

*Andrea feels shy and awkward
about almost everything—
except logging on to her
favourite Internet chat site*

Some Days

You're the Puppy

Short Story by Trudy Morgan-Cole

Spike J: Well gotta go get back to Real Life.

Mariana: What's so great about Real Life anyway? I wait a second, then the message Spike J exits flashes on my screen, and I'm alone in the chat room. I flex my fingers over the keys for a second and try to imagine what Spike J is doing now, whoever and wherever he might be. According to him, he's 13/ m—that's a thirteen-year-old male—he lives somewhere in the southern United States, he's tall with red hair and green eyes, and he plays basketball. The only thing is that with people you meet online, you've got to remember that some or none or all of that might be true. After all, as far as Spike knows, I'm 13/ f, short, with blond hair and blue eyes, I sing soprano in my school choir, and I live on the fourteenth floor of an apartment building in Toronto.

I log off, roll away from the computer, and hear my mom calling from the kitchen. "Andrea! Are you still online?"

“Just got off, Mom,” I shout, running downstairs. She’s always bugging me if I spend too much time online, complaining that I’m not living in the real world. She says I should get more involved in school activities. What this usually means is that she wants to get at the computer herself. Mom works at home designing Web pages and Dad is network administrator for the company he works at, so we’re a pretty high-tech bunch. We’re usually fighting over who gets to use the good computer.

Right now Mom is down in the kitchen, looking pretty low-tech as she peels potatoes for dinner—a job that will quickly be mine if I’m not careful. I breeze past her out onto the back porch. Our house is about as different from a fourteenth-floor Toronto apartment as you can imagine. It’s a two-storey house covered in green clapboard on a steep downtown street in St. John’s. From the upstairs windows you can see the harbor. Our house is over a hundred years old, and Mom and Dad have been restoring it since they moved in, the year my sister Sheri was born. Sheri’s now married with a baby of her own, and our house still isn’t finished, but it’s comfortable. And I love our backyard. Even now, in November, when the big maple trees are bare and the garden is all dead brown stalks, it’s one of my favorite places.

At the other end of the scale, my least favorite place on earth has to be our school cafeteria, where I'm stranded the next day at lunch. I went to a small elementary school, and when I hit junior high this fall I was kind of overwhelmed by the crowds and the noise—in homeroom, in the halls, but worst of all in the cafeteria. I stand there clutching my tray, looking at the crowded tables, and praying I'll find someone to sit with, when I see Molly waving from a table way at the back.

Weaving my way through the crowds, I wonder what I'd do without Molly. She's really my only friend. I wasn't this pathetic last year. You'd have to call me a shy person—I'm not outgoing or loud like Molly—but I had friends in my old school. Now Molly's the only one of my old friends who's in any of my classes, so I stick close to her. Unlike me, she's having a blast in Grade Seven. She makes a new friend every two minutes.

“Coming to my practice this afternoon?” she asks, biting into a granola bar.

“Yeah, I guess.”

If I go straight home I can get in an hour or two online before supper, but then I think that's just so pathetic—I mean, I have a chance to do something with real people instead of hanging out in cyberspace. Besides, I like watching Molly's drama practices. If I had enough nerve, I'd be in drama myself.

“You can sit there and drool over Jared McNeill,” Molly promises.

I roll my eyes, as if the thought of drooling over Jared has never occurred to me. “No thanks, I don’t need Tessa clawing my eyes out.”

“Oh, those two are history,” says Molly. “I think he dumped her— out looking for new hearts to break.”

“Well, mine won’t be one of them.”

Of course I’d let Jared McNeill break my heart if he wanted. But I wouldn’t stand a chance. He’s this totally gorgeous grade eight guy. I have to admit, as I sit and watch Molly and the others practice that afternoon, I do give him a few glances. But only a few.

