Plot Summary

Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes is a young adult novel by writer Chris Crutcher. Moby is a high school senior whose best friend, Sarah Byrnes, has been put in a hospital because she refuses to speak. Sarah Byrnes, a young woman disfigured by burns she received when she was three, has always been a friend to Moby even when his excess weight made him an outcast at school. Now Sarah Byrnes needs Moby to be her strength like she was his in junior high. Moby does not know who he can trust but finds himself turning to the most unlikely people to find a way to protect his best friend. Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes is about being an outcast, about friendship, and about standing up for what is right, even when it means betraying the trust of the one who has always been there.

Moby visits Sarah Byrnes, his best friend, in the hospital where she was taken after she quit speaking. Moby does not know if Sarah Byrnes is faking but is determined to do all he can to make her okay again. Moby sees Sarah Byrnes everyday, talking to her about their escapades in junior high when they were both outcasts tortured by bullies who seemed to take special interest in the two of them. Moby and Sarah Byrnes created a newspaper in junior high called Crispy Pork Rinds. The title of the paper refers to Sarah Byrnes' scarred face and hands, a result of burns she received at the age of three, and Moby's excess body fat. The first edition of the paper targeted one bully in particular, Dale Thornton. Dale was punished as a result of the article, so he went after Moby for some payback. Sarah Byrnes realizes that Dale must have learned Moby was the author through the principal at the school, so she befriends Dale to present a united front against the principal with latter issues of the paper.

Moby was asked to join the swim team as they entered high school. Moby began to lose weight but was afraid if he became skinny, Sarah Byrnes would assume he no longer wanted to be her friend, so he began eating more to stay fat for her. Eventually Sarah Byrnes tells him to stop it; however, during this time, Sarah Byrnes became closer friends with Dale. Dale and Sarah Byrnes have an abuse in common; therefore, Sarah Byrnes told Dale things she never told Moby. As a result, Moby finds himself turning to one of his worse enemies when Sarah Byrnes is admitted to the hospital in an attempt to help her. Moby then uses the information Dale gave him to force Sarah Byrnes to show that her break with reality is fake.

Sarah Byrnes tells Moby, both in person and in a letter, that she has faked her mental status in order to give herself time to think. It turns out that Sarah Byrnes' father caused her burns in a fight with her mother and that he has continued to abuse her all her childhood. Sarah Byrnes has noticed her father's cruelty growing and is afraid he is about to do something even worse than the burns he gave her as a child. Sarah Byrnes first considered suicide but then decided to go into the hospital to find another solution. Sarah Byrnes begs Moby not to go to an adult because she knows they will have to involve Child Protective Services. However, Sarah Byrnes is afraid her testimony against her father would never stand up in court because she was so young when the burns happened.

Moby turns to his teacher and swim coach, Ms. Lemry, despite a promise to Sarah Byrnes that he would tell no one. Ms. Lemry says they must find Sarah Byrnes' mother, the only person who could testify against Virgil Byrnes in court. When Sarah Byrnes learns that Moby told Ms. Lemry, she explodes, revealing her ability to talk to the hospital staff. Sarah Byrnes is forced to run away from the hospital so her father cannot take her home. Sarah Byrnes goes to live with Ms. Lemry. Together, Sarah Byrnes and Ms. Lemry go in search of Sarah Byrnes' mother in Reno, Nevada.
Unfortunately, when they find Sarah Byrnes' mother, she refuses to help.

While Sarah Byrnes and Ms. Lemry are gone, Virgil Byrnes attacks Moby in an attempt to learn where Sarah Byrnes is. Moby is cut on the face and the knife is embedded in his back. Moby once again turns to Dale Thornton, who gets him medical help and becomes something of a hero in the papers. The attack on Moby gives the police a reason to arrest Virgil, but he has disappeared. Desperate, Sarah Byrnes decides to run away, but Moby and Ms. Lemry are able to stop her. Eventually Virgil Byrnes is arrested and convicted, and given twenty years in prison. Sarah Byrnes is adopted by Ms. Lemry and her husband, giving her a second chance at the happiness she was cheated out of by her biological parents.

