Opening extract from

Girl Parts

Written by

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Girl Parts

"Are humans more human than an android who looks and acts the part? With an almost anthropological eye, first-time novelist Cusick digs into the connections people make – physically, emotionally, and technologically… A bittersweet and prescient novel which makes the teenager-as-robot metaphor work so well." *Publishers Weekly*

"It may be hard for readers to get this book out of their system: Cusick's first novel is charming and witty, peppered with satirical jabs at the irony of being lonely in an increasingly connected world." *The Horn Book*

"Two very different teens find their concepts of love and connection challenged when they meet the manufactured girl of their dreams in this *I, Robot*-meets-*Pinocchio* cautionary tale… This modern fable about the breakdown of interpersonal communication in the computer age is also a keenly observed and timely take on relationship building, gender roles and the qualities that make us human." *Kirkus Reviews*

"Rose, programmed to be naïve, hopelessly romantic, and cheerful, is achingly endearing as she struggles to find her own self under all of the assigned cues… There are moments of absolute raw examination of what it means to feel alone while networked with millions that may shock readers into considering the depth of their own connections." *Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books*

"A funny, touching, near-future science fiction tale that explores teen relationships and what it means to be a 'real' person." *VOYA*

Girl Parts

JOHN M. CUSICK

WALKER
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For Wanda

and

for Sarah

0.

The room was empty and black save for the blue eye of the computer and the yellow wedge beneath the door. Shapes crouched in the darkness — the dresser, a desk, a bed with adjacent night table. The bed had a lived-in look, the tousled sheets littered with crumbs and stained with ink, cola, coffee. The stars-and-moons comforter lay bunched against the headboard, along with a threadbare teddy bear and Mary Poppins pillow missing its spangles. Books and magazines were shoved to the wall, into the gap, along with countless socks, balled underwear, lost pens, scraps of paper, and secret journals, their pages bulging with ticket stubs and pasted photographs.

It was quiet. The analog clock went *teck*.

As if on cue, the door opened, spotlighting the posters on the wall — Monroe, Dean, Bogart, and the tragic Entwistle. A girl in creased white pajamas shuffled in, arms full. She closed the door, shutting out the yellow glare, and set her burdens on the desk. She pressed the flat monitor button. The computer hummed. The blue eye watched.

She stood the blender, filled with ice, and the liter of Coke off to one side. She placed the third object, small and squat, before her like an offering.

"I'd like to thank you all," she said to the eye. "I can't tell you how much it means to me you came tonight."

The girl was slight, with a thin face, pale skin, and heavily lidded eyes. Her hair was limp, with electric red highlights, damp now and pulled back in a scrunchie. One strand lay against her cheek. Her fingernails, unpainted and chewed to the quick, were still soft and white from the shower.

She reached under the desk to plug in the blender, her pajama top riding up her back. In a tree outside, a small bird awoke and spied the sky-blue glow inside the room. It took flight, wings fluttering, and struck the window with a fatal crack, falling dead into the darkness. The girl sat up, oblivious, adjusted her top, and opened the squat bottle. She dumped two hundred crimson-colored pills into the blender and added the Coke. The blades churned, pureeing the mixture into sweet, slushy gunk. She dumped the concoction into a large drinking glass and took a sip. It tasted like a Coke slushie.

She clicked the mouse. A favorite old movie began. She watched and sipped, knees pulled to her chest. The star's name loomed on-screen in tall letters as the shades of a window overlooking a city street opened like lazy eyes. As those eyes opened, hers began to droop, and she felt suffused with a heavy warmth. One final swallow and she climbed into her beloved bed, pulling the comforter up to her chin.

She was asleep before the opening titles ended, and by the time a dozing Jimmy Stewart appeared, her heart had stopped.

The blue eye stared. After ten minutes, it ceased recording. One by one, the 750 viewers logged off. The show was over. It had been her best-attended video blog to date.

