GOSSON PRESS

From **Weeks and Days** by S.E. Phinney
Available April 6, 2016
ISBN: 978-0-9970489-0-2
More at www.gossonpress.com

"Sorry," Stephen said, without sounding sorry at all. "You're not on this list." He paused. "You are, however, on my list."

I blinked. I was standing in front of the mostly empty candygram table, after school on Valentine's Day. I should have explained that I knew I wasn't on the list—that I hadn't received an over-decorated memo telling me I had hearts to pick up, that I hadn't even expected to receive such a memo, and that, in fact, I was only hoping I might be able to buy a leftover box for my younger sister. Tammy, at eleven, was just old enough to love Valentine's Day approximately ten million times more than any other day, but I suspected she hadn't received anything significant at school, either.

I should have been telling Stephen all of this from the start, before he even asked my name. But I guess I was just too surprised.

Even knowing he was on student council (which in itself was perplexing), Stephen wasn't the type of person anyone expects to see running a booth for valentines. That said, he was perhaps the only boy in our school who could sit alone behind a table festooned with pink crepe paper and piled with boxes of candy hearts and look neither smug nor uncomfortable. I, meanwhile, was becoming less and less comfortable with every second that passed.

I blinked again. "What?" I said.

Stephen looked up from his second clipboard. "You're not on the list for a candygram," he said. "But I made a list of all the girls who weren't getting one and you're on there. I bought a couple extra boxes, and I was going to give everybody one heart."

I stared at him.

"But then I decided that was unwise," he went on. "It's probably unsanitary, and it also has the potential to be taken disastrously the wrong way. The boxes have mixed messages, but individually… If I give someone a single heart that says 'be mine,' they're a lot more likely to think I actually mean it than if they get a whole box, where the 'be mine' is mixed in amongst seven other phrases. So I decided to do boxes instead, but my budget wouldn't support one for every girl.

"But," he said again, "you're the first girl off my list to turn up, so you get one. Here," he said, and, without a modicum of ceremony, picked up a box and held it out toward me. "Happy Valentine's Day."

From **Weeks and Days** by S.E. Phinney
Available April 6, 2016
ISBN: 978-0-9970489-0-2
More at www.gossonpress.com

After a pause that was slightly longer than I wish it had been, I took the box and thanked him. "Good," I said, and, trying to keep some dignity intact, explained about Tammy. "Now I can just give her this one."

"No you can't give it away," Stephen said, affronted. "It's a present from me."

"It's a pity gift," I said flatly.

"Well, when you put it that way."

"I don't really want a pity gift," I said. "And also, I'm fairly sure none of the other girls on your list will, either. It's not about the candy, it's about getting to think that someone likes you." Which made my idea of getting something for Tammy seem pretty useless, but then, being eleven, she'd actually eat the candy, which none of my classmates ever did. It was more the idea of it we were after. "You should have just sent them as secret admirers," I told Stephen.

"There are sixty-two girls on my list," he said. "I don't have sixty-two dollars for that kind of thing. It had to be first come, first served."

"Then you should have just picked at random. Honestly," I said, "I think most of us would rather get nothing. Can you imagine the humiliation of deciding, hoping against hope, to come up here, just in case your memo maybe got lost, squaring your shoulders and smiling brightly and asking, and then having to be told, by a normal, decent-looking boy, no less, that you're not on the list, but you are on this other list of losers that he's made, so here, you get this consolation box of cheap candy."

Again, Stephen looked affronted. "I paid higher than market value for this," he said. "These boxes are seventy-five cents each at the grocery store."

"You didn't understand the sentiment at all, did you?" I said. "That's not what I meant by cheap."

"I did," he said, then took four more boxes off the pile and held them out to me. "Here. I won't do any more."

I was surprised, and so said something asinine. "I don't really want five boxes of candy hearts."

"Give them to your sister, then," Stephen said, and raised his arm a little higher. "These four."

"But not this one," I said, giving the first box a small shake. I wanted to, but somehow couldn't quite roll my eyes. "It's special, from you, for me."

"Right," he said. "Although, if it makes her feel better, you can tell her that these are also special, from me."

"I doubt that'll make her feel better," I said.

"It'd be rather unsettling if it did," said Stephen. "Especially as I don't know any eleven-year-olds. It might say some things about your sister that none of us wished to know."

I wasn't sure how to respond to that. I thought he was joking, but wasn't totally sure. "Well, can I at least pay you back?" I asked.

"No, just take them," he said. "Or hadn't it occurred to you that perhaps boys like giving things on Valentine's Day just as much as girls like receiving them?" He paused. "Besides, what else would I do with them? Probably no one else was going to come anyway, and I don't want five boxes of candy hearts, either."

"All right," I said, and took them. "Thanks."

"Eh," Stephen said, and shrugged.

When I got home, Tammy was face-down on her bunk bed, sobbing, which she continued to do for the rest of the day, even after I placed all five boxes of hearts on her shelf. I rubbed her back and told her that boys, and especially sixth grade boys, were idiots, and it would all get better in a couple of years.

