subject of a glowing profile ("Shane's New Best Friend") written by ten-year-old Thomas, the fourth of five Feist children.

Shane has a new best friend named Jason Daggett. Jason is in Shane's class at Bedford Junior High School. They became friends on the first day when Jason helped Shane find his locker. Jason likes video games and action movies which take place in China. He lives with his mom and has no brothers or sisters. Shane says that Jason is very funny, and a good friend. I think this is true, because Jason makes me laugh a lot and is always nice to me when he comes to visit even though he is older. Jason is very cool.

It is because he likes them so much that he passes the Feists' street, despite their standing invitation that he is always welcome. He doesn't trust himself today. There's a high probability he'll do something stupid and irreversible—a sudden meltdown, a rush of profanity—to betray himself in their presence. He dreads that one day the Feists will counsel their gee-whiz guileless son to maybe find a new best friend, one who's not so ... damaged.

Of course it starts to rain. Jason laughs bitterly—because what else can you do?—and plunges his hands deeper into his pockets. March rain is as close to ice as rain can get, little knives of cold piercing holes in your skin. By the time he trudges up Rutledge Street Jason is shivering and craving a hot chocolate and some Oreos.

The house is quiet. His mother works the closing shift at the Sports Stadium on Wednesdays, hanging out with the late crew of musclebound college boys and the odd ambitious mom who's sent the kids off to bed and hit the treadmill. Jason is alone until at least eleven.

He takes his snack to the couch and flicks on the television, too tired to muster the concentration required for orchestrating video-game violence. On a talk show some woman has just revealed to her boyfriend in front of a live studio audience that she is really a man ... and his long-lost first cousin. Jason snorts. Normally he despises these shows and their public airing of dirty laundry. They only reinforce his budding theory that the human race is, generally speaking, a cesspool of self-centred tools. But for a moment he

is comforted to know that poor blindsided Ryan Clement of Gum Spring, Virginia is actually having a lousier day than him.

The question is, which is worse: one big bombshell or a trickle of tiny miseries lapping up one after another, a slow death by erosion.

He closes his eyes and when he opens them half an hour later the transgendered relative-lover has given way to the evening news. With the weary sloppiness of an old dog nearing its last days, Jason gathers himself up and cobbles together a microwaved dinner of hot dogs and leftover tuna casserole. Midway through the meal he starts to cry, deep sobs that rattle his shoulders and splatter tears on the plastic tablecloth. The outbreak lasts only a minute, but still he hates himself for it. It's the third one this month. The previous two came late at night, in the privacy of his room. He worries that one day he'll be randomly stricken in the middle of the afternoon, with a sneering audience.

Defeated, he chases his dinner with a glass of milk and a hit of Zanafidol.



Math is the bane of Jason's existence, cold infallible numbers that document his shortcomings. After half an hour he's completed three equations (in that he has arrived at a final number, though whether it's the right one is anyone's guess) and sketched the Chinese symbol for courage on the inside of his forearm.

He is *trying* here. That's what they don't seem to believe—his father, who thinks he's just lazy, and his mother, who honestly believes he'd be Stephen Effing Hawking if he'd only take his medication. "You're so *clever*, Jason," she insisted recently. "You remember every little thing about your favourite movies. You just need to learn how to unclutter that brain of yours. To focus on the important things and drown out the rest, that's all." Yeah, *that's all*, like it's that simple. And he's insulted by her arbitrary definition of what's important. He'd like to see someone prove that spending three hours trying to figure out the value of x over and over will serve him better in the long run than, say, studying the nature of fear so hauntingly depicted in the latest Batman movie.

But he didn't bother to argue his case, knowing it was pointless. Instead he retreated to the comfortable isolation of his room. He does it more and more these days.



While the bathtub fills with steaming hot water, Jason lights three candles that smell like sandalwood and sheds his baggy hoodie and jeans—the standard teenage-boy uniform that doubles as a force field, taking up twice as much space as his body requires, conveying a hard-edged distance. Unclothed he is angular and bony, some stranded thing that needs to be wrapped in a blanket and fed warm milk. He knows Cory Bennett would consider it unforgivably gay that he likes to relax in a hot bath with scented candles. Jason prefers to think of it as an act of meditation—an ancient eastern warrior decompressing after a day of battle.

The phone rings. He doesn't move. Odds are it's his father calling to make an excuse or his mother checking up on him. He lets the answering machine do its job.

“Uh, hi Jase. If you're there, can you pick up, please? Listen, I'm really sorry about missing you, I got stuck in a meeting at work and—”

Jason sinks his head under the water, waiting for the beep. When he surfaces he snakes an arm out of the tub and gropes for the paring knife sitting atop the toilet-seat lid.

He studies the blade for a second and sets it against the hand-drawn tattoo on his left arm. The first slice of the skin stings sharply, sending a rush through his head, heightening his alertness. Blood springs to the surface and darkens in the foreign atmosphere. Jason traces the lines of the Oriental character as heavily as he dares, wary of striking a major artery. He is not interested in ending his life. He just wants to test his mettle. To feel something genuine—something visceral, unadulterated by chemicals and stupid social conventions. But he's a worse artist with a knife than with a pen, and after four strokes his canvas is a slick mess and he is lightheaded from the hot water and the shock of self-injury. He sets the knife down and eases his bloody arm under the surface, closing his eyes.

I am a ninja returning home from a dangerous mission. I have killed, was nearly killed myself. I bleed but I walk tall, indifferent to my wounds. My beautiful servant undresses me and tends to my injuries. As she works I am stone-faced and silent, showing neither pain nor relief. She asks no questions, knowing I will not speak of what I have seen, what I have done. When she has finished she traces her fingers along my arm, up to my shoulder, leaning in close to—

Jason hears the click of a lock, the sound of a heavy purse hitting the floor. His eyes spring open.

“Jason?”

“Oh *shit*,” he whispers. He springs out of the tub and lands on his feet in one motion so fluid and agile that he would be thrilled, had he the wherewithal to notice.

“I’m in the bath!” he shouts, locking the door. He turns on the taps again, to drown out any reply and buy himself some time.

Jason looks at the pinkish tub, the streaks of watery blood trickling down his forearm, and wonders where to start. He can’t let her see this. She will totally freak out.