

FALLING FROM THE GROUND

TONIO FAVETTA



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Can't Put It Down Books

Falling From the Ground
By Tonio Favetta
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To my extraordinary wife, Julie, the world would be a better place if you were in charge of it.

And to my ingenious daughters, Anna and Rachel, the world is a better place because you're in it.

You're all the inspiration I ever need.

1 ROAD TRIP

The beige minivan twisted down the exit ramp, tires shrieking. Screams became laughter in the back seat when Alison turned to look at Olivia. “You didn’t think my family vacation was going to be *this* exciting, did you?”

Alison noticed her mother, sitting like a statue, gripping the dashboard and the grab handle above the door. Mom snapped around to glare at Dad. “Mother of Pearl! Tommy, the brake’s the one on the left.”

Here we go again. Alison checked to see if Olivia was cringing or anything, but Olivia didn’t seem bothered by Mom and Dad.

It felt like they’d been on the road for a hundred years. The night before, Olivia had slept over so they could leave on time. Dad’s idea of on time turned out to be crazy, stupid, still-dark early. Alison had wanted to stay in her pajamas, but Olivia talked her into getting dressed.

They had made it as far as the end of their street when Alison realized that she had forgotten her phone. Dad said he wasn’t going to turn around for that, but then Mom had freaked out and made him.

“Suppose she’s dead in a ditch?”

“If she’s dead she can’t call.” Michael had been slumped in the back row like a dead body. Even with his eyes closed he looked grumpy and annoyed. But Alison thought he looked like that most of the time, especially in the morning. It was kind of a miracle to see him before lunch. The Vampire, Dad called him.

It had taken Michael and Dad forever to jam in all the bags, sweatshirts, pillows and blankets until the big luggage carrier strapped to the roof rack bulged like an overstuffed burrito.

When Alison had found her phone in her backpack, she knew Dad was going to flip.

He did.

Then Mom did.

“That’s what happens when you rush me,” Alison snapped.

“If you packed last night when we told you to...” Mom had let the ending just hang there.

Back at the roller-coaster off-ramp, after Dad had practically flipped the car and killed them all, Alison watched Mom stop glaring at Dad so that she could turn around and start glaring at Michael instead.

“Michael, I know that you think you’re all grown up now and leaving for college, but I’m still your mother, and I told you not to use that kind

language, especially in front of the girls.”

“I’m surprised Vampire is awake.” Dad huffed.

“Even he couldn’t sleep through your driving,” Mom said.

“Relax, Mom. They can’t hear me,” Michael declared. He was sprawled out, apparently enjoying having the back bench all to himself. “They’re wearing headphones.”

Alison smiled across at Olivia, trouble bubbling up like a fountain inside her. “We can *so* hear you, Michael.” She pulled off the headphones, but did not turn around. “You should watch your mouth around our delicate young ears.”

“Shut up, Alison.” She heard Michael scrambling to lean forward, putting his head between her and Olivia’s. “And don’t act like you and Olivia don’t talk like that when Mom’s not around.”

“Exactly. *Not* around Mom. *I’m* not stupid.”

“So you’re saying I am?”

“I didn’t say that.” Michael was making it too easy.

“You implied it.”

“Implied. That’s a pretty big word for you.”

Michael put his face up to Alison’s ear and gritted his teeth. “Alison, I swear...”

“ENOUGH!” Dad thundered.

“You really shouldn’t swear, Michael,” Alison chided. She slipped the headphones back on and pretended not to hear the things Michael called her.

“If by some miracle your father’s right and this place really exists, we’re stopping for lunch now. So stop eating those chips,” Mom barked. “Especially you, Alison. What would Dr. Pam say? No point in seeing a nutritionist if you ignore her.” Alison handed the bag to Olivia so she could roll the top closed.

Thanks, Mom. That’s not too humiliating.

Mom waved a finger. “And stop bothering your brother! We let Olivia come with us so you *wouldn’t* bother Michael.”

“Yeah. Great plan,” Michael snorted. “Now they’re *both* bothering me.”

Looking stunned, Olivia put her hand to her chest. “What did *I* do?”

“Could everyone please stop yelling for one minute?” Dad clenched his teeth. “I’m trying to drive here.”

“If that’s what you want to call it,” Mom said.

Dad scowled. “You don’t like my driving? Fine. After lunch it’s all you. If you hadn’t been distracting me with your directions, I would have been in the right lane in the first place.”

“Distracting you?” Mom cocked her head around and looked just as

annoyed as Dad. "If I didn't say anything you would have blown right past the exit. You're the one who's dying to stop here. We all want to get to Cape November."

