

Friends. Bullies.

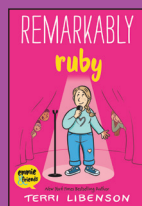
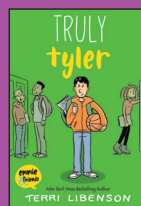
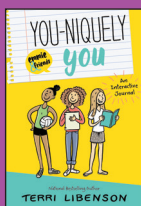
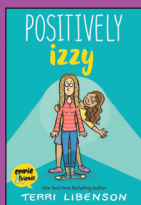
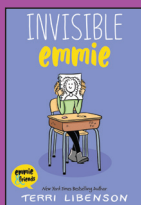
MIDDLE SCHOOL

Anthony is TPFW*. Leah is a shy nerd.
What could they have in common?
A lot, as it turns out!



Then one day they witness Anthony's teammates bullying a sixth grader. What happens next could cement their new friendship—or blow it up forever.

*Too Popular for Words



HARPER

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Ages 8–12 • Cover art © 2024 by Terri Libenson
Cover design by Terri Libenson and Laura Mock

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Always Anthony

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www.harpercollinschildrens.com

Library of Congress Control Number: 2023943328

ISBN 978-0-06-332093-2 (hardcover)

ISBN 978-0-06-332092-5 (pbk.)

ISBN 978-0-06-339582-4 (special edition)

ISBN 978-0-06-339584-8 (special edition)

ISBN 978-0-06-344912-1 (PJ Library edition)

Typography by Terri Libenson and Laura Mock

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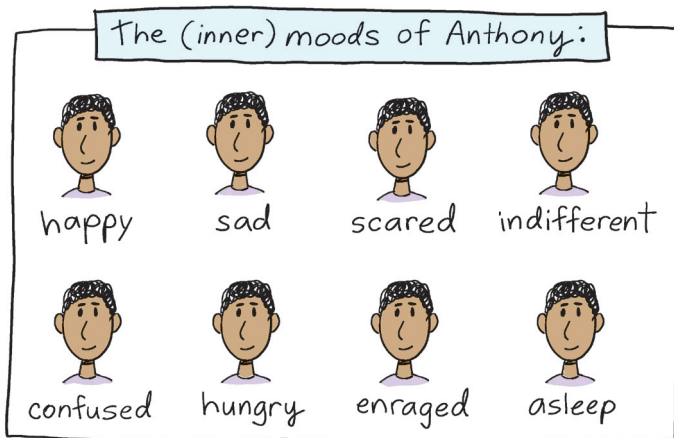
This edition printed for PJ Library 2025

PROLOGUE ANTHONY

I've never been what you'd call an open book.

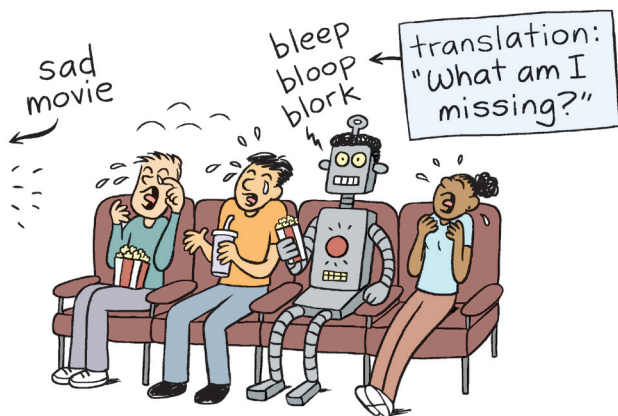


Not to say I don't have feelings or anything. I do. I just hide 'em well. My best friend, Tyler, once made a chart documenting all my moods.



When I saw it, I laughed.

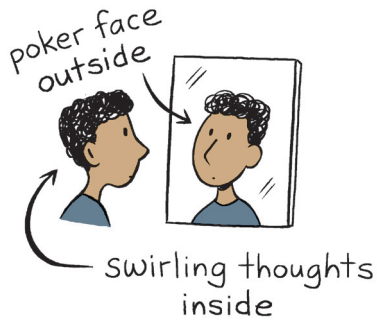
But I didn't actually think it was funny. It kinda made me feel like a robot or something. Which sounds cool in theory but not in practice.



It also had me wondering if that's how other people see me, not just Tyler. But eventually I shrugged it off. I mean, it was a joke. I was making too big a deal of it, right?



But if that's true...

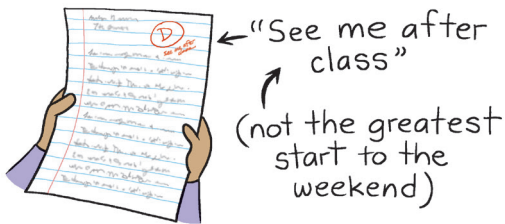


... why do I still think about it?

ANTHONY



I'm staring down at my Language Arts paper. And not liking what I see.



I don't know what went wrong. I thought I had this in the bag. The topic was cool, too:



Write about a time when someone helped you with something that you were struggling with.
What was the hardest part of the experience?

So I wrote about last year when Tyler's older brother, Zach, helped me with my layups.




The bell rings. I get up and walk over to Mrs. Winn's desk while everyone else files out. I'm jealous. It's Friday and I wanna get home asap. Malik waves to me from the door and tilts his head. That's his signal for "See you tomorrow?". We practice at the Y most Saturday afternoons.



Mrs. Winn doesn't look stern. In fact, she smiles at me. She's my nicest teacher. I wish I were better at her class.




I nod. I should be more concerned, but I really just wanna get out of there.

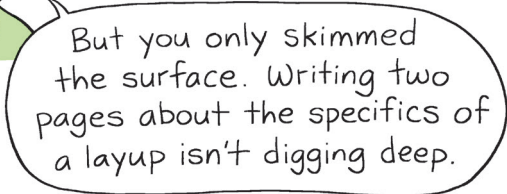


The reason you got a D:
Any guesses?

I shake my head.




Well, the subject
you chose was fine.



But you only skimmed
the surface. Writing two
pages about the specifics of
a layup isn't digging deep.

I don't say anything. I mean, I wrote every detailed step on
the precisions of that shot. What more does she want?



And, unfortunately, you had
a lot of grammatical errors.
Almost like you didn't check
your work.

Okay. I don't deny that.

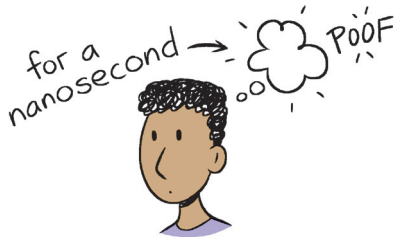


I know what you've accomplished over the years. You're too smart to let your grade slip.

If you rewrite your paper over the weekend, I'll give you extra credit, which will boost your overall grade. What do you say?



I think about it.





She looks surprised.

Truth is, I have a lot going on this weekend. I have a big game next week, and I wanna get in as much practice as possible. I also have science and math tests on Monday and Tuesday, and I'd rather focus on those.

Yeah, I've had my issues and worked through them. But now I've gotta be choosy. English isn't that big a deal to me. I'm not great at it, but I **am** at STEM. I follow my strengths.

Mrs. W shakes her head as I head out. I try not to feel too guilty.



Tyler joins me in the hall as we walk to our buses. We always meet up after eighth period.



Tyler's sleeping over tonight. We're gonna have a Super Smash Bros. marathon.

