

TIM BASCOM

Community College

W^{E E K 1}

Larry can't come because he went to his dad's place and found him on the floor, face down, dead. Dwayne can't come because he's got black lung from smoking cigarettes. Mindy can't come because Walmart changed her schedule; it's either eat or learn.

WEEK 2

Dwayne and Mindy are back, but Larry still can't come because of his dad's funeral.

Amanda is here, and she wants to talk. She's upset because, well, it's embarrassing, but after Blake asked her out and she said no, he sent her a nasty e-mail saying he had seen her on the Internet having sex. He's telling other people. She knows because a friend told her. She doesn't want people talking. Even if she did do that stuff, it's none of his business.

WEEK 3

Larry is back, but he may have to miss class once more so he can talk to the lawyer about his father's estate. His dad owned Larry's house. Now the sister wants to sell it. For her it's money; for him, it's where he lives.

Amanda is here, along with Blake, but they keep mouthing messages across the room.

Jane is here, as well, even though her daughter is struggling and her husband, a trucker, is away. She wants to write about the guy who came around selling insurance, the one who thought she shouldn't have painted her hallway like a U.S. flag. Where does he get off telling her what might upset people? If he doesn't like it, he can go back to India, or wherever he came from.

WEEK 4

Arlene can't come because she's attending a one-week course for beauticians. Nikki can't come because she's cutting herself, at least according to her friend. And John can't make it because he's in the psych ward.

Dwayne's gone, too—in the hospital—because the black lung turned to pneumonia. He'll be back, he whispers on the phone. He knows he's here for a reason; otherwise he'd be dead. He's been stabbed and shot, and almost died from the bad lungs, but God won't let him go. Jesus has a plan.

Oh, and Sara can't make it because she's got a migraine. They dilated her eyes, so it hurts to read.

WEEK 5

Jane is on time, as usual, but she looks frustrated. She isn't going to write about that guy who criticized her hallway walls. Who cares? He can go back to Saudi Arabia or wherever he's from. She's going to write about her first husband—because he was an addict and she didn't think her kids knew until she was at a pizza place and the littlest one got scared by a man at the next table. Her daughter said the man was a druggie. "How can you tell?" Jane asked. "Cause he has eyes like Daddy."

WEEK 6

Larry is back. He argued with his sister in the parking lot, so the estate isn't settled.

John is back, too, released from the psych ward. He says in high school he was a star on the football team and got good grades—before the Army put him in a morgue where he had to look at bodies from Iraq. He says he can make up all the work now, if he can find his books.

WEEK 7

Dan's been coming every day, despite his diabetes. His sight is getting worse, but he can still use the computer. He types his notes big—about two inches tall—and if he pulls at the corners of his eyes, he can read.

Jimmy is here all the time, too, and he smiles. He says he didn't used to be so easygoing, not until the skull fracture. His parents aren't so sure about the change, but he's happy. He thinks he used to cause too much trouble. He grins when he describes the extreme kickboxing that he does to make money on the side. The best way to win, he explains, is to hurt the other guy in a leg.

WEEK 8—MIDTERM

Arlene has disappeared, never to return from the beautician's course. And Chase is gone, even though his first paper (about body piercing) was beautiful. Mindy is AWOL as well, after coming back long enough to explain that she's not sure if she's a lesbian—which, along with the Walmart work schedule, is making it hard for her to get anything done.

Amanda is back, but she doesn't want to press Blake on the Internet thing. There's something she should have explained—because actually she *is* on the Internet. It was one of those webcam things, and there's lots of others involved. She didn't think anyone here would see it.

Dwayne is back, too. The pneumonia is over, but now he doesn't care about anything. His woman friend says she can't see him since she isn't divorced. It doesn't make sense: if she loves him, then why doesn't she want to see him? He can feel himself going hard inside like he used to get before he went to prison. He wants to feel that way again so it doesn't hurt. If God gave him this woman, then why take her away?

WEEK 9

Sara has another migraine, so she can't make it. Heather can't be here because her fiancé is returning from Iraq for the wedding. Nikki can't be here because she has been cutting herself again, according to her friend, who says that once, in grade school, Nikki convinced a boy to break her arm.

Clarissa isn't coming either. She won't say why, but her brother, Ronnie, thinks she's depressed. As for Ronnie, he comes all the time, despite the fact that he was born with Spina Bifida and had 15 surgeries on his legs and has to use a wheelchair.