"You didn't stop at Irma's with your friends?" Dad laughed. That was half the reason me and my friends liked driving down the Cape.

Alison always liked it when Mom and Dad talked about the past. It wasn't just that they had probably been happier back then, but they seemed happier when they talked about it.

Mom shrugged. "We drove straight through. Anyway, this place has probably been shut down for years." Mom stared out her window.

"Great positive thinking there, hon." Dad huffed.

Mom snorted. "Aww, poor Tommy. Why don't you tell Nelson and the rest of your buddies the next time you play golf with them?"

Alison cringed as something squeezed her gut.

Dad looked angrily at Mom. "You're not really bringing that up now, are you?"

Alison dug her nails into her palms. Her chest felt tight.

"What? That all you ever do anymore is play golf or go fishing with *your* friends?"

"That's *not* all I do."

"Oh right. How could I forget poker night?" Mom spat.

"Maybe we don't have to talk about this right now." Alison caught Dad's glance in the rearview mirror. His voice was tense and tight.

"No, I suppose you're right." Mom gave a big sigh and looked out the window. "You can talk about it later. You can call up Gerry. Or Roberto."

Alison watched Dad's lips tighten over his teeth, but he didn't say anything.

"Are we stopping soon?" Michael groaned. "I gotta take a leak."

2 REST STOP

As the minivan crunched onto the gravel parking lot, Alison surveyed the long, low wooden building. It looked like an oversized log cabin. It didn't encourage her that their minivan was the only car in the lot, but she felt stiff and sore from sitting and was happy to get out. Even if it was at a place where no one else on the planet apparently wanted to go.

"Dad, this place is a pit." Michal squinted up at the sign.

"You don't know anything." Dad put the car in park. "We used to stop here all the time coming down the Cape. You're going to love it." A large wooden sign hanging over the door advertised *Irma's BBQ Station*. On the other side of the parking lot another sign was supposed to say the same thing, but some of the letters were missing so it said *Ima B ation*.

"Look," Olivia said, "I'm a bat ion."

Alison laughed. "What's that? A bat with a negative charge?"

That made Olivia laugh. Michael looked annoyed, only making it funnier.

"Bantam's Qi Bistro!" Olivia added.

"Game on!" Alison thought for a moment, rearranging letters in her mind. "Batman's Qi Bistro!" Alison replied.

"Iraq bombs a tint."

"We're using proper nouns now?" Alison said.

"You started. You used Batman."

Alison closed her eyes for a moment, "Tom's in Qatar bibs. That totally wins."

"Does not!"

"It's basically a real sentence."

"Barely." Olivia folded her arms across her chest. "What are Qatar bibs?"

"Bibs from Qatar. Duh!"

"Nerds?" Michael cooed. "Oh nerds? You can stop now."

Creaking and groaning, they unfolded themselves from their seats and stretched in the oppressive, soggy heat.

"It's gonna rain," Dad said.

"Yeah, you might actually have to sit and talk to me," Mom snapped. "What a bore."

Alison stopped rummaging for her phone and turned to watch her parents. Something heavy writhed inside her.

"Did I say that?" Dad protested.

“You were thinking it.”

“So now you’re a mind-reader?”

Mom seemed to soften. “You’re right. Why am I being mean? You’re allowed to play golf. It’s your vacation, too.”

Alison felt Olivia’s shoulder brush against her own. She relaxed her fists enough so that her nails stopped digging into her palms.

“I wasn’t even talking about golf. I don’t care if I go golfing. If you don’t want me to golf just say it. I’ll call Nelson and tell him forget it.”

“Hang on. He’s actually down the Cape?” Mom sounded suspicious.

Her father chuckled and looked at the gravel. “He’s not down the Cape; he’s over at Friendly Point.”

“That’s only an hour from the Cape,” Mom said coldly.

“It’s a little over an hour, actually.” Dad’s half-smile deflated to a scowl. “Look, I mentioned we were coming down for the week, and he said he was going to be in Friendly Point for the weekend—just the weekend. We thought maybe we could sneak in a quick nine. There’s this great course over in...”

“It’s never a quick nine with Nelson.” Alison watched the muscles tighten in Mom’s cheeks. “Nine becomes eighteen and then thirty-six. Then you head to the clubhouse for drinks, and I don’t see you all day. Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I didn’t think of it. Look, if you don’t want me to, I won’t go. It’s no big deal.”

Alison knew that wasn’t true, but she bit her lip like she always did. Hard. Getting in the middle would set off World War III.

