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First published 2017 by Walker Books Ltd
87 Vauxhall Walk, London SE11 5HJ

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

Text © 2017 Dyan Sheldon

Cover photographs © Iryna Hramavataya/Alamy Stock Photo,
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This book has been typeset in Berkeley

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data:
a catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-4063-6303-6

www.walker.co.uk

For Terence



ZiZi



*Books aren't the only
thing that begin with a "B"*



Towards the end of my freshman year in high school, Jude Fielder touched my breast.

So you don't get the wrong idea, there was nothing sexy or romantic about it. It wasn't like we were in some passionate clinch in a dark corner of somebody's basement. We were in the town library. I was looking for a book for my history assignment. I guess I left it a little late, because by the time I got around to finding something, everything under three thousand pages had been taken out of the school library. I begged the librarian to see if maybe there was one little, reasonably sized book that hadn't been shelved yet or was in the back waiting to have its spine fixed or something, which he did (he was always very helpful). But there wasn't. He was really, really sorry, but what could he do? The problem wasn't what he could do, but what I had to do. This was one

of those times when you couldn't just slap something together from the Internet. You actually had to read a book. *Quel pain in the butt.*

So anyway, there I was on a Saturday morning, when I could've still been in bed or on my way to the mall, standing in the world history section of the public library, hoping to find something no thicker than a crispbread for my assignment, when Jude Fielder came up beside me. I knew he was looking at me, but I was used to guys looking at me, so I acted like the only thing next to me was air. He sighed, he looked, he took a book off the shelf, he put the book back on the shelf. And then, instead of reaching for another book he wasn't interested in, he suddenly put his hand on my breast. Just like that! It was really quick. I was so surprised I could hardly believe it. I'm not really sure, but I think he may have pressed. Lightly. He laughed, like it was a joke, and then he apologized. "Sorry," said Jude Fielder. "I just wanted to see if it was real." I didn't think there was much I could say to that. (*What made you think it wasn't real? Do I look like a robot?*) Or much I could do. I know I'm not supposed to say this (at least I know it now!), but I was kind of flattered. I mean, what's the point of push-up bras and cleavage and low-cut tops if no one notices? If you don't want to be noticed, you wear baggy turtlenecks and dungarees.

And anyway, I guess I was a little embarrassed (even if I wasn't sure why). I figured he was probably embarrassed, too, for doing such a dumb thing, but I wasn't too worried about how he was feeling right then. I just wanted to get out of there. So I took the book I'd been flipping through (which turned out to be more boring than white socks) and left without opening my mouth. As I said, I was used to guys looking, but nobody'd ever groped me before. And anyway, the library isn't where you'd ever expect something like that to happen. Seriously? You don't exactly go into the library thinking, *Wow, I wonder if someone's going to grab my boobs while I'm looking for a book on the Romans.* So even though I wasn't really mad or anything, I was kind of shocked. But it wasn't a gigantic big deal because Jude Fielder was pretty okay. When our science class had to get garbage out of the river for Earth Day, in middle school, Jude Fielder let me carry the bag while he did all the work and got dirty. Plus he was one of the better-looking boys in my year. Not gorgeous, but not gross like some of them, either. (Just the thought of one of the creeps from the deep touching me would've made me throw up.) So anyway, I got out my book and left. I didn't run (in case my breasts bounced too much – that always gets looks) but I walked pretty fast. I was halfway to the sidewalk when I heard this

kind of wounded-animal cry and then someone shouted, “What the hell, you crazy bitch!”

That made me stop and turn. There were other people around (like the background crowd in a movie), but right behind me were Loretta Reynolds and Jude Fielder. They were staring at each other like they were checking out flaws in a mirror. Jude Fielder was red in the face. Loretta Reynolds was her usual colour (wet, unbaked pastry). Loretta said, “Sorry. I just wanted to see if it was real.” She said it really loud.

Quel day for surprises! You could’ve knocked me over with an eyelash.

Jude Fielder looked pretty surprised, too. (You wouldn’t have needed a whole lash to knock him over.) He didn’t laugh that time. What he did was stomp off, shouting at me as he passed, “Your freakin’ dyke friend’s crazy, you know that, Abruzzio? Like two hundred per cent certifiable!”