What they’re doing today is called “improv,” which is basically acting with no script. You make everything up off the top of your head. Molly is great at it. I’d be so terrified! They’re getting ready for an improv competition against all the schools in the city. I’ve already promised Molly I’ll go to the contest and scream my lungs out.

But the only person I really know in drama is Molly. While she gabs with all her friends after the practice, I’m left on the sidelines, feeling out of place. It’s kind of a relief when I finally do get home and slide in front of the computer. As I log on to my favorite chat site, I’m relaxed. My everyday self—the boring straight brown hair, the tall skinny frame and bland face, the

shyness and awkwardness—just drops away and I can become whoever I want to be.

After you chat on the same site for awhile, you get to know people. The chat room is full today and I recognize most of the names, like Princess, Sweet Thang, and Jody. My nickname is Mariana. I like the sound of that.

Mariana enters.

Sweet Thang: So any guys wanna chat with me?

Princess: Hi Mariana, hows it goin'?

Jody: Hi Mariana.

Pepper: Stats Sweet Thang?

Sweet Thang: 14/ f/ 5'2"/ blond/ green eyes.

Pepper: Wanna 1-2-1?

Princess: I'm in computer class. School is so boring!

Mariana: I'm home from school already and I'm glad.

If Princess is smart—which she isn't—she'll know that means I live further east than she does. I never tell people on chat where I really live, or put in my real e-mail address. That's just basic safety. People say there's a way to check to see where the person's server is and tell where they're logged on from, but I don't think most people bother to do that. Maybe Jody does though, because he asked me once where in Newfoundland I was from. I said I

didn't really live in Newfoundland that I was just here for a couple of weeks visiting my grandmother. That's when I came up with the apartment-building-in-Toronto story.

I love chatting, but you've just got to accept that almost everybody is lying about a lot of stuff. Some of it is just for protection—like not telling where you live or your real name—and some of it is to impress people, like me supposedly being blond, and blue-eyed, and singing in choir. The reason I say Princess is not too smart is that she doesn't seem to grasp this. Or she didn't. She was having this big-time online relationship with this guy Mad Dog (I think the name should tell you something), who was supposedly sixteen and gorgeous. Well, finally she agreed to meet him because he lived near her, and it turned out he was almost thirty and a real jerk. She didn't get into any serious trouble, but she could have. She had to get her phone number changed because she'd given it to him. I don't know how she could have been so dumb.

After a while, Spike J comes online and says hi to everyone. Then he says:

Spike J: Hey Mariana want to 1-2-1?

Mariana: Sure Spike.

I click on the button to open a private chat with Spike.

Mariana: So what kind of day are you having?

Spike J: Lousy! My girlfriend broke up with me and she's telling all her friends lies about me. I feel like such an idiot.

Mariana: Sounds like she's the idiot not you.

Spike J: No, because I trusted her.

Mariana: You've got to trust somebody if you care about them.

Spike J: Yeah but what if they don't care about you?

Mariana: I guess you have to take that risk if you want a real relationship.

Spike J: Not me, not any more. I'm never trusting anyone again.

Mariana: You shouldn't say that, just because one girl hurt you. I bet you're a great guy and lots of girls like you.

Spike J: I'm not that great. I made stuff up to impress you—like I'm not really on the basketball team. I play a little but I'm not on a team. I'm really into art and drama and stuff like that.

Mariana: But that's cool.

Spike J: Yeah I know but girls seem to like jocks better.

Mariana: Depends what kind of girl.

I can't believe myself. In school I'm so nervous my tongue ties in a knot if I even try to talk to a guy, and here I am giving Spike all this wise advice about his break-up, and then practically flirting with him. The Internet is truly amazing. I feel so brave when no one can see my face.

Mariana: I'm into drama myself. In fact I'm on my school's drama team for this competition that's coming up.

Now why did I say that? Talk about making stuff up to impress people! I quickly veer the subject away from drama so I won't have to make up any more details, and we chat a little longer, mostly about his ex-girlfriend. When I have to log off I say:

Mariana: Hope you have a better day tomorrow! Keep smiling.

