

# KAT FLYNN'S GUIDE



To getting over a crush



The short story  
by Denise Vega



# *Contents*

Dedication

Copyright page

Why I Wrote This Story

Kat Flynn's Guide to Getting  
Over a Crush

Fact of Life #31 Excerpt

Reviews

About Denise

Buy Fact of Life #31

To everyone who has ever  
had an unrequited crush...

KAT FLYNN'S GUIDE TO  
GETTING OVER A CRUSH

by Denise Vega

# *Copyright page*

Kat Flynn's Guide to  
Getting Over a Crush

An e-short story

by Denise Vega

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

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in-person and Skype author appearances. See her website for more information.

# *Why I Wrote This Story*

I've had a lot of positive feedback and reviews for my teen novel, *Fact of Life* #31 (published by Knopf Books for Young Readers). Many readers have asked for more on Kat and Manny, mostly in the form of a sequel, but I just couldn't wrap my mind or my

passion around the idea of a sequel—the book feels like it ends exactly where it should and I didn't want to mess with that. I liked that the ending for *Fact of Life* #31 allows the reader to imagine where things might go next.

Then, at the end of 2012, I came up with an idea that excited me—what about a short story? Great! Loved that idea since I was also working on a novel that was completely different than

anything I'd ever done.

But what should the short story be about?

After trying out a few ideas, I came around to one of the things that really intrigued me about Kat—she'd had a crush on the same guy for five years. I had a lot of crushes when I was in middle school and high school, but most of them didn't last more than a few weeks. So what the heck was up with Katima Flynn and

this never-ending crush?

I wanted to find out, so I wrote the story you find here: “Kat Flynn’s Guide to Getting Over a Crush.” It completely stands on its own, but could also serve as a bit of a prequel to the novel, giving a little backstory before that book begins, so I hope it will please both readers who have already read *Fact of Life* #31 and spark the interest of those who have not.

I hope you enjoy reading

“Kat Flynn’s Guide to Getting Over a Crush”—I had a blast writing it!

—Denise Vega

# *Kat Flynn's Guide to Getting Over a Crush*

He was standing just outside the gym, talking and laughing with a group of guys and girls. All six-foot-two, dark-haired awesomeness of him. So close and yet so far away. Once again I tried to imagine

sketching him. Could I capture the tilt of his chin, the way his hair fell softly over the collar of his shirt?

The first time I'd thought of it was last year when I came across a picture of him in the yearbook. In the picture, he was looking over his shoulder as he walked down the hall, as if someone had called out to him from behind, his grin caught forever by the camera. I often wondered whom that person

was and what they'd said to make him smile even before he'd turned around.

I didn't sketch him then and I knew I wouldn't sketch him now. It felt too intimate and we were anything but.

“Get in line, right?”

I started at the voice. I looked down to see a girl I didn't recognize standing next to me. I had to look down. I'm taller than most of the girls I know and more than a few boys.

“What?”

“Manny Cruz,” she said.

“Male extraordinaire. Major lust object.”

Okay, who was this person and why was she in my personal space calling Manny a “major lust object?”

“I’m not—”

She laughed, cutting me off. “You don’t have to admit it to me. I don’t care. But it’s all over your face.”

I frowned. Looking at someone you might want to

sketch and looking at someone with lust was not the same thing. I knew it wasn't.

“I think you’re confused,” I said.

She smiled. “Maybe, but somehow I doubt it.” She stepped past me, all confidence and girl-swagger. “You probably know it’s a really long line,” she said, and then glanced back at me. “But I intend to cut.”

She walked away, toward Manny and his crew. She was

what? A freshman? No, probably a sophomore. Give me a break.

I watched as she slowed down when she got close to him, turning her head slightly as she smiled. He glanced up at her briefly, and then back to his phone, where he was busy texting and nodding at something one of his friends had said.

My first thought: *That was so obvious.*

My second thought: *Was*

*that how I looked when I was around him?*

Thursday morning I ran into Ms. Dufford, my art teacher from last year. She was wearing one of her signature homemade skirts—this one had been created out of what looked like an old bed sheet, with cars and trains racing around it.

“Very nice,” I said. She was the only person I knew who could wear bed sheets

and have everyone—faculty included—raving about her trend-setting fashions.

“Thank you, Katima.”

She curtsied slightly as she came toward me. “How’s my favorite artist?”

I grinned. “All of your students are your favorites.”

“What can I say?” she said. “It’s true.” Ms. Dufford had been to Abra’s Midwifery and seen the Babies on Parade mural I’d done and asked why I hadn’t signed up for one of

her drawing and painting classes. I told her they wouldn't fit my schedule, but the truth was I wasn't sure I wanted my art judged—by her or anyone else in the class. If it was up on a wall, completed, people just admired it. It could be mine and only mine without input from anyone else.

I did wonder what it would be like to sell a piece of art, to have someone connect with my vision in

such a way that they wanted to possess it, hang it up, look at it every day. I knew that students in all of the art classes were invited to participate in the winter art show and sale and that when the sale was over, the student artists got to keep half the money and the other half went into a fund that Ms. Dufford used to provide art supplies to schools in need. Last year they went with her to deliver the supplies and

give a mini art lesson to a class of fifth graders. That was the part I regretted. It would be fun to help a little person fall in love with art and feel proud of what they'd created.

“Are you working on anything right now?” Ms. Dufford asked, bringing me back to the hallway. She always talked to us like we were working artists, as if our projects were lined up just waiting for us to come to

them with pencil, charcoal, paint or clay. Though actually, that was sort of me.

“Just a mural at home right now.” I thought I’d finished it, but it felt unfinished somehow so I’d been pondering it lately. I also had random sketches I’d do here and there but I didn’t count those.

“That sounds fun,” she said. “I love the ones at your mom’s office.”

I smiled.

“Well, I’m off to get some supplies for my ceramics class,” she said.

“Have a good day, Katima.”