Mom looked at the gravel and then at Dad. She dropped her voice to just above a whisper but Alison heard her anyway. “It’s not that I don’t want you to play golf,” Mom said. “I don’t want you to want to play golf. I don’t want to always be the nag who says you can’t go.”

Dad laughed unpleasantly. “I’m an adult, Sara. I can do what I want.”

“I know.” Mom sighed and looked across the parking lot. “But it would be nice if what you wanted to do was stay with me sometimes.”

“Is it such a crime that I like golfing and fishing? You have your book club.”

Mom’s hands snapped to her hips. “We meet once a month at most.”

Dad’s mouth hung open for a long, silent moment, but no words crawled out. Cringing, Alison looked at Olivia who stared awkwardly at the little gift shop next to Irma’s. She looked as if she wanted to be anywhere but in that parking lot. Not that Alison could blame her.

From the entrance to the restaurant, Michael’s voice floated across the haze. “Are you people coming? It’s hot and I’m starving and I need to take a leak.”

Inside Irma's BBQ Station, Dad reminded them about a million times that this was the place where everyone used to stop on the way down the Cape. Alison didn't think it looked like anyone stopped there anymore. It was a dark, old restaurant that smelled like mildew. Soft, old-timey country music crackled out from hidden speakers.

"Well at least it's not crowded." Mom said it a little too cheerily.

"Sure," Dad grunted. "Nobody likes to stop at places like this anymore. They just hit the drive-through and get where they're going."

Alison knew that was aimed at her and Michael. Dad always took them on roads labeled *scenic* and stopped along the way. This drove Alison and Michael crazy most of the time, but sometimes he surprised them with oddball stuff that turned out to be cool.

Mom had a photo album of these trips. Alison would look at it with her sometimes. There were pictures of Alison and Michael petting Otto, the World's Largest Two-Headed Dog. He was stuffed, of course. According to the guy in the museum, Otto died in 1974. The museum was in the back of a tractor-trailer. At that same stop they also got to feed a sheep with five horns, and there was a skeleton of a so-called *real* mermaid. It was the size of a large cat, and the tail looked like it had been made out of salami. Alison asked the guy about it, and he said that the original skeleton had been damaged in a fire but that this was a *faithful reproduction based on DNA samples and archeological evidence*. Alison remembered being impressed, but she had been only seven at the time.

Then there was the time they stopped at the old tin works. The sign on the factory read *If we can't make it out of tin, you probably don't need it*. Alison had spent the whole time pointing out why the sign was wrong because she thought annoying the tour guide was hilarious. *How about food? How about clothes? How about soap?* Mom was so embarrassed that at the end of the tour she bought a set of tin coffee cups that they used on their one and only camping trip the next year. Camping had been a real disaster. Michael and Alison had begged their father to rent a camper, but he insisted, *If you want to camp, you sleep in a tent. Otherwise what's the point?*

Even sitting in a booth at Irma's so many years later, Alison's mother started to laugh as soon as Alison reminded her of that trip.

"Your father was so proud of that sad little tent," she laughed.

"Until it started to rain," Alison said.

Dad's mouth twisted into a scowl. "Yeah, and the sun was going down and your brother, the rocket scientist, wandered off."

"Really?" Olivia asked. Alison hadn't realized that Olivia had never heard this one.

"Oh yeah," Dad explained. "There was no sign of him. I tell you,

Olivia, we're laughing about it now, but at the time...It's a feeling I would never wish on any parent."

"How long was he gone?"

"Like three hours," Dad said. "So Sara and Alison stayed in the car while this big thunderstorm rolls in. Lightning. Thunder. Wind. I knew it was only a matter of time before a big tree fell on us and killed us all. We had to get out of there, find a hotel or something, but we didn't have Michael."

"What did you do?" Olivia asked.

Dad said, "It was like the Apocalypse. The rain was coming down like a waterfall. The lightning and thunder was right on top of me. Branches—trees—everything was coming down, and I'm picturing my son dead someplace. And if he's alive, he's terrified."

"Tommy was out screaming his head off through the whole storm looking for Michael. I was beside myself. I wanted to look too, but I had to stay with Alison. It was totally dark, but at least the storm had blown over by the time Michael came back to our campsite. He was asking what was for dinner, totally dry, like nothing had happened. This was about nine o'clock at night. None of us had eaten."

"Where was he?" Olivia asked.

Dad scowled at Michael. "The rocket scientist found another kid. He went back to his camper to play video games."

Everybody started laughing, even Dad.

"Tommy came back bleeding, covered in scratches and soaked to the bone. But you should have seen the look on his face when he saw Michael sitting at the campsite with a flashlight, on a little folding chair, eating a peanut butter and jelly sandwich."

