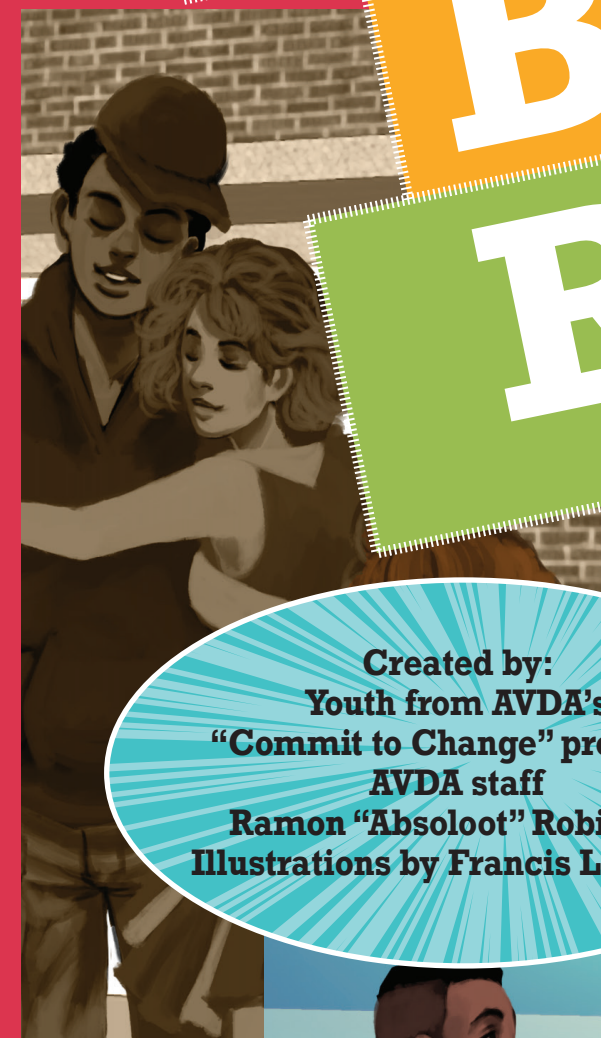


A Bad Rap



avdaonline.org

This material is the exclusive property of Aid to Victims of Domestic Abuse, Inc. (AVDA) and is not to be reproduced or distributed without express written permission of AVDA



Created by:
Youth from AVDA's
"Commit to Change" program
AVDA staff
Ramon "Absoloot" Robinson
Illustrations by Francis Llamzon



South Beach Cove
High School



John swaggered through the students crowding the halls of South Beach Cove High School and why shouldn't he? He finally had his dream girl, Melissa, on his arm. She was out spoken, strong, focused and determined. He'd been crazy about her since middle school - since the moment he saw her dancing on the football field. Now they were seniors and Melissa was his girl. Melissa's dark hair fell past her shoulders and swung gently with her light dancer's step. Whenever she smiled at him, his heart did a little flip in his chest as her face lit up just for him.

Right now, he couldn't wait to show his new rap song to his friends - TJ, Ford and Wally. He's been working on this one for a while and it was really good. John had been into rap for years, but had only started writing six months ago, just about the time he and Melissa got together.

Melissa reached up on her tiptoe and gave John a kiss on the cheek.
"I've got practice now John. I'll see you after?"

"Sure baby," John assured her with a smile. He waved to Ford and Wally who were over by Wally's locker. John's best friend, TJ, joined them from the adjoining hall.

"I'll walk with you Melissa," TJ offered. "Coach is really ramping up the drills for next week's game. He's killing me."

"You're his star football player. He'd never kill you!" Melissa laughed, linking arms with TJ.

John reached out and grabbed Melissa by the arm. "Don't forget our date Melissa," John warned, his face darkening.

"Of course I won't John," Melissa looked up startled, and let go of TJ.

"What was that all about?" TJ asked when they'd reached the football field.

"Oh that?" She hid her hands behind her back, head down. "Nothing, he just really loves me is all." Melissa laughed, but she couldn't help thinking about the way John had been acting lately, about the mean things he'd been saying. He was starting to sound like his rap songs. Some of them were violent, and almost all of his songs were degrading and demeaning to women. It just didn't make sense to her why he would write such awful words. She knew he couldn't really believe those things about women, not when she knew what he felt about her. John said he loved her and she believed him. Melissa had fallen for John's charm and intelligence. He was a born leader and a good friend. She ran off to practice with a worried mind.





John showed his new song to Wally and Ford. "Wow man, you write just like the pros. You could really record this stuff," Wally praised.