“You, too.” I turned to head to class and when I reached the end of the hallway, something in the art studio caught my eye. Pressing my face against the window to the left of the door, I read the flyer:

*Designer Wanted!  
I’m looking for a  
student to design the*

*art display case and  
the Clubs and  
Athletics Fair table  
for Back to School  
Night.*

- *Submit your design ideas via the web link below. You'll be identified by a number and will only be able to submit one idea. (I don't want to play favorites—oh, wait, you're all my favorites )*
- *Don't include anything*

*that will give away your identity. If I suspect you've done that, I won't hesitate to press Delete.*

- *Submit no later than August 24th at the end of the school day.*
- *I'll make my selection and contact the student by August 28*

I felt a little shiver of excitement run up my spine. I'd never done anything like this, but I could already feel

ideas pricking at the back of my mind. Not only would I love to do it, it was just the thing to get my mind off he-who-I-should-not-be-thinking-about.

And then I read the last line:

*I will only consider the first ten ideas submitted so don't procrastinate, people!*

Oh no. When had the notice gone up? The deadline was tomorrow. Had she already gotten the ten? I

rushed down the hall, not caring that I'd be late to class. I had to find Ms. Dufford.

She was in the ceramics room, unloading a box, when I rushed in. I stopped short in the doorway, taking in the wet, earthy smell of clay, the colorful rows of unglazed and glazed pieces lining the shelves. Even though I hadn't taken ceramics, I felt like I was coming home. Creativity swirled from every corner. It was intoxicating.

“Katima!” Ms. Dufford raised an eyebrow. “Aren’t you supposed to be in class?”

“Yeah,” I said, “but I saw the sign in the studio for a designer. Did you already get ten?”

She furrowed her brow. “Oh, dear. I may have. I meant to check and take the sign down if I’d gotten ten.”

It turned out she had two slots left. During lunch I used one of the school computers to submit an idea that had just

popped into my head—I was Designer #9 according to the website—and crossed my fingers.

“So she’ll notify the designer she wants to use on Tuesday.”

I was sitting on my bed across from my best bud, Christy Buchanan. She was wearing her black gambler’s hat—“It’s *not* a cowboy hat!”—because it was Friday. Christy loved hats and had a different one for each day of

the week.

“That sounds perfect for you,” she said. “I can’t wait to see it.”

“I have to get selected first. Ugh. I have so much homework.” I tugged books out of my backpack. “Did you even understand what Dr. Harding was saying in Trig? She seemed to be talking in a foreign language.”

Christy laughed. “Yeah, it’s pretty crazy. I think I may need to get a tutor.” She

tapped her phone. “So tell me about Manny and this girl you texted me about earlier. What’s up with that?”

I wrinkled my nose.

When I’d thought about cut-in-line girl, I’d gotten that uncomfortable feeling you get when you’ve done something stupid or embarrassing and you just want to shake it off. The lame way she’d tried to get Manny to notice her, how he hadn’t, and how I knew, somehow, that that was me,

too.

*It's a long line.*

Did I really want to be in it? Especially since I was at the back?

“I think it’s time to admit defeat with Manny and move on,” I announced.

“But you haven’t even read my report.” Christy pointed to the little orange notebook between us—aka the Buchanan Field Report. She’d started the notebook back in seventh grade – a

compilation of her observations about other people at the school; our own middle school tabloid that only the two of us read. She had a section on Manny, starting back when I'd first gotten my crush on him.

“He’s not dating anyone right now,” she said. “This could be your time.”

Yet another thing to love about Christy. Even though it had been four years of nothing, she was still there

for me if that's what I wanted. Not once had she said that maybe I should look elsewhere or judged me about the Manny crush (unlike her boyfriend, Glen, who thought I was crazy and Manny was out of my league).

I told Christy about cut-in-line girl.

“That’s *her*,” she said. “Not you. What does she know? Besides, Manny doesn’t go for younger.” She stopped, pressing the top of

her pen against her lip. “Well, maybe once, but I think that was it. He’s pretty picky.”

“It’s been so long,” I said. “It’s embarrassing.” Even now, starting my junior year, I could remember the day when I’d first felt the flutter.

It was seventh grade Spanish class. Our teacher had paired everyone up to read through the dialogue in our book so we could translate and answer the

questions that followed.

“Kat Flynn and Manny Cruz,” she read from her paper.

I'd noticed Manny in class, but it wasn't until we switched seats and I sat next to him for the dialogue that I actually looked at him. I mean *really* looked at him.

Whoa.

He had this amazing wavy dark hair and dark eyes with to-die-for thick eyelashes. At close range I

could see three adorable freckles marching across the bridge of his nose. Okay, there were a few zits too, but it was seventh grade and I could overlook those because of the hair. And the eyes. And the way he smiled a little when he sat down, like we shared a secret.

“What page did she say?” He flipped open his book as I scooted in my chair.

“Fourteen.” I opened my own book, turning to the

correct page while watching him out of the corner of my eye. Were those lashes for real?

“You start,” he said, so I read the first line. Then he read: “*¿Quiere que decir ‘I love you’ en español?*”

*How do you say “I love you” in Spanish?* Double whoa. Sure, it was a story about an older woman advising a little girl who wanted to say it to her grandmother, but I could

work with it.

My heart had skipped a beat, even though he was just reading what was on the page and didn't even seem to register what the words were. I remember thinking (wishing?) that he *had* registered it, deep down in his subconscious where these things get filed away for future reference.

We continued the dialogue, answering the questions that followed.

Once, his elbow brushed mine and sent a tingle through my arm. When we finished, we passed our notebooks forward and people returned to their regular seats for the remainder of class.

We weren't paired up for a dialogue or anything else for the rest of the year, but it didn't matter because I was *gone*.

“OMG,” I had said to Christy after school that day. “He is *so* cute.”

“I’m on it.” She had opened her Buchanan Field Report to a new section and labeled it MC. She made it her business to find out as much about Manny as she could, and every few days she’d give me the update—how many and which girls liked him, who he might like, who he hung out with.

This went on through eighth grade and into high school. It was true that I would occasionally have

another crush or didn't like anyone at all. Like in eighth grade I liked John Stanton for about a week because he smiled at me and then asked me to the spring dance. It turned out he really wanted to get close to Christy—mostly because she had boobs, which had suddenly appeared the summer before eighth grade—but by then she was already going out with Glen, who loved her boobs, but had proved himself by not

touching them for a long time which meant he now got to touch them a lot.