"I was ready to kill him right there."

"That's not true," Mom protested. "You gave him a big hug because you'd been so worried."

"Aww," Michael said. "You really care, Dad."

"To top it all off, the next day and for three weeks after, I was itching all over because I'd gone through some poison ivy."

3 FEEDING THE PYTHONS

At the table, Olivia swallowed her last bite of awesome cheeseburger. Mr. Nunios was right; the food was great. The old wood paneling made everything dark, but antique stained glass lamps, each one different, hung over the tables. In the yellow light of the lamps, Olivia saw dozens of black and white photographs stuck on the mirror. Many were of parties from long ago with people dancing in suits and dresses. In some they wore paper party hats like it was New Year's Eve or something. Some were close-ups, signed by people Olivia had never heard of, but who must have been famous once. She wondered if she signed a picture and hung it on the mirror, would some kid in fifty years think she had been a celebrity because she had a picture hanging on the wall.

The table was littered with their dirty plates. Everyone's antique map placemat was stained with ketchup and barbecue sauce except Mrs. Nunios's. Her map was still clean. Olivia could see the tentacles of a mythical sea monster just offshore near a finger of land labeled *Cape November*.

Feeling guilty for picking at her fries in front of Alison, Olivia covered her plate with her paper napkin like Alison had. That had been Alison's nutritionist's suggestion. If Alison finished all her fries, her mother would be all over her about it.

To distract herself from the fries, Olivia watched Michael tip back in his chair and pat his rock-hard abs. The terrifying boneyard in his plate used to be his Oink and Cluck Deluxe platter.

Mrs. Nunios called the pale, young waitress and politely asked her to wrap up her grilled chicken Caesar salad.

"You're taking that?" Mr. Nunios asked, sounding doubtful.

"It's a whole piece of chicken and a lot of salad."

"Who's gonna eat it?"

"I'll eat the chicken." Michael beamed.

"You'll eat anything," Alison pointed out.

"I gotta feed the pythons." While the waitress cleared their places, Michael grinned broadly and, leaning farther back in his chair, flexed his huge biceps in his red sleeveless tee shirt. It said Bulls Wrestling. The waitress was pretty, Olivia decided, in a washed-out kind of way. Not her type, but she could see where Michael would try to flirt with her.

Olivia had spent a lot of time in one gym or another, and as a swimmer, she had seen plenty of great bodies, both male and female.

There was no denying that Michael was in impressive shape. Big, but not bulky. Solid as a rock. A lot of girls thought Michael was totally hot and, while he definitely wasn't her type, she understood the attraction. She considered for a moment what it would be like to be with Michael, but it was only a thought experiment. With his thick mop of curly black hair, he looked like a male version of Alison, except his eyes were blue like his dad and Alison's were brown like Mrs. Nunios. It wasn't like she never fantasized about being with Alison, but when the fantasy was over and reality returned, she felt dirty and guilty, so she rarely indulged in that daydream. There were plenty of other pretty girls to think about.

Olivia felt embarrassed and slightly violated when Michael's chair made a loud cracking noise, startling her out of her naughty thoughts. He flapped his arms like a bird to keep from falling over backwards. Olivia laughed out loud.

"Don't encourage him," Mrs. Nunios sighed.

"Did you just break the chair, Mikey?" Mr. Nunios snapped. "I swear if you busted that chair..."

Michael looked down and wiggled his weight around on it. "No. I saved it."

Olivia cracked up at Michael and then really lost it when she saw that Alison had snarfed club soda out of her nose. Michael was laughing, too.

The waitress looked more annoyed than amused, probably because she was the one cleaning up. The waitress scurried back into the kitchen to wrap the food for Michael's pythons. Watching her sway Olivia realized the waitress might have been more her type than she had first thought. Not that Olivia could do anything about it at the moment. She couldn't even flirt badly like Michael. Not unless she was ready to answer a bunch of uncomfortable questions. And she wasn't. *Story of my life.*

"She was checking me out, though, right?" Michael winked at Alison and Olivia with his twinkling blue eyes.

"I don't even think she speaks English," Alison pointed out.

"Even better," Michael grinned. "She can marry me for citizenship and we won't ever have to talk."

"You're disgusting," Alison sneered. "That girl is a human being with a job. She's not here to be your sick fantasy."

"Calm down. I'm just joking around." Michael waved his hand dismissively.

"Listen, Romeo," Dad growled, "the way you eat I can't afford to pay for new furniture, too."