The night Nora Vogel died, the power went out in Westtown, Massachusetts. Everything went dark from Route 290 south to Olive Lake. Televisions blinked and computers held their breath. The big map at the power station shut down. The grid had a disconnect, and dot by dot the colored bulbs representing the homes of Westtown popped off like Christmas lights.

David Sun lived in one of the big houses on the western shore of Horizon Lake. He was grounded for smoking. His mother had found his stash behind the hall hamper, so David was home alone, watching *Scarface* on Retro_Flix.com.

David's computer was a Sony Triptych, the kind with a three-monitor layout and content spiral technology. David's dad invented the Triptych, and his dad's company, Sun Enterprises, sold them. Each monitor scanned and responded to the others, so when David image-searched the new Cadillac Pinnacle on Monitor 1, Mon2 splashed the latest stats from Gearhead.com. Mon3 responded with a vid of Gearhead's top model, Cynthia Sundae, washing a Caddy in her bathing suit, and so Mon1 answered with condom ads. It went around and around, over and over again.

Link by link the Triptych brought David from *Scarface* to Al Capone to James Cagney to James Dean and finally to StarryEyedStranger42.blogspot.com. Nora died on Monitor 2. The image was so clear, David could see her eyelids flutter.

He didn't know how to react (the monitors did: Mon1 flashed a webpage of Fast Meds for Low Prices). He decided to message his friends, to see if they'd seen it, to see what they thought. But just then the power cut, the yellow desk lamp dimmed and died, and David was alone in the dark.

Across the lake, Charlie Nuvola stood on the beach and stared at the yellow glare of David Sun's house on the opposite shore. Charlie cradled a suede jacket in his arms. The vintage leather smelled vaguely of soy sauce and the fruity perfume of a person he sincerely hoped he'd never see again. He didn't know about Nora Vogel's suicide. He didn't even own a computer. He just wanted to be alone.

And as he watched, the houses along the west bank went dark. A power outage. Charlie saw something prophetic in that. His house was off the grid. The generator continued to hum, and he identified with the lonely porch light burning away over his shoulder, self-sufficient.

Then there was a pop. The generator gasped, the porch light flicked off, and the yard went dark. He stood in the gloom until his eyes adjusted, and he could see the blue stars. They were winking.

1. Charlie and David

Even before Nora and the power died, Charlie's and David's lives were mixed up together like pigments on a palette.

Charlie and David lived on two sides of the same lake, Horizon Lake, which wasn't a real lake but a man-made reservoir. Horizon Lake was three miles long and one mile wide and marked the center of Westtown. There were mansions along the west bank, trees along the east. The biggest mansion belonged to the Suns. It was a four-story glass palace, split down the middle like a dollhouse so that the family inside was always visible. At night the Sun house, true to its name, blotted out the stars, tossing its white shadow across the water.

The west-bankers had long ago bought the land on the east bank, so they'd have no ugly houses to mar their view.

The only lot they couldn't buy belonged to a botanist and his wife—Charlie's parents. The land had been in the family for years, and they refused to give it up at any price. The Nuvolas kept an old map of Westtown on their den wall. Charlie had once calculated that if he folded the map in half, Egg Lake in the south and Olive Lake in the north would lie one on top the other, and he liked the natural symmetry. If he folded the map the other way, Charlie's and David's houses would come together like button and clasp.

David and Charlie attended the same all-boys Catholic school on the other side of Route 290. Saint Sebastian's ran from sixth grade through twelfth. Charlie was one of the odd ones who transferred in freshman year, breaking up a homeroom that had been constant three years running. Saint Seb's lauded alternative teaching methods. Rather than moving from room to room throughout the day, students stayed at one desk, taking Web-based classes on personal computers, progressing at their own pace. It was all part of the headmaster's directive to "prepare young men for the modern virtual workplace."

The school was named for Saint Sebastian, who survived a thousand arrows. Sometimes Charlie could relate.

"Here comes Charlie Freak."

"Hey, it's Mr. Magoo! Hey, Magoo!"

"Gnarly Charlie. You get those glasses off an old lady or what?"

