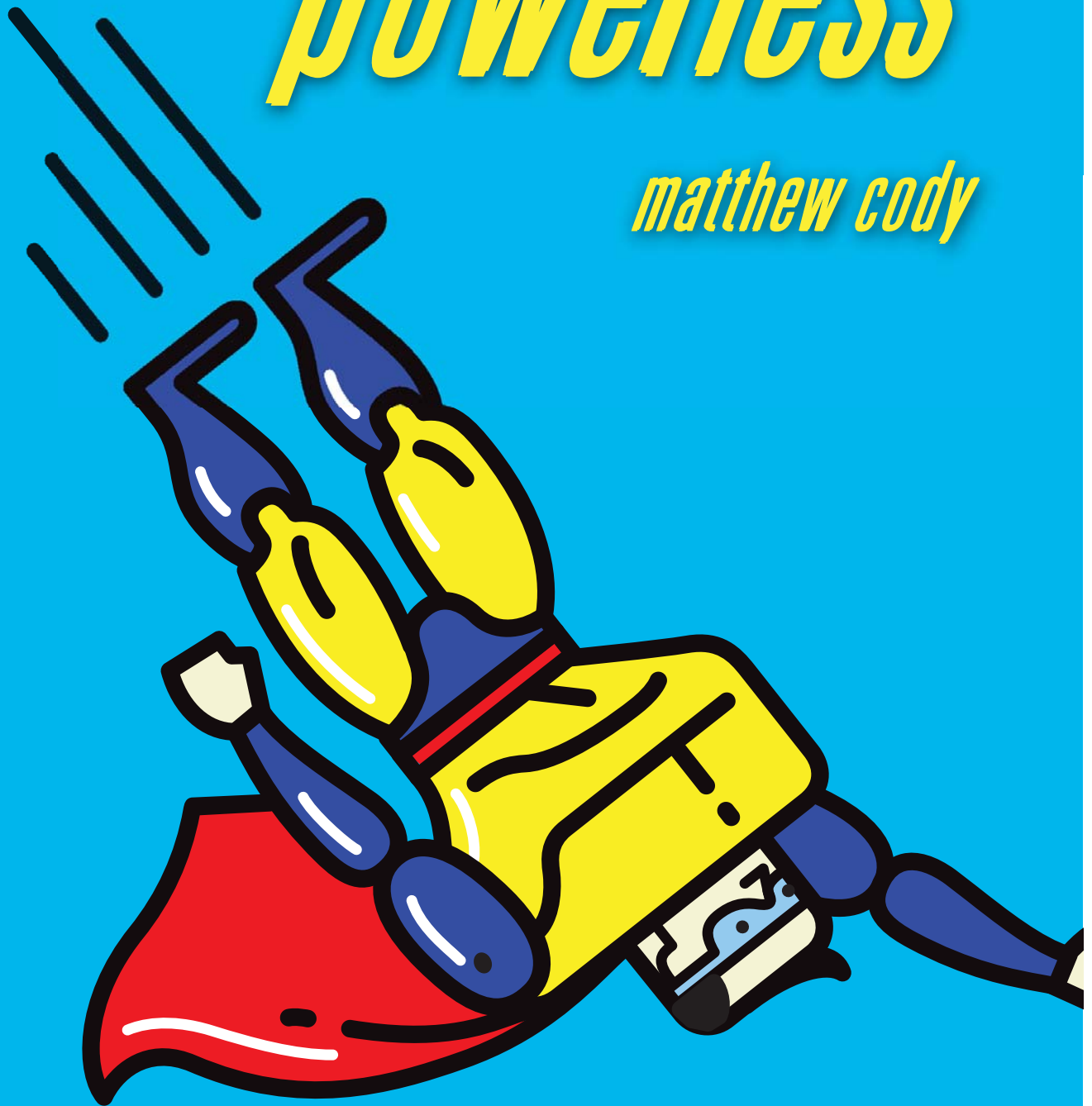


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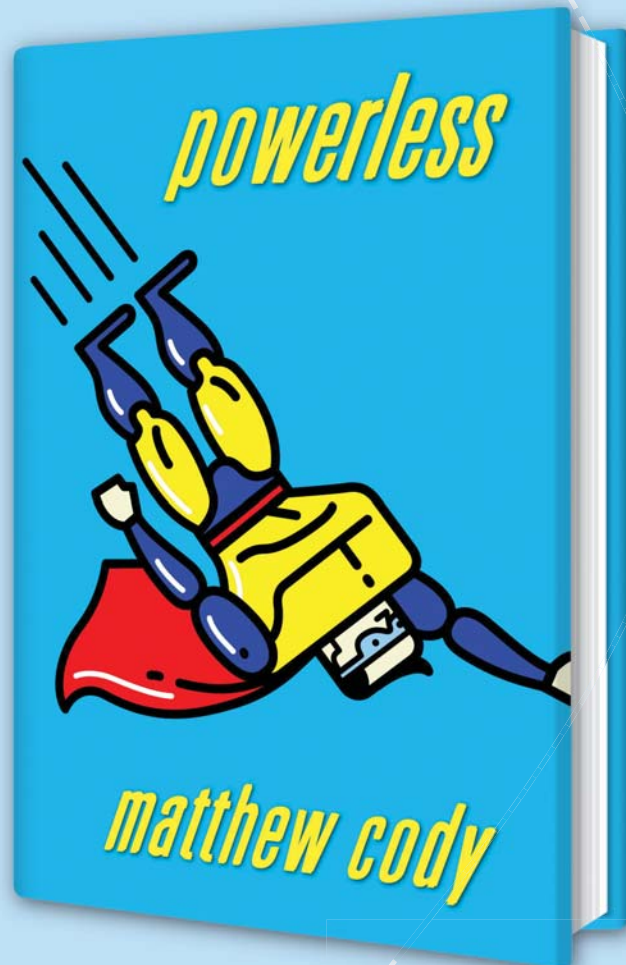
matthew cody



chapter sample

Can one powerless boy help a group of superheroes?

