

Fly on the Wall

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Random House Children's Publishers UK

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About the Book

At the Manhattan School for Art and Music, where everyone is “different” and everyone is “special”, Gretchen Yee feels ordinary. She’s the kind of girl who sits alone at lunch, drawing pictures of Spider-Man so she won’t have to talk to anyone; who has a crush on Titus but won’t do anything about it; who has no one to hang out with when her best (and only real) friend Katya is busy.

One day, Gretchen wishes that she could be a fly on the wall in the boy’s locker room – just to learn more about guys.

What are they really like?

What do they really talk about?

Are they really cretins most of the time?

Fly on the Wall is the story of how that wish comes true.

E. lockhart

fly on the Wall

RHCP DIGITAL

**for Daniel,
because this is my first romance**

part one

life as an artificial redhead

FRIDAY. I AM eating alone in the lunchroom.

Again.

Ever since Katya started smoking cigarettes, she's hanging out back by the garbage cans, lighting up with the Art Rats. She bags her lunch, so she takes it out there and eats potato chips in a haze of nicotine.

I hate smoking, and the Art Rats make me nervous. So here I am: in my favorite corner of the lunchroom, sitting on the floor with my back against the wall. I'm eating fries off a tray and drawing my own stuff—not anything for class.

Quadriceps. Quadriceps.

Knee.

Calf muscle.

Dull point; must sharpen pencil.

Hell! Pencil dust in fries.

Whatever. They still taste okay.

Calf muscle.

Ankle.

Foot.

KA-POW! Spider-Man smacks Doctor Octopus off the edge of the building with a swift kick to the jaw. Ock's face contorts as he falls backward, his metal tentacles flailing with hysterical fear. He has an eighty-story fall beneath him, and—

Spidey has a great physique. Built, but not too built. Even if I did draw him myself.

I think I made his butt too small.

Do-over.

I wish I had my pink eraser, I don't like this white one.

Butt.

Butt.

Connecting to: leg . . . and . . . quadriceps.

There. A finished Spidey outline. I have to add the suit. And some shadowing. And the details of the building. Then fill in the rest of Doc Ock as he hurtles off the edge.

*Mmmm. French fries.
Hell again! Ketchup on Spidey.
Lick it off.*

Cammie Holmes is staring at me like I'm some lower form of life.

"What are you looking at?" I mutter.

"Nothing."

"Then. Stop. Staring," I say, sharpening my pencil again, though it doesn't need it.

This Cammie is all biscuits. She's stacked like a character in a comic book. Cantaloupes are strapped to her chest.

Her only redeeming quality.

"Why are you licking your Superman drawing?" Cammie tips her nose up. "That's so kinky. I mean, I've heard of licking a centerfold, but licking Superman?"

"Spider."

"What?"

"*Spider-Man.*"

"Whatever. Get a life, Gretchen."

She's gone. From across the lunchroom comes her nasal voice: "Taffy, get this: I just caught Gretchen Yee giving oral to some Superman drawing she made."

Spider. Spider. Spider-Man.

"She *would.*" Taffy Johnson. Stupid tinkly laugh.

*Superman is a big meathead. I'd never draw Superman.
Much less give him oral.*

I haven't given anybody oral, anyway.

I hate those girls.

Taffy is doing splits in the middle of the lunchroom floor, which is just gross. Who wants to see her crotch like that? Though of course everybody does, and even if they didn't,

she wouldn't care because she's such a unique spirit or whatever.

I hate those girls, and I hate this place: the Manhattan High School for the Arts. Also known as Ma-Ha.

Supposedly, it's a magnet high school for students talented in drawing, painting, sculpture or photography. You have to submit a portfolio to get in, and when I did mine (which was all filled with inks of comic-book characters I taught myself to draw in junior high) and when I finally got my acceptance letter, my parents were really excited. But once you're here, it's nothing but an old, ugly New York public school building, with angry teachers and crap facilities like any other city public school—except I've got drawing class every day, painting once a week and art history twice. I'm in the drawing program.

Socially, Ma-Ha is like the terrible opposite of the schools you see on television, where everyone wants to be the same as everyone else. On TV, if you don't conform and wear what the popular kids are wearing, and talk like they talk, and act like they do—then you're a pariah.

Here, everyone wants to be different.

People have mohawks and dreadlocks and outrageous thrift-store clothes; no one would be caught dead in ordinary jeans and a T-shirt, because they're all so into expressing their individuality. A girl from the sculpture program wears a sari every day, even though her family's Scandinavian. There's that kid who's always got that Pink Panther doll sticking out of her jacket pocket; the boy who smokes using a cigarette holder like they did in forties movies; a girl who's shaved her head and pierced her cheeks; Taffy, who does Martha Graham-technique modern dance and wears her leotard and sweats all day; and Cammie, who squeezes herself into tight goth outfits and paints her lips vampire red.