"Don't worry," Michael replied. He repositioned his Bulls baseball cap on his mopy head. "I have cat-like reflexes."

Olivia and Alison looked at one another and rolled their eyes.

4 GIFT SHOP

“Gotta drain the lizard again before we hit the road.”

“Michael, honestly.” Mom sounded exhausted. “Are you going to say things like that in college?”

“Only when I gotta go,” Michael tossed over his shoulder.

Alison didn’t want to just sit there waiting for the check with her parents. It would only make her want to finish her fries, and that would set Mom off. Nobody had screamed at anybody in the last fifteen minutes. Alison was afraid she’d jinx it, but she wanted to check out the store before they got back in the car.

“Olivia and I are going to the gift shop.”

“Don’t buy any junk,” her father warned.

“Leave them alone, Tommy. She’s got babysitting money.”

“You should be saving up for gas money. Don’t you want to get your license next year?” Dad looked hopeful, like a little kid.

“It’s not like you’re going to buy me a car.”

Alison breathed a little sigh of relief that her father didn’t sound angry. “That’s what I’m saying. You can save up for a car.”

“It would take me ten years to afford a car.”

That made Dad scowl. “So what? You might as well throw your money away on some piece of junk at a gift shop as soon as possible. And where are you gonna put it? We’re packed to the gills already.”

Alison thought of a place she’d like to put it, but she was not about to say that to her father.

The gift shop was part of the log cabin building, but it had its own entrance. Just like the restaurant, everything was made of old wood. The same creaky music was pumping quietly. It took a moment for Alison’s eyes to adjust to the dark store.

An old woman watched them from her perch on a stool behind the front counter. She was round and flabby. Parts of her oozed over the side of the stool. Her face was red and rough. Above her scowl, her hair stuck up like wires.

Alison remembered what it felt like to be overweight, not that she’d ever been as big as the old woman. She wondered for a moment if that’s what she would have eventually looked like if she hadn’t started eating better and exercising more. If Olivia hadn’t helped her. Alison felt kind of sorry for the old woman who had no Olivia in her life. Maybe she didn’t have anyone in her life. Alison smiled at her, but the old woman just kept

scowling. This annoyed Alison. *This is why I never bother to be nice to people.*

Even this far up the highway, there were Cape November postcards and magnets, picture frames and ashtrays. Some showed the beach or the ocean, but they could have been of any beach as far as Alison could tell. There were a few old-fashioned sepia pictures of old cars and men in suits with derby hats and women in long hoop skirts. A few faded postcards showed a lighthouse that looked like it was made of blue stone blocks.

But the place was more like an antiques store than a gift shop. There were sets of old dishes, racks of men's neckties, a whole row of used coffeemakers, all shoved next to each other with no order, just chaos.

As Alison moved farther in, the shelves became more cluttered and dusty. A black mug caught her eye. Examining it, she saw a dark sky over a stormy ocean. Huge octopus tentacles reached up out of the waves. Blue, dripping letters spelled, *Beware of Cappy*. Alison shivered slightly and set down the mug. The whole place was giving her the creeps, and she was sorry she'd come in. Alison glanced back at the old woman. Still scowling.

Alison found Olivia, moving from shelf to shelf, picking up a ratty old pocketbook and then a huge desktop lighter. She was fascinated by stuff like that. Olivia was curious about everything, like a little kid in some ways. Each new thing she would pick up and show Alison. They laughed together. It felt good.

They laughed like that the night before when they were packing. Alison had spent an hour giving Olivia a killer pedicure, and then she hid her toes inside her stupid running shoes. She had probably destroyed the pedicure, but Alison had learned a long time ago that it wasn't worth getting annoyed at Olivia for things like that. That was just Olivia. She was proud to be clueless about fashion.

The crazy part was, even standing in some dirty gift shop wearing a pair of boring khaki shorts and a plain blue tank top, Olivia still looked ridiculously, hopelessly beautiful. Everybody said she looked exotic, which drove Olivia completely insane. Olivia's mom was tall, blonde and fair-skinned. Her dad was also tall with dark skin. When he was younger, he had been a soccer star in Senegal. Olivia's parents were both workout nuts. They ran marathons and stuff. Not together. They had been divorced before Alison even met Olivia.

Olivia was tall like her parents, and she had gorgeous caramel skin. Her long, coppery hair had blonde streaks that got lighter in the summer. On rare occasions when she didn't pull it into a ponytail it fell in thick curls to her shoulders. If Alison didn't love Olivia so much, she would hate her for looking like that. A lot of girls did.