Chapters 1-2 Summary

Sarah Byrnes is a young woman who was scarred by burns at the age of three. Sarah Byrnes insists everyone call her by her full name because of the play on words with her last name and her condition. Eric "Moby" Calhoune has been her best friend since high school.

In chapter 1, Moby is at swim practice, pushing himself to the brink of exhaustion in preparation for his next swimming match. Afterward, Moby goes to see Sarah Byrnes, his best friend, at the psych ward at Sacred Heart hospital. Moby sits beside Sarah Byrnes but does not know what to do or say. A counselor comes up and tells Moby to just talk to her with the hopes that normal conversation will help her return to herself. Moby asks Sarah Byrnes if she remembers Crispy Pork Rinds. Crispy Pork Rinds is a newspaper Moby and Sarah Byrnes wrote and published in junior high as a way to get back at bullies. The premiere issue got Moby a one way ticket to Mr. Mautz's office, the school principal. Mr. Mautz demanded to know if Moby wrote the paper, but Moby refused to say, standing on the fifth amendment as Sarah Byrnes told him to do. This only caused Mr. Mautz to grow angry, warning Moby that if any more issues of the paper showed up in the school he would be suitably punished. Sarah Byrnes was not one to back down, however, and insisted they get started with a second issue immediately.

In chapter 2, Moby is in his Contemporary American Thought, or CAT, class. Moby introduces the subject of whether or not the world is a good or bad place. Moby uses Sarah Byrnes' life as a disfigured person as a reason why the world is a bad place. Ms. Lemry, the teacher, does not want to discuss Sarah Byrnes without her permission, so she pushes the subject in a new direction. Moby becomes quiet because all he wants to discuss is Sarah Byrnes. Moby is frightened for her, but he does not know what to do to help her. This causes Moby to begin recalling his early relationship with Sarah Byrnes. The two of them were drawn together because Moby was overweight and Sarah Byrnes was scarred, something she called the terminal uglies. Moby recalls one afternoon when a bully, Dale Thornton, wanted Sarah Byrnes’ lunch money, but she refused. Dale hit Sarah Byrnes in the face over and over until her scarred skin was swollen and purple, but she continued to resist. Dale turned on Moby then, but Moby was more afraid of Sarah Byrnes than Dale, so he refused as well. Dale finally gave up. It was because of this incident that Dale was the subject of the headline article in the first issue of Crispy Pork Rinds.

Chapters 3-4 Summary

In chapter 3, Moby goes to swim practice on Saturday with Ellerby, his teammate and friend. Ellerby drives a unique car that appears to make fun of religion. This causes a great deal of tension between Ellerby and fellow swim team member, Mark Brittain. Brittain is a Christian and finds Ellerby's car offensive. This leads to animosity among Ellerby, Moby, and Brittain. That day's practice is for every member of the team to swim under their best time for one hundred laps. Ellerby, Moby, and Brittain are among the ones who make it to the end. Ellerby and Moby are constantly setting the pace, so when they reach the ninety-seventh lap, they cause Brittain to fall under his time and be
Moby goes to visit Sarah Byrnes where another counselor asks him if Sarah Byrnes has any other friends who might visit her, or know why she had this mental break when she did. Moby thinks of Dale Thornton. Moby remembers just after the first issue of Crispy Pork Rinds came out, he hid in a bathroom stall as Dale forced another kid to read him the article in the paper featuring Dale. The article revealed that Dale skipped a class in school a few weeks before due to a bet in which he attempted to keep chewing tobacco in his mouth for a whole hour. As a result of the article, Dale was called to the principal's office and punished for this episode. Soon the whole school knew Dale was looking for Moby.

In chapter 4, Moby talks to his mother about Dale Thornton, causing him to recall Dale's reaction to the article in the first edition of Crispy Pork Rinds. Dale knew somehow that Moby wrote the article, so he waited to ambush Moby after school. There was a bet that Moby would not make it home without being beat up, and Sarah Byrnes had a lot of money on Moby. A ride home would make the bet go in Dale's favor, so Sarah Byrnes hid Moby in a box and attempted to push him to safety on a handcart. Unfortunately, Dale was not as stupid as they were hoping, and figured it out. Later, Sarah Byrnes told Moby that Mr. Mautz must have told Dale about Moby being the writer of the article. Sarah Byrnes suggested that they befriend Dale in order to make a united stand against Mautz with future issues of the paper.

