Lovereading4kids.co.uk

Opening extract from

Airhead

Written by

Meg Cabot

Published by

Macmillan

All text is copyright of the author

Please print off and read at your leisure.



First published 2008 by Macmillan Children's Books
a division of Macmillan Publishers Limited
20 New Wharf Road, London N1 9RR
Basingstoke and Oxford
Associated companies throughout the world
www.panmacmillan.com

ISBN 978-0-330-46068-2

Copyright © Meg Cabot LLC 2008

The right of Meg Cabot to be identified as the
author of this work has been asserted by her in accordance
with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be
reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or
transmitted, in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical,
photocopying, recording or otherwise), without the prior written
permission of the publisher. Any person who does any unauthorized
act in relation to this publication may be liable to criminal
prosecution and civil claims for damages.

3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from
the British Library.

Typeset by Intype Libra Ltd
Printed and bound in the UK by CPI Mackays, Chatham ME5 8TD

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not,
by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, resold, hired out,
or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent
in any form of binding or cover other than that in which
it is published and without a similar condition including this
condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.


Airhead

Books by Meg Cabot

The Princess Diaries series

The Mediator series

All American Girl
All American Girl: Ready or Not

Avalon High
Avalon High manga: The Merlin Prophecy
Teen Idol
How to Be Popular
Jinx
Tommy Sullivan Is a Freak
Nicola and the Viscount
Victoria and the Rogue

For younger readers

Allie Finkle's Rules for Girls: Moving Day

For older readers

The Guy Next Door
Boy Meets Girl
Every Boy's Got One
Queen of Babble
Size 12 Is Not Fat
Size 14 Is Not Fat Either
Size Doesn't Matter

Also available in audio

For Benjamin

Many thanks to Beth Ader, Jennifer Brown, Michele Jaffe, Susan Juby, Laura Langlie, Abigail McAden, Rachel Vail and especially Benjamin Egnatz

One

'Emerson Watts,' called my first-period Public Speaking teacher, Mr Greer, startling me from the light doze into which I'd drifted.

Well, whatever. Do they really expect us to be alert at eight fifteen in the morning? Come on.

'Here,' I called, jerking my head from the top of my desk and surreptitiously feeling the side of my mouth, just in case I'd been drooling.

But I guess I didn't do it surreptitiously enough, since Whitney Robertson, seated with her long, tanned legs crossed beneath a desk a few feet away from mine, snickered, and hissed, 'Loser.'

I threw her a dirty look and mouthed, *Bite me.*

To which she responded by narrowing her heavily made-up baby-blue eyes at me and mouthing back smugly, *You wish.*

'Em,' Mr Greer said with a yawn. I guess he'd been up pretty late last night too. Only I'm guessing it wasn't because he'd been frantically finishing his homework for this class, like I was. 'I wasn't calling roll. It's time for you to give the class your two-minute persuasive oral piece. We're going in reverse alphabetical order, remember?'

Great. Just great.

Chagrined, I slid out from behind my desk and made

my way to the front of the room while the rest of the class tittered. All except Whitney, I saw. That's because she had dug her compact mirror out of her bag and was gazing at her own reflection. Lindsey Jacobs, seated in the row beside hers, stared at Whitney admiringly and whispered, 'That shade of gloss is so *you*.'

'I know,' Whitney murmured to her reflection.

I fought off a reflexive urge to gag – because I was about to speak in public, not because of their exchange . . . although I guess that could have had something to do with it – and turned round to face the room. Twenty-four sleepy faces blinked back at me.

And I realized I had completely forgotten the speech I'd been up half the night writing.

'All right, Emerson,' Mr Greer said, 'you've got two minutes.' He looked down at his watch. 'And . . .'

Amazing. The second he said that, my mind went even *more* blank. All I could think was . . . how did she know? Lindsey, I mean. That that shade of lipgloss was so right on Whitney? I have been alive nearly seventeen years and I still have no idea what shade of lipgloss looks good on me . . . or anybody else, for that matter.