Alison watched Olivia examine things from the shelves. *This place is*

so weird. There were mounds of souvenir key chains piled inside antique ashtrays that were jammed in next to old picture frames, some metal, some wood, some made of shells. And those were next to more old ashtrays and sets of wine and beer glasses and bottle openers. Some of the bottle openers had handles shaped like lobster claws or octopus arms. There was a row of small ceramic saints and angels and other figures that Alison could not even identify. They were sort of like white squids, but they were standing up like people. Looking at the little squid statues made Alison's skin slither under her hair at the back of her neck.

Alison picked up a corkscrew. It was white and shaped like a squid, or a possibly a jellyfish. It was hard to say. The two arms that pulled out the cork were made to look like long tentacles coming off a bulgy head. There were no eyes, but the opening at the top looked like a mouth full of teeth. The teeth could open a bottle cap. Just looking at the corkscrew made Alison feel a deep, creeping fear. *Who would buy this?*

Olivia suddenly giggled right beside her. It startled Alison, and she dropped the corkscrew noisily into a pile of assorted snow globes.

Up front, the woman gave a wet-sounding grunt.

"Liv, you gave me a heart attack." She breathed a sigh of relief that nothing had broken.

Olivia held up a wooden sign with a picture of a huge man standing over a toilet. He was missing completely. The large letters under the picture read: *We aim to please, so you aim too, please.*

Alison laughed and the slithery feeling went away.

Olivia grinned and showed Alison a second sign. "We should get this one for Doctor Farwen's math class." The ceramic plaque read: *Today's not your day and tomorrow ain't looking so good either.*

Alison picked up a round mirror with a magnetic backing. It had the words *You look awful!* across the top. Alison laughed, "This is perfect for my locker."

"Not funny." Olivia's mouth was an irritated slit.

One of the things Alison always found amazing, but kind of annoying, was the way Olivia rarely said anything bad about anyone, even about the jerks who were mean to her. Olivia certainly never let Alison say anything mean about herself. She was like the self-esteem police.

She's a nationally ranked swimmer, in a hundred times better shape than me, but she never, ever, makes me feel bad about myself.

Alison continued to look at her reflection in the mirror. "God, do I really have a double chin?" Alison worked hard to stay in shape. She tried to eat the healthy foods Dr. Pam told her to eat. She watched her portions. She avoided sugar and starch. She ran, rode her bike and tried to get to the gym at least four times a week. Alison had come a long way since her

childhood as the class fat kid, but she felt like her body still clung stubbornly to her chubby childhood.

“Don’t be stupid,” Olivia snapped. “You don’t have a double chin. It’s just the way you’re holding the mirror. Here.” Olivia took Alison’s hand and brought the mirror up so that it was level with Alison’s face. “See? You look great.”

Alison didn’t think so, but she had to admit her chin looked okay once Olivia moved the mirror. Dad and Mom were both kind of short and loved cooking and wine way more than exercise. Alison knew she was never going to look like Olivia. That used to bother her, but she was becoming okay with it. She was becoming okay with herself.

Dr. Pam, the nutritionist her mother had been taking her to, looked like she never ate anything but kale, and it seemed like that was her plan for Alison, too. She had lost count of how many parties she went to and didn’t eat any cake or ice cream or chips. All her friends ate whatever they wanted and no stupid nutritionist had to weigh them once a month to see how they were doing.

The thing that really helped Alison was Aristotle. Yes, *that* Aristotle. The Greek dude with the beard. Student of Plato, teacher of Alexander the Great. He gave Alison the first piece of useful diet advice anybody had ever given her—and he’d been dead for twenty-three hundred years.

Alison and Olivia had first met in the gifted and talented program at school where Mr. W. had them do a unit on philosophy and taught them that, for Aristotle, the right thing was always the middle ground between two extremes. Aristotle called this the Golden Mean. Like to really be successful at school, you can’t be just a total nerd who never does anything fun and who just studies twenty-four-seven because you will eventually have a total mental breakdown from the pressure. Alison hoped Olivia wasn’t heading that way, but if anybody would...

On the other hand, you can’t be a total loser who never does any work and who cuts class all the time because you will keep failing everything and eventually you will just drop out of school and live in your parents’ basement complaining about the government. Alison was pretty sure that if she were going to flame out, that would be her way to go. Just flop on the couch with Netflix and Cool-Ranch Doritos and never come up for air until her parents took down a wall and rolled her out of the house on a gurney.

