



Invisible

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Invisible

In all honesty I really do like my name. Chase Alexander Devereaux. I think if there's one thing that my mom did right, it was picking out a unique, cool-sounding name for her kid. Sometimes I really wish I was as cool looking as my name though, or that I didn't always act like such a fag.

Really it's not deliberate. Sometimes I try really hard to be anything but gay. I watch the other guys—and I know what you're thinking. You think I mean I check them out, and yeah, I can't help but do that too. But what I'm sayin is that I watch the really normal guys, the ones who are into sports, who act all totally straight, and I try to copy them. I try to lower the timber of my voice, not sound so nasally when I talk. I try to gesture with my hands in a manly sorta way instead of all limp-wristed and girly. I try to remember not to sit with my legs crossed, and I try really hard to avoid throwing a ball like a girl.

Sports just really isn't my thing, though. It's weird 'cuz you'd think I'd be all about sports. That's where all the hot guys are. All the muscle. All the butt-swatting and high fiving, hugging on each other during the games. But I just know I'm not good at it. I suck at almost all sports, and like when I try to participate in sports at school, I just make a fool of myself. Then the guys see what a dork I am, and instead of them liking me and thinking of me as their team member, they ridicule me. They tell me to quit being such a sissy and man up.

I've been trying to man-up all my life, really. I can't honestly say that I'd ever wanna be anything like my older brother Daryn, but there are times I envy him. At least he was good at Little League baseball. No one ever called him a fag, and if they did, he'd kill them. Daryn says I'm the cause of a lot of my own problems. He tells me to just quit acting the way I do and people will stop treating me like such an outcast. Sometimes I just hate him. He doesn't really know anything about me, and he's my own brother.

Today's gonna be different. I hope. I'm so nervous that I think I might throw up. Maybe I shouldn't wear this tie. See, I wanted to look nice because I have a big day at school. I'm giving a speech in my Oral Communications class, and like the whole class is going to be watching me. Nobody wears dress shirts and ties to school, though, so maybe I'll just wear this polo shirt. No, I can't wear short sleeves. Then it's even more obvious how puny my arms are, and how much a sissy I am when I gesture with my hands. I'm gonna wear this long-sleeve pullover. It's casual looking but not in a slobbish sorta way. I can't remember if I've ever seen

any of the cool kids wearing a shirt like this. I don't know. Definitely jeans, though. I gotta take off these khakis and find a pair of jeans.

It sucks because Oral Communications is right after lunch, and lunch is right after gym. I hate having gym third hour, right in the middle of the day. Our teacher is such a jerk. It's like I know he hears the stuff that the other guys say to me, and he just like totally ignores it. One time I even heard him laugh when one of em made a joke about how I was running. His name is Coach Schraeder, but most of the kids call him Schraeder the Masturbator behind his back. They're probably right. I think he has like two brain cells.

Brad is the worst. He's in my gym class, and he's like the leader or something. He's the one who always starts stuff. He says the first insult, and then the others laugh, and usually they join in. Even the other kids who are otherwise nice can't help but snicker at some of the mean things he says. I've tried to defend myself, to talk back to him a little bit. That makes it worse, 'cuz then he just mocks me. He like repeats back everything I say in a really overly-effeminate girly voice, and then everyone really does laugh. Ya know, I feel like I'm about two inches tall when he does that. I just want to die.

I really do hate Brad, but then on the other hand I can't deny how hot he is. He's totally a jock, and he has perfect hair. I wish sometimes I looked more like Brad. Instead I have this kind of hair that never looks good no matter how I comb it. When people look at him, immediately they want to be his friend. He has this smile that totally disarms you. He's so perfect-looking that you want to believe everything he says. You wanna feel like you're his best friend.

I'll never be Brad's friend though. Even if he changed and stopped picking on me, I'd still always hate him for what he's already done. Once he flushed my head in a toilet. He shoved me into my locker and closed it. He's knocked me down more times than I can count, and he's called me every name you could even think of.

Nobody is ever gonna tell on Brad though. They'd be stupid if they did. It'd be like suicide. He's so popular that even the teachers like him. Really I think even if the teachers knew all the mean stuff Brad did, they wouldn't do anything about it.

