

JOYLAND

GAMEBOOK

The things no one knows. Not even the best players.

Chris Lane stockpiles facts to use, like weapons, against his father, in a showdown that will never occur. He cruises through like a digitized arrow, meant, somehow, to represent a human. (50 points)

Tammy Lane is eleven and a half and she has already fallen in love many times. She does not yet know what love is, but the blue estuaries in her heart are large enough to have carried half a dozen devotions already. (75 points)

In 1984, Joyland video arcade closes its doors. At one time, Space Invaders was its most popular game — in spite of a dank row of boogers left anonymously along the machine's back edge. (100 points)

Unrequited love will almost always lead to violence. Some may know this, but in the heat of the moment, this information will be misplaced. (500 points)

Somewhere in the rustbelt of Ontario, there is a girl named Genevieve Cartier. You will never meet her. She is the key to everything. (1000 points)

In a few years, North America will undergo an economic shift. The factories will lock their doors. Only a faucet forging shop and a few dirt roads will remain. Every time Chris Lane washes his hands, he will feel his own imminent death, a closing down. (Lost player)



LEVEL 1

GALAGA

PLAYER 2

The girl who was flopped on the carpet knew cities of jacks, terrains of kitchen crumbs, the dumb wooden legs of furniture, and all that lay between them. The worn spot beside the right pedal her father's piano foot had stamped and thumped, and vigorously rubbed off. The catalogues and as-yet-paperless presents beneath her mother's side of the bed. The jagged letters of her brother Chris's name gouged white into an underlying beam of the playroom table (which had since become a study table), though he would not now admit that the letters had any association with him. The difference in vibration of footfalls — the hesitancy of her mother's, the severity of her father's, the singular triumphant stomps issued by Chris. The place to look for a lost Lite-Brite peg, a kicked Tinker Toy, a clumsy fallen Battleship, an elastic-shot chunk of Lego. The stretch of linoleum where a marble or HotWheels would stall. Whether or not a doll's shoe would fit beneath the door. First, second, third, and fourth grade accumulated between individual grains of shag. When Tammy rose up, she was halfway through Grade Five, she would soon start Six. She had witnessed the beginning of her

life from this fixed, ground level. She teetered through the house off balance, unaccustomed to being vertical. By her eleventh birthday, she had found her footing. Eventually, she became addicted to height, learned to climb.

That summer, Tammy Lane was brave enough and strong enough to reach the very top of the maple tree in her backyard. From there, she could see the cars on St. Lawrence Street shooting past. She could see her brother flying away down the sidewalk on his BMX. She could see him flying away from her, away from everything she had ever known. Tammy watched afternoon lapse into evening and waited for him to come home.

Chris zigzagged through the grocery store parking lot, his butt in the air as the front tire cleared the curb and dropped him into the street. He disappeared through the branches. According to Tammy's *Big Book of Spy Terms*, he was "in the gap." When he reappeared, he was at the corner near the donut shop. Tammy lost him then — longer, "in the black" — and when she spotted him once more, he had doubled back through the grocery lot, riding hard and quick with his head down. Tammy pulled herself up by a branch she didn't trust, crooked her body onto a side bough that bent away from the trunk — at an alarming angle. The branch had been cut off and had veered, growing at a ninety degree angle from its sacrifice point, though not during Tammy's lifetime. She held tight, looking down, a thirty yard drop. She glanced back up just in time to catch Chris dodge into the string of back lots of the businesses on St. Lawrence.

Parallel, she located them: three shapes moving in the stretch in front of the donut shop. Bright blue track jackets and yellow hair bands. Girls.

To Tammy's knowledge her brother had only six fears. One, their father (though Tammy couldn't begin to fathom why). Two, J.P.'s older brother, who terrorized them on occasion (the same way J.P. and Chris liked to terrorize Tammy). Three,

classical music (or anything other than hard rock and metal). Four, visiting their grandfather, but only because it meant being away from Joyland for days at a time (days, Chris said, that would make him “a total amateur again”). Five, ostriches (because he was once bitten while visiting an animal safari during family vacation). Six, clowns (due to too many viewings of the movie *Poltergeist*).

To this list, Tammy added number seven. Girls (an un-discriminating category including nearly all, except her).