Spike J: Thanks. I guess some days you're the puppy and some days you're the fire hydrant.

Mariana: LOL! That's so funny.

Spike J: It's something my brother always says. See ya later.

I often type LOL when I'm not really laughing out loud—it's just the usual way to tell people something's funny—but the puppy/ fire hydrant saying really does make me laugh. And the whole conversation lifts my spirits. The confidence I have online spills over into real life, and all evening and the next day I'm in a good mood.

I'm in such a good mood that the next afternoon, when I'm watching Molly's practice again, I do something that surprises even me. One of the guys on the improv team is missing so the drama teacher, Ms. Penney, says, "Andrea, will you fill in? In case we need an even number for some of the games?" And before I even have time to think I answer, "OK, sure."

Already I'm nervous, but I figure I won't have to do much. They're playing a game called "Freeze!" where two people are acting out a scene, and someone in the group calls "Freeze!" The actors freeze in place while the person who yelled steps in and changes the scene. I'm watching it, thinking how cool it is, while Molly and this Grade Nine girl, Melissa, are doing a scene. Molly's there with her arms outstretched, pretending to carry a huge box when I hear my own voice yell, "Freeze!" Molly freezes, Melissa drops out, and I run up to Molly, grab her outstretched arms, and start ballroom dancing. She catches on right away, and we pretend we're learning to tango. When someone yells "Freeze" and jumps in, I have no problem going with it. Even when the Freeze game ends I'm still really involved, playing games and doing

scenes. I'm nervous, but I'm having a blast. Molly looks at me as if I've been taken over by aliens.

At the end of practice Ms. Penney calls me over and says, "Andrea, you're really good at this. Would you like to be an alternate on the team—in case someone gets sick?"

All in all it's a fantastic day. When I get online later that evening, I find Spike's been looking for me. We quickly switch to a private chat.

Mariana: So were you the puppy or the fire hydrant today?

Spike J: LOL! I was the hydrant again but not as bad as yesterday. My ex kept her mouth shut today. But I flunked a math test. What about you?

Mariana: I was the puppy today! It was so cool!

I consider telling him the whole story, about the Freeze game and everything, but it would take a long time to explain. Besides, I'd have to tell him that I lied yesterday about being on the improv team. But today it's not a lie! I end up just saying that some good stuff happened in drama and I'm proud of myself. Then we talk about other things, till Mom yells at me to get off the computer and do my homework.

After that I start going to practice every day. I know I probably won't be in the actual competition—there are two alternates, although the other one isn't into it that much and doesn't show up regularly— but I think I'd be too nervous for that anyway. It's just fun learning all the activities, practicing with the others, feeling like part of a team. Ms. Penney's always saying how everyone has to pull together and trust each other, and I feel like I'm really getting to know the other players. Even Jared McNeill turns out to be a nice guy who's good for a laugh, not the god-among-men I had pictured.

With all the practices, I don't get nearly as much online time as I used to, but I do hang out in chat a few times a week. I meet Spike there about three times over the next month, and each time we have a private conversation. He's getting over the break-up and we have a lot of fun chatting. I don't understand some of my online friends who get so excited over having a virtual boyfriend. You can't see the person or go to a movie with them. It's fun, but it's not real life.

Then, the day before the Improv Games, Melissa O'Dea is not in school. She's the best player on the improv team, and she has the flu. "She'll be better by tomorrow, I'm sure," Molly assures us at practice.

"But if she's not, you'd better come through for us, Andrea," someone else says.

I'm terrified at the thought of replacing anyone, much less Melissa, who's such a good actor. And even though the other team members are really encouraging, I can tell they're scared to lose Melissa too. I don't know if I can take the pressure.