Ford nodded. "Too true John, I love the way you tell it. I can just hear the beat, it's awesome."

"Thanks! I worked really hard on this one. I wanted it to be real and gritty." John was excited that his friends liked his song. Now he just needed TJ's opinion. Maybe he could even get permission to perform it at the dance in two weeks. "Hey, I gotta run. I've got student council. See you guys later at Jackson's."

"You know I wouldn't pass up one of those greasy burger bombs for nothing." Wally clutched his stomach and grimaced.

Melissa ran off the field toward the showers with a smile on her face. She had worked long hours on the routine she helped choreograph and it was really paying off. Although she'd had a bit of a rocky start with her mind on what had happened with John earlier, she had rallied. All the girls loved the routine, so did her cheerleading coach.

TJ was just coming out of the guy's locker room as Melissa rode past him on her bike. "Wait up, Melissa!" he shouted. "I'll give you a ride."

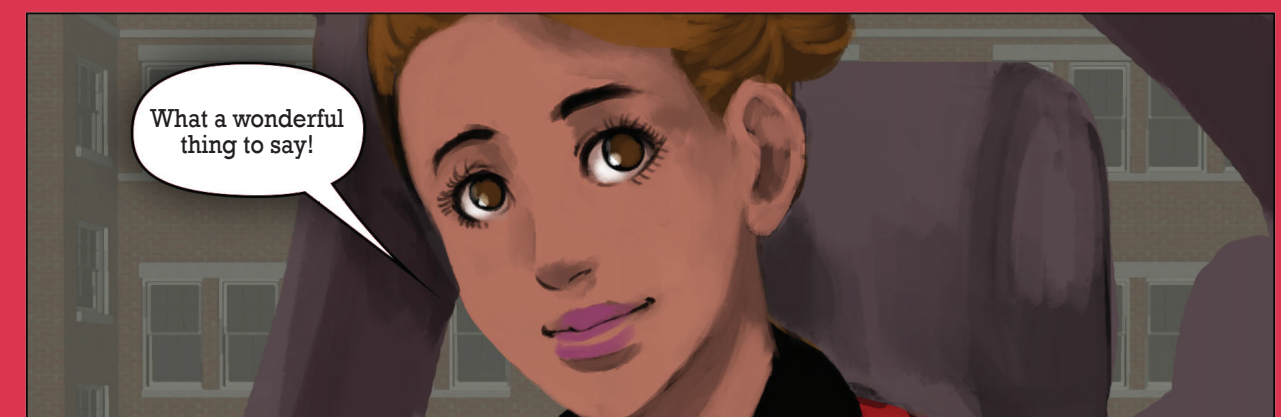
"Thanks TJ. It actually looks like it may rain." she told him as he lifted her huffy into the back of his truck and pulled a tarp over it.

"Hey, I saw your routine today Melissa. It was really good. All the other girls were watching you. "I'm impressed." TJ smiled, but kept his eyes on the road.

"Oh, thank you. I came up with a lot of those steps myself." Melissa beamed.

"I'm not surprised," he responded.

"What a wonderful thing to say!" It was just nice to have someone appreciate her hard work like that.





After they parked the truck at Jackson's, TJ told her something funny that had happened at practice and they walked in together, laughing like fools. John watched their approach, a deep line was forming between his dark brows. He got up and pushed Melissa into the booth between him and Wally so TJ would have to sit by Ford.

In the shuffle, Melissa spilled her purse on the table. When TJ went to help, John said, "Naw man, I got this," and swept her phone, lipstick and pens back into her purse. Then he leaned over and whispered in her ear.

"John! Why do you say things like that to me?" she hissed. A dark red flush crept up her throat and her eyes darted between the other boys. Melissa was sure they'd heard what John had said to her. It made her feel dirty.

"Come on baby, you know that's just how men talk." He threw his arm around her shoulders and sank down in the seat. Ford and Wally chuckled.

Later that night, alone in her room, Melissa cried. What was happening to John? He seemed to be changing right before her eyes. At first it was just little things, running other guy's girlfriends down when they had arguments, always taking the guy's side.

She thought, "Well he is a guy, right?"

Then his songs had started talking about treating women poorly, calling them demeaning names – she really hated the names. When she tried to talk to him about it, he'd just brush it off as "rap talk." But today, today he called her one of those awful names, like it was some sort of endearment. Maybe he was just mad that she had gotten a ride with TJ. Still, she didn't like it one bit. They needed to talk.

Later, when
Melissa gets home.



The next day ...



TJ looked up from John's lyrics, his mouth hanging open. "Man, why are you writing this kind of stuff? You don't really believe this, do you?"