Fears numbers three and four probably didn't count. Still, Tammy left them in. Chris's seven fears were a thumb-sized wedge in the pie graph compared to all of hers. The Seven Fears. Like the seven dwarves, fears were real and respiring, each with its own distinct personality.

She pressed chin against branch and let her lips trail over the grey, leaving a wide wet mark, the kiss of the bark on her lips like a hard, scarred thing. She dropped her forehead to the branch and closed her eyes. When she opened them again, Chris and the girls were both long gone. Tammy swung from one limb to another, carefully, letting her body hover in the space between just a fraction of a second longer than needed to obtain the exhilaration of floating.

On the outskirts of South Wakefield, on the other side of St. Lawrence Street, the building slouched like an extra baseball player on the bench: the disappointed V of eave, hands between the knees. Its back was covered in an emblematic tongue, the Rolling Stones' logo stitched to the concrete by an ecstatic spray nozzle held in a talented anonymous hand. Chris's paradise, Joyland, was scabbed with black paint, outside and in. He would come over as soon as Tammy jerked open the door of the establishment. He'd turn from the machine, as if he had caught a

whiff of “sister” through the smoke; as if there were evils waiting to pounce, and then he would usher her out, all authority. This was their ritual. When the arcade had opened back in 1980, Tammy was seven-and-a-half and really didn’t have any business being there. Alone, too short to see what was on the screens, she had looked for her brother between legs of worn blue jeans — cigarette packs bulging in back pockets, and obscenities falling off guys’ mouths like ash off their cigarettes. And first, she had to cross the street. Cars gunned by at seventy, though the sign said fifty.

Today, Tammy had gone halfway and was waiting for the last two lanes to clear when J.P. Breton emerged from the arcade.

“Someone tell Chris Lane his sister’s stuck in the middle of the road,” he yelled back through the door.

“Hey, just callin’ it like I see it,” J.P. laughed, not even flinching when Tammy slugged his skinny arm. He reached up and adjusted the strap of his ball cap, letting his corkscrew hair half-free before he matted it back under. He was one part Scottish and three parts French, with an Afro that rivalled Michael Jackson’s and eyes as blue as Michael J. Fox’s.

“Y’ain’t never gonna get him to go home. Pffft — not today.”

“Why not?”

“It’s the last day.” He snorted when he said it, as if surprised by the statement’s hilarity. Then, scowling, he wound up for a kick, powerhoused a pop can across the parking lot. It hit the curb and fell. He squinted into the distance as if there was something there that was monumentally fascinating. “We’re not supposed to know, but there’s a rumour.”

They stood there under the arcade’s hand-painted sign. Edged red, gold jagged letters veered into one another like spaceships crashing. Above the black background floated a single floodlight that turned on at night. Now, five o’clock and June-bright, blue sky yawned behind the dark sign.

“Got any quarters?” J.P. asked. Tammy bit her lip for a second, reached into her pocket to fork them over. “You should play. While you still can.” His hand fell on Tammy’s shoulder as he ushered her inside.

As Tammy entered Joyland the smell of microwaved meat welcomed her along with a breathful of smoke. Below the pinging and powing of games came the low hum of hot dogs wrapped in paper towel, basking like babies in receiving blankets behind the pinhole plastic of the tv-sized oven. A dampness weighed the room down. The afternoon sun settled on the blond forearms of boys, in motion at the wrists and elbows, their ball caps pushed back from glistening foreheads; the girls, just dark curving shapes streaming from the yellow jukebox. The microwave door snapped open and shut, plastic on plastic. Coins rang through slots. The bells on the front door rattled as it fell shut behind Tammy and J.P. He looped her shoulders protectively, salt and vinegar released from the skin beneath his mesh sleeves. Tammy was here for the first time to play. She’d just been born.

“Come on.” J.P. gave her shoulder a squeeze before his arm fell away.

She followed him through the maze of games as if treading carefully through the secret garden that had grown at last, flower heads heavy with neon rain. Boys were bowed over the screens and other boys clustered around them. Their bodies branched away from one another even as their faces leaned close in concentration, cheeks illuminated.

At the end of the row stood her brother.