My speech is about global warming. We had to pick a controversial topic and make an argument for it. I know it's not really that controversial of an issue any more. Everyone knows global warming is happening. It's so obvious, but still there are a few morons left in the world who are in denial. I'm so nervous about it—I'm gonna throw up!

Yeah, I like the shirt, and thank god, it's gonna be a good hair day. Uggghh! Is that a zit? I have this big frickin zit right in the center of my forehead. Why does this always happen? Why today? I gotta get goin though. I can't keep obsessing about this stuff. It doesn't matter if I have a zit or not, nobody cares. It's not like I have anyone interested in me. And nobody's even gonna care about my speech either.

Mom's already left for work, and Daryn gets a ride with his friends. I walk. It's only like fourteen blocks, maybe a couple miles at the most. Sometimes my friend Shelly walks with me. She lives on the next block, but if her mom isn't working, she gets a ride to school. Her mom's pretty cool, and sometimes she swings over and picks me up. Not always though. Her mom's like pretty much a scatterbrain, and she's always running late.

Shelly didn't text me, so I guess I'm on my own today. It's strange how my one and only friend is a girl, and really I don't even like girls—not that way anyhow. I told her last year—when I was fourteen—that I'm gay. She was cool about it, and she kinda acted like it was no big deal. Even though she knows a little bit about the stuff with Brad and his friends, I don't tell her everything. In fact, I never even told her about the swirly incident. It was too embarrassing.

Plus Shelly is kind of popular herself. She's not popular like Brad, but she is definitely not one of the school losers...like me. She'd probably say something to one of the teachers if she knew all the times Brad tormented me. That'd just make things worse. Or like she might even say something directly to Brad, and that would be a catastrophe. But really I think she sort of likes Brad, well at least as much as all the other girls in school do. Brad's really friendly to the girls, and it's almost impossible for them not to like him.

As always, the school hallways are so crowded. Seems weird to be so invisible amongst all these people, but invisible is good. An invisible day is a better-than-average day. Invisibility means no name calling, no fag jokes, no gut punches or pranks. On an invisible day, I make it out unscathed. Sometimes I'm even able to feel good about myself—about the A I got in geometry, about the positive comment Mr. Phillips wrote on my composition paper, or about the fact that Trent Richards smiled at me.

Trent's my fantasy lover. LOL! Seriously, he is just the nicest guy. He doesn't have the model looks or the muscle that a guy like Brad has, but he's every bit as dreamy. Trent is more quiet, but he's not nerdy like me. I'm like 100% positive he's not gay, though. One time back in my

freshman year I helped him with his Algebra assignment, and sometimes I wish he'd need my help again.

"Shelly, wassup?" Her locker is only a couple doors down from mine.

"Nice shirt," she says, smiling at me. "What's the occasion?"

I shrug. "Nothin... but thanks. Ya know, I gotta give that speech today."

"Really? Cool... you ready?"

I sigh. "Oh my God, I've like rehearsed it a zillion times. I hate this... I hate public speaking!"

She steps closer to me, placing her hand on my arm, just above my elbow. "You'll do fine. Chase, you're so smart. I can't wait to hear your speech."

I laugh nervously, embarrassed. "It's dumb really. Boring... global warming."

Now she shrugs. "Better than mine. I'm doing Veganism."

"Is your speech today, too?" I ask, closing my locker and holding a stack of books against my chest.

She nods. "Oh don't worry, I'm sure I won't outshine you. I could've done more research, ya know."

"Wow, well I'm glad..." I stammer a bit. "Um... I mean I guess misery loves company, ya know. Glad we're doin it the same day."

Someone behind us tugs at her arm. It's her friend Kelli. "Come on," she says, ignoring me.

"Hey, I'll try ta catch up with ya at lunch, okay? Don't be nervous!" Quickly she turns to give her attention to her airhead friend.

"Okay, thanks," I mumble. She doesn't hear me. Well it's cool. First and second hour are snoozers. Geometry and Biology. My favorite class is fifth hour Composition. Sixth hour is Spanish.

