



The Great American Whatever CHAPTER ONE

I don't consider myself to be precious, necessarily, but give me air-conditioning or give me death.

Maybe the only thing worse than a midwestern winter is a midwestern summer, especially when your AC is broken. We are going on our second straight week of record-breaking highs here. This is the universe's way of showing it has a sense of humor, since I am personally going on my sixth straight month of record-breaking lows.

"I have got to get a new air conditioner."

I actually say this out loud, just to hear a voice. Anyone's voice, really, these days.

"I have seriously got," I say again, crawling to the side of the bed and tricking my body into standing upright, "to get a new air conditioner." And then, a little louder: "I am requesting a new air conditioner from the universe."

Like if I say it enough times, the air-conditioning fairy will arrive. (Hey, you never know.) I give it twenty seconds. Alas, no fairy. Other than, you know, me.

I dare my feet to walk me to the bathroom so I can take a whiz, and then I lope back out to my bedroom, and all of this cardio makes me hot enough to formally debate "cooling-off options" that don't involve leaving my room.

I'd remove my clothes, but I'm already wearing only my lucky boxers, and every time I take them off these days, I'm like: What's so wrong with me that I'm almost a senior and I still haven't been naked with another person?

Great. See? And now I'm even hotter.

I keep my boxers on and move to the next option.

The mini-fridge that Mom got me two birthdays ago isn't quite big enough for me to comfortably lay my head inside—believe me, I've tried—and if I took out my broken AC and cracked the window, I'd have to confront the reality that I might hear, like, birds, or worse: the merry squeals of neighborhood children. And who has the stomach for that kind of unannounced joy at this hour?

So I go low-tech, slumping into my beanbag chair and fanning myself with a take-out menu. That's when some sweat rivulets drip from my elbow onto the floor, and not just that—that wouldn't be so bad—but my sweat hits a random page of an application for this lame student filmmakers' competition. Apparently I never got around to completing the application last fall, let alone sending it in. I can't seem to finish anything these days, except, oh, dessert.

I kick the form under my desk and decide to sneak downstairs and just stick my face in the freezer for a minute. Hey—maybe it'll shrink my pores at the same time. The school counselor calls that kind of thing multitasking, which she also claims is a dangerous myth. No, really. This is an actual, hand-to-God quote: "Multitasking is a dangerous myth, Mr. Roberts."

She always calls me "Mr. Roberts," probably as mildly embarrassed to say my first name as I am. Can't blame her there.

"Studies show that humans are able to pay attention to only one thing at a time, Mr. Roberts—are you listening to me?—and I'd prefer for you to pay more attention to your schoolwork than to your movies."

But the counselor was dead wrong, because as she was yammering on that day about how there's no such thing as multitasking, I was nodding and making earnest faces and imagining how incredible it would be if the school was hit by a freak comet. I was, you know, multitasking.

Obviously this was all before I stopped attending classes altogether.

Mom is downstairs on the wicker couch in our sunroom, snoozing as always. I tiptoe by and open the freezer, hoping some Popsicles will have magically appeared (the Popsicle fairy?), only to find a buttload of Healthy Choice meals.

OPEN QUESTION: Is it still a healthy choice if you have three of them in one sitting? Because that's how many are scattered around Mom's feet right now. She's really let herself go. See, Mom sort of eats her feelings—and this year has been nonstop feelings. The difference between us is that I can basically demolish a large pizza in under fifteen minutes and actually lose a few pounds, if I'm also worrying about my future while chewing.

I walk past a landfill's worth of unopened mail on our kitchen counter, with this hair salon postcard advertising "1/2 off BOLD new summer looks" sitting on top. "Maybe I'll trim my own hair today," I mumble to myself, careful not to wake Mom.

She's actually really cute when she's asleep.

Anyway, I could use a "BOLD new summer look," or an anything new summer anything. I've had the same haircut since I was a toddler—a style you might call "longish and brown." So maybe I'll finally do something different with it. To spice up the day. I don't know. My therapist has encouraged me "toward optimism."

I shut the freezer and trudge back upstairs to root around for a beard trimmer on Dad's shelf in the medicine cabinet. When he left, he just left. Meaning: All his stuff is still here. If you know anyone in the market for pleated knee-length shorts, let me know ASAP.

UPDATE: I'm back in my bathroom with Dad's rusty old trimmer. It buzzes right on, and I consider it a minor financial triumph that at least the electricity hasn't been turned off around

here. Maybe the local energy company has made it an unofficial policy not to screw with my mom for a few months. Our little community has basically written us an ongoing blank check of worried looks and faux concern—which is what happens when your big sister gets killed in a car wreck right outside the school on the day before Christmas break.

Oh. Spoiler alert.