Aristotle’s Golden Mean was a balance. So Alison tried to eat healthy, but splurged once in a while. She ate chips in the car, so she didn’t eat *that many* of her fries. *Whatever. The place we’re staying at the Cape has bikes we can ride.*

Alison put down the mirror and sighed. “What am I going to do next

year when I won't have you at school to talk me down?"

"I won't have you either," Olivia protested.

"Hey, I'm not the one that got recruited by some whoop-de-do academy."

"You think I want to spend my junior year getting bullied by a bunch of rich, stuck-up mean-girls? I *begged* my parents to let me stay at the high school with you."

"Yeah, but our team sucks and Ashton Academy is basically a feeder to Team USA. You'll be fine." Alison laughed sarcastically. "Anyway, you're too beautiful to get bullied."

"Yeah." Olivia smirked. "That's how it works."

Olivia was amazingly, stunningly, drop-dead-in-the-street-with-a-smile-on-your-face beautiful. Alison kept waiting for birds and bunnies to flock onto Olivia's shoulders. Alison was pretty sure that if *she* looked like Olivia, she would be able to take over the world. But Olivia carried her looks like a disease.

Olivia once told Alison that the reason she loved swimming was because the whole race was underwater and nobody could see her. But it was hard to be a recluse and look like, or be as talented, as Olivia. All she ever wanted to do was to fit in, but people treated her like a statue in a museum. Teachers assumed she was dumb. Coaches just wanted her to win. Boys never heard a word she said—and she wasn't even into boys. And forget the girls. The girls were always so jealous, all they ever did was compare Olivia to each other and to celebrities. Olivia had no interest in any of that. *Hel-lo! Haven't any of these idiots noticed that the girl doesn't even wear make-up?*

"Seriously, Liv, you know you look like a model."

Olivia scowled, but only a little. "Don't you start that, too." She laughed then, but something sounded bitter in it. "It doesn't matter. I'll never be popular like you."

"Shut up!" But Olivia was right. Alison owned any room she was in. She had earned that right. Being the fat girl had often made Alison the center of attention whether she wanted to be or not. When Alison was younger and seriously overweight, kids were mean and teachers only made things worse when they tried to help. But being the fat girl who came home crying every day in elementary school had done a few good things for Alison.

She grew a thick skin, and she didn't care who liked her. Unlike a lot of her friends who tried to act a certain way to fit in, Alison never quite fit in, so she could be herself all the time. Once the novelty of making fun of her for being fat wore off, kids just liked her for her. In case anybody didn't get the hint, Alison also developed a flair for coming up with on-

the-spot putdowns. Whenever a kid with his hat on sideways and his own YouTube channel took a swipe at Alison, he ended up red-faced and crying while the class pointed at him and laughed. Alison got hauled into the principal's office a lot, but kids stopped bothering her.

That was the third gift her fat childhood had given her. Alison could sense what people were thinking and feeling. Empathy, her guidance counselor back in fifth grade had called it. What she didn't tell her, but what Alison figured out on her own, was that empathy is just another name for knowing someone's weakness.

Sometimes Alison had fun twisting some wannabe bully's insecurities until he cried, but empathy also meant that a lot of kids called her *Mom* and told her their problems and cried on her shoulder. Alison didn't mind that, even though she thought a lot of the kids' problems were just a bunch of stupid drama.

Olivia's arm felt as firm as a bike tire when Alison squeezed it to comfort her. "Going to Ashton might suck for—like—the first month, but then it will be awesome."

"I won't know anyone, Alison. I'm not like you. I can't talk to strangers. I barely talk to the people I know."

Alison laughed. "So be a hermit. They gave you a full scholarship. Girls would kill for that. Last year half the graduating class from Ashton went to Ivy League schools."

Olivia squinted skeptically. "Are you making that up?"

Alison realized that her reputation was even worse than she thought if Olivia had to ask. "It says it in one of those brochures in your bag."

Olivia looked at her skeptically. "Why were you reading that?"

Feeling sheepish, Alison shrugged. "It was the first thing I grabbed. I needed something for the bathroom."

Olivia sighed heavily. "I know Ashton is supposed to be this amazing place and that it's this huge opportunity and all that, but I don't want to move to the ass-end of Pennsylvania."

"You'd rather stay in New Jersey?" Alison found that hilarious.

Olivia punched her playfully in the arm. "I love New Jersey."

Alison massaged her arm. "It will still be here." Alison would not let herself think about how bad school was going to suck without Olivia. She took Olivia by the shoulders and pressed their foreheads together. "And so will I."

Olivia smiled sadly and pulled Alison into a hug. "I know."