"Gimme a break TJ, you know that's how all rappers talk," John blustered.

"Not all John, and what about Melissa? Is this how you feel about her? I thought you two were doing great." TJ gave John a hard look as they turned and walked toward their next class.

"We are. She understands. No problem." He flashed a smile at TJ before ducking into Ms. Toni's Advanced Algebra class.

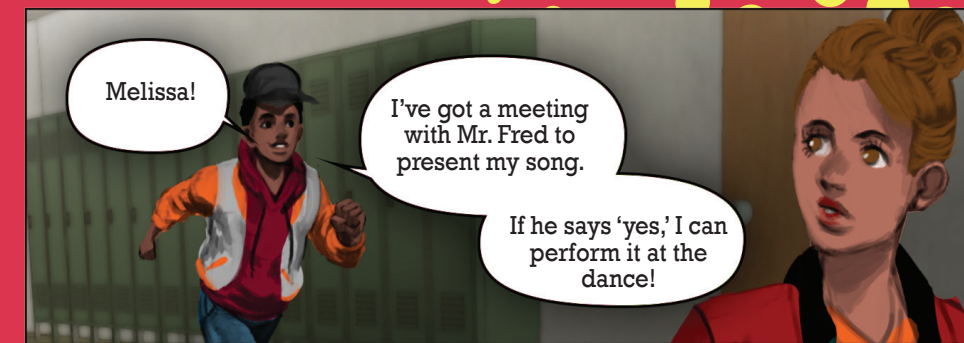
Melissa tried to bring the subject of John's rap lyrics up a couple times over the next two weeks, but he either had a student council meeting, or math club, or she had practice or dance committee and neither one of them wanted to talk in front of their friends.

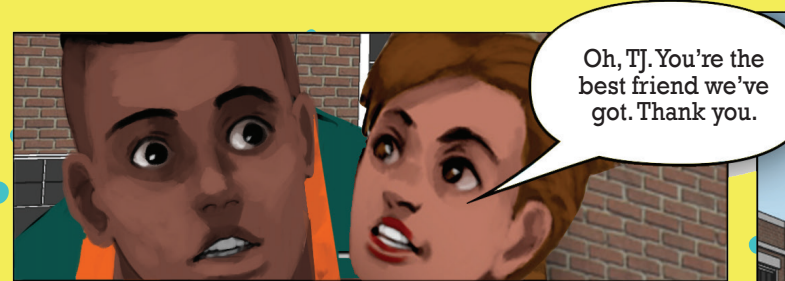
A few days before the dance, John came running up to Melissa in the hall, obviously excited. "Melissa," he called before even getting close. "I've got a meeting with Mr. Fred to present my song. If he says 'yes,' I can perform it at the dance!"

She couldn't believe what she was hearing. Would the assistant principle really approve such a degrading and violent rap song?" "John, are you sure you want to do this? Those lyrics, they aren't you baby."

"What could you possibly know about it?" He spat. "You've never supported my writing." John spun on his heels and stalked off towards the front office.

Melissa fought back the tears. When had things gone so wrong? John used to come to her practices and watch her dance. She loved knowing he was there, supporting her. Often, they'd talk about her dream of one day joining a dance company and choreographing her own routines.





"Tj, I don't know who else I can talk to. You're John's best friend. I'm worried," Melissa began. "He hasn't spoken to me since yesterday. He just gives me dirty looks. I think Mr. Fred might have said 'no' to John performing his rap song at the dance." "I'm sure he did. That song was... well, I was shocked. I can't believe John even wrote it. I've been worried about him lately too. He's been running girls down and saying things I can't repeat in front of you. I've been feeling pushed out of the group lately because I don't approve of them talking that way."

Melissa jerked as if she'd been struck, nearly dropping her books. "Oh man, I'm sorry. You came to me to talk and here I am unloading on you." Tj ran his hands over his short cropped hair.

"No. I needed to hear that Tj." Melissa glanced deeply at her book cover with a pic of John. "Now I know it's not just me." She didn't mention the way John had been talking to her and acting lately. She was too ashamed. "What are we going to do? I feel like we're losing him." Melissa's face fell.

Tj crossed his arms over his broad chest. "I don't know yet. Are you two still going to the dance? I'll be working on the hybrid race car right up to then, but maybe I can think of a way to get through to him."

"Oh Tj, you're the best friend we've got. Thank you." Melissa reached her hand up to high five Tj. Feeling optimistic after they talked about what's happening. John watched her walking away from Tj. His face was a twisted mask of dark emotions.