Charlie Nuvola was weird. He looked weird; he acted weird; he was interested in weird things. Worst of all, he didn't seem to know or care that everyone else thought he was weird.

Charlie was an early bloomer. The summer after eighth grade, his upper lip was dotted with stiff, greasy hairs, and by freshman year, he towered over his classmates. From his mother, Charlie inherited a frilly mass of dark hair that loomed like a storm cloud when he leaned in to describe—in his low, rumbling voice—a *fascinating* strain of artichoke just discovered in Guam.

At lunch, Charlie sat alone, reading the latest issue of *Botanica* or one of his dog-eared Danny Houston novels (a series from the sixties about a dashing boy who solves crimes from a helicopter). Boys at the nearest table competed to land the most French fries in Charlie's hair before he absently swept them away. David Sun was the reigning champion.

The only person who encouraged Charlie was Coach Brackage, who presided over the school's miserable basketball team. Charlie was recruited for one season, and though he was tall, his shots were wild and halfhearted. "Focus, boy!" Coach yelled. "Keep your eyes up! And don't run like you're wearing flippers, for God's sake!"

When basketball season ended, Charlie was glad to have his afternoons back. He liked to follow the brambled path behind the school, away from the bright parking lot where David Sun and his friends lolled half out of their

cars, music booming through their walleyed speakers. The path lead into the woods. This was where Charlie fit. His big feet stepped easily between the rocks and knuckled tree roots, and the branches started just high enough for him to pass under without stooping. The clumsy bee making the lily dip, the lazy blink of a sunny patch when a cloud rolled across it, the distant mutter of dragonfly wings. Every branch, bug, and pebble was connected in a grand plan. This was Charlie's utopia — a world without people.

David Sun fit in by instinct. He had two best friends, John Pigeon (called Clay) and Artie Stubb. Clay, Artie, and David had sat together since sixth grade. Their row shifted from term to term, but the Pigeon-Stubb-Sun phalanx was never broken. The freshman-year arrival of Charlie Nuvola and another boy, Paul Lampwick, threatened to strand Clay in the back of the second row, but a last-minute transfer restored the natural order. Even so, the trio still resented Nuvola and Lampwick, who weren't lifers like them and who were both at Saint Seb's on pity scholarships. David, whose father's monitors topped every desk in the building, especially despised scholarship kids.

Girls liked David. He'd had a girlfriend — a beautiful blonde a year older than he, the star of every school play — until she dumped him on Labor Day. He'd cheated on her. It happened on Nantucket, which to David's mind was out of bounds and therefore fair game. It hadn't been satisfying. The girls on Nantucket were wild dancers, but tight

as clams when he got them alone. Two were steamed open with weed he bought from the local hippie, but he still came home a virgin. They wouldn't even let him past third base. Later, he bragged to Clay and Artie, only to discover the base system varied from region to region, and in western Massachusetts, David had barely rounded second.

"Ah, don't sweat it, Little Dog," Clay said, putting an arm around David's shoulder. Clay, despite being overweight, somehow always had a girlfriend and liked to dispense advice. "See, you've got to make her want it. You've got to run your hand up and down her side, see, and then you kind of graze your thumb . . ."

"Jesus, Clay," Artie said, grinding out his cigarette. "You want to make me sick?"

"I'm trying to tell our boy how to get some boob. . . ."

"Some boob?" Artie held his hands as if cupping a bowl. "Boob is not a substance you can have *some* of. You can't quantify boob."

David laughed, but Clay just shook his head. "So what? You have *fewer* boobs?"

"Right," said Artie, laughing too. "You have *fewer* boobs, and *less* ass."

That killed all three of them, and they actually rolled on the sidewalk outside the Pavilion like a bunch of bums. It was a good night.

Then came the afternoon in September, two weeks before the power outage. Charlie biked home from school, leaned

his rusty ten-speed next to his father's, and pulled open the whining screen door.