The kids in the town called Noble's Green are superheroes. But when Daniel, a boy without any superpowers, moves to Noble's Green, he discovers that a super-villain has been stealing the Supers' powers! Daniel and his new friends will learn that it takes more—and sometimes less—than superpowers to be a hero.



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Available wherever books are sold!

Prologue

The wind howled in Michael's ears. He would be picking bugs out of his hair for days, but he didn't care. The air down here was unusually warm for this time of year—an Indian summer. The heat and moisture had collected into a low-hanging cloud that hid the peak of Mount Noble, but it couldn't hide Eric and Mollie. He could just make out their silhouettes against the dark cloud-wall, and though he couldn't tell which was which, it was safe to assume that Mollie was out front. She was faster, the fastest flier Michael had ever seen. But then, speed wasn't everything.

He had given them a head start by counting to thirty before even leaving the ground. By now they were a good two hundred yards in the lead. Michael smiled to himself as he took in a deep breath of mountain air, savoring the clean tang of pine in his nostrils, and watched as the forest disappeared beneath his feet—this was going to be fun.

It wasn't enough to be naturally fast; you needed to know how to ride the wind if you wanted to win. If you fought too hard against nature, you would quickly tire and lose. So Michael held back until he found an updraft of warm air from the valley. Spreading his arms, he caught the wave of heat and added to it his own power, hurling himself straight up into the ceiling of gray cloud cover. Conditions were turning rough up here where the warm gusts met the cold, high winds, and soon the skies would be too dangerous to ride. Already Michael could feel his skin prickle with static, and it wouldn't take long for that static to turn to lightning.

But Michael would end this race long before that happened. Up and still farther up he soared, expending the last of the momentum borrowed from the updraft. In a great curving arc he flew, breaking the cloud ceiling for a glimpse of the twilight skies above, and then, folding his arms tight at his sides, he dove back down to earth like a rocket, like a meteor.

Cold rain stung his face as he plummeted through the mist, but he laughed anyway. He felt the speed in the pit of his stomach, in the tips of his fingers; he felt the speed in every nerve and it was exhilarating. When he cleared the clouds, he spotted Eric and Mollie, each a few hundred yards from the peak. They were looking over their shoulders, searching for him, confused by his sudden disappearance. But he wasn't behind them, he was above and in front, just

seconds from the peak, just seconds from the chosen finish line.

He almost felt sorry for them, losing another race, their last race all together, but his pity didn't last long. It was swept away in the thrill of speed and freedom, drowned out by the roar of the wind. Michael was just born to fly. . . .

From the moment he opened his eyes, Michael felt as if something was wrong. It was a strange feeling, like waking up in a dark room in a bed that wasn't your own. But this was his bed—he recognized the sheets dotted with little stars and half-moons, and sunlight streamed through his open window, revealing blue sky outside. He was in his own room and he had woken to a beautiful early morning. And yet there was this nagging *itch*, somewhere in the back of his brain. Scratching at him, as if he'd forgotten or misplaced something.

Michael looked at the alarm clock next to his bed—6:20 *a.m.* Far too early for a lazy summer morning. Squeezing his eyes shut, he rolled over and tried to will himself back to sleep. But it was no good. He was wide-awake now, and after a few minutes of restless tossing and turning, he gave in with a sigh and hauled himself out of bed. Maybe if he got started with his day, he'd feel better.

Unsatisfied, the little itch in his head continued to scratch.

Michael grabbed a wrinkled pair of jeans off the floor and the dirty T-shirt draped over the bedpost—he didn't feel like

digging through his dresser for a clean one. When he had finished dressing, he looked in the mirror and gave himself a weak smile.

“Happy birthday, Me,” he told himself.

He certainly didn’t look thirteen. At least he didn’t look the way he’d always pictured himself looking at such an important age. He’d always pictured the thirteen him as tall, more grown-up, maybe even with a muscle or two. But the boy in the mirror looked just as short and just as skinny. He looked, well, twelve.

As he frowned at the mirror, he noticed something odd. Something in the reflection that shouldn’t be there. Once again he was in a room that he didn’t quite recognize. It was something about the walls. . . .

When he turned around, he saw them everywhere. Drawings. They were taped to the wall above the bed, on the closet door, even stuck to the window. Everywhere he looked were more drawings—he must have been half blind not to notice them before. Leaning in close, he studied one. It was an ink sketch of a boy floating in a cloudy sky. Across the top, in bold Magic Marker, were the words “You Can Fly.”

As he took a step back, he realized that they were all pictures of the same thing, repeated over and over again: the boy soaring above the rooftops or over the mountains or through the clouds. It was a little frightening. Though he couldn’t remember drawing them, they looked like his—they

all had the same awkward hands that he could never get right. And each one contained the same message written in his own messy scrawl:

You Can Fly.

Michael's first impulse was to call out for his parents. They were sleeping just down the hall, and if he yelled, they'd be there in a matter of seconds. But he was thirteen today, and thirteen was the age when you started taking care of yourself, when you started figuring things out, and so that was precisely what he decided to do.