So I'm lifting Dad's clippers to my sideburns—or attempting to, anyway—but I lose control of them, alarmed by a thud at my bedroom door. Jesus, I barely even heard Mom come up the stairs. Rare.

Thud. Thud. Thud.

Now the knocking is twice as loud, and not only because I've taken my earplugs out. (I've been wearing earplugs for a while now. They give the world a comforting dullness.)

"Mom, come on. You know this is 'me time.'"

It's been "me time" for about half a year now.

"It's not your mother," says my not-mother. "It's your Geoff."

Great. It was bound to happen. Old friends have a way of creeping up on you.

"I'm coming in."

"I'm naked," I lie.

"I don't care, Quinn."

Oh, it's Quinn, by the way. My name. What I'd give to be a John or a Mike or even an Evan. To be an Evan is to have been guaranteed a completely tragedy-free life, right from the get-go. What kind of dad names his first and only son Quinn?

(The kind who walks out without taking his pleated knee-length shorts or rusty clippers with him, that's the kind.)

Geoff kicks my door open. A liiiittle dramatic. My lock hasn't worked in, oh, forever.

"Dude," he says, grabbing his nose and laughing through his hand. Evidently it smells like I haven't had a shower in a month-ish, which I haven't-ish. "Your room makes me embarrassed to be a teenage boy," Geoff says, stepping inside. "And that's saying something, because I literally name my farts, for Pete's sake."

Poor Pete. Who is Pete? And why do people do such terrible things, just for his sake?

"Hey."

“Hey,” Geoff says. “What happened to your head?”

I look back at the bathroom floor. A severe clump of my hair is lying in a heap by the sink, like it was making a prison break from my scalp and got gunned down. (If you haven’t seen *Escape from Alcatraz*, by the way, put it on the list. Great movie.)

Anyway: “You startled me,” I say to Geoff, “right in the middle of a thrilling autobiographical haircut.”

But I’m not really pissed. In fact, the part of my head that’s now missing the clump is feeling a little cooler, maybe. My first accomplishment in weeks. Heck, months.

“It’s a good thing you’re not ugly,” Geoff says, and then: “It’s actually kind of a not terrible look for you,” he adds, squinting at me like it’ll help shrink his exaggeration.

“I wasn’t really asking for reviews,” I say. “But thanks.”

It’s a bit of an insult to get judged by Geoff on my “look,” as it were. I don’t have a particularly adventurous sense of fashion, myself—give me jeans and a T-shirt and let’s call it a day—but Geoff’s outfits never even fit right. His clothes appear to be actively leaping from his body at all times, as if they’re afraid to be seen in public with him. Today he’s in a Steelers T-shirt, a pair of vaguely tragic camouflage cargo shorts, and neon-yellow flip-flops. Not to mention, bless him, an attempt at a mustache. This is new. Or new to me. It’s been a while.

“We’ve got to get you out of the house, dude,” he says. “Like to a movie or an Eat’n Park or something. Anything. It’s time.”

My pulse thumps. I have to pull it together and start locking our front door. Food delivery guys just let themselves in these days and head straight up to my room. And now this.

I’m not ready for this.

“No way,” I say. “It’s a weekend. I don’t want to run into anyone from school out there.” I start waving my hands at the general direction of the window, like there’s a zombie apocalypse happening on my block. A zombie apocalypse and not just, you know, Western Pennsylvania.

“It’s Wednesday,” Geoff says, laughing. “And it’s the summer. So everybody’s probably at the pool. You can duck down when we drive by.”

It actually sounds amazing to dive into the pool right now. A freezing one. Headfirst. In the shallow end.

“Dude,” Geoff says, noticing a stack of pizza boxes in the corner of the room that have, in my opinion, begun to take on an artistic still-life quality. “We’re throwing those away. Today.” But then he just looks at me and goes, “So?” Like I invited him over, which I did not! “What’s the

game plan?"

Accidentally, I speak: "Well, I kind of need to get a new air conditioner."

Geoff wipes his arm across his forehead. "Gee, you think?"

He crosses to grab a ruler from my desk, which is covered in a layer of dust that I want to describe as thin but is, in fact, thick. Bordering on "duvet."

"What are you doing?" I say. "Like: redecorating?" Man, it's been ages since I've had a scene partner. My dialogue's rusty.

"I'm measuring your window."

I perk up. "Oh, are we jumping to our deaths?"

Geoff shoots me a straight boy's version of daggers, which are actually more like bullets. Please, like a straight boy would ever knife somebody to death. That would require a degree of closeness I don't think they're genetically capable of. "Dead teenager jokes, Quinn? You, of all people?"

"My timing's off. Sue me."