Melissa knew John loved it when she wore bronze tones. He told her they made her eyes look like sparkling cola. She'd bought a new dress for the dance, one she could really move in and have fun, one just the color John loved. The dance started at 7:00 p.m. When 6:30 rolled around and she hadn't heard from John, Melissa began to get nervous. At 6:45, the doorbell rang and Melissa's breath caught in her throat. She had no idea how things were going to go.

"Hi John," she greeted him, smiling.

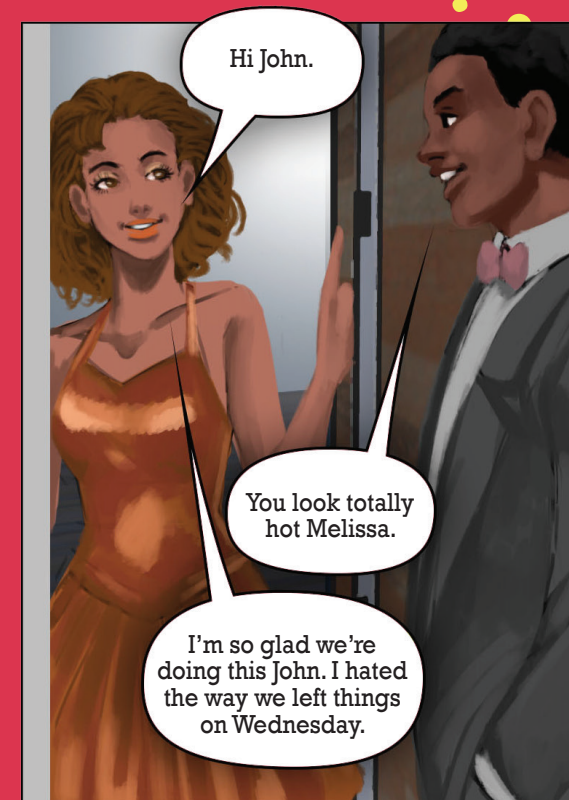
"You look totally hot Melissa." John's smile was bright and full of warmth. If Melissa had looked closely though, she would have seen that it didn't light his eyes.

"Thank you! Bye mom." Melissa took the hand John offered and let him lead her into his car. He opened the passenger door for her, then went around and got in the driver's seat. "I'm so glad we're doing this John. I hated the way we left things on Wednesday."

"Yeah, but we're going to have a great time tonight, right?" It's our last year and you're my girl." He reached over and put his hand on her knee.

"I'm your girl John." Melissa picked up his hand and held it in hers.

When they got to the dance, their good friends Zac and Tina were just pulling into the lot too. They all walked in together. They talked a bit about mid-terms coming up and then John saw Ford and Wally with a couple of girls from another school. "Come on Melissa, let's go talk to them. Check out those girls, they are really dressed for it." John chuckled.





"What do you mean by that John?" Melissa asked, unable to hide the disappointment in her tone.

"You know. Just look at them. They're here to hunt. Ford and Wally don't stand a chance against those two." John shook his head, laughing. Melissa kept silent. She didn't want to hear anymore. Just because the girls were a little extra dressed up didn't mean they were using Ford and Wally. Melissa was getting really tired of hearing John say that women were only interested in money and things. What did he think of her? Why did he think she was with him?

"John," Melissa tried again, but he was already introducing himself to Ford and Wally's dates.

"Melissa, this is Tammy and this is Marley. They're here with Ford and Wally," John said with a wink. Melissa suppressed her anger and greeted the girls warmly. John, Ford and Wally were deep in conversation when the music picked up, leaving the girls just standing around. Melissa spoke briefly with the other girls, but she really didn't want to stand around talking all night. She wanted to dance. So, when her friend Zac came up and asked her, she said, "Absolutely!"

Melissa and Zac danced two songs before the music slowed down and Tina wanted to dance with her boyfriend. Melissa handed him over with a flourish and turned around to find John just inches from her face. "Why do you always have to act like such a tramp, always teasing and looking for the next guy?" John accused.

"What? Zac and I were just dancing. You know he's one of my best friends." Melissa sputtered.

"Right, you're just trying to control me like all you women do. Well, it won't work. You're mine and you'll do as I say." John snatched her arm and began to pull her from the gym.

"Stop! I don't want to go anywhere with you!" Melissa raged. All of the hurt, disappointment and confusion of the past weeks boiled up in that single moment.

"Don't you back talk me!" Grabbing her arm aggressively.

TJ burst through the crowd and shoved John away from Melissa, pulling her behind his back. "What's wrong with you man?!? You don't grab a girl like that!"