Michael knew that when he was little, he would sometimes walk in his sleep. He'd wake up at the foot of his bed or at the other end of the hall. Once his parents had caught him at the front door. Perhaps he had gotten up in the middle of the night and drawn a bunch of pictures. He hadn't sleepwalked in years, but what other explanation was there?

Then something began to happen: the longer he stared at the drawings, the more they started to feel . . . familiar. The harder he concentrated, the stronger the feeling got. There *was* something about them that he recognized, beyond the badly drawn hands. It was like a memory of a dream—it didn't make sense exactly, yet it seemed so real. The itch in his head grew insistent and when he closed his eyes, he could almost hear the sound of wind roaring in his ears, feel the cold, crisp air biting against his cheek. . . .

All at once he felt sick. A queasy feeling twisted in his gut, and his head threatened to split open with a jabbing pain. His knees buckled as the room started to spin, and he had to grab hold of his desk just to stay upright. An awful fear gripped him—that there was something waiting for him when he closed his eyes. It was like a bad dream coming to life, a shadow blacker than the surrounding black—a living menace in the dark. And it was reaching for him, reaching . . .

And like that, it was gone. He opened his eyes and the darkness, the spinning, the horrible sickness—all of it vanished as quickly as it had come. The itch receded once more to the back of his brain, chased there by the terrible shadow.

“HAPPY BIRTHDAY, MICHAEL!”

He looked up to see his parents in the doorway. They were still in their pajamas.

“Hey, Michael, what’s the matter?” asked his dad. “You look a little pale.”

Michael thought about telling them everything that had just happened—the mysterious drawings, the strange memories of cold wind . . . the thing in the dark. They were his parents—surely they could help?

“I’m . . . I’m fine. It’s just a little early in the morning,” he answered instead. He was thirteen today, after all.

To Michael’s parents his birthday party probably looked just like any other. The kids finished up their cake speckled with melted candle wax and went out into the yard to play catch.

Eric teased Rohan whenever he dropped the ball (which was most of the time), while Mollie complained that boys didn't throw straight anyway, so why were they even playing such a stupid game? Louisa and little Rose just watched and cheered and tried to ignore Simon as he flicked ladybugs at their hair. But to Michael, everything felt different. He couldn't get those pictures out of his head, or the fear that if he shut his eyes for too long, something would be there waiting for him.

His friends were acting strange, too. On the outside they seemed all right—joking around and laughing—but Michael caught them giving each other looks when they thought he wasn't paying attention. It reminded him of when Charlie Campbell's dad passed away—how all the kids at school treated Charlie on his first day back. Everyone had been extra nice, but no one had been themselves.

When they got bored with playing catch, Michael half-heartedly asked what they wanted to do next. Rose pointed up at the sky and grabbed Michael's hand. "Let's go up! Let's go up!" she was saying.

Michael was about to ask Rose what she meant, but before he could say anything, Louisa shushed her sister and whispered something in her ear. For some reason Rose turned red-faced, ashamed. That was when Michael noticed how quiet it had turned. He looked around to see his friends all watching him, as if they were expecting him to burst into flames or something.

Michael didn't know why, but this made him absolutely furious. Why were they all staring at him anyway?

"Aren't you a little old to be picked up?" Michael snapped. "What are you, Rose, some kind of baby?" He turned to the rest of his friends. "And why do you all keep staring at me? What's the matter with you?"

Louisa didn't look at Michael; she just put her arm around her sister and gently pulled her away. But Mollie turned and stalked off. Without a word, she got on her bike and pedaled away.

Michael looked around, confused. His head felt thick, as if it were stuffed with cotton balls. His eyes stung with tears. "What's going on?" he asked. "What'd I do?"

Eric took Michael by the shoulder, scowling as Mollie disappeared down the street.

"You didn't do anything, Michael. Mollie's just being a girl, you know?" he said, tossing him a catcher's mitt. "Here, wanna throw the ball around some more?"

But Michael didn't want to be outside anymore. He didn't want to be around *them* anymore. He dropped the mitt at Eric's feet and went inside without bothering to say goodbye.

After dinner he said good night early and went up to his room to be alone. He tried reading a comic, but it was just another story about some superhero doing impossible things, and that annoyed him, too. He found himself wondering why all those comics had to feature people doing crazy

stuff, like lifting cars over their heads and outrunning trains. It was really pretty stupid when you thought about it.

Once again Michael studied the drawings on his wall. A flying boy. It was as if someone had collected a montage of dreams and plastered his wall with them. A child's dreams.

He walked over to his desk and ripped the first picture down. The corners tore away, leaving four little triangles of paper and tape stuck to the wall. He ripped down another. Then another. It felt good. He was reaching for more when he saw something moving in the moonlight just outside his window. Michael's house was three stories tall, and his room was on the top floor. An oak tree grew outside his window, and the uppermost branches reached almost, but not quite, to the window. There, sitting in the tree, was Mollie. She was wearing a Windbreaker with the hood up, but he could still see her face. She looked upset, and she might even have been crying, but it was hard to see in the dark. As he watched, she slowly lifted from the branches of the giant oak until she was no longer in the tree but above it, several feet above the highest branches. And she was waving goodbye.

At that moment a cloud must have passed in front of the moon because the yard was suddenly covered in shadow, and Michael couldn't make out anything. He was so shocked that he couldn't even speak. He just stood there, frozen, waiting for the cloud to pass. When it did, Mollie was gone. All that was left was the old oak, swaying in the breeze.

Michael leaned heavily on his desk. He wanted so badly

to give in to that itch—that dim memory somewhere in the corners of his mind—but the sickness threatened to return, and with it the shadow that haunted him. If he allowed himself to remember anything, he'd have to remember *everything*, and that was something he just didn't have the strength to do.