Here’s the thing: Loretta Reynolds was not my friend. I knew her from being in school with her since for ever, just like Jude Fielder did. I didn’t dislike her (most people like her okay even if they think she’s pretty weird), but I didn’t really know her. I could’ve picked her out of a police line-up, and if I’d run into her at the airport on my way to Paris, I would’ve said hello, but that’s it. Loretta is the

girl who always sits at the front of the room and is either first with her hand in the air to give an answer or the only person with a question. (That's from primary school on.) She's really smart and never cared who knows it. And she's always been confrontational. My first vivid memory of Loretta disagreeing with a teacher was in Year Two when she argued with Mrs Dansk about whether or not cats and dogs can think. (Loretta won. Yes, they can.) But until that fateful Saturday, if I ever spoke to Loretta directly it was only to say sorry for bumping into her. (Although, like just about everyone else who'd ever had a class with Loretta, I'd more than once muttered under my breath "Please shut up" when she was yammering away about something, or "Please don't start" when she was about to.)

So, as Jude Fielder stormed away, I screamed at him, "I'm really sorry. And she's not my friend."

The next thing I knew, Loretta Reynolds was shouting at me. (*Quel ironic!*)

"Are you out of your tiny little mind?" she roared. "What the hell is wrong with you?"

Me? What was wrong with *me*? How did I get to be the one who was nuts? The one who had something wrong with her? I didn't do anything.

"Excuse me," I said, "but I'm the innocent victim here."

"If you're such an innocent victim, maybe you could

explain to the incredulous TV audience why *you* apologized to *him!*”

“Excuse me, but I wasn’t apologizing for me. I was apologizing for *you*.”

“Oh, thank you so much.” (In books, people’s voices drip with sarcasm. But not Loretta’s. It poured.) “You apologized for the one person in this little drama who has nothing to apologize for.” She said that really scornfully. “And just to clarify things, Giselle Abruzzio, you are not an innocent victim.” Only teachers or parents who are mad at me call me Giselle – everybody else calls me ZiZi. “What you are is an unconscious enabler. How come you just stood there like a doll and let that jerk maul you?”

I said I didn’t let him – he did it without asking me. Plus, he didn’t maul me. Maul was an exaggeration. (Exaggeration is a Loretta Reynolds trademark. She should patent it.) And anyway it wasn’t exactly the crime of the century. “Chrissake, it’s not like he hit me or ripped off my blouse.” I was poised and calm, not enraged and waving my arms around like some people. “All he did was touch me.” Really lightly. “And, anyway, what about you? What did you do to *him?*”

“Tat for tit,” said Loretta. “If he’d grabbed my breasts, I’d’ve decked him.”

Yeah, right. Only no boy was going to go grabbing

Loretta Reynolds' breasts. He'd have to find them first.

I thought she was seriously overreacting (something else she's known for). He didn't really grab my breast. (Already I knew better than to mention the possibility of a squeeze to Loretta.) I said it was more like someone brushing against you at the mall when it's really crowded. Like when there's some big sale on or it's Christmas.

Loretta flapped her hands in the air some more. It was amazing she didn't take off. "Except that someone shoving past you in the mall isn't deliberately going for your private person! He had no right to do that. That counts as assault."

I didn't think so. It was more an imposition than an assault. I mean, it wasn't like Jude Fielder went into the library planning to go for my private person. I figured he acted on impulse. Like when you buy a pair of shoes you know you can't walk in because they look so cool you just can't help yourself.

That argument scored in the high nineties on the Loretta Reynolds' contempt meter.

"So if I have the impulse to push somebody in front of a car, that's okay because I didn't plan it?"

I still don't know anyone else who can scream and sneer at the same time. I said that was like comparing lipstick to leggings. He wasn't trying to kill me. I think

I shrugged. Philosophically. (Loretta's not the only one who can be philosophical.) "If you ask me," I said, "getting all warped out about what happened's dumb. It's like being mad at the cat for scratching you when you're dangling a piece of string in front of it. He was just being a boy. They can't help it."