In the long line of boys in cut-offs and muscle shirts, a couple of them shirtless, Chris stood in a pair of full length brown cords, chalk-blue T-shirt tucked in at the waist.

Chris always stood with his weight more to one side, giving him an air of impatience. Today was no exception. He leaned to the left, palming the Fire button with what seemed like growing

exasperation. Bottom lip curled under canine — Tammy watched the small stitch of white concentration she knew so well. He didn't notice them as J.P. loped up and stood beside him. J.P. said nothing. Tammy followed his example.

Her brother pumped the red Fire button. Green and yellow space moths spun, a pinwheel on the left side of the screen, before forming a jet upward, the sorry remnants of their fleet lining the top of the disco-lit sky. Chris let his bottom lip loose of clenched teeth and his face settled into a placid dark cloud. One might expect his eyes to move back and forth, but he was almost meditative. Cool. Guiding his gunship with eyes that took in everything at once, rather than singular objects. Muscles coiled tight; the rest of him calm. Tammy observed the slight twitches at the corners of his lips, the orange explosions that were the result of his tapping fingers. Alien insects evaporated in puffs of pollen.

Her brother's face was smug, almost sullen, even in victory. His thick lips flattened in a tight sideways smile that held its true happiness back. There were always two of Chris — the one who protected her and ushered her out of Joyland, and the one who let his friends noogie the back of her head or drag her across the grass by her feet.

This was the latter Chris. Chris the champion.

His gunship glided across the bottom of the screen, dodging dive-bombing red butterfly ships. A train of tiny scorpions emerged, their curling tails trailing down the sky. Chris killed them with three successive shots. One of the gigantic moths swooped down. Hovering, it shot out blue cyclone-shaped rays, sucked Chris's gunship up in the beam, spinning end over end. Ominous music. FIGHTER CAPTURED. The enemy dragged Chris upward, tucked him behind its back when it reached the top. A new fighter was given and, biting his lip again, Chris avoided bullets, taking careful aim. The insect exploded. The captive

ship fell to the ground slowly, joining with its saviour. A strong double force.

With the two ships steering as one and twice the firing power, Chris cleared the board quickly and advanced to the challenging stage. He nodded. "Ready to take over?" Glancing at Tammy for just a second, he made a move as if to step back from the machine. The first insects began to pour down the screen in a perfect line.

"No!"

"Kay, okay." Chris picked them off without even seeming to look. "Next challenging stage then. There's nothing to it, see? They don't drop any bullets at this juncture. All you do is shoot."

Tammy nodded. *Juncture* was a conceited-Chris word.

The music chimed when CHALLENGING STAGE appeared in the centre of the starry screen a few minutes later.

"Ready?" As Chris said it, aphid crafts were already appearing, zooming in from either side of Tammy. She hit a bunch at the bottom and fired random shots up to the top of the screen.

At the end of the action, her results were displayed: 24 hits. From watching Chris she knew there were 40. He'd gotten all 40 and the word PERFECT! with an exclamation mark. Tammy knew about percentages. She'd hit 60%. If it had been a test, barely a C.

"That's respectable," Chris tried to reassure her. Her expression had given her away. "Keep playing." She got killed in all of two seconds. Jumping out of the way, she let him take over again.

J.P. was still there. Tammy's face grew hot. She shook her hair back, feigning confidence, Pam Dawber to the intended Brooke Shields.

"Should've played third round 'steada seventh." J.P. readjusted his ball cap again. "Prob'ly did as well as I would've." He peered over Chris's shoulder at the game for a couple seconds. "I got your back," he said to Chris, then headed off.

“You can’t compare yourself to him,” J.P. said over his shoulder as if he expected Tammy to follow him. They wandered toward the far wall, where J.P. stood in front of the air conditioner, flapping his shirt up and down off his belly. “If we all did that, we’d feel so bad we’d never play.”

The black mesh shirt swung back down over the pucker of J.P.’s belly button, the white circle of skin confessing the fact he never went shirtless. Three years older, he was nearly as skinny as she was.

“What’s your favourite?”

“Aw, whatever,” he said. “It don’t matter. I don’t play to compete. You know, it’s all a game.”

Across the room, a bell shrieked and something went *splat!* A sputter of boy-laughter scrambled its way across the surface of the noise. The microwave rang. Pengo plinked out its theme.