Michael suddenly surprised himself with a laugh—what an imagination he had, to think he saw Mollie out there floating in the yard! He had clearly spent too many hours reading too many comics and wasting his time with stupid drawings. Now he was seeing things—menacing shadows in his head and friends floating in trees. The sickness passed again with a few deep breaths, and this time the itch disappeared entirely and for good. His head clear for the first time all day, Michael gathered up the rest of his drawings and dumped them all, unceremoniously, into the garbage.

It was easy to forget now. A new voice in his head was whispering to him, telling him that it was time to put away childish things. He realized now that the voice had been trying to talk to him all day long, but he'd refused to hear it until now—that the itch had been keeping him too distracted. But no longer. He pulled the shade down, so he wouldn't be tempted to look out again at the old oak, and climbed into bed. He turned out the light, and before long he was fast asleep.

You Can Fly.

That night, and every night thereafter, Michael dreamt ordinary dreams.

You Can Fly.

And he never flew again.

Chapter One
The New Kid

*WELCOME TO NOBLE'S GREEN, PENNSYLVANIA—
THE SAFEST TOWN ON EARTH!*

T*he safest town on earth?* thought Daniel. *Couldn't sound lamer.*

Daniel Corrigan and his family saw the sign from their car just a few miles outside town. When it came into view, Daniel's father honked the horn of their minivan as his mother clapped her hands. Of course Daniel's baby brother, Georgie, had to join in, squealing with delight while kicking his plump legs against his car seat. Georgie was only two years old and he always just assumed that everyone was clapping for him, which was usually the case. Daniel's parents clapped when Georgie smiled or spoke or even burped.

Instead of joining in the applause, Daniel just buried his

nose deeper in his book. His mom warned him over and over again that reading in the car would make him sick, but he did it anyway. The Sherlock Holmes mystery *The Hound of the Baskervilles* was one of his favorites. Daniel had a thing for detective stories, and Sherlock Holmes was the best detective ever. Period. While Daniel was completely aware that a middle-aged, pipe-smoking British sleuth was not the typical hero of the average twelve-year-old boy, peer pressure meant little to him. He liked spending his time amidst the gaslit streets and horse-drawn carriages, the dangerous arch-criminals and, of course, trusty sidekick Dr. Watson.

Daniel sometimes wished for a trusty sidekick. All he had was Georgie, who was too young to be of much help in anything. *With a sidekick like Georgie, not even Holmes would have solved many crimes*, thought Daniel. *He would have been too busy clapping all the time.*

Besides, Daniel understood something that Georgie didn't—that his parents were clapping to get their minds off why they were moving in the first place. They were moving to Noble's Green because that was where Gram lived, and she was very, very sick. For Daniel, the best way to escape that sad fact was to disappear between the covers of a well-read book.

The moving truck was waiting for them by the time the family minivan turned onto Elm Lane, the Corrigan family's new address. The truck was backed into the driveway as far as it could reach—it was one of those big tractor-trailer types

and the front cab stuck out into the street. He didn't understand why they would need all that stuff, even if they *were* going to be here for a long time. The thought of their old apartment sitting empty back in Philadelphia filled Daniel with a strange sadness.

When they pulled up, the movers were already unloading the truck.

"C'mon, Daniel," said his dad. "We'll let your mom go in and tell your gram that we're here. I'll give you the grand tour."

"Watch yourself getting out of the car, honey," said his mom as she unbuckled Georgie from his car seat. "The oncoming traffic can't see you with that big truck in the way."

His dad smiled as he gestured to the giant wraparound porch. "Pretty cool, huh?"

Gram's house was two stories tall, three if you counted the attic, and the whole thing was painted a sort of pale blue, with white doors and window frames.

"You'll get the attic bedroom—it's got a great view of the mountain—and Georgie will sleep in the one next to ours."

Daniel didn't say anything; he just focused on not looking impressed.

They ended their tour at the back of the house, next to a set of double doors. They were closed, but Daniel could hear the sound of laughter on the other side.

Daniel's father knocked very gently, and a small voice answered from the other side, "Come on in!"

His father put his hand on Daniel's shoulder and gave him a reassuring squeeze, then opened the door.

The master bedroom was bright and airy. Floor-to-ceiling windows covered two of the walls, and the light filtered down through the trees, shining in beams along the dark wood floor. A large four-poster bed sat in the middle, and there was a soft sofa against one of the windows. Daniel's mother was holding Georgie in her lap, while a woman in a nurse's uniform perched on a stool, reading a magazine. And there, seated on the edge of the bed, was Gram. She looked thinner than he remembered and her hair seemed whiter, even though it had only been a few months since she had last visited them in Philadelphia. A small plastic hose extended from her nostrils to a tank around her waist, but she was smiling.

His father leaned down and whispered, "It's okay. Why don't you go and give your gram a hug?"

"I know. I look like something out of a movie, hooked up to all these contraptions. Robo-Gram," she said.

Daniel's initial trepidation melted away when he saw Gram wink in his direction. She might not look as strong as he remembered, but she sounded just like her old self.

He walked over and wrapped his arms around her. His gram used to smell of stale perfume and hair spray, but now she smelled of something he didn't recognize, something *mediciny*. Daniel could feel the bones of her rib cage through her shirt.

She must have read Daniel's mind. "Yeah, I'm as skinny as a bird, aren't I? It's the food they've got me on. No one around here understands the healing power of fat and grease! But together, maybe we can convince them. What do you say to some burgers and fries?"

Daniel smiled as she patted his cheek. "You bet!" he answered. "Milk shakes?"

