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217 pages **75** illustrations

CROSLEY HIGH CHRONICLES

Story & Art by Joe Six-Park



TEENS
**Trans-
Formed**
TG



J O E S I X P A C K

CROSLEY HIGH CHRONICLES

**Story & Art by Joe Six-Pack
A Teens Transformed story**



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CROSLEY HIGH CHRONICLES

DAY 1



RIVER PETERSON-LUNTZ

It was my first day, and before I even got into the parking lot, I could see that there were three protestors sitting in beach chairs, holding up a sign that said “Crosley High Sexism Must Stop.” They were positioned just off school property, dressed for the rainy weather. Another sign read “Allow Access to Birth Control. Now!”

I really, really, really didn’t want my dad to see them, but he did. So you know he’s gotta stop the van, get out and go talk to them. Every time. Every single time. “Please, *no...*” I begged him.

“It’ll be just a minute,” he said. “They have a cause, and are doing the tough thing. They have to know that they are loved and appreciated.” He got out of the car and headed over to them, acting as if he’d known them for years, like lost brothers and sisters. My father, Greg, used to be a college protestor from his days back in Berkeley, then became an organizer for a number of left-wing groups, and was now in PR for yet another organization trying to save owls or something. Give him a cause and he’d be there to march and chant until his legs and/or throat gave out. Just in the past two years, he’d been arrested six times for non-violent protests.

He was such an embarrassment. This was my first day of school, my first day in this town, and he was already stirring shit up.

I felt like punching the horn to get his attention, but the horn hadn’t worked for years. Besides, when he got to talking about protests and civil demonstrations, it was a lost cause. School was about to start in five minutes, and I already knew this was hopeless.

So I just let myself out of the car and headed into school myself. It was just a hundred yards away, and I headed up the steps and through the front security gate, flashing my ID. River Peterson-Luntz, 16, junior class.

Since it was my first day, I had a note that I was to report to the office first thing. When I finally found it, there were five or six kids in there, all new like I was. All of them guys, actually. I liked that.

The last school I went to was down in southern California. They had some amazing girls there, sure, and it was paradise for us guys, but really, I never had

a shot with them. They were all too rich or too ambitious. After a while, it became torture. Sexy teenage girls all over the place, and they wanted nothing to do with me. They ran that school, too. I was happy to leave.

Not that I blame the girls for treating me like dog shit. My hippie parents send me to school in fuckin' Birkenstocks and macrame vests. I "lost" the vests in the move, but I still gotta wear my dad's hand me downs most of the time. They're clothes he wore as a kid, and I think they were old even then. They looked like they were from the sixties. Wearing them, I was a total freak, even in freak-friendly California.

Since no one knows me here, I'm hoping I can make a new start. All I have to do is make sure any friends I make never came over to my house.

Well, actually, it's a tent. My folks are converting an old barn into a house for us, and we're living in tents outside for a few weeks.

Out the front window of the office, I could see Greg, my dad, still talking to the protestors, totally ignorant that I'd left the van and was already beginning my first day in the new school. My parents didn't like to be called "Dad" and "Mom." They said they didn't want to be prejudicial with outdated normatives or some crap like that. So my dad is Greg, and my mom is Feather. This is our new home.

Crosley High is small, with only a few hundred students, and no one really dressed up here. Everyone I had seen so far was in jeans and flannels.

The school office is kinda cramped and small, and everyone who works there looks really old, like they had been doing the same jobs since the fifties. The whole place looks the same age. There was a computer or two, but they were still using typewriters.

Finally, this woman comes out from behind the desk and talks to us. She said her name was Mrs. Blithe. She was probably in her late late, *laaate* sixties, and she sounded like she had made this speech a million times — Welcome to the school, get your schedules at the counseling office, here's your locker combinations, the office is here to help you, and don't make trouble. Standard stuff.

Mrs. Blithe then introduced us to a girl by the name of Harmony. Harmony was dead cute, clutching a clipboard to her chest with crossed arms, and a bright, eager smile. I was immediately feeling flush and awkward around her. However, she was dressed in the most uptight of outfits, with a high ruffled collar blouse and a green corduroy jumper and a skirt that went down to her ankles, just revealing the feet of the white tights she wore along with her buckled black shoes. Her hairstyle was from decades ago. Maybe more.

She had an infectiously bubbly manner, and bounced on the balls of her feet with every other word. I don't know why, but I was already in love.

Introducing herself, she said it was her last year at Crosley, and she was going to miss it. "It feels like I've been here forever," she explained.



She then asked us to form a single-file line and follow her as she led us on a tour. She led us around, and we saw what you expect a school to have: a gym, a multi-purpose room, wood shop, art room, library, and that kind of thing.

I was about to fall asleep on my feet, being so bored, but keeping my eye trained on Harmony's sweet little butt kept me from losing all interest. I had fallen hard for her. I can't say for sure what the reason was. Maybe it was because she was so different from the girls back in California.

My phone chimed, and it was a message from Carson, my friend from back in SoCal. He was a long ways away, but we still kept in touch. I had only moved last week, after all.

"Do they have running water at the new school?" He had texted me.

"Electric light and everything," I replied. "We're going to trap a possum for lunch."

Carson was the only decent guy I had met in my time at my last school. He was definite an LA type of person, who enjoyed the lifestyle of sun and celebrity. He was brash and boastful, but he was never mean to me. I felt like his sidekick, but at the same time, he'd never treated me like it.

My phone chimed again. "When the hoedown is over and you finish bailing the hay, let me know how it went," he sent back.

He really made me miss the sophistication of living in a big city. Now I lived in a town where the suburbs were "the city" and we lived miles away from it.

Well, as the morning went on, we finished up our tour and Harmony had gathered us in the main courtyard of the school, and sat us on the benches.

She began to lecture us on the "traditions" and "legacy" of Crosley High. I didn't really listen much as it all sounded like a bunch of bullshit, but I could tell they were way more intense about the school than anyone was back in southern California. Back there, school was a thing you did before the other more important things in your life. Here, the school *was* your life, almost like a cult.

The word Harmony said most often, and she said it with deep reverence, was "Proper."

The secret to the school was keeping "proper" respect towards one another. Behaving in a "proper" manner was essential. There was a "proper" order to follow and a "proper" way of doing things.

We must all keep ourselves perfectly proper in all things, and at all times, Harmony had said.

We all agreed and nodded out heads. I'm not sure why.

When she was done, Harmony retrieved the school principal, a Mr. Weinhurst. He was surprisingly young, compared to the geriatric ages of the rest of

the office staff. He was probably going forty-something.

"I'm sure Harmony has told you all about our wonderful little school," he said. "She's welcomed so many students just like you over the years. I'm sorry to see her go." He sounded awfully sappy and melancholy to be talking about someone who had only been here for four years. They were treating her like it had been a lifetime.

He basically repeated the same speech the office lady had given us earlier, a mix of welcoming language and veiled threats, and then we were off to our home room class. School was already in session, and the halls were quiet as we were led to the far end of a hallway where a very small classroom was hidden away.

That class was going to be just for us five, for the new students only. Our instructor was a thin old woman who scared the crap out of me. She looked eighty, and dressed like it was the 1800's. She wore granny boots and a long prairie dress in coal grey. It wasn't unlike what Harmony was wearing, actually. She sneered at us with a foul look on her face, a face that featured a nose that could only be described as a beak.

"My name is Mrs. Scripperton, and I will not tolerate disobedience in my classroom!" She said. Nice way to make introductions.

The first thing she did was walk up to me and look at my clothes. "What is your name?" She cawed.

"River," I replied, knowing the answer was going to make her mad.

"We have standards at this school, *River*." She spoke my name like she was trying to crack a nut in her teeth. "I will not see you in these clothes tomorrow."

I looked down at the tattered, nauseatingly colored shirt with tassels Greg's father had probably worn when he was in school. "They're all I have."

"Talk to Harmony. She can help you find more *appropriate* clothing." As she walked away, she glanced down at my sock-covered feet in Birkenstocks, and sneered even more.

I'm not a fan of it either, lady.

"Your first homework assignment," she said as she walked to an old-fashioned green chalkboard, "is to write an essay. An essay on the three keys to proper student behavior. Harmony told you these key points several times during her orientation. Now, because you were certainly all paying attention to her, you know all about these keys and writing an essay won't be any problem for you."

Even though I didn't know any of the other guys in the class, we all looked at each other, united in our sense of panic. No one knew what the old woman was talking about. I had been staring at Harmony's chest when she was talking about "proper" stuff.

When I got home in the afternoon, my folks were nowhere to be found. The two tents which belonged to us were empty. The van was empty, too. I had taken the bus home, since no one was responding to my texts, and counting on Greg to do anything was almost always a mistake.

I dumped my books into the corner of my tent and tried to relax. That's something that's hard to do in a tent. You feel the bumpy, rocky ground below you, and try not to pay attention to it. Even bundling up my sleeping bag for a cushion didn't work.

The barn had no floor in it right now, and the ceiling was falling apart, so we weren't going to live in it for three weeks, or so Feather said. The plumbing was going to "probably" work tomorrow, she had added, and then we could at least shower in private. Right now, I had to hide behind the van and use a garden hose with ice cold water.

My parents like to camp a lot, so this is something I'm used to in small doses. Only this time, instead of a few days camping, we're doing it for three weeks. Why can't I have regular parents who actually buy a finished house before moving into it?

My phone went off, and it was a text back from a number I didn't recognize.

"Hey," it read.

"New phone. Who dis? I texted back.

"Harmony," was the reply.

Fuck. How? I never gave her my number. I wanted to, but, you know, on the first day I met her?

"Oh, yeah?" I replied, hoping I sounded casual.

"Mrs. Scripperton said you needed some clothing for school," Harmony typed back. "Come on over."

I waited so long she sent the message again. Finally, I managed to say, "Where?"

"My house."

"Where is your house?" I had to clarify.

"Next door. The yellow house."

Next door? How had I not noticed this? Hot girl lives next to me, and I missed it.

"Wipe your feet," She said when she met me at the door. That smile was still making me feel good. "Come up to my room."

"But your parents..." I said, letting the inference hang there.

"My parents?" She replied. "Oh, yeah, my parents. No, they trust me. C'mon up!"

As was the trend these days, she had decorated her room in an early eighties kind of style, with a Stranger Things poster on the wall, E.T. toys on her shelves and a Rainbow Brite doll on her bed. I already liked her style.

“Okay, so, let’s get you out of your clothes,” she said with a grin.

“...What?” I asked, sheepishly.

She laughed, covering her mouth. “I just wanted to say that to make you blush.”

This girl had a wonderful laugh. My heart rumbled when I heard it.

“No, what I need you to do is to change into this...” She picked up a large white bathrobe from a chair. “And give me your clothes and I’ll take them.”

“Uh...” I was completely lost. I hadn’t know her for more than a few hours and here she was trying to get me naked? “My Clothes? Take them? Take them where?”

“To measure them for some new clothes. Ones Mrs. Scripperton will approve of.”

“Um... When will you be back? How long do I have to wait?”

“I’m not going anywhere. I’m sewing the clothes myself.”

“You can do that?”

“Eight-time 4H sewing champion of the county,” she said with pride. “Now, I’ll leave and you can change.”

“This is a lot of fuss for getting new clothes.”

“It’s no fuss at all! I love to sew. That’s why Mrs. Scripperton volunteered me. She knows how much I *adore* sewing.”

So, knowing that this could definitely be a set-up, or at the very least, disaster waiting to happen, I did as she asked. She turned her back as I removed my clothes, waiting for me to signal when it was okay to turn around again. When I was in the robe, she took my pants and shirt in her arms, folding them neatly as she did. She wanted my underwear too, which was so awkward and embarrassing I don’t want to think about it again, and then I waited.

“I hear you moved here from Los Angeles!” She called from down the hall, over the noise of her sewing machine.

“Topanga Canyon,” I yelled back.

“What?” She shouted.

I left her bedroom and found the kitschy little sewing room. It had aged wood paneling, a hung sign that said “Luv is... A needle, thread and you.” It had some image of a sad big-eyed child painted on it. So vintage.

She looked like she was already done with some pants. “You’re fast,” I said.

"I already had the patterns cut," she replied. "I just needed to make exact measurements."

As I stood by, I couldn't help but passively smell her. She had a pleasant, fresh scent that radiated from her thick, shiny, strawberry blond hair. I knew it was creepy, but I couldn't help but edge myself closer to get more of the sweet air around her. It was much better than the insides of my tent, I'll say that much.

"Here you go," she said, pulling the pants off her table. "Still some finishing touches, but see how they fit."

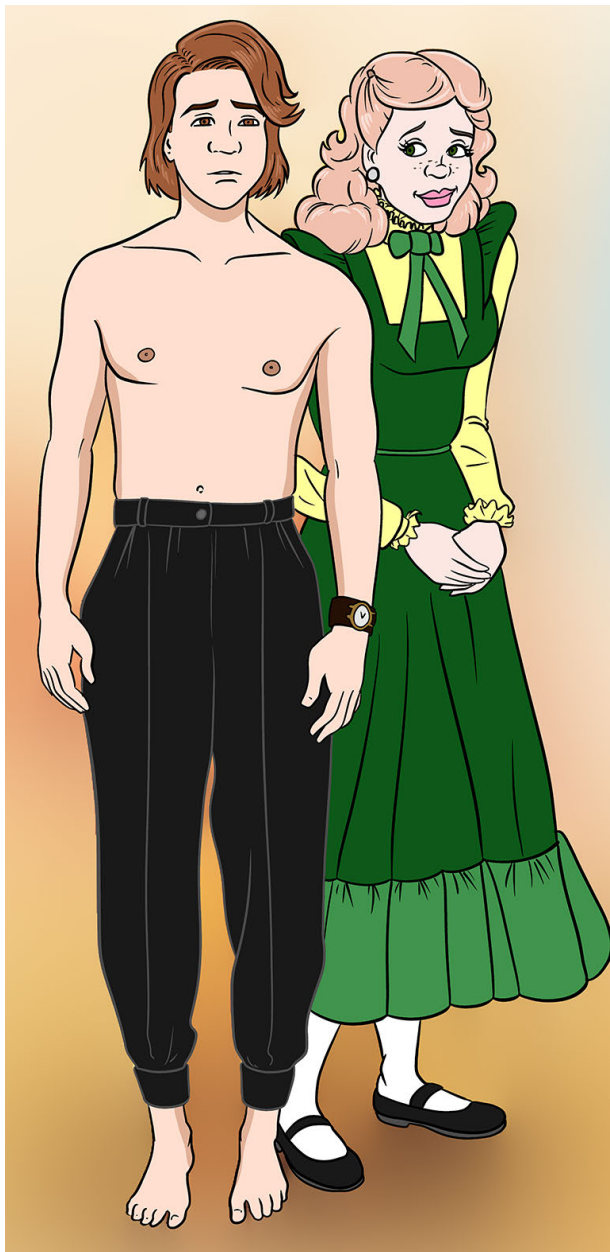
Cute girls do not often tell me to put on clothes, so I was helpless to do exactly what she asked me to do.

I went back to Harmony's room and slid into the pants. It was commando, but that was the only thing I could do at the moment. The pants were... Not what I was expecting.

They were black, high-waisted, with a pleated front and tapered down to tight cuffs that were two inches above my ankle.

"Those look great on you!" Harmony said as she joined me. "Turn around so I can see!"

I felt stupid, especially bare-chested and underwear-free, but I did turn for



her. As I did, I noted the lack of back pockets. I suppose that was one of the finishing touches she mentioned earlier.

Harmony bounced on her toes in delight. "I love it! Tell me they fit."

"I guess?" I replied. I honestly wasn't sure.

"Great!" She chirped with irrepressible enthusiasm. "I brought you a top. Shirt. Top shirt."

She handed over a white cotton button-up shirt, and then headed for the door. "Try that on, and..." She paused. "That machine of mine is pretty loud. I'll put on some music."

Harmony fiddled with the buttons of a cassette tape deck, and suddenly the sounds of "Total Eclipse of the Heart" came over her speakers. "Okay, you probably want some underwear," she said as she left again. "I'll be back in a jiffy!"

The music was loud, and as I slid the shirt on, I thought about turning it down, but I didn't want to make it sound like I didn't like Harmony's taste in music. All of the sudden, I picked up some kind of pulsating, static-y sound and I started to lose my balance.

The next thing I know, I'm being tapped on the cheek by Harmony, as I stared into her lightly freckled face.

"What?" I said, sitting up on her bed. I looked around, and the sky outside was dark. "What happened?"

"I think you got bored and fell asleep waiting for me," Harmony said. "You looked so peaceful, I didn't want to wake you."

I felt like I had been asleep for days. My mind was all fuzzy. "Sorry," I said. "That's embarrassing."

"I once had an uncle who'd sleep anywhere," Harmony said. "He once fell asleep standing up and eating spare ribs at a picnic. Strangest thing I'd ever seen."

"Yeah, I suppose it would be," I said. I was still puzzled. I wasn't normally the kind of person who fell asleep so easily.

Then she handed over some underwear. "Just finished these. Give 'em a try, and I'll be back in a minute."

I had been given something that wasn't quite like the boxers I usually wore. These were looser, made of pink satin, had ruffles and looked like bloomers, but in a much smaller size.

I had never worn underwear quite like this before, and I was eager to try them on. I changed into them and enjoyed the cool slick material on my body. I adjusted the thin pink bow, and got a look at myself in the mirror. It certainly was a big change for me.

Harmony had also left the shirt for me, and I assumed I was supposed to wear it, too. I put it on, and found it loose as well. The sleeves were big and puffy, and came to a tight cuff at the wrist with a ruffle. The neck also had the same type of tight cuff and ruffle, and was tall enough to go right up to my chin.

There was a big, floppy bow that tied around the neck, but I wasn't very good with bows, so I let it droop. I then put the pants back on so I could get a look at the whole outfit.

"Are you decent?" Harmony said as she walked in the room. I was just buckling up the waist of the pants, and got it done just in time. "That looks great on you!" She said.

I hadn't been able to look yet, so I hopped over to the mirror to see for myself. These clothes were so different from my usual stuff. Folks wouldn't even recognize me, dressed like this.

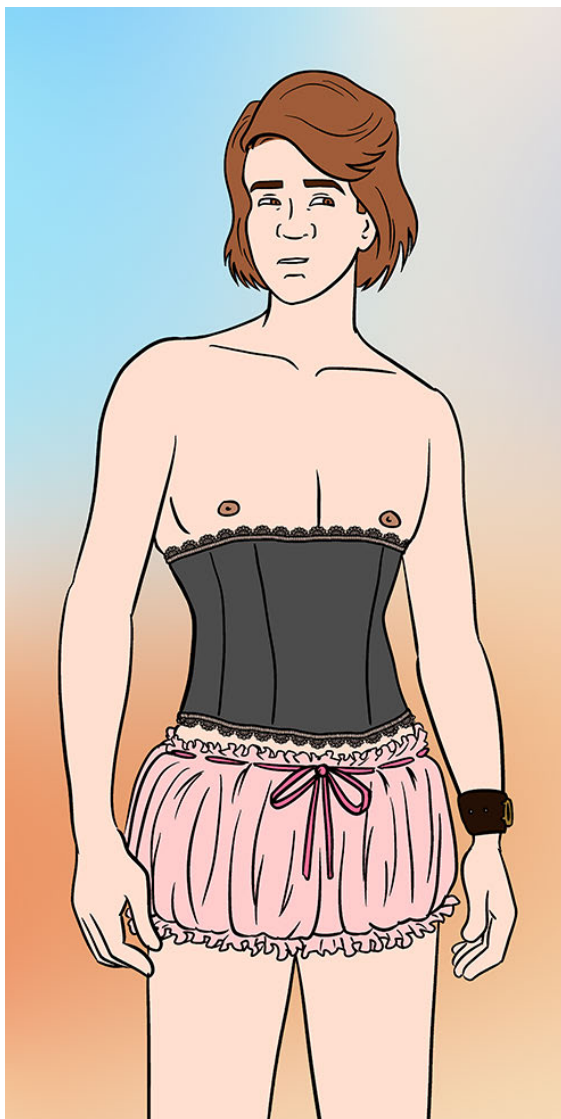
"I don't like the way this falls. You know what you need," Harmony said, as she tugged at the shirt. "A corset!"

Before I knew what we were doing, I was pulling a tight black leather thing up to my waist. "Is this really necessary?" I asked. "I can wear something else."

"The whole outfit needs a thin middle," she replied. "Plus, you are going to love wearing a corset. Hold still while I tighten it up."

She stood behind me as I tightened the laces, and it quickly started to squeeze my ribs. "Is it supposed to hurt?" I wanted to know.

"That will pass. I wear a corset every day and I just can't imagine living without one." She placed her hands at



my waist. "Feel how tightly it embraces you."

The corset had molded my midsection into a strange shape, but the pressure on my body, the tightness of the material, and like Harmony said, its embrace, all felt strangely comforting.

"I can see you already like it," Harmony said. I could feel myself blush a little.

We put the shirt back on and this time, it tucked very neatly into the pants and gave me a wasp-waisted look. She was right, the clothes looked a lot better on me with the corset.

"Let me get that bow for you," she said from behind me, wrapping her arms around my neck. The bow was huge and droopy, and she made quick work of getting it tied up tightly. The pressure around my neck was just as cozy and snug as the corset. This was another new sensation for me, and I'd be lying if I didn't admit to liking it. The collars around my neck, wrists, ankles and the corset were all tight and I could feel my blood flow under them. Underneath it all, the slippery material of my undies tickled me. It was a thrilling new world of sensations.

Everything I had ever worn up until now was the opposite of this. From the natural fibers Feather was always insisting on, to the well-worn hand-me-downs from my father, I was used to loose clothes that were made more for comfort than style. I had an instinct of some sort that told me I looked swishy, that these weren't clothes meant to be worn by a man. I didn't much care, as I felt amazing.

"You need shoes," Harmony said. She got a pair of patent leather black ballet flats from her closet and presented them to me. "And some suntan knee-highs should go with them," she added as she reached into her dresser drawers.

"These shoes?" I asked. I hesitated, holding them up and looking at them. They were so shiny and looked so small. It was then that Harmony handed the knee-high stockings to me and I guess I kind of chickened out. "I can't wear these! They're for girls," I said.

"Hold on, let me put on some music," she said, and started up her cassette player again. "Now go ahead and put on the knee-highs."

I sat down on the edge of her bed and put the first one on. I don't know why her music calmed me like it did, but whatever problems I had seemed ridiculous now. I was rewarded by the tightness of the stockings as they went over my feet and up my calves. I just loved the way tight clothes felt on me. If I wasn't already dressing myself in the room of the cutest girl I had ever seen, I'd say that this experience was the best thing to happen to me in a while.

Now fully dressed, she had me stand in front of the mirror. The outfit looked sharp. Maybe it was a little dated, maybe a little stuffy, but I liked it.

"Now that's a proper outfit," Harmony said.

I felt a surge of pleasure rush through me, unlike anything I'd ever experienced. I'd almost call it an orgasm if it didn't sound ridiculous. I looked at my reflection with even more interest. Yes, it was a proper outfit. A proper outfit for a proper student.

I could see this person sitting at attention in class, the first to answer a question, the first to volunteer, the most eager to be of help. He could be the most proper of proper students.

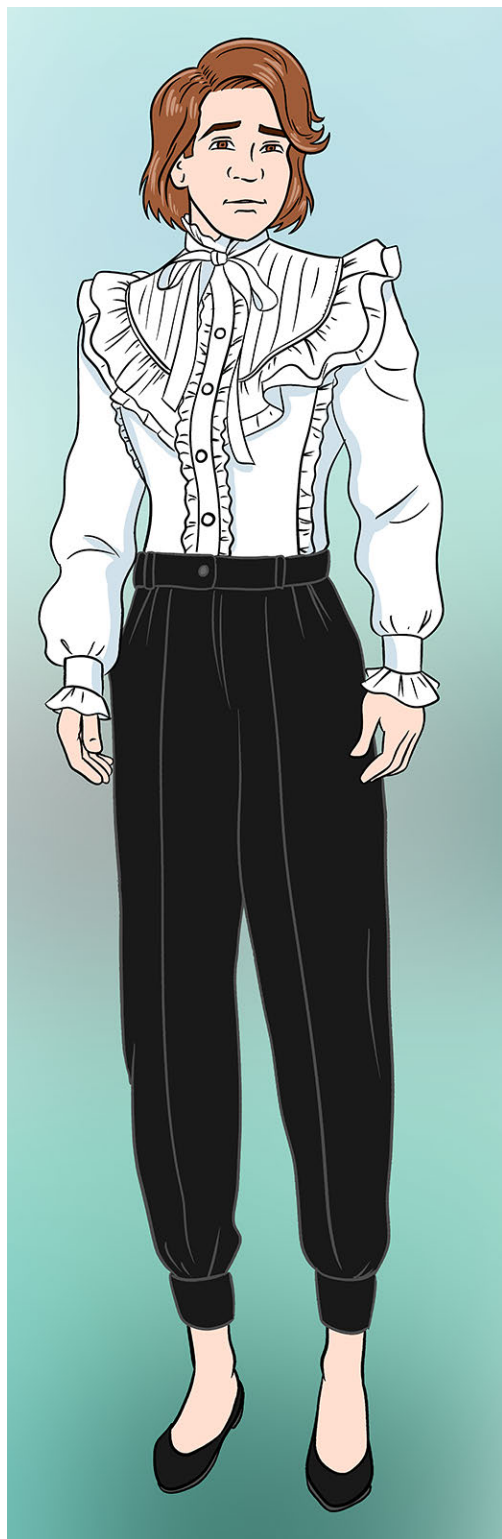
This whole experience had been a rush of emotion. I felt a little humiliated and degraded for dressing and undressing in front of Harmony, and I felt more alive than I had for a long time wearing these clothes and the undergarments beneath them.

I would have never tried dressing like this before, to dress with a sense of style and purpose. I knew Mrs. Scripperton would be pleased. I could see that Harmony was pleased. I, too, was pleased.

"Thank you," I said to Harmony, as I turned to face her. "You don't know how much this has meant to me."

"Oh, I can guess," she said. "But you probably should get going home now. It's close to dinner time."

I sighed to myself. Back home. It sounded so miserable. I didn't want to go home. I wanted to stay here, listen to music, try on more clothes and hang out with Harmony.



Back home meant a cold night in a lonely tent and some barley soup heated in the van's microwave.

"I need to change," I said. "I don't think my parents..."

"Of course!" Harmony pointed to my clothes, which were neatly folded in a pile on the bed. "But why don't you keep the corset on?"

That night back in my tent, as I changed for bed, I made sure my parents' tent was quiet before I took everything off. I didn't want my parents to see the corset — or the undies. I had even snuck those past Harmony. I couldn't bear to remove them.

I'm not sure what had come over me that day, but I had discovered something I knew I wasn't going to be able to let go.

When I closed my eyes I could still see my reflection in Harmony's mirror. That was not the look of a hippie student who was going to be scorned for his clothes. This person would not be hassled for being hopelessly, tragically out of step. This was a proper student.

I wanted to be a proper student. Properly dressed, properly treated, and properly diligent in my studies.

I opened up my backpack again to take a second look at my homework I had completed just a few minutes ago. My essay on behaving properly was scribbled out on two pages of paper. I had never really recalled what the "three keys" of being a proper student were, and faked my way through it.

It wasn't enough. I had so much to say. So much to express. I tore the papers in two.

My homework needed to be perfect. I needed to make it better than I had done it before. It needed to be a properly perfect paper.

Before I realized it, I had begun to ejaculate into my new undies. I had to lay back and let it run its course.

I was confused. Had I just gotten off? No rubbing, no tugging, nothing physical at all. Just the thought of being this proper student had caused me to reach new heights of pleasure.

I rinsed out the undies with canteen water I kept in my tent and dried them in the lantern light.

As I did, I realized I wanted to dress up again. I took all the clothes Harmony had made for me, and put them on, including the shoes and stockings.

I felt so good. So complete. So alive. This was not the student who slacked off and didn't complete homework. This was the student who handed their work in first, properly stapled, properly formatted, properly complete.

Another wave of delight passed over me.

It was then that I stepped back and thought about what was happening to me.

I hadn't ever felt like this, especially about clothes. I had never wanted to be a good student.

I had questions for Harmony. It was like she knew this would trigger something in me. I was going to have to wait to ask her, though.

For now, I restarted my essay. I wrote my name and date in the corner in careful, clear writing, just like a good student would. I was suddenly filled with excitement again as I began to think about the three keys to being a proper student. Suddenly, I could remember what Harmony had taught me, and it all made perfect sense.

What a fun first day.

DAMIEN (LAWRENCE) COOPER

So, first day of school and already my life has fallen into a bottomless pit of everlasting blackness and despair.

The only reason I even took this class was because it was the only class I ever *wanted* to take. I don't need education. I know all there is to know about the world — and the underworld. I had been at Crosley High for three years, just waiting for when I was a senior and I could finally take the one class I ever had any interest in: Gothic Literature and Legends.

Now, they had even taken that away from me. They had deceived me. Me, the dark son of the dark demon wolf, Damien, has been trifled with. The pathetic minions who run this school will rue the day they decided to toy with me.

At the end of last year when we choose the next year's schedule, I had signed up for this class, as it spoke to me. It spoke to my black heart. Gothic Literature and Legends. Even my friends Renwick and Gossamer had signed up, and they were now just as pissed off as I was.

The instructor, Mr. Valdemar, who was the only person on staff who was sympathetic to the children of the darkness, tried to explain to us this morning that the class was not cancelled.

He said something about budget cuts, and how the school couldn't afford a class for just three students, so he had been forced to combine two classes into one. Since he was already in charge of the drama department, it made sense to teach it at the same time. So — as he *claims* — even though this was technically a drama class, he would be teaching the three of us some “optional” gothic literature on the side.

Sucks.

So while the rest of the class is putting on a production of “A Star is Born” for the end of the year, Renwick, Gossamer and myself will be studying a “re-

duced” lesson plan for Gothic Literature. It’s not the same. It’s just not the same. We have been betrayed.

Class wasn’t even in a regular classroom. Our classroom was located next to the school theater stage. I mean, it’s kinda dim and dark there, with lots of old dusty equipment and a spooky costume room, so it’s cool — but it’s so far away from the rest of the classes. Running to the bathroom takes forever.

Whenever I gotta go take a piss, it takes ages. That’s just how the man likes to keep us goths down. Hey, maybe some people have it easy, just throwing on whatever and running off to their pathetic little corporate-approved life, but goth isn’t like that. I put a lot of thought into what I look like. My black trench coat is probably the only thing I wear the same every day. Every morning I look in my mirror and say, how do I freak everyone out today and expose the truth behind their lives of self-deception? Some days, it’s the mesh shirt and mesh gloves, some days it’s the leather pants with a dozen straps. Some days it’s the elevated leather boots. Whatever gets people to hate me more. Because by hating me, they expose themselves and their closed minds, mind packaged and prepared to be claimed by the church, big corporations and the government. All ready to be sold and thrown into the woodchipper of life.

So while the other students were chattering away like the clones they were, making dibs on who got what parts, the three of us were in the back of the class, trying not to lose our shit.

It wasn’t like we had a choice, either. We were locked in to this class. Sure, we were allowed to transfer out, but all the other language arts classes were full. The only things left were Calculus and Applied Physics. None of us were even going to think about trying those.

Now we were surrounded by the most lost of lost souls, the drama students. No one cared about the plays they put on — they were strictly for the parents. No one cared if they were going to “make it” in Hollywood — they weren’t. Their hopes and dreams, which they just wouldn’t shut up about? No. One. Cares. No one gave a flying fuck about them.

They were loud, melodramatic and perpetually peppy. *Perky*. No one liked the drama students. Even the students I hate *also* hated the drama students.

“Hi! I’m Daisy!” The girl seated next to me with the kind of enthusiasm that deserved a real bloodletting. Okay, I’m not totally serious about that, but just a moment of true horror to make her rethink her outlook on life. She obviously didn’t notice the dyed black inky hair of mine or the streaks of black I had drawn running from my lips as an invitation to fuck off. “I’m super excited to meet another drama aficionado! I think I’m going to go for the part of Allie! Or Margot! Or maybe even Mrs. Holder!”