At the opposite end of the arcade, through spaces between machines, Tammy noticed the yellow jukebox light and the stray parts of the people collected in front of it. Jean pocket details stretched so tight, the corner rivets resembled tacks stuck directly into the wearer’s behind, as if to restrain the skin from pushing right through the material. A plastic purse the size of a gym bag was being swung about. Blush brushes and compacts tumbled over a pack of Players Light. Several blue-line notebook pages had been folded into exact two-by-two squares. A full-size can of hairspray clunked against the jukebox. The debris of combs and picks and hairclips shone, proud possessions encased behind the plastic. Two of the other purse straps were thin denim, decorated with clunky Twisted Sister buttons and feather clips. Behind the plethora of purses and makeup bags, beaded crop tops exposed brown skin. An orange tube top suctioned to triangular breasts. They jutted unapologetically from the chest of a girl wearing hot pink lipstick. These five or six girls circulated, passed in and out of Tammy’s line of vision,

just parts of them, like jigsaw puzzle pieces, their odd shapes somehow fitting together. If they saw Tammy standing there with J.P., would they mistake her for his sister instead of Chris's? Would they mistake her for his girlfriend?

Laughter. A pair of snapping fingers as one of the girls began to dance. She wriggled behind the black frame of a game and then all Tammy could see were the bruised legs of a skinny girl in a pair of pink and white pinstriped shorts. Her bum rested against the starburst of the jukebox panel, one knee thrust out, her entire kneecap the size of a silver dollar, and on it a black mark the size of a quarter. Tammy couldn't see her face. A crop-top girl was moving in front now, a freshly lit cigarette held at waist level. Expert fingers dangled, short square nails with chipped pink polish. The cold that the air conditioner hissed out hit Tammy's back with a wave of pleasure.

She wanted to argue with J.P. It wasn't a game: it was a world.

The Frigidaire swirled up her neck as she gathered her hair into a ponytail and held it for a second before shaking it out over her shoulders. When she glanced up at J.P. she saw he wasn't paying attention to her, but to the same thing she had been distracted by: the girls weaving and dancing between the cracks.

"You like Pat Benatar?"

Tammy nodded.

"Good." J.P. launched his body away from the wall toward the jukebox. White strings straggled from his jean cut-offs and trailed his thighs, catching in the thin puffs of his leg hair. He took long steps and Tammy had to skip to keep up. He sauntered past Chris, who was still pounding out space bugs. Just before they reached the end of the aisle, J.P. turned around.

He hunched down slightly. "So when I give you the quarter, you think it over like it's your idea. Then pick 'Love Is a Battlefield.' They totally love that song but I don't want them to

think I would play it.” J.P. looked at her earnestly, his breath hitting her face. Sweet, like Grape Crush.

She swallowed and nodded.

The jukebox girls had a smell about them; it hovered there like a nimbus. Tammy had noticed it before, at school, whenever gangs of Grade Eight girls passed by her, trailing fragrance like a ribboned kite-tail of colours. Soap and smoke and confidence — she’d wondered if she would ever carry that scent, if, when she reached a certain age, it would roll from her skin the way it did from theirs. She didn’t know if it was natural or chemical — some combination of hairspray, perfume, and powder — or less contrived, seeping out of pores as easily as sweat, something undefinable. Femininity. Its essence. Their laughter washed over Tammy as she approached. She looked at her feet. She looked at J.P. She didn’t know how to look at them. They were all protrusions and nubs and tucks and foreign flesh betraying the confines of their clothes. Even their eyelids were alien: swollen purple and white, ringed with blue mascara. They were like extraterrestrial angels.

“Tammy,” J.P. was saying. “What’dya wanna hear?”

She looked up at them all then. Just looked.

“Tammy?” J.P. repeated.

The girl with the orange halter began to laugh. She poked the one with the bruised skinny legs and skinnier arms. “Fuck,” said the tube top, her pointy boobs jiggling with giggles. “She’s just like her brother!”

“Yeah, she don’t know how to talk!” hooted the chunky blonde with the plastic purse.

A chorus of laughter.

“Kitty cat got your tongue?” asked Cindy Hambly, who Tammy knew from Chris’s grade at school. Nice-ish, but not really.