So I spent the dance moving and twisting in front of John while he craned his neck to watch Christy, who only had eyes for Glen.

And then there was Ben Slater freshman year. Starting high school had been exciting —so many new people, including new guys. I was convinced that there was someone to take my mind off

Manny and when Ben bumped into me—literally—as I stepped out of English class, I thought it was fate. He was everything Manny was not—straight blond hair, blue-eyes, thin bordering on skinny.

And he talked to me. Noticed me. Even left a note in my locker once.

*Come to my tennis match?*

Okay, so he wasn't professing his undying love, but it was a start.

So I went, dragging Christy along with me. He smiled and waved at me and I smiled and waved back.

“He’s cute,” Christy said as they started the match. “Not Manny Cruz hot, but definitely cute.”

Unfortunately it only lasted five days. He told me he needed some space. I laughed. I thought he was kidding. It wasn’t like we’d really been together. But it felt like it could be

something. The next day I saw him talking to another girl. Another tennis match was coming up. I had a feeling she was going to get a note in her locker later and I realized it didn't bother me.

I went for a few weeks not liking anyone and then I was back to lustng after Manny Cruz.

“Did you feel like you were cheating on him?” Christy asked me when the Ben thing was over

(tennis/note in locker prediction right on the money).

I sighed heavily. Hearing it out loud made it sound even more ridiculous. “I know it’s crazy. I can’t cheat on someone I don’t have.”

“No, but I understand the feeling,” she said. “And your fear that if you start going out with someone else, you’ve closed the door on Manny forever.”

I groaned. “Do you see

how serious this is? You have to help me.” And she did, introducing me to another little detour last year named Dan Mason. Dan said he liked that I was flexible. I thought he meant going with the flow, but he actually meant how flexible my body was. He’d caught me doing yoga poses near the theater. He wasn’t impressed that I would do yoga in plain sight of others. He was impressed that I could sit cross-legged with my feet

up on my thighs in lotus position, and then lean down to place my forehead on the floor.

“If I could do that,” he said. “I could really do some damage on the wrestling mat.”

I invited him to my yoga class, but he refused, asking if I could just show him how to do some of the poses myself. I tried, but his body couldn’t seem to get it.

“I don’t know why you

can do contortions on the mat and not do this,” I said to him one day.

He’d just shaken his head.

But he seemed to like me and I thought I liked him until I was standing outside the boys’ locker room waiting for him to come out and Manny came out first.

“Hey,” he said before walking past me.

I couldn’t even speak. It was like he took my breath

with him when he passed.  
And that's when I knew.

There was no one but  
Manny for me.

So Christy kept up the  
MC section in the BFR and I  
listened eagerly to her  
reports. Until now.

I sighed, looking into  
Christy's gentle eyes. "If  
you've had a crush on a guy  
for four years, is it still a  
crush? Or just pathetic?" I  
shook my head. "I'm thinking  
pathetic, even though I still

can't seem to stop liking him.”

“It’s not like you can just shut off your emotions any time you want to.” Christy tapped the notebook absently.

“Maybe I could. If I really tried.” I bit my lip. “I need to get over him.”

We both looked down at the little orange notebook between us. It seemed to glow, inviting me to pick it up, open it to the MC section, find out the latest on Manny

Cruz.

Maybe just a peek. One more piece of information before I went cold turkey.

My fingers twitched. Then relaxed. I crossed my arms over my chest.

“I’m done with the BFR. At least the parts about Manny.”

“Okay.” Christy picked up the notebook and tucked it into her funky, patchwork shoulder bag. But then she reached in again and I thought

she was going to pull it back out.

“No!” I said. But it wasn’t the familiar orange notebook. This one was green. And empty—the pages fresh, clean and white.

“Okay,” she repeated. “So how’s this going to work?”

**Uncrush Step #1: Stop  
Stalking Following Trying  
to Be Where He Is**

Not surprisingly, Christy

managed to find out Manny's schedule every year so I could accidentally on purpose be at a nearby water fountain or set of lockers or doorway when he emerged from a classroom or came around a corner. No more. From now on I'd just follow my own schedule.

“This is good,” Christy said the first day of Step #1. “We can see what guys are on your natural route and scope them out. Maybe we’ll discover one who’s been

checking you out without us even realizing it because we've been so focused on Manny."

"What?" The thought of some guy secretly pining away for me while I'd been pining for Manny seemed pretty ridiculous. Still, it did give me a little thrill. Maybe there was some cute guy who, unlike Dan Mason, would appreciate my calm and balance while doing a yoga tree pose.

“Move, Yoga Girl.” A shoulder bumped mine, sending me hard against my locker.

“Hey!” Christy and I said in unison. But the guy who belonged to the shoulder was already gone, pushing someone else out of his way.

Okay, so maybe I wouldn’t be admired for my mad yoga skills.

“Do you want me to walk with you?”

I shook my head. “I can

do this.”

“No veering?”

“No veering.” It would take some practice to follow my regular route, but I’d manage. It wasn’t just about it being a habit; I really needed to see him. It was like a drug or something and the withdrawal kind of sucked.

Closing my locker, I hoisted my backpack on my shoulder. “See you at lunch.”

Christy smiled and nodded before walking away.

It was just me and my new non-Manny plan.

As I headed to class, I swung by the art studio and noticed Ms. D had posted a new sign:

*DESIGNERS: I have my ten applicants! Thank you for your interest.*

So someone had signed up after me. My idea was going up against nine others. I wondered what the other ideas were and how mine might stack up. Were they all

current students? Was it anyone I knew? I thought back to last year's class, trying to think of anyone who might want to do this. A lot of them had been like me, content to draw and paint by themselves without a lot of interaction. I couldn't think of anyone who would want to put themselves out there.

Come to think of it, why was *I* doing it? If I was selected, I'd have to stand at the table and talk to people.

I'd have to be articulate and knowledgeable about our art program (when I'd never taken a class) and the art clubs (which I'd never joined). I'd have to make sure I didn't make a fool of myself. I'd—

“Katima!” Ms. Dufford was walking toward me. “Did you submit something for the Back-to-School Designer?”