Talk about dangling a piece of string in front of a cat. If Loretta had been a cat, I'd've been covered in blood.

"Don't tell me," shouted Loretta. "Let me guess. You think it's cool when guys gawp and make comments when you walk down the street. You think it's part of being a girl."

Not all girls. It for sure wasn't part of being Loretta Reynolds. But she was annoying me with her attitude, like she was the only one who could ever be right, so I gave her what I knew was the wrong answer. "It is kind of a compliment. You know, unless they're saying your butt's too big or you have a nose like a pelican or something like that. They're letting you know you're attractive. What's bad about that? I mean, unless it's some ugly old loser with a beer gut or someone really creepy. That would be pretty gross."

The contempt meter went through the stratosphere.

"You hear that sound?" bellowed Loretta. "You know what it is?"

I didn't hear anything besides traffic and normal people talking in normal voices about normal things as they walked past us. And Loretta. They could probably hear her in Florida. I pictured all these old people sitting by their pools, looking around trying to figure out who was making the big racket.

"I'll tell you what it is." If you don't know something Loretta feels it's her duty to fill in the gaps. "It's the sound of Emma Goldman rolling in her grave!"

I had no idea who Emma Goldman was, but I figured the smart move would be not to ask. Not that Loretta gave me a chance. She answered anyway.

"In case you're interested, she was an outspoken champion of women's rights."

I wasn't interested, but I knew better than to say that, too. So I tried to lighten the mood. "Does that mean we can thank her for miniskirts and sexual liberation?"

"You can thank her for more than that," snapped Loretta. And away she went again. We stood there while half the town passed by and Loretta lectured me on male violence and aggression and female passivity – and at least a dozen things that started with the word "gender". Which wasn't a word I was used to hearing in everyday conversation. I didn't know what she was talking about. It was like when you have a couple of years of school

French and then you go to Quebec and the only things you understand when someone talks to you are hello, no and goodbye. I figured God probably didn't know what Loretta was droning on about either. If He was smart, He'd tuned out after the second sentence the same as I did.

"Maybe it's this sweater," I said when she finally stopped. That's what I'd been thinking about while she gabbled away. My sweater was orange.

"Sweater?" Loretta blinked. "Maybe what's this sweater?"

"The reason Jude did that. Bright colours make you look bigger."

Which could be considered the first fashion tip I ever gave her. And the first she totally ignored.

"So the whole thing was really your fault, is that what you're saying? That you were right to apologize?"

See how she twists things?

"I told you, I was apologizing for *you*, not for me."

You know how sometimes your parents look at you like they're wondering if the babies were switched in the hospital? That was the way Loretta was looking at me. Then she closed her eyes and counted to ten. When she was done counting, she opened her eyes again and said, "Okay. Let's start over. I guess at least you're right about

it not being planned. If he'd planned it one of his friends would've been at the end of the aisle, taking a picture. And then it'd be all over the Internet."

So there was some good news.

I said I was the one who should've taken a picture. The next time she did something like that she should give me some warning so I'd have my phone ready.

Loretta laughed. "His face was great, wasn't it? You'd think I'd just hit him with a dead fish."

I laughed, too. "More like the entrails."

When we stopped laughing Loretta asked if I wanted to go somewhere for a coffee.

I guess because we were laughing like normal people my guard was down. I said, "Sure."

Quel day for firsts.



Although there is a lot of randomness in the universe, I am the sort of person who likes to know what's going to happen next. I'm not happy bobbing along on the ocean of life, waiting to see where the current takes me. I make lists, schedules and plans – and I keep to them. If I say I'm going to do something, I do it. If I say I'm going to be somewhere at a certain time, I'm there no matter what – because I'm also the person who always takes the variables like weather, traffic and unexpected events into consideration. Which means I knew all the things I was doing that Saturday – and becoming friends with Giselle Abruzzio was not on my agenda.

