

Stargirl Chapters 12 & 13

12 This is how Hot Seat went.

It took place in the communications center studio. There were two chairs on stage: the infamous Hot Seat itself-painted red with flames running up the legs-and an ordinary chair for the host, Kevin. Off to the side were two rows of six chairs each, the second row higher than the first. This was where the jury sat. It was a jury in name only. The twelve members did not vote or render a verdict. Their job was to ask questions, to give the Hot Seat its heat: ticklish questions, embarrassing questions, nosy questions. But not mean or hurtful questions. The idea was to make the subject squirm, not roast.

In the spirit of mock inquisition, we called the subject the "victim." And why would anyone want to be the victim? The lure of TV. The chance to confess-or lie-before a camera and before peers instead of parents. But I doubted the usual reasons applied to Stargirl.

There were three cameras: one for the stage, one for the jury, and Chico. Chico was the handheld close-up camera. According to Mr. Robineau, our faculty advisor, a student named Chico once begged him to be a close-up camera kid. Mr. Robineau gave him a tryout, but Chico was so skinny he practically collapsed under the camera. The job went to someone else and Chico went to the weight room. By the following year Chico had muscles, and the camera was like nothing on his shoulder. He got the job, and he was brilliant at it. He gave the camera his own name. "We are one," he said. When he graduated, his name stayed behind, and from then on the close-up camera and its operator were a unit called Chico. The host and the victim were each fitted with a thimble-size clip-on mike; the jury passed around a hand mike. Opposite the stage was the glassed-in control room, sound-insulated from the rest of the studio. That's where I worked, wearing my headset, watching the monitors, directing the shots. I stood at the shoulder of the technical director, or TD. He sat at a rack of buttons, punching up the shots I ordered. Also in the control room were the graphics and audio people. Mr. Robineau was there as faculty overseer, but basically the students worked everything. Kevin's job was to get things started: intro the victim, ask a few opening questions, stir things up if the jury was slow. Usually the jury was on the ball. Typical questions: "Does it bother you that you're so short?" "Is it true that you like so-and-so?" "Do you wish you were good-looking?" "How often do you take a shower?"

It almost always added up to entertainment. At the end of the half hour, as we cued credits and music, there was always a good feeling in the air, and everyone-victim, jury members, studio crew-mingled and became students again. We filmed the shows after school, then broadcast them that night- prime time-on local cable. About ten thousand homes. Our own surveys said at least fifty percent of the student body watched any given show. We outdrew most of the hot sitcoms. We expected to top ninety percent for the Stargirl show.

But I had a secret: I wished no one would watch.

In the month since we had scheduled the show, Stargirl's popularity had dropped

out of sight. Gone were ukuleles from the lunchroom. More and more kids saw her cheerleading behavior as undermining the basketball team and its perfect record. I was afraid the boos for her might spread from the court to the studio. I was afraid the show might turn ugly.

When Stargirl came in that day after school, Kevin gave her the usual briefing while Mr. Robineau and I checked out the equipment. As the jury members straggled in, they were not clowning around or tap-dancing on the stage as jurors usually did. They went right to their seats. Stargirl was the one tap-dancing. And mugging for the cameras with Cinnamon the rat licking her nose. Kevin was cracking up, but the faces of the jurors were grim. One of them was Hillari Kimble. My bad feeling got worse.

I retreated to the control room and shut the door. I checked communications with the cameras. We were ready. Kevin and Stargirl took their seats. I took one last look through the plate glass that separated the set from the control room. For the next half hour I would see the world through four monitors. "Okay, everybody," I announced, "here we go." I cut the studio mike. I looked over my control-room mates. "We all set?" Everyone nodded.

Just then Stargirl lifted one of Cinnamon's front paws and waved it at the control room and said in a squeaky voice, "Hi, Leo."

I froze. I came unraveled. I didn't know she knew my name. I just stood there like a dummy. Finally I wagged my fingers at the rat and mouthed the words "Hi, Cinnamon," although they couldn't hear me on the other side of the glass.

I took a deep breath. "Okay, ready music, ready intro." I paused. "Music, intro." This was the moment I lived for, launching the show. I was the director, the maestro, I called the shots. On the monitors before me I watched the program unfold according to my commands. But on this day the thrill was missing. I felt only a dark dread snaking along the cables.

"Greetings...and welcome to Hot Seat..."

Kevin went through the opening spiel. Kevin loved to be on camera. He was ideal for a show like this, which made good use of his smirky grin and arching, Did-I-really-hear-you-say-that? eyebrows.

He turned to Stargirl. Then, impromptu, he reached out and stroked the nose of Cinnamon, who was perched on Stargirl's shoulder. "Want to hold him?" she said.

Kevin gave the camera a Should-I look. "Sure," he said.

"Ready, Chico, rat," I said into my headset mike.

"Ready" was always first in the command sequence.

Chico zoomed in.

"Chico."