“Don't you want it to be anonymous?”

“Oh, I won't know which

one's yours. Well, I might. But, it doesn't matter. I'm just glad you did."

"But I didn't say—"

"I know. But I could tell." She smiled and patted my arm. "If it doesn't work out or even if it does, I hope you'll reconsider and join one of the art clubs. I think you'd be a real asset."

"I'll think about it," I said, even though I had no interest in staying after school to do whatever they

did in the clubs.

“Good. See you later.”

She was off in a swoosh of what looked like a skirt made of canvas grocery bags.

I arrived at my first period class and sat down, realizing that I'd been so busy thinking about art and the design thing that I hadn't had time to think about not seeing Manny. Any other day I would have been near the water fountain by the chemistry lab where he had

first period, hoping for a look or a smile my way.

I had a moment of dread. What if this had been the day he would have actually looked at me and smiled? What if he was going to say something to me today and I wasn't there to hear it and reply?

My muscles twitched as I thought of jumping up and rushing out of the classroom and over to the chem lab. But then the bell rang and I was

able to take a breath and realize how stupid that would have been.

The point was to get over him. I was already implementing Step 1—not purposely trying to see him—and it was going well so far. True, I was only about ten minutes into it, but I had to start somewhere.

One period down, seven to go.

I got through the next two

periods pretty well. I arrived at third period late because I automatically started heading toward the east hall where Manny had Twentieth Century Lit and realized it when I was practically there and had to double back to my classroom. Luckily the teacher was talking to a student so I slipped into my seat without being asked for a tardy pass.

But on my way to lunch I saw him. He was standing

near some lockers with his friends, nodding and laughing. I sucked in a breath, my heart doing its usual Manny hop-skip.

God, look at him. He's so gorgeous with that dark hair and his amazing eyes and man, does he fill out that T-shirt.

*Stop.*

I kept my eyes forward, willing myself not to look at him, to appear uninterested, doing my own thing. Almost

there. Ten feet away. Four feet away. Two feet away.  
Passing him—

“Hey, Kat.”

I turned toward the voice, a male voice that wasn’t Manny’s.

“Oh. Hey, JT.” Jason “JT” Turner had been in a couple of my classes the last two years. We weren’t really *friend* friends, just the kind that talked about homework or stuff going on at school. But he was nice and I felt

comfortable around him, which made me give him a second look. Maybe he was the One and Manny was just my unattainable or incompatible distraction. That happened a lot in books and movies where the girl realizes at the end that the love of her life was right there in front of her (or beside her) the whole time she was going after a guy she didn't belong with.

“Going to lunch?” JT asked.

“Yeah. You?”

“Yeah.”

He waited, as if this reply was a segue into some fabulous conversation. Or maybe he wanted to walk to the cafeteria with me, which I realized I didn’t want to do.

“Okay, well, see you.”

“See you.”

Maybe I was too quick to judge, but I didn’t think JT and I were going to hit it off in any romantic way. I continued to my locker and

then on to the cafeteria.

“So?” Christy raised an eyebrow as I sat down at the table across from her. I was glad to see Glen wasn’t attached to her today; I didn’t really want to talk about Operation Uncrush in front of him.

“Not bad,” I said. “I had one sighting just now, but didn’t go near him.” I didn’t tell her about JT. She might make it out to be more than it was. “On another topic, Ms.

Dufford asked if I had submitted an idea for the design thing.”

“I thought it was supposed to be anonymous.”

I nodded. “Right? But she somehow knew I’d done it and she was glad. I wonder if she’ll be able to tell which one is mine.”

“Probably, because it will be the best one.” Christy grinned. “Now will you tell me what it is?”

I shook my head. “Not

till I know if I get to do it.”

“Okay, fine. Then back to Operation Uncrush. Can you get through the afternoon?”

I nodded. I could do this. I just had a little challenge trying to control my desire to follow the Manny route.

## **Uncrush Step #2: Stop ~~Mooning Over~~ Thinking About Him**

Tuesday afternoon I received an email from the Design website:

*Congratulations! You've*

*I had been selected to design the Back-to-School Night display and table. There was a tie so I came to the art studio right after school to meet your partner in art!*

A tie? A partner? I wasn't sure I liked the idea of working with someone else, but at least Ms. Dufford would be there to help.

I arrived at the art studio as soon as I could get my stuff together. It was empty, so I dropped my backpack on

the floor next to a table and wandered the perimeter, taking in the ceramics, sculptures, and paintings that dotted the shelves and walls. I had my back to the door when someone entered.

“Hey, I’m Mira. You must be the other winner.”

I turned around—  
and my chin nearly hit  
the floor.

Cut-in-line girl had a  
name.

Mira.

“You,” we said in unison.

“So you know my name,”

she said. “What’s yours?”

“Kat,” I mumbled, just as Ms. Dufford entered.

“Wonderful! You two have met. Won’t this be fun?” She was carrying a large stack of newsprint, which she set on one of the tables. “You both had such amazing ideas that I thought the display would be that much better with you working as a team.”

Mira frowned. “How

exactly is this going to work? I'm sure we have very different ideas.”

“Actually, they dovetailed nicely,” Ms. Dufford said. “Katima has an artist studio theme where some of the art is incorporated into everyday objects and your theme has to do with found art. Kat’s idea is more fleshed-out, though, so let’s start there.” She pulled a folder out of her bag. “Here, I’ll show you.”

She laid out two pieces of paper—my design and, I assumed, Mira’s. We both stepped toward the table from opposite sides.

Mira stared at my design, frowning.

Her design was good and I started nodding. “Yeah,” I said. “I can see how this would work.”

“Really?” Mira looked unconvinced.

“Sure.”

“So, is Kat like the leader

or whatever?” Mira asked Ms. Dufford. “Do I have to listen to everything she says?”

Ms. D smiled. “This is a team effort. The three of us will be working together. But I’d like most of the ideas to come from the two of you.” She pulled out a clean sheet of newsprint. “Okay, let’s get started.”

Christy busted out laughing when I told her I was working with Cut-in-Line Girl.

“This is perfect,” she said. “If she keeps going after Manny, you’ve got a front row seat for what not to do.”