Charlie lived alone with his father, Thaddeus, who was a professor at Clark University on a sabbatical of undetermined duration. Thaddeus's passion was New England flora, and he spent hours in the backyard, pondering plants. Like Charlie, Thaddeus was tall. He had a long beard and bushy eyebrows that reminded people of the kitschy wax candles carved to look like tree-spirits. Absentminded by nature, he would crouch in a patch of poison ivy for hours with his field book, then come inside, muttering to himself, "Where did I put the Dr. Burt's?"

Charlie dropped his bag by the door. There were coffee dregs in the sink and pencil shavings on the table. Charlie deduced his father was home and had probably been doing the crossword. He put his hand to his chin (just like Danny Houston) and pondered what called him away.

The flushing toilet solved the mystery.

"Hey, pal, what's new?" Thaddeus said, emerging from the bathroom with the paper under his arm.

"Nothing."

Charlie downed his afternoon glass of milk in three swallows, then settled into the sofa. Drowsiness enveloped him like the musty cushions. No matter how alert he was at last bell, the comfort of home was like ether, usually knocking him out until suppertime. If the woods were his natural habitat, the Nuvola house, with its wood paneling

and clutter of paperbacks and magazines, was his den. Nothing could touch him here, off the grid.

"This one's got me stumped," Thaddeus said, meaning the crossword. "What about a nine-letter word for *truest pal*? Begins with a *c*?"

Charlie mumbled a response. He couldn't do word games.

Through his thickening doze, Charlie sensed his father watching him. He opened his eyes. Thaddeus was in the La-Z-Boy, leaning forward, hands folded. Charlie had seen his father stare this way at unclassified blossoms. Charlie felt uneasy.

"So, I had my meeting with your school counselor today."

"Oh?"

"The test results came in."

The first day of school, Saint Seb's administered "personality adjustment profiles." Ten pages of questions like, "If you were a spoon, what sort of handle would you have?"

"The counselor, Dr. Lightly, she told me your results suggested maladjustment." Thaddeus rubbed his hands together, his voice casual, as if they were discussing the latest article in *Botanica*. "They think you're depressed."

"Wait, what? What do you mean?"

"She mentioned Fixol." Thaddeus scratched at the bare patch of skin under his right eye. Fixol was a popular antidepressant.

Depressed. The word closed like a lid on his brain. And the way his dad smuggled it home, into their den, and dropped it with no more than mild scientific curiosity. He felt sick. Thaddeus placed a hand on Charlie's knee. His pinky was smudged with newsprint and graphite.

"That . . . can't be right." Charlie swallowed. It felt like a walnut was caught in his throat.

"Do you feel depressed?"

"I . . . don't know."

Thaddeus exhaled, his mustache poofing outward. "Well, think about it. OK, pal?" He patted Charlie's knee and rose from the armchair.

Charlie's mother had always said, "Normal follows the path of least resistance." Charlie thought he chose—on some level—to be different, but what if he was wrong? Wasn't he happy? At least sometimes? In the woods? By himself? A test couldn't determine that, could it?

Suddenly he couldn't breathe. Darkness crowded him, filling his nose and ears. It was like drowning. He turned over and puked on the floor.

"Are you OK?" Thaddeus rushed to his side. Charlie's face was green. "Sorry, buddy. I should have thrown that milk out a week ago."

That night, Charlie tossed and turned until three. He went to his desk, turned on the light, and made a list of times during the day when he was happy. Then he made a list of

the times he was sad. The columns were even but showed an obvious trend: Charlie was happy alone. He was miserable with others.

Then he rated, from one to ten, how he felt on average. He remembered when he was a kid, going swimming with his parents at Olive Lake, his dad hoisting him up on his shoulders, his mom laughing and taking a picture. That day was a ten.

He looked at the number he'd written. Three.

Charlie put his head in his hands and thought. He woke later, still at his desk, an oval puddle of drool on the blotter, his Afro dented on one side. He turned off the light and climbed into bed. He lay awake in the darkness for a few minutes, then whispered, *"OK."* In a moment he was asleep.