**Chapters 5-6 Summary**

In chapter 5, Moby recalls how Sarah Byrnes convinced Dale Thornton to help them with Crispy Pork Rinds, convincing him that Mautz was the common enemy. The following Monday, Brittain grabs Moby has he goes into his CAT class and asks why he and Ellerby were mean to him at practice. Moby tries to defend himself without looking stupid in front of Jody Mueller, Britain's girlfriend and the girl Moby has loved since the beginning of high school. Ms. Lemry's entrance ends all conversation, and she asks student to present their ideas for topics to be discussed in class. Ellerby presents a song that expresses how God sees everything from a distance, perhaps explaining why bad things are allowed to happen to good people. Brittain argues with Ellerby's take on the song, expressing offense at the spirit of the song, but Ellerby insists that it is about shame, which is what he wants to present as his topic.

In chapter 6, Moby arrives to see Sarah Byrnes, but Virgil Byrnes, her father, has arrived first. Moby stays back and watches as Virgil speaks angrily to Sarah Byrnes before storming off. Virgil then comes to Moby and asks him if Sarah Byrnes is faking. Moby insists she is not, but Virgil clearly does not believe that. Moby recalls the end of the Crispy Pork Rinds when they could no longer come up with people to attack and stories to write. The paper had served its purpose, running a series of stories about a two-headed alien child belonging to Mautz. Instead, Moby and Sarah Byrnes began getting their revenge on bullies in quieter, more subtle ways. On the heels of this memory, Moby convinces Ellerby to take him to Dale Thornton's house in the Edison district, a dangerous section of town. Moby asks Dale about Sarah Byrnes, questioning something he once said about Sarah Byrnes not getting her burns from a boiling pot of spaghetti like she told everyone. Dale denies that Sarah Byrnes ever told him anything about the origin of her burns but expresses disbelief that Sarah Byrnes would have a mental meltdown.

**Chapters 7-9 Summary**

In chapter 7, Brittain attempts to drop the CAT class and to have Jody withdrawn as well, but Ms. Lemry will not allow Jody to leave because she feels as though she is being pressured by Brittain. As a result, both Brittain and Jody decide to remain. Moby makes a comment to Jody that causes her to leave a note on his desk asking for his number. Later that day, Moby visits Sarah Byrnes and makes
a comment about seeing Dale that causes a reaction. Moby begins to wonder if Sarah Byrnes is faking. A few days later, Moby talks to Ellerby about Jody's note but confesses he has done nothing about it. Ellerby accuses him of having cold feet. The conversation turns to Ellerby's shame topic. Ellerby tells Moby that he and his father have been good friends ever since he attempted to run away in the aftermath of his brother's death. Ellerby says that he and his father redefined religion for each other and that his father is supportive of his opinions. Later that night, as Ellerby drops Moby at his house, Dale approaches them. Dale tells Moby that Sarah Byrnes told him her father burned her intentionally by pressing her face against a wood stove. Dale swears both Ellerby and Moby to secrecy.

In chapter 8, Ms. Lemry announces that abortion is to be a major topic they will discuss in CAT class. A few days later, an open discussion about abortion takes place in CAT class. There is a great deal of discussion over whether life begins at conception or later in pregnancy. Brittain brings in the religious connotations of life and argues that abortion at any time is murder. Brittain gets worked up when Moby and Ellerby enter the argument. A verbal fight breaks out between Brittain and Moby that only ends when the class bell rings. After class, Jody approaches Moby and asks him to meet her after school at the Burger Barn.