I had bigger problems to worry about. “I wasn’t talking to you, fleshbag,” I said, and turned my back.



“I love the attitude! That way the audience remembers you!” Daisy said back in a gratingly chipper tone. “Good talk!”

It was a little awkward because I meant to look like I was turning away to talk to my friends, but both Renwick and Gossamer were chatting with another one of these refugees from a Disney Channel show. Renwick giggled at a joke one of the guys made. I was going to have to remind him who the enemy was here.

I used to go out with Gossamer, but we realized we were stronger apart than together. Renwick dated her too. Maybe they’re still dating? Sometimes it’s hard to tell. I’ve known Renwick since we were kids, back in middle school. We kinda started in on the goth thing together, as we both realized we weren’t like the other people. Gossamer transferred in two years ago, and was an easy fit into our little sect. We’re all... Well, ‘friends’ is too soft a word. We’re soldiers. Soldiers for darkness.

I spent the rest of the morning fighting the machine as they had us do a physical. On the first day of school? Yeah, on the first day. These people can’t wait to have us students weighed and measured like cattle. That’s all we are to them. Walking meat.

I was given a box of nutrition bars to eat, which looked heinous. The nurse said my complexion looked pallid, and they were going to make sure I had at least one a day. My complexion is “pallid” because I like it that way, something these people would never understand.

But, hey, free food, so I guess why not? I'll keep some in my locker.

Not much else is different. It's fuckin' Crosley High, what do you expect? The only thing new was that my study hall period was way different than it was last year. Last year it was more like detention than study hall, being restricted to my seat and told not to make eye contact or any noise. No phones, no music, no nothing. Now, they have these headphones that I'm supposed to use to listen to audio courses instead of reading. Fine with me, I can just sleep through it. They didn't think of that, did they? I can bide my time, sleeping and dreaming of burning this place to the ground. They think they're so smart, but I'm always gonna find a way to break the system.

That's me. Damien. I'm your worst nightmare.

DAY 2



RIVER'S STORY

The next morning, I was seated at my desk in Mrs. Scripperton's class. I was almost ready to leap from my seat, I was so eager to hand in my paper.

I looked down at my hands, clutching my essay, with my wrists tightly bound by the ruffled cuffs of Harmony's hand-sewn shirt.

It hadn't been easy, but I had arranged to come to school in the clothes Harmony had made for me.

I had texted Harmony early that morning, just as I woke up. I was looking at my clothes — my boring, regular clothes — and hating the idea of wearing them to school. I told her this, and she suggested I come by and change before classes began.

I didn't want to impose, but at the same time, I was so glad she had suggested it.

I told Feather and Greg I was leaving early, and I ran off to Harmony's place. I dressed quickly, as she fussed with my hair. As her music played on the stereo, we finished up just as her dad was honking the car horn for us to get moving.

Her dad is nice, but shockingly young looking. If he wasn't Harmony's dad, I'd say he was more like in his twenties. He invited me to his church on Sunday. Turns out he's a preacher.

"You look nice, River," he said to me. I blushed at the compliment. No one had ever said that to me.

That was how I got into the clothes Harmony had made for me, and I feel a little guilty about misleading my parents, but I wasn't ready to talk to them about it yet.

So, when I first got to school that morning, I got some real stares. I mean, it was only my second day in school, so it wasn't like I had established a "normal" look for me. Maybe I always dressed like a proper student? How would they know? Why was everyone was acting like I was radioactive or something?

"Don't worry," Harmony said as she tightened the silken bow round my neck and fussed with the hairband she had put in my hair. "People here adjust quickly."

I was met at the doorway of my homeroom by Mrs. Scripperton, who made an

expression that was almost like a smile. Although I think actually smiling would have broken her face.

“This is the one?” She asked Harmony, looking at me.

“Looks like it,” Harmony replied.

“Very well,” she replied. “I approve.”

Of what? Then she just talked directly to me. “You look like a proper student,” she said. “Well done.”

I don’t know why it meant so much to me, but it did, and I almost floated to my seat. A *proper student*. I was sad to see Harmony leave for her homeroom, but I was ready.

“Pass your papers forward,” Mrs. Scripperton told the class after the bell rang. Then she looked at me. “Would you gather up the essays and put them on my desk, dear?”

I leapt to my feet. As my flats hit the ground, I said “Yes, Ma'am!” with all the enthusiasm I could muster. I took them all and placed them on the teacher’s desk and then dashed back to my seat, ready for the next lesson, my hands folded on top of my desk. I felt like the most perfect of proper students, and my heart was beating with excitement.

I spent lunch in the library. Mrs. Scripperton had given me a new assignment, to write a paper on the history of Crosley High School. I didn’t want to let her down, or to sully the good reputation I now had as a good student, so I didn’t waste any time in beginning my research.

I had some time — a month, actually — but there was no time like the



present. I checked out all the things I would need. A locally-printed book on the history of the county, the oldest school yearbooks I could find and photocopies of the earliest school newspapers.

I was so ready to write the best essay I could. It was a new start for me here at Crosley High School. I was no longer going to be the oddball hippy student. I was now the best student. A proper student. This was the new me.

So when Harmony's dad, Josiah, drove us home that afternoon, I quickly fell almost sick at what was ahead of me. I was going to have to change back into my old clothes, go back to my tent, and spend the rest of my day pretending like bean soup was a great dinner, and that listening to Feather sing while Greg played acoustic guitar was entertainment.

When I saw that there was a note waiting for me inside my tent, I panicked. Feather was always leaving notes for me, whenever she had something to say. She was non-confrontational like that. Had they been told of what I had done? Did they know? With my hands shaking, I opened the folded note. It said, "I look forward to seeing you at church with us this Sunday." It was signed "The Reed Family: Josiah, Mary, Harmony."

My heart soared. I felt like I had finally found something I could call my own and truly cherish. Friends. Close friends. In my silken, frilled undies and my tight, warm corset, I fell asleep with anticipation of what I could make of my new life.

DAY 3



KEN HARPER

Well, I got the job. I'm not sure it's the right thing to do, but I'm now on the payroll. I never thought I'd use my teaching credentials like this, though. Sure, I had wanted to be a teacher since I was in grade school, but then when it came time to make a living, I had better opportunities elsewhere. Besides, although I liked the idea of teaching, it turns out I hate kids. Especially teenagers. They are the worst.

So when my wife came to me and asked me to go get a job as a high school teacher, I didn't know what to think. My job as an on-site construction engineer is seasonal, so I had six months free. I certainly didn't need the money, though. I get paid well enough to hold up my end of the family budget.

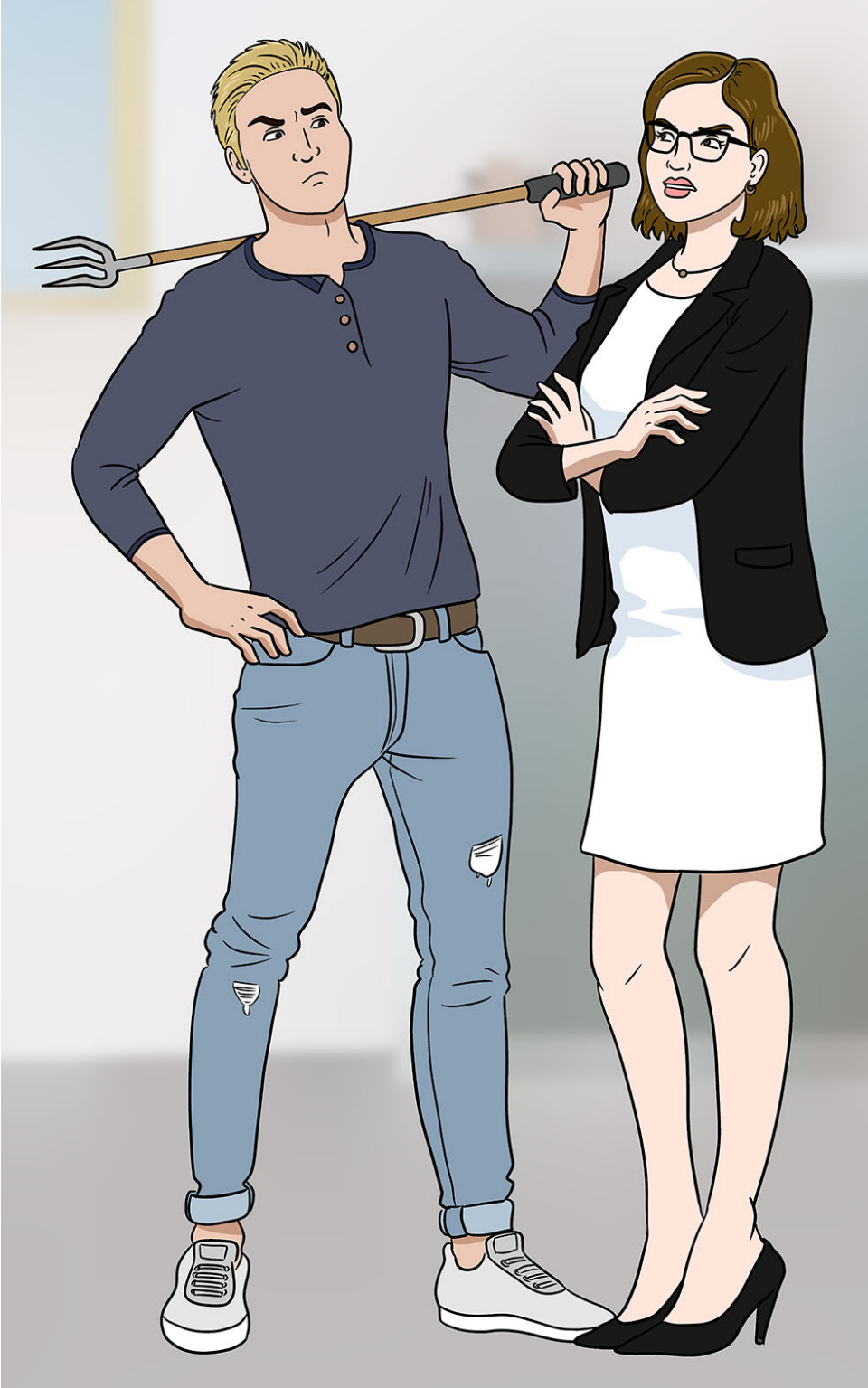
My wife, Nora, she does pretty good too. She's a lawyer. She usually pulls in six figures a year, but she works hard for it. We plan to have a child at some point, but like I say, I'm not much for kids.

So when she asked me to go get a job as a teacher at a high school across town, I had no idea why. Then she explained it to me. She has a class-action suit with parents at Crosley High School, who say there's been a culture of misogyny, harassment and institutionalized discrimination towards female students. They claim the female students are encouraged to have unprotected sex and won't allow birth control to be used on campus. What she wanted me to do was to get a job at that school and see for myself what was going on, and collect any examples of that kind of behavior.

She worked on me for about two weeks before I said I'd think about it, but you know how women are. I can only put up with the silent treatment for so long, and she eventually got what she wanted. So after a few interviews, I'm now on the staff at Crosley HS. I report tomorrow for orientation.

So that's the first thing I'm going to tell my wife about this new job. The orientation is unlike anything I've seen before. They have a series of audio instructional courses on the school rules and regulations I have to listen to, in addition to further audio courses on my class material. I have to go to the school, report to an orientation room and listen to the pre-recorded courses. Some of these things are three hours long! Afterwards, they'll quiz me on the material, so they know I listened and was paying attention. That's going to be a drag.

The other weird thing they're doing is they're sending me a box of nutrition bars, because they're worried about my stamina. Now, I'm not a big guy, de-



spite being in construction. I'm one of the people who works in the trailer on a computer, making last-minute adjustments to the plans when problems arise on site, so I spend all day sitting in front of a screen. Now, that means I could definitely put some meat on my frame, but it's not like I'm about to collapse from malnutrition.

Still, they say I'm going to have to eat two of these things a day. They had me take a physical, gave me some booster shots in the butt, and then told me about the nutrition concerns. Fortunately, the bars are pretty tasty. Strawberry flavored. I'm not sure how this has anything to do with my wife's class action suit, or how it could help her, but it is plenty strange, so I'm certainly going to tell her.

I also think it's odd that this is a three-week program. That's a long time to get prepped for this kind of work. When I got hired as an engineer, they had me sign some forms, drove me to the site and I was working that day.

There was just one close call. The principal, Mr. Weinhurst, looked at the name on my resume and asked me if I was related to "that lawyer," but I told them I wasn't. They didn't ask again, so I guess we're good. I sure hope Nora is going to get what she needs, because this is above and beyond.

THE SCHOOL OFFICE

Edith Blithe was the only person left in the office of Crosley High School that night. She had been the administrative school secretary for 49 years, serving Principal Weinhurst, and Principal Johnson before him and Principal Holder before him. She was 68, just a year or two before she was going to have to seriously start thinking about retirement.

It would be the saddest day in Edith's life, when she would no longer would have a job to come to every day. This school and Edith had been through a lot and seen a lot. In many ways, neither could have existed without the other.

She made the rounds, checking every office to make absolutely sure it was empty of the people who usually worked in them. She flicked off the lights in every one until she was done.

Returning to her own desk, she put the dust cover over her trusty typewriter and locked the top drawer of her desk shut. It held all the secrets she was in charge of, and she had lost count of the number of times a student had tried to break into it. There were gouges in the wood where student had tried.

With that, she was done, and it was time to gather her fashionably 1965 purse and thick wool coat for the drive home.

Just as she was leaving, though, the phone rang. It always seemed to her that the very act of leaving was some kind of trigger for the phone. It was always

ringing as she was closing down for the night. She wanted to ignore it, but the light indicated it was from the Superintendent's office. She had to answer a call from the school Superintendent.

The old woman picked up the receiver on her desk with her bony fingers and put it to her sagging ear. Almost as quickly, she said "I obey," and dropped the receiver, and left it dangling off the edge of her desk. Staring off into the distance, she removed the cover to her typewriter, fed in a pink paper form, and started to type with a blazing speed that betrayed her elderly age.

Edith didn't stop typing, her eyes unfocused and looking at nothing in particular, until she had gone through seven pink forms, each one for a particular student. Forms that would be necessary for the year ahead.

"Student Identity Profile," read the title of these forms. She filed them away, one by one, the permanent records of the students involved. She even had to create a couple of new files.

Once she was done, she walked back over to the phone, picked it up to listen to it, and then snapped her head back. "Hello? Is no one there? Hello?" Edith said, before carefully hanging the phone up. "I don't know why they don't fix that," she said as she tugged her coat tighter and left for the night.

DAY 4



RIVER'S STORY

When I woke up, I found a rip at the top of my tent and the overnight dew had been dripping water on my sleeping bag, which had sucked it up like a sponge. I was sopping wet in the cold morning.

I was shivering as I put on my wool socks and my itchy hemp shirt. I had to remove my undies and hide them, as wet as they were. I was back in my organic linen boxers.

"I have muesli and almond milk, River!" Feather said as I emerged from the tent. "Oh no, wait. I'm out of almond milk. You can have an apple instead. If you can find one."

"Actually, I have to go see Harmony," I said, impulsively.

I wasn't invited, but as I ran over to her house, I hoped that they might at least let me dry out my undies.

"You're late!" Harmony said as she answered the door, in her nightgown. "I was worried you wouldn't come." She pulled me inside and led me up the stairs by the hand. "I have a surprise!"

She dropped me off in a room I hadn't been in, next to hers. It was sparse, just a closet, a chair and a mirror.

"What?" I asked.

"This!" She then pulled open the closet door to reveal a mostly empty closet.

"Okay..." I said, trying to catch on.

"Well, it's not much now, but these are yours," she said, running her hand along a few hanging items. "And we're going to fill this closet up with new outfits for you!"

"For me?" I said, as I approached the clothes. "Are you sure?"

"Look, I know it's kind of awkward, with your parents and all," Harmony said, tossing her head to the side, and staring at the sky, "so I cleared out this old room. You can use it to change every day, before and after school."

My own place to change? Somewhere that didn't have rocks and insects? Harmony couldn't have picked a better surprise if she had been able to open up my mind like a book and read it from cover to cover. "Really?" I asked.

"Really. You don't need a key, neither. We never lock the door, unless we're

all gone.”

We didn’t have a lot of time before we had to leave, but I made sure to hug the stuffing out of Harmony and then quickly went about getting dressed for the day.

I had been given a new top and another pair of pants, just like the ones I had worn yesterday, but in dark grey. Everything fit perfectly and felt wonderful. I felt like singing the whole day long. I really had found something I loved.

When I got back that night, I spent a few hours talking with my new best friend, as we listened to her music, which I had to admit, was growing on me. She even helped me with some of my homework. She knows a lot about just about every subject, it seems.

When it was time to change and go home, I finally took a look at the other clothes in the closet. There were a few duplicate items of what I was already wearing in different colors, but the main thing that grabbed my attention was a long, pink pastel dress with ribbons. It looked so nice. I was already curious how it was going to look on me.

“That one’s for church,” Harmony said, as she came in, just slipping her nightgown over her naked body as she entered. “You have to have a nice dress for church.”

“I can’t wait to try it,” I said, feeling the super soft material.

DAY 6



ALBERT MEYERS

My sister. It had to be my sister. I heard the car come to a screeching halt, the front door slam, my father yell at her, the stomping up the stairs. That was followed by the clack of her high heels storming down the hallway, the slam of her bedroom door, and pounding, slamming and screaming from the other side of my bedroom wall. Yet another date gone wrong for Alyssa, I assumed. Was there any other kind?

We weren't even a week into the new school year at Crosley High, and she was already having problems dating other students. It was some kind of new record, I thought to myself. I suppose that's what happens when you're such a desperate, miserable social creature like my sister.

I sighed and went back to the book I was reading, Kafka. I had a paper due in two weeks, and I had only read this book once. I was not in the mood to be interrupted tonight, and I was simply not going to tolerate it.

My concerns proved to be prescient, as it couldn't have been more than ten minutes later when I could hear Alyssa start sobbing and wailing. My goodness, did she just start to make noise. It just got louder and louder, making it nigh impossible for me to concentrate. Finally, I just had to put the book aside. The disturbance was intolerable.

It went on like this for hours. She cried like a mother who's baby had been plucked from her arms and stolen away by bandits. It was dreadful. "It's not fair!" She yelled. "Boys are all alike! They just want sex!" She continued. "Never again! I'm not wasting my life!" That was followed by even more thrashing.

I was surprised my parents weren't intervening, however, I





suspect that they were just as scared of her as I was. Alyssa was 18, a senior in our high school, and possibly the most popular student. Well, I use the term student loosely, as she rarely, if ever, showed any kind of academic aptitude. No, Alyssa had chosen the darker path, relying on popularity, a painted face, and the clothing of a courtesan to achieve her meager goals in life.

She is a ravishing beauty, make no doubt, but with a tempestuous streak in her that could set a wooded forest ablaze with just a moment's worth of anger. Mother, Father and I had all learned to avoid her in these moments, lest we meet our doom.

It wasn't unusual for her dates to end like this, with a display of emotion so intense that if bottled, could power a mighty quasar. Why she didn't seem to grasp her situation was beyond me. If you use honey, you are indeed going to attract insects.

Her boyfriends were the scourge of Crosley High, from hair-triggered juvenile delinquents to dull-eyed lummoxes of questionable athletic prowess. Lecherous souls, all of them. Still, at one time, Alyssa had mooned over them, proclaimed her everlasting love for them, and her unimpeachable intent to get married and live happily ever after. She never appeared to understand the cause and effect of her actions.

So five nights ago, when this all took place, it was an oft-told tale of misery that was playing out, one we had all grown weary of in the Meyers abode.

This time, things did seem a tad different. The very next day, instead of dressing herself in the bright eye-inflaming pinks, circulation-restricting tight clothes and lofty heels she was usually encased in, she went to school in grey sweat pants, sneakers and a black hoodie. It was practically unthinkable, and I had to field many questions about her health that day. People were thinking she had cancer or some other horrid malady from their fevered, uninformed imaginations.

"No," I told them. "She simply suffers from being Alyssa."

All the concern for my tragically, deeply bereaved sister was alarming. It was just another cry for attention, and it was working. Not only were my fellow students concerned, but my parents were just as alarmed. They should know better.

The next day was even worse. She had adopted new habits, which I found particularly irritating. She came home immediately after school which was a first, and went straight to her room to — I jest not — study. She went to her make-up vanity, pushed some bottles aside and sat there, reading her assigned books and doing her homework. A blatant display of theater the likes of which I have never seen. She stayed in her room, reading for hours, almost missing dinner.

After that day, she didn't even bother with her hair, and she was taken to wearing thick wool sweaters. Saggy jeans and tired sneakers became her new

regular things.

I might note that this was particularly disturbing to me, as these were *my* customary articles of clothing. In fact, I am very sure the button-down shirts she's wearing come from my old ones down in the garage. It didn't take long before I surmised what she was doing. She was adopting my lifestyle.

I am 17, one year my sister's junior, and although I am young, I have worked very hard to establish my own personality and manner. I am very much a male, and not ashamed of it. I work hard to educate myself in arts & letters, and I hope some day that the name of Albert Meyers will be inextricably associated with intellectual excellency and fastidiousness.

What I don't need is my very own sister ridiculing me by taking on the guise I consider rightfully mine. There is room for just one Albert Meyers in this world, and I have no tolerance for her pastiche of my dignified scholarly pursuits.

At school, I was mortified as Alyssa showed up in the library to work on her assignments and socialize. She seemed particularly intent on familiarizing herself with the people in my peer group, which I was sure was folly on her part. My friends would not be so easily swayed by a pretty face. They were intellectuals, like me.

Just the other day, however, I was made aware that I could no longer wait for my sister to get tired of this farce. I was in my room alphabetizing my library of classic literature when I saw my friend Nicholas pull up in his car outside my window. He had Jacob with him, as well as Dimitri. After quickly tidying up, I awaited their arrival. I heard Mother greet them at the door, and then I came out to invite them in.

"Hey, Albert," Nicholas said, as he adjusted his glasses. "You joining us?"

"Joining you?" I replied. "I'm afraid I don't understand." I headed back into my room as my friends followed. "Is this about..." I asked as I turned around. I realized I was alone.

Nicholas, Jacob and Dimitri were at my doorway. "Uh, actually we're here to see Alyssa," Nicholas said.

"Yeah," Jacob confirmed. "We can catch up on the way out, I guess."

"See ya," Dimitri said, turning his back to me.

The three of them turned and knocked on my sister's door. Before I could even ask why, they were inside and the door was shut in my face.

Consequently, at school, I found my former friends hovering around Alyssa on a daily basis. They followed her around like her loyal subjects. As for me, my chess games had no opponents, my assignments had no one to collaborate with and my lunchtime had no one to commiserate with. It seemed impossible, but I had lost my friends to my own addle-minded, superficial, thoughtless sister.

Even my teachers were entranced by the new Alyssa. They called on her first in class, praised even the slightest achievements, and lauded her constantly. Her performance as an erudite student of letters was like a spell cast on everyone. It was all too much. She was a charlatan, pure and simple.

The girl, by her actions, had sullied the notion of academic excellence, mocked my affinities, and was a parody of all the things I held dear. Now, she had stolen my friends, peers and close associates! Somehow, she had buffaloeed them into believing that she was just as intellectual and insightful as they were, despite her very obvious deficiencies. She was merely adopting the guise of an academic, just as if she were trying on dresses at the store. Why didn't anyone see that?

She didn't care for literature or the arts insomuch as she had just found a new style to mimic and then dispose of when the next trend was dumped in the troff of fashion she gorged herself upon.

"Mother, what am I to do?" I queried my maternal parent one evening.

"Lighten up, Albert," she replied. "Your sister has been through a lot. I think she's finally found a way to center herself. You could learn a lot from her."

Blasphemy!

I was a man alone, faced with a challenge I never thought those around me would be insipid enough to succumb to. I was going to have to remind my sister of her rightful place, return her to her natural state and repair the rift she had left in my life.

Naturally, I called her boyfriend.

I spelled out my plan to Lance Hartman, Alyssa's beau, three times. I told him what I needed him to do.

He, in turn, told me how much I would have to pay him to do it. I tried to appeal to his better nature, but to no one's surprise, he had none. It would cost \$100 to secure his services and confidence. I paid him the next day at school and left him with a written script.

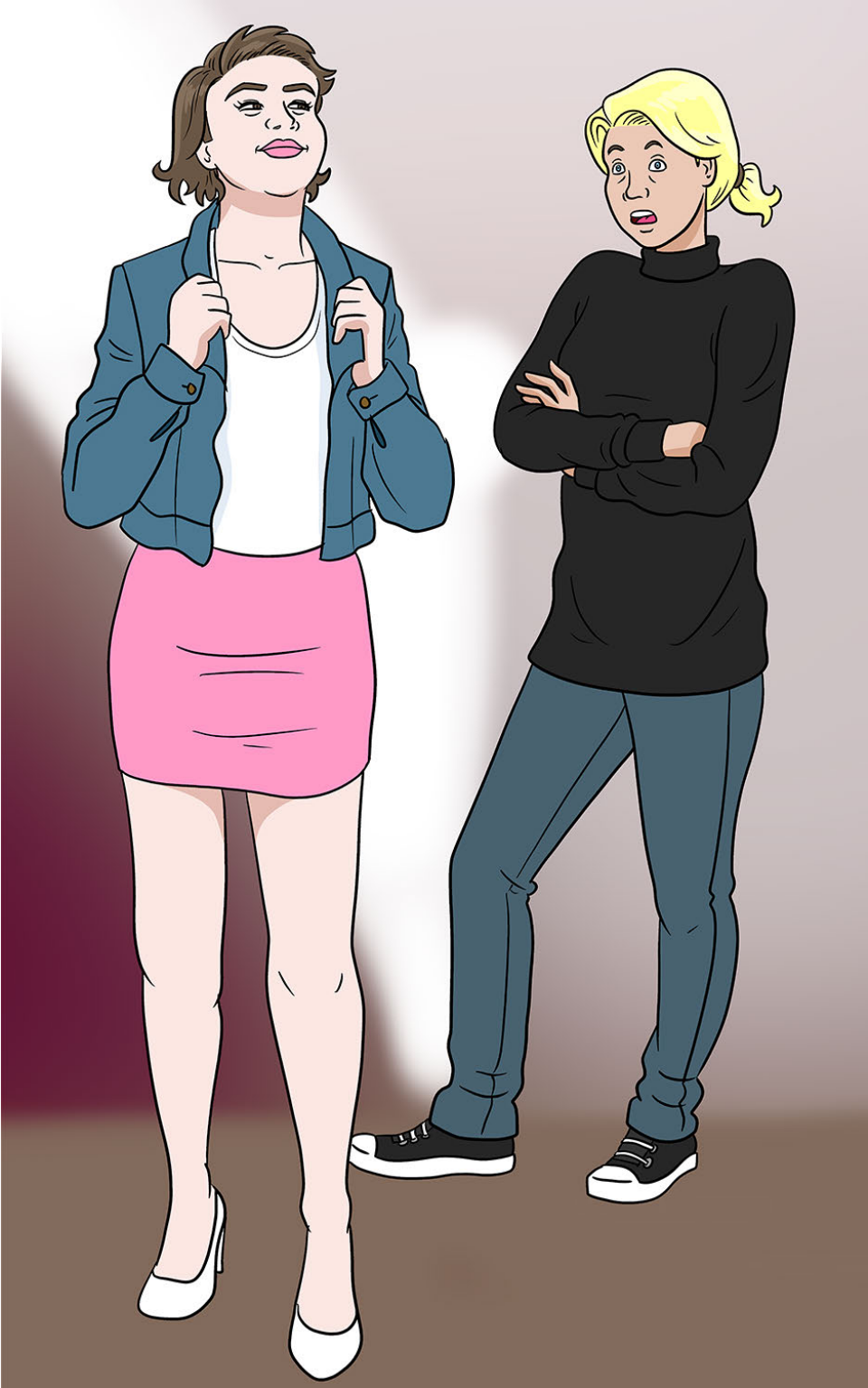
So this evening, right on time, the front doorbell rang. "Alyssa," My father called up the stairs. "Your date is here to pick you up!"

Alyssa came out of her room, straightened her bulky sweater and pulled her unkempt hair out of her eyes. "I don't *have* a date, Dad," she yelled back, as she came down the stairs. When she saw who it was, she hardened up. "What do *you* want, Lance?"

"Hey, Alyssa," Lance said. "No, I didn't come for you, I...."

"He came for me!" I said, as I nudged my sister aside. "Lance and I are going out."

I confidently strode to Lance's side and took his arm. I was dressed in white



high heels, a short pink skirt, a white tank top and jean jacket. I had spent hours on my makeup and hair, getting my lips glistening pink, my eyes seductively dark and my face flawless and smooth. My hair had been teased out to look as feminine as I could get it, my legs were shaved smooth, and I smelled of flowers.

If I do say so, I was perfect. My likeness to my sister had always been noted by friends and family, and now for the first time, the resemblance was working in my favor.

Neither my sister or father uttered a word. I had completely flummoxed them. That was all well and good, and just as I had intended, however, I was hoping for some kind of objection. “No, you can’t,” or “He’s my boyfriend!” I was hoping for at least a “I’ve made a horrible mistake!” But there was nary a word being spoken.

With no other choice, I had to press on. So, I left with Lance, ready to catch a movie. “See you later,” I said with what I’m sure was a grin the Cheshire Cat would have been jealous of. “Don’t wait up!”

I couldn’t wait until I came back and saw the jealousy and fear on my sister’s face. She was going to beg me to have her boyfriend back, now she knew what she was missing. Of course, I kind of expected her to stop me before I even had a chance to leave, but, I could wait for the inevitable.

DAY 7



RIVER'S STORY

It only took a few days for Harmony to quadruple the clothes hanging in my new closet. She must have been sewing in her sleep.

I don't think my parents much minded me leaving so early every morning. They were always leaving me alone to do my own thing. This morning, I didn't even explain where I was going, they just watched me leave as they drank their morning tea.

I wanted to be as early I as could be, just to get a better look at the dress. I had never worn a dress before, as best I could remember, which seemed a shame. Why hadn't I tried one before? It was such an oversight on my part. I have to be more open to trying new things.

Crosley High is strangely progressive in some ways, and regressive in others. The way they treat girls at the school does seem odd, and I can see where the protestors outside the school are coming from. The girls wear a skirted gym uniform that reveals quite a bit and only do dancing and aerobics. Also, they have to take mandatory Home Economics, Child Development, Cooking, Typing and dance classes. It all seems kind of misogynistic.

The small number of girls at the school all don't seem to mind, though. In fact, they all appear to be happy and well-adjusted, at least on the surface. They also dress like they're a little bit desperate, in short skirts, low-cut tops, heels and heavy makeup. It works, too, because at least five of them were pregnant. Maybe it's just a different social situation out here.

In other ways, the school is very progressive. I had to do a full health check-up with the school nurse, and the health office was full of high-tech equipment, as everything about me was measured, weighed and tested — even getting blood samples taken. The next day, they produced something they called “nutrition bars” that were “engineered” especially for me. They're not bad tasting, either. Strawberry flavored. I'm supposed to have one every day.

I also have to take an audio learning course, where they have a bunch of us students in a room where we wear headphones and listen to lectures or educational lessons. They even gave us audio players to take home with us to do it on our own. I've never known a school to do that. I don't think I've kept my eyes open yet for a whole class, though.

“Learn to square dance yet?” Carson texted me yesterday.

“Not yet,” I replied. “But it wouldn’t shock me.”

It was true. This wasn’t just a school where suburbs end and farms begin, but it was everything my old school wasn’t. It wasn’t full of overly dramatic angsty students, it wasn’t built eerily like a minimum-security prison, and it didn’t have edgy, stressed teachers who could snap any any moment. Crosley High was certainly different, but in a way I liked. I could handle this.

Maybe that was why I felt so excited about being here. This was a new start for me. I didn’t have to be the River everyone expected me to be. I could be the River I wanted to be.

And the River I wanted to be, was someone more like Harmony. I think she knew it, too.

She encouraged me to volunteer to help teachers at every opportunity. Always be the first to raise your hand in class, she told me. If you find anyone cheating, turn them in immediately. Most importantly, never miss an assignment, never skip on a study session and always, always be prepared to learn every day like a proper student.