I didn't tell her that the reason it had gotten better was that I'd finally managed to stop caring about such things; that wouldn't have helped. And I certainly didn't tell her that I hadn't properly gotten a single Valentine's token. That wouldn't have helped, either.

Tammy ate the hearts over the weekend; by Monday, all traces of red and pink had been removed from the school, and I thought that was the end of it. In fact, I'd already all but forgotten about Stephen when, a week and a half later, he came up to me in the hall. We didn't have any shared classes, and I'd rarely seen him around. I found out later that he'd abused his student council privileges to look up my schedule and find out where my locker was located.

He fell into step beside me and for several moments I thought perhaps we were just coincidentally walking in the same direction at the same speed. Then he cleared his throat and

straightened his hat. "Emily, right? About what you said—that I was a normal, decent-looking boy. What did you mean by that?"

"I…" I may have stammered a bit. "I meant what it means, I guess."

"Oh," he said. "I don't suppose when you used the word decent, you used it the way some people do to actually mean, like, mad awesome." He didn't really make air quotes, but the way he said "mad awesome" made me hear it like he had. His diction was so precise; with the rounded vowels and clipped consonants, he sounded like a British radio announcer from World War II. Even though the likelihood of a British radio announcer from World War II ever having used a phrase like "mad awesome" is extremely unlikely.

"No," I told him. "I didn't."

Stephen wasn't mad awesome-looking. That doesn't mean he was ugly or unattractive, either. But there's a lot of room between unattractive and mad awesome, at least in my book. He was just normal, like I'd said.

"Well," he said, seeming unperturbed. "I didn't suppose you had. But I figured there was no harm asking."

"Oh," I said carefully. I didn't feel that way at all. I hadn't actually shot him down, but if our places had been reversed, I'd have felt like he had.

Stephen shrugged, and then said, like he knew, "We're different, you and me. But I don't intend to waste any more time being shy. Let me be honest. It's not you, it's me. Two weeks ago, I didn't know your name to your face. I know everyone in my class—side effect of being on student council for six years—but you're not in my class."

His watch beeped then, four sharp little beeps before Stephen tapped the face, silencing it. Without breaking stride, he dug one hand into his pocket, pulled out a little case and extracted two small, white tablets, put them in his mouth at once, and swallowed. He did this all so matter-of-factly that I almost thought I'd imagined it.

"Until the, er, candygram incident, I didn't know anything about you," he went on, as if nothing unusual had happened. "I still don't know anything about you, other than your name, that nobody sent you anything for Valentine's, that you have an equally undesired younger sister, and that you think I'm normal."

For some reason, I latched onto the last part, rather than taking offense at what he'd said about Tammy and, with only negligible misdirection, implied about me. "Normal-*looking*," I said, even though I remembered that wasn't exactly what I'd told him.

Stephen shrugged again. "I'll take that."

I wasn't at all sure what was happening. And, while he may have looked all right, I also wasn't at all sure any more that normal was an appropriate adjective to apply to Stephen.

He glanced at the numbers on the doorway we were passing. "I can't accompany you any further in this direction," he told me. "I'll be late for seventh period. But we'll speak again later, all right?" He was still using the English accent.

"Are you for real?" I asked. I couldn't help it.

He'd already started heading back the way we'd come, but for a few steps he turned, walking backward to look at me. He smiled; it was just the slightest bit crooked. "For now," he said.

He showed up at my locker after school a few days later. "What are you doing this weekend?" he asked.

"Why?" I responded.

"Would you like to do something?" he said. And then, when I didn't immediately reply, "I didn't have anything in particular in mind. What do you like?"

I didn't really have a lot of experience with teenage boys. I had an older brother, but he was much older, already twenty-three. I'd been too young to pay much attention when he was a teenager, and even if I had, it'd been so long ago that most of it probably wouldn't have been relevant any more.

So if there'd been nothing special about Stephen, I wouldn't have known. But I liked how direct he was. In my mind, there were two types of teenage boys. Type one: fictional, boys who were amazing and implausible and, like Stephen, direct—the kind of boy who would decide he liked a girl (usually an odd girl), walk up and declare his intentions, and summarily sweep her off her feet—in other words, perfect boys who, in real life, didn't actually exist.

And type two: the regular ones, whose numbers were made up by, among others, all of my male classmates, who were basically ordinary, who liked sports and belching and girls with bigger breasts

than I'd ever have, and none of whom would ever unexpectedly approach a girl in the manner described above—unless he were one of those unfortunate, unintentionally creepy persons who goes through life without ever learning acceptable ways of behaving socially, and in that case, there would be no sweeping off of feet.

Despite behavior that meant he either belonged in the unintentionally creepy camp or was a fictional character, Stephen didn't come across as too socially off, and he'd assured me the other day that he was, in fact, real.

I was forced to revise, quickly, my previous assumptions about males between the ages of roughly twelve and twenty-five. I knew that Stephen didn't play sports (though he may well have watched them) and he probably burped after eating or drinking, and probably did spend a fair amount of time making eye contact with girls' chests—but it was also true that, on this occasion and on our previous two encounters, he hadn't behaved in any of the prescribed regular teenage boy ways. In fact, he was doing a pretty good impression of a fictional character—just, without the fictional part.