She “stopped by” the art studio on Wednesday after school to give me a book, but it was really so she could check out Mira. She shook her head ever so slightly and gave me a look that said “This is your competition for Manny Cruz?”

I just smiled and shrugged.

The first week actually went pretty well. At least I thought it did. Mira kept wrinkling her nose every time I made a suggestion, even if it was about using her work. But we did make some progress, coming up with an overall design for the display case. We'd carry the same theme on a smaller scale to the art table in the cafeteria for the Activities and Clubs Fair.

“Great work, girls,” Ms. D said as we gathered our

backpacks.

“Thanks for doing this,” I said. “It’s just what I needed.”

Mira and I walked out together, though not by choice.

“I have to hurry,” she said. “I’m meeting Manny.” She lingered a moment, no doubt letting this information sink in.

I pulled my phone out of my pocket and flipped it open. “See you.” I hoped I

sounded nonchalant because inside I was about to scream. How could she possibly be meeting Manny when last week he barely looked at her? Of course, I hadn't seen Manny much because of the new uncrush plan. Maybe they'd become friends over the last several days.

I tried to push the thought out of my mind. I was trying to get over him. I had to let things like this happen. It wasn't like I could do

anything about it anyway.

The next Tuesday I was at Abra's Midwifery, catching up on some paperwork before her first appointment arrived. I was hopeful that being here would help get my mind off *him*. Part of Step Two was not saying his name, the idea being that he would become less Manny and more just some guy if I didn't keep using his name.

So far it wasn't working.

Now, when I heard the word “him,” I thought of Manny. Not really helpful since people tossed around “him” all the time, not realizing how difficult it was for me to hear it.

I looked up at the Fate Goddess image on the wall. I wished she could tell me if I was doing the right thing with this whole Manny business. Somewhere deep inside, I felt a truth to Manny and me. But I couldn’t explain it without

sounding like I was the stereotypical girl with a crush on a guy she couldn't have. I believed, on my best days, that Manny was a guy I *could* have. Just not right now.

Right now I needed to focus on the “not right now” part and move forward. I pulled out my sketchbook and started brainstorming a few more ideas for the art display at school.

Getting everything ready for

the display and tables meant meeting with Ms. Dufford and Mira to review dozens of pieces to decide which ones would go in the case and which on the tables and to communicate with the student artists. This meant dealing with the sometimes angry reactions of those whose work wasn't selected.

“You’ll be in the winter show,” I kept telling them. “We’re just trying to show a variety of styles and media.”

Ms. Dufford had insisted I include a painting I'd told her about last spring called "Invisible." It showed a huge, vibrant, colorful tree in the middle of a square with people walking through it as if it wasn't there. It had been a challenge to maintain the color while making the tree semi-transparent.

Mira's piece was a sculpture of a bike made from a variety of different metal pieces—parts of an aluminum

pop can, some aluminum foil, tin lids and thin metal rods. It was called “Re-cycle,” which I thought was extremely clever and told her so.

She just shrugged. “It was a finalist in a sculpture contest last year. It’s not even one of my best pieces.”

Whatever.

That afternoon I was carrying a roll of white paper back to the display case. We planned to use it to line the walls so we could paint a

background. It was a little unwieldy, so I kept shifting it from arm to arm.

“Need some help?”

Holy crap. Manny Cruz was suddenly walking next to me, looking down at me (down, yes, because he was taller than me. One of the few.)

“Uh, uh.” Yeah, I’m articulate.

“I think that was a yes.” He reached out and took the roll from me before I could

protest (not that I would have, even though I probably should have).

“Thanks.” I sounded a little breathless—from carrying the paper or seeing Manny I wasn’t sure. Either way, I hoped he didn’t notice.

“What’s this for?”

I explained about the display case and table.

“That’s cool,” he said. “I may see you. Coach asked some of us to stop by and talk about basketball at the boys

athletics table.”

Okay, no freaking out. I’m supposed to be getting over him. But it was like every time I was almost there, he’d show up and I’d fall for him again. Like deep down he didn’t want me to get over him even though he didn’t really know me, let alone want to go out with me.

I knew this was insane even before it settled in my brain. Good thing Manny wasn’t a mind reader.

We arrived at the display case in a few minutes.

“You can just lean it against the wall.” I pointed to the left of the case. “I have to do some cutting before I can use it.”

He did, and then straightened up. “Good luck. I’ll swing by and check it out.”

“Thanks again,” I said. I watched him walk away as Mira strode up. “Was he looking for me? Should I go

after him?”

“No to question number one and to question number two: that’s up to you. He was just helping me with the paper roll.”

She frowned, her eyes on his receding back. “Did he say anything?”

“Not really. He said he would check out the display.”

She brightened. “I guess I’ll see him then.”

I didn’t say anything. I was focused on the fact that

our conversation didn't bother me, that I was more interested in getting started on the display than dissecting what may or may not be going on with Manny Cruz and Mira.

“Go grab the scissors from the room,” I said.  
“We’ve got a lot of paper to cut.”

Once we’d selected and received the student pieces, we had to figure out how to display them within our

theme. After a few false starts, I had one of those cool “yes!” mental fist pump moments and couldn’t wait until the final bell rang so I could get to the art studio and talk about it with Ms. D. I was pretty sure Mira would hate it not because it was a bad idea, but because it wasn’t hers.

“I don’t see how we can use a ceramic bowl as part of her studio window,” Mira said. She was being annoying,

taking my suggestion of using the pieces as part of the surroundings literally.

“It doesn’t have to be part of the window,” I said. I really, really wanted to strangle her. She wasn’t stupid, but she liked being difficult. “It can be somewhere else in the studio. It could be for her morning cereal, or a container for her pastels.”

“That’s right, girls,” Ms. D said. “Just try different

things until it meets or exceeds your vision.”

We opened up the display case and got to work. We had already painted the back to look like a textured wall and hung some of the paintings up as well as added a shelf that held a ceramic vase and two ceramic plates. I used jewelry to make a pastoral scene “outside” the window we’d built and mounted on the back wall of the case. It turned out even better than I’d hoped.