As long as I can get into my first hour classroom unnoticed, everything will be fine. Nothing ever really happens 'til gym. That's when I have to deal with Brad...and his friends. Maybe I should skip gym today. I hardly think the Masturbator would even notice my absence. I can say I'm sick, and I won't be lying. I do feel like I might puke. No, that'll ruin my attendance record, and I might get sent home. Then I'd have to do my speech another day and go through it all again. I'll just stay invisible. Hopefully gym will be free period like it is half the time. Lot of times the coach doesn't feel like conducting any sort of organized activity and just lets us do whatever. Shoot hoops, use the weightlifting equipment. I can do what I always do—bounce a dodge ball against the wall for an hour.

Geometry's boring. Who cares about axioms and theorems? All I can think about is the speech. I have it memorized, every last word. I've said it aloud maybe a thousand times. I can do it. It's just like five minutes. Then it'll be overwith. It's no big deal really, not in the scheme of life. It seems big now, but it's just another assignment. God, why can't I be like Shelly? She has to give a speech too, and she doesn't even seem worried about it.

The worst thing is that Brad's in my speech class too, and so is Trent. When I mess up, which I know I will, Brad's gonna laugh his ass off. It'll just give him one more reason to abuse me—more ammunition. And I can't humiliate myself, not in front of Trent. I'd die. I'd totally just die!

God I'm so glad first hour's over. Two more hours, then lunch... then...oh man. I gotta get to Biology, but I'm gonna be sick. I head for the bathroom. I hate this. Oh God, I'm on my knees, puking into the toilet. Please don't let anyone come in. Please let me stay invisible!

Thankfully I only get a stern look from Mrs. Dennison when I walk into Biology two minutes past the bell. I take my seat, opening my textbook to the page number she has written on the chalk board. She calls on me, asking me a question about photosynthesis. I guess it is my punishment for my tardiness. Thankfully I know the answer. She moves on. Invisible again.

My heart begins to race when the bell rings. Gym! Why does this one hour seem like ten? Sixty minutes... no really only fifty. Third hour is from 10:05 to 10:55a.m. I can do it. I can blend in for fifty short minutes, and then it'll be over. Then my speech. I'm gonna throw up again! No, calm down Chase. You're such a fag. Brad's right. Quit acting like a wuss. Man-up, like Daryn said. It's a frickin speech, for God's sake. No big deal.

"We've got physical fitness tests coming up, and today we're gonna start getting ready." Coach Shraeder is addressing the class. We sit on the bleachers, hanging on his every word—Not! I hear what he's saying but am only half listening. All I can think about is my speech class. He says something about four categories. Pull-ups, sit-ups, running, and push-ups... I don't know. Whatever.

Coach has us count off into four groups. Shit! I end up in Brad's group. Of course Coach selects Brad as the group leader. This totally sucks. Each group is sent to a different corner of the gym. We have to work on the particular physical fitness requirement, and the group leader then writes down our result. Running is the easiest, and that's what we do first. We start at our corner and run laps around the perimeter of the gym. We

have to complete a mile, and we run together as a group. Not hard to blend in. I go unnoticed. We don't have any fat kids in our group, and everyone pretty much keeps up. You just have to complete a mile, that's all. Doesn't matter how long it takes.

I'm out of breath after the run, and I slink off to the corner. I sit on the bleachers, waiting for the whistle which will indicate that time is up and we must move on to the next category. Brad's writing on his clipboard, checking off the names. "Faggot!" I know he's talking to me, and I look up. "Get your lazy ass over here and quit slacking! I should make you run again."

I look at him, bewildered. I try to speak, but there's a lump in my throat. "Why you think you get to sit your lazy, faggot ass down, while the rest of us are out here participating? Did I say you could take a break?" I look around me. Several of the boys in our group are sitting on the gym floor. We're exhausted from the run.

"Um...no, I'm sorry," I say. I know what I sound like. I know he's gonna mock me. He rolls his eyes and turns away. Invisible again.

The whistle blows and we move to the next event. It's chaos for a few moments as the entire class changes places in the gym. Sit-ups. Another easy event. I can do a million sit-ups, I swear. We only have to do fifty, though. I get paired with a partner named Steve. He's all right. He's never picked on me, but I can tell he's disappointed that he got stuck with me. Steve's skinny like me, and we get done with our sit-ups early. Brad comes over and is holding his clipboard. He addresses Steve, ignoring me.