We'd known each other since we started school, but ZiZi and I had never been what you'd call friends. Not the kind who walk together if they happen to be going the same way, and for definite not the kind who

eat lunch together and go to each other's house to play. I don't remember ever having an actual conversation with her, but in primary school we were always in the same groups for reading, etcetera, so we must have said something to each other sometime. I do remember that once – in Year Three or Four – some boys in our class threw her backpack up on the roof, expecting her to burst into tears or go running to a teacher, but she just climbed up and got it. In Year Five, she and I tied for first place in the school-wide Math Marathon. And in Year Six we were in the group that did a project on the effects of oil spills on ocean life for the Science Fair (we won second prize). What I'm trying to say is that, in my memory, ZiZi Abruzzio used to be smart and feisty (and really good at things like Science and Math). But when we got to middle school I guess she discovered there was more to life than reading, independence, algebra and environmental degradation. There were clothes, make-up and boys. Which means that she went from being a person who could shimmy up a pole to the roof of the school to being a Girl with a capital "G". Girls with a capital "G" are so bouncy and energetic that even if they aren't cheerleaders, they seem like they are – cheerleaders when it's always half-time in an important game. I've always thought of them as the Misses Bubble. They talk a lot,

shop a lot, talk about shopping a lot, talk about boys even more, and laugh as if they're in a laughter competition – especially if it's at some unfunny joke by a guy. For reasons I don't understand, they don't like to be seen to be smarter than boys – especially ones they like. The only climbing they do is into or out of a car. After we moved up to middle school I know for definite that ZiZi and I didn't talk to each other. Not until The Assault in the library.

The night before The Assault, I'd watched a documentary about Emma Goldman, the twentieth-century American political activist, philosopher and orator who led the struggle for workers' and women's rights. File under the heading: *Positive role model*. I fell asleep thinking of her. I dreamed that she was giving a speech on a street corner. There was an enormous crowd gathered to listen – mesmerized by her eloquence and passion, and surrounded by policemen. Suddenly, it began to rain and people started to run for shelter, until I was the only one left – I had my emergency rain hat with me – and Emma continued as if I was a multitude. It was better than the dream where I win a Nobel Prize. When I woke up, Emma Goldman was still in my mind.

On my list of things to do that day were a couple of odd jobs in town – I did everything from mowing lawns

and putting up screens to rewiring lamps and putting up shelves. I started fixing things around our house when I was eight or nine. My dad and mom are both great at their jobs but they're fairly useless when it comes to basic household upkeep. They can change a fuse and clean out the filter on the washing machine, but that's their limit – and as far as the car goes, their expertise stops at putting in petrol. Somebody had to be able to do necessary maintenance and repair, and the cats weren't interested. I taught myself basic plumbing and carpentry, the man next door had a vintage motorcycle and he taught me basic mechanics. Our middle school offered an elective in woodwork and I took it – I was the only girl. I started fixing things in other people's houses and putting the money I earned away for college when I was twelve – which may sound a little extreme but, as I said, I make plans and one of them is to take several college degrees.

On my way home that Saturday, since she was still on my mind, I decided to go to the library to see if it had a book on Emma. It didn't, which wasn't exactly the surprise of the year. Howards Walk isn't what anyone would call a bastion of radical thinking. I was on my way out when I glanced down one of the non-fiction aisles and there were Giselle Abruzzio and Jude Fielder. I don't know whether I stopped because the sight of either of them in

the library was so unusual that I wanted to be certain my eyes weren't deceiving me, or because Jude Fielder wasn't actually looking at the shelves of books as Zizi was, but at ZiZi's breasts. And then he grabbed one – a breast not a book. To be fair to ZiZi, she looked as shocked as I felt. My first thought was: *What would Emma Goldman do?* Zizi didn't do anything. She just stood there as if she'd been turned to plastic. Jude Fielder laughed. Then he said, "I just wanted to see if it was real." Which made me think that he's probably even more stupid than I'd always thought. ZiZi had a half-smile on her face, like she wasn't sure what had just happened, but she must have been sure because she left so quickly she might have been on wheels. Jude Fielder waited a few minutes – presumably because he was at least smart enough to give her time to get away in case she recovered the power of speech and not because he'd suddenly discovered a love of books.