My heart soared and I found myself grinning in what I was sure was a goofy and ridiculous way. But it felt amazing to have an idea I was excited about and be able to bring it to life.

“I guess this vase with glass flowers can go here.” Mira set it on a narrow table near the back, where the reds and yellows popped against the wall.

“Perfect.” I nodded in admiration.

About an hour into it, JT strode by and gave us a thumbs up.

“Looking good, ladies.” I knew he purposely said it that way so we weren’t sure if he meant us or the display. Except I could see he was looking more at Mira than me.

“Thanks, JT,” I said.

“You going out with him?” Mira asked after he was out of earshot.

I shook my head,

swallowing a smile. “Just a friend.”

Christy came by after her tutoring session on Friday, her eyes growing wide as she stepped up to the case.

“Oh my God,” she whispered. “It’s amazing.”

We had pulled out the existing shelves and done an art studio theme, a life-size diorama with a mannequin artist on one end holding a paintbrush and working at an

easel that held two small student paintings. On the mannequin's neck, arms and fingers we'd placed necklaces, rings and bracelets from the Jewelry and Metals classes. Then we'd incorporated other pieces of art into her surroundings—other paintings became a valance for the window we'd built at the back of the display, jewelry created the view outside the window—hills, trees, and a sparkling

yellow sun. The infamous ceramic bowl was now the base of a planter for a metalwork bouquet.

“Yeah, we’re pretty proud of it.” I looked at Mira who had been grinning until she caught me looking at her. She immediately dropped her smile and tried for bored.

“It’s okay.”

“Okay?” Christy practically shouted. “Are you crazy? It’s brilliant. You’ll have crowds around this

thing. They'll be a traffic jam.”

Mira allowed a flicker of a smile. “I think it worked pretty well to put my cycle so that it looks like it’s leaning against the wall in the far corner.” Whoa. She actually said something almost positive.

“Perspective,” I said.  
“Gotta love it.”

“It’s genius.” Christy’s eyes flitted here and there, taking everything in. “This is

really beyond wow. It's, like, Ultimate Wow." She turned to grin at me. "It's cool to see you so excited about something. I think you're more excited about this than the mini triathlon you're going to start training for."

I grinned back. "I know. It's like my brain was just exploding with all of these ideas and then Mira and Ms. D had ideas and it all just took off."

"And you're going to

hang out at the tables at Back to School Night and answer questions?” Christy shook her head in mock disbelief. “You, Kat Flynn? Miss Don’t Look at Me Even Though I Call Attention To Myself by Doing Yoga in the School Hallways?”

I laughed.

“*That’s* the other reason I know you,” Mira said. “You’re Yoga Girl.” She wrinkled her nose, an expression I had seen many

times before in our short time together. “Well, gotta go. Manny and I have a date tonight.”

Christy raised an eyebrow.

“Who knows?” Mira said. “We might end up like that gorgeous popular couple. You know, those seniors.”

“Mitch and Libby?” Christy couldn’t hide her disbelief. “No offense, but you have no idea what you’re talking about.”

She shrugged. “Maybe not. We’ll see.” She hesitated a few seconds more before turning on her heel and heading down the hallway.

“That was interesting,” Christy said. “But why would she say she has a date with him when it’s so easy to disprove?”

“What do you mean?”

Christy’s eyes grew wide and she put her hand to her mouth. “Oops. I’ve said too much.”

I grabbed her arm.

“You’re not still writing things about Manny in the BFR, are you?”

“I get scoops,” she said.

“From everywhere about everyone. I can’t just stop because of Operation Uncrush.”

I shook my head. “Well, now you have to tell me.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

“You told me not to.”

I paused, realizing I

didn't want to know. Her "oops" meant he was either busy tonight or dating someone else. If I really wanted to get over him, I didn't need to know his business. One day maybe I wouldn't care. But one step at a time.

"Can you help me put these supplies away?" I grabbed a pair of scissors and a box of glue. "Mira-Has-a-Hot-Date forgot to do her share."

I could feel Christy's eyes on me and knew she was wondering if I was really going to drop it and not ask about Manny again. But she didn't say anything; just picked up the other supplies and followed me into the art studio.

## **Uncrush Step #3: Stop ~~Lusting After~~ Liking Him**

The past two years, Back to School Night was the usual: my parents went to all

of my classes and came home with a handful of flyers from all the sports and club tables to give me, which I would take up to my room and promptly toss in my recycling box.

But this year I was there, a part of things, hanging out with Ms. Dufford and Mira at the art tables, which we'd designed as an extension of the artist's studio in the display case, with two mannequin arms for the

jewelry, some easels, a potter's wheel, and more, each decorated with or displaying student art. My dad stopped by before heading to my classes (Abra had a baby to deliver).

“I saw the display case,” he said, shaking his head. “All I can say is—wow.” He smiled at Mira and Ms. D. “You all did an amazing job. And this,” he swept his hand in front of the table, “beautiful.”

“The girls did it all,” Ms. D said. “You have quite a talented daughter.”

My dad smiled. “That I know.” He turned to Mira. “Kat told me how talented you were. I bet your parents are really proud of you, too. Are they here? I’d love to meet them.”

Mira glanced at the doors. “Excuse me,” she said, and strode away without another word.

My dad and I looked at

Ms. Dufford.

“I think her parents are out of town a lot on business,” she said, sighing.

“That’s a bummer.” Mira had parents who weren’t around much. She lied about dating Manny. It’s weird when you start to know more about a person than what you see on the outside or what they want to show you. I shifted uncomfortably.

My dad squeezed my arm and gave me a meaningful

look. “I’ll see you afterward. Can’t be late for class.” He headed off with the other parents to visit student classes.

I smiled slightly, but I was still thinking of Mira.

Occasionally someone would have to pass by the cafeteria and they’d stop in to chat. I was the one who usually ended up talking to them because Mira kept leaving our table to wander past the boys’ athletics table.

An hour ago I would have rolled my eyes. Now I just felt sad.

Soon enough the class visits were over and it was time for the Club and Athletics Fair. People began streaming into the cafeteria. I was surprised how many of them mentioned the display case when they stopped at our table.