This was the new me, the proper-student me.

DAY 11



JAMARCUS RUSSEL

I had a really weird meeting with the school counsellor, Mr. Dawson. Principal Weinhurst had called me into his office because he said he was worried that I looked tired. Tired? That's why I get taken out of class and everybody gets on my case about being sent to the school office? *Tired?*

He even said, "Jamarcus, I know it's tough being our only African-American student..."

I just stopped him right there. This has nothing to do with being black.

The dude couldn't even just ask me how my summer went? Naw, he gotta just slip in the knife. I told him it was just because I didn't get enough sleep, but he said he wanted to have me "checked out" by the school staff.

Crosley High sucks for a lot of reasons, like the small number of girls who go here, but probably the worst is the administration. They're always getting in your business and trying to act like they give a crap about us students. They don't.

I was then sent to the nurse's office where she took some blood for some reason, and then I was sent along to Mr. Dawson's office. I do *not* like Mr. Dawson.

Some of the guys say he's cool, but he's cool in a Christian rock kind of way. It may come off as interesting, but it feels all creepy and fake. I always get the feeling he's scoping me out for something.

Anyway, I had to talk to him for, like, fifteen minutes to prove I wasn't depressed, that it wasn't a racial thing, I wasn't being abused or doing any drugs. Even if I was, why would I tell him about it? They're just wasting everyone's time.

Am I depressed? No more than usual, going to this dumb school. Is there a racial thing going on? In *this* school? They ain't got the balls to be racist here. Am I being abused? My dad works hard and he's not home much, but we have a good relationship. Am I taking drugs? No, but not like I wouldn't.

Then, if that wasn't weird enough, he starts asking me about my friends. I have two friends, Jeff and Kevin. We play video games and talk about movies. That's about it. Then, he wants to know if we have girlfriends.

I think he's grooming me. Everyone knows Mr. Dawson is gay, and the rumor



is he's an ex-con. Yeah, I know what grooming is, and he's doing it. I fuckin' swear.

Anyway, all I said was if I *did* have a girlfriend, it's none of his business. He asked again, and this dude wasn't going to stop asking, so I just lied and said I did. I don't need him coming on to me. He said that I was showing signs of abnormal social development, and if I was lying and I didn't have a girlfriend, that was an actionable offense. Then, he was going to have to put me in a special program. So he asked a third time, and I probably should have explained myself, but I was already committed. I lied again.

Then he said he wanted to meet her. Fuck.

So after I got out of there, I had to find a girl who's gonna cover for me. I'm not gonna let some dumb school counsellor ruin my life. If he wanted to see a girlfriend, I'd show him one.

No, I don't know a lot of girls at Crosley High. Like I said, there aren't that many of them, and the ones that are here are either mega-popular and way out of my league, or strange loners. There's nothing in between here. Besides the ten or fifteen pregnant girls, that is.

There are a few girls who hang around the library, who aren't too embarrassing to be seen with, and one of them, Cathy, had a crush on me back in middle school.

I put on an extra swipe of deodorant after gym class and headed over to the

library building. I knew this was going to be all kinds'a awkward.

She wasn't hard to find, Cathy, as she was always on a computer. I found her in the computer lab, rapidly clicking a mouse as she adjusted her glasses.

So I try to come off all relaxed n' shit, and I say, "Hey, I've been thinking about you lately, Cathy."

She didn't even bother to look away from the screen. "Ew. Yuck," she said.

No, I'm not exactly a girl's dream guy, but what the hell? She acted like she had guys making passes at her all the time. With zit-studded skin and an overbite that could you could use as a paint scraper, I know that's not the case.

It wasn't like I needed her to do anything besides tell people she was my girlfriend. I didn't need this kind of attitude. I told her I'd pay her, and she said if it was anything less than a hundred, forget it.

A hundred bucks to have a nerd like Cathy pretend to be my girlfriend for a five minute conversation? She was straight trippin.

I told her she'd make less giving the librarian a BJ. She didn't react. That's the Cathy I remember. No fun.

Then I noticed the paper coffee cup next to her computer filled with something dark, and asked if it was coffee.

She said something smart-assy, but it was definitely coffee. Where'd she get it? She explained that the school staff recently got this expensive latté machine in the teacher's lounge, and because it's government property, they legally they have to share it with everyone, even the students. But they're trying to keep it secret.

"So anyone can go and use it for coffee?" I asked.

"Duh. That's how I got it. But don't tell people. I don't want a line."

"For coffee?"

"Lattés. They're better than coffee. It's *Italian*."

Since this conversation was going nowhere, I decided to check this out. I headed over to the teacher's lounge and took a look for myself.

They tried to keep me out, but when I told the teacher who was being a dick that I knew about the latté machine, he sighed and let me through. "But leave when you're done!" He told me. "And don't go telling everyone!"

Sure enough, there's this huge metal machine in there. I'd never worked one before, but it had instructions. I figured why not give it shot, huh? I mean, it was free.

The instructions were complicated, with making "espresso" and then using steam to foam milk, and a whole bunch of other crap. So I spent probably five minutes doing this, and fucking it up a few times, getting the eye from the

teachers in the lounge. Finally, I had it done the right way, and I tried it. Awful shit. I mean, it wasn't totally nasty, but it was like liquid tree bark and cigarette butts.

There was a bunch of stuff on the table I could use to add to it, like cocoa, cinnamon and something called pumpkin spice.

So I tried the pumpkin spice.

Big mistake.

Not that I didn't like it. No, actually I really liked it. Really, *really* liked it.

I came back later that day for another. Then the next morning. I skipped the next day, because I was worried I was becoming addicted, but the day after that I had three more.

Pumpkin spice latté, man. That shit's the *bomb*.

Every day, I got myself a Pumpkin Spice latté to start my day. How come people aren't killing themselves to get this shit? It's the best thing I've ever tasted, and it wakes me up. I don't do anything before I have one in the morning, and I need one at lunch to pick me back up, and another before final period to get me over the finish line.

Yes, I knew I had a problem, sure, but now at least I knew why adults are always talking about coffee. It's awesome stuff. Every morning now I head to the lounge, ignore the stares from the teachers, and make myself a pumpkin spice latté. I can't start my day without it. If anyone asks, I just say I got it at home.

So I'm in there one morning, and I'm making my latté, when in comes Mr. Dawson. He sees me using the machine and comes over, and real quiet like, he says, "some of the staff think you've become addicted, Jamarus."

I told him I was fine. I wanted to tell him to mind his own fucking business, but I was in the wrong place for that.

"Still, you are taking all of the flavor syrup," Dawson said. "So, as a compromise, I got you your very own bottle."

A shivered for a moment, seeing a full, new bottle of pumpkin spice syrup placed in front of me. It was going to taste so, *so* good. I was drooling.

Mr. Dawson must have seen my expression. He patted me on the shoulder and said that this bottle was just for me, and not to use the bottle for everyone else. He made me promise. In fact, he made me promise three times. Dude even wanted me to take the bottle with me and not let it get mixed up with the teachers' bottle.

Guy is whack. But at least I snagged my own bottle of dope pumpkin spice. I was going to enjoy this.

"What the fuck, man?" Kevin asked me when he saw me pouring pumpkin spice into my milk. It was lunchtime, and I was at the table, eating with my



friends.

“What is that?” Jeff asked me. Before I even had a chance to answer, Kevin had swiped it and was reading the label.

“Pumpkin Spice Flavored Syrup,” he read.

“Pumpkin Spice?” Jeff repeated. “That is such a Basic Bitch thing.” He gave me a disturbed look and backed away from me.

“It’s such a white girl drink. My sister in college always has a Pumpkin Spice latté in her hand this time of year,” Kevin said. “She can’t stop drinking them. She’s an addict.”

I grabbed it back from Kevin and told him to fuck off, but he won’t give up.

“Funny, you don’t look like a basic bitch,” he said.

“He needs to be wearing those boots,” Jeff said. “And he’s not even blond.”

This was apparently the funniest thing these guys had every thought of. “Yeah, you gotta wear black leggings and a scarf and shit.”

“And like this dumb sorority sweatshirt...”

“And blue nail polish...”

My friends were barely even able to talk, they were laughing so hard. “He’d look awesome with those nasty eyebrows they have...”

“And talking into a pink phone, taking shots of food. You wanna take a shot of your lunch, Jamarcus?”

I packed up my stuff and left them. I didn’t need this shit. It’s just fucking



pumpkin spice, assholes.

So then when I get home, I'm telling this story to my dad about my fuckin' asshole friends, and all he cares about is that I'm drinking coffee.

He says it's gonna stunt my growth or something. I'm six two, do I need to be taller? Any taller and people are gonna think I'm Black Slenderman. I already have enough trouble with people always asking me if I'm gonna play in the NBA. I never know if I should be angry because I'm being stereotyped as tall or as black.

"You're always trouble, boy," Dad said to me. He's always saying shit like that. "Your mother always warned me, ya gotta keep that boy on a short leash," he scratched his chin as he spoke.

"She ain't never said nothin' like that," I told him. "Momma told *me* to watch out for *you*."

He smiled. Talking about Momma always put a smile on his face. I missed her. We both did.

"She'd kill you for drinkin' coffee, though."

"I'm old enough. I'm not a kid anymore."

"No, you ain't," Dad said before giving up on the debate.

Besides, I'm not giving up my lattés. I don't care what he says. He's gonna have to fight me, and yes I know he's my dad.

He did make me give up my pumpkin spice bottle so he can see if it "checks

out.” Like what, the school counsellor is gonna spike my coffee flavoring with drugs? Come on, dude.

Then Dad makes his own coffee, adds the pumpkin spice, tastes it, and he gives me this funny look. “That’s not half bad,” he says.

DAY 13



RIVER'S STORY

I was seated very still in the back of Mr. Reed's car. For some reason, I felt more nervous than I ever had before. This was going to be my very first Sunday church service, and I wondered how it was all going to go. Harmony assured me I had nothing to worry about, and that mostly I had to sit and stand when I was told to, and sing along to the songs.

"Or at least fake it," she said. "I do that a lot."

"Harmony!" Her father snapped from the driver's seat. "We're not supposed to say that out loud."

Harmony giggled at her father's humor. He seemed like a good-natured guy, especially since he was the preacher and all.

She told me over and over that the main thing was just to smile, nod and look pretty.

This was also going to be my first trip out in a dress, and I hoped I looked half as pretty as Harmony. She helped me out this morning with my dress and hair, and even a touch of gloss for my lips.

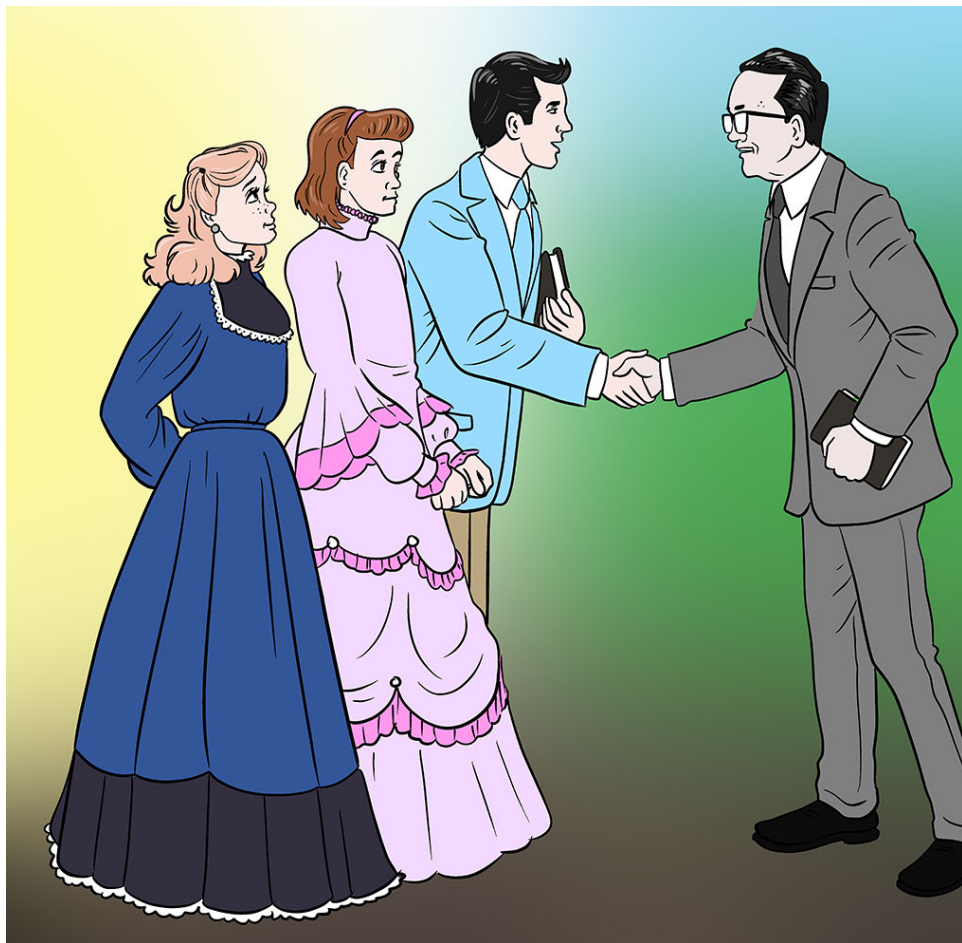
I knew I was betraying my parents, to a certain degree. They didn't know about me going to church. They're both atheists, and had raised me as such. But the idea of worship had really fascinated me ever since I met Harmony's family. I was excited to experience a church service for myself.

We got to the church early, before anyone else arrived. Since Mr. Reed had to get things going, that only made sense. I walked up the church stairs, with tips from Harmony on how to manage my long skirt. Maybe I shouldn't have worn a dress on my first church visit, but it just felt like the right thing to do.

I offered to help set things up, but I was told I had to look after my dress and just be patient, so Harmony and I sat by and watched her dad prepare for the service.

It didn't look quite like a normal church. It physically looked like a church, at least how I've seen in TV and movies, but there weren't crosses or stars or anything that indicated what the religion was. Instead, where one would expect there to be a symbol of some sort, a large framed photograph of a rectangular structure was hung. It looked like a picture of a mobile trailer. "What's with the picture?" I asked Harmony.

She dipped her head, reverently. "That is Mafu, the divine," was all she said.



An hour later, the first folks began to arrive. Mr. Reed stood out front and greeted every one of them, as Harmony and I stood nearby. It was odd to be on display like I was, but Harmony assured me that I looked fine. She was right, people only said nice things about me as they passed by. I felt a little like a piece of art as the viewers walked by to look at me. Every time they smiled or complimented me, I felt a surge of delight. Being told I'm pretty is so life-affirming. I can't explain it. For next week, I was going to be even prettier. Maybe I'd curl my hair or wear a hat. A nice silken ribbon around my thin corsetted waist would look nice.

"River!" Said a voice. "Is that you?"

My heart went ice-cold when I heard my name being used. No one was supposed to know me here.

I looked up, and it was a large man with a beard. He was smiling at me.

"Of course it is!" He said. "Oh, you don't recognize me. It's probably the beard. I'm Max Danforth. I was the one who talked your folks into moving on

out here! But whenever I come by, you're always at school."

I was slowly placing the voice. He used to work with Greg, my dad, a couple of years ago. I think.

"Don't you look pretty!" He said. "You look lovely in your Sunday finest."

My parents weren't supposed to know about this. They weren't supposed to know I was coming to a church in a fancy dress. I might have been trembling. "Please don't tell anyone," I said, in a small voice. "Please?"

"What happens at our church stays at our church," Mr. Reed said. "It's a matter between our god and the followers. Isn't that right, Max?"

"Yes, yes, I understand," the big man said, patting Mr. Reed on the shoulder. "I didn't mean to... Forget I even said anything."

He went on inside the church. I could feel Harmony's hand in my back, keeping me steady through it all. "It's fine. Don't worry," she said, in a whisper.

Hearing her say that made me feel a lot better. Still, it became clear to me that I'd have to tell Greg and Feather something. A reckoning is coming. I just had no idea how to explain myself.

The service was less than an hour, and I followed Harmony's advice and just did as everyone else did. Sitting, standing, listening, singing. Or at least lip syncing. The scene inside the church was unlike anything I'd ever experienced is was like a combination of a crowd at a basketball game but with songs, interrupted by long speeches. It wasn't a very big crowd, maybe about twenty to thirty people, and Harmony and I were the only kids, but they sure were enjoying themselves. I was sad when it all came to an end.

Once again, Mr. Reed waited by the door as he thanked everyone for coming. He put everything away, turned out the lights and locked the door as we left.

With the euphoria of the service wearing off, I was too frightened to think of anything else but what might happen to me if word got to my parents. If I had kept a clearer head, I would have asked about the thing that looks like a trailer again. It still wasn't clear to me why they were worshipping such a strange thing. We even sang a song to "The Redeemer Mafu," which is what they called it.

It was very strange — however, everyone seemed to be having a good time anyway. In retrospect, most of them were men. Not a lot of women came. I guess that's just normal for this part of the country.

Once we got back to the Reed's place, I looked out the window at the barn to see if my parents were doing anything odd. Greg was just hammering a nail into the side of the barn, and Feather was painting a plank of wood. They didn't even look concerned.

"Maybe you can change and help us out with dinner?" Asked Mrs. Reed. So I went up with Harmony to get out of our dresses. I didn't want to take it off. I

liked myself in this dress. Despite how much of a hassle it was, I did get a lot of compliments. I felt special in that dress.

Harmony walked into the room in her bra, corset and panties, and showed me how to hang up the dress so it wouldn't wrinkle, which was nice of her. She even tightened the straps on my corset, which was always welcome.

"Did you enjoy church?" She asked me.

I had to admit that I did. It wasn't quite what I had expected. My parents had always told me that church was for the "misguided" and for "zealots." But all I felt was love and warmth. I asked if I could come again next Sunday.

"That sounds like a wonderful idea," she replied. "But I have to know, are you ready to accept Mafu into your heart?"

"I'm not sure," I replied. I really did want to be a part of everything. I wanted a place to belong. "But I'd like to try."

"That's all I can ask. Now, let's get you dressed." She stood in front of me, her breasts cradled in a soft cotton bra that looked so comfortable. As I buttoned up the shirt, Harmony put my hair up in a bun, and then tightened the ribbon around my neck.

"You like that, don't you?" She said, obviously reading my expression. I nodded.

"Say it," she whispered. "You love the tightness."

"I love the tightness," I said.

"You love the softness."

"I love the softness."

"You love being properly dressed."

"I love being properly dressed."

"You want more."

"I want more," I said, and she was right. I did. "Please tell me there's more."

DAY 26



KEN'S STORY

Well, um, so they gave us our assignments, since that whole orientation thing is over and stuff. I'm majorly ticked off, too. Instead of being a teacher, and teaching, I have to be an assistant. That's not the worst part. I have to be a coaching assistant. A coaching assistant! What do I know about coaching? So dumb.

They said they didn't have an open teaching position right now, but they'd have me doing classwork soon. This wasn't what I had in mind when I signed up for this. Three weeks of orientation to be a coach? This sucks.

My wife is totally pissed off, too. She says she's got a lot of pressure on her at work to turn up some evidence against the school, and I need to try harder. I mean, I'm doing everything I can! It's not like I can just tell them to make me a full teacher. This is so incredibly unfair.

Not only is she on me about producing evidence for her dumb case, but she says I'm not acting like myself. Who died and made her Queen? Even if I was acting 'differently' (and I'm not) where does she get off telling me how to behave? I'm an adult! I can do what I want.

Right now, she's so bent out of shape, I had to move out of our bedroom into the guest room. One night she started

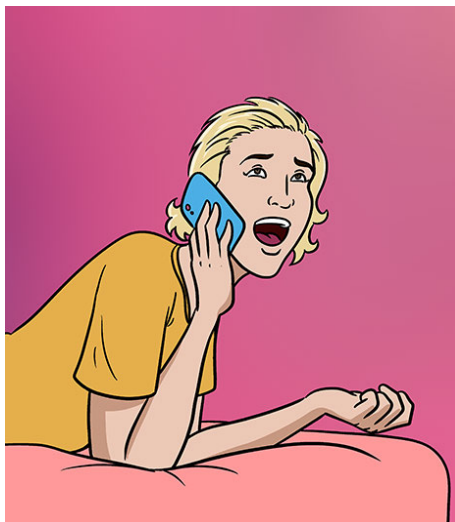


complaining about me growing my hair out, shaving my body, and how I looked too feminine. Feminine? Only a real guy who's confident in his masculinity can grow out their hair like this. She wouldn't stop complaining about it, so I went into the other bedroom. It was decorated for her mother when she used to visit, so it's got lace curtains and pink wallpaper, which isn't normally my thing, but after living with it for a while, it's cool. I just have to get away from Nora. I can't take any more!

So now that I'm a "coaching assistant" they gave me a whole new set of audio courses to listen to. They said it was because I was previously listening to academic material, and now I need to know the sports material. Since when is cheerleading a sport? Did I mention I'm an assistant cheerleading coach? Yeah, they assigned me to that. A bunch of screaming, airhead teenage girls. Just what I need.

Now that I have my own space in the guest room, I hang out there most of the time listening to the audio courses and eating my nutrition bars. I've already lost twenty pounds! Plus, in here, I can talk to the girls on the squad in private. Part of my job is to make sure they have their homework done and check that everyone knows when practice is and what they'll be doing. They sure do gossip a lot. I'm glad I have the unlimited texting plan on my phone, otherwise I'd probably be broke by now.

Anyway, I had to go get some clothes n' stuff for coaching, since I don't have much athletic wear. The girls made some great suggestions, and I can't wait to show off these super cute shorts and tank tops and see what they think. Yeah, I still hate teenagers, but at least they have good taste in clothes.



DAY 29



ALBERT'S STORY

Before I even begin, let me say that my sister is the one to blame for this current predicament. If she simply had the good sense she had been gifted by the gods, she would have realized that I was stealing her boyfriend from her, and that it was a wake-up call for her life. This facade of intellectualism she had been playing at needed to end there and then, or else she would lose all she valued dear. I had demonstrated to her, beyond any reproach, that she was well out of her element and natural way of life.

That, unfortunately, was almost a month ago.

If anything, when we next spoke, she was even more resolute. She was incensed at my endeavor to educate her, but that wasn't the emotion I had been trying to unleash. I had to conclude that my attempt had an undesired effect on the situation. Possibly the opposite effect of what I had intended.

My parents were livid, understandably so, and wanted a full explanation. It was all based on proven mythology. I tried to relate to them of the Fable of the Two Sisters, as written by Daironomous the Elder, but they didn't even let me get through chapter three before they cut me off. For the first time in my life, I found myself "grounded" in the proverbial sense. Of course, locking me in my room was fruitless, as that was a normal day for me. Instead, they took my books away from me. Well, they tried to, but I have a lot of books. They just made me promise not to touch them.

Alyssa was dismissive of my many attempts to calm the waters. She simply didn't want anything to do with me. It was also clear that the story of my performance had been told and retold to my friends, who wouldn't speak to me, and just stared at me as if I were a paramecium under a 20x lens. That ensured that she was spending even more time studying and fraternizing with people I used to call my comrades.

Because of this, logically, I went to school the next day in Alyssa's clothes.

Obviously, I was going to need to do a more thorough job of teaching the lesson she needed to learn. She was going to see, up close, the mistake she was making. I was going to show her the glamour, the friendships and the popularity she no longer enjoyed. Even if I had to risk everything to do it.

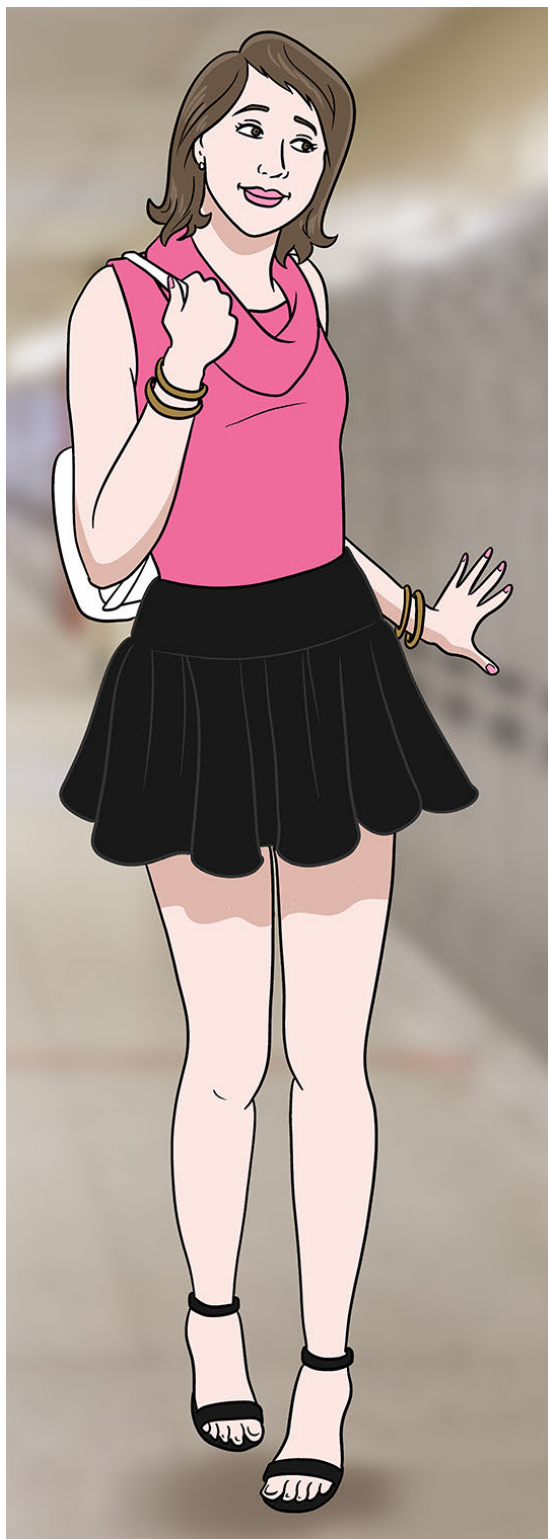
It was quite the operation, let me tell you, to leave the house in my usual garb and change clothes, do my hair, my face and still arrive before the first bell.

Yes, this was a recipe for ridicule, and my fellow students did not restrain themselves that morning to make fun of me, but truthfully, without any real friends anymore, it was of little loss to me, personally.

I made a show of it, striding down the main hallway, in a short black skirt and pink cowl-necked tank top, my three-inch heels loudly clacking on the linoleum. Needless to say, everyone looked. Even Alyssa. I opened my locker and immediately began to re-examine my makeup, just as my sister used to do every morning.

As I could hear the buzz in the hall, Alyssa approached me. Just before she was about to speak, in a display of serendipitous timing, Lance appeared by my side and wrapped his arm around me possessively, just like he did with the real Alyssa every morning. He kissed me on the cheek. "Hey babe," he said. "You look hot."

"Thanks, babe," I replied in a convincing imitation of my sister's chirpy voice. Lance had done exactly what I had paid him to do. I told him what I expected, wrote him another script, and paid him what he demanded. I was going to have to find a way to replace the \$1000 from my college fund, but I considered it money well spent. For a Cro-Magnon, he was a surprisingly convincing



actor.

The look of shock in my sister's eyes was alone worth the money. The disgust I could see in her expression when she looked at me was just the first of many emotions I hoped to unlock in her, ultimately to lift the veil in her mind and embrace being her true self once more. Yes, dear sister, I was stealing everything you value. Dare you try to stop me? Dare! Dare!

It was about twenty minutes later that the vice principal showed up, grabbed me by the arm and hauled me to the school office. This was expected, of course. Crosley High was not known for its high degree of tolerance for student mischief.

Upon arrival, I was given a look by the school nurse. She feared I was suffering from a heat stroke or something, so they had me go through a full physical. I was given a few shots, blood drawn, and later given a box full of nutrition bars I was supposed to eat. Two a day, they said. They taste like strawberries, and I was told it was mandatory. Delightful.

Once I was done with that, I was interrogated, as the vice principal, school counsellor and the principal himself demanded to know what I was up to.

Fortunately for me, they were much more receptive to my plan than my parents were. Once I explained the circumstances and my motivation, they merely scolded me for not telling them what I was up to. The principal was most helpful, actually. I was quite impressed with his ability to see the genius in my idea.

It wasn't long before my records were altered to "Allie" instead of "Albert," and I signed me up for Alyssa's classes. Most helpful. This way, I was sure Alyssa would not be able to avoid me. I suppose adults can be handy from time to time.

In my first class of the day, I delighted in watching Alyssa peer over in my direction, seething. You could tell, just by the look on her face, she was regretting her choices in life. The rest of the students were muttering the most foul of words at me, making the unkindest of comments. I was not about to give up on accomplishing my task, though, no matter how badly they treated me.

The morning announcements came over the audio system, and just as they usually did, they practically put the class to sleep. Like most mornings, I was dozing off, unable to hear the full announcement, however. The gentleman who does the announcement has a particularly mesmerizing voice, in my observation. I was stirred awake by the school theme song at the end.

There were no more difficulties for the rest of the day. In fact, things were going swimmingly well. The students stopped harassing me, the teachers called me Allie, and my sister was still angry. All in all, a very good day.

When Lance dropped me off at home that afternoon, though, my parents were as angry as one could imagine. They had been informed of my activities at some point during the day, and had been called into the school for a confer-

ence. For future reference, there is nothing that will make a parent more furious than having to go to a school conference.

Needless to say, I had to change my clothes immediately.

Alyssa, much to her credit, and much to my consternation, took it all in stride. She was still not talking to me, but she went about her business without any dramatics. Once she went into her room, I didn't see her until dinner, when she microwaved some food and carried it back to her quarters. She didn't so much as glance at me. Truly, she was a formidable opponent.

My resolve might have been diminished, just in the slightest, but when I heard from Regan and Blair, the wind was back in my sails. Regan and Blair are — well, *were*, I suppose — Alyssa's best friends. Or, as the girls referred to themselves, "best besties."

They conference-called me on my phone, and after thinking they had the wrong number, made it clear it was me they wanted to talk to. Were they going to make fun of me? Shockingly, no. They couldn't have been more enthusiastic about what I was doing. They said they dearly missed their "best bestie" and wanted the old Alyssa back, praising me for what I was doing. Oh, and they had tips — things I needed to do to perfect my disguise like using a purse, matching my lipstick to my outfit, choosing shoes, and all sorts of valuable information. We all resolved that we should get together tomorrow before class and try to make my costume even more on point. Or, as the girls put it, "clean."

I hadn't been completely sure until that moment but I was absolutely going to do this again. With her friends on my side, and the school helping me, I knew Alyssa had no idea the kind of pressure I could apply. I texted Lance and let him know that we were on for another day, and sent him the appropriate reimbursement.

As I began saying, though, that was a month ago.

Now, I'll be the first to say that spending an entire month dressed as a girl is not what one might call healthy. I can certainly see the argument that I should have called this off a long time ago, and just accepted defeat. Despite my persistent efforts, Alyssa has remained steadfast, and it doesn't appear that she is losing her confidence in any way.

Then my parents decided to have a word with me. One night, they came into my room while I was experimenting with my hair, and they closed the door behind them. "As far as I'm concerned, I don't even have a son!" Father said to me. "I have a lovely daughter instead."

"You look just like your grandmother at that age," Mother gushed. "We want you to know, you are our child, and we'll support you no matter what you want to do."

"I'm going to double your allowance," Father added. "It's a little more expensive to be a girl than it is a boy."

“And please, if you ever need to talk, we’re there for you,” Mother concluded. “Sometimes life is harder for a girl.”

My parents had had what one might call a change of heart on the matter of my dressing up. Ever since they had come back from that conference at school, they seemed almost enthusiastic about my change in appearance. They both call me “Allie,” and Mother has been insisting on taking me with her whenever she goes shopping. Father calls me “Angel Face” and “Princess” from time to time.

Whatever they said at school must have been quite convincing. Now, I’m somewhat concerned that my folks won’t let me become their son again when this is all over. While they’re on my side, though, I can pressure Alyssa more than ever.