He ignores me instead, the in-person equivalent of sending a call straight to voice mail. Not that I've been on my cell much these days. Like, at all. "I'm just getting some dimensions," he says, "and then we're going out to buy you that air conditioner."

But I'm barely listening, because now I'm staring past Geoff to the rocky driveway outside, where he and Annabeth and I set up a lemonade stand when we were little. Ugh. I hate that word: Were. The only word I hate more than were is was. Annabeth is so not a past-tense kind of person. Frankly, my sister could be so present, it was intimidating.

I blink hard and kind of hope a zombie apocalypse might really appear: a real-life Night of the Living Dead (excellent popcorn flick), except set in the daytime, in our yard. Somebody bite me, please, I would yell out the window. But nope. No zombies. It's just that rocky driveway out there, with no lemonade stand in sight.

"All right," Geoff says, "all set." The floor creaks, which must mean he's moving toward the door. I'm on pause, stuck looking outside.

Then: "Hold up," I say. "How much do you think air conditioners cost?"

I'm a little low on cash these days. Last night I had half a Hot Pocket for dinner and a packet of Theraflu for dessert. It actually wasn't so bad. That stuff will knock you out.

Geoff's tapping something into his phone. "I dunno. We'll use my mom's card if we have to."

His parents have a nicer house than we do. Actually, ha, everybody does.

Now Geoff's in my bathroom, which never ends well. But when I go to tell him no, and to use the one downstairs, my shower squeaks on. Plot twist.

"Dammit," I hear him mutter. He scalded his hand, I know it. Our sole luxury around here is instant hot water, and also an agreement that you don't have to make eye contact at the dinner table. Which is actually pretty great.

"Get in," Geoff shouts to me.

"I'm not taking a shower with you," I say—as a joke, obviously.

"You wish," he goes, but not in a mean way. Also, we've never really talked about that, but I think he knows I do not wish. Frankly, there have been really good sandwiches I'd rather lose my virginity to than Geoff. He's not my type.

(I am still narrowing down my type.)

We switch places, and when he's back in my room, I step into the moldy chamber that's also known as my shower.

"I'm giving you two minutes," he says from outside the door.

"Lay off," I call back. "It's not like Pittsburgh is going through a drought."

Geoff pushes the door back open and shakes his head at me. "Quinn, your friggin' life has been a drought. And this summer, we're gonna make some rain."

So . . . yikes, am I right? I literally spend half my life wanting to rewrite Geoff's taglines.

"Very poetic," I say, covering myself up. "I'd do a slow clap for you, but I don't want to expose my junk."

He rolls his eyes and heads back into my room. I keep trying to think of good excuses to get him out of the house so I can just lie down in the bathtub and maybe try to fall back asleep. But it's been so long since I've engaged in an intellectual debate that stretched beyond "pepperoni or plain" that my brain stalls.

"This is your one-minute warning!" he yells.

I let the water gush into my mouth, and I close my eyes and plug up my ears with my fingers, and in the insistent tip-tip-tip on the tin roof of my head, I decide to decide that making some metaphorical rain this summer isn't the worst idea of all time.

Look at me. Attempting optimism.

I make a note to share this with my therapist at the next session. That'll buy me some brownie points. It's funny how I try to piss off my school counselor but try to impress my therapist. Throw the word "Doctor" in front of somebody's name and all of a sudden I want her to like me.

"Fifteen seconds!"

Who am I kidding. I want everyone to like me.

"Okay, hang out in the hallway," I say to Geoff. I towel off in my room and throw on a clean-ish pair of shorts and a definitely not clean T-shirt, and then I slip on some Vans and duck my head out to check if he's still there or if I just made this whole thing up. If I'm back to my old ways, naively imagining things will turn out okay, like they do in the movies.

"You ready to jump-start June?" Geoff goes. He's there all right, sitting against the hallway wall, playing a game on his phone and not even pausing to look up. God, his outfits are ridiculous.

God, it's good to see him.

"I guess we'll find out," I say.

He leaps to his feet and pockets his cell.

"Just, be quiet going down the stairs. My mom is sleeping."

I watch his eyes flick over to the buzz mark in my hair, and right when I think he's going to say, Put a hat on—because my head really does look like a yard-work accident—instead he just goes, "See you in the car," and he smiles.

That's the thing about best friends: They don't really care what you look like. The real ones don't, anyway.

He clomps down the stairs. He isn't quiet about it at all. Straight boys.

I take one more survey of my room, wondering how it'll feel to return to such a storm of dirty laundry and empty Hot Pocket containers later on today.

"Let's go," Geoff whisper-shouts from downstairs.

I've gotta get out of here. Nobody ever talks about the fact that grief's best friend is boredom. Why is that? Why aren't we warning people about this?

"Shotgun," I call back.