TD punched up Chico. The camera followed Cinnamon from Stargirl's hands to Kevin's. No sooner was the rat in Kevin's lap than it scampered up his chest and darted between two buttons into his shirt. Kevin yipped and squirmed. "It scratches!"

"He has fingernails," Stargirl said calmly. "He won't hurt you."

Chico nailed Cinnamon poking his head out from between the two buttons. Mr. Robineau stuck a thumbs-up in front of my face.

Kevin gave the camera his Ain't-I-something face. He turned again to Stargirl. "You know, ever since you showed up at school this year, we've been wanting to put you on the Hot Seat."

Stargirl stared at him. She turned to the live camera. Her eyes were growing wider...

Something was happening.

...and wider...

"Chico!" I barked.

Chico moved in, crouching, giving it a little upshot. Terrific. "Closer, closer," I said.

Stargirl's wonderstruck eyes practically filled the screen. I checked the long-shot monitor. She was frozen, rigid, as if electrified to the chair.

Someone smacked my shoulder. I turned. Mr. Robineau was laughing, saying something. I lifted one earphone. "She's joking," he repeated. And suddenly I saw. She was taking "Hot Seat" literally. She was milking it for all it was worth, and judging from the blank stares of Kevin and the jury, Mr. Robineau and I were the only ones who got the joke.

Stargirl's hands were rising now from the arms of the Hot Seat...

"Ready one," I called. "One!"

Camera One, not there at first but getting it now, the long shot, nailing her as her hands came off the chair arms, fingers spread wide, you could almost see her fingertips smoking... Hold it, I prayed, hold it...

...as her horrified eyes swung down over the side of the chair, the Hot Seat, saw the painted flames...

"EEEEEEEEEEEEEEYIKES!"

Her scream bent instrument dials like palms in a hurricane. The rat leaped from Kevin's shirt. The TV image quaked as my Camera One man flinched, but he recovered and caught her standing now on the front edge of the stage, bending over with her rear end in the camera, flapping her hand behind her, fanning her smoking fanny.

Finally Kevin got it. He went nuts.

"One, pull back, get Kevin in it. Ready...One."

Kevin was doubled up, tipping out of his chair, on his knees on the stage. His laughter flooded the control room. The rat ran over his hands and hopped down the single stage step...

"The rat!" I yelled. "Two, get the rat!"

But Two couldn't get the rat because the rat was nosing around Two's feet and Two was bolting from his camera.

"Chico, rat!"

Chico dived. He was flat on the floor, feeding the live screen a brilliant shot of the rat heading over to the jury, the jury members scrambling, taking off, climbing onto their seats.

Forget the "Readys"; things were happening too fast. The cameras were dancing, feeding the monitors. I barked commands. TD was punching his button rack like some hard-rock keyboarder.

Stargirl's pantomime remains the best I have ever seen. Mr. Robineau kept

squeezing my shoulder. As he said later, it was the greatest moment in Hot Seat history.

But because of what followed, no audience would ever see it.

13 In less than a minute, everything returned to normal. Stargirl retrieved Cinnamon and sat back coolly in the Hot Seat as if nothing had happened.

Kevin's eyes twinkled. He was squirming. He couldn't wait to dig into the interview. Neither could the jury, but their eyes were not twinkling.

Kevin forced himself to look serious. "So, your name. Stargirl. It's pretty unusual." Stargirl gave him a blank look.

Kevin was flustered. "Isn't it?" he said.

Stargirl shrugged. "Not to me."

She's putting him on, I thought. "Chico," I said into my mike, "stay tight on her face."

A voice was heard dimly off-camera. Kevin turned. A jury member had spoken.

"Jury mike up," I said. "Ready Two." The mike was passed to Jennifer St. John. "Two."

The mike looked like a black ice cream cone before Jennifer's face. Her voice wasn't pleasant. "What was wrong with the name your parents gave you?"

Stargirl turned slowly to Jennifer. She smiled. "Nothing. It was a good name."

"What was it?"

"Susan."

"So why did you drop it?"

"Because I didn't feel like Susan anymore."

"So you just threw out Susan and named yourself Stargirl."

"No." Still smiling.

"No?"

"Pocket Mouse." Twelve pairs of eyes boggled.

"What?"

"I named myself Pocket Mouse," Stargirl said breezily. "Then Mudpie. Then Hullygully. Then Stargirl."

Damon Ricci snatched the mike from Jennifer St. John. "So what's it gonna be next? Dog Turd?"

Uh-oh, I thought, here we go.

Kevin jumped in. "So...you change your name whenever you get tired of it?"

"Whenever it doesn't fit anymore. I'm not my name. My name is something I wear, like a shirt. It gets worn, I outgrow it, I change it."

"So why Stargirl?"

"Oh, I don't know." She petted Cinnamon's nose with her fingertip. "I was walking in the desert one night, looking up at the sky-like," she chuckled, "how can you not look at the sky!-and it just sort of came to me, fell onto me."