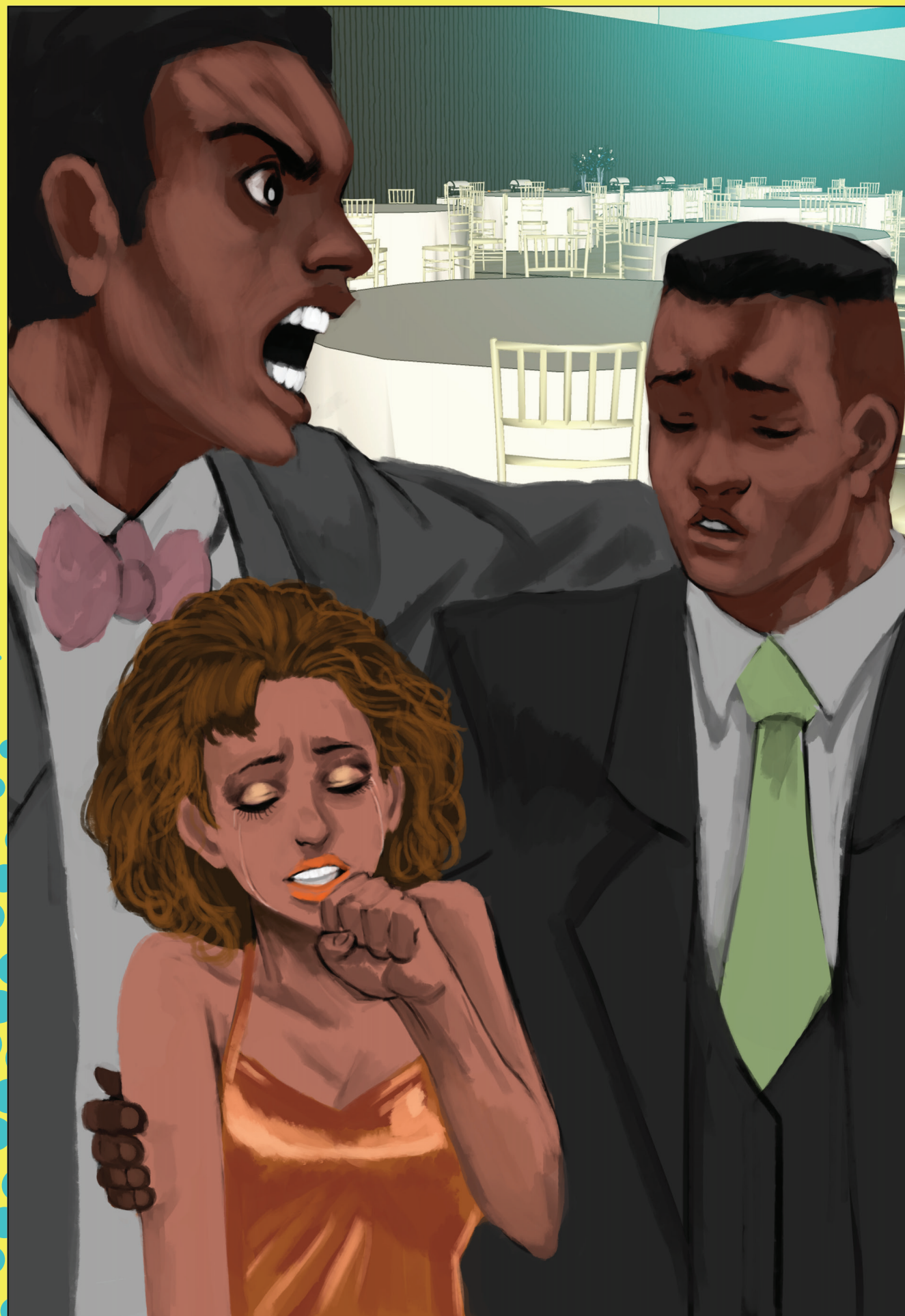
"This is none of your business TJ. Sneaking around behind my back with Melissa. I ought to teach you a lesson right here." John howled.

TJ put both palms out toward John. "Listen John, we were just worried about you, and it looks like we had a good reason. What's going on with you? This isn't you John."

"Just get away from my girl, TJ! I thought you were my friend." He snapped, reaching for Melissa.

Melissa pulled back behind TJ. "You stay away from me John. Do you hear me? I never want to see you again!" John shoves her into the wall. A crowd begins to gather around them.





Zac and Ford emerge from the group surrounding them and tell John “Stop. What are you doing?!?”

