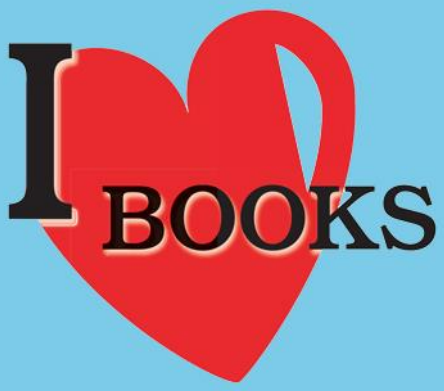


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Opening extract from

The Reluctant Journal of Henry K. Larsen

Written by

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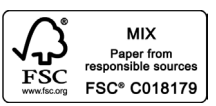
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Monday, January 21

INTRIGUING FACT: Killer whales travel around in pods. Each pod has a distinct set of clicking sounds, whistles, and cries. It helps them stick together.

It works the same in the first year of high school. A bunch of scared kids from a bunch of different elementary schools show up in September, and, within weeks, they form their pods. The jocks join teams; the nerds join clubs, like 'chess' or 'computer'; the stoners find a spot behind some bushes, just off school property.

So when a new kid shows up in January, nobody really notices. They already have their pods. And that suits me just fine. I'm happy to be like Luna, the killer whale that strayed from his pod and swam around by himself for a couple of years, off the coast of Vancouver Island. After all, he seemed pretty content. He had a perfectly good life.

Well. Until he was accidentally chopped to bits by a boat's propeller.

But here's the problem. There's always at least one other kid who is also swimming solo, because none of the pods will let him in.

At Port Salish Secondary, that kid was my brother, Jesse.

At Trafalgar Secondary, that kid is Farley Wong.

I'm pretty sure he picked up my scent the day I started here, two weeks ago. But today he went in for the kill.

'Greetings and welcome to our planet, Earthling,' he said to me this morning, with a thick Chinese accent. I was putting my math book in my locker, which, as luck would have it, is only one door down from his. 'Farley Wong.' He held out his hand.

'Henry,' I replied, skipping my last name. He tried to do an elaborate handshake, but I lost him after the first couple of moves.

'Where did you transfer from?'

'Vancouver Island,' I replied. Best to keep it vague.

'We have three classes together,' he said, counting them on his fingers. 'Enriched Math, Phys Ed, and Enriched English.'

I knew this already, only because he's pretty hard to miss. He's the nerdiest-looking kid I have ever seen.

I know, I know. I'm one to talk. Pop-Pop likes to joke that I have so many freckles, it looks like I got a tan through a screen door. And yes, my hair is red and curly. And yes, I am short. And yes, I have to buy my clothes in 'husky' size, which is a nice word for 'fat'.

But I don't *advertise* my nerdiness. Farley looks like the model for that nerd action figure you can buy in novelty stores. He has thick Coke-bottle glasses. He wears

short-sleeved button-up shirts and lines the pockets with *plastic protectors*, so the pens he keeps clipped to them won't leak on his clothes. His pants are always ironed, with a neat crease down the middle. He belts them up high, so the waist stops just under his nipples.

And he carries a briefcase!

'You want to walk to English together?' he said. 'I know a shortcut.' He gazed at me, his magnified eyes full of hope.

I'm not dumb. I knew that being seen with Farley could be like committing social hari-kari. In high school, it's all about first impressions. Just look at what happened to Jesse.

But, on the other hand . . .

Farley is the first kid in seven months to talk to me like I'm a regular human being. So I heard myself say, 'Sure.'

Farley talked the whole way to class about a show called *Battlestar Galactica*.

'I have the entire series on DVD. It's frakking brilliant.' The more he talked, the more bits of spittle formed at the sides of his mouth.

We rounded a corner, and a big guy in jeans that hung well below his bum bumped into Farley, accidentally-on-purpose. I recognized him; his locker is across the hall from mine.