At home, I can wear her clothes all the time now. I can act as girlishly as I want to, showing her how her carefree teenage life is so much more of a match for her diminished intellect and temperamental nature. I make sure to cry, laugh and emote whenever I can, wether watching TV or on the phone with Regan and Blair. I even throw random tantrums just like she used to. I hope it reminds her of the rushes of emotions she used to feel. Not that it’s hard for me. For some reason, I’ve been feeling quite unstable at times, my mood swinging violently. Blair even called me a “drama queen” the other day.

Still, there was little progress to report in scaring some sense into Alyssa. It seemed as if I was going to have to formulate my most devious plan ever to snap Alyssa of her malady.

DAY 31



RIVER'S STORY

When I woke up this morning, I thought to myself that it was crazy that a whole month had passed sine I'd started at Crosley High. It only seemed like a few days.

As I woke, I looked down at myself, with a T-shirt and satiny bloomer panties on, and I had to remember how and why I was dressed this way.

I used to be repulsed by this kind of thing. I remember when I was about twelve and I found a website that had all sort of pictures of men in silk panties and wearing dresses. I could barely even look at the pictures, and felt my stomach turn. I made sure that my browser history was erased because I didn't want anyone to think I had any interest in this kind of depravity.

Now I was wearing the same kind of clothes, and it didn't feel like I was doing anything wrong. It felt right and proper.

I can't say why I feel this way. I'm not sure why the idea of wearing feminine things revulsed me once and now delights me. It wasn't sexual, though. I just felt like a whole person in women's clothes. In fact, I can't even really say why I should feel ashamed at al about it. Sometimes I think I should just tell Feather and Greg, but I don't think they'd be able to handle it.

I dressed and headed over to Harmony's house just as I always did. They expected me every morning, and Harmony was eating a piece of toast as I let myself inside.

"Hey, River!" She said as I walked past her in the kitchen.

"Mornin'" I replied as I went up the stairs.

I was feeling good today, so I chose a full skirt for school. My favorite white high-neck, high-collar blouse was back from the laundry, and I matched it with the skirt, which was black and ankle-length. I used a thin black tie around my neck to keep it nice and tight.

I passed by Mrs. Reed as I headed out of my room. "Good morning!" She said.

"Good morning!" I said, walking carefully my in a pair of black booties. I wasn't used to a heel.

I returned downstairs and sat in my usual seat at the breakfast table. Without even being asked, Harmony stood up and began to arrange my hair.

My hair had always been long, as Feather had always told me she wanted me

to keep long hair. She promised I could cut it when I moved out of the house. Recently, it had begun to grow like crazy.

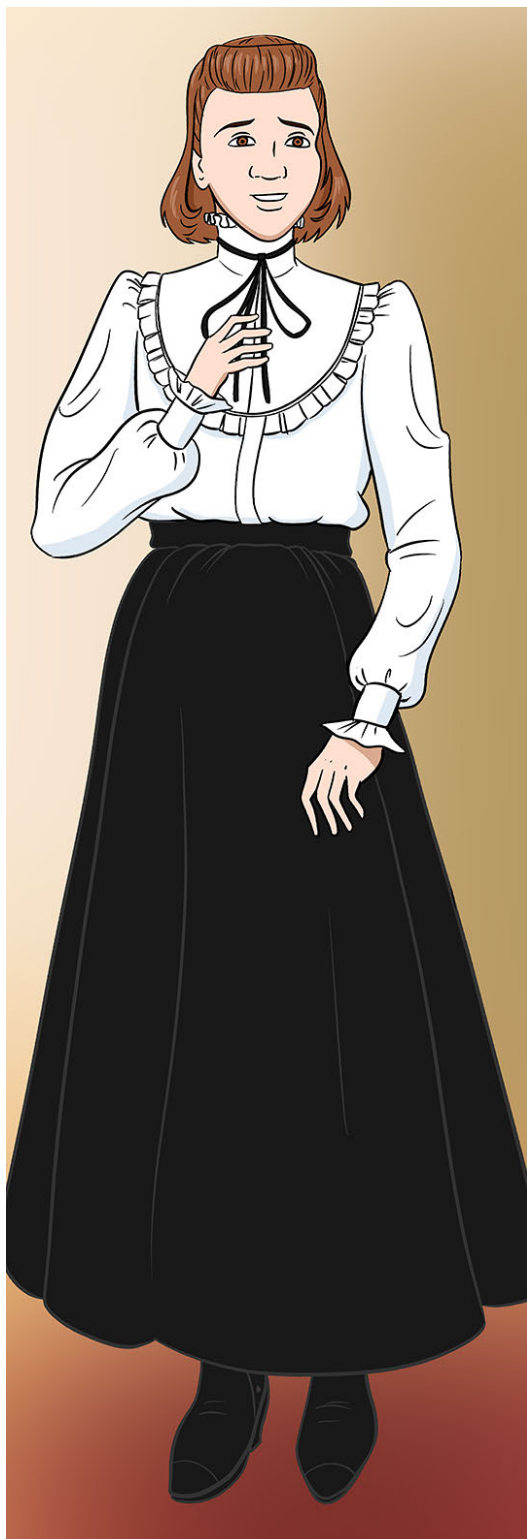
“It happens in this part of the country,” Harmony had explained to me. “People just have fast-growing hair around these parts.”

The nutrition bar from the school nurse had been laid out on a plate for me, and I started to snack on it. They were a little dry, but the strawberry filling was so good, it didn’t matter. It’s a good thing I like them, as I was told I have to eat them all year long.

School today was the usual, as I helped Mrs. Scripperton clean out the wastebaskets and wash down the chalkboard before class, and met up with Harmony at lunch. She was gathering her notes for student council. She’s the student body president! I didn’t even know. Anyway, she invited me along, as her “special assistant.” I immediately agreed.

They held the meetings after school, and it was going to be tomorrow. It sounded like so much fun!

She said she’d help me pick a special outfit for me to wear, and I couldn’t wait to see what she had in mind.



DAY 32

I was seated behind Harmony at the council meeting, knees together, hands in my lap, sitting primly. I was absolutely beside myself with excitement. Student council was so interesting. The way they followed so many procedures, cited so many bylaws and followed such a rigid structure.

Everybody followed a plan. They didn't just make stuff up as they went along, like buying barn and then realizing they had nowhere to sleep until they moved half way across the country. No, planning was important. Very important.

I was dressed in a smart blue outfit, with a white blouse, white tights, and a long blue skirt and short blue blazer with a cameo keeping my high neck tight. My corset kept me seated perfectly upright.

Harmony was amazing as the student body president. She ran the meeting like precision clockwork, but with a smile. She read out a list of things the administration wanted to change, and the student reps voted for each item, passing them unanimously. She brought forth a new proposal from the Superintendent that students caught trespassing in the area around the Superintendent's office would be suspended from classes immediately and sent to the audio study room for a week of correctional instruction. It passed unanimously without any debate.

When we took a break, I made sure that Harmony had a fresh water bottle before she even asked for it. She thanked me, and it was the best feeling in the world.

She said she had to talk privately to the Vice Principal, so that meant I had to leave her to her business.

I found a spare desk in a nearby empty classroom, and opened up my tablet to watch something to kill time. There was a baseball game on, but that wasn't really very interesting. I also had a bunch of comedy shows I loved, but I couldn't keep watching it for very long.

The actors were making such vulgar jokes and swearing so much that I had to turn it off. I used to love these shows, but it was so offensive. Why hadn't I noticed it before?

I tried all the shows I had downloaded, but none of it was any good. They were so mean-spirited and profane. Finally, I found a live stream of C-Span, showing a congressional hearing on the budget. This was just my kind of thing. I watched as the legislators spoke and made motions, voted and quoted parliamentary procedure. The men in their suits looked so in charge and powerful. I was enraptured.

When I came back to the Reed house, I changed out of the jacket and skirt and into a more casual patchwork skirt Mrs. Reed had just finished for me. It

was so adorable. All the women of the Reed family were amazing dressmakers, and I felt so lucky to have them constantly surprising me with new clothes. Maybe, if I'm lucky, Harmony will give me a few lessons.

She also had a new hairband for me with a fabric dandelion stitched into it. I loved the new look so much, I took a pic of myself. I posted it to my facebook without even thinking about it.

Later that night, worried that it might cause people to ask questions, I logged back on and meant to delete the pic. Instead, I found myself deleting all my old photos. My parents would never see it, as they hated technology, but my new friends would. This was me, now. There was no need to hide it.

Maybe I'm just trying to cause trouble for myself. Maybe I secretly want Greg and Feather to find out. Maybe some twisted part of me wants to see the disappointment, anger and frustration in their eyes. It's probably a stupid thing for me to do.

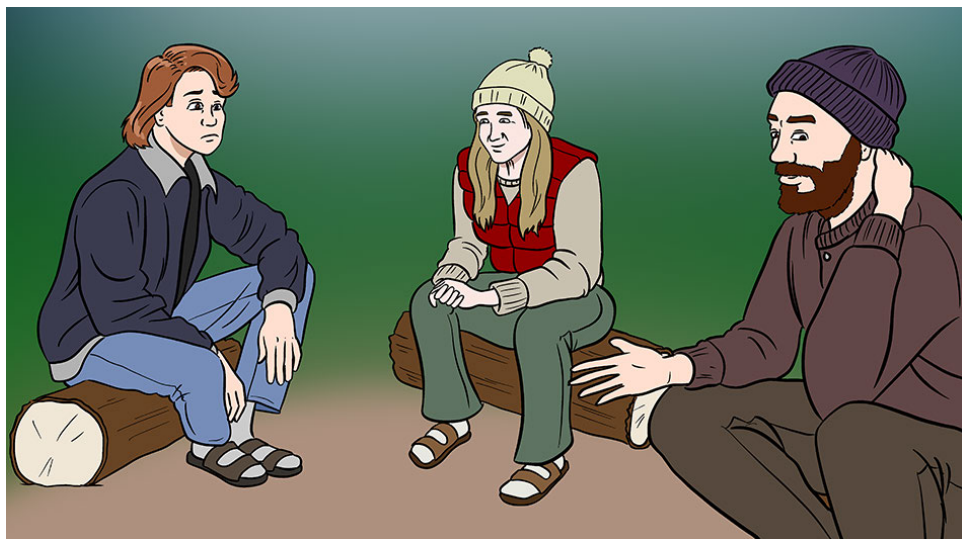
Still, I'm not changing it back.

It was that night, as I sat eating dinner with my parents, that they told be that the barn wasn't going to be ready as they had promised. In fact, they didn't know if it was going to be done this year.

"It's a lot more work than we thought," Greg said, casually, as if it were nothing.

Somehow, I wasn't surprised.

I didn't want to live in a tent for two more months, and it was going to start to snow soon. Greg and Feather gave me the same speech they had given me when they told me we wee moving out here, that it was an adventure, not a hardship. That's when I guess I kinda lost my temper and got really angry with



them.

I asked if I could talk to the Reeds to see if I could stay with them instead. My parents didn't like the idea, but I begged and pleaded with them to at least let me ask.

JAMARCUS' STORY

I am totally freaking out. There's something wrong. Really wrong. Two weeks ago, I was just putting on my jeans, my jeans I've had for a couple of years, and I can't fit into them. I'm tugging, I'm pulling, but nothing works. So I'm thinking, they shrunk, right? It happens.

I had to ask my dad for fifty bucks to go get a new pair that would fit me. I go get them, wear them for a week, and then all the sudden, they don't fit either. I'm all, WTF? I lost like ten pounds this month, I should be able to fit in them really easy. I had to beg Dad for another fifty, got another pair, and then *they* stop fitting after another week.

So I tell my dad about it, and that something is really wrong. We have to do something. We have to get a new washer and dryer, because it keeps messing around with my clothes.

He says we can't afford it, so we'll just have to make do. "Boy, you ain't got no sense for money," he said. "Look at me, I lost even more weight than you, and I can still fit in my pants."

I wanted to tell him



they they weren't his pants, but my mother's. He even looked a little like my late mother, as he was letting his hair grow out and shaved his face clean. He'd beat my ass if I talked back, though.

So, now I'm wearing stretch pants to school. They're the only thing that fits me, and I know if they shrink I'll still be able to wear them. They're lame, and I'm embarrassed, but at least no one gives me any shit about it.

School is so boring. Every day it's the same thing. I get up, brush my hair out until it's as straight as I can get it and sweep the bangs back, out of my eyes. I get dressed, get my backpack, head for the kitchen and make myself a latté.

That was why we couldn't get a new washer and dryer, I guess. Dad had blown about five hundred bucks on a high-end espresso machine for the kitchen.

Ever since he had that taste of pumpkin spice latté, he had become just as hooked as I was. He was all in, and made himself at least three a day from the new machine. At least he doesn't get on my case about my habit any more, now that he has his own problems.

Anyway, I grab my cup full of steaming hot awesome, and head for school where things never change. Every day is like this. Go to my locker, dump my books, try to find Jeff and Kevin, exchange homework answers, and then kill time until classes start. You go to home room, that same dumb morning announcement music plays, I fall asleep like always, and then wake up right when it finishes. Every day.

I still had this problem with Mr. Dawson, that I needed to find a girlfriend to prove to him I wasn't some kind of anti-social psycho, and I still wasn't getting anywhere with that. This school has too many boys in it. I wonder if it's normal to only have about fifty girls in a school of six hundred students?

So once and a while, even as I get all the same stupid assignments and listen to the same stupid lectures, I try to see if I can hit on a girl.

"Hey, your name's Jenna, right?" I asked Jenna Listerman, a dope black haired girl who takes my first period homeroom.

"You know it is, Jamarcus," Jenna said. "Oh my God, are you trying to hit on me?"

I told her I wasn't, but she had that look on her face like she just didn't believe a thing I said. Either that or she was just ignoring everything I said.

As I pushed my bangs back, I tried again. "We've been taking this class for a while, and I really like your style," I said.

Her expression didn't even change. "You are! You're trying to hit on me."

Again, I told her I wasn't, but I guess she could tell or something, and just kept frowning.

Why can't girls just play along? I mean, even if she knows what I'm doing, why can't she just let me do this without making me feel like a jerk?

"I'm just making conversation baby," I said, blowing my hair out of my face.

"Here, hold still," she says. She takes a little pink plastic clip from her hair out and then clips it into mine. "That'll help."

Sure enough, it kept my dumb bangs in place. I didn't even realize how much of a nuisance it was.

"Thanks," I said. "So do you wanna..."

"God, no. Just because I give a guy a barrette doesn't mean I like them, okay?"

She turned away and didn't look at me for the rest of class.

I meet up with Jeff and Kevin for lunch every day, who still give me feel like crap about my lattés. You'd figure after a month, they'd get tired of it, but they haven't.

I've tried to tease them about the nutrition bars the school is making them eat every day for lunch, but they don't even care. I stopped even bringing it up.

Then I spend the afternoon in my audio class, where a bunch of guys and I just sit around listening to audio recordings for two hours a day. I hate listening to the recordings. they make me dizzy and I never seem to remember what they were trying to teach me. All I ever want to do after taking off those headphones is to have another latté anyway.

So when it comes to getting a girlfriend, after getting shot down, I don't know, like twenty times, there was this one girl who was kinda interested in me. Her name is Karen Schimmers, and we have the same chemistry class. She's not anything special, but you know, she's okay. I mean, a guy could do worse. Especially in this school.

We were paired up to do a lab thing, testing acids and bases with this color paper stuff, and we got to talking.

"I like your barrette," she said. Ever since Jenna showed me how convenient they were, I guess I had started wearing them regularly, especially because I was growing my hair out for a change of pace. I have a whole drawer full of them. Plain ones, butterfly ones, ladybug ones, jeweled ones... I kind of collect them.

"Thanks," I replied. She didn't like chemistry that much, Karen said, and neither did I, so we had that much in common. We had no idea what to do for this assignment, so we just made up our lab answers and kept talking.

She had just broken up with her boyfriend, and was looking for someone to talk to. You don't need to tell me that this was my big opening, so I suggested we go do something together. Maybe get some coffee?

Karen wasn't that into it, I could tell, but she agreed to meet up at a coffee

place in the downtown area.

I was early, and was already done with my second pumpkin spice latté when she came in. She had done herself up for a date, and I felt kind of guilty, just wearing my black stretch pants and a green sweatshirt. I guess I didn't realize how much this meant to her. "You look nice," I said.

"And you look... Thirsty," she replied, seeing my empty two cups.

"Do you want something to drink?" I asked.

"I've never been in a coffee place before," she said. "I wouldn't know what to get."

"I'll take care of it," I said. I wanted to be the big man and buy my date something, so I headed over to the counter.

"Nice swish, homo," a guy said as I walked by his table.

He was probably in his thirties and looked kinda pissed off, so I just ignored him. I don't know why people were messing with me so much lately. I mean, every time I was downtown or walking along the street, people were giving me the strangest looks.

Anyway, I get to the counter and order Karen the best thing they make, in the biggest size, with the most whipped cream, and bring it back to her.

"Pumpkin spice?" She asked me when she tasted it. She looked like she had just tasted a shoe. How could anyone not like pumpkin spice?



I offered to get something else, but she told me not to. So it was already off to a bad start, and it just got worse from there.

When I pulled up in the driveway and tried to get back into the house without being noticed, my dad stopped me. He was curled up on the sofa watching *Riverdale*, sipping his latté, and made me tell him everything.

I had to watch him bite his lip and giggle as I told him all about my date. I didn't want to say anything, but he demanded I spill all the details. I noticed he had an open bottle of nail polish next to him, so he was probably high on the fumes.

Well, I told him that Karen really just wanted to unload about her ex, and was just going on and on about how they were meant to be together, but he couldn't see it.

She even started to cry, which, of course, made me start crying. I mean I can totally sympathize with her, if a guy treated me like her ex treated her, I'd be just as distraught as she was.

I suggested that maybe this wasn't a good time, and maybe we should try again another night, and if I could just get her number...

Then she shuts me down and runs out, crying. Everyone looks at me like I caused it. Black kid makes white girl cry. You know someone's gonna call the cops. I grab my latté (and hers, too, no sense in letting it go to waste) and the the fuck outta there.

As I'm telling Dad all this, he's just covering his mouth, trying not to laugh. No look of concern, no fatherly advice. He just rolls back, kicking his legs in the air and giggles.

"Are you wearing my pants?" I asked him. It looked like he was wearing a pair of my black stretch pants. He hadn't even asked. He just took them.

"We share things in this family," he said back with a stern look on his face. Then he giggled again. "Homie can't even get a girl's phone number!"

I headed for the kitchen as he was still snickering at me. Thanks for nothing, Dad. He's acting as childish as my friends.

So it hasn't been the best of months. At this rate, I in't never gonna get me a girlfriend. My boring, everyday existence was interrupted by random moments of terror and I got laughed at for it.

I grabbed a quart of cookie dough ice cream from the freezer and headed for my room. I had a weird impulse to spend the rest of my night with some desert therapy and a sappy romantic movie. I grabbed a box of tissues for crying.

DAY 34



DAMIEN'S STORY

When I got up this morning, I faced my usual dilemma: what could I wear today that was going to blow people's tiny little minds? And then I remembered: That wasn't the plan today.

I told Alexa to play my Sisters of Mercy playlist to give me strength. I had to force myself to do it, cringing every second, as I dressed in a pair of skinny jeans, a button-down yellow flannel and my new jean jacket. So let me explain why I have to this fucking bullshit.

It's been a pretty nasty month being in this drama class. We keep getting promises from Mr. Valdemar that he's going to spend more time with us three on Gothic Literature, but I don't know. He seems far more interested in his drama students than us. We barely even have stuff to do every day.

This last week, for instance, we didn't even get reading assignments. The drama students are going over their lines for their play, and since they don't have enough people, Gossamer, Renwick and me are filling in, reading lines.

I'm reading lines for "Molly" who is an aspiring singer. I tried to give it my own take, but I was told I was ruining it for everyone and had to do it "normal." Maybe Molly has the voice of a demon spawn from hell, did you ever think of that? Show some open minds. And why am I reading the part of a girl, anyway? I guess that happens when your school has so many dudes in it. Renwick has to do a girl part, too, so at least he can't give me shit about it.

Class just sucks. Every day when I get there, I'm surrounded by drama geeks. They all dress from the bargain bin at Target, in bright colors and trendy styles, like they live inside a sit-com. They all have that super-happy expression on their faces and are always smiling. This isn't a fucking episode of Glee. Don't they understand that fate will mercilessly grind them into blood and bone dust? Life is just pain and suffering until you are mercifully wiped from existence. They wouldn't be so chipper and happy if they just opened their eyes to reality.

What made it even worse is the way they look at me. I asked Daisy about it, and she said good actors study character and make notes so they can call on them later. It's seriously weird, the way they keep their eyes on me and whisper back and forth. I'd say I felt like a walking freak show, but the again, *I want to be a walking freak show*. That's my thing.

Last Monday was the worst day so far, though. We were given an assignment

to put together a “scrapbook” of characters’ memories and their likes and dislikes, to “flesh them out.” Gossamer didn’t want anything to do with it, and got into a big argument, but Mr. Valdemar said it was a major part of our grade, and he couldn’t excuse us three from the assignment.

I just cut up some magazines and slapped them in a notebook. Like I care who “Molly” is. I handed it in on Friday, and Mr. Valdemar just gave it right back to me. “At least make it look like you’re trying,” he said.

It’s a year-long project, and we turn it in periodically to prove we’re making progress. It’s not due for months. Still, Mr. Valdemar wanted to see progress, and asked to see a “better effort” by Monday. So I had to spend all of my weekend trying to put together a scrapbook for “Molly.” I mean, come on.

I asked my mom to do it, because, you know, I’m not a girl. She said no.

So now I gotta think about this shit. I suppose it isn’t really that hard. This Molly girl is just another sheeple throwing themselves into the gnashing teeth of hell with a stupid smile on their face.

She grew up with Disney shit, and believed it. She wanted to be a princess in a castle, waiting for some brain-donor prince to claim her. She’s gotta be into all kinds of girly stuff, with trips to the mall, slumber parties, makeovers, salon visits, you name it. She likes glitter, pink, and puppies.

I’m already thinking too much about it. Anyway, I clipped out pics of all this stuff, put them in a glittery purple scrapbook that my Mom got for the assignment, and handed that in. Mr. Valdemar said it was “exactly what I wanted to see.”

Great. And someone might have thought: but Damien, this is a total overreaction, it was just a lousy scrapbook, why so much angst?

But the scrapbook wasn’t all.

The next thing was that all the drama students needed to “live” their character to bring them into the real world, and see life from their perspective. We were assigned to select a wardrobe for our characters from the school costuming department... And wear it. To school. For a week.

Understand why I’m so pissed off?

Renwick and I were not going to do it. Just no. We gave the teacher and everyone else hell. Mr. Valdemar said we didn’t have to pick out dresses or anything, that we just had to “re-conceive” of what a male version of our characters would dress like. We still weren’t going to do it, but got voted down by the rest of the class. Even Gossamer voted against us, as she laughed. She was no help.

I wasn’t even a drama student. I just wanted to read cool books. Now I gotta do this bullshit.

There was no way you were going to get me to pick out a dumb normie outfit, so I asked Daisy to do it. I mean, she’s all about that kind of shit, so who bet-

ter?

"I won't bother you for the rest of the year," I told her.

"Listen here, mister!" Daisy said. "I don't cotton to cheaters! Don't make me have to tell on you!"

I had to bug her for two days, but she finally caved and agreed to do it.

That's how I wound up wearing the shittiest clothes I have ever, or will ever wear, in this life and in the next. I had on the skinniest, tightest jeans, converses, a bright purple mock turtleneck shirt and a light blue denim jacket with the sleeves rolled up and cuffed. The jacket had a bunch patches on it, like googly eyes and flowers. Flowers! I wasn't allowed to wear my face stuff, either, so no black makeup. I looked like a fuckin' asshole.

Weird thing was, even though I knew I was going to catch hell from everyone, no one even seemed to care. I was in my stupid homeroom class, and no one even glanced at me. Have I been working so hard to become the living embodiment of a demon God, only to have people not even notice when I look like the other blue pill addicts in this school?

I gotta step it up.

Renwick and I, when we ate our lunch of nutrition bars in the corner of the lunchroom, couldn't believe that no one had even mentioned how we were dressed. I mean, when some kid comes in with a new haircut or something, we all make fun of them. It's not that big a school. We all know what everyone is supposed to look like.

Renwick did point out that he did get some stares and whispers when he first came in the school, and I guess I got a few, too. But after homeroom got started, and the morning announcements were over, no one even cared.

"It was like we were just the same as every other student," Renwick said. "I've never been so spooked."

"I know what you mean," I replied. "I just wanna quit this class."

Renwick agreed, but like me, our parents would kill us if we did. At this point, it would be an F on our record. We had to at least pass it.

Still, the last few weeks had been hell. Every day it felt like my find was fighting me. It felt like my soul was being consumed by a scaly hundred-eyed beast gnawing at it, bite by bite, shredding it into a bloody pulp, licking it up and then shitting it back into my body.

I was having dreams I couldn't explain, where I was finding myself in a bleak burnt-out world of death and everlasting blackness, just the way I liked it. But then all of the sudden, I saw myself at a birthday party, blowing out candles, surrounded by smiling people and colorful balloons and gifts wrapped in ribbons. It was awful. Sometimes I'm on a family trip to the grand canyon and we're singing songs in the car, and I'm leading them. It's agony like I've never

known. Every night, it's getting worse. This morning, I woke up looking for my birthday presents, before reality came back to me. I don't know how long I can bear this torture.

"Check this dude out," Renwick said, looking in the direction of a guy who had just entered the cafeteria. At least, I think it was a guy.

"What about him?" He looked like he might have been a student, and he was wearing a "Crosley Cheerleading" shirt, but then again, he could have been a coach. He was wearing a whistle, he didn't quite look our age, and I don't think I'd seen him before. I'm not totally sure, but I don't think they even have guys on the cheerleading team.

"Dude looks so gay," Renwick said. We both watched as he paraded across the room, swinging his hips back and forth, his wrists limp, looking extremely homo and not even trying to hide it. "Shoot me if I ever act like that in public."

"I'll shoot you anyway," I told him. I looked closer. This guy waved to the cheerleading squad and skipped over to go sit with them. "Are you sure that's a dude?"

"Fuck if I can tell." Renwick replied. "You ever notice how many students here look and act like fags?"

"You're just *now* noticing that?" I said. What a stupid fucker. Then I saw the



so-called power couple of the school looking to find a table. “And here comes the skin walkers.”

“Lance and Alyssa,” Renwick verified.

I call them skin walkers because they're just human skin wrapped around a skeleton. Cut them open and a thousand cockroaches would come scurrying out.

“Wait. Are you sure that's Alyssa?” Ren asked.

“Of course it's Alyssa. She and Lance do everything together. Wherever she lurks, he won't be slithering far behind.”

“I don't know. That doesn't look, you know, *exactly* like her. It looks more like her brother.”

“Dude,” I said, “Who else would it be?”

“Yeeeah... I don't know, man. Is her hair different? Maybe she's put on some weight.”

“Alyssa? She'd chew off her arm rather than allow herself to gain an ounce.”

“I know. Still, there's something different about her.”

“Looks the same to me,” I said. “A harpy cloaked in disguise, with her talons dug into her prey. A putrid, fetid mass of hair and makeup in the semblance of a person. A void that will be on a life-long quest to stuff itself with sex and money to never be filled. A succubus that drains life of all energy, leaving their victim a dried up and shriveled husk.”





“Still, I’d do her,” Renwick said.

“Oh yeah, in a hot second,” I agreed.

Gossamer didn’t help my mood when she sat down next to us and couldn’t stop laughing. “Oh my Goddess! You two look like you’re trying to start a nineties boy band. Ren is the sensitive one, and Damien is the brash one.”

She looked just as awful as we did, but even dressed in Old Navy shit, she had still managed to make it look dangerous. I was so jealous.

“Shut up,” Renwick said, turning away, embarrassed. That wasn’t like him. Usually, he’s just as direct as I am. But to be honest, I felt embarrassed, too. I had spent so much time and effort to be the manifestation of evil I knew I was inside, but with one dumb assignment, I caved in.

It didn’t help that Gossamer gave me hell for wearing the same clothes again the next day, especially since the assignment was over. Now that I’ve been wearing the outfit for the whole week, Gossamer is really on our case about it. She’s threatening to break up with Renwick, because he’s still coming to school in these lame outfits, just like I am.

Why? Well, it’s not like I have a choice. I really don’t. The day after that dumb costume assignment, I got back into my usual stuff, but it didn’t fit me. The pants were too long, the shirt hung on me like a curtain, and my shoes wouldn’t stay on. How does that happen? Maybe my body was compressed in the tight

clothes. Maybe I just sweated off pounds as I wore it. How the hell do I know? It just happened, and now I had to deal with it. Maybe I should have just rolled up the pant legs and dealt with it, but for some reason, I couldn't stand the idea of wearing clothes that didn't fit me.

The costume was all I had that I felt comfortable in, so that was my only choice. I had to wear it to school the next day, and then the day after that. My parents said they weren't going into town anytime soon, so there was nothing else I could do. Gossamer really needed to back off, and let me explain, but she just wouldn't stop.

Ren and I were both really pissed off about it, so it wasn't like she was helping by rubbing our noses in it.

Anyway, after five days, I came up with an idea. I had just finished listening to our audio courses, and this crazy idea jumped into my mind. I told Renwick about it, too. Why not turn our problem into our advantage? Maybe we could conduct a little experiment. Maybe we should just keep dressing all normal-like and see what happens.

I know it sounds weird, especially for a demonspawn like me, but think about it. We would keep wearing the clothes, be all nice and friendly, and over time, all these sheeple accept us for being one of them. Then, when they least suspect it, we do something big and show them how easy it is to infiltrate their ranks. We show them that they can't trust anyone. We make them think that anyone they know could be an agent of darkness in disguise. They won't trust anyone ever again! We'll show them what true horror really is.

Renwick likes the idea, too. I think we'll give it a shot. Of course, it'll be difficult, fooling kids into thinking we're just normal pod-people, with normal Pepsi-swilling lives, but it'll be so worth it.

So the next thing is to normalize me. I'm going with my dad to pick up some new clothes tomorrow. I've convinced him that I just want to go to the Gap and that I'm "over" being a goth. Mom suggested getting a haircut, and I think I'll do that, too. Nothing I can't undo, but just enough to look like everyone else. This is going to be so good. I can't wait.

THE SCHOOL OFFICE

School Secretary Edith Blithe sat at the old, charmingly out of date console the school used as an intercom system. It was metal, with a giant streamlined chrome microphone resting on the desktop of the cabinet-sized device. Edith was adjusting some dials and knobs that looked like they were meant to control a hydroelectric power plant. Giant plugs came out of the console connected to thick fabric-covered wires that were unlabeled, and hadn't been touched in

decades.

She looked at the master console's clock, the one that all other school clocks were coordinated with, and saw it click over to 7:43, the time for the morning announcements. She pressed "play" on the reel-to-reel tape player and it began to play the school fight song.

At least it was supposed to be the school fight song. It was so old that its sound was muffled and indistinct, but it was certainly loud, so it would grab everyone's attention.

That was Principal Weinhurst's cue, as he appeared from his office, clutching some notes, and sat down in front of the microphone. Edith stood aside, and waited patiently.

The music died down and the Principal began. "It is Wednesday the 23rd of October, I'm Principal Weinhurst, and these are your morning announcements." If one were to listen carefully, they could hear his voice echoing in the nearby corridors of the school. If one listened even closer, they would hear the groans of apathy from the collective students and staff. "The Girls Basketball Team is playing against Parkerton tonight in the gym at six o'clock, admission is eight dollars, free for students. Today is International Siblings Day, so if you have a brother or sister attending the school today, be sure to show them their due respect."

The man had a droning voice, put no enthusiasm in his speech and tended to make awkward pauses in the middle of sentences. Still, that didn't really account for why students consistently found themselves waking up after the announcements were over.

The phone rang at Edith's desk, as it always seemed to do whenever they were doing announcements, and she strode out of the control room, over to her desk, and answered. Before she could even ask who it was, she said "I obey," and had let the receiver drop. Her eyes glazed over. Unaware, she tapped the illuminated button on her phone that linked the call into the intercom system.