They all fit in here, or take pride in not fitting in, if that makes any sense—and if you're an ordinary person you've

got to do *something* at least, like dye your hair a strange color, because nothing is scorned so much as normalcy. Everyone's a budding genius of the art scene; everyone's on the verge of a breakthrough. If you're a regular-looking person with regular likes and dislikes and regular clothes,

and you can draw so it looks like the art in a comic book, but you can't "express your interior life on the page," according to Kensington (my drawing teacher),

and if you can't "draw what you see, rather than imitate what's in that third-rate trash you like to read" (Kensington again),

then you're nothing at Ma-Ha.

Nothing. That's me.

Gretchen Kaufman Yee. Ordinary girl.

Two months ago I capitulated to nonconformity-conformity and had my hair bleached white and then dyed stop-sign red. It cost sixty dollars and it pissed off my mother, but it didn't work.

I'm still ordinary.

I TAKE LITERATURE second period with Glazer. I rarely do the reading. I don't like to admit that about myself; I'd like to be the person who does the reading—but I don't. It seems like I've always got some new comic to read on the subway, and the homework for drawing is more interesting.

In literature, I can't concentrate because Titus Antonakos sits next to me at the big rectangular table. He's an Art Rat, meaning he's one of the boys in the sophomore drawing program, group B. He's delicious and smart and graceful and hot. White skin, with high cheekbones and messy dark hair. Lips like a Greek statue—a little too full for the rest of his face. He's got a retro Johnny Rotten look; today he's wearing a green vinyl jacket, an ironic "I heart New York" T-shirt, jeans and combat boots. He's thin to the point that he's off some other girls' radar, but not mine.

He is absolutely on my radar.

Titus.

Titus.

Titus.

Touch my arm by accident like you did yesterday.

Notice me.

Notice me.

"Gretchen?" It's Glazer.

"Huh?"

"Vermin." She's obviously repeating herself. She sounds annoyed. "The word. I asked you to define it."

"It's a bug, right?" I say. "Like a cockroach."

"It can be," says Glazer, smirking. "Most people do assume that Kafka had his protagonist, Gregor Samsa, turn into a cockroach. That's the standard interpretation of 'The Metamorphosis.' But if you all turn to page five, you'll see that the word Kafka used in German—and the word in our translation—is not *cockroach* or *bug*, but *vermin*—a 'monstrous vermin,' Kafka says—which can be taken to

mean any kind of animal, especially those that are noxious or repellent in some way: rats, mice, lice, flies, squirrels.”

No idea what she is talking about. I just know the story is about some guy who turns into a bug.

Whatever.

Titus.

Titus.

Titus.

God, he smells good.

“Titus?” Glazer, calling on him. He actually put his hand up.

“Doesn’t it also mean disgusting *people*?” Titus says. “Like you could say people who—I don’t know—molest kids or steal from their mothers—they’re vermin.”

“Absolutely.” Glazer lights up. “And by extension, you sometimes see the word used as a derogatory term for the masses—for large groups of ordinary people. Or for prisoners. It expresses contempt. Now: why would Kafka use such a word to describe Gregor’s metamorphosis?”

Titus did the reading.

He just seems good, somehow.

Like the core of him is good when the core of other people is dark, or sour. Like he’d do the reading even if no one was checking, because he cares about stuff.

I wish he didn’t hang with those Art Rats. I have class with them every single day, but I can’t figure those guys out.

Because they’re boys, I guess, and because they try so hard to seem slick and sure. They’re nice one minute and cruel the next.

And with Shane around all the time, I can’t talk to Titus.

At least, I can’t talk and make any sense.

Truth: with Shane around I can’t talk to anyone.

The bell. "Finish through page sixty for Monday and enjoy the weekend," calls Glazer. A rustle of books and backpacks.

"Hey, Titus." My voice sounds squeaky. (Shane, thank goodness, is out the door.)

"Yeah?" His mouth looks so soft.

"Oh, I—"

Hell. Was I going to say something? Did I have something to say?

Oh hell,

oh hell,

he's looking right at me, I've got nothing to say.

"Do you—"

What?

What?

"—do you remember what the Kensington is?"

Titus bends over to pick his pencil off the floor. There's a strip of skin between his shirt and the top of his jeans in the back. I can see the top of his boxers. Plain light blue. "Sketch three sculptures of the human body at the Met, remember?"