The next day Melissa's still not in school, but she shows up to our practice at lunchtime. She looks horrible, and her voice is almost gone. "But I'll be there tonight," she croaks. Everyone exchanges worried glances, even Ms. Penney. "You'd better come along with us after school," Ms. Penney tells me.

After school we all pile into Ms. Penney's van to head out to where the games are being held. It's a sunny day, even though it's cold, and we're all excited. We sing very loudly off-key as the van rolls out Columbus Drive, past the Avalon Mall and the Village Mall to Mount Pearl. When we get to Mount Pearl Junior High, we meet the other improv teams, go through some warm-up exercises, and eat supper. There's no sign of Melissa, and I'm torn between being thrilled and terrified. Half an hour before the games begin, Melissa walks in. We give her a round of applause, but I'm disappointed as well as relieved.

She's still sick, but she's going to go through with it. I give everyone a hug for good luck before I go to take my seat in the stands. Soon some other students and a few parents and teachers from our school show up, and we have our own little cheering section.

When our team is announced, they run out to do their opening routine, which is full of hand-stands and cartwheels. The first event is a mystery skit. The emcee asks the audience what the murder weapon should be. “A pear!” someone yells above the roar of suggestions.

As the team huddles for fifteen seconds to plan, I’m trying to figure out how they’ll work a pear into the story. I wish I was up there doing it.

Even after the first event—this goes great—I wonder if I might get called in, because every time our team takes a break, Melissa rushes for the bathroom. At intermission Molly tells me that Melissa is throwing up every time she’s not acting. But when she’s out on stage you’d never guess because she’s got so much energy! Our whole team is excellent. I’m especially proud of Molly.

Our team gets lots of laughs and cheers from the audience, but when the scores are tallied up at the end of the evening, we’re in third place. Even though we knew we couldn’t beat the senior high teams, we had hoped to score best in the junior high division. But we didn’t even manage that.

I rush up to our team’s bench as the audience leaves. “You were great, guys! You should’ve got more points for that last event. Molly, you were terrific!”

“You were all terrific!” Ms. Penney says, hugging one team member after another. “I’m so proud of all of you.”

All the team members are hugging, and slapping each other on the back. “Remember,” Ms. Penney says as parents start to arrive to take people home, “the whole team’s invited to my classroom for pizza at lunchtime tomorrow. You too, Andrea,” she adds. “You’re part of the team.”

“Yeah thanks, Andrea,” says Melissa. “I nearly couldn’t do it—it’s a good thing you were here.”

“Come on, Andrea, my dad will give you a ride home,” Molly tells me. Behind me, Jared McNeill is picking up his stuff and talking to his older brother, who’s driving him home. “You did great, kid,” his brother says.

“Yeah, but we never won.”

“Oh well—some days you’re the puppy, some days—”

“—you’re the fire hydrant,” Jared finishes.

When I whip around to look at him, I find him glancing at me. Both of us look as if we’re about to ask something, say something. He smiles, then I smile, and his brother says, “Come on, Jared, let’s go.”

There’ll be plenty of time to ask questions later.

Responding to the story – answer the following questions in **COMPLETE sentences!**

1. Do you think that Andrea’s mom is right when she says Andrea is “not living in the real world” when she is online? Explain.

2. How does Andrea feel about being in junior high?

3. Can you relate to how Andrea feels about being in junior high school? Explain your answer.

4. How is Andrea's personality different when she is talking with someone in the chat room?

5. Why does Andrea act differently in the chat rooms? Explain your answer

6. What do you think Andrea gains from her participation in the improve practices?

Vocabulary: fill out the chart below, include a definition and an explanation in your own words!

Word	Definition	Own Words Explanation
Character development		
Fictional		
Genre		
Symbolism		
Point of view		
Foreshadowing		

Summarizing: Fill out the chart about Andreas motivations

Somebody	Who is the main character?	
Wanted	What did the character want or want to do?	
But	What is the problem in the story?	
So	How did the character try to solve the problem?	
Then	How was the problem solved? What was the resolution?	