Marley and Tammy walk over to Melissa and lead her outside of the building. Melissa was his girl. He loved her and she loved him. What was happening? He stood there, stunned, while Melissa left sobbing.

Mr. Fred makes his way through the crowd and asks John and TJ, “What’s going on here?”

TJ says, “You need to talk to John!” and walks away.

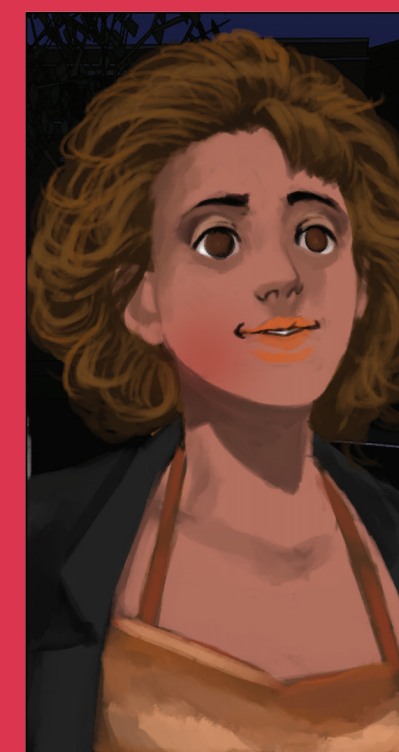
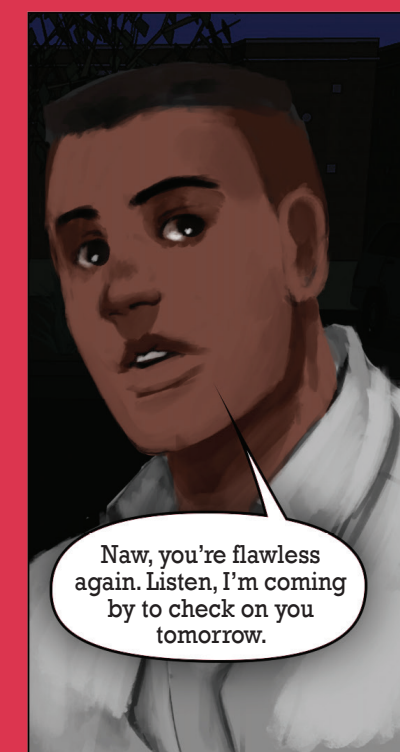
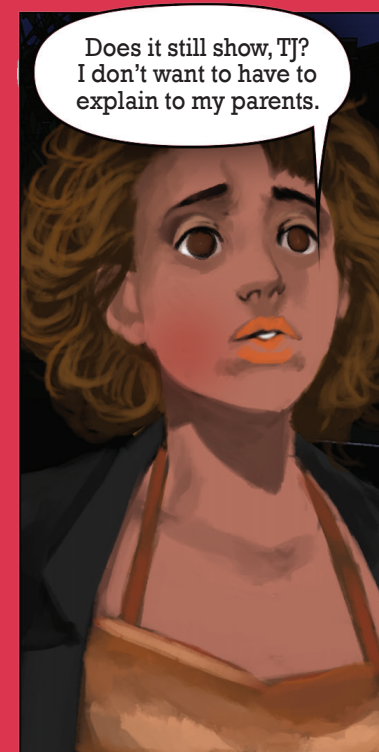
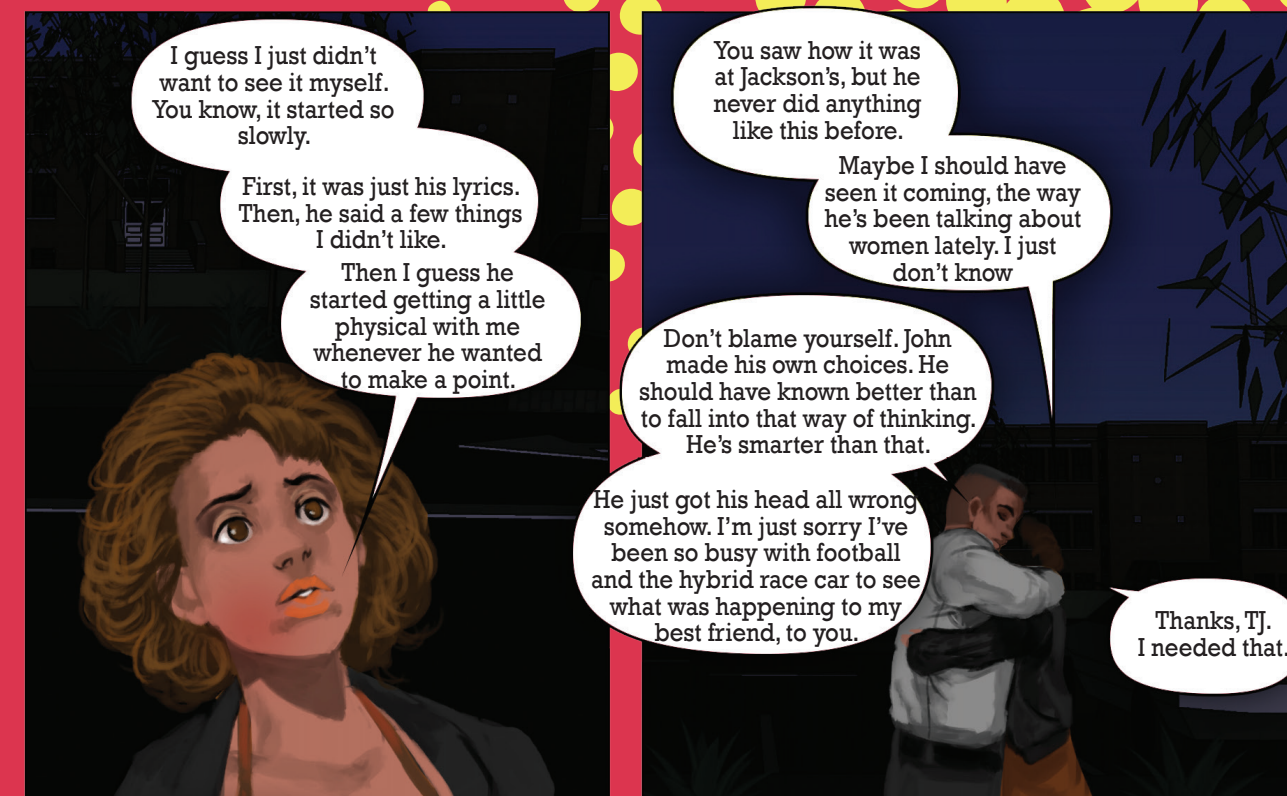
TJ meets Melissa outside and offers her a ride home. Marley and Tammy join to give Melissa a ride home. "How are you Melissa; let me see?" Looking at the mark on her arm from John grabbing her. "Why didn't you tell us it was getting this bad?"