In chapter 9, Moby goes to visit Sarah Byrnes and she speaks to him. As they walk outside to avoid being overheard, Sarah Byrnes confesses to faking her condition in order to get away from her father. Sarah Byrnes tells Moby that her father burned her face to get back at her mother during an argument, then threatened to kill her if she ever told. Sarah Byrnes has begun to recognize the same crazy behavior in her father recently and is frightened he is going to hurt her again. Sarah Byrnes feels she cannot turn to the legal system because her testimony could never stand up to her father's, and she cannot run away because she is too ugly to disappear successfully. Sarah Byrnes makes Moby promise he will not tell anyone what she has said. Later, Moby has dinner with Jody and learns that Brittain forced her to have an abortion the year before and blamed her for the pregnancy, claiming she should have taken precautions. Jody is unhappy in her relationship with Brittain and wants to move on, preferably with Moby.

**Chapters 10-12 Summary**

In chapter 10, Moby tells Ms. Lemry that he is going to begin dating Jody Mueller. Ms. Lemry asks Moby if he is doing this for the right reasons and suggests that he start going a little easier on Brittain. That same day Moby sees Brittain who tells him that Jody is a liar and that he should not believe anything she says. They nearly come to blows, but Moby walks away before the discussion goes that far. Moby's mother questions his motives in dating Jody as well, but Carver, her boyfriend, comes to Moby's defense. Carver then admits to interfering in a relationship Moby's mother was having with a man in his office. Carver's bravery in the face of his mother's wrath makes Moby begin to think Carver is alright after all. After Carver and his mother leave, Moby thinks about his visit to Sarah Byrnes that day. Moby was never allowed to see her because Virgil Byrnes was there, screaming at Sarah Byrnes that she was faking. The counselor finally forced Virgil to leave.

In chapter 11, Moby goes to visit Sarah Byrnes and finds her father there again. Moby decides to leave a notebook under her mattress and asks her to write her plans in it. When Moby is finally able to get the notebook back, he finds a letter written to him that expresses how afraid Sarah Byrnes is of her father. Sarah Byrnes expresses the idea that the only person who can help her is her mother. Moby takes this letter to Ms. Lemry, trusting her despite his promise to Sarah Byrnes, and they agree that they must find Sarah Byrnes' mother.

In chapter 12, Moby and Ellerby return to Dale Thornton's. Moby asks Dale if Sarah Byrnes ever said anything about her mother. Dale says that Sarah Byrnes once mentioned that her mother dreamed of
being a card dealer or dancer in Reno. The following day at school, Mr. Mautz, who has moved up to the high school as vice principal, asks Moby to have lunch with him. Mr. Mautz talks to Moby about Brittain and suggests that Moby be nicer to Brittain. Mautz also asks that Moby stop dating Jody until Brittain can get over their breakup, but Moby refuses. At practice that afternoon, Moby warns Ms. Lemry that Mautz was also asking about CAT. When Moby visits Sarah Byrnes that afternoon, they are able to walk together. Moby tells her that he confided in Ms. Lemry, and Sarah Byrnes becomes so angry that she begins yelling. Now everyone knows she can talk.

**Chapters 13-14 Summary**

In chapter 13, Sarah Byrnes runs away from the hospital before her father can take her home and begins staying with Ms. Lemry and her husband. Sarah Byrnes returns to school, perhaps under the assumption that her father would not make a scene in such a public place. In CAT class, the discussion on abortion continues, but this time Mr. Mautz is watching. As Brittain continues to express his belief that abortion is murder and all babies have a right to life, Sarah Byrnes decides to challenge him. Sarah Byrnes asks if a baby whose mother knows her child is in mortal danger from her spouse should be born; Brittain insists it should. Sarah Byrnes continues to push Brittain until he explodes and accuses her of hiding behind her disfigurement. This explosion causes Jody to confess to the entire class that she had an abortion at Brittain's insistence. Brittain calls Jody a liar and marches out of the classroom.

