

TRAUMA QUEEN

Barbara Dee



ALADDIN M!X

New York London Toronto Sydney

Sleepwalking

I am standing outside homeroom in yellow flannel monkey pajamas.

Everyone else is dressed normally: jeans, track pants, sweaters, whatever.

Apparently because today, Monday, February 23, is not Pajama Day at Crampton Middle School. Also apparently I am the only one who is celebrating Pajama Day, because I am the only one whose mother *told* her it was Pajama Day. After using the New Student Information Packet to line a dog crate for this one-eared beagle she's babysitting.

"Hey, Marigold," some girl across the hall is calling.

“That’s your name, right? Um, no offense, but why are you in your pj’s?”

I don’t answer. That’s because my ears are burning and my eyebrows are sweating. It’s hard to say something casual and jokey like *whoops, silly me* with sweaty eyebrows. I dig my thumbnails into my palms, but I’m not waking up.

Now this buzz-cut-headed eighth-grade boy is starting to laugh. And point. “Yo, New Girl. Yeah, you. Did you forget something? *Like getting dressed?*”

That’s it; I’m done. I escape from homeroom. My poofy blue bedroom slippers skid on the waxy floor. “Excuse me, no running,” some office lady calls out from down the hallway. Which is when I start to run, seeing a mob of giggling girls turning the corner and coming toward me.

I bang open the door to the girls’ room and hide myself in a stall. Then I yank my cell phone out of my backpack and speed-dial Mom.

It rings five times. Six times means I’ll get her voice mail, which means she’ll never get my message, because she doesn’t ever check her voice mail. *Pick up*, I pray. *Pick up, pickuppickuppickup*.

“Hello?” she finally shouts. “Marigold?”

Then a truck honks. Right in my ear.

“Mom?” I say.

“Oh, sweetheart, what’s wrong? Are you okay?”

“No.” I wipe my sweaty face on my flannel arm. “I’m wearing pajamas.”

“I know. Those cute monkey ones.”

“Because you said it was Pajama Day.”

“Right, it is. I read it in the packet.”

“Except it isn’t.”

“It’s not Pajama Day? Are you sure? The first day of— what do they call it? Spirit Week?” I can hear dogs barking now. She must be downtown with her Morning Walkers.

“No, it’s not,” I say loudly. “I’m the only one in the entire school wearing pj’s. I look like a total dork.”

“I’m sure you don’t, baby.”

“I’m sure I do. I’m coming home.”

“Oh, Mari. You can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Because you just got there five minutes ago.”

That’s so illogical I can’t even argue. “Okay, then can you please bring me some other clothes?”

“Yes, of course.” She shouts this over yapping and arfing dogs. “But you’re going to have to wait a few minutes.”

“How come?”

“Because I’m not home. I’m at least a mile away, with three of my Walkers. And I’m supposed to pick up two new greyhounds by eight o’clock.”

“But this is a major emergency.” I check my watch: three minutes until homeroom. “Can’t the greyhounds wait?”

“Oh, come on now, Mari,” she says in a voice meant to be soothing. Except you can’t soothe when you’re shouting; it kind of spoils the effect. “So you’re wearing pajamas. Have fun with it; improvise. Pretend you’re sleepwalking.”

“*What?*”

“See where it takes you. Think of it as a costume.”

“I don’t wear costumes.”

“Oh, sure you do, baby. We all do. Every single day.”

“Mom,” I say. “Can we *please* not have a big philosophical discussion about this?”

“Sorry.” A truck honks. “Well, look at it this way. At least you’ll be comfortable.”

That’s when the door to the girls’ room creaks open. I can hear the sound of heels on the floor tiles, and then the sharp click of someone locking another stall door. “Just listen to me, okay?” I whisper desperately

into my cell. “I *won't* be comfortable. I'll be the *opposite* of comfortable. I'll be traumatized for the *entire rest of my life*. Just please, please bring me different clothes. *Please*. I'm begging you.”

She processes. A dog arfs. Finally she says, “All right, I'll be there in a few minutes. BEEZER, SIT. I'm not fooling, buddy. SIT. Good dog.”

“Mom? MOM?”

“Just try to hang in there, Mari, okay? First I need to get the greyhounds.”

The line goes dead, as if everything's settled. Whatever; at least I got through to her. Mom usually does better in person, but even then, normal back-and-forth conversations are definitely not her strong point.

I leave my stall and check myself out in the mirror. Great. My cheeks are flushed, my eyes look huge and freaked-out, and my wavy brown hair is damp and limp.

Plus, of course, there's the jammie issue. Can't forget that.

I drown my face in freezing water, then crank out some paper towel. The other bathroom user shuffles her feet. Which, I suddenly notice, are in pointy-toe black leather boots. Scary boots. Get-out-of-my-face boots.

I cram the paper towel into the trash can. “Well, bye,” I call out, so that at least Pointy Boots knows that I realize she’s an earwitness.

“See you, Marigold,” Pointy Boots answers in a quiet, amused sort of voice.