WEEK 10

Dan is on time as usual, with his cane in hand and his bad eyes up to the computer. He is applying for a scholarship for the blind, so he can get into computer programming at the university. He wants to know if he will get his paper back. Last year the woman in charge never gave papers back. Not even on the last day. He doesn't want an A if he didn't earn it.

Larry is coming regularly, too, although his dad's estate is in stalemate. He says he will have to miss class once more when he goes to court with his ex. He doesn't like the essay about how women get marked—Miss, Mrs., and Ms. "Men get marked, too," he says. "Men are always at fault. Go to court and you'll see."

Dwayne is still coming, but he doesn't know why. His woman friend won't see him, and he can't stand the apartment. It reminds him of the way his dad used to put him in the garage and make him sleep there.

WEEK 11

For the first time, Jane is absent. She drops by to apologize. She has discovered that her junior high-age daughter stole \$1,000 out of the ATM machine to give to a girl who keeps kicking her after school. There was a note in her daughter's drawer explaining why she might kill herself. Jane's sorry to be late, but she had to talk to the principal. If he won't do anything, she's going to press charges.

John hasn't made up any of his missed work, and he is not answering e-mails. Mindy isn't answering e-mails either. And now William is missing because he

has rehearsals for the community play, *Julius Caesar*. He's playing a commoner, he says in his message. "Hey, like real life!" he adds.

WEEK 12

Dan is here as usual, but he says he will have to leave halfway through. He's still putting together the scholarship application—the one for blind students—but he can't stay because there's been some trouble at home. Family first, you know.

Nikki is back, too, and she wants to write about people who cut themselves.

Jimmy is smiling like usual, but he announces that he will take next semester off. He's going to stop the extreme kickboxing. They don't pay enough to cover injuries. Instead, he's going to be a bounty hunter in Chicago, going after guys who skip bail. There's a device to help him see into a room. That's the main thing—to see inside before you knock down the door.

Amanda hasn't come for weeks. She sends e-mails to explain. She's sorry about the whole Blake-Internet-sex thing. But she's got her act together now—because she has joined the Army. After a year at a fort in Texas, she'll ship out to Iraq. It will be tough on her family, she knows. Especially her two-year-old. But she's not worried because the girl will be in good hands.

WEEK 13

Sara is back. The migraines are over. She wants to write about mules because she has one at home. They're not stubborn, she says. They're smart.

Mindy is back, too, after two weeks AWOL. She says she doesn't want to talk about it, but then she does anyway. A guy friend raped her, and she couldn't come to class because she had a black eye. She hasn't told her parents because her dad might do something stupid. She says this isn't helping with the whole lesbian deal, or the job at Walmart.

WEEK 14

Jane has turned in her paper about the ex-husband who's an addict, and she's proud of it. She says her junior high daughter is doing much better now that the other girl isn't kicking her.

Blake has turned in his paper also (about hunting for turkeys), but it's word-for-word from a site on the Internet. So's Amanda's paper, which she e-mailed from where she is getting trained as a soldier. After she learns that she has been caught, she e-mails back to say she's sorry. She feels just terrible. Since she doesn't deserve to take classes, she's going to drop them all.

Sara turns in her paper about mules, and she's right: they're smart.

WEEK 15

Maxine will have to miss the last two weeks because she's getting her stomach stapled.

John, who has been released from the psych ward for the second time, says he is going to let this semester ride. He'll try again after the meds are adjusted.

Mindy wants an extension, so she can make up the missing paper after she works through the rape and the whole lesbian issue.

Nikki turns in her paper late—the one about people who cut themselves—and it's a fine bit of writing. Still, she says, she's not going to take classes anymore. Her friend explains: "She's pregnant. The guy's a jerk."

Larry gets his paper in late, too. He says it's okay to dock it. He understands. Anyway, he doesn't know if he'll be back. The lawyer told him he might have to sell his house. How's he going to finish his degree if he's homeless?

WEEK 16—FINALS WEEK

Jimmy comes by on the last day of the semester, just to say bye. He says he learned a lot. He says he'll be back if the bounty hunter deal doesn't pan out.

Dan drops by, too, when everyone else has gone. He holds out a letter from the university. It says he got the scholarship. He is full of thanks. Thanks for the letter of reference and the advice about the application. Thanks for helping to make it happen. His eyes are pale. They focus on nothing. He shifts the cane to his left hand and reaches with his right. He doesn't want to hear about how he did all the work himself, or how he deserves the money. His grip is firm.