"I don't know," I said. I meant more along the lines of "I don't know if I want to do something with you," because at that point I was still kind of thinking he had to be too good to be true. There was bound to be some fatal flaw—or worse, an elaborate joke—because if any girl in the school was going to get a fictional character come to life asking her to hang out, the very last girl it would be would be me.

Not because I wasn't a little odd, like those girls usually are. But I always found it a bit hard to believe in books where some perfect boy would inexplicably fall in love with this radically, deliberately unusual girl who he'd never even spoken to before. Also, I wasn't that odd—not radically, and certainly not deliberately. (That, rather, would be my friend Mari.) I was more just on the periphery.

In other words, I didn't want to get my hopes up.

Even though I also kind of did, because every girl's dream, no matter how impractical she knows it is, is that a contemporary young adult fictional romance will happen to her.

Stephen's response demonstrated that he had interpreted my "I don't know" as in regard to his query about what I liked, not doubt about, well, him. "Not even one thing?" he said. "I get that at this stage in life, most of us are still figuring ourselves out. That's reasonable to expect. But you must

know at least one thing you like, even if it turns out to be something you later can't stand and you're mortified to look back and reflect that you spent time on such a pursuit."

He was right—about the first part. I didn't know what I liked, nor who I was. I was, I suppose you could say, in between identities. I stayed at home, and read a lot. Reading a book isn't really something you can do this weekend with another person, so instead, I asked Stephen what he liked.

He didn't answer me. "Tell you what," he said. "Do you like helicopters?"

As a matter of fact, I did not like helicopters, and I told him so.

"I have a fear of heights myself," he said. "But I'm getting over it." He paused. "I didn't mean going up in it. Apparently there's some kind of historical airshow this weekend. My neighbor's a mechanic," he added, as if this would explain why he knew such a thing. "But what about hiking?" he suggested, switching without preamble. "How do you feel about hiking?"

"It's still calendar winter," I said. Yes, spring was starting to show, but we had three more weeks before the equinox, and it wasn't all that unusual to get moderate to heavy snowfalls as late as mid-March.

"Yes, the twenty-first," he agreed. "That's too long to wait. So, if you're expecting snow, there's skiing."

He was joking. At least, I think he was joking. For some reason, this unsettled me. "I'm sorry," I said. "I'm going to miss my bus."

It didn't occur to me until later that he must have known I was lying, because it had been at least fifteen minutes after the bell when I'd finally left him at the candygram table the first time we'd talked.

"I'll drive you," he said anyway.

I shut my locker slowly and put my backpack on only halfway. It was awkward with just one strap, but it was my way of demonstrating that I still wasn't sure if I wanted to go with him. He seemed aware of it, and didn't say anything until we were in the parking lot.

He had a fairly nondescript car, sort of an older, less offensive forerunner of a sport utility vehicle, rougher around the edges, too angular to be boxy. If I'd been guessing, I would've said it was a decade or more older than we were. Probably a manual transmission.

We stood side by side in front of the hood, and Stephen looked over at me. "We call it the wagon," he said, like a name. "It was my grandfather's until he got too old to drive; then he kept it

in storage until I was old enough. He gave it to me on my birthday, against my parents' express wishes. He said it'd be a good starter car, because you can get into crashes in it, and afterwards, nobody'll be able to tell the difference."

"Have you?" I asked.

"Crashed? No. But I suspect he'll have." He fished his keys out of his pocket and looked at me again. "Do you have your license?" he asked; I nodded. "You can drive, if you want. I'm not always the most… reliable driver."

This, in combination with the revelation that he'd been given the vehicle at least in part because of its ability to hide evidence of previous damage, was not entirely reassuring. I stood on my toes and leaned forward to look through the windshield, then fell back. "I can't drive stick shift," I said.

"We can remedy that in future," he told me. Then he spun the keyring around his finger and walked to the driver's door. "Come on," he said. "I'm not that unreliable."

Stephen's driving was fine. In fact, compared to that of the average high school student, it was probably very good—good enough that I even started to relax. We were halfway through town before I realized he hadn't asked me any directions. I opened my mouth, then stopped, and decided not to say anything. Not because I believed he would somehow know where I lived. Just to see what would happen.

What happened was a cul-de-sac at the edge of town, in an older development that no one had ever gotten around to building anything beyond. Stephen's house was slightly left of center at the end of the loop, with a two-car garage and an empty double-wide driveway, and a third spot in gravel to the left of the other two. Stephen parked in the gravel, and turned to look at me as he unbuckled his seatbelt. "Here we are, then," he said brightly.

"I thought you meant you were going to drive me home," I said. "Like, to *my* home."

"Oops," he said. "Sorry."

"Did you do this on purpose?" I said.

Stephen didn't look away, or seem chagrined or embarrassed, or even lie, like I'd thought he might. He looked right at me, shrugged one shoulder, and smiled. "Possibly," he said.