“It’s so creative,” one woman said to Ms. Dufford. You could tell she assumed

Ms. D had done it, which made sense. But Ms. D was always quick to point to us and say, “Yes, it is, and Katima Flynn and Mira Stokes are the designers.”

I smiled at Mira. A genuine smile. She looked at me uncertainly, and then gave me a tentative smile back.

The hour flew by as we answered question after question and handed out flyers about the art classes and clubs. It occurred to me

that I had never really looked at any of the clubs even after telling Ms. Dufford I would. I'd never been big on joining things, but maybe...

I folded up one of the flyers and tucked it into my back pocket.

As the crowd started to thin, I could actually see across the cafeteria where tables were set up for winter and spring sports. And there was Manny, chatting away with some parents. I noticed

some girls hanging back a little, watching him, including Mira. She exchanged a few words with him, but it wasn't much. Definitely not what you'd expect to see if they actually had been out on a date.

I sighed. Mira was brave enough to go up and talk to Manny, but had exaggerated their relationship. Another girl walked up to Manny—one he smiled at and talked to without looking at his cell

phone once. Mira's shoulders slumped and she shuffled away, across the cafeteria and out the doors.

People started to make their way to the exit as it got closer to nine-thirty. I could see my dad in the hall through the doorway, talking to Mr. and Mrs. Buchanan, Christy's parents. Ms. Dufford and I started to break things down, removing the art and placing it carefully in the boxes under the tables. Mira was still MIA

and Ms. Dufford had been waylaid by a parent.

I peeked over at Manny again. The girl was gone and he was chatting it up with his buddies.

Suddenly JT was beside me. “For what it’s worth,” he said, “he seems like a really great guy. Probably worth waiting for.”

“What?” I said, my cheeks warming. “Who?”

JT looked across the cafeteria at Manny, but he

didn't need to; we both knew who he was talking about.

"Thanks," I murmured.

He smiled.

"Hey," I said suddenly.

"Can you do me a favor? Mira left a little while ago and hasn't come back. She left her purse." I held it up. "Would you mind seeing if you can find her?"

JT's eyes lit up. "Is Mira your little art partner?"

I nodded, trying not to smile.

“I’ll do better than that,” he said. “I’ll take it to her.” He grabbed the purse and headed toward the door. I chuckled. He was practically running.

“Well, I think that was a big success,” Ms. Dufford said as she walked up.

“It was really fun,” I said, folding the tablecloths. “I loved every minute of it.” And I realized I did. Being involved in this project had really taken my mind off

Manny. But more than that, I loved doing it. *Loved it.* Like running, I felt alive doing it. I felt whole and real and centered.

Ms. Dufford smiled.  
“You both did an amazing job.” She looked around.  
“Have you seen Mira?”

“I sent a friend to find her.”

She nodded. “Good. I feel bad that her parents weren’t here to see her beautiful work. I hope she’s okay.”

I thought about how excited my dad had been, knew Abra would have reacted the same way if she had been here. Mira had gotten lots of compliments, just not from her parents. And then she had circled Manny and come away empty.

“I’ll make sure she’s good before I leave.” We grabbed the last of the boxes and carried them and the artwork back to the art studio.

“Have a good night,” Ms.

D said.

I waved good-bye and headed toward the doors out to the parking lot. On the way, I saw JT talking to Mira. She was laughing, her eyes bright. When I got closer, they both looked at me and waved.

I waved back. She looked more than okay. At least for now.

Walking on, I texted my dad that I was coming his way. I was so intent on my

phone, that I bumped arms with someone going the other direction.

“Sorry,” I mumbled, looking up—

At Manny Cruz—

Looking at me with a smile. Of recognition.

“Me, too,” he said, holding up his phone. “Bad habit.”

I nodded.

“That display was rockin’,” he said. “I mean, really awesome.”

“Thanks,” I said as we passed.

“See ya, Kat.”

*He knows my name.*

*Of course he knows your name, you idiot. He’s been at the same schools as you since seventh grade.*

But I couldn’t remember the last time I’d heard him say it. And I liked hearing it.

Crap.

My fingers flew fast and furious over my phone on the

way home, even as I told my dad how great the night had been and how many compliments we got on the display.

*Manny talked to me!*

*Say what? When? What did he say? From: HatGirl Cell, 9:48 pm*

“Well I’m not surprised,” my dad said.

But it was almost as if he had answered my text:

*Manny talked to me!*

*Well I’m not surprised.*

“You really have a lot of talent,” my dad said. “I mean, look at the Womb.” He was referring to the room he and I had built next to Abra’s birthing room in our house. When it was finished, he’d said it was “a womb of your own” –ha ha. I’d painted a mural in it.

“Thanks, Dad.”

I texted Christy again, telling her about the brief encounter with Manny.

*So what are you going to*

*do??? From: HatGirl Cell,  
9:48 pm*

“Kat? Hello?” My dad interrupted my text convo. “I really don’t want to compete with whoever you’re texting.”

“Sorry,” I said, staring at Christy’s question before closing my phone.

What *was* I going to do?  
Did I have to do anything?

No. I didn’t. And it didn’t have to mean anything either. It could just be what it was—a short, friendly exchange

between two people. And that actually felt okay.

“Do you think you’ll do an art club?” my dad asked.

“I don’t know,” I said.

“Maybe.” I wasn’t ready to admit that I was actually thinking about it, had slipped the flyer into my back pocket. Most of my art had been very private—something all my own. But I did like the art show last year. And being involved in the Back to School display. And seeing

Mira happy—that was something too. I'd felt confident and competent these last couple of weeks. I couldn't say that for other areas of my life and I had to admit I wanted to hold on to that feeling, see where it led.

When we got home I headed up to my room to call Christy.

“See, here’s the thing,” I said. “I like Manny Cruz. I’ve liked him for four years and I will probably go on liking

him until I don't." I took a breath and let it out. "But you know what? He's not everything. He shouldn't be everything. This thing with the art display made me realize that I'm really good at something, something that other people can appreciate, not just me. But it wasn't just about that. It was about doing something I really loved, something that took me to a place that was comfortable and familiar because it was a

place I'd created and made my own. A place where ideas flowed and sometimes they worked and sometimes they didn't, but it didn't matter because I knew we'd figure it out. And it had nothing to do with Manny Cruz. Just me." I paused. There was silence on the other end. "I'm done now."