Kevin looked up from his sheet of prepared questions. "So what do your parents think? Are they sad you didn't keep Susan?"

"No. It was almost their idea. When I started calling myself Pocket Mouse when I was little, they called me that, too. And we just never went back."

Another distant voice from the jury.

I tapped the soundman. "Jury mike. And keep all mikes open." I hated to do it.

It was Mike Ebersole. "I said, do you love your country?"

"Yes," she answered briskly. "Do you love yours?"

Ebersole ignored her question. "Why don't you say the Pledge of Allegiance right?" She smiled. "Sounds right to me."

"Sounds like you're a traitor to me."

Jurors were only supposed to ask questions, not make statements.

A hand reached into the picture and grabbed the mike from Ebersole. Becca Rinaldi's angry face appeared on Camera Two. "Why do you cheer for the other team?"

Stargirl seemed to be thinking it over. "I guess because I'm a cheerleader."

"You're not just a cheerleader, you dumb cluck"-Becca Rinaldi was snarling into the mike-"you're supposed to be our cheerleader. A Mica cheerleader."

I glanced at Mr. Robineau. He was turned away from the monitors. He was staring straight at the set through the control room window.

Stargirl was leaning forward, looking earnestly at Becca Rinaldi, her voice small as a little girl's. "When the other team scores a point and you see how happy it makes all their fans, doesn't it make you happy, too?"

Becca growled, "No."

"Doesn't it make you want to join in?"

"No."

"Don't you ever want the other team to be happy, too?"

"No."

Stargirl seemed genuinely surprised. "You don't always want to be the winner...do you?"

Becca scowled at her, jutted out her jaw. "Yes. Yes, I do. Yes. I always want to be the winner. That's what I do. I root for us to win. That's what we all do." She swept her arm around the set. "We root for Mica." She jabbed her finger at the stage. "Who do you root for?" Stargirl hesitated. She smiled, she threw out her arms. "I root for everybody!"

Kevin-to the rescue, thankfully-clapped his hands. "Hey-how about this? Maybe it should be official. Maybe one person in the whole district should be appointed to be on"-he waved his arm-"everybody's side!"

Stargirl reached over and slapped Kevin's knee. "She could wear every school's letter on her sweater!"

Kevin laughed. "She'd have to be big as a house!"

Stargirl slapped her own knee. "Then no letter at all. That's even better." She looked into the camera, she swiped at the space before her. "Out with letters!"

"Cheerleader-at-large!"

"Everybody's cheerleader!"

Kevin sat at attention, placed his hand over his heart. "With liberty and justice...and a cheerleader for all."

Ebersole snarled into the jury mike: "And a nut roll for all."

Kevin wagged his finger. "That's a no-no," he scolded. "No statements from the jury. Questions only."

Renee Bozeman snatched the mike. "Okay, here's a question. Why did you quit homeschooling?"

Stargirl's face became serious. "I wanted to make friends."

"Well, you sure have a funny way of showing it, making the whole school mad at you."

I wished I had never given in to Hot-Seating Stargirl.

Stargirl just stared. Chico filled the screen with her face.

"Gimme-" It was Jennifer St. John, reaching for the mike. "And out of school, too. You meddle into everybody's business. You stick your nose in, whether you're invited or not. Why do you do that?" Stargirl had no reply. Her usual impish expression was gone. She looked at Jennifer. She looked at the camera, as if trying to find an answer in the lens. Then she was looking away, looking at the control room. I took my eyes from the monitor and for a second I thought they met hers at the control room window.

I had been wondering when Hillari Kimble would speak up. Now she did. "I'm gonna tell you something, girl. You're goofy. You're crazy." Hillari was standing, jabbing her finger at Stargirl, chewing on the mike. "You must've come from Mars or something..." Kevin raised a timid hand. "And don't you tell me 'no statements,' Kevin. Where'd you come from, Mars or something? There, now it's a question. Why don't you go back to where you came from? There's another question."

Stargirl's eyes filled the camera. Don't cry, I prayed.

There was no stopping Hillari. "You want to cheer for other schools? Fine! Go there! Don't come to my school. Get outta my school!"

Other hands were snatching at the mike.

"I know what your problem is. All this weird stuff you do? It's just to get attention."

"It's to get a boyfriend!"

The jurors laughed. They were a mob. Hands grabbed at the mike. Kevin looked anxiously at me. I could do nothing. With all the buttons and switches at my command, I was helpless to change anything on the other side of the glass.

"I got a simple question for you. What's the matter with you? Huh? Huh?"

"Why can't you be normal?"

"Why do you wanna be so different?"

"Yeah-is something wrong with us, you gotta be so different?"

"Why don't you wear makeup?" They were all standing now, jabbing, jutting, shouting, whether they had the mike or not.

"You don't like us, do you? Do you?"

Mr. Robineau flipped the master toggle on the console. "That's it," he said.

I flipped the studio sound switch. "That's it. Show's over."

The jury went on shouting.