“She is Chris Lane’s sister, isn’t she?” the tube-top girl asked.

“Oh puh-leeze. Look at her, of course she is!” Cindy leaned toward her, fingers straying to Tammy’s head. She pulled the hair back into a ponytail, as if there were no boundaries. “Just imagine if Chris had longer hair.”

“He’d look like Boy George.”

“Trans . . . vesta-tite!”

“You idiot — trans-ves-tite.”

“What’s . . . ?” Tammy didn’t get to finish the question before they all exploded. Their bright faces turned brighter beneath their blush. Their bodies swerved, knocking into one another as they giggled and snorted.

“Oh geez,” said the brunette with the drinking-straw arms. “It means your brother looks . . .” she wrinkled her nose, “. . . a little too much like us.”

“Yeah, but maybe he’ll grow out of it,” said Cindy, a note of sympathy in her voice as she looked down at Tammy. “You know . . . when he grows another foot or so!”

“Short Fry!” they all chorused, like it was the most hilarious thing.

Tammy peeked over her shoulder at the Galaga game. Chris’s head turned, just for a second, in response to the outburst. His mouth clamped into a tight line and he looked back into the game. Between Tammy and her brother, two other guys — maybe Grade Nines or Tens — swayed against the machines, knocking things dead with their index fingers. Their massive thighs were covered in squiggly dark hair. Tammy looked up at J.P., who stood taller than her dad. At the far end of the arcade, Chris leaned further and further into the screen, as if he could escape into it, become a wheeling, firing, two-dimensional object in a graphed-out universe, trying to jam things up and override the system like Tron.

J.P. was still extending the quarter. One hand came to rest on Tammy's shoulder. "Kay, don't spaz. C'mon, chill. What do you want to hear, Tammy?"

She only had one line, and she'd forgotten it.

The girls stopped and looked at her, waiting. Tammy held power over the whole arcade, could subject all of them to her choice.

"Maybe Pat Benatar?" J.P. prompted.

The girl in the orange tube started to smile, shook her hair back from her shoulders joyfully. Her lips were greasy with colour, wet all over, like she'd been sucking on a cherry popsicle. She looked positively thrilled with J.P.'s offer.

Tammy shook her head. "Scorpions."

The girl's lips fell flat, her face emptied. The rest of the group exploded. The skinny girl leaned over, clutching her ribs. The plastic-purse girl and the beaded-crop-top girl banged into one another as they laughed, the can of hairspray in the bag smashing once again across the glass of the jukebox.

J.P. crisscrossed hands over Tammy's shoulders, around her throat like he would strangle her — then pulled her back against him in a half-hug. She felt his warm chest ridged with ribs against her back.

"Tammy Lane, you little fucker." She'd never heard the F-word spoken with such affection. "I shoulda known you'd do your own thing just to piss me off. You don't even like the Scorpions, ya spaz."

"She is just like her brother," the girls were saying, in self-congratulatory tones. "Just like her brother."

"I just want you to know," J.P. said, clutching one hand to his heart, his head bowing toward the face of the orange tube-top girl. "I was fully preparing to sacrifice my quarter for Pat Benatar. But now . . ." He spread his hands wide ". . . due to no fault of

my own, I am forced — *forced*, I tell you — to play ‘Rock You Like a Hurricane.’”

The quarter went in and the buttons were pressed. The song blasted out over the whole arcade. Guys looked up from pinball and fozzeball, nodding their heads in appreciation.

Tammy wandered off. She hated the Scorpions. They were Chris’s favourite.

“D’you meet the girls?” Chris asked.

He’d been growing his hair all spring, eyes barely visible under brown bangs that parted in the centre and trailed thick off his cheekbones. Beneath them his eyes flicked nervously back and forth, checking that none of the beautiful creatures were about to walk by at that particular moment.

Tammy nodded.

“They’re asswipe dumb,” Chris said, though he never cursed at home. He closed the conversation by flipping a quarter heads/tails from his thumb to his palm, as if it were of infinite interest, as if he could distract either of them from what they both knew Chris felt. “Burnouts,” he said. The coin flew up. He made a swipe and caught it in his fist. “Druggies.” His voice dropped lower. “Don’t ever be like them.”