"You guys done?"

"Yeah." Steve nods.

"You did your fifty?" Again we both nod.

"What about you, fag?" he finally speaks to me. "Did you do em all?"

He's starting to piss me off. Why's he always got to call me names? I feel my face redden. "I did em," I reply.

"What?" he says, really loudly. "Speak up, queerboy!"

"Yes! I did them." My voice is squeaky.

"Do twenty-five more. Now!" I stare up at him, disbelievingly. "You heard me! Do twenty-five more or I'm marking you 'incomplete'."

I look at Steve. He shrugs, and I know I have no choice. I again assume the position and do my extra sit-ups. It's so humiliating, I think I might cry. My face is hot, but I don't say anything. I remember what Daryn said. I gotta man-up. The hour's half over, then it'll be done.

I'm worried about the pull-ups and push-ups. I have no strength in my arms. They're like twigs, really. I'm pretty sure I can do the push-ups though, but I'm already tired. The extra sit-ups didn't help. The anxiety over the speech doesn't help either.

Brad doesn't even do any push-ups himself. He doesn't need to. He's already ready for the physical fitness tests, which is why he was chosen to be a group leader. He walks back and forth, first in front of us, then circling around behind. I'm doing my set, twenty-five total, and I'm on number eight. My arms are starting to shake. I doubt I can do seventeen more, but I press on.

I know he's behind me. He's stopped walking. "Count em aloud!" he orders. I think he's addressing the group, but his remark is directed solely at me. "I said, 'count em, faggot!'"

I stop, my chest pressed against the floor. I feel that same embarrassment, and I'm pissed. I push myself with all my strength. "Nine!" I yell. "Ten...Eleven."

I feel his foot pressing into my back as he steps on me, forcing me down, "Five!" he yells, resetting my count.

This can't be happening! My arms are again shaking. As he removes his foot from my back, I continue. "Six...Seven...Eight."

His foot slams into my lower back a second time, again forcing me flat against the floor. "Five!"

I feel the tears, and now I'm visibly trembling. "Please..." I beg.

"What?" he yells. "Speak up, Faggot!"

All the others have finished their set. They're watching me, and I feel the tears streaming down my cheeks. I hear snickering and laughter. I'm mortified, but I can't stop crying. The whistle blows. "Incomplete!" Brad calls out, checking the box on his clipboard and smirking at me. "You're such a wuss." He walks away from me and the group heads over to the final event.

I wipe my face on my tee shirt and head over to the corner which contains the pull-up bar. I'm last in line, of course. We have to do five pull-ups, and I'm terrified. I've never been able to do even one pull-up, and today is worse than normal. I'm already worn out, and the push-ups made my arms feel like jelly. As I watch the other group members, it seems so easy. A couple of them struggle on the last one or two, but they all complete their sets. Now it's my turn.

I step into place below the bar. I wait for Brad to grab me by the waist and hoist me up like he's done with the other guys. Instead he shoves a

step stool in front of me. Leaning in, as if to whisper in my ear, he speaks real loudly. "I ain't touchin you, faggot."

Thank God for small favors. I don't want him to touch me.

I step up on the stool and stretch to reach the bar above my head. As I do so, I notice how quiet the gym is. I glance around me. Everyone's done with their events, and I'm the last one. I take a deep breath, hoping the whistle will blow and save me. "Hurry up!" Brad orders.

I look to my left and see Trent. He was in another group, but of course they're done. As I grip the bar, I feel the step stool being removed, and suddenly I'm just dangling there. I look into Trent's eyes. I gotta do this! I can't let him see me fail. How mortifying!

I strain myself and pull against the bar, willing myself to rise. I can do it...just gotta get my chin up over this bar. Oh my God, it's so hard! I'm trembling, my arms shaking. Please God, Help me! I get halfway up, but it's no good. I fall back down, desperately clinging to the bar.

Brad bursts into laughter. "Come on, faggot! You can at least do one!" Now Brad's not the only one laughing.

Trent is right there, standing behind Brad. He's watching the whole thing, and I wonder what he thinks. He knows Brad is right. He can see what a wimp I am. He can see how much of a fag I am compared to everyone else.