'Nice slacks, Fartley,' he said. Then he kicked me. Not too hard, but still. 'Sorry,' he said. 'I thought it was Kick a Ginger Day.'

'I've seen that episode of *South Park*, too,' I retorted. 'Years ago. Pretty stale joke, don't you think?'

OK. I didn't say that. But I thought it.

'That's Troy Vasic,' Farley said after he'd sauntered away. 'You wanna watch out for him.' He was quiet for the rest of our walk. 'Oh, well,' he said when we reached English class. 'I guess there's a Troy Vasic at every school.'

True, I thought.

But at Jesse's school, his name was Scott Marlin.

Farley latched on to me like a leech for the rest of the day. In the afternoon, we had gym together. I'm not very good at sports, but compared to Farley, I'm an Olympic athlete. He's *awful*. The funny thing is, he doesn't seem to care. We played volleyball, and when he finally managed to hit the ball over the net, he shouted, 'Yes!' even though it was way out-of-bounds.

And guess what? He wore his gym shorts pulled up to his nipples, too.

So, you could say Farley is my first new friend. But it's kind of like the first car you buy. It gets you from A to B, but from the moment you own it, you're constantly dreaming of the day you can get an upgrade.

11:00 p.m.

The water stain on my bedroom ceiling looks like a puffer fish.

1:00 a.m.

I think I'll write a little story about Jesse. Cecil would probably pee in his pants if he knew. But he never will because I will never tell him.

Why Jesse Larsen Was Never Accepted into a Pod

by Henry K. Larsen

The first week of high school at Port Salish Secondary, the new kids did 'bonding activities' with the older kids – bowling parties, pizza parties, that kind of thing. It was the school's way of making them feel welcome. On Friday, each new kid had to get up onstage in the auditorium and say a few words, in front of the *entire school*.

When it was Jesse's turn, he said he liked playing on his PS3, reading manga, and watching the Global Wrestling Federation's *Saturday Night Smash-Up*.

It was a little dorky maybe, but no big deal. So he couldn't figure out why the entire audience was laughing like crazy.

When he left the stage, the principal took him aside and said, 'Jesse Larsen, XYZ.'

'What?'

'XYZ. Examine Your Zipper!'

Jesse looked down. His fly had been unzipped during his entire speech.

Again – no big deal.

Except it was.

Mom had told Jesse the week before that she refused to do any of his laundry unless he put it into the hamper. And Jesse never got around to it. So when he discovered that morning that he was out of clean Y-Fronts, he decided that *no* underwear was better than *dirty* underwear.

That's right. He went to school commando. Meaning, every single kid at Port Salish Secondary didn't see his underwear through his fly.

They saw his you-know-whats: his family jewels, his nuggets, his love spuds. His *balls*.

A kid in the front row took pictures with his phone. I was still in elementary school and didn't have a cell phone, but a lot of kids in my class did. So, along with every other kid in Port Salish and beyond, I saw the photographic evidence within the hour.

The school went into overdrive, of course. 'This is a form of bullying, and we won't tolerate bullying of any kind,' blah-blah-blah.

The photos got taken down pretty fast, at least the ones that were posted on Facebook. But the other stuff – the stuff the grown-ups couldn't see or maybe didn't want to see – had just begun.

Scott Marlin gave Jesse his nickname, the one that stuck through his first two years of high school, until he put an end to it for good.

Ballsack.

For almost two full years, the boy formerly known as Jesse was called Ballsack. Some kids even called him that in front of the teachers, who thought they were calling him Balzac, after some dead French writer.

I'm not saying Jesse didn't have his quirks. Scott would have found other things to tease him about. His zits, which were bad. His obsession with the Global Wrestling Federation. The way he giggled when he got nervous.

But the Ballsack event was the biggie. It was the match that lit the fuse that exploded in our faces last June.

As my Enriched English teacher, Mr Schell, would say: 'That, Henry, is what we call an *inciting incident*.'