I blame my dad. He's the one who gave me a boy's name to begin with, since he'd been so sure I was going to be one – despite what the ultrasound had shown – because I kicked my mom so much while I was in the womb. Dad insisted on naming me after his favourite poet, which is what you get when your father teaches university-level English literature. I guess my mom was still high off her

epidural or something, because she totally let him, even after the ultrasound turned out to be right. So *Emerson Watts* is what it says on my birth certificate.

I know. I was a victim of sexual stereotyping in utero. How many girls can claim *that*?

'. . . *go*,' Mr Greer said, turning on his oven timer.

And just like that, all the research I'd done on my assigned topic the night before came flooding back.

Phew.

'Females,' I began, 'make up thirty-nine per cent of people who play interactive computer games, and yet only a small fraction of the games created by the estimated thirty-five-billion-dollar worldwide gaming industry is geared towards female players.'

I paused . . . but it didn't matter.

I guess I couldn't really blame them. It *was* barely nine in the morning, after all.

Even Christopher, who lives in my building and is supposedly my best friend, wasn't paying attention. He was in his normal seat in the back row, and he was upright.

But his eyes were closed.

'A study,' I went on, 'by the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA showed that the percentage of computer degrees granted to women has now dropped to an all time low of less than thirty per cent. Computer science is the only field in which women's participation is actually *decreasing* over time . . .'

Oh, God. No one in first-period Public Speaking was awake now but me. Even Mr Greer's eyes had drifted shut.

Terrific. Way to be part of the problem, Mr Greer, and not the solution.

'Many researchers believe this is due to our educational system failing to engage girls in the sciences – particularly computer science – during the middle school years,' I battled on, staring directly at Mr Greer. Not that he noticed. He was now gently snoring.

Great. Just great. I mean, I'd been slightly psyched when I'd gotten my topic, because the truth is, I *like* computer games. Well, one computer game, anyway.

'So what can be done to keep girls interested in gaming,' I went on desperately, 'which studies show increases problem-solving and strategic abilities, and also helps develop social interaction skills and cooperative play?'

There was no point, I realized. Really.

'Well,' I said, 'I could strip off my clothes and reveal to you that under my jeans and sweatshirt I'm actually wearing a tank top and short shorts, much like Lara Croft from *Tomb Raider* . . . only mine are flame retardant and covered in glow-in-the-dark dinosaur stickers.'

No one stirred. Not even Christopher, who actually has a thing for Lara Croft.

'I know what you're thinking,' I went on. 'Glow-in-the-dark dinosaur stickers are *so* last year. But I think they add a certain je ne sais quoi to the whole ensemble. It's true short shorts are uncomfortable under jeans and hard to get off in the ladies' room, but they make the twin thigh

holsters in which I hold my high-calibre pistols so easy to get to . . .'

The oven timer dinged.

'Thank you, Em,' Mr Greer said, yawning. 'That was very persuasive.'

'No, Mr Greer,' I said with a big smile. 'Thank *you*.'

It's a good thing my parents aren't paying for my tuition – I'm on a full academic scholarship at Tribeca Alternative – because I have true reservations about the quality of the education I am receiving here.

I went back to my seat as Mr Greer asked – himself mostly, I guess – 'Now, who do we have next? Oh, yes. Whitney Robertson?' Mr Greer smiled. Because everyone smiles when they say Whitney's name. Except me. 'You're up.'

Whitney – who'd gone for a quick nose-powdering after the oven timer went off – closed her compact with a snap and uncrossed her legs. I knew I wasn't the only one in the room who got a flash of her leopard-print thong as she did so. Suddenly, everyone seemed to be wide awake.

'Here goes nothing,' Whitney said with a laugh, and she unfolded her long, lean frame out from beneath the desk, and sauntered – no, really, even though she was wearing four-inch platform heels. How do girls do that? If I tried to saunter in four-inch heels (even in two-inch heels) I'd trip and fall flat on my face – down the aisle to the front of the room, her short, ruffled skirt swaying behind her. When she turned to face us, there wasn't an eye in room that wasn't on Whitney.

Except Christopher's, I noticed, when I turned around to check. He was still soundly asleep.

'And . . . *go*,' said Mr Greer, adjusting the oven timer.