"Well, of course! Milk shakes go without saying."

They went on like that for a while, with Gram teasing and making Daniel laugh. It wasn't until Georgie started to get restless that Daniel's mother decided to break up the fun.

"Daniel, why don't you take your little brother outside for a bit? Let us talk for a while."

Georgie looked up hopefully at Daniel and said, "Ball." So far Georgie had been slow to talk—he only knew a few dozen words that weren't baby talk, and *ball* was definitely his favorite.

"All right," answered Daniel. "C'mon."

"Watch the traffic," called Daniel's mother as they turned and walked down the long hallway to the front door.

Daniel told Georgie to wait on the porch while he got his brother's favorite toy out of the car. Playing ball with Georgie was really quite simple—it consisted of watching Georgie drop the ball on the ground, squeal and then pick it up again. If you clapped every now and then, he was happy as could be.

When Daniel came back with the ball—a big blue-and-

white-striped one—Georgie jumped up and down and started shouting, “Ball! Ball! Baaaallllll!”

“I think he wants that ball,” said a voice behind Daniel.

He turned around and found himself face to face with a girl. She was close to his age, with straight dark hair cut short and holes in the knees of her jeans—a good sign that she was somebody who wasn’t afraid to get dirty. As a rule, Daniel didn’t put too much stock in girls, but this one looked as if she might be sort of okay.

“Hey,” he said.

The girl didn’t say anything right away. She just kind of squinted at him instead. Daniel didn’t know why, but he felt suddenly self-conscious. He straightened his shoulders and ran his fingers through his tangled curls. He’d had a cap on all morning and his head looked like a matted sandy-brown mop.

Finally she spoke up. “If you don’t give him that ball pretty soon, I think his head might explode.”

Daniel had forgotten all about Georgie. His little brother was on his tiptoes, reaching up, trying to bat the ball out of Daniel’s hands. Georgie’s little face was growing bright red as he strained to grab it.

“Oh shoot!” said Daniel. “Sorry, Georgie. Here you go.”

Georgie’s giant frown turned to a grin as he took the big blue ball with both hands and plopped it on the ground. He laughed and made a bunch of squawky two-year-old noises as he chased the ball down the sloping yard.

“So is your family moving in with Mrs. Stewart?” asked the girl.

“Yeah, she’s my gram. She’s been sick, so we’re here to take care of her,” answered Daniel. “You live around here?”

The girl shrugged and half pointed over her shoulder. She seemed not to care about much of anything, and that included answering Daniel’s questions.

“Across the street,” she said.

Again there was that uncomfortable silence. Maybe Daniel had been wrong about her. Maybe the dirty jeans were a ruse and she was just as weird as all the other girls his age. She might even have a doll hidden on her somewhere.

Well, she could stand there and stare all day long. He would just play ball with Georgie until she got tired of watching and went home to wherever it was she came from. “Across the street” somewhere, he supposed.

That was when Daniel noticed that Georgie had followed his rolling ball a little too close to the edge of the yard. If Mom saw him playing that far away from the house, she would throw a fit.

“Georgie!” Daniel called. “Come on back away from the street, okay?”

But Georgie wasn’t listening. He threw the ball up in the air and laughed as it bounced off the curb and out in front of the truck. Georgie toddled after it, chasing it into the street, not paying attention to the car that was barreling toward him.

“Georgie!” Daniel screamed as he raced to his brother, knowing he would never make it in time. As Georgie disappeared into the street, Daniel heard a loud popping sound as the car came around the corner.

“GEORGIE!”

“BALL!” shouted Georgie’s voice behind him.

Daniel turned to see the girl standing there, holding his little brother in her arms. Georgie was clapping. She set him down and looked past Daniel into the street.

“I think his ball just got run over,” she said. “Looks like he’ll need a new one.”

Daniel was so relieved to see his brother safe and in one piece, he couldn’t speak. But how was that possible?

“Well,” she sighed, “I’d better get back. It’s almost lunchtime.”

Georgie gave one of his giggly little squeals, and the girl looked down at him and smiled. It was the first time Daniel had seen her do that.

“Keep a good eye on your little brother here. I think he likes trouble.”

And with that she started to walk away.

“Wait!” called Daniel, breathless. His mind was racing, trying to catch up to what had just happened. He needed to stall, to have time to think. “Um, I mean . . . what’s your name? I didn’t get your name.”

She squinted back at him again and paused before answering.

“It’s Mollie,” she said. “Mollie Lee. See you around, New Kid.”

Then she turned and walked off toward the little yellow house directly across the street.

Chapter Two

The Bus Stop

T*he only thing worse than your first day in a new town, thought Daniel, is your first day in a new school in a new town.*

On that morning his parents offered to drive him, but Daniel knew it was hard enough being the new kid without getting chauffeured around by your parents. He knew better than to give in to the butterflies in his stomach. The first day at a new school was like the first swim in a cold lake—it was better to just dive in and get the initial shock over with. So after a quick breakfast, Daniel grabbed his brand-new backpack and walked bravely to the bus stop at the end of Elm Lane.