I could feel Christy smiling through the phone. "Wow," she said. "That's the most amazing thing I've

ever heard.”

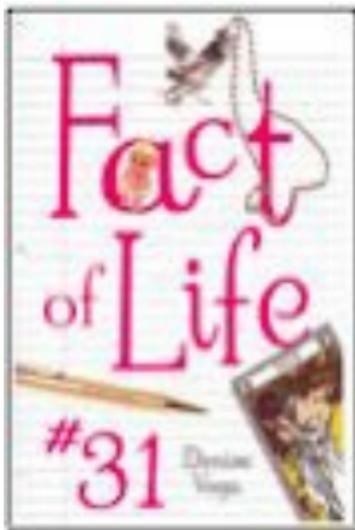
We talked awhile longer and then hung up, both of us needing to finish homework. I smiled as I sat down at my desk, feeling more content than I had in a long time.

I opened my Spanish textbook and a little tingle went through me. Spanish class meant Manny. What would happen when I saw him?

*Bring it on, I thought. I can handle anything.*

*Fact of Life #31*

*Excerpt*



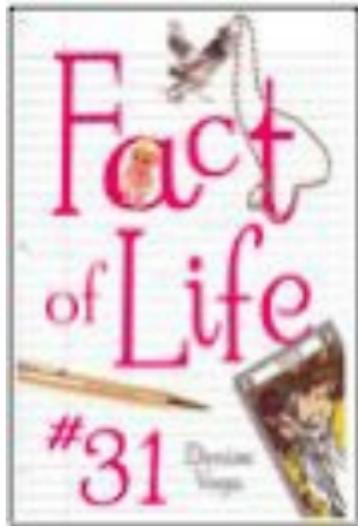
*Fact of Life #31*

a novel by Denise  
Vega

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# *Reviews*



Praise for *Fact of Life*  
#31

“...Told in Kat’s passionate voice, this coming-of-age novel, with its romantic subplot, snappy dialogue and strong secondary characters, will appeal to fans of Sarah Dessen.”—*Kirkus Reviews*

“...athletic, artsy, oddball Kat is an unusual

protagonist who doesn't easily fit into type, and many readers will welcome her strong individuality and believable growth.”—*Booklist*

“Vega is a master at putting her characters in difficult situations and allowing them to grow and work through things,

and this book is no exception...A beautiful exploration of life, love, and family; definitely a must-read!”—Jolene Gutierrez, Librarian

“Denise Vega writes with a touch of quirky humor and has built a world of characters that readers will find engaging, complex, and

admirable, even when they are not the people we want or expect them to be. ... Vega's light touch blends it all seamlessly, making Fact of Life #31 a smooth and satisfying read for any age.”—

Curled up with a good kid's book

“...The novel is well-written and well-paced.

All the characters are likable even as they fail to communicate with each other in moments of comedy juxtaposed with real pain.”\* — *Kliatt*, (\*asterisk highlights exceptional books.)

“...In her second novel, Denise Vega delivers a thoughtful, realistic story about

friendships, families, firsts, and fresh starts.”—Little Willow on Amazon.com

“Readers looking for an amusing yet meaningful story should definitely check out Kat’s story in Fact of Life #31”.  
—The Book Muncher

“I love, love, love it...”

In a way, this one reminds me of Dairy Queen and The Off Season though I'm not sure why my brain has made this leap. I suppose it is because of the depth of the characters—it's rare to fully explore family dynamics with such heart and soul and authenticity.”—Becky’s Book Reviews

“OK, I cannot say enough good things about this book! I totally loved it!! It is so cliche to say that it made me laugh, cry, etc and that I didn’t want to put it down, but seriously that is exactly how I felt!...A must read for any chick-lit or realistic fiction reader!”— Kristin, Librarian

“What I loved about this book was the way that Denise Vega told the whole story. In places where other authors would have stopped (the adorable crush finally asks pining girl out, jerky boyfriend is roundly dumped for being, y’know, a jerk, daughter finally tells her mother

what she thinks), Vega went on, taking us through overlapping series of character and relationship arcs that wind up telling a much more complete story.”—  
Confessions of a  
Bibliovore

“*Fact of Life* #31 continues a trend of books about capable, out-

of-the-mainstream teens that have just the right amount of quirk, wit, and teen-society apathy to give a glimpse into a wonderful character.”—*What to Read What to Read*

“I really enjoyed this title... once I hit page 2, I was hooked. Denise Vega has a talent for channeling

a teen girl in her most vulnerable state, but still infuses strength and heart into the character. Loved it.”—A Patchwork of Books

## *About Denise*

Denise Vega is the award-winning author of six books for kids, from toddler to teen, including her middle school “blog” books: *Click Here (to find out how i survived seventh grade)* – a Colorado Book Award winner – and *Access Denied (and other*

*eighth grade error messages).* Her other YA novels are the award-winning *Fact of Life #31* and *Rock On: A story of guitars, gigs, girls, and a brother (not necessarily in that order)*. Denise lives in Denver with her family where she loves to hike, walk, swim, read and eat French fries.

Other books by Denise:

*Click Here (to find out how ii survived seventh grade)*

*Access Denied (and other eighth grade error messages)*

*Fact of Life #31*

*Rock On: : A story of guitars, gigs, girls, and a brother (not necessarily in that order)*

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GoodReads

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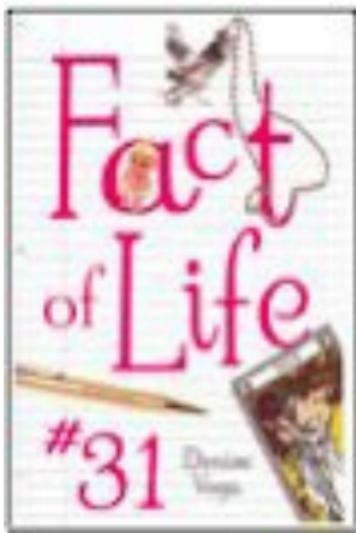
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