'My topic is about why I,' Whitney began in a sing-song sweet voice completely unlike the one she uses when she is advising me to bite her, 'don't believe in the fallacy that Western civilization's standards for female beauty are too high. Lots of women complain that the fashion and film industries are attacking the self-esteem of young girls and older women alike. They want these industries to employ more, quote, average-sized women, unquote. I say this is ridiculous!'

Whitney tossed some of her long blonde – dyed, apparently. At least according to my little sister Frida, who knows about things like that – hair and asked, her blue eyes glittering with indignation, 'How is it an attack on any woman's self-esteem to promote a healthy weight – which scientists have determined as a body mass index of below twenty-four point nine – as beautiful? If some women are too lazy to go to the gym because they sit around all day *playing video games*, well, that's their problem. But they can't then turn around and blame those of us who take proper care of our bodies of being sexist or holding them to impossible standards of beauty . . . especially when so many of us are living proof that those standards aren't impossible at all.'

My jaw dropped. I looked around to see if anyone else was as stunned as I was. *This* was Whitney's interpretation of the topic Mr Greer had assigned her for her two-minute

persuasive piece? That normal-sized women should stop blaming the media for hyping stick-thin models and actresses as the beauty ideal?

Apparently I was the only one in the class who thought she'd gotten it wrong. At least if the rapt way everyone else (the male half of the class, anyway) was staring at Whitney's – admittedly extremely perky – boobs was any indication.

'If wanting to look as beautiful as someone like Nikki Howard, for instance,' Whitney went on, naming the current It girl in the beauty-and-fashion scene, 'was really so wrong, would women be spending an estimated thirty-three billion dollars a year on weight loss, another seven billion on cosmetics, and three hundred million or more on cosmetic surgery? Of course not! People aren't stupid! They know that, with a little effort and maybe a little more money, they can be as attractive as – well, *me*.'

Whitney flung her long hair behind one shoulder, then went on, '*Some* people –' *insert the name Emerson Watts here*, the look she sent in my direction implied – 'might think it's stuck-up of me to call myself attractive. But the truth is, beauty isn't just about being five foot ten and a size zero. The most important accessory a girl can have is confidence . . . and I guess I just have plenty of that!'

Whitney lifted her shoulders in an innocent shrug, and almost all the boys – and half the girls – in class sighed as they gazed longingly at her. I whipped around in my seat and was relieved to notice that Christopher's head had

lolled forward in sleep. One guy – out of fourteen – was safe, anyway.

I turned back around in my seat just in time to hear Whitney say, 'And the truth is, contrary to what critics tell us about the ideal being unachievable and women dying to be thin, the only thing killing women in this country is obesity, which is at epidemic proportions.'

Everyone in class nodded in agreement, as if all this made perfect sense. Which it so didn't. At least, not to me.

'Well,' Whitney said, 'that's about it. Was that two minutes?'

Right on cue, Mr Greer's oven timer dinged. He beamed and said, 'Exactly two minutes. Excellently done, Whitney.'

She simpered again and started back to her seat. Since I saw that no one else was going to say anything – as usual – I stuck my hand in the air. 'Mr Greer.'

He looked at me tiredly. 'Yes, Miss Watts?'

'Seriously,' I said, lowering my hand. 'I thought the purpose of the two-minute persuasive oral piece was to *persuade* our audience of something using facts and statistics.'

'Which I totally did,' Whitney said as she slid into her seat.

'All you did,' I shot back, 'was make everyone in this class who isn't as skinny and perfect as Nikki Howard feel totally bad about themselves. How about mentioning the fact that most of us are never going to look like her, no matter how hard we try or how much money we spend?'

The bell rang, loud and long. I guess I'd been asleep longer than I thought, because that period seemed to have flown by.

And as everyone sprang from their desks to get to their next class, Lindsey got up and said to me, 'You're just jealous.'

'Totally,' Whitney said, running her hands over her slender thighs. 'And you got one thing right, Em: no matter how hard you try, you're never going to look *this* good.'

Cackling with laughter at her own witticism, Whitney hurried from the classroom with a giggling Lindsey in tow, leaving me alone with Mr Greer. And Christopher.

'You can bring up those points next week if you want, Em,' Mr Greer volunteered helpfully, 'when we do rebuttal persuasive pieces.'