At the moment she did, every head in every class dropped unconscious.

Edith didn't know it, but she did this every single day. Every morning, she answered the same call, a call from the Superintendent's office, and then sent the audio over the intercom. She would then wait approximately twenty eight seconds, hang up the phone, depress the button to the intercom, then shake her head, and wonder what it was that she had come over to her desk to do. Then she'd shrug and return to the control room.

"...Lunchroom special is chicken burgers. They are a dollar thirty nine," the principal spoke into the mic never knowing that his voice hadn't been heard for the last half minute. He added his tagline, "That concludes today's announcements. Have a super day for learning, and learn super things."

Edith dove in and flipped the off switch quickly. The Principal stood up,

fussed with his tie and pushed the chair back under the counter. “I have a lot of reports to get through before noon,” he said to his faithful secretary. “No disturbances unless the school is on fire, all right?”

“Yes sir,” Edith said. She went back to her desk and got down to doing some typing.

DAY 35



RIVER'S STORY

For the first time in forever, I woke up today in a bed. A proper bed. My feet weren't freezing, my face didn't feel like it was frostbitten, I didn't have to check for insect bites and I could sit up in bed and not worry about hitting the tent pole and having it crash down on me.

I hadn't wasted any time asking the Reeds if I could stay with them, and I don't know who was happier when they said yes — me or Harmony.

They wasted no time in bringing a spare bed from the basement into the room where my clothes were already kept.

My parents even came over and had a long talk, apologizing for me, and the Reeds reassured them that I was "a delight" and "already like one of the family," and more than welcome to stay "as long as was necessary."

As I woke, I also realized that I was headed directly for school from here, and there was no need to dress up in those old clothes anymore. I could start my day in a skirt.

But before then, I was treated to true decadence: a hot water shower. Harmony encouraged me to use her body wash and shampoo, which I did. They smelled just like her.

When I was done, she helped me get my corset back on and then she blow-dried my hair and set it with bobby pins. My hair looked even better when it was pinned up.

I dressed in front of the mirror looking like I was a born student. A proper student. Properly dressed in proper fashion. I had a white ruffled taffeta blouse and heather grey pleated slacks with a pair of leather slip-on wedges. I loved my look, even it felt like it was straight out of the 1980's.

"Snap out of it!" Harmony called to me. I grabbed my books and apologized, blushing profusely.

We sat down to breakfast, and Mr. Reed asked me to lead in saying grace. I had never done it before, and I almost screwed it up, but Harmony said I was just perfect. I felt amazing. I was so happy just be a part of something.

In the back of Mr. Reed's car, I watched my parents in the cold, wet grass huddled around a lantern. They were so silly. Silly people doing silly things.

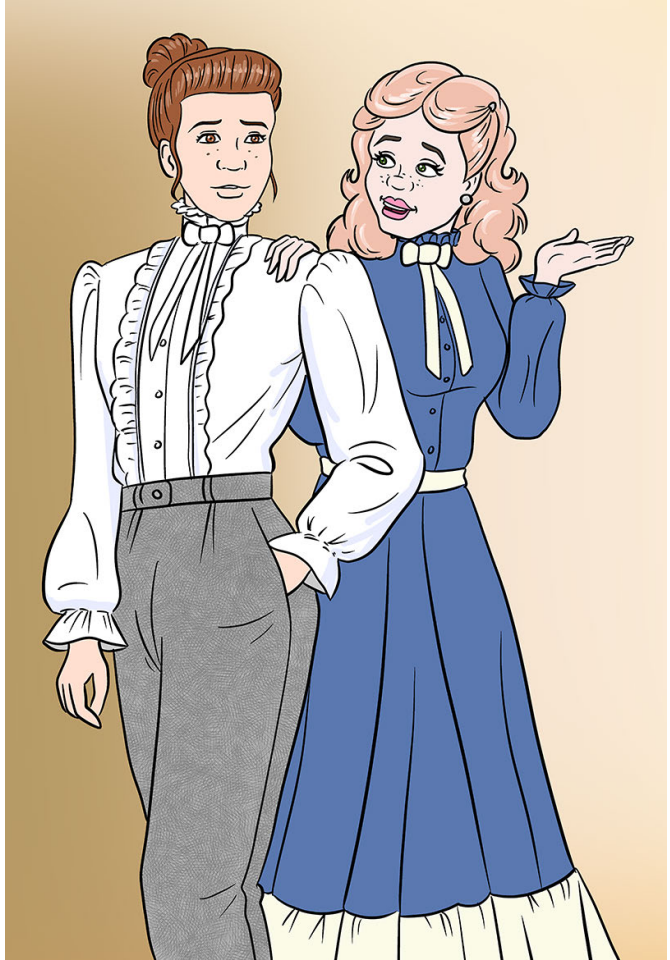
I found myself shivering at the thought of ever waking up in the cold air again.

That wasn't for me. I wasn't the camping type. I adjusted the vent from the car heater and bathed in its warmth.

We pulled up at school. "Thank you, Daddy," Harmony said, bending forward over the front seat, hugging her father around the shoulders and kissing him on the cheek.

"Thank you, sir," I said, doing the same. I almost apologized for being so familiar with him, but it felt okay. He knew I was just being grateful.

Harmony took my hand and we walked into school together. It felt like a new start for me. It felt like the way I wanted my life to be.



DAY 42



LYLE BRUNSON

I was just tryin' to get some shoelaces from Mr. Tempkins' office when he started talking. I hate talking to Mr. Tempkins. He's usually the wood shop teacher, and I do take wood shop, but he's also the wrestling coach, and I'm on the wrestling team. So I guess if my life goal was to avoid talking to him, I was failing mighty hard at it, yes sir.

The thing was, he kept the super-long laces for our wrestling shoes in his office, so there wasn't any way to avoid him when you needed new ones.

So he's laying back in his chair, feet up on his desk, flipping through his tablet when he says, "Would you look at that."

Jasper, like an idiot, responded before I could stop him. "What?" He replied. Immediately, he looked at me and shrugged, knowing too late he had fallen into the trap.

Mr. Tempkins then tells us about this new wrestler at Oakmill High. They're our next opponent, coming up tonight. He shows us that this wrestler hasn't lost a match all year, and is setting some kind of state record for going undefeated.

How? Well, when Mr. Tempkins showed us a picture, it just looked like some scrawny fella who probably had trouble opening a can of pop, let alone bein' a decent wrestler.

"That guy can't be any good," Jasper said.

"Wins every tiiiime," Mr. Tempkins said. "Most of his opponents even forrrr-feit. The match never even takes place."

"So what you reckon his secret is?" I asked. I was actually curious to know. Had he found some kind of secret technique? Psyching out his opponent in some way?

"He's on the girls' team," Mr. Tempkins replied, sitting up and taking his feet off his desk. "And no girl wants to wrastle with 'im."

"How did he get on the girls' team?" Jasper asked. I should have grabbed him by his singlet and dragged him out of there, if we ever wanted to end this good-for-nothin' conversation.

"Modern times," Mr. Tempkins said. "Modern times. See, the state says that any boy that eyyyye-dent-if-eyes as a fee-e-male, they can compeeete as one."

He draws out his words so long, you're afraid a bird might roost in his open mouth.

"So all a boy has to do," he continued, "is to say he eyyyye-dent-if-eyes as fee-male, and he's wrastlin' girls."

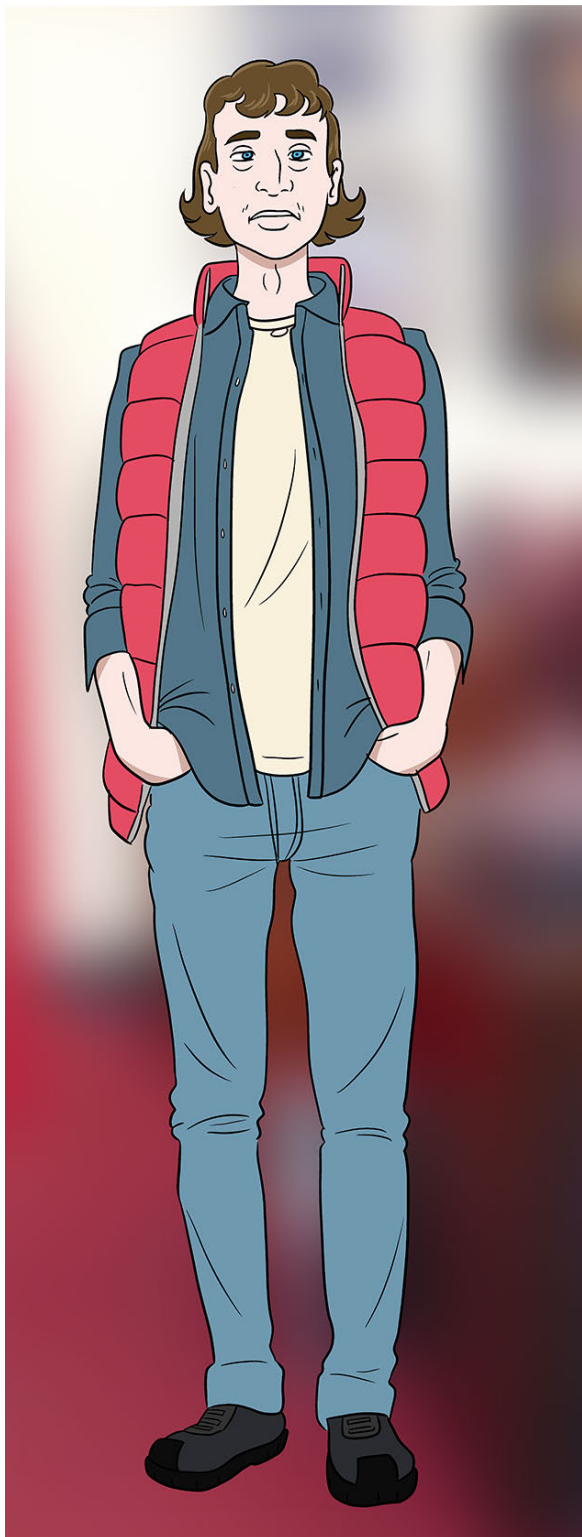
We asked him what he meant by "identifying" as a girl, and as he explained it, all you had to do was just say you "felt" like you were a female instead of male, and the state had to let you wrestle as a girl.

I should have seen this coming a mile away, but I had to ask the dumbest question I think I ever done asked. "Why are you telling us?"

So a couple hours later, I was wrestling in the 126 pound category — girls division.

I guess Mr. Tempkins had decided that he needed someone who could defeat this "female identifying" wrestler, and I was the one he had chosen. When we got to the gym, I had to register with the match referees that I was "gender dysphoric" or something and that I wanted to compete as a girl. I had to fill out a form.

Now, I was under the impression that something like a boy saying they're a dang-



blamed girl would cause a bit of a ruckus. Paint me red and call me a mailbox, because that didn't happen.

I begged coach to not do this to me, but he said I was a "natural" for it. I know I'm not that big or have a lot of muscles, and my mullet is kinda on the long side, but I ain't no girl!

I wound up having to wrestle that scrawny kid from Oakmill, and defeated him without even trying 5-0. Everyone else forfeited, and I got five points for the team. So yeah, good for the team and all, but I ain't never been so embarrassed.

Momma even came out of the stands, spittin' hellfire, and wanted to know what in tarnation was going on. Mr. Tempkins had to run for his life as she chased her into the locker rooms, swingin' her purse.

You show 'em, Momma. I'd have laughed, watching her go after him, but I had a bigger problem.

"Miss Brunson? Miss Lyle Brunson?" One of the officials said to me as they got in my face.

"Yeah, I'm, uh, 'miss' Lyle Brunson," I said. "Who wants to know?"

"Nothing too complicated, Miss Brunson, I just wanted to make sure that you have your papers in order. You'll want to have your doctor send proof of your intent for gender reassignment to the state educational board by the end of the month, that's all."

Ho-lee shit.

DAY 45



DAMIEN'S STORY

Six weeks! How has it been six weeks? All right, here's what's been happening. Renwick and I are very happy with the progress we've made. We both look like total sell-outs.

He's taken to wearing torn blue jeans, collared button-down shirts and a t-shirt over it. My usual look was a brightly-colored t-shirt, skinny jeans, and my trusty jean jacket. We might as well be on a Teen Nick afternoon show, we look so clean and average. I even had my long hair cut. Well, not really cut, so much as fashioned into a wavy style that makes me look truly ordinary.

Ren and I had a plan. We were going to go after the intercom system. He and I had both volunteered to help out with cleaning the office up, something only the truly dweeby students did. We knew that if we could swap out the school fight song — for, I don't know, some Killing Joke or something — we'd begin to sew the seeds of our ultimate reveal. They'd know that someone had sabotaged the office, but how could such nice, well-behaved ordinary students like Ashleigh and Molly do it?

Oh, I should explain that. The drama class has a “challenge” going on, where we're supposed to use everyone's character names. Every student is supposed to only use the name of their character in the play, and refer to everyone else as their character name, so it's second nature to us. Each time someone screws up, they have to let the class vote on a punishment for them, but the last one to get eliminated will win a prize. So for the time being, I was “Molly” and Renwick was “Ashleigh.” Since we were really trying to sell our new squeaky clean image, we couldn't risk getting caught. We only use those names now, and who knows, maybe one of us wins?

Anyway, we knew what our first goal was. Infiltration. So we had to clean the office fourteen times before we finally had our opportunity. That old bat Mrs. Blithe left us alone, and we got to the announcement room. It's this crazy old thing with knobs and dials. Problem was, we didn't realize how old it was. They were using this ancient tape machine from forever ago. There was no slot for an SD card, USB port or anything to download my mp3, and that meant we had to think of something else to do.

Renwick had an idea to pour some water on it, but that wouldn't really prove anything, and we'd just get the cops called on us, probably. I noticed that an audio jack was plugged in, attached to a wire that ran up the ceiling, out into



the office, and connected to the avocado green phone on Mrs. Blithe's desk. You have to think that this was a way for a phone call to go into the intercom system. That meant, if I could figure it out, I could be anywhere, make a call, and have it broadcast to the entire school.

I checked it out, and it was hooked up to one particular number. I programmed it into my phone, and then started thinking of ways I could use this. By the time Mrs. Blithe came back, we were just minding our own business, cleaning the office just like the nice, safe kids we appeared to be. Little did she know. I was going to blow everybody's mind.

DAY 47



LYLE'S STORY

"Well, that, I didn't know," Mr. Tempkins said when I saw him today in his office. I had told him about this doctor's requirement, and he shrugged. "News to me."

I wanted to yank that man's tongue out by the root. I spent all night shooting cans and kicking tires in the front yard, I was so angry. Mr. Tempkins was the one who had talked me into doing this — begged me practically — and now he claimed he didn't know I was going to have to "prove" that I "wanted" to be a girl?

Not just that, but if I didn't come through with proof, I'd be suspended for life from state athletics. I'm a starting pitcher for the baseball team. I'm the starting defensive back on the football team. I can't get suspended from sports. It's all I gots. Ever since my pappy left us, I ain't got nothing but sports. Now I could lose it all for doing what me coach told me to do?

Momma was a like a crazed animal all night. She nearly ran us off the road three times drivin' home. I had to promise her that this was all part of a plan, and it helped us win the meet. It was the first time I'd won my weight class all year.

All she wanted to know was who's idea it was and why I shamed her in front of the whole town. I didn't wanna pass the blame, but it really wasn't my idea.

"Now just hold on," Mr. Tempkins said. "Just hold on." I had gotten in Coach's face, and I must have put a bit of a fright in him. Who would blame me? "I got an answer, okay?"

He then takes a seat at his desk and opens up a drawer. He pulls out a box and puts it on his desk.

"Nutrition bars?" I asked. His answer to my problems was nutrition bars? Honest to God, it was.

"Not just any nutrition bars. These is *special*. My cousin... He's not what you call, the brightest bulb, you follow?" He lowered his voice so he couldn't be heard from outside the office. "Boy is dumber than a bag of hammers. A few years ago, he starts smokin' the hashish. Hooked on it. So whenever he tries to get a job he flunks the medical test."

"What's the point?" Jasper asked from behind me.

"Well, then he heard from his cousin's cousin, on his mother's ex husbands'

side of the family, that by takin' these little beauties, you can fool any test."

I picked on up and looked at it. "They don't look that special."

"Oh, but they is!" Mr. Tempkins said. "Don't go spreadin' this around none, but whenever one of my boys flunks a drug test, I just have them eat these, once a day, and when they come back for the second chance test, they can fool it."

"What's it to me?" I asked him.

"Take these, and you'll fool any doctor into thinking that you're a gen-u-ine girl."

That made no blasted sense to me. I may be a farm boy, but I'm no hayseed. There ain't never been nothing on God's green Earth that can do such a thing.

"Trust me," he said. "Eat these, one every day, and you can get the doctor to confirm you're on your way to becoming a fee-male. That way you stay on the team, and everything works out."

"What's gonna happen if I eat 'em?" I asked.

"Nothin' that ain't gonna fix itself," he said. "Don't worry. And you might want to keep eating them just in case they want to do another test. Sometimes those people at state try and trick 'ya."

Turns out, they ain't that bad. Strawberry flavored. I can probably eat one a day for a while. I'll just have to wait and see what happens, I guess.

Mr. Tempkins better be right about this, that's all I gotta say. He doesn't want to cross my Momma. She's already cleared a spot on the clothesline to hang his tanned hide.

DAY 48



RIVER'S STORY

It turned out that today was a big day for me. I was transferred out of Mrs. Scripperton's homeroom class into the class that Harmony took. I was told that I had "passed every test" and could join the rest of the students. I wasn't sure what that meant, but I was so happy to be with Harmony and meet all her friends.

There was Cadence, a cute blond girl who liked my neck tie, and Daisy, a nice energetic girl who just came to the school last year, and Sienna, a hippie girl who kind of reminded me of my mom. She seemed kind of spacey. Nice, but spacey. They all agreed it was nice to have more "representation" in class.

Oh, and Derek. Derek is a tall guy with short dark hair, blue eyes like the reflection of the moon in a pool of water, and shoulders that could carry the weight of the world. I immediately liked Derek.

After class it was lunch time, and Derek was sitting all by himself. Harmony practically pushed me to go sit with him.

"Hi," was all I could really say to him. For some reason, I was all nervous just to talk.

"Hey, have a seat!" He said. He was such a nice guy.

I sat opposite him at the lunch table, keeping my hands in my lap. I could barely even look him in the eyes, he was so handsome.

"So, tell me about yourself," He said. "You were really quiet in class."

"Sorry," I said, embarrassed.

"Harmony said you were staying at her place. Are you guys related?"

"No," I said, almost too quietly to be heard. I wasn't about to explain the circumstances, I didn't want anyone from school knowing about my parents.

"You're really cute, anyone ever tell you that?"

I could feel the heat radiating from my cheeks. "Thank you."

"I like you. I think you're very sweet."

"Really?" I replied, raising my head. My heart was pounding.

"So, you like sports?" It was such a sudden question. I thought about it. I had always been into football, and I played basketball at my last high school. "Of course, I don't really think someone like you would like sports much," Derek

continued. "You're so delicate."

Sports really did cause a lot of injuries. I hadn't had any, but it was true that I could get hurt. Maybe badly. Sometimes, people get hurt for life playing sports. This might be a good opportunity to get away from them.

"No, I don't like sports," I said. I immediately felt better, as I resigned myself never to do any real athletics anymore. It already felt like it was the right decision.

"That's cool," he said. *He said I was cool!* "And I bet you have real strong opinions on politics. Most people do, I guess." I could tell by the look on his face that he was not looking forward to my answer.

"I'm not really that political," I said. Oh, my parents would hate me for answering like that. They were so liberal, it was a little alarming sometimes. I mean, they did live in a commune before I was born. That's where they met. I think that means they're communists.

"Really?" Derek said. "I mean, if you and Harmony are such good friends, I'd expect you'd kind of have the same way of thinking. She and her family are real deep red conservatives. Mr. Reed always preaches about voting Republican."

"Well," I had to think for a moment. "I guess I'm a conservative, then," I said. I had been to four church services with Mr. Reed, and I always agreed with what he said. Harmony, too. We did think a lot alike, and if they were conservative Republicans, then I guess I was one as well.

"Did Harmony call you River?" He asked me. "That's kind of a weird name. Do people make fun of you because of your name?"

I immediately felt uncomfortable. *River*. It was the one thing I hadn't been able to hide about my family. I felt like the ground should swallow me up and take me all the way down.

"No," I said, almost at a whisper. I wasn't really replying to Derek. I was telling myself that I was my own person. I wasn't going to let a name chosen by a couple of dirty hippies ruin my life. "She was just kidding," I said. "That's not my name."

"Let me guess, then," Derek said. "Since you and Harmony are so much alike... I'd guess your name is... Melody."

"You're right!" I said with a smile. "You must be like a psychic or something!" I liked having Derek pick out my name for me. I felt excited to no longer have to answer to River. I especially liked how proud and impressed with himself Derek looked. I had made him feel so good.

"You gotta be kidding? That's really your name?"

"Yes!" I said. "You're amazing!"

"Aw, it's nothing. Just a lucky guess."

"It's like you already know me," I said.

"Yeah, I was thinking the same thing," Derek said. "You wanna go do something after school, Melody?"

"Yes!" I replied, way too energetically.

All too soon, the bell rang and we had to part to go to class. I could have talked to him for a hundred hours. He's smart, handsome, a great sense of humor... And he likes rules. I was to wear a skirt for our date, I needed to be on time, I had to pay 50% of the gas, and I wasn't allowed to do anything but hold his hand.

I like people who respect rules, who knew how to act properly. I already knew I was going to really like spending an evening with Derek.

"How did it go, Melody?" Harmony asked me as we walked to class. Funny how she already knew my new name.

"Great! I got a date!"

"Wow! I'm so happy for you!" She gushed. "No dilly-dallying after school, okay? We gotta get you home and changed and do your hair."

So like I said, it was a big day for me. New friends, my first date at Crosley, and a new name for me. I was Melody now, and I liked being Melody.

The date was fun, and we went to go see a movie together, and sat one seat apart from each other, as he insisted.

He dropped me back at the Reed house precisely at nine, and let me hug him for a moment before waving good-bye.

Harmony and the rest of the Reeds wanted to know all about it. I told them every detail, and how we were going to go out again



this weekend.

In the past, when I was alone, I'd look up into the night sky and wonder if I was ever going to fall in love. Now that I had, I wondered how I ever could have doubted I'd find someone. I was very much in love with a very wonderful person. His name was Derek.

DAY 61



JAMARCUS' STORY

You wouldn't believe what I've had to put up with in the past two months. First, I had a visit with the school nurse, so you know, no big deal, right? But no. She says that she's worried that my breast growth was going to threaten my health.

And I was all like, 'scuse me lady? *Breasts?* That scared me. It was like I had totally spaced about my breasts. As soon as she pointed them out, it all suddenly came back to me. Of course I had breasts. How could I have forgotten about my breasts? Talk about a brain freeze.

Then she says the added weight might put my balance a bit out of whack, and I needed to take "appropriate measures" to strengthen my legs, especially my ankles. So she said I needed to wear boots for the next year "at the minimum" as my body adjusted. She said she didn't want me to wear anything but boots from now on.

That was no big deal, I mean, I love boots. They go so great with everything. No, my big problem was trying to find a bra. I guess I must have lost them all in the laundry or something, because I couldn't find one in the entire house! Whack.

That was just the beginning, though. It wasn't too long after that when I got that rash on my face. It wasn't a medical crisis or anything, but I had just recently started using a new body wash the nurse had given me, so I assumed that was the problem, but the nurse said it was some kind of virus going around some of the guys in school. The rash wasn't red, instead it was turning my skin pinkish and pale. It wasn't obvious or anything, and you really had to look closely to see it, but it was definitely happening. So she gave me a flesh-colored cream to cover my face that was supposed to fix the problem until my skin cleared up.

I asked if that was why my facial hair was getting thinner, and some of my black hair was growing in lighter and straighter.

"Sure," she said. "That sounds like it might be true."

Now I had to use this cream on my face every day. I thought the cream was way too light for me, but it wasn't like I had a choice. So when I covered my skin with this stuff, it washes everything out, and you have to re-draw your face again, to just look human. I had to color my lips, eyes, cheeks and brows care-



fully.

I was given a few instructional videos to watch, and that kinda sent me down a rabbit hole. I became totally obsessed with doing my face perfectly. I couldn't get enough help. Then I found these makeup videos on youtube, and they worked even better than the ones the nurse had given me. I guess what I was doing was a lot like using makeup, which is convenient.

So now I get up a couple of hours early so I can get my face perfect. Jeff and Kevin are always texting me asking for tips, but I'm not telling them anything. It's hard work to look this good, and I'm not giving up my secrets.

Yeah, Jeff and Kevin were also having problems like I was. Skin problems, breasts, clothes not fitting and that sort of stuff. Jeff was always complaining about his voice changing, and Kevin was wining about shrinking or something, saying he was now shorter than five-seven. I mean, I had the same problems, but you didn't hear me complaining all the time about it. After a while, though, they finally shut up and just accepted it. I mean, thank God — they were driving me nuts.

If I was going to complain about something, I would have probably complained about my hair. It's a total mess. I have to do a lot of work on it to just look normal. I've used just about every kind of hair relaxer to get my kinky hair straight, but it's something I have to do every morning. Sometimes I think I should just let it be natural again, but I really like the way straighter hair looks on me. When it got long enough to reach my shoulders, brushing it, ironing it and conditioning it straight was taking forever, so I thought: I should go to a stylist and have them take care of it?

My stylist's name is Maribelle, and she is such a sweetie. She is so good. When I asked her to make it straighter so I didn't have to mess with it, she did her best, but it's tough with kinky hair. Now it's got this nice, gentle wave to it. It's neat and perfect, and it looks *a-may-zing*. Maribelle pointed out that I had new hair growing in that was blonde instead of black. I asked her if she'd ever seen

that before, and she asked me if I went to Crosley High. I don't know what that had to do with it, but she said it was to be expected if I went to Crosley.

Anyway, turns out, this blonde hair that's growing in is absolutely my color. I would have never thought I'd look good with long blond hair. But I do. I really do.

So no more complaining about my hair. Enough about that — I haven't even mentioned what my dad did.

One day, about four days ago, I get to school, and I see my dad. In my home room. In class, sitting at a desk just like any other student.

I wish I was kidding. So I go up to him, and I'm all, what the heck, Dad? He just looks at me, like he's always been in my class, and it's no big deal that he's pretending to be a student.

He was wearing my headphones, the ones the school gave me for my audio lessons. "Don't get us in trouble," he said to me, like I was the crazy one. "And call me Madison."

I tried to keep talking to him, but he put the headphones back on and ignored me. I look around and everyone was staring at us. I didn't want to make a scene, so I asked the teacher if I could go get Mr. Dawson real quick, and he was all like, why?

Like he had to ask?

So I go run to Mr. Dawson's office. I don't know why I went to him, because I probably should have gone to the principal or something, but anyway, I explained what was happening in my class.

For the first time, in, I don't know, ever, he actually looked shocked and concerned. He got right up out of his seat and ran to my classroom. "Has he been dressing oddly?" He asked me as he ran.

"I guess, I don't know. Maybe?" I replied. He dressed in black stretch pants, boots and a sweatshirts, just like normal people do.

"Has he been behaving differently in any way?" Mr. Dawson asked as we turned a corner.

"Not really," I said. "Oh, he did quit his job last month and he just said he wants to be called Madison."

"Fuck!" Mr. Dawson yelled. I so wanted to tell on him for swearing.

He didn't even bother to knock when we got to the classroom. He just barged in and headed over to my dad. The teacher barely even noticed.

Then he turned to me. "Why is he wearing your headphones?" He asked.

I didn't know! Maybe he borrowed them when I was at school or something? I had no idea. He's always stealing my stuff.



“He’s lost so much weight... He’s already shorter... His skin is so much lighter... His hair is already changing!” Mr. Dawson said. Didn’t my dad always have blonde roots? Maybe not? “Jesus Christ, It’s too late! I can’t fix this!”

“Like, what is your *problem*?” Dad asked when he took my headphones off.

“Did you use his pumpkin spice?” Mr. Dawson asked him, pointing at me. “Tell me!”

“We *share* things in our house, you know,” Dad said, proudly.

“God fucking damnit!” Mr. DeBurner shouted, angrily.

Then, it was the weirdest thing. Mr. Dawson said something. I forget what, but then I found myself waking up at my desk. The morning announcements finished playing like it always did, and made me kinda dizzy, like it always did, and my dad was now seated next to my desk, like... He always was?

I don’t know how to explain it, but it felt perfectly normal to have Dad here in class, next to my desk. I knew this wasn’t normal, and he wasn’t supposed to be here, but then again, it *was* normal and he *was* supposed to be there. So weird.

I mean, no one else seemed to have a problem with it. No one was staring at him, or me, and he was just leaning back in his chair, just like I usually did. The

teacher was just going on about whatever teachers talk about.

So I guess I just let it go? I mean, what was I supposed to do? I hadn't dreamed the whole thing with Mr. Dawson, had I? But yeah, I guess I did. So my dad is now my classmate? I guess that's the way it's supposed to be. It's been four days, and it feels more normal every day. So, nbd?

DAY 63



LYLE'S STORY

It's been a busy couple'a weeks since the wrestling meet. It's been jumping like water on a hot skillet.

A couple of days after the meet with Oakmill, I had to go into the city with Momma, and see this doctor lady. She's not a regular doctor, like one who hits your knee with a rubber hammer, but a specialist for something called gender hormone therapy.

I was more confused than a goat on astroturf, but she tells me that my "transition" is coming along well, and that all my blood tests say I'm well on my way to becoming female. Damned if Mr. Tempkins' nutrition bars hadn't done the trick. I got my letter and the doctor sent it off to the state.

Thanks to the bars, I wasn't gonna get in trouble and I wasn't gonna get kicked off the baseball and football teams. Momma didn't seem to understand it none, but I'd be lyin' if I said I understood it my own self. All I knew was that



I didn't have anything to worry about, especially if I kept eating the bars.

The state championships were yesterday, and I took the state title. Didn't even have to wrestle anyone. Seemed like a shame, and I didn't even have to put on my singlet. I stayed in the locker room for the whole match talkin' to Jasper to pass the time.

So now, I'm gonna get a trophy in the school trophy case at school. "Lyle Brunson, State Champion, 126lb. Class, Girl's Division," it's gonna read. I'm kinda caught between proud and humiliated to be honest. I never won anything before, and I'm proud to represent my school. I asked Mr. Tempkins if they'd just take the plaque off of it or something. They said they'd talk about it. They congratulated me during the morning announcements, and I was waiting for someone to smart mouth me about it, but so far, there ain't been no trouble from no one, and it better stay that way.

But then they told me about the awards banquet. Every year after the state meet, all the winners go to a big, fancy dinner where they go up on stage to be honored for their win. I told Mr. Tempkins I couldn't go, that I wouldn't go on stage to take the award for winning a women's title. Why can't they just stick it in the mail? I thought that would be the end of it, but he tells me that I'm the first person from Crosely to win a state title, and the Principal himself said I have to go. If I didn't, he said I might have "trouble" finding an "open spot" on any school teams in the future.

I told Momma that they were threatening me, but she just hollered at me that I was being a wuss. She said that since I had been winning all the matches pretending to be a tranny than I deserve to accept the trophy as a tranny.

She was kind of sour with me, you know. Can't blame her none.

So I guess I'm going to a banquet next week and take an award for being a champion lady wrestler.

DAY 65



RIVER'S STORY

I got up this morning feeling wonderful, the light shone through my window, waking me — and I was already smiling. I had been with Derek last night, and I was still coming down off that cloud. Or was I staying on that cloud? It was our tenth date, and it still felt like our first.

I could still feel his eyes looking me over, stealing glances when he didn't think I was looking. I know, because I was doing the same thing to him.

Harmony came bounding into my room, all excited, and sat on my bed, her nightie fluttering as she did so. "Did you and Derek have a nice time last night?" She asked.