As he waited, he tried to distract himself by reflecting on the mysterious Mollie Lee. It had been several days since their strange meeting, and he hadn't seen so much as a glimpse of her since then. No matter how many times he replayed the scene in his head, he could not figure out how Mollie had gotten into the street, rescued Georgie from the oncoming car, then returned to her original spot that fast—and all without Daniel seeing a thing. As something of an amateur sleuth, Daniel had carefully worked out three possible explanations:

The first and most likely (if least interesting) solution was that Daniel was just flat-out wrong—that when he thought he'd seen Georgie run out into the street, he had simply been mistaken. Perhaps it was just Georgie's big blue ball that rolled out there, and Daniel mistook that flash of color for his brother. The only problem with this was that Daniel had *clearly seen Georgie run out into the street!*

Which brought Daniel to the next, and somewhat more interesting, possibility—he was going insane. Perhaps he had contracted some kind of rare tropical brain fever like in the Sherlock Holmes story “The Adventure of the Dying Detective,” and now he was seeing things. The upside of brain fever would be that you probably got to miss a lot of school, but the downside was, well, you had brain fever. That couldn't be all that fun. And the fact that, other than his one little hallucination, Daniel felt fine pretty much ruled out the rare disease theory.

Which left explanation number three, by far the most exciting one: that somehow Mollie really had been quick enough to run over and save Georgie from the oncoming car and then carry him back, all before Daniel could take a single step. Either she was that fast or she made it *appear* she was that fast. Perhaps Daniel was the victim of some kind of crazy practical joke? In the Holmes stories, anything that defied explanation or seemed in some way supernatural was always a hoax.

Whatever the answer, all the evidence told him there was something very interesting about Mollie. Not the least of which was the sight of her standing right in front of him. He'd been so wrapped up in his own thoughts that he hadn't even seen her approach.

Some detective.

Mollie looked to be wearing the same pair of dirty jeans as before, though Daniel suspected that all of her jeans looked this way, since she didn't seem the type to let a good pair of jeans go undirtied. Standing next to her was a small boy about their age but a good several inches shorter. He was wearing a pair of thick glasses and a little-boy-sized tie. In stark contrast to Mollie, the way this boy was dressed reminded Daniel more of a tiny adult than a kid.

Mollie nudged the boy in the ribs. "Rohan, look, it's the new kid I told you about."

The short boy stared at Daniel, squinting at him from behind bottle-thick lenses.

Daniel waved at them.

Rohan looked back at Mollie. "Seems perfectly nice to me."

"I liked his brother better," she said.

"I thought you said his brother was, like, two?"

"Yep," she answered. "Exactly."

Daniel found this talking-about-him-as-if-he-wasn't-there thing very unsettling.

"Daniel," he said.

"Excuse me?" asked Rohan.

"Daniel. My name's Daniel. Not 'New Kid.' "

"Whatever." Mollie smirked.

"Oh," said Rohan, blinking. "Of course. Pleased to meet you, Daniel."

This Rohan kid even talked like a little adult, and sure enough, the next minute he was shaking Daniel's hand. A firm, professional handshake.

"Don't mind Mollie," said Rohan, smiling big. "She's a bit territorial, and she doesn't like it when new people show up in her neighborhood. Bears are like that, too, you know. Big, stupid bears."

Mollie just rolled her eyes and snorted, but it made Daniel relax a little to see Rohan poking fun at her without getting hit.

Rohan stopped, sniffing the air. He made a face. "Uh-oh."

"Speaking of big and stupid . . .," said Mollie, pointing to something coming down the street.

Daniel turned to see two rough-looking boys walking toward them. Something about them just said “trouble.” It was the way they walked, maybe, or the fact that they weren’t carrying book bags, or books at all for that matter. They just looked tough, like the kind of boys who plan to pay for lunch with someone else’s money.

“Crud,” said Rohan. “It’s Clay Cudgens. He and Bud must’ve missed the bus and decided to hike up here to our stop.”

“Or they just decided to start their day off with a little ‘fun,’ ” said Mollie. “Watch yourself around those two, New Kid.”

“Yeah,” echoed Rohan. “Same goes for all of us.” For some reason, Rohan had put on a nose clip, the kind that you wear for swimming. Daniel had never seen a sillier sight than little Rohan standing there wearing a tie and nose clip, but he didn’t have the time to comment on it, because Clay and Bud were upon them.

“Well, lookee here! It’s Mollie and her girlfriend, Rohan!” shouted one of the boys. Physically he was the skinnier of the two, but something in the look of his eyes said that he was definitely the meaner. He was wearing a grotesque concert T-shirt decorated with skulls and decapitated bodies. His enormous friend’s shirt was plain except for the word “Bud,” which was stenciled unevenly on the front.

Daniel heard Rohan whispering to Mollie, “Just ignore

them, Mol.” But Mollie didn’t look as if she were about to go along with Rohan’s plan. Daniel could practically hear her teeth grinding together.

“Aw, yeah, Clay!” said Bud. “Rohan is Mollie’s girlfriend, because Rohan is such a girl! Good one, man!” Bud’s arms were a little too thick and his head was a little too small. He looked like a bald ape with a Twinkies problem.

Then there was the smell. This Bud character *stank*. At first Daniel wondered if there was some kind of roadkill nearby, or perhaps an open sewer, but before long he realized that the stink was coming off Bud. The kid had a stench that went way beyond regular body odor. It smelled like rotten garbage, if you buried it in a pile of raw fish. Then left it out in the sun. In summer. Somewhere in the Land of Stink. Rohan and Mollie were openly covering their noses. Daniel now wished he had a ridiculous-looking nose clip of his own. Even Clay seemed to have had all he could take of his friend’s smell.

“Yo, Bud. Stand downwind, man. You’re going to make me lose my breakfast!” said Clay.

“Sorry, dude. It gets worse when I get excited,” said Bud as he stepped back a few feet from the rest of them.

“So,” said Clay, sizing up Daniel. “Who’s this?”