I just glared at him. 'Thanks, Mr Greer,' I said.

He shrugged and looked sheepish. I looked at Christopher, who was slowly waking up, and said, 'Thanks to you too. You were a big help back there.'

Christopher, blinking groggily, rubbed his eyes. 'Dude, I heard every word you said,' he said.

'Oh, really?' I raised an eyebrow. 'What was my assigned topic again?'

'Um . . . I'm not sure.' Christopher's smile was slightly crooked. 'But I know it had something to do with short shorts. And glow-in-the-dark dinosaur stickers.'

Slowly I shook my head. Sometimes I think high school is just something society puts teenagers through as a sort

of test to see if we've got the stamina to handle the real world.

It's a test I'm pretty sure I'm failing.

Two

You would think on weekends I'd get a respite. You know, from the Whitney Robertsons of the world.

The problem is, my little sister is turning into one. A Whitney, I mean.

Oh, she's not quite as bad as the Queen of Mean. Yet. But she's slowly getting there. As I realized to my horror on Saturday morning, when Mom said I had to go with her to the Stark Megastore grand opening, because at fourteen Frida's still 'too young' to do stuff like that by herself.

Substitute the word *silly* for *young* in the sentence above and you'll get my mom's gist.

Not that Frida is actually mentally diminished in any way. Like me, she got into Tribeca Alternative High School on an academic scholarship.

She's just turned into a Whitney Robertson wannabe . . . or, more technically, a member of the Walking Dead. That's the term Christopher and I use to describe the majority of our classmates.

To most people, zombies are the undead. But to Christopher and me, zombies are the popular people at TAHS, who are very similar to the undead, in that they have no soul or personality. But they are, technically, alive.

However, because they have no actual interests of their own (or if they do, they squelch them in order to fit in),

and merely pursue those that they think will look best on their college apps, they're zombies.

Ergo, the Walking Dead is what makes up the majority of the student population of Tribeca Alternative High School.

It was kind of frightening to watch your own sister turn into one of the Walking Dead. But unfortunately, there really isn't anything you can do to stop it from happening. Except try to embarrass her as much as possible in public.

Which would be why Frida (it was Mom's turn to do the naming when my little sister was born, and so she got stuck being called Frida, after Frida Kahlo – Mom's a women's studies professor at NYU – a feminist Mexican painter best known for her self-portraits featuring her uni-brow and moustache) was as thrilled to have me along to the Stark Megastore grand opening as I was to be going with her.

Um, not.

'Mo-om!' she whined. 'Why does *Em* have to come with me? She's going to ruin *everything*.'

'Em is not going to ruin everything,' Mom said, rolling her eyes at Frida's dramatics. 'She's just going to make sure you get home all right.'

'It's TWO BLOCKS away,' Frida pointed out.

But Mom wouldn't budge. There've been people protesting outside the new Stark Megastore since before it was even built, back when the neighbourhood found out that's what would be replacing Mama's Fruit and Vegetable Stand (located in the middle of an abandoned

lot) on the corner of Broadway and Houston. Situated just two streets over from our university-subsidized apartment on West Third and La Guardia Place, Mama's was where we bought all our lettuce and bananas, since you can't trust the produce at the local Gristedes, and the gourmet food store over on Broadway, Dean and Deluca, was way too expensive.

Mom and I weren't the only ones who were mad when we found out what was going up in that empty lot. The whole community banded together to save Mama's, and demanded that Stark get out.

But despite all the picketing, letters to the editor, sabotage of the construction site by the ELF, the Environmental Liberation Front (I swear I had nothing to do with it, despite what Mom and Dad seem to think), and promises of a community-wide boycott, Mama's got pushed out, and a Stark Megastore – featuring three stories of CDs, DVDs, video games, electronics and books (the smallest and most inaccessible part of the store) – went up, guaranteed to put all the locally owned shops that already sold these things out of business with its steep discounts, endless supply . . .

. . . and publicity stunts, like the one today: a supersized grand opening, including free food and drinks (Stark Cola and Stark Cookies and Pretzels), with live performances on all three floors by some of the hottest young entertainers of the moment, followed by an opportunity to get a personally autographed CD from them.