I remembered making myself look pretty for him. I remembered letting him open doors for me, and acting like a proper lady should. I remembered letting him order for me at the restaurant. I remembered him talking about how a real lady should behave and doing exactly what he told me.

"It was *wonderful*," I said, probably sounding as lovesick as I felt.

"I'm so jealous," Harmony said. She sprang up off the bed, and ran out the door. "Tell me more at breakfast!" She said.

I made my bed and got dressed, taking off my camisole top that Harmony had taught me to sew, and changing my panties. Sometimes I felt like I was in a bit of a rut. I really loved wearing my white blouses and long skirts to school every day, but I didn't like the girls thinking I didn't have much variety, so I wore a dress today.

It was a grey dress, in an Edwardian style, with a high ruffled neck and long sleeves with puffy shoulders. The ruffles at the edge of the hem, though, were touching the ground. I had worn this dress just a couple of weeks ago, and it wasn't this long.

"Mrs. Reed?" I asked Harmony's mother as she was making breakfast. I carried the dress in my arms, and I was in my robe. "This is too long. Is there anything I can do?"

She grabbed it from my arms and took it away. "I'll have it fixed lickety-split!" She said. "Just keep stirring the pot, okay?"

I wasn't sure how a dress could get longer, but it wasn't as if I was shrinking, so what other answer was there?

Mr. Reed came in, holding his tablet, and stood it up on the table. I explained that his wife was adjusting my dress, and he nodded.

I filled his coffee for him, and then went back to stirring.

He was watching Fox News, and I spied a little over his shoulder. They were talking about migrants at the border, and how we were facing an invasion of criminals and disease-carrying foreigners, and that it was practically unstoppable. It sounded terrifying.

"You shouldn't be watching this, Melody," Mr. Reed said to me. "You don't want that cute little head of yours to worry about these kinds of things."

"Okay," I said, "but..."

"But nothing! If there was anything to trouble you with, I'll let you know. Otherwise, let those who can handle it, handle it."

He was right. "Yes, sir," I said, relieved not to have to think about these scary times we lived in.

Mrs. Reed returned all too quickly, telling me my dress was all ready on my bed. I handed over the stirring duties to her and returned to my room.

I was sure thankful Harmony had tightened my corset up last night, as the dress was very thin-waisted. I loved the way it gave me curved hips.

"Melody! Are you ready yet?" Harmony asked just as I was doing the collar buttons.

"Just about," I said. I slipped my feet into the heeled black boots that matched the dress perfectly and checked my hair one last time.

It was strange how I seemed to look more and more like Harmony every day. Maybe it's just my subconscious wishing it, but I really do think she and I could be mistaken for siblings. The sprinkle of freckles across my nose was the latest thing I had noticed. Before that, was the way my hair had started to curl, just like hers. Maybe I should be afraid of these kind of changes, but in a way, I enjoyed it. It brought us closer, and that's what I really wanted.

As I turned around, Harmony met me with some lip gloss. "You never wear enough makeup," she said.

"Your dad said..."

"My dad isn't in charge of everything, you know," she interrupted. "He's really good at making man decisions. This is not a man decision."

I giggled. I liked it when Harmony was a little naughty.

Oh, the reason everyone called me Melody now was because Mr. Reed decided that it was time for me to be baptized. So I went through the ceremony in my nice peach colored dress I had made with Harmony and was re-introduced to our congregation as Melody. So in the eyes of God, and the divine Mafu, that's my name. They changed it at school, too, which was nice.

It was a fun ceremony, and it seemed like the whole congregation was there for it. I was not expecting the dunk. I thought the tub was like for washing my hands or something, but no, Mr. Reed speaks some latin or whatever, and then splash! I think I took in gallon of water up my nose.

Harmony couldn't stop laughing. Well, it was funny, I guess.

Afterwards, we went into town to get brunch, still dressed in our church clothes. We went to a regular diner kind of place, and Mr. Reed ordered bacon, ham, sausage and pancakes for all of us.

My parents hadn't made meat for me in years, and had said they were "virtually" vegans. Living with the Reed family was almost the complete opposite. I remember when they served me fried chicken for my first dinner with them, and I said I wasn't allowed to eat meat. The look I got from Mr. Reed frightened me. I immediately took a bite of the chicken.

Honestly, I was kind of sick that night, but now, oh my goodness, am I hooked! Bacon is what they serve in heaven, you know. It's all I want to eat. Steak is so delicious. Mrs. Reed's fried chicken is incredible. I can't get enough meat.

Seriously. I like my meat with a side of meat and some meat on top. Yum!

After eating, Mr. Reed wanted to go get the car washed and tuned up, so he dropped the rest of us off at the mall to do some shopping.

They had this wonderful dress shop where they had the most amazing dresses. They had a lot of modern things that I wasn't crazy about, but they also had a wide variety of Victorian and Edwardian style dresses. I told them they should hire Harmony.

Mrs. Reed, Harmony and myself didn't try anything on, but we all took notes as to what we were going to try to make when we got back.

In fact, we also stopped by a sewing supply store, and I could see Mrs. Reed examining the prices of a new sewing machine. With the three of us, we were already having trouble scheduling time on the one machine they had. She didn't get a new machine, but Harmony and I each carried bags of fabric, thread and sewing patterns out of the store.

When she was talking to Mrs. Reed, the clerk referred to Harmony and me as her "two daughters" and I thought that was kind of funny.

She thought I was a girl! Some people just aren't very observant, I guess.

As we waited for Mr. Reed to pick us up, I took a few more selfies of me in my dress with Harmony, and posted them to Facebook.

While I was logged in, I changed the name. "Melody" fit my pictures so much better. And my status? "Born again."

DAY 72



LYLE'S STORY

What I did, and I'm none too proud, is I dressed up all lady-like and went to the banquet disguised in a dress. That was the only way out for me. This way no one would know it was me, and I could still do what the school wanted me to do.

It was Mr. Tempkins who suggested it, even though he was probably joshing me. The more I thought about it, it seemed like the only thing I could do. I remember that after sitting through my audio learning course, I had made up my mind. I was going to do it.

Jasper helped me pick out something nice from his sister's clothes, as she's away at college, and we combed my hair out so it looked all feminine and the like. Did me some makeup, too.

I asked ahead of time, and found out I didn't have to speak. I also made sure they didn't call me by my Christian name. Jasper suggested I use the name Matilda, and so that's what I done.

You know, I ain't not the sort of man who speaks badly of others, but I have to be honest and say I was not the ugliest girl there. I guess a room half full of female wrestlers isn't exactly a Miss America pageant. In fact, I may have been one of the prettier girls, because I had to rely on Mr. Tempkins to get in between me and at least six other guys.

I can defend myself, of course, but this wasn't the time or place to start nothing. I could barely stand in those dumb high-heeled shoes anyhow.

There was this one guy who tried three times to talk to me, all slick-like. He tried once at our table, another time when I was on stage standing next to him while someone was givin' a speech, and a third time when we took group photos.

Finally, when Mr Tempkins was taking me to his car to drive me back home this same fella pulls up in a 2018 Ferrari 488 Spider. Mother of pearl. I ain't never seen one of those before.

That's your type F142M, with a 670 PS 3.9-liter twin-turbocharged V8 engine, zero to sixty in under three seconds. That's what that is.

See, a lot of folks would tell you not to get too excited over the Spider, since they introduced the F8 Tributo, but it's more like a software upgrade to the ECU, not so much a totally new car. Sure, it's got those upgraded gear ratios,



but that's not so big a thing.

Maybe it's obvious, but I do like me some supercars, and the 488 is my dream car. I never thought I'd ever see one with my own eyes, though.

This city slicker is no more than seventeen, but he claimed that he owns it. I don't care if the car had been stolen from orphans, I was happy as a pig in mud. He said it was okay for me to touch it, which was good, as I'm sure I was already drooling on the paintwork. He even let me sit behind the wheel for a spell. I was so worried I was going to damage somethin', I thought was gonna throw up.

"Say, do you mind drivin' the little lady home?" Mr. Tempkins said to this fellow. "I have to run some errands."

"Delighted," he says.

I didn't know what to say. A half-hour drive in a 488? I never thought to dream somethin' like it. But dressed like I was? He thought I was a girl, and darned if he wasn't trying to pick me up.

"Shall we go?" He said. "I haven't caught your name."

"Matilda," I said, as I ran my hands along the curves of the car.

"I can take the scenic route, if you want me to."

"Yes... Please," I said, batting my eyelashes at him and smiling.

Damn it all, I just wanted one ride in a Ferrari. Don't you judge me 'til you've been in my place.

DAY 77



JAMARCUS' STORY

Every day, I feel like have this strange void in my memory. It always seems to be something to do with Madison. I keep having that same dream where Madison is my dad. Even now, weeks later, I still don't know why I'm dreaming something so messed up. Of course Madison is my sister, I understand that. It just... I don't know, it's just kind of strange in a way. I can't explain it.

I mean, Madison and I have our lockers next to each other, and we have most of our classes together, we drive to school together, and we eat together. Jeff and Kevin never even asked why Madison was doing stuff with us now.

He has lost a ton of weight lately. Not only that, but his hair had grown down to his shoulders and is completely blond. He had no trace of a beard, and I guess he caught the same skin problem I had, because his skin wasn't nearly as dark as it used to be. The nurse had his use the same cream I do. The reason I know all these things because they've been happening to me, too. I wonder if all his body hair fell out, like it did for me? I'm too embarrassed to ask.

Even at home, he only responds to being called Madison, and we do homework together, binge shows together and even sleep together. Yeah, we share a bed now. Why? I'll tell you why.



So this wasn't even the biggest thing that happened in the past few months. I know, one would think that having a new sister would be the biggest thing that could possibly happen. But it wasn't.

Three days ago, Mr. Dawson moved into our house. His wife also moved in — I swear, I thought he was gay for sure — and they took over.

He said that he was taking responsibility for his mistake, whatever that meant. Madison signed over the house and everything else to him, and now he and his wife, I don't even know her name, are living in the master bedroom.

That means Madison is sleeping in our room, now, and we have to share everything. Especially the bathroom! It's *impossible!* I only have two hours to do my face and hair, and now that I have to share it with Madison, it's so unfair. And he keeps stealing all my stuff. And Mrs. Dawson won't do anything about it. I think Madison is her favorite.

DAY 88



LYLE'S STORY

I guess on the ride home from the banquet, I must have said something about going on a date with this fella. His name is Garrett, by the way. Garrett Belmont III.

Anyway, this mornin', more than two weeks later, he texts me to let me know he's coming to pick me up in the Ferrari. If I had known what was gonna happen that night, I would have shut it down right then. But, like a dang blamed fool, I went ahead with it.

As God is my witness, I did not know things were going to turn out the way it did. I don't rightly know what I was thinkin'. I just wanted to see this Ferrari again. I had gone all over the internet, downloadin' pictures, specs, readin' stuff. I was rightly keen on that car. I was even more excited to get a second look at it now that I knew so much about the 488. Goofin' this fella in a dress seemed harmless.

The afternoon of the date, Jasper brought over some stuff to choose from, dresses, shirts, skirts, shoes an' other stuff from his sister's closet. Jasper's sister always did dress a bit fancy, and I had a lot to choose from.

I remember Jasper asking me if I was goin' all funny on him. I just wanted to see that car one more time. That was all. Nothin' more to it.

The first dress made me look fat, so I tried the second, but I looked much to hippy. Finally, I settled on a dark blue dress. It was shorter than it probably should be for a first date, but I wanted him plenty distracted, so he might give me a shot at drivin' that bee-utiful little car.

As I was using some of Momma's hair spray to get my hair just right, Jasper asked me again if I was sure if I wasn't losing it. I told him to knock it off and try to find a darker shade of lipstick for me. I needed something that me me look a little more sultry.

Garrett showed up just in time. Any longer and Momma was going to be back from the market. I hadn't told her what I was up to.

Anyway, he picked me up and we went into the city for something to eat. I'd never been to a classy restaurant with waiters and tablecloths and all that.

I wasn't allowed eat, though, as Garrett kept on talking, going on and on about my eyes, my face, my legs, and who knows what else. Don't make no sense to me none. Spend all this money on food, then don't eat almost none of it.

After that, we got ice cream, and then he drove out to an isolated spot where we wouldn't be bothered. Finally, a chance to really open up that engine and see what it could do.

He said I could drive it if I gave him a kiss, so I figger, what the hell, right? That car makes gear shifts faster than you could ever believe. Faster than double-struck lightning. I'd never used paddle shifting before. Kissin' Garrett was worth it.

Anyways, eventually I had to go back home. We got back to my house later than I thought, and I already knew that sneakin' in past Momma was gonna be trouble dressed as I was. She was gonna catch me. She always does. Before I was gonna get my ass chewed out, I asked Garrett for one last turn behind the wheel. I hadn't even tried the race mode yet, and we had a nice, long empty road to use out front of my house.

So after another kiss, I gunned the engine, revving that puppy up for maximum torque and slammed on the throttle.

That's when my heel got stuck in the pedal. They don't build those for stilettos.



Anyway, long story short, that car bucked the road, hopped over the drainage ditch and tore right through the front window of our house, reducing it to splinters. You never did see such a thing.

The car was okay, thank Jesus.

Oh, and so was Momma. She was in a different room. She was none too pleased with me, what with destroyin' our house and all.

She was so irate, she didn't even care how I was dressed. I guess it didn't matter much now that I had just made us homeless and lost all of our possessions. It might be a while before I'm even able to talk to Momma again.

Garrett offered to put us up for the night in his guest house, which was nice of him, but I'm not so sure I'm gonna survive to morning, with that look in my Momma's eyes.

DAY 92



RIVER'S STORY

I didn't have my alarm clock set this morning, and I woke with the light, hearing the birds chirp outside my window. At first, I panicked that I had missed school, but it was Saturday. Thing is, I hate Saturdays.

It's the day I have to dress up in the old clothes and go spend the day with my parents. During the week, I could say I was busy, and Sunday was church, so Saturday was the only day I had no excuses but to be River, Greg and Feather's kid.

"There he is!" Greg said as I made my way over to the barn. "How are you holdin' up?" He asked. "That Reed family. They aren't giving you any trouble, are they?"

"I'm fine," I said. My parents assumed that living with the Reeds was some kind of hardship for me. It wasn't a hardship. It was a dream come true. Dressing in pretty clothes, living with structure, a roof over my head and no crazy surprises... I loved living with the Reeds, and I was counting the minutes until I could go back.

"Go help Feather with the upstairs," he said, handing me a hammer and a box of nails. "She's trying to fix a wall that's about to collapse."

I took the tool and headed to the barn. It didn't look like much. Parts of the outside had been removed and left in a pile, leaving just the timbers in place. I stepped inside and headed up a ladder, where Feather was timidly tapping a nail into a plank.

"Hey!" She said when I approached. "Welcome to the disaster zone! Try to see if putting some nails over there or something might help. This wall just doesn't want to stay up!"

Feather wasn't exactly a master carpenter. I got to work, crouching down and doing what I was asked to do. Feather just kept tapping away at the one nail she was working on, and didn't look up. No 'hello,' no 'I missed you' — nothing.

I drove a couple of nails into the base of the wall, which didn't do much, but I didn't expect it to. I was tempted to call Derek up so he could help and show us what to do. He would know.

I did about fifteen minutes of work before Feather stopped and left, without explanation. Through the bare timbers of the barn I could see her go talk with

Greg, and then they walked away. I could smell the scent of pot a few minutes later.

Were they serious? They just wanted to have me come and do their work so they could slack off like they always did? They made me sick. They didn't know the meaning of hard work. Let someone else deal with it, that was their mantra.

They were hippies. Lazy, dirty, selfish hippies. Mr. Reed was right. People need to learn self-responsibility. Take some pride in your work! This country was rotting away because of people like them.

That was when my phone vibrated. I picked it up and saw it was a message. It was from Carson. My friend from my old school.

"Guess wat!" He had written.

"?" I replied.

"U R never gonna guess!"

"Guess? Guess what?"

"someone is about to bust your town wide open" he answered

"still confused"

"ur boi is coming!"

Carson's dad was on a business trip to the city, so my old friend had talked him into tagging along.

For a moment, I thought maybe I should tell him I was busy or something. I really don't want to answer questions about why I was living with another family or about my new look.

But I can't do that. I have to be the decent, proper person I know I am. I don't abandon my friends.

"Great!" I wrote back.

DAY 97



DAMIEN'S STORY

So, okay, I kind of gave up on the announcement prank. Blowing everyone's mind? It sounded good at the time, but not anymore. I mean, okay, sure, it'd be cool to pull off something zany like changing the announcement music, but... I just don't think it would be appropriate. And maybe everyone doesn't have my sense of humor? I'll think of something else, I guess. Something more fun.

Thing is, even though I gave up on our kooky prank, Ashleigh hadn't. He was still all-in. He had been working on what he had been calling the "ultimate normie freak-out."

And, yes, we're still calling each other by our character's names. We're the last two students in the contest. No one is allowed to call me Damien. Only Molly. Not my parents, not other teachers, not anyone. And no one is going to catch me calling Renwick anything but Ashleigh. By golly, I'm going to *win* this contest.

So, Ashleigh is really losing it. See, he was still heck-bent on putting his own recording in place of the morning announcement music. He had been working on editing together some kind of replacement audio he was going to use. Renwick had found an old reel-to-reel tape machine so he could record his thing (whatever it was) and then swap it out for the school's tape.

He said that he wanted to get it just right, so he recorded one of the morning announcements on his phone, and then transferred it to his PC so he could edit it. So yesterday, he comes back, pulls me outside, and says we need to call the police.

He meant it, too. I've known him for a long time, and he was terrified. I thought he was just trying to mess with me.

Of course I wanted to know what the heck he was talking about, and he said when he played the recording back, he blacked out. That was nothing new, it puts us all to sleep. But he said he played it back five times, and every time, he lost consciousness.

He then claimed he'd edited the recording to skip the opening, and it was the voice of an old man telling everyone that certain male students were to be treated like girl students.

I told him he was trolling me or he messed up his recording or something. He

insisted he had it right, and if I had heard the recording, I'd know what he was talking about.

So play it for me? Was that so tough to do? He said he forgot to transfer it back to his phone.

Yeah, he was trolling me.

He looks stupid, plugging his ears every morning when the announcements are made, and he tries to get me to do it too, but I'm not into looking like an idiot.

Today, he brought in what he says was the recording, without the part he said made you black out, so I could hear the voice. What I heard was some scratchy-voiced old man ramble on about how the girls in our school should be treated like girls. Everything could have been faked, and knowing Ashleigh, that's what he did. I have to give him props for sticking with it though. He almost had me.

Otherwise, my class with Mr. Valdemar is kind of where it's always been. We keep going every day, and every day it's another drama assignment, not a Gothic Literature assignment.

What makes it even worse is that they keep changing the play we practice. The whole reason I was okay with being Molly was that she had, like, four lines. Now, the part has been re-written to be the main character's best friend, and I have dozens of scenes and hundreds of lines. Like I keep saying to everyone, I'm not a drama student. I have no idea what I'm doing.

Daisy says I can handle it, but I don't know. I'm always having to ask her for help, and for tips on acting and memorizing my lines. If she wasn't there for me, I don't know what I'd do. I mean, she's still pretty irritating, but at least she's encouraging me to do better.

This wouldn't be happening if we weren't losing the few girls we had in class to getting pregnant. I swear this whole school is some kind of incubation chamber, with the number of girls who get knocked up. Now that we're down two girls, they have to combine parts, and Molly is a much bigger role.

So now, she's a singer-songwriter, and her part includes doing some songs. That's right, I have to sing. In class. In front of *everyone*. Not only that, but the songs are the dumbest things you've ever heard. One is literally titled "The Sun Only Shines When You Smile." I have to choke down the vomit whenever I sing it.

Molly is also now this air-headed ditz who constantly gets all worked up, is always bubbling over with excitement and would drive me up the f'ing wall, if she really existed. Plus, I have to be involved in just about every scene, so now they want me there for the after-school rehearsals they're doing. Well, there's no way I'm doing that. Never.

When I get home, I do try singing my songs every night just so I don't embar-



rass myself. Sometimes it helps if I just act like Molly when I'm by myself. I put on a little lipstick and mascara from my goth makeup stash, and listen to some pop music. It really puts me in the right frame of mind. Thanks for the tip, Daisy!

At night, I like to lie on my bed, working on the Molly scrapbook. You know, I didn't think I had it in me to really understand a girl like Molly, but the more I work at it, the more real she becomes to me. I'll clip out some pictures from printouts I make, add some stickers, some colorful markers, then maybe something random, like a clover or a piece of fabric. I also make some little drawings to add even more life to it. Mr. Valdemar says it's astonishing how well it's coming along.

Anyway, I guess the next thingy I have to do is come up with a new way to really shock people. I mean, my plan was to integrate myself into the ranks of all the normal people at school, and I've done that. Maybe even *overdone* it? So, I've done all this prep work for some kind of ultimate surprise and now I don't have any idea what I should do.

I already know what Ashleigh wants to do, and that's just too extreme for me, so there's no point in asking his opinion. Maybe Daisy has some ideas to inspire me. I'll see what she thinks. She always has good ideas.

DAY 118



KEN'S STORY

So, my mom — I mean, my wife — is losing her mind. Gaaawd, why do I keep calling her my mom? Way weird. Well, maybe because she acts like it.

Anyway, she's really lost it. She says that I'm acting like a girl, and I'm like, *whatever*. I'm still the man of the house, and her husband. That hasn't changed.

It's been four months, and so far, I haven't found anything that would help this court case. It's just a regular high school, like any other. Popular kids, narcs, spazzes, retards and super hot jock boys.

I'm so happy the girls talked me into attending classes. Now I can keep up with everyone else on the squad all day long, instead of waiting until practice. We hang out at lunch and between classes n' stuff and it's so cool! The classes are hard, though.

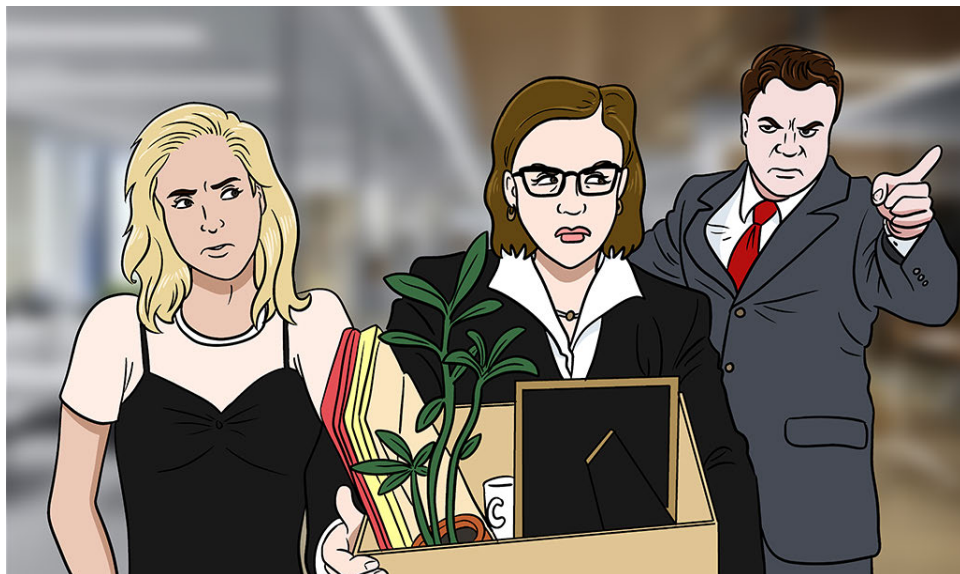
So my wife wanted to know what was going on with me, and why I'm hanging out with the cheerleaders so much. Well, it's because it's my job! That's what I'm supposed to do! So then she asked me what I've been doing differently since I got the job at the school, and I was like, nothing. It's all the same. I mean, besides the audio files I listen to and the nutrition bars, what else is there that's changed?

Oh, by the way, those audio files are now way awesomer because they don't have any of those boring lectures. Now they're all hot high-energy pop hits like the ones we practice to in cheerleading. And the nutrition bars have helped me lose another few pounds. I'm down to one forty. That still makes me the fattest person on the team, besides the coaches, but I'm totally going to get even thinner. Especially since Kari showed me that trick you do with your finger to get rid of extra food. It's gross, but so worth it!

Anyway, like I said, my mom — sorry, wife — was on my case, and took one of my nutrition bars and my music player away and sent them into a lab or something. She says the bars were laced with hypnotic drugs and hormones and other stuff I don't understand, and the music files had messages in them that make me act like a girl.

Oh my God! I am *not* acting like a girl!

But she was all trying to convince me I should get out of school, because of what they were doing to me, and I was all like no way, because all my friends



were on the squad, and why would I want to leave my friends?

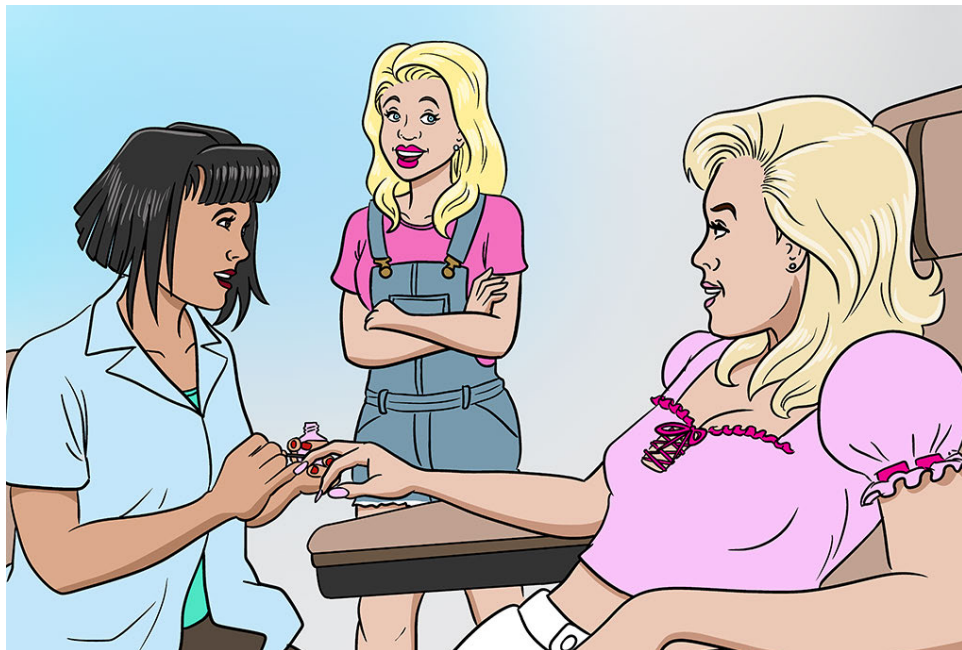
So she went to her bosses at the law place thingy she works at and showed them all the stuff she thinks changed me, and I had to come too, as some kind of proof or something. So I did my hair and makeup and put on a hot outfit that I had just gotten at Forever 21, and went to work with my mom for the day. Wife. I know. I keep making that mistake. Sorry. The boys at school are right, I am such an airhead!

Anyway, they fired her! Right on the spot! They said she had turned the whole case into some kind of freak show, and she was going to make them all look bad. So now she's all angry and wants me to bring her to school so she can confront the people who "did this to me."

Did what? Look, Since I'm helping with cheerleading, I have to make sure I look as good as any cheerleader. I don't want to embarrass them. And helping out with the routines is what I'm supposed to be doing. I'm kind of in charge of some stuff, you know? So if I wasn't going to classes and enrolled at Crosley High, how could I say I was really one of the group? And just because they call me Kimberly doesn't mean that I think I'm a girl. There are tons of men in Korea named Kim, aren't there? What's the diff?

Mom is really on the warpath, too. Every day I get home from practice, she's always going "blah, blah, blah, stop acting like a girl, blah, blah, blah, shouldn't be wearing miniskirts and dresses, blah, blah, blah, men shouldn't be growing breasts, blah, blah, blah." Give it rest, okay? Seriously!

I told Melanie all about it when we went to the salon, and she was so sympathetic. I mean, I have the best friends on the squad. She was telling me that I can do what I want to do, and that just because I'm growing my hair out long,



having my nails done, putting on makeup and wearing a bra because my chest is getting flabby doesn't mean I'm not a guy. She was so right! I can't let what other people think of me change who I am. Melanie reminded me that even if I wanted to have surgery to improve myself, no one should be able to tell me I shouldn't. What did I ever do to deserve such great friends? Kids these days are the best.

But anyway, I still have to bring mom – my wife, I mean – to school and have her meet the people in charge. Awkward!

THE SCHOOL OFFICE

“To what do I owe the pleasure?” Principal Weinhurst said, shaking the hands of the parents in his office.

“Cut the pleasantries, Weinhurst,” one the husbands said. “We have a major problem, and I want to know why you haven't done anything about it!”

It was almost 5 o'clock, Crosley High long since empty of students except for some of the kids who were at practice on the athletic fields. A school this late in the day felt dead and lifeless, especially for those who were used to teeming hordes of noisy kids filling the halls.

The school office was just Principal Weinhurst and school secretary Edith Blithe, and of course the parents who had demanded an emergency meeting.

There were two couples: the parents of Kevin McIntyre, and the parents of Jeff Farber.

As he sat down at his desk, the man in charge of Crowley High flipped through the files on his desk for a quick refresher. Jeff and Kevin were both normal students, with no significant marks on their permanent records, except for some commentary about them being “rambunctious” and “back talkers.” That could define about 75% of his students, the Principal thought to himself. Reading further, they got average grades in average classes, neither were into sports or extracurriculars, and both were up to date on vaccinations. That was about all there was to them, as far as he could tell.

“Now my secretary has briefed me about your very serious concerns,” Principal Weinhurst said, lying through his teeth. He didn’t even know he had a meeting until he opened his office door thirty seconds ago. His years of experience told him how to handle the situation. “But I want to hear the story as you tell it. Please tell me everything you think is pertinent.”

“*My son...*” Jeff’s father started to bellow. A hand on his knee from his wife, stopped him cold.

“Our son Jefferey,” said Mrs. Farber, “has been involved with an undesirable element of your student body.”

“This sounds serious,” the Principal said with a knowing nod of his head.

“It is,” she continued. “For the past several weeks, my husband and I have been noting significant changes in our son’s behavior. He’s been dressing strangely, acting strangely and denying everything.”

Mr. Farber had composed himself, and felt like he had waited long enough before taking over the conversation. “At first, we thought he might be, you know, goin’ all gay on us,” he said, “but then we noticed his friends doing the same thing.”

“That’s when the Farbers called us,” Mrs. McIntyre said. “Jeff and Kevin are close friends, and we had noticed the same changes in Kevin. Dressing in more and more feminine clothing, speaking in a higher tone of voice, growing his hair long, and hanging out with other boys who were doing the same. We thought it was just our son going through something, but it’s not — it’s some kind of deranged craze.”

“After looking into it,” Mr. Farber took over the narrative again, “we’ve spotted at least half a dozen kids here at Crosley who are doing the same thing. Boys dressing and acting like girls.”

“Why weren’t we told what was going on?” Mr. McIntyre asked, speaking for the first time. “And why haven’t you taken steps to address the problem with the parents? This is an epidemic!”

“I see, I see,” Weinhurst said, as he did his best impression of someone giving

careful consideration to the problem. From his perspective, though, this was a familiar complaint. It seemed that several times a year he'd hear from a parent who claimed their sons were behaving oddly. Principal Weinhurst had just learned to live with the complaints, as they eventually faded. A parent might complain once or twice, but sooner or later, they would adjust to whatever changes their son was going through. It always seemed to be the boys, too. The girls never seemed to have the same issues. "Well, this is certainly something that you feel very distressed about. That much is clear. And I want you to know that your pain is real."

Mr. Farber moved to the edge of his seat, with the fiery temper of a youtube conservative. "I didn't come here for new-age mumbly-mouth bullshit! What's happening to my son?"

"Hold on now, let's stay level-headed about this," the Principal said.

Jeff Farber's father was not finished. "When I left my house, my son was dressed in yoga pants and painting his nails! He says he's a vegan, won't eat gluten, checks his horoscope every morning, is stockpiling scented candles and wants a Givenchy Antigona for his birthday! What the hell is a Givenchy Antigona?"