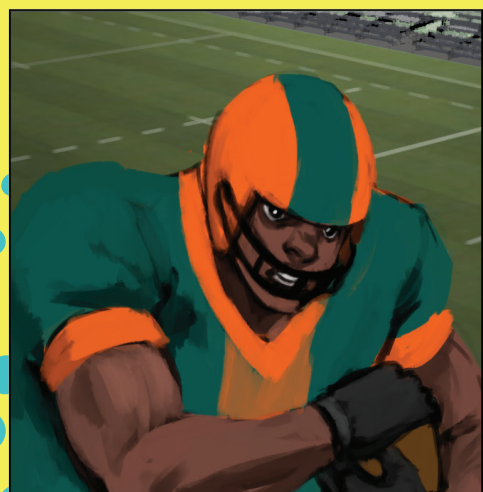
She sniffed and dried her eyes on a tissue from her purse. "I guess I just didn't want to see it myself. You know, it started slowly. First, it was just his lyrics. Then, he said a few things I didn't like. Then, I guess he started getting a little physical with me whenever he wanted to make a point. You saw how it was at Jackson's, but he never did anything like this before. Maybe I should have seen it coming, the way he's been talking about women lately. I just don't know."

"Don't blame yourself. John made his own choices. He should have known better than to fall into that way of thinking. He's smarter than that. He just got his head all wrong somehow. I'm just sorry I've been so busy with football and the hybrid race car to see what was happening to my best friend, to you." TJ brushed away a stray tear, giving Melissa a sad smile. He opened the car door for her and waited for her to get settled before he closed it and went around to the driver's side.

Melissa smiled. "Thanks TJ, I needed that." He walked her to the door and they hugged goodnight and gave her his jacket to cover her arm. "Does it still show, TJ? I don't want to have to explain to my parents." Melissa turned her cheek.

TJ smiled. "Naw, you're flawless again. Listen, I'm coming by to check on you tomorrow." Melissa gave him a little smile and a nod and went inside.