Daniel’s legs turned soft and jellylike as Clay’s beady eyes focused on him. It was like being looked at by a strange, mangy dog. You don’t trust it, and you don’t dare turn your back on it, so you just stand there—frozen.

Daniel had once read that when facing a wild animal, you should never show fear because animals can smell weakness and it only makes them hungrier. Bolstering his courage, he took a deep breath and answered, “My name’s . . . uh . . . er”

Oh no! Had he just forgotten his own name?

“Uh, I’m the n-new kid,” said Daniel, sounding just like lunch.

“His name’s Daniel,” answered Mollie, much to Daniel’s surprise.

“Daaaaniel, huh?” Clay sneered as he stepped closer. He was a good several inches taller than Daniel. “So are these your new best friends, Daniel? A crazy Buddha and a girl?”

“I’m Hindu, not Buddhist,” Rohan chirped.

“Shut up, no one’s talking to you,” said Bud from several feet away.

“So, what’s the story, New Kid?” asked Clay, putting one of his long arms around Daniel’s shoulders. “Are these *losers* your friends or what?”

Daniel immediately recognized what was going on—Clay was giving him a choice. In Clay’s eyes, Daniel was a blank slate, a new kid with no allegiances. He could become friends with anyone—with Rohan, Mollie, a couple of bullies like Clay and Bud. Trouble was, in order to befriend a bully, you had to become one.

Daniel was going to have to go with the short kid and the tomboy.

“Yeah,” he said, gesturing to Mollie and Rohan. “I guess they are my friends.”

Clay’s eyes narrowed to tiny slits. “Too bad for you, New Kid,” he said. “Just for that, I think I’ll take that nice new backpack you’re wearing. I left mine at home.”

Clay gave Daniel’s backpack a little tug. Daniel held firm. He knew he wasn’t a match for these two, but that didn’t mean he was going to give in this easy.

“C’mon, *New Kid*,” said Bud, leering. “You don’t want to get hurt, do you?”

Still, Daniel wouldn’t let go. He wasn’t a fighter, but if he gave up now, these two would hound him for the rest of the year. Daniel had no intention of being marked as an easy target.

An ugly look crept over Clay’s face. “Warned you.”

Clay pulled again, only this time much harder. Impossibly hard. Daniel felt his feet leave the ground, and when his head finally stopped spinning, he realized that Clay had thrown him twelve feet at least. This boy was stronger than a grown man—stronger than *ten* grown men.

Mollie came to his rescue. Daniel didn’t even see her move but there she was, standing face to face with Clay, yelling at him to return Daniel’s backpack. Bud began giggling like a hyena and the air grew thick with his stench.

Daniel was bruised up a bit, and his head was still ringing from being thrown around like a rag doll, but he wasn’t

about to sit by and let Mollie fight this fight for him, no matter how strong Clay might be.

“I can handle this,” said Daniel, getting to his feet. “Give me back my bag, Clay.”

“Oh, the new kid’s a scrapper, huh?” said Clay, looking over Mollie’s head. “Okay, tell you what—if you can take this backpack from me, you can have it. I’ll even let you have the first punch. Bud, grab me one of those rocks.”

Bud reached down and picked up a fist-sized rock from the side of the road. Daniel swallowed hard. A rock like that could seriously hurt someone, or worse.

“Give it to him,” said Clay.

Bud tossed the rock to Daniel, who caught it awkwardly with both hands.

What was this kid up to? Was he crazy?

“Okay, give me your best shot.”

Daniel hesitated, staring at the heavy rock in his hand.

“C’mon, Daniel. I’ve even given you a weapon! Hit me as hard as you can.”

Daniel felt sick to his stomach as Clay smiled a wicked smile.

“Of course, then it’ll be my turn,” said Clay. “But I promise I’ll only use my fist.”

This was turning very serious.

“That’s enough, Clay!” shouted Mollie.

“This is none of your business, Mollie,” answered Clay evenly. “It’s between me and Daniel here.”

“I’m making it my business,” said Mollie through clenched teeth. “He lives on my block, so I’m gonna look out for him. Give him his backpack. Now!”

Clay paused. There was a flash of something almost like worry across his face, and Bud was no longer laughing. Then Clay spat on the ground in front of Mollie.

“Fine! You want to get into it, too? I’ve been waiting for this day for a long time. Let’s see just how fast you are, little girl!” Clay took a step forward and balled his hands into fists. Mollie stood firm, but Daniel could see the fear in her eyes. There had to be some way to stop this.

It was Rohan who broke it up. He stepped between the two of them and tapped Clay on the arm. Rohan calmly looked up at the towering Clay and said, “Clay? If you hurt Mollie, Eric will hear about it, you know he will. Are you prepared to ‘get into it’ with him, too?”

Clay glared down at Rohan, his face red with anger and the veins in his temple ready to burst. He looked as if he wanted nothing more than to smash everything in sight, but he didn’t. Instead, he put his fists down, tossed Daniel his backpack and cursed under his breath.

“Have it your way,” he said. “But no one stays a kid forever—not even Eric. I *promise* you, very soon things in this town are gonna change. Then you’ll all get what’s coming to you. You too, *New Kid*. Congrats, you just made my Enemies List.”

With that, Clay stalked off down the road. Bud looked around anxiously and called, “But, Clay, we’ll miss the bus

again! It's the last stop and we'll miss school! Dude, my mom will kill me!"