I'm so emotional. The sting of my tears burns my cheeks. "He's crying!" Brad announces. "He's a faggot and a crybaby!"

My arms give out, and I release the bar, tumbling to the floor.

"Incomplete!" Brad says, and once more I hear the laughter. I look up from my humble position on my knees and see Trent staring down at me. He's not laughing, but he doesn't say anything either. He just turns and walks away.

The whistle blows.

I wait for the others to finish their showers before I take one myself. I'm the last one out, and as I head for the cafeteria, I know I can't eat. Instead I turn and go down to the bathroom, quickly scurrying into the back stall. I'm going to vomit again. I can feel it, but there is nothing left in my stomach. Dry heaves are the worst. They hurt worse than the sit-ups.

I take deep breaths, trying to calm myself, and sit on the toilet seat. Why am I crying again? Why do I always have to cry? I look up at the wall, and see the graffiti, and it really is the last straw. There it is—my name—written in bold black permanent marker: CHASE D SUCKS COCK.

When did it all start? When did I become this victim? It must be something about me, some characteristic or defect that has made me so inferior. Bad luck? Poor genes? Daryn isn't like me though. It's just weakness. The worst thing about it, though, is that most of what Brad says about me is true. I really am a fag. I really am gay, and even though I've never come out to anyone but Shelly, they all know.

They all know what I am, and they know I deserve everything I get. Of course they do, or they wouldn't just stand there watching as Brad humiliates me. They wouldn't laugh at my expense. Trent wouldn't just stare at me, standing there like a statue. Certainly he'd say something in my defense...unless he felt the same as Brad. Unless I deserved it.

I know I can't give my speech now. Brad is right. I'm a weakling. I'm a failure. I'm incomplete. I decide what I'm going to do. I'll tell Mr. Frye that I'm not ready with my speech. I'll take an F. It doesn't really matter. My grades are good enough that I'll still pass the class.

I sit there on the toilet seat for the next forty minutes, waiting for the bell. Finally it rings, and I go wash my face and head for speech class.

I slip into my seat right before the final bell, and Shelly leans over to me. "Where were you? I saved you a seat at lunch." I don't have time to answer before the bell rings.

Class starts immediately.

"We have a lot of speeches to get through and less than an hour to do it. Let's get started." He pulls a lectern over to the center of the room, directly in front of the chalk board. "Who'll be first?"

Brad stands up, without even raising his hand. "I'll go first, Mr. Frye," he volunteers, and steps forward, stepping behind the podium.

"Very well, go ahead Mr. Davenport."

Brad's speech is on steroid use. Yawn. His delivery, though, is animated. He speaks confidently and with conviction, and Mr. Frye seems impressed. So do the students, and they give him a big round of applause. The next volunteer steps forward, this time a girl named Mindy.

Shelly gives her speech about halfway through class, and she does well. She's so convincing that I debate committing to Veganism myself. There are only about four students left, none of them volunteering. Mr. Frye has to choose someone, and he picks Randall. I heave a sigh of relief, praying we run out of time before it's my turn.

There is fifteen minutes left in class, and only two remaining speeches which haven't been presented. Trent and I are all that remain.

"I'll go next," Trent offers. I cross my fingers and hope he's long-winded.

As Trent steps behind the lectern, he looks down at his notes and then out at his audience. He seems nervous, and I think his knees are actually wobbling a bit. I feel for him, empathizing with his anxiety. I'd have never expected him to be the type to fear public speaking though—not Trent!

He takes a deep breath and then slowly lets it out. His sigh is audible, and it feels almost like time has stood still for a few moments. Then he speaks, his voice at first wavering.

"Teen bullying is an epidemic in the United States," he says. I stare at him wide eyed as he looks up. His gaze locks upon my own. "And it's got to stop!"

The room is deathly quiet, and I think I hear my own heart beating in my ears. Trent pauses, as if collecting his thoughts, and then he looks down at his notes. Quickly he picks them up and tears them in half, rather dramatically. He tosses them behind himself, and they cascade to floor.

"I have a lot of statistics. I can tell you how many kids have killed themselves in the past two years as a result of bullying. I can tell you how many of them were gay or lesbian. I can tell you which states they are from, and what hate crime laws we have in place in each of these states.