No Problem

Samuel J. Crampton Middle is my third school in four years. And if there's one thing I've learned about middle school by now, it's this: Attention is bad. Any attention. And now here I am in seventh-grade homeroom with, like, thirteen girls crowding around my desk, all paying attention to my dorky monkey pajamas.

“Omigod, Marigold,” says this tall one named Jada Sperry. She has perfectly straight dark blond hair with no split ends, and hyper-sympathetic brown eyes. As far as I can tell, she's in charge. I mean, of *everything*. “What happened? Did you think it was Spirit Week? That was last month!”

“I know. I guess I read the calendar wrong.”

“Omigod, I feel so, so sorry for you! What a total nightmare.”

“Thanks.”

“You must want to die. Omigod, if it was *me*—”

“It wouldn’t be you, Jada,” says this girl named Ashley with curly brown hair and green rubberbands in her braces. “You’d never mix up the month.”

“Hey, everybody makes mistakes,” Jada says seriously, and all the other girls nod, like, *Ooh Jada, you’re so understanding.*

Then this thick-looking boy named Brody comes up behind me, pokes my shoulder, and snores into my ear: *HONK-Schwee, HONK-Schwee.* He leans over my desk; I can smell his minty toothpaste. “Hey, Marigold, want a bedtime story? And your teddy bear? And a nice glass of milk?”

“Go. Away,” Jada says, giving him a look. “He’s such a loser, Marigold. Just ignore him.”

“Thanks,” I say. I’m starting to figure it’s my best line in this scene, so I’ll just keep saying it until everyone leaves my desk.

And miraculously it works. After another round of Jada announcing to everyone how *sorry* she feels for

me, she finally takes her seat. Then Ashley does, and then this superskinny girl named Megan does, and then all the others take theirs. One girl named Layla with smudgy mascara and a bright orange streak in her hair is curled up in her chair and staring at me in a rude-curious sort of way, kind of like a nasty cat, but at least no one's crowding my desk anymore. Maybe, I tell myself, if I just keep acting grateful and boring and monosyllabic they'll forget I'm even here.

Another poke from behind. I spin around, but it's not that moron Brody again. It's this teeny pale girl with big eyes, who I'm pretty sure is named Quinn. "Do you want to borrow my sweater?" she asks in a voice so quiet I can barely hear her. I tell her no because I'd probably be roasting, but thanks for the offer. She looks embarrassed. Maybe I should just take her baby-blue, doll-size sweater, I think, even though there's no way it would fit over my baggy pj's.

I'm about to turn around to ask for it when Mr. Hubley the homeroom/science teacher says in this really juicy, phlegmy voice, "Attendance, please. Settle down." Nobody's listening, so he tries again: "ATTENDANCE, PLEASE. SETTLE YOURSELVES DOWN, PEOPLE." The louder he talks, the juicier he

sounds, and he doesn't even bother to clear his throat. *Oh help*, I think. Because what if this isn't a cold, and he's just going to sound like this for the entire rest of the year? If that's the case, I'm not sure I'll pass home-room, and let's not even discuss science.

He starts calling out names, so to distract myself from his drippy voice I stare at the second hand on my watch: 8:10 and 32 seconds, 8:10 and 33. Mom said she was picking up the new dogs at eight, which was, like, eleven minutes ago, so where is she? Of course, she said they were greyhounds, which means they're probably impossible to walk with a bunch of normal-size Walkers. I try to think who else is on Mom's Morning Walk list this week—Beezer the beagle, Tristan the mutt, Darla the shepherd-something-mix. Nobody too alpha, so hopefully they're getting along okay. Probably she's just crossing a street somewhere, trying to coordinate five leashes without getting herself all tangled up the way she always does. She pretty much sucks at dogwalking, even though these days it's basically her job.

Attendance is over. Mr. Hubley is typing on his computer now, so the room starts getting noisy again.

"Honk-Schwee," whispers Brody from across the aisle. "Wake up, Marigold. Don't press that snooze alarm."

“Shut up, Brody,” Jada tells him. “Like *you* never made an honest mistake before.” She smiles sweetly at me.

“Hey, at least I remember to get dressed.”

“Marigold didn’t *forget to get dressed*. She thought—”

“That we all wanted to see her sexy lingerie?”

Layla snorts loudly. “Save me,” she mutters, then rests her head on her arms.

I see Megan whisper something to Ashley, who laughs and turns around to stare at Layla. Then she says something to a dark-haired boy named Ethan, who’d be seriously cute if it weren’t for the fact that he’s Brody’s best friend.

Brody makes a chimp face. “*Aah-aah, ooh-ooh, eee-eee,*” he says practically in my ear. “Got any bananas, Marigold?”

Jada rolls her eyes at me. Before I can thank her for rolling her eyes, the PA comes on. You can hear an office lady tap in the mic, then say, “Marigold Bailey? Please come to the main office immediately!”