"My Kevin wants a rescue puppy," Mrs. McIntyre said, looking frazzled. "Is that a puppy that rescues people or is being rescued? And from what?"

"These kids," Mr. Farmer bellowed, "are getting together and throwing make-up parties! Fashion shows! Hot yoga sessions! It's sick! It's debauchery! *Raw*



animal depravity!”

“We'll get to the bottom of this,” Principal Weinhurst said, holding his hands out flat to pat down the imaginary anxiety in the room. “We'll do everything that can be done.”

He wasn't much rattled, the veteran administrator. There was a procedure he had been told to follow in these cases, one that so far hadn't let him down. He had been told, repeatedly, not to try and diffuse these situations himself. He needed to make a call.

“I want you to know this is a very serious situation. I'm going to see if I can get a hold of the School Superintendent.” He began to dial his phone. “I'll put him through on speakerphone.”

“Yes, this is Superintendent Crosley,” said a firm but hoary voice on the other end of the line.

“Hello, Superintendent,” the Principal said. He had been instructed not to wait for a reply. “I'm here with some very concerned parents, who have expressed some concerns over their sons behaving oddly...”

Before he could finish the sentence, a blast of static came from the speaker, causing all five adults to suddenly lose consciousness.

“I feel that was a very productive meeting,” Mrs. Farber said to her husband as they drove home.

“Yeah, I hate to admit it,” Mr. Farber said with a growl, sitting at the steering wheel. “I was all set to lay into that idiot, but I'm feeling good about this.”

“To think we so misunderstood Jeffrey,” Mrs. Farber said with a sigh.

“Jessica,” Mr. Farber corrected. “Her name is Jessica.”

“Oh, yes, of course.”

“I just hope I can be as good a parent to a daughter as I was to a son. Better, hopefully.”

Mr. Farber thought back to the meeting he had just left. He remembered being so angry, and then, just as he was really getting going, how he had to fight to stay awake. He could recall a strange noise coming from the speakerphone, and then seeing his wife fall unconscious, as did everyone else. He, too started to feel like he needed to sleep. But he fought it.

“Having a daughter is going to be quite a challenge,” Mrs. Farber said with an uncertain smile. “I don't know if I'm up to it.”

“Well, I'm excited to see what it's going to be like.”

“I don't know. I just don't know.”

Mr. Farber could just barely remember fighting to stay awake in the Principal's office. He could hear an old man's voice commanding him to accept his

son's new life, and embrace the change. But he had managed to stay awake — just barely. He was on his knees, inching forward, trying to grab that speaker-phone and rip it from the desk.

"Your resistance has been noted," said the voice from the speakerphone. "We have a special way of dealing with troublemakers like you..." And then there was another more intense blast of that hypnotic static noise, and that was the last thing he could recall.

Mr. Farber looked at the anguish on his wife's face. "You know what," he said. "Maybe you should take that cruise you've always wanted to take."

"The around the world cruise?"

"That's the one. I think you deserve to get a fresh start and clear your head."

"But... We can't afford all three of us..."

"I'm not talking about the three of us. Just you. I can stay home and raise the girl."

"Really?" Mrs. Farber said, her attitude suddenly brightening. "Do you mean it?"

"Of course!"

"But I can't leave you with Jessica, all alone... Who will be her mother?"

A strange, but urgent compulsion came over the middle-aged man. He tried to resist, but that strange static noise started to echo inside his head. "I will!" Mr. Farber said. "I've always wanted to be a mother." As soon as he said it, the noise went away, and he felt so much better.

"I suppose it could work..."

"Sure it can," Mr. Farber said. "I'll even dress in your clothes. Grow my hair out like Jessica is. We'll be mother and daughter."

"I guess that's all right. You would do that for me?"

"Of course I would. If womanhood is good enough my girl, it's good enough for me. I can take her shopping, go to the salon, have all kinds of mother-daughter moments. I'll even start taking hormones and get implants."

"And a sex change?"

"Maybe, down the line..." Mr. Farber, in his head, pictured looking down at himself and seeing his dick and balls gone from his body, with a smooth front, free of masculinity. It thrilled him. This was what he wanted. This would make him very happy. "Sure, why not? Being a woman will be fun."

"A cruise... A round-the-world-cruise," Mrs. Farber began to muse, as if hearing her burly husband commit to becoming a woman was of little concern to her. "It's my fondest dream come true."

Mr. Farber also thought about his own fondest dream. He could see himself

cooking dinner for his family, a skirt swirling around his legs, his hair dancing on his shoulders, and finding himself wrapped in the arms a big, powerful man, kissing him on the neck. He then pictured himself being thrown on the bed, and spreading his legs to accept his man's cock...

"Well, being a mother to my new daughter is dream come true for me, too."

"Oh honey, I've never loved you more than right now." She then paused. "Platonically, of course. Since you're going to be a woman, I'll want to find me a real man."

"Me too!" Mr. Farber said, and laughed. They both laughed.

DAY 121



RIVER'S STORY

I had spent the night back in my old tent. It was cold, wet and awful. I didn't even fall asleep, scared that something might jump out of the trees and attack. Why did I do this?

Well, I had to be ready to see Carson, and Greg, Feather and I were going to pick him up at the airport for his daytime visit before heading back tonight for SoCal. It only made sense to stay with my folks to get the day started.

I had to wear those old clothes I used to wear, and I was almost crying as I put them on. They were so bulky, heavy and itchy.

"Yo!" Carson called out when he saw us in the passenger loading zone. "Where all the puss-ay at?" He said with a smile. He immediately hung his arm



around my neck. “My boi gotta be gettin all the bitches, am I right?”

I was trying not to cringe at his vulgar behavior. I had forgotten how crude he could be.

A wave of memories washed over me as we drove in the van, talking. We had been so close back in California, almost like brothers. We drank our first beers together, snuck into football games together and one time we stole that car.

“Man, Riv, you look so different,” Carson said to me. “You lose some weight or something? You’re not sick, are you?”

“I’m fine,” I said.

“Speak up! You’re talkin all quiet n’ stuff, dude!”

“Sorry.”

“Ya gotta snap out of it! This is your man, Carson, okay? I haven’t seen you in forever! Loosen up!”

“Sorry.”

“Okay, yeah.”

We stopped at a Harold’s Chicken Shack to get something to eat, because Carson said he’d always heard about them. Feather and Greg stayed in the van.

I almost ordered something for myself, before I remembered that River didn’t eat meat. I just had the Mac N Cheese instead.

“So, uh, Riv,” Carson said, as he paused in between pieces. “What’s up with your facebook page?”

That hit me like a lightning strike. I had forgotten that he might be keeping track of me on it. I froze up in fear.

“Looks like you in a dress. Going to church... Sewing... It’s kinda weird.”

I went with the only explanation I could think of. “School play,” I said.

“Ah,” Carson nodded. “Gotcha.”

“You need a napkin,” I said, pushing a stack of them towards him.

He looked at me strangely, then it was if he was going to say something. He just kept eating, but he was glancing over at me like he didn’t recognize me.

All I could think about was how horribly he behaved. Derek would have never acted like this. At the very least, Derek would have let me wipe his mouth. He would have also dressed up for the flight, looking like a proper gentleman, rather than show up in sunglasses and sneakers.

I was embarrassed to be seen with Carson, they way he was acting. I had already counted seventeen curse words. I desperately hoped I wasn’t going to bump into anyone from church.

I was also thinking that maybe Carson could do with a little worship in his life.

A little fear of God might do him well. That Hollywood attitude of his was nauseating in its smugness and self-importance.

A little while later, we stopped at the barn, but there wasn't much to see. It was also chilly and I didn't really want to hang around outdoors. Carson hadn't dressed for the weather, and it was too cold to comfortably leave the relative warmth of the van.

Instead, we mostly drove around town, showing off the town store, the farms, that kind of thing. Greg did point out the spot the protestors occupied, which just had one person today. It wasn't a school day, after all.

Greg stopped the van, jumped out and gave the guy standing there a muffin wrapped in tin foil.

"Your dad is such a softie," Carson said. "That protestor dude should just go inside."

"He believes in what he's doing," Feather said. "I respect that."

"Yeah, I guess you got a point," Carson replied.

I remembered all the times Greg had dragged me along to various demonstrations and sit-ins. They really weren't that bad, I guess. The people there were passionate, and believed they were doing the right thing. And at least they were willing to put in some time and effort to try to gain some attention. Maybe they're not as bad as I thought.

Thinking back to my life over the past few weeks, maybe I had let myself become a bit too suggestible. I think I even told people I was a conservative Republican.

Of course I wasn't. I mean, they weren't as bad as I once thought they were, but I'd never be a conservative. Had I really changed my facebook status to "Born again?" I was really losing it.

Finally, we stopped at the town store, where Greg and Feather said they needed to pick up some stuff. That left me and Carson in the van.

"Hey, Riv," he said, checking to make sure my parents weren't listening. "I gotta come clean wit' you."

"What?"

"Man, are you sure you're not sick? You look so much smaller than I remember."

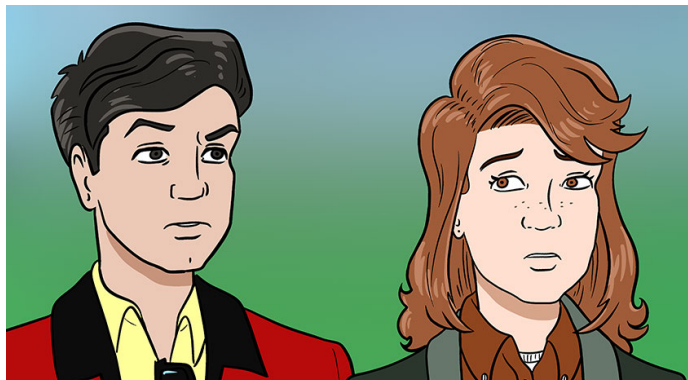
"I'm fine! Now, what did you want to tell me?"

"You know my dad works for Stonestriker Films, right? Well, it's not an accident that we came out here to see you guys."

"What do you mean?"

"Dad's got a new film, and we're doing some background work."

It was true. His father had been a production assistant on several documentary films, and he always seemed to be flying off to scout a location to shoot in. They did some serious journalistic work, exposing scams and corruption.



“What’s it about?” I asked.

“Something about this church that runs a school around here,” he said. “You know anyone who goes to Crustly High?”

“You mean Crosley High?”

“Maybe,” Carson said. “I didn’t pay a lot of attention to what my dad was saying.”

“That’s *my* school,” I said. “That was the school we were just *at*.”

“No shit? Wow.”

“What do you mean the church runs it?”

“They got this weird cult church thing down here, and they packed the school board full of their members. Now the school is under investigation for being anti-women, because only men run the school, teach the classes and force female students to take certain classes. There are also charges that they promote promiscuity from their female students and encourage pregnancy. It’s all some kind of big conspiracy.”

Was he talking about *my* church? No, he couldn’t be. I’d have figured that out by now. It wasn’t a cult anyway, it was a real church with a real religion. But, now that I thought about it, the only women on staff were Mrs. Scripperton and Mrs. Blithe. The other fifty or so staff members were all men.

“Um, so... Your dad wants to do a film about my school?”

“Seems like it. I think he’s in the city right now, getting all the permits to shoot.”

“It’s really going to happen, I guess.”

“Probably. You can be our inside man. Cool!”

“Yeah... I guess...”

“Awesome! So, uh. Don’t tell anyone, okay?”

DAY 122

I guess I'm kind of in a bad spot, now. Even after seeing Carson off last night, I'm preoccupied with the situation. I spent the night in my tent again, even though I could have gone back to my room in the Reed house.

Instead, I just wanted to stare up into the night sky.

I should have gone to church today, since it was Sunday, but it didn't feel the same. I wasn't looking forward to it like I always had been. I knew, in the back of my head, that this church Carson talked about was *my* church. It had to be. There wasn't another church in this town, and I guess an outsider might see it as kind of like a cult. Maybe?

The thing was, is I really liked being Melody. I liked being part of the Reed family. It was hard to give that up.

But to sacrifice my real family for it? To throw away my life? To just change the person I've always been?

I should have faced up to Harmony when she started to dress me up in girls clothing. Thinking about it, why had I let her do it? How was it not obvious to me what she was doing?

I may not have realized it at the time, but now it seemed incredibly obvious. She was turning me into a girl. How could I not understand that? It was like I wasn't even conscious of it happening.

And why? Why was she doing it? And how had she convinced her family, her church, and the whole school to go along with it? Or maybe the church put her up to it, and was forcing her to do this to me.

No. As the daughter of the preacher, they had to be in on it together. Harmony was deep into the church as anyone. Hell, she had been installed as student council president. She ran the students, her family ran the church, the church ran the school.

Still, even now, I wish I could slip back into my panties and do my hair all fancy, and wear a nice dress. I want to forget what Carson told me and go back to the way it was. They way it should be.

I am so ashamed of what I let her do to me. Now, a part of me was addicted, and didn't want to give it up. I so wanted to be Melody.

But now what do I do? I could spill the details to my parents, but they're total wildcards, and completely unreliable. I honestly have no idea how they would react to what I could tell them. Knowing Greg, he'd just join the protest group and let me figure the rest out on my own.

I could go to the police and tell them what happened, but I wasn't sure any laws had really been broken.

No, what I had to do was put an end to this. I had to help Carson and his dad make the film. If I exposed the situation for what it was, I could force some kind of resolution to it.

This is the only way to end it.

DAY 123

On Monday morning I woke up in Melody's bed. Maybe this was the last place I should be, but I felt that if I were going to expose the situation, I had to work from the inside, and returning to the Reed home was the way to do it.

"You look horrible!" Harmony said when she saw me. "I bet you're happy to be back in panties!"

The thing is, I *was* happy. I loved the feel of the fabric on me. The lightness, the coolness, the softness. Oh God, I do love it.

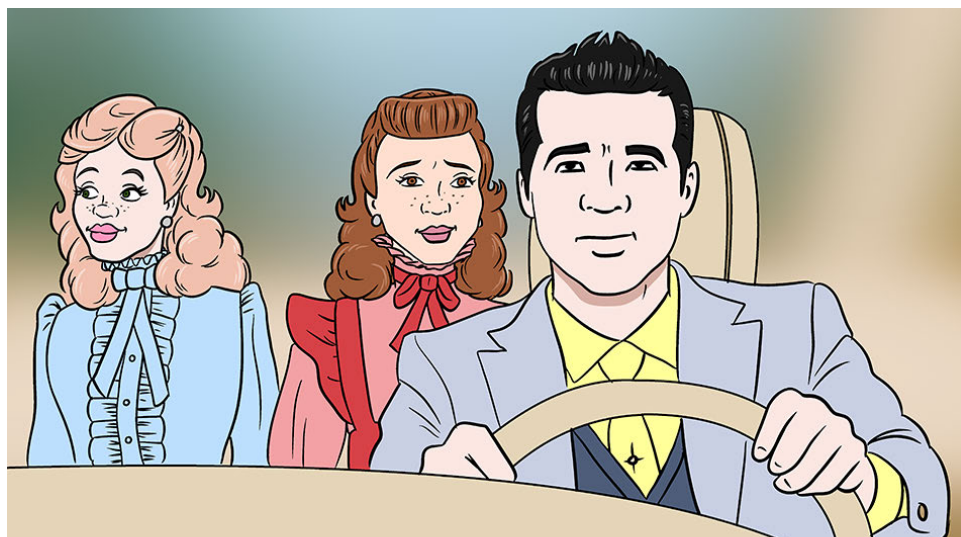
I watched in the mirror as Melody was re-assembled, from my panties, to my camisole, to my clothes, and my hair. When Melody fastened the necktie around my high-collared neck, I almost gave in.

When I was being driven into school by Mr. Reed, I loved rustling my skirt on my tights-clad legs. The feel of my long hair dancing on my shoulders was wonderful. The scent of the shampoo was so familiar and sublime I couldn't believe I was trying to give it up.

"Dirty hippies," Harmony mumbled as we drove past the protestors outside the school. "Parasites." She added.

"Let's have a great day at school!" Mr. Reed said from the front seat. I hugged and kissed him on the cheek like I always did, enjoying the warmth and love he was offering me, and feeling like a monster for betraying him.

He was so handsome. He could tell me to do anything I and I would do it. Surely if life was fair, this was the man who should have been my father. I already felt like I was his child, and no one else's. All I wanted was to dress in my pretty clothes, pray with my family and have him tuck me in and snuggle up in



my hand-sewn sheets. I already thought of them as my real family. The Reeds. I was Melody Reed, and I was loved by my daddy and my mommy and my sister and God. This was who I was. A proper daughter. A good girl.

I was already out of the car when I got a hold of myself. It was so tempting. I could just let it go, and tell the Reeds all about the film, and then they could shut it down and we'd be a happy family forever. I could feel it. I could feel the warm embrace of the future I wanted to have, as if they were silken ribbons wrapping around me, embracing me tightly, wrapping me up in comfort and bliss.

"I have to do some council stuff," Harmony said, taking an unexpected turn as we walked. "See you in homeroom, okay?"

I took some deep breaths as I headed on to my locker. The clothes were trying to take me over. I was barely able to keep control of myself.

I tried to remember my real life. California with Carson. Sleeping in a tent with my folks. Building a barn. Guy stuff.

I was setting my books in the locker when I heard some scuffling behind me. I turned to see a girl scrambling out of a classroom, obviously in a rush and having trouble in her heels. Only she wasn't a girl. On closer inspection, it was a guy. A guy in a skirt.

Another one like me?

None of the other students were paying any attention to him, and since I was the only one looking, trying to figure out why he was dressed like he was, his eyes locked on to mine.

He rushed over to me. "Don't let them do this to you!" He said in an urgent and low voice. "It's the announcements! Don't listen to the announcements!"

"Ashleigh!" A loud voice came from the other end of the hallway. It was the Vice Principal, and he looked angry. "Don't move!"

The boy gave me a crazed look. "It's all coming from the Superintendent... The Superintendent! He's the one! He's behind it! He's doing this to me!" He gave me a second look. "To *us*!"

"Back away from her, Ashleigh!" The Vice Principal called. He was on him swiftly, and grabbed him by the arm. The boy didn't have much of a chance to run, in high heels he obviously didn't know how to walk in.

The Vice Principal then said something, something I can't remember, and I zoned out. When I came to, he and the poor kid had vanished.

"Oh, it's so good to have you back," Harmony said as she sat down next to me in homeroom. "You make school fun," she said. At least, I think that's what she said. As the morning announcements ended, I discreetly removed the wads of paper I had jammed in my ears.

DAY 124



DAMIEN'S STORY

I have officially had it up to here with Gossamer. She is absolutely impossible. Every day, it's the same thing. She's all hung up on a bunch of stupid stuff. Like, for instance, she says that I'm no longer a Goth. I'm like, of course I'm a Goth. This is just part of the plan that me and Ashleigh are working on, or don't you remember?

She says *I'm* the one who's forgotten about the plan. How can I forget about the plan? I'm the one who's got to dress up every day, I'm the one who has to act like a normie. She just gets to be herself.

Every day, I have to choose clothes that will make me look like my friends in drama class do. Every day! But Gossamer keeps telling me I don't need to put so much effort into it. How else am I supposed to fit in? And it's not that much effort. Daisy and I already go to the mall practically every day, so it's no problem to stop by the Gap, Target or Banana Republic and pick up something new to add to my options. It takes time to build up a whole new look. I've been dressing in black Goth stuff for so long, that's all I have.

I gotta get jeans, khakis, shorts, polos, tees, sneakers, sandals, flip-flops, cardigans and hoodies — all in the latest styles and colors! Actually, dressing Goth was easier, with fewer choices. Now I spend hours choosing my clothes every day, and often the night before, too.

So for Gossamer to say I've given up, I mean... I don't *think* so!

But then she says I don't need to wear my hair in twin tails, color my nails, wear bracelets and use lipstick or perfume. That wasn't my idea! My stylist did my nails, and it's not perfume, it's the hair conditioner I had to buy. Blame her.

Then Gossamer tells me I need to stop acting like "they" act. First of all, little miss know-it-all, "they" aren't that bad, okay? Just different. Second, of course I have to *act*. I'm a drama student. I'm an actor. That's what I *do*.

Yeah, yeah, I know I said I was here for the Goth Literature stuff, and that's all still really interesting and everything, but this is a drama class, and I got a really good part in the play. So if we get to the Goth stuff, great, but for now, I need to pass this drama class. Or do you object to that, Gossamer? Is that okay with you?

As pissed off as I am with Gossamer, and yes, I'm not afraid to use that kind of language, Ashleigh's been a thousand times worse.



Look, I'm trying to learn a part! The whole play is counting on me! I don't have time for these kinds of hijinks. With every day, I've watched my former best friend lose another piece of his mind. First, it was a lot of stuff about "messages" in the announcements, then he was going on about "noise" that made people fall into a hypnotic state, and the latest is how there are a dozen or so male students dressed as girls. He keeps stopping me in the hall, pointing at some poor student and telling me that they're a boy dressed in girls' clothing.

Of course, they look fine to me. There's nothing wrong with them. They look like they always have. Everyone knows that Albert Myers has is just a fashion queen, Jamarcus Russel and his dad have been a total basic bitches forever, and Coach Harper is one of our peppiest cheerleaders. I don't know why Ashleigh is losing his mind about it.

In fact, just yesterday, he comes into our audio learning class looking like he's been up all night, and begs me to lean over so he can whisper something.

I put down my headphones reluctantly. By the way, Our audio lessons class is honesty the best 112 minutes of my day. Lately, instead of real lessons, they've been playing Top 40 pop music, and I'm so into it. Maybe they mixed up the tapes, but I'm not not going to be the one to tell them to stop. I love the beat!

"It's going down," he said, looking nervous and he turned his head every direction to see if we were being listened to.

I was hoping this was another fun acting improv exercise, but he wasn't kid-

ding. "What is?" I asked, with a despondent sigh.

"I don't know!" He replied. Great. More of this paranoia. "You know that number you gave me? The one that was hooked up directly to the intercom?"

"Kinda," I said. I had given him that number I found weeks ago on the phone in the office. I had no use for it.

"It's to the Superintendent's office. The messages are coming directly from the Superintendent!"

"Oh, not with the messages again!" I said, wanting to give up.

"So I recorded yesterday's announcement, and edited it."

"And?" I had to ask.

"The voice said there's a saboteur in school. That information about the school is being leaked to people on the outside."

"Oh, you mean someone might get a hold of the lunch schedule? *What will we do?*" I replied.

"I'm serious! They said he wanted all the boys that are dressing as girls to start 'looking and acting like real girls,' as he said. They probably don't want outsiders noticing what they're doing to the boys!"

"So they're making boys dress in cute clothes, and you object."

"Of course I do! Boys shouldn't be dressing in skirts!"

And then I had to point out the obvious. "Like you, Ashleigh?"

"What?" He said. Then he stood up, looking down at his outfit, as if for the first time. Ashleigh had worn a pink sleeveless top, a pink miniskirt and pink high heels today. He had been dressing so nicely lately. "What... I'm... I'm wearing a skirt?" He said, as he grabbed at his clothes. He then grabbed his head, and pulled at his chin-length curly hair. "They... They *got* to me!"

He backed out of the class, looking like he was a cornered animal, turned, and ran out, stumbling in his heels. The poor thing was going to turn an ankle, if he wasn't careful.

So that was yesterday. I hope he's going to be okay. Despite the way he's been acting, I am worried about him. It's been a full day since I've heard from him.

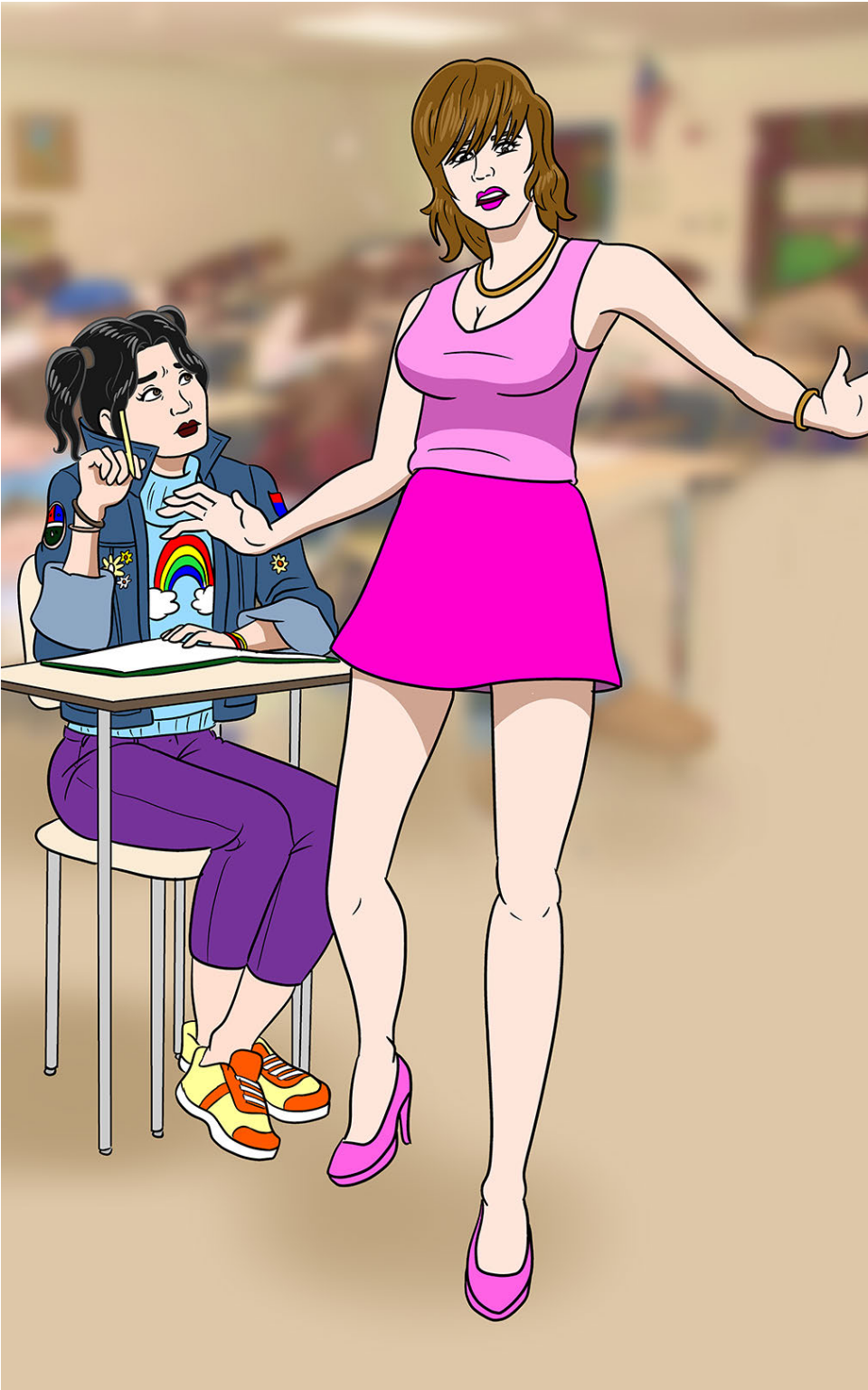
Today, I asked Daisy at lunch if she'd seen him, and she hadn't. "Maybe he'll turn up for rehearsal after school," she suggested.

"I don't know," I replied.

"Stay positive, Molly!" She said. "You know everything is gonna work out A-ok!"

"But..."

"Throw those negative notions in the trash! Now, put a smile on your face and



think happy thoughts!”

“I don’t...”

“Happy thoughts for happy people!”

She always knew the right thing to say to turn my spirits around. “Okey-dokey, Smokey!” I replied.

“What a trooper! Everything’s gonna be great!”

“Abso-heckin-lutely!” I replied. But still, I had my doubts. I’ve gone to rehearsals every day, and hadn’t seen Ashleigh once. I love rehearsals and love acting my little hinie off, but he was too preoccupied. I hope he finds whatever he’s looking for.

DAY 137



RIVER'S STORY

I had been putting things off for several days when I finally gathered up the courage to go investigate the School Superintendent. I suppose it was seeing a number of other students who seemed to be in the same state I was, somewhere in between being male and female. It wasn't easy to tell. None of them even seemed aware of what was happening to them. They just acted like it was normal for a boy to dress and act like a girl.

I think what let me see it, these bizarre changes in the students, must have been me ignoring those announcements. I was almost sure some kind of brain-washing was going on.

So a few days after my run-in with "Ashleigh" I slipped out of my audio study course and headed for the Superintendent's office. I wasn't sure what I was going to do there, but I did at least want to see who was there. It was located in a far corner of the school complex, shielded by some trees. It was just a small little house with a flat roof and a tiny, empty parking out front.

That's when I saw it. The trailer.

Behind the building, surrounded by cyclone fencing, was the same trailer we prayed to every Sunday. I feel to my knees out of habit, in the presence of something I had been taught to worship as a holy thing. I bowed my head and didn't want to look at it, out of reverence. After a little while, though, I straightened myself out and got my head right again.

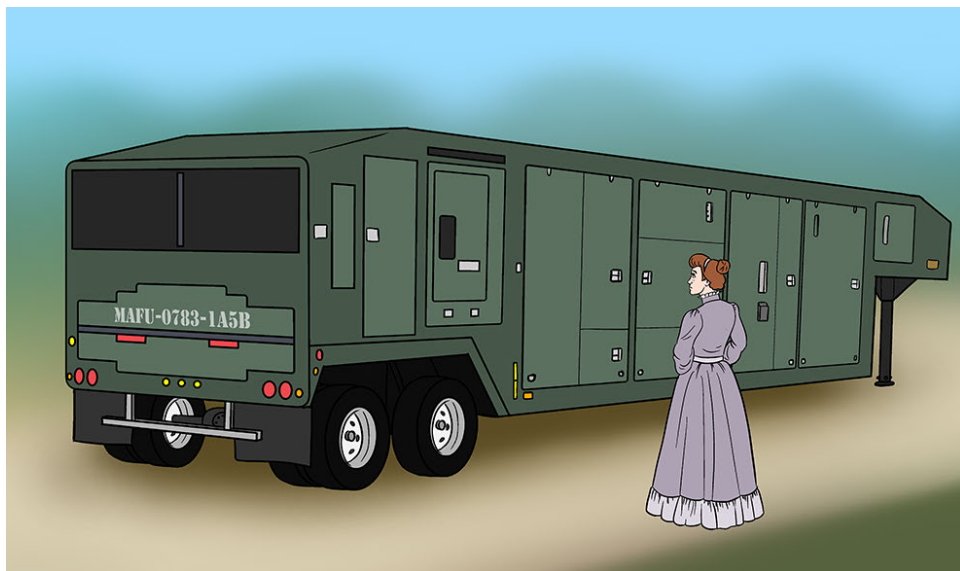
It was just a trailer. An ordinary thing. It was very large, the length of a semi truck trailer, but with panels, markings, ports and an olive green paint job that made it clear it was for some sort of military use.

Sure enough, when I looked at it closer, it had the designation "MAFU-0783-1A5B" in stenciled lettering on it. I had sung songs about this vehicle.

A thick rubber cord came from it, and attached to a power hook-up on the main building. It hummed a little bit. I wondered how long it had been here, as some of the paint was flaking badly, and it looked more than a little sun-bleached.

By some upturned dirt I could tell that people had been here recently, though.

I walked around to the front of the building again, where double glass doors



greeted visitors — only these weren't greeting anyone. They were locked up tight, and the lock had rust on it.

The thing is, I could hear a voice inside. The lights were out, the doors secure, but there was someone inside, and it sounded like they were on the phone.

I was about to walk away, when I remembered why I was out here. I needed answers, and on the verge of getting some, I decided I couldn't give up now.

Knocking on the door produced no results, even as I could still hear talking. I tried a small side window and pounded on it, but there was still no reply. Finally, I just threw a rock at it, shattering the glass.

No one reacted. I had to boost myself up on a nearby trash can, which it wasn't easy in my long skirt, but I got up to the window and opened it up, enough to get inside.

The place was covered in dust. Years and years of dust. It felt totally abandoned. The walls were covered in cheap wood panelling and various paintings of beaches. A small desk with ancient office equipment was stationed just behind a half-height wall. It looked like a secretary's desk.