He paused.

“You wanna see something?”

Tammy nodded. Anything.

“On Galaga, they can bring out your own dead ships and turn them against you. But it also means you can win them back.” The quarter sailed up again, spinning.

“Call it.”

“Heads.”

Chris lay the quarter on his wrist without looking. He

pulled his hand away, exposed the silver antlers of a Canadian caribou.

“Tails,” he said.

“But it’s the *head* of the deer,” Tammy pointed out.

“It’s a caribou. And don’t be a brat. The queen’s always the head and the animal’s always the tail.” He feathered his hair back through his fingers, swaggered toward the machine, Chris the champion again, leaning to the left with that air of impatience as he stood before it, continuing to pontificate.

“Even if it were an American coin — a bald eagle — it’d still be the tail. Doesn’t have anything to do with whether it’s coming or going. You can be player number two. Besides,” he said, “that way I can show you.”

“How are South Wakefield girls like bowling balls?”

J.P. leaned back against the machine, self-righteous and satisfied after a half-hour by the jukebox with the tube top. Chris had been showing Tammy the nuances of the Galaga game. Namely, that if she shot the bugs before they dive-bombed, they were only worth half as much, so if she was playing for points, it was better not to attack until they went on the offensive. Sometimes, Chris had explained, he played for points, and sometimes, he just played to survive.

“How are South Wakefield girls like bowling balls?” Tammy repeated. Even as she parroted J.P., her head felt huge on her shoulders. She stared at her running shoes. Blue and white suede. “How are South Wakefield girls . . .”

“You can fit three fingers in them.”

J.P. leaned back, grinning. Chris erupted into the machine, shaking his head and losing their last player.

“Oh man!”

“She doesn’t get it,” J.P. said with a mocking glance at Tammy.

“Of course not, she’s eleven!” Chris sucker-punched J.P. and J.P. doubled over. “Don’t talk that way around my sister.”

“Yeah, well, you laughed.” J.P. faked a jab.

“Tell me, Chris.”

“No way.”

J.P. leaned down, cupped fingers confidentially around Tammy’s ear. She arched into his hand.

“Tell me,” she said, this time to J.P.

J.P.’s voice was husky as he hissed, “It has to do with s-e-”

“Don’t!” Chris yelled, ineffectual as Tammy usually was. J.P. held him off with one elbow.

J.P. threw his head back and yelled: “S-E-X!” The whole arcade swivelled slowly, looked over with disinterest — the kind of gradual, obligatory head turn Tammy’s mother did whenever she yelled, “Mom, look! Look!”

“They say that incest is best,” the pinstripe girl called over.

“You would know!” someone yelled back at her.

“Yeah, your mother showed me.”

They all turned back to their games.

That night, as Tammy ran home, the concrete blurred beneath her running shoes. White flecks flashed like constellations embedded in the dark asphalt. A universe spun away under her footsteps. Spirograph pictures passed beyond her recognition. The starburst on the jukebox panel. Things she would never see again. She closed her eyes and imagined the air pushing past as J.P.’s breath when he whispered “s-e-x.”

Closed, the world around her became bits. Its sounds and its smells. The cut grass of the Scotts’ lawn. The indent of the sewer that clanked when she ran over it. The lopsided lurching of running blind. Open, Tammy took in the world and stepped over the curb, across the grass clippings (which stayed on her

shoes). She continued on the sidewalk — over squares that had been newly paved — a pancake paleness in comparison to the street. Her calves jolted with every step. An X mark had been made with a fingernail overtop of a mosquito bite to stop it from itching. Short thin hairs stuck out over the elastic of tube socks. All down the street, houses shimmered lit eyes, windows still open, only the hum of an air conditioner or two breaking the pinging that lingered in Tammy's head.

She stood in her driveway, looking up at the Little Dipper. A line of crabs inched its way across the night sky. She locked her fingers into the shape of a pistol. Raising it above her head, she watched the streetlight throw her shadow into the silhouette of a Charlie's Angel. Tammy angled her body away from the house, where her mother had just flipped on the porch lamp.

"*Pow*," Tammy whispered. "*Pow*," and she shot at the stars before she heard the door open, and her mother calling her in.