Everyone looks at me, like *Whoa. So now you’re in trouble? This is getting good.*

“Your *mother* is here,” the office lady explains. “Marigold Bailey? Main office!”

“Don’t wanna be late, Bananas,” Brody teases. He scratches his armpits at me.

Layla makes that snorting sound again. “Evolve, Brody,” she says, stretching her legs in front of her. That’s when I notice the pointy-toe black leather boots she’s wearing.

For a second I freeze. She looks right at me and yawns.

“You’d better go,” she says, like it’s permission.

I grab my backpack and skid out of the room. When I get home, I am totally tossing these slippers, I promise myself. In the same trash can as these stupid pajamas.

Inside the main office, there’s my mom in her purple Wagley College sweats, her cheeks glowing, her too-long brown hair looking frizzy and wild, as if she’s just run all the way over here with a bunch of tangled-up dogs. Which she probably has.

I’m so relieved to see her that I give her a huge hug even though the office ladies are staring at both of us.

“Where are they?”

“Where’s who? You mean the dogs?”

“I mean my clothes.”

She cocks her head. “Mari, I told you. I wasn’t home when you called—”

I pull her out into the hall. “Mom. Mom. You didn’t bring any *clothes*?”

“How could I, baby? You were in such a big rush for me to get here! I didn’t have time to go home first.”

I open my mouth. Then I close it. Then I say, “So why did you even come?”

“You wanted to change out of your pj’s, right? So just wear my sweats for the day. I don’t mind. It’s the least I can do for messing up.”

“Mom,” I say.

Dogs are barking off in the distance somewhere, but she doesn’t seem to notice. She’s grinning at me as if she’s starting to enjoy this. “Is there a bathroom nearby where we can switch? I thought I remembered one from Orientation.”

“Mom.”

“It’ll just take a second. No one will even notice.”

“*Mom*. I’m *not* wearing your sweats, okay? And you’re *not* going home in my pj’s.”

She laughs. “Why not?”

“Because you’ll get arrested. For weirdness.” The image of my wild-haired mother walking five dogs all over town IN MY MONKEY PAJAMAS isn’t something I can bear to think about. And if she can’t see

for herself how impossible that would be to live down, even if we stayed in this town for another seventy-five years, then what's the point of standing in the hallway trying to explain it?

"Oh, Marigold," she says, laughing. "This is what I do; I'm *supposed* to get noticed. Think of it as free publicity."

"Right. The terrible kind."

"There *is* no terrible kind. Haven't I taught you anything by now? Take my sweats."

"No. Just . . . no."

Suddenly Mr. Shamsky, the principal, comes bursting out of the main office. "Mrs. Bailey?"

"Ms. But please just call me Becca."

"Are those your dogs out there?"

"Not really. I mean they're not mine technically. I'm actually just walking them."

"But you tied them to the flagpole?"

Mom's eyes flash; she looks mythological. "My daughter," she announces, "was having an emergency. So I couldn't stop to make alternative arrangements for five dogs."

He squints at my pajamas. "Everything okay now?"

"Oh, sure," I mutter.

“Great,” he says, like he doesn’t believe either of us. “You know, Marigold, the school nurse keeps spare clothes in her office. Just in case.”

“In case of what?” Mom asks innocently.

The end-of-homeroom bell rings. I peek at Mr. Shamsky, whose shiny bald skull is turning pink.

“In case of what?” Mom repeats, louder this time.

Is she kidding? There’s totally no way she doesn’t get this.

She looks at me with a mischievous sparkle in her eye. And the corners of her lips are twitching, like she’s trying not to smile.

Oh. Okay. I get it now. She’s trying to make Mr. Shamsky say something he doesn’t want to say: *IN CASE A GIRL GETS HER PERIOD*. It’s one of Mom’s spontaneous performances, only this time it’s happening *in my school*. And in front of a live audience, because now doors are opening and kids are pouring into the hall. In fact, way off in the distance I can see Mr. Hubley, and now Jada, Ashley, and Megan are walking this way. And also Layla. And also Brody and Ethan.

“Mom,” I beg her. “*Please.*”

She blinks at me, disappointed.

Mr. Shamsky pretends to cough. “So anyway, Marigold, you’re welcome to stop by the infirmary and check out the closet. But right now, Ms. Bailey, you need to remove those dogs. First period is starting and we can’t have all this barking.”

“Oh, no problem,” Mom says cheerfully.

She puts her hands on my shoulders. She looks deep, deep, deep into my eyes, as if he’s not even there. As if dogs aren’t barking and kids aren’t staring, and she’s trying to locate a tiny little speck on the back of my brain. “Last chance, baby. Do you want to switch or not?”

“Not.”

“Ms. Bailey,” Mr. Shamsky warns.

“Okay, listen, Marigold,” she says in my ear. “If I go home now and get your clothes, I could be back here in forty-five minutes. An hour tops.”

“No, thanks,” I say, pulling away. “I’m going to the nurse. Just go take care of the dogs now, okay?”

Then I skid down the hall, the late bell ringing in my ears.