In chapter 14, Mr. Mautz comes into the CAT class and announces Mark Brittain attempted suicide, and that everyone in class was responsible. Ms. Lemry demands he get out of class and then opens a discussion on suicide. One girl walks out after taking Mr. Mautz's side in the discussion. Ms. Lemry is then called out of the class and does not return. Jody and Moby are at his house after school, discussing Brittain, and Carver tells them his emotional difficulties after his own father committed suicide, helping Jody see that she is not responsible for what Brittain has done. Later that night, Moby goes to Ms. Lemry's house and learns that she and Sarah Byrnes are preparing a road trip to find Sarah Byrnes' mother in Reno. When Moby returns home, he finds a note asking him to call an unnamed man. When Moby makes the call, it is Virgil Byrnes on the other end. Virgil thinks Moby knows where Sarah Byrnes is and threatens to kill Moby if he refuses to tell.

**Chapters 15-16 Summary**

In chapter 15, Sarah Byrnes leaves for Reno while Moby goes to school. Moby and Ellerby are called into Mr. Mautz's office where they find Brittain's father waiting for them. When Mr. Brittain announces he blames them for Mark's attempted suicide, Ellerby insists on calling his father. When Mr. Ellerby arrives, he listens to Mr. Brittain's opinions regarding his son's suicide attempt, then asks him to leave. Mr. Ellerby cuts into Mr. Mautz, claiming that he is overstepping his authority and that he is mixing church and state. Mr. Ellerby tells Mr. Mautz that all discussion should cease until the principal returns from a trip out of town. Mr. Ellerby leaves with his son, leaving Moby alone with Mr. Mautz. It is then that Mr. Mautz invites Virgil Byrnes into the office. Virgil accuses Moby of knowing where Sarah Byrnes is and purposely keeping it from him. In anger, Moby admits to knowing where Sarah Byrnes is but refuses to tell. There is nothing Mr. Mautz can do, so he sends Moby back to class.

In chapter 16, Moby is on his way home from Ellerby's when he discovers Virgil Byrnes in his back seat. Virgil holds a knife to Moby's cheek and demands to know where Sarah Byrnes is. Moby manages to knock Virgil into the windshield by driving erratically, then escapes into the streets. Moby runs for a while, but Virgil seems to read his mind and know where he is going. Moby then changes direction when he realizes he is in the Edison district; however, Virgil finds him anyway. Virgil threatens to cut Moby's throat if he does not tell, so Moby does. As Moby is running away, Virgil's knife gets stuck in his shoulder. Moby goes to Dale Thornton's house where the police are
Chapters 17-19 and Epilogue Summary

In chapter 17, Moby is recovering in the hospital while a manhunt begins for Virgil Byrnes. Brittain comes to visit and tells Moby that he feels stupid for everything that has happened. Ms. Lemry visits, telling Moby that they found Sarah Byrnes’ mother, but she is unwilling to help. Ms. Lemry is frightened that this will cause Sarah Byrnes to give up.

In chapter 18, Brittain visits again and asks Moby's advice on dealing with the fallout of his situation. Moby tells Brittain he should stand up for himself. Brittain agrees, telling Moby that Mr. Ellerby came by and offered to help as well. Sarah Byrnes comes later and tells Moby that she is leaving town to protect him and the Lemrys. Moby begs her not to go, but Sarah Byrnes insists it is for the best. When she is gone, Moby calls Ms. Lemry and asks her to come get him. Together they go looking for Sarah Byrnes, finding her in the train station. Ms. Lemry convinces her to stay.

In chapter 19, Brittain returns to school. During CAT, Brittain tells the class that Jody told the truth, that he was wrong, and that no one in the class was responsible for his suicide attempt. This instantly raises Brittain in Moby's personal opinion. Time passes and Virgil Byrnes continues to go free. Carver tells Moby's mother he is going on a business trip, but a short time later Moby sees him on the television news as he is arrested for breaking into Virgil Byrnes' house and beating him up. A reporter does an interview with Carver on live television a while later. Carver admits to breaking into Virgil's house, claiming something had to be done. Carver also claims that Virgil attacked him first but that he was more than willing to fight back because he knew Virgil would get a light sentence for hurting Moby and that he deserved so much more for what he did to Sarah Byrnes.

In the epilogue, Sarah Byrnes is adopted by the Lemry's just a few hours short of her eighteenth birthday. Carver only got a few months of a work-release sentence and probation. Moby and his friends have graduated from high school and are looking forward to going to college.