Of course I remember. If I had a single bone in me I'd ask him to go there on Saturday with me.

I should ask him.

I should ask him.

I should ask him.

"Oh, right," I say. "That's it. Thanks."

Oh! I am a coward!

Spineless, boneless, vermin girl.

“Sure. See you in gym.” I try to smile at him but it’s too late. He’s gone.

LATER THAT AFTERNOON, Sanchez the gym teacher makes us play dodgeball, which leaves bruises all over my legs. I'm not that fast, and I get hit a lot. Titus hits me twice.

"Do you think it means something?" I ask Katya after gym, sitting on the locker room bench in a towel.

Katya is naked in the shower like that's a normal way to have a conversation. She's washing her hair like she's just everyday naked in front of people.

Well, we *are* everyday naked in front of people. Gym is five days a week, shower required. But anyway, Katya is having a naked conversation like it doesn't even bother her, which it obviously doesn't—even though she's not built like a model, just regular.

The locker room is so cramped and tiny that I can feel the warm spray of her shower water on my knee as I'm sitting on the bench.

"It would have meant something if we were sixth graders," says Katya, scrunching her eyes as she rinses out the shampoo.

"Like what would it mean?"

"You want to hear me say it?" She's laughing.

"Yes."

"It would have meant that he liked you back."

"I didn't say I liked him," I mutter.

"Oh please," Katya says, ignoring my point, "that's very sixth grade. You know, how boys were always teasing the girls they liked, pulling their hair. But we're way too old for that crap now. So I don't think it means anything if he hits you with the dodgeball. Sorry."

Katya is always such a realist. She's soaping her underarms like she's alone. I could never do that.

I make a quick dive out of my towel and into my bra and a T-shirt from the second Spider-Man movie, covered with pastel dust. "I didn't say I liked him," I say again.

"Oh, don't give me that."

“What? I’m analyzing the cruel and particularly complicated sociodynamics of sophomore dodgeball.”

“No, you’re not.” Katya is drying off now. In the next row over, annoying Taffy is stretching and showing off her dancer’s body while listening to our conversation. I hate this tiny-ass locker room.

“What, it’s that obvious?” I ask.

“It’s all over your face, all the time,” Katya says, grinning. “Titus, Titus, Titus.”

I’m blushing. I can feel it. And my Chinese half makes it so that once my cheeks go pink, they stay that way for hours.

Katya never turns pink. Broad, Russian American face and a lumpy nose and long pale brown hair—you wouldn’t think she’d be pretty if you made a list of her features, but somehow she is. She’s mysterious. You can’t read what she’s thinking.

“Well, he’s better than the others,” I say, conscious of Taffy in the next row, trying to sound less obsessed.

“Whatever.”

“He is. Let’s be objective. He’s cuter than Brat Parker. Nicer than Adrian Ip. More interesting than Malachy.”

“What’s wrong with Malachy?” Katya sounds annoyed.

“He never says anything. Like having his ears pierced makes him so slick he doesn’t have to talk.”

“You don’t have to be so mean about everyone, Gretchen.”

“I’m not being mean. I’m doing an objective comparison of the Art Rats.”

Which isn’t true. I *am* being mean.

I feel mean. I don’t know why. This school is making me evil, maybe.

“It’s not objective. It’s *subjective*.” Katya hooks her bra behind her back. “It’s just what you think, not the truth.”

“Don’t bite me, Katya. I’m only talking.”

“Well, you’re talking about people you barely know.”

"I know them. They've been in practically every class with me all year. I know Shane."

"We all know you know Shane. Enough with Shane." Katya gets into a dress she made herself on her mother's sewing machine.

"Wanna get a slice?" I try changing the subject.

"Can't. I've got to pick the monsters up at day care."

I wish she didn't have three little sisters. Wish she didn't live an hour-fifteen away from school on the F train, all the way in Brighton Beach.

"You're always busy these days," I say, and it comes out pitiful and whiny.

"That's life, Gretchen," snaps Katya. "I've got responsibilities. I'll call you later."

She's out the door. My only friend, really.

I can't count Shane, even though we said we'd be friends after last October.

We're not, obviously.

Not friends.

Just people who groped each other for a few weeks at the start of this year, when he was new and sat in front of me in math. One day, he wrote me a note about this nose picker sitting in the front,

*and we wrote notes back and forth about boogers,
which led to notes back and forth about other stuff,
and he ate lunch with me and Katya,
and put funny sketches in my locker,
and we were friends. I thought.*

But one day Shane walked out of school with me when classes were over,

*and got on the subway with me,
and went home with me, without me even asking him.*