"I can tell you a lot of things about bullying and what it does to a person." Tears are forming in his eyes as he continues. "But sadly, I can't tell you that I've done my part to make it stop."

"I'm so sorry," Trent says, as once again he stares at me. "I'm so sorry that I stood there all those times and said nothing. I'm so terribly sorry..." He reaches up to wipe the tears from his cheeks as I feel the sting of my own tears running down my face. I wonder if he'll be able to go on; he seems overcome, and the entire room is stunned by the weight of his emotion.

"I witnessed something today...a few minutes ago, actually. Something happened right here in our school, and let me tell you, there are horror movies I've seen that were less scary." He shakes his head and then looks out into the audience, making eye contact with several of his classmates. "You see, there's this person I've admired for a really long time. I have no problem telling you who he is, but I'm afraid that at this point to mention his name may only further add to his humiliation.

Certainly he'd have every right to be ashamed of me now, because...well, I'm ashamed of myself.

"This person I'm talking about is so smart. He's the kind of kid who seems to know all the answers... like a genius or something. I don't get it really. I don't know how somebody can store all that information in their head, but he does.

"He's also a really nice guy. I've never heard him say a mean word about anyone. When all the rest of us stand around talking smack about one another, he minds his own business. He doesn't tell cruel jokes. He doesn't make fun of anyone, and he's always very helpful.

"I remember one time this person helped me in one of my classes. I guess I was too dumb to understand the material, but he never treated me that way. He saved my butt, really. And I bet he'd do the same for just about anyone in this classroom." Trent pauses and looks directly at Brad. "Well, almost anyone.

"I've been noticing for quite some time that he isn't treated right here. I've heard a lot of people say mean and nasty things about him, call him names, mimic him mercilessly. They write things about him on the walls in the bathroom. They hurt him so badly that it makes him cry, and then... then they laugh at him for crying.

"I heard a group of guys bragging about how they'd taught him a lesson. They said they flushed his head in the toilet." Trent continues to stare directly at Brad, who squirms a bit in his seat, in spite of the cocky smirk that remains plastered across his face. "I guess they thought it was funny. I guess they thought he deserved it.

"But I have to ask myself, 'What'd he ever do? Why does he deserve to be treated like this?' I think all of us know the answer to this. He's different. He's quiet; he's sensitive. He doesn't act like a macho jerk. He just doesn't fit in...and you know what that means. We all know what that means. You have to fit in around here in order to be accepted. God forbid someone could be their own individual. God forbid someone could be unique in any way!"

Trent pauses and takes a deep breath. I'm crying openly now, disbelieving the words I'm hearing. Trent rubs his forehead and looks down, as if ashamed before continuing. "What happened today was the worst thing I've ever seen in my life. I saw this kid publicly shamed and mocked. I saw him tormented and called horrible names. I saw dozens of other guys standing around laughing while it was happening. And I saw myself there too... doing nothing!

“When I think about it, there is so much I could have done. I could have intervened. I could have said, ‘Stop!’ I could have given this kid some support, some comfort. I could have stood up for him. Instead I remained a bystander.

“I remained silent and let it happen. Shame on me, and shame on all of you. Shame on you for knowing and doing nothing! Shame on you for ignoring what is happening right before your eyes. You all know it’s wrong. I know it’s wrong. Yet we all continue to allow it to happen.

“I want to make a pledge to this friend...well, actually I’m not sure I deserve to even be called his friend. But regardless, I want to pledge to him from this moment forward, it will never happen again. Never! Never in my presence, and I’d better never find out it has happened any other time. I don’t know if he can forgive me for being a bystander to his torture, but I swear ... I won’t stand by silently any longer.”

Trent is no longer crying. He’s no longer shaking, and his knees have stopped knocking. He stands there confidently, seemingly enraged and passionate. “Thank you,” he says quietly, and then takes his seat.

Mr. Frye is leaning down to pick up the papers from Trent’s notes as the bell sounds. I turn to see Shelly’s tear-streaked face, and then I smile meekly. I step toward her but suddenly stop, as I make direct eye contact with Trent. He steps over and places his hand on my shoulder as I turn to him and find myself wrapped protectively in his warm embrace.

I suddenly no longer feel invisible.



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