Alone in his room, John paced. “That TJ! He’s been after Melissa for months.” He growled. Looking up, he came face to face with a large poster of one of his favorite rappers. “Yeah, you know those women are all alike.” He put on the rapper’s newest CD and turned up the volume on his headphones. As he listened, he began to realize something. His Melissa wasn’t like that. What had he done! He tore the headphones off and slammed his phone. Then he started looking at his rap songs. The ones he’d written in the beginning were pretty cool, but the last one – it was all wrong. Why hadn’t he seen that? “Now it’s too late,” he sighed. “She’ll never take me back.”

TJ kept his promise and came to check on Melissa the Saturday after the dance. He even sat with her at lunch a couple of times a week. After a while, they started eating lunch with everyone, every day. Often, they talked about John. Through it all, TJ showed Melissa how important she was to him, that’s what mattered. Melissa did the same for him. She went to every football game, even the away games when her squad didn’t cheer. He went to every one of her dance and cheer competitions. TJ’s friendship got her through the worst of the disappointment and pain. She missed John, but she could never allow herself to be treated like that again.

One of the girls on Melissa’s cheerleading squad came up to her a few weeks after the dance. “I’m so glad you finally got away from John. We could all see what was happening.”

Melissa’s breath caught in her throat. “Why didn’t you say anything to me, try to help me?”

“Well, it really wasn’t our business, was it? We figured if you couldn’t see it, well...” the girl she had once thought of as a friend trailed off.

Melissa was floored. How many other girls went through this every day? How many other so-called friends refused to get involved? Melissa made up her mind right then. She was going to do something to raise awareness. No one deserved to be treated like the girls in John’s rap songs.

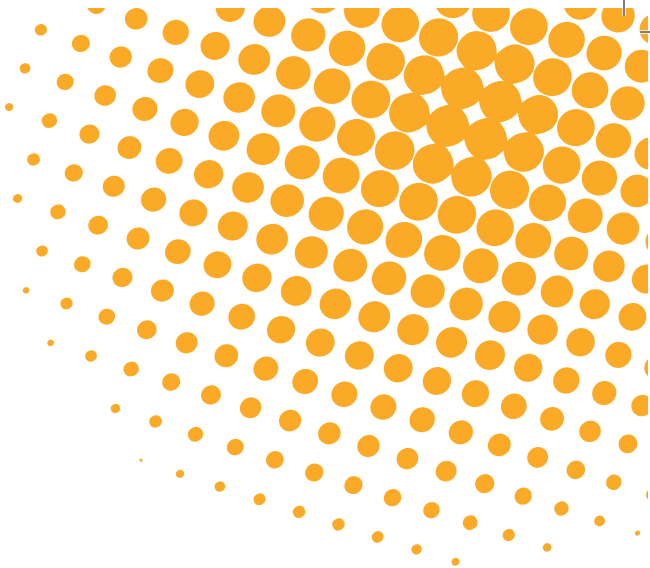
John spent several weeks in a complete funk. He was confused and hurt. He’d lost his dream girl; and, he knew it was his own fault. He really needed someone to talk to, but Melissa and TJ were his best friends. Now they thought the worst of him. Finally, he decided to go and talk to the school counselor.

“I’ve just gotten so off track. I always wanted to be an engineer. But, for a long time, I spent every minute on my rap songs. I was kinda obsessed,” John began. The school counselor listened quietly as John recounted the entire story with the songs. He asked a lot of tough questions that made John have to really think about the things that he had done, and what he truly believed. After a while, John started to understand better how he had fallen into such a bad pattern, and more importantly how not to do it again. Slowly, he began to feel better about himself too.





Discussion Guide



TJ and Melissa went to prom together as friends. She wore her own favorite color that night. It was a reminder of how many times she had altered her behavior to please John. She understood now that some changes could be healthy, while others just fed an unhealthy relationship.

When TJ came to pick her up her stared for a moment, “You look like an angel, Melissa.” Melissa smiled. TJ always said the sweetest things. He opened the car door for her and helped her with her dress.

During the prom, John came up to them for the first time since that terrible night. “I just wanted to say...I’m sorry, to both of you. I’m sorry I got so wrong in the head. I hope someday we can all be friends again.”

TJ laid his hand on John’s shoulder. Melissa’s smile lit up her face. “I would like that, very much.”

John looked at his two best friends and let himself hope.

1. What are some of the warning signs/unhealthy behaviors John showed early in the story?

2. What are some ways John’s friend’s tried to help? What else could they have done?

3. Do you think music influenced John’s attitude and behaviors?

This project was supported by Grant No. 2015-CY-AX-4002 awarded by the Office on Violence Against Women, U.S. Department of Justice. The opinions, findings, conclusions, and recommendations expressed in this publication/program/exhibition are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department of Justice, Office on Violence Against Women.