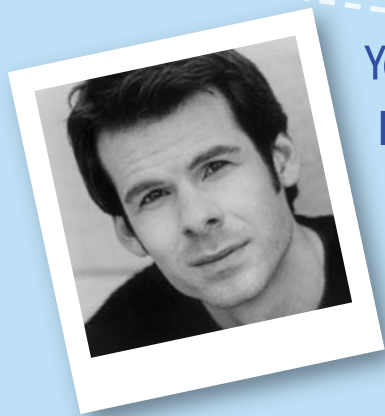
Clay kept walking, saying nothing. Bud stood there for a few more seconds before chasing after him, taking the cloud of foulness with him.

Mollie and Rohan watched them go in silence. Daniel wanted to shout or laugh or something, but the other two seemed so deep in thought, so full of worry, that he didn't say anything. He just waited for the bus with his new friends, a million questions swirling around in his head.

Get to know Matthew Cody, author of Powerless

Matthew Cody divides his time between writing and teaching college English in New York City. *Powerless*, his first novel, comes from a lifelong love of superhero comics and 1940s pulp fiction.

Originally from the Midwest, Matthew lives with his wife and young son in Manhattan, where he's at work on his next novel for Knopf.



You can visit him on the Web at **MatthewCody.com**.



A Conversation with Matthew Cody



What got you hooked on comic books as a child?

My older brother is the real culprit when it comes to my comic book obsession. Growing up he had this enormous collection of comics going back to the '60s and even earlier. Most comic collectors are a bit anal about their books and they are very protective of them. There are all sorts of rules that go along with the hobby—keep them in acid-free plastic bags and boards, keep them out of the direct sunlight, do *not* read and eat at the same time, etc. Of course I had my own comics, but his were these incredibly valuable things that were kept far, far away from my chocolate-stained kid's fingers. If I was very, very good, or if he needed to bribe me to keep a secret from our parents, he'd let me read one. Supervised, of course. So if there's anyone to blame, it's him.

Your love of comics as a child followed you to your 'grown-up' years. How did that influence the way you wrote *Powerless*?

Comics are very good at leaving you wanting more, by ending each issue on a cliff-hanger. This is something I very consciously tried to reproduce in *Powerless*. I wanted it to feel like a serial story, with each chapter serving the same function as an issue of a comic, and I wanted the action and pacing to follow the same structure. Great action plots get rolling early, and pull the readers right through to the end. I want kids to get in trouble for reading *Powerless* at the dinner table and long after lights-out!

Your main character Daniel is the new kid in town—an experience understood, and often dreaded, by many kids. What went into your decision to add that element to his character?

I think that everyone can relate to being the new kid at something—whether it's the first day in a new class, or a new little league team, whatever it is. We've all felt that awkwardness of not belonging and that's something that's easy to tap into. It makes Daniel a sympathetic character right off the bat. He's the New Kid, and that's a label he's got to fight against from day one. Daniel is very perceptive and he understands his situation and all of the unwritten rules that go along with being the New Kid.

Regular and powerless, Daniel is an unlikely hero in a cast of superhero superkids. What do you hope readers learn from his character?

Perseverance. That is Daniel's power. He refuses to give up, no matter what the odds. Of course this doesn't mean that he doesn't have moments of doubt, he does. And he has to deal with some very tragic events in his life. But he always manages to pick himself up and tackle the problem. He says to himself, "I can't fly and I'm not superstrong, I may be clever but I'm not supersmart, so what *am I* good at? How can my talents help me out and help out the people I care about?" Everyone has gifts and everyone is valuable. I really believe that.

It's safe to say that daydreaming about superpowers is common among people of all ages. Can we gather anything about your favorite superpowers from the ones you chose? If you could have one superpower, what would it be?

Well, obviously the luckiest ones are the cheats. By that I mean the kids who got more than one power and can be superfast *and* fly, or superstrong *and* invulnerable. But if I had to choose one, I think I'd like Simon's power over electricity. Although he doesn't have much control over it yet because he's young, I think that he has a lot of potential for some really cool things. Plus with the world's energy crisis, he could grow up to be the world's first Green Energy Superhero!

Powerful or powerless. Which would you pick?

Trick answer—no one's powerless. How's that?

How has your theater background shaped your career as a writer today?

Theater is storytelling, and it's storytelling focused on character and conflict—even more so than most movies or TV. I think that novels and theater have that in common—they both start with the wants and needs of the characters, and move on to test the characters in some way. There's a saying in the theater: a good play is about the worst day in that character's life—and I think that holds true in a novel as well, only perhaps expanded over a longer period of time. You could say that a good book is about the worst series of days in a character's life. Even if it turns out all right in the end, it gets pretty dark there for a while.



What led you to write a children's book first?

I've written short stories for adults, but children are such a wonderful audience that it just seemed like a good fit for the longer stories that I wanted to tell. Adults get very set in their ways with their reading habits. You'll often hear adults describe themselves as "a mystery reader" or "a science fiction reader," etc. Kids just read whatever interests them and you can write many different types of stories for the same reader. They're a great audience for blending genres—as long as you tell a good story and tell it well, they are happy to go along for the ride.

What's on your bookshelf these days?

I read a lot of adult detective fiction and I'm a huge fan of classic adventure authors like Jules Verne and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, but as far as current all-ages stuff right now I'm reading *Leviathan* by Scott Westerfeld and really enjoying it—it's a Steampunk World War I novel. I'm also a history buff and love reading about colonial America. And, of course, there's a stack of comics next to the bed . . . always.

What's next for you?

I'm currently working on my second book for Knopf. This one touches on my love of classic adventure stories and weird pulp fiction. It's a Steampunk novel (there's that word again!) full of airships and secret societies and time travel. And it answers the age-old question: Should we be afraid of that dark closet at night? (I'll go ahead and spoil it for you—the answer is a big YES!)

For more details, visit MatthewCody.com



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