I followed him out, still thinking, *What would Emma Goldman do?* As soon as I stepped outside, I knew exactly what Emma Goldman would do if she were alive now. She was an activist, after all – and she wasn't afraid of making a scene. I'm not exactly known for my spontaneity, but I hurried to catch up with Jude, and when I was right behind him I called his name. Jude Fielder stopped and turned. I made a grab for the crotch of his jeans.

He jumped back so fast and screamed so loudly that I didn't actually touch him, but the effect was the same. He was horrified, but, unlike ZiZi, he still had the power of speech; he yelled that I was crazy. I said I was sorry, that I just wanted to know if it was real. I was pretty pleased with coming up with that line; usually I don't think of the really good, zinger response until it's too late. He didn't find that a fraction as funny as he'd found molesting ZiZi. Well, he wouldn't, would he? Then he marched off, yelling at ZiZi about her dyke friend – which would be me, despite the fact that at that time I was neither of those things. And what do you think Giselle Abruzzio, having been assaulted in broad daylight in a public place by a boy whose only documented talent is the ability to run a piece of dental floss through his nostrils (Year Six, cafeteria, absolutely disgusting) did next? Here's a hint: it for definite wasn't what Emma Goldman would have done. ZiZi apologized! Of all the things that had happened in the last ten minutes that I couldn't believe, that was the one I couldn't believe the most. She said, "I'm sorry," and sounded as if she meant it. *I'm sorry?* Was she insane? What the hell was she sorry for? Having breasts? Not letting him grab the other one, too? Not taking off her top? Talk about blaming the victim. Here I was listening to the victim blame herself.

That's when I decided I had to talk to her. She didn't seem to realize that this is the twenty-first century, and women are no longer considered the property or inferiors of men. Not in our society, at least. But, as soon as I opened my mouth, I kind of lost it. I may have shouted. I do tend to shout when I feel strongly about something, and I felt very strongly about what had just happened in the non-fiction section, world history aisle, of the public library. ZiZi didn't want to know. Talk about defensive! Why was I getting on her case? She was completely innocent. If you ask me, she was more comatose than innocent. Why didn't she do something when he grabbed her? Yell, scream, hit him over the head with the book she was holding. Instead, all she did was apologize. *She* apologized to *him*! Had we all fallen down a wormhole? That's when she shifted everything around so that I was the one in the wrong – which I now know is a typical Giselle Abruzzio manoeuvre. She said she was apologizing for my behaviour, not hers. She said that I was overreacting. Apparently, it's flattering to be sexually harassed. According to ZiZi, Jude Fielder hadn't done anything wrong; he was just being a boy. At least she got that part right. I tried to make her see all the other things that were examples of boys being boys and men being men – war, murder, genocide, rape, pornography, colonialism,

slavery, torture, domestic violence, paedophilia, recreational hunting, etcetera – but she wasn't listening. She was thinking deeply. I know that because when I finished she said she thought the reason Jude Fielder assaulted her was because of the sweater she was wearing. I felt as if I'd been walking down an ordinary street in an ordinary way and suddenly ploughed into a mastodon eating an ice-cream cone. *Where the hell did that come from?*

I said I guessed that meant she was five hundred per cent right to apologize since the whole thing was her fault – her and her orange sweater. What had she been thinking when she got dressed that morning? Why didn't she wear black? Why didn't she put on something baggy over it like a bathrobe? Maybe she should start wearing a suit of armour. That would make her breasts virtually non-existent. ZiZi smiles the way everyone else breathes. "I wasn't blaming myself," she said. "I was just saying." How can you reason with someone like that? We might as well have been speaking different languages. It was like trying to convince a climate change denier of global warming. I was still thinking of ZiZi as the Koch brothers when she said that next time I did something like that I should give her some warning so she could take a picture. I immediately saw Jude Fielder's face in front of me, looking as if I'd just hit him with a dead fish. And

ZiZi said it was more like I'd hit him with the entrails. We both started laughing.

I think that was when I realized there was hope for ZiZi. She'd been smart and spirited before; she could be smart and spirited again. She was drowning in the frothy, pink sea of girliness, and I was in the solid boat of persondom. It was my duty to pull her aboard.

I asked her if she wanted to get a coffee or something. File under the heading: *Fate*.