Which was why Frida was so determined to go.

Because unlike the rest of our family – and residents of our community – Frida was *thrilled* about the new Stark Megastore opening up within spitting distance of her bedroom window (not that Frida would ever do something as déclassé as spit). She could not have cared less that Mama's had relocated to a windy, desolate corner way over in Alphabet City, nowhere close to walking distance to our apartment building, or that we were being forced to eat wilted lettuce and brown bananas from Gristedes.

'Nothing's going to happen,' Frida kept insisting to Mom. 'I'll look out for ELF protestors. I'll wear my bike helmet, if I have to.'

Mom just rolled her eyes. 'It's not ELF I'm worried about, Frida,' she said. 'It's Gabriel Luna.'

Frida's round cheeks (well, they are. What can I say? Round cheeks – like stick-straight brown hair, brown eyes, medium height and weight, and size-nine feet – is our genetic destiny, the way high cheekbones and perfect everything else are Whitney's) instantly turned bright red.

'Mo-om!' she cried. 'Whatever! He's, like, twenty. He's not going to be interested in a kid like me.'

That's what her lips said. But anyone could tell by the glint in her eyes that Frida didn't actually believe this. She honestly thought Gabriel Luna was going to fall madly in love with her as he personally autographed her CD. I could tell. I used to be fourteen after all, just two and a half short years ago.

So it was a good thing when Mom replied, 'Then you won't mind bringing your sister along. Just in case.'

'Just in case *what*?' Frida wanted to know.

'In case Gabriel Luna invites you to a party back at his penthouse.'

You could tell this was *exactly* what Frida had been hoping would happen. Not that she'd ever admit it. Instead she snarled, 'Gabriel doesn't have a penthouse, Mom. He's not into the trappings of fame.'

When I burst out laughing at *trappings of fame*, Frida glared at me and said, 'Well, he's not. He lives in a studio apartment somewhere here in NoHo. He's not one of those music-company-fabricated pretty boy-band types Em hates so much. He's a singer-songwriter. Even though he's already a sensation back in his native London, hardly anyone outside England knows who he is.'

'Except everyone who reads *COSMOgirl!*, evidently,' I pointed out. 'Since you just quoted that verbatim from their article on him last month. Including the *trappings of fame* part.'

'How would *you* know, Em?' Frida demanded snarkily. 'I thought you never read teen magazines. I thought you only read your lame *Electronic Gaming Monthly*, or whatever.'

I sighed. 'Yes, but when I've finished that and your *COSMOgirl!* is the only thing that's lying around, what choice do I have?'

'Mo-om!' Frida cried. You could tell she was really upset that Stark had been so short-sighted as to schedule their

grand opening on the last warm weekend in September, which all of her fellow Walking Dead members were being 'forced' to spend at their families' vacation homes in the Hamptons. They'd invited Frida along of course.

But she'd as soon eat glass as miss an opportunity to meet actual celebrities – even ones who don't live in a penthouse.

'Em's going to ruin everything. Can't you see that? She's a dork, you know, Mom. Not even a geek, which would be semi-respectable, but a *dork*. All she ever does is play her stupid computer games with Christopher, study, and watch disgusting surgery shows on the Discovery Health Channel. And she's going to say something mean to Gabriel, and embarrass me.'

'I will not!' I protested, with my mouth full of microwave waffle.

'Yes you will,' Frida said. 'You're always mean to guys.'

'That is completely false,' I said. 'Name one time I was mean to Christopher.'

'Christopher Maloney is your boyfriend,' Frida said, rolling her eyes. 'And I mean a *cute* guy.'

This was such a libellous statement – since no way is Christopher Maloney my boyfriend – that I nearly choked on my waffle. Not that I haven't sometimes *wished* Christopher were my boyfriend, and not just my *boy* friend – or my best friend, actually.

But Christopher has never once expressed any sort of similar desire. You know, that we should take our friendship to a more-than-platonic level. In fact, I'm not sure

Christopher has ever even realized that I'm *not* a boy. I'm not actually the most feminine girl in the world. I honestly wouldn't mind trying to be, but the two or three times I've experimented by putting on eyeliner or whatever, Frida has just burst into hysterical laughter and told me to 'Take it off! Just take it off right now!' before I've even gotten out of the apartment.