Alison couldn't take another second of sappiness. "Hey, this is vacation. Why are we acting like somebody died?" A tee shirt on the shelf caught her eye. It was a cartoon picture of a very curvy woman's body in a bikini. Alison put her head over the collar of the shirt, covering her body

with the voluptuous cartoon. "You have to get a picture so I can post this!"

Olivia laughed. "My phone's in the car."

"We'll use mine." Alison fished for her phone in her bag.

"NO PICTURES!" Alison felt an electric shock to the heart when the old woman suddenly screeched from her perch. "Look, this ain't a hangout. You gonna buy something or ain't cha?" The woman scowled and the extra flesh on her red face jiggled.

"I'm looking," Alison explained, her heart still racing.

"So stop touchin' everything unless you're gonna buy it." The old woman scowled at them sternly. "You gotta leave. You gotta leave now."

"Why?" Annoyed, Alison crumpled up the shirt and dropped it on the floor.

"See whatchur doin' there with that shirt? That's why." The old woman oozed off the stool. She flowed like lava around the glass and wood counter. Off the stool, she was short and round. Turning redder, the old woman shouted and spit flew from her flabby lips. "You spoiled rich kids always come in here and mess up the place."

"Mess up *this* place? This place is a pit. I bet no one's been in here for twenty years. Where'd you get all this stuff? From your disgusting hoarder house? Do you use a bucket because you can't get to your toilet?" Alison felt her freckles catch fire. She was mad at herself for feeling any compassion for the woman earlier.

"Get out!" the old woman howled.

Alison suddenly hated the old woman. Disgust churned in the pit of her stomach. "And I *would* have folded it nicely, but you started screaming at us." She began to knock over piles of shirts, ashtrays, plaques, snow globes. Whatever she could get her hands on. "Good luck cleaning up now. Can you even bend over?"

"Alison, cut it out!" Olivia's voice cracked a little. She followed behind Alison, putting things back. She was such a goody-goody.

"That's enough!" Olivia's voice was sharp. "You don't need to be so mean to her."

Her heart hammered in Alison's chest. She could hear the blood flowing through her ears. She felt like a monster.

Angry and embarrassed, Alison just wanted to leave. She took one step toward the door when she saw something shiny on the shelf beside her. She had to see what it was.

"Alison, we should just go." Olivia's words made perfect sense, but that snow globe was nothing like any regular snow globe Alison had ever seen. It was more like looking into a movie. No matter how she turned it, she always seemed to have the same view.

In the dark-blue miniature ocean, two figurines sloshed around

through the sparkly flecks of artificial snow. One figure appeared to be a white sperm whale. *Moby Dick*? Alison wondered.

The other white creature was some kind of...sea monster? It looked alien and unfamiliar. It was hard for Alison to understand what she saw. A giant squid? A jellyfish? A lobster?

When Alison moved the snow globe around, the ocean and the two figures stirred slowly, at their own pace. It was as if they weren't reacting to Alison's motion, but were motivated by something else entirely.

"How much is this?" Still looking into it, Alison held the snow globe up to show the old woman.

The old woman's voice screeched, "Put it down. It ain't for you. Just get out!" Alison looked up from the snow globe and saw the old woman shooing at the girls with her hands as if they were raccoons on her garbage cans. "I'm not selling you nothing."

"Why not?" Alison's anger roared back. She looked away from the strange snow globe. The woman waddled over.

Red-faced and puffing, the old woman rasped, "I'm runnin' a business here an' you're trespassers. And shoplifters."

"We are not! Are you ugly *and* deaf? I said I would *buy* this snow globe." Obviously the old bat had no idea who she was dealing with. Alison's rage bubbled down. This final insult made her laugh. "If I wanted to steal something it would have been gone before you knew it was missing."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

When he isn't writing books, Tonio Favetta is a high school English teacher, writing mostly during the summer. This is one reason why it takes him a long time to finish things. The other reason is that he's lazy. He started teaching in 1990, but he started writing way back in the '80s when he was growing up in Jersey City, New Jersey. He loves New Jersey, so he still lives there, just a stone's throw from Newark, along with his wife, his daughters and a deranged labradoodle.

As a younger reader, he loved Tolkien (and still does!), and he devoured *Conan the Barbarian* novels and *The Sword of Shannara* series along with any other fantasy he could find. He still loves reading fantasy and science fiction, but he also loves *Moby Dick*, *The Odyssey* and *A Confederacy of Dunces*.

Tonio enjoys hanging out with friends and family, playing the guitar, riding his motorcycle, pig roasts, Bruce Springsteen concerts and all things Star Wars, Star Trek, Batman, Marvel and Coen Brothers. Not necessarily in that order.