So I've taken it off.

I guess it's unusual that my best friend is a boy. But the truth is, I haven't had a *girl* friend since fifth grade. The few occasions girls ever actually invited me over in middle school, it was always so . . . *awkward*. Because we ended up having nothing in common. Like, I always wanted to play video games, and they always wanted to play Truth or Dare (with an emphasis on the Truth part . . . like, 'Is it true that you have a crush on that Christopher guy, but that you just tell everyone you're really only friends, and that even he doesn't know you secretly love him? Do you want us to tell him how you really feel for you? Because we'll be happy to.').

Yeah. Like that.

It just didn't work for me. I told my mother I'd rather stay home and read.

Which is one of the good things about having parents who are academics. They know how you feel. Because the truth is, they'd always rather stay home and read too.

Christopher was different, though. From the day almost eight years ago that I saw him hanging out with

the moving van that was delivering all his stuff to our building, I knew we were going to get along.

And OK, mostly because I peeked into the box marked *Chris's Video Games* as it sat next to the freight elevator, and saw that we liked all the same role-playing games.

But whatever.

I guess because we hang out so much, people think we're dating, but nothing could be further from the truth (alas).

Still, even though we're not dating – however much I might wish that we were – I resented Frida's implication that Christopher isn't cute. He isn't, under the standard Walking Dead definition of hottie, of course. I mean, he's over six-feet tall and does have the requisite blond hair and blue eyes the WD so favour. Except that Christopher has been trying to see how long he can grow his hair before he drives his father, the Commander (he teaches political science), completely insane. It's almost past his shoulders now.

And he doesn't spend four hours a day lifting weights, so he isn't a muscle-bound freak like Whitney's boyfriend, Jason Klein.

But just because Christopher isn't what the WDs consider hot doesn't mean he isn't cute.

'Thanks,' I snarled at Frida. 'A lot. See if Christopher ever comes over to defragment your computer again.'

'*Christopher's hair is longer than mine*,' Frida hissed. 'And what about yesterday in the cafeteria, when you screamed

at Jason Klein to shut up while you were both in line for ketchup for your burgers at the condiment bar?'

'Well,' I said with an uncomfortable shrug, 'yesterday was a bad day. And besides, he deserved it. And at least Christopher can cut his hair. What's *your* excuse?'

'All Jason said was that he preferred the cheerleaders' spring halter-top uniforms to their winter sweater ones!' Frida cried.

'Well, that *is* sexist, Frida,' Mom said.

I flashed Frida a triumphant look over my waffles. Still she wouldn't let it go.

'Cheerleaders are athletes, Mom,' Frida insisted. 'Their halter-top uniforms are less binding than their sweater ones, allowing them more freedom of movement.'

'Oh my God.' I stared across the breakfast table at my little sister. 'You're trying out for cheerleading this year, aren't you?'

Frida took a deep breath. 'Forget it. Just forget it. I'll ask Dad. Dad'll let me go by myself.'

'No he won't,' Mom said. 'And you will not disturb him. You know he got in late last night.'

Dad lives in New Haven during the week, where he teaches at Yale, and only comes home to Manhattan on weekends (it's tough on married academics when they can't get hired by the same college).

Because of the guilt he feels about this, Dad will generally let us do anything we want. If Frida had asked if it would be OK if she went to Atlantic City with the men's swim team for the weekend to gamble away her

college-education money, Dad would have been like, 'Sure, why not? Here's my bank card, have a blast.'

Which is why Mom watches us like a hawk when Dad's home. She knows perfectly well that he's a pushover when it comes to his teenaged daughters.

'And what's this about you trying out for cheerleading?' Mom wanted to know. 'Frida, we need to talk . . .'

While Mom went on about how women weren't allowed to play men's sports in school until the 1970s, and so were relegated to cheer for the male athletes on the sidelines, thus giving birth to cheerleading, Frida sent me a withering look that said, *I'll get you for this, Em!*

I had no doubt she'd get her revenge later, at the Stark Megastore opening.

And it turned out I wasn't wrong.

It just didn't happen quite the way I'd been expecting it to.