Behind that desk was a door with a brass plaque affixed to it. I had to wipe the dust off to read it. "School Superintendent Hiram J. Crosley," it read.

There weren't a lot of Crosleys in the world, so I guess this was the person the school was named after. Then I heard that voice again, much clearer, from behind the door.

I knocked. There was no reply.

After several moments of debate, I straightened my dress, primped my hair and opened the door.

“Yes, this is Superintendent Crosley,” said a strong but aged voice in the darkness.

I flipped the flickering yellow florescent lights on. The room was just as bad as the one outside. The cheap wood paneling was falling off the walls, several massive water stains were in the foam ceiling which had completely collapsed on one side of the room. There were cobwebs in every corner, and even they were covered in dust.

A large desk with tiny American flags on it was positioned in front of a giant map of the United States. Seated at the desk, in a slate grey suit, was a skeleton.

“The annual budget must be sent to the state as required by law,” said that same voice. After I picked myself up off the floor, dusted my skirt off and got my heart rate back down to normal, I looked for the source of the voice. On the desk was a small metal box with a flashing red light on it. “Please see to it that the Department of Education has what they need by the appropriate date,” said the box.

“Yes, Mr. Crosley,” came a reply from a tinny speaker. It must have been someone at the high school. “Is there anything else you wanted?”



“No, that’s all for today,” the box said again, the red light flickering as the sound was made. “Thank you.”

It took me a moment, but I walked over to the desk and checked the calendar on the corner of the desk. It was for 1980. This office had been sealed up since 1980.

The room was silent again, and I could only wonder how this had come to be. This old skeleton, presumably the remains of Superintendent Crosley, sat at the desk, waiting for something that would never come.

The box suddenly came to life again, with a dial tone. A number was dialed. “Hello, Monroe Elementary,” said a woman’s voice.

“Yes, this is Superintendent Crosley, put me through to the intercom.” His request was followed by a blast of static that made my head spin. I almost fainted.

“I obey,” said a the woman on the other end.

Another, longer, louder blast of noise came from the phone. I recognizing the hypnotic tone I heard every morning, and nearly faded out.

“I command you and you will obey. Student Kyle Peterson is to be treated as a girl. Her name is Kyla Peterson. She has always been a girl, and has always been named Kyla. Even if she does not appear to be a girl, you will see her as a girl. She will be treated like a girl, and assigned to girls classes. Staff members are to change any and all records of Kyle Peterson to Kyla Peterson. Once again, Kyle Peterson is now Kyla Peterson. You will forget this message. This ends my command.” This was followed by one more static blast.

Then there was a click as the call was ended. I couldn’t believe it. This box had just instructed a whole school, the local elementary school, to re-write a student’s life.

Was this the same thing they were doing at the High School? It had to be. This box was controlling the entire school system, using some kind of advanced mind control and the synthesized voice of a dead man.

But why?

I looked closer at the box that was producing the voice. It was labeled “Auto-Caller Smart Voice Duplicator with Neural Control.” It was hooked up to a cable that snaked its way to the wall, and unless I was very much mistaken, this was the same spot the trailer was connected to outside.

I looked at the box once again. It was old and metal, and rusting out in spots. I dared to pick it up, finding a paper label affixed to the bottom. “Dept. of Defense,” it read. “To be used in conjunction with MAFU Model 5B.”

I left the room as I found it, only the footprints of my Mary Janes left behind in the dust. Just before I closed the door, I took several pictures. I took more pictures of the trailer outside. I was sending this to Carson.

Since then, I have tried to think of explanations for what I saw. I couldn't. It didn't make any sense. Then I got messages back from Carson.

He had passed the pictures on to his dad, who then did some research. According to what he could find, there has never been a death certificate filed for Hiram J. Crosley. He would be 97 years old if he were still alive. The skeleton was almost certainly him, dead at his desk.

The reference of "MAFU" on the trailer was an acronym, and the only match that Carson's dad could find for it was to a discontinued cold war program called the "Domestic Fertility Assurance Program." It was only in operation for a brief time, and was designed to make sure humans could reproduce in the event of a nuclear war.

The trailer, apparently, was some kind of medical vehicle, a "Mobile Applied Fertility Unit" that was supposed to help in some way. DFAP? The Superintendent had apparently programmed his voice into the box and the trailer, and it had been running the school by phone call and hypnotic commands since then.

"What are you reading?" Harmony asked me as I read the messages from Carson on my phone. I hadn't noticed her enter my room.

"Derek wants to go out Sunday afternoon," I said, turning the phone off and nearly fainting out of fear.

"Too bad that's church," Harmony said.

"Yeah, too bad," I said, smoothing out my skirt on my bed. "We'll figure it out, I guess."

I was lying, but at the same time, I did owe Derek a date. I missed him, and I could use the comfort of my boyfriend right about now.

DAY 149



ALBERT'S STORY

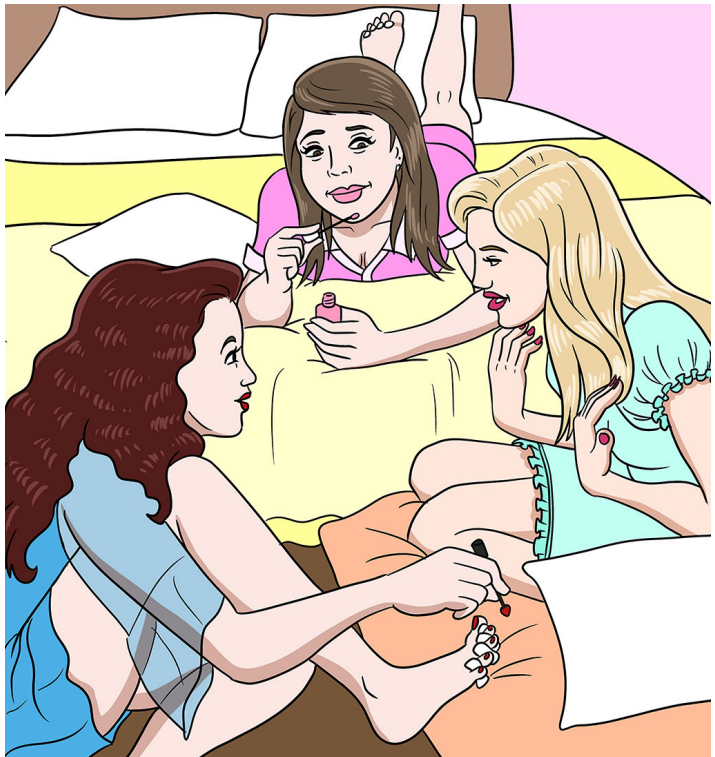
Five months. It hardly seems like five months could have passed. It's inconceivable. O. M. G. Like, *seriously*?

I would have never thought it would take this long to break my sister's will. If you had asked me when I started this, I would have said, like, maybe fifteen minutes? Now it's been five months! The fall clearance sales have already turned into spring clearance sales, it's been so long.

I haven't given up, though. I can't back down now, I'm far too invested in this. My whole reputation rides on getting Alyssa back into her old life. I know my best besties Regan and Blair are behind me, and they've been so awesome about how long it's taking. They are always helping me, keeping me focused on being Alyssa. They never turn down an invite to come over for slumber parties, where we have fashion shows, do each other's hair, cry over romantic movies and just girling it up to the extreme.

As they remind me, I have to be as loudly "Alyssa" as I can be, so even if I have to be a little over-the-top, it's just a part of the plan. One of these days, I know it's going to get to her.

Lance has been super cool about it, too. I don't think he's asked for money for months, because he's just as dedicated as I am to getting Alyssa back. He must



really love her. Everybody treats him like my real boyfriend now, and even Mother and Father call us a couple. That's how much I've been working at this. I've gotten really good at being Alyssa. I mean, if someone had seen Alyssa six months ago, and then saw me now, they'd never know the difference. I've got everything she ever had — the boyfriend, the girlfriends, the clothes, the hair, the attitude. I'm probably even more Alyssa than even Alyssa was.

I mean, I even have all her stuff. She had tried to throw it all out, and had bagged it up in trash bags, ready to donate to Goodwill. I found them in the garage one day, and brought them up to my room. It was all there, everything that made Alyssa Alyssa.

I cleared off my study desk and put her vanity mirror on top, then dumped out the drawers and filled it up with her makeup. She had so much cool stuff! All kinds of mascara, eye shadow, foundation, nail polish, earrings, necklaces... Oh my God. So good.

And her clothes. I didn't even know where she had been hiding it all. I had been sneaking into her room to get stuff to wear to school, and she didn't seem to mind, but I hadn't even seen half of this. Then the shoes. So many shoes! Shoes, shoes, shoes! Even months later, I'm still all worked up about it! It was seriously one of the greatest days of my life.

From then on, I could just be Alyssa from the inside out. The only thing I didn't want were her undies. I mean, ew! Mom and I made a day of buying me my own panties, and she showed me all of Alyssa's favorite styles.

My sister even had her old posters, dolls and decorations in there, too. Well, now they're on my shelves and my walls, where she can't forget them so easily. I had brought all of her things back and made sure she'd see them every day. There's no escaping her past.

The one thing she did do was change her name, kinda-sorta. She wants everyone to call her "A.J." now, which is her initials for Alyssa June. I still call her Alyssa, of course. I'm not going to let her try and run away from herself that easily.

That pisses off all her friends like Nicholas, Jacob, Dimitri, and the rest of those turncoats. They used to be my friends you know, but I think that ship has sailed. If they're so easily fooled by the act my sister puts on, then they have no place in my life.

Sometimes I'll have to talk to one of them, and I tell them that she's just fooling them with her fake depth and brains, but they never believe me. They always insist that she's much smarter than she ever let on, and she's a whole new person. Fools, the lot of them.

People just don't change so dramatically, you know. Like, I'm *so* sure.

I mean, if she's supposed to be so smart, why am I having so much trouble in her classes? If I can't figure things out, what chance did she have? I have a ge-



nious-level IQ, you know. I read books n' stuff all the time.

The school has me taking a special class to listen to “extra” lessons on an audio player, which is supposed to help me in Alyssa’s classes. I can take them home, and I like to listen to them when I take my bubble baths and when refreshing my nail polish. They are really soothing and relaxing. It’s like a luxury spa treatment for my mind. Sometimes I even forget that I’m really a guy and for a second, I think I’m the real Alyssa — they’re that good.

Yeah, so, I’m taking all of Alyssa’s old classes, and I even joined up with the Fashion Club, the one she used to be a member of. I wasn’t going to, but Regan talked me into it. It’s way more fun that I thought it would be. We talk all about the looks coming up in New York and Paris, and our favorite fashion sites, the best instagram accounts, the girls on reality shows, and we swap the fashion mags we subscribe to. We even have a clothing exchange every month. I swear, our meetings go so fast. I could talk about this stuff forever.

But doing schoolwork is totally busted. At first, Alyssa’s classes were the embodiment of a cakewalk, but in more recent months, I’ve found it more and more difficult. Truthfully, I’m not totally sure the audio lessons are helping me learn school stuff, just attitude stuff. I’ve gotten worse since I started listening to them, and I find it harder and harder to focus. I mean, it’s tough, juggling school, friends, a boyfriend, shopping and keeping up with the trends. Then, on top of all that, I have to find a way to get Alyssa to pull herself together.

Okay, I know I’m supposed to have that plan thing done by now, but I’ve been really busy! It’s not my fault!

I did do this one thing, where my best besties and I went into Alyssa’s old salon and asked who her stylist was, and so I just said, do what you do for Alyssa on me. She was so confused. “Aren’t you Alyssa?” She asked me.

That kind of thing makes everything I’m going through so worth it. Whenever anyone thinks I’m the real Alyssa, I know I’m one step closer to bringing out all the jealousy in my sister. Anyway, now she’s my stylist, not Alyssa’s. She even calls me Alyssa when I go see her.

When my best besties and I go out shopping, I’ll see people who know me as Alyssa. Shop girls, waiters at cafés, boys in the food court, they all “recognize” me. One guy was going on and on about “my” blue eyes, and he didn’t even have a clue they were just my new colored contacts. Flirting with guys is something I never thought I’d ever have to do, but it’s not that hard, really. A lot of cute guys are drawn to Alyssa. A lot. Fortunately, I can cut it off when I mention my boyfriend.

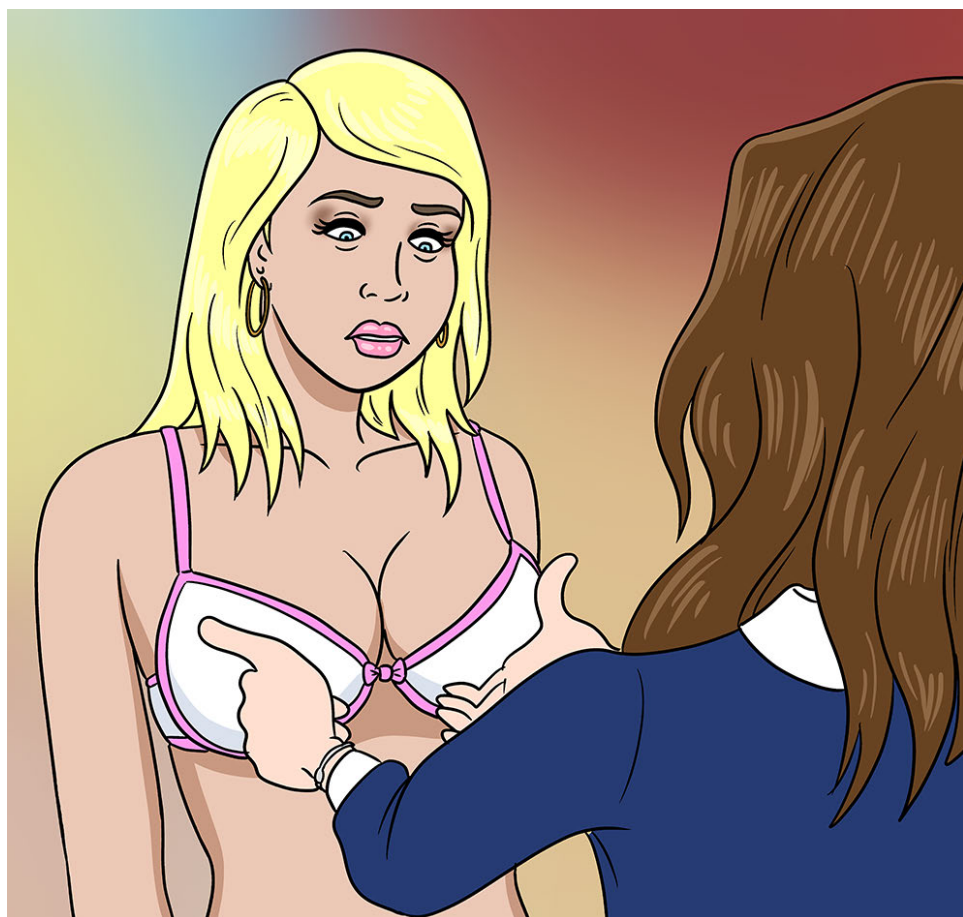
Sometimes I can’t figure Lance out. I mean, if I was faking a relationship with someone who wasn’t actually a girl, I don’t think I’d be able to keep up the act as long as Lance has. Okay, example: just the other night, when I noticed that Alyssa had her window open while studying, I called Lance up and he came

right over. We parked his car where Alyssa had to see us, and made out for an hour. I made sure I was moaning as loudly as I could, so she'd hear it. When she slammed her window shut, I knew the mission had been accomplished. Lance was so sweet, he didn't complain at all!

I tease him that he doesn't even remember I'm not really Alyssa when we're kissing. He shrugs it off. I think a lot of the students at school don't know who I really am, and I'm being totally serious about that. I know it sounds crazy, but I swear most everyone I talk to, even teachers, think I'm a real girl.

I suppose the breasts kind of help give them that impression. They're not very big, but not a lot of guys my age have breasts, so the confusion is understandable. The school nurse said it's just an imbalance, and I'll grow out of it, so I'm not that worried. Mom says they're cute. Besides, it's easier to wear Alyssa's dresses with breasts, and I look far more feminine. Padding never seems to get the same look, you know?

I don't even remember growing them. I was out buying panties one day, and the sales girl suggested a bra, and I was all "why?" and she was all "You don't



want your breasts to sag.” And I looked down, and, boom! Breasts! How could I not notice? It was like being woken up from a trance. Weird, amirite?

All right, so, now that I think I've got things under control, it's time to get back on with my plan, and give it everything I've got. Really, this time for sure. Promise!

DAY 152



DAMIEN'S STORY

Well, I couldn't have been more tickled to see Ashleigh back in class. Daisy was right. It was only a few days after she ran off that she came back with a whole new winning attitude! She was finally in a good mood for a change. No talk about messages, crossdressing or mind control. Just good old Ashleigh.

The first day she came back to class, she said he wanted to just be a normal student, center her chakras and get into a serious relationship with a hunky guy who will love her back. Good for her! She deserves to be happy.

She was dressed in black leggings, an oversized cable-knit sweater, ugg boots and her hair up in a loose, messy bun. She had done her makeup flawlessly, especially her brows. They looked so sharp. Overall, she looked so... Comfortable.

I guess that's the right word for it. I had gotten so used to seeing Ashleigh's eyes darting back and forth in a panic, her forehead in a clammy sweat, and jogging a leg anxiously, that I barely even recognized her.

Now, she didn't seem to have a care in the world. I even brought up her theory that we were being mind-controlled, and she just giggled and said "Oh my God" ten times in a row, stifling laughter. "I never said that, did I?" She was in such a good mood! Whatever had happened to her over the past few days, sign me up for that!

Anyway, she quit the drama class the day after she came back. It's probably for the best. A spot opened up, and now she's taking normal English classes. I barely even see her anymore, but



when I do, we always stop and chat, complimenting each other's outfits. It looks like we're both past that Goth phase, huh?

Oh, I'm so glad to be over the Goth thing. I mean, Gos-samer still gets on me about it, but we all have to fly our own kites in this world, right? That's a line from one of my songs in the play. It's so deep!

Me? I love bright colors, a little bit of glitter, cute tops, short skirts, but most of all, I'm into short-shorts. That's what I'm wearing today. A cutie-cute little pair of denim shorts, a snuggly sweater and a pair of stockings that look like knee-highs. They have kitties on them!

Yeah, I decided to finally go all-Molly with my outfits. I think I was trying to be sensitive to Ashleigh, and that kept me from doing what I wanted, but now that he was normal again, I could dress how I pleased.

I can put on little lacy ribbons to hold my twin tails, candy bracelets on my wrists, my rainbow unicorn earrings and all sorts of cool stuff! It's all so cute I could just scream!

Daisy pointed out that I dress almost exactly like my character does in the play, but she was probably just teasing me. "Play Molly" and



“me Molly” are two very different people. For instance, play Molly has to wear what’s in the drama department wardrobe. Real Molly can wear whatever will make me look the cutest!

SO, I guess an obvious question to answer is when did I start getting all this stuff? I guess it kinda snowballed. First, I just picked up some thing here and there, then you needed something more to go with the thing you just got, and... Well, as an example, Daisy and I were out shopping one day, and she suggested I get a bra. I was like, but why? And then she just grabbed my boobs and shook them around. “For these, silly-billy!” She said.

So we went to a store and got a bra for me. Well, they came in sets, and so I got panties, too. And the little pink ribbons on the panties and the bra were so adorable, that I had to find something that matched, and that led me to getting ribbons for my hair, and that didn’t look right without a necklace, and the necklace matched these cute earrings... I mean, you can see how it all got out of control, right?

When I got home that day, my parents were stunned. They had no idea how to even talk to me. Fortunately, when they came back from an emergency meeting with the school counselor, Mr. Dawson, everything was peachy-keen.

Now I can sing and dance whenever I feel like it, and not have to hide it. Of course, my parents do want me to “dial it back” when I get a little too carried away.

But I just love singing so much! I can probably sing every song in the pop music charts by heart, and do the dance moves from the videos, too. Pop has taken over my life, and I’m never going back.

That’s a good thing because they changed my part in the play again — but I’m not complaining! Now I’m playing the *lead*! Yup, Molly is now the lead character, and I get to do more lines and sing more songs! Now the play is about a girl who dreams of making it big as a super-famous pop star, and hits the big time. I mean, they might as well call it the “Me” story, because that’s exactly what I want to do. Yes! Me — Little ol’ Molly!

Acting is super-duper fun, but it’s becoming a pop star that really excites me. I haven’t told anyone yet, but I already signed up for a talent show in the city. They even send the winners on to a state competition, and then, who knows? Hollywood? I’m going to give it everything I’ve got!

I can already see my parents faces when I tell them that their son Molly has won a talent competition. I hope they’ll be proud of me!

One thing I know, I’m not doing it without Daisy. We’re a team, and we do everything together or not at all. I’ve never known someone who is so on my wavelength. Two peas in a pod, Mr. Valdemar calls us. I couldn’t agree more!

THE SCHOOL OFFICE

Mrs. Blithe rolled out the pink form she had been typing on, tore out the carbon paper and slid it into the trash. She took the form and placed it on top of a file on her desk marked “Renwick J. Davis.” She then carefully typed up a label on an adhesive sheet, and placed it over the name on that file. It read “Ashleigh J. Davis.” The form, a “Student Identity Profile” form, now reported that Student 6801 was a “Completed Project” done on as an “Emergency Rush.”

Edith methodically placed the form in the folder, arranging the papers in their correct order. White papers, blue papers, pink papers, yellow papers. It had been this way for fifty years, and that’s the way she wanted it. Before she filed it away, however, she walked to the back room, where there was a staircase leading down. There, on a desk, sat Renwick’s PC and a reel of magnetic tape. Edith picked up the PC and dropped it into a large metal chamber, letting it tumble in carelessly. She then tossed in the reel, a trail of tape fluttering behind it. The door was closed, a large red button marked “Incinerate” was pushed and the machine began to heat up.

Black smoke rose from a tiny pipe on the roof of Crosley High School.

DAY 160



RIVER'S STORY

I check my phone a hundred times a day hoping to hear back from Carson. I'm beyond desperate. It's been three weeks. Something has to happen. All I know is that his dad is still waiting on the permits for shooting in and around my school. Someone keeps blocking and delaying them, probably someone involved with my church.

Once they have them, though, they're going to come out and start doing interviews and shooting. I wished it was now. Why did I have to wait? I didn't know how much longer I could hold out.

This morning was one of the toughest days I've had, as I got ready for school. I have to act like the old Melody, even though I'm not Melody. I'm River. I am. I know I am.

I showered and did my hair like I always do, I put my corset and panties on, and my bra. I have to wear a bra now, and it's been the most savage blow to my psyche yet. I have what Mrs. Reed says are 28 B-cup breasts on my chest. I don't know if I can even explain it. It was like some kind of haziness in my mind lifted when Harmony pointed them out to me. I hadn't even noticed that I was growing breasts until then. I couldn't have missed it. It couldn't have happened overnight. Just one day, I realized that the flabby parts of my chest were real, feminine, breasts.

Neither Harmony nor Mrs. Reed acted like anything was out of the ordinary. They behaved as if it was just like I needed to trim a toenail. "Those breasts need a bra," Harmony said, as she squeeze them one morning. "I'll get you one of mine."

Now, I wear a bra and panties every day. Just like any girl would.

I was worried my folks would notice and say something, but then I realized I hadn't actually seen them in weeks. I had forgotten all about keeping up appearances. I had essentially moved in with the Reeds and ignored Greg and Feather. How had I not noticed? Why hadn't they come by to check on me? Had they forgotten about me? Were my parents really that flaky... Or was something *making* them forget about me?

Knowing what I know about the military somehow being tied into all this, I can't keep my thoughts straight. One moment, I want to bring it all down, the next, I want to live with Harmony forever.

This morning, as I stood in front of my closet, considering what I would wear, I just wanted to throw myself in, and let them engulf me and never let me go.

I had to back away, close the door and sit down on my bed. I decided that I would wear my old clothes today. I didn't care if it was going to jeopardize everything. I had to do it.

I put on my jeans, my flannel shirt and my sneakers. I couldn't believe it. I was standing on the pant legs, holding the waist up with one hand. I looked like a child in their father's clothes, they were so big on me. The tails of my shirt covered my knees. The collar was so large, it slipped over one of my shoulders. I had shrunk. I really had.

Using my bedside window as a way to measure, knowing that most windows were 32 inches from the floor, I estimated that I was now five feet, five inches tall.

Whatever these people were doing was so far beyond what I thought they were capable of — what *anyone* was capable of. It didn't seem it could be real. Was it real? Or had they messed with my mind so much that I just *thought* I had shrunk?

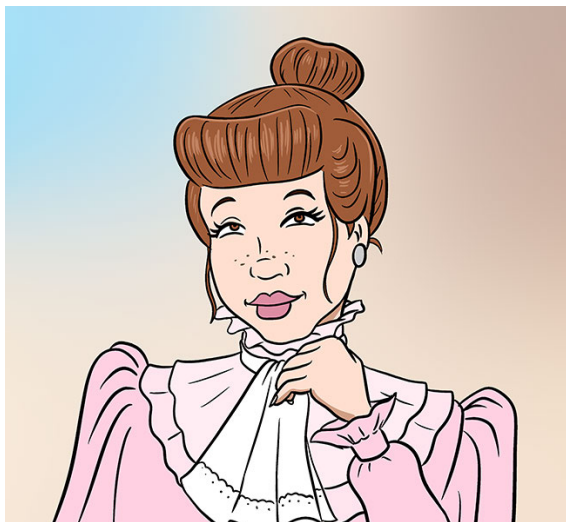
I guess over time, over the past five or six months, it could happen so gradually that I might have not noticed what was happening. Could they do that? Could they do any of this?

I took my clothes off and stashed them away again. I wanted to jump out the window and kill myself. I



had such strong and wild impulses, like clawing my skin off or launching my head through a mirror. I don't know how I managed to control myself.

But the only way out was to finish what I started. I walked to the closet, opened it back up, and picked an outfit. As I held the fabric, the strangest things started to calm my mind. I thought that I didn't really mind having such a small body. I liked how soft my skin was. If I was this



smaller version of me, I might be able to live with it. As long as I could wear these clothes, I'd be happy. The more feminine I was, the happier I would be.

I may have been dressing as Melody, I may look like Melody, I may even act like Melody, but I was still River. I just had to keep telling myself that.

I put on my best pink blouse, some white tights, my best long skirt, and tied my neck up with a tight, a frilly white ascot. With my Mary Janes on my feet, I looked into the mirror.

I was smiling. Even knowing what they had done to me, and what I had become, I was smiling. I liked looking like this. I liked being this. It all made sense when I was Melody. Everything was better when I was Melody.

DAY 162



LYLE'S STORY

Jasper looked at all the things I had piled up against the wall, the bouquets, the perfume, the chocolates, the dress boxes and shoes.

"All this in three months?" He asked me.

"That's just *this week*," I replied, adjusting my bra. Garrett don't have the sense God gave a goose. More money than brains. He just wouldn't take no for an answer. I am *not* going to be his girlfriend.

"You're a trophy girlfriend," Jasper said.

"Bite your tongue," I told him.

I would have refused these gifts, but I was living in his family's guest house. I don't rightly think it would be polite to send them back.

We was supposed to only be here for a night, but Momma needed to see a doctor for her nerves, and she spent a couple of days in the hospital, and so we didn't have time to look for a new place and none too much money.

This ain't my idear neither. Momma herself told me this was all my fault, and that if I didn't want to sleep in a ditch and scrape my dinner off the highway that we'd accept Garrett's family's invitation to stay in the guest house — and I'd keep pretending to be a girl.

"I don't know why you complain so much about living here," Jasper said to me, looking around the guest house. It was nice, there was no debatin' that. The furniture was new, the beds were soft, the carpet was plush, and it was cleaner than I thought you could ever get a house to be. Everything looked so nice you'd have thought you'd died and gone to heaven. We even had a maid come in to clean up every day. "If it was me, I'd do anything to stay here."

"Even dressing like a girl?" I replied.

Jasper laughed. "You've been doing it so long, sometimes I forget you're *not* a girl."

It *had* been a long time. At first, when Momma made it clear I didn't have a choice, I was thinking I just had to pretend to be female when I was here in the house. Then Garrett transferred into Crosley, because he's stalking me, and when that happened, I had to have the office alter my records. Now I use the name "Matilda Leighton" when I'm at school.

It sounds like I'm lyin', but the school had no problem changing my records. I

came to Mr. Tempkins, and explained everything that had happened. He said he understood, and he'd try to make sure I would be taken care of by the staff and students at Crosley. They even gave me a new class schedule and a locker, too. Mr. Tempkins also gave me an audio player for me to listen to, and said it would help calm me down and get my head screwed on right. I think it does, too. I feel much better after an hour or two of listening to the music on them.

At school, I thought all the students would recognize me when I first showed up in a dress, but no one has. Only Jasper knows the truth. Everyone else thinks I'm a new student — a girl student named Matilda Leighton.

It doesn't help that I'm losing so much weight, neither. We eat with the Belmont family every night, and they serve these tiny portions. The scale says I'm down to 112 pounds, but that can't be right. My butt doesn't feel very thin, that's for sure, and the fat that I've got growing on my chest tells me I should be gaining weight, not losing it.

These bras Momma makes me wear make me look like I've got breasts, too. I hate 'em, I do. I wish I was back home, tillin' the soil, running the tractor in the field. This is supposed to be plantin' season, and I got me the itch to do some farmin'. Instead, I'm spending my days at a country club.

The Belmonts put me and Momma on their list for access to their club, and that's where I spend most of my time after school and on weekends. At first, I





didn't much cotton to hanging around a bunch of pansy-ass rich folk, but Garrett introduced me to some of his friends, and pretty soon we were playing golf together. It's nice to have a place to go where you can relax and take your mind off things, I reckon. I an't none too bad at golf, either. Especially using the ladies' tees.

I do worry about Momma, though. She ain't been herself lately. She started goin' to the hair salon and gets her hair done all blond and fancy. She makes me go, too. I hate what they done to my hair, makin' it all so shiny and dark, but I guess it goes with my disguise.

Anyway, Momma's lost even more weight than I have and she's talkin' all highfalutin, using college words, like she's one of them. Turns out, she's got one of those audio players like I do, and listens to it every day. I guess it's some kinda fad or somethin'. She says Mr. Tempkins gave it to her for helpin' her adjust. All I know is that she's adjustin' maybe a little *too* much. We ain't rich folk, and we shouldn't act like it none.

"I guess I best be goin'," Jasper said, as he headed to the door.

I didn't get to see him that much these days, so I was sorry to see him go. But I did have a date with Garrett this evening, and I needed to pick out an outfit and do my face. "Thanks for droppin' by," I said.

"Shore thing," he replied. He looked nervous for a moment, and I thought he was gonna say something, but the look on his face was all I needed to see. He looked kinda all scared-like. I know how he felt. I was scared when I looked in the mirror, too. I didn't recognize myself half the time. I was spending too much time pretending to be a girl, and I wasn't so sure I was doin' as much pretendin' as I should be.

One he was gone, I stripped out of my day clothes and picked out a nice little black dress and heels for Garrett. I put on a coat of smear-free lipstick, as Garrett was always mussin' up my face with his kisses. No, I wasn't his girlfriend, but the boy did have a sweet-as-molasses garage full of cars, and if I was nice to him, he'd take me out in one of 'em for a drive.

I was not allowed to get in the driver's seat under any circumstances, which is fair. I did destroy a whole blasted house, after all.

Thing is, I did not expect him to propose to me last night.

Of course I turned him down. I ain't gone crazy. It's that boy who's a few pickles short of a barrel.

DAY 173



JAMARCUS' STORY

Six months is not enough time to get a new wardrobe, you know. I can't be seen wearing that trash-heap of clothes I used to wear. Boot cut jeans? Sneakers? Boys tidy whites? I mean, what was I thinking? Oh my God. Madison and I have go out shopping almost every weekend with Mrs. Dawson, and bring back tons of new clothes, just to have something to wear for the next week of classes — but it's never enough. I mean, I have kind of a basic look, it's not that different every day, but still, it's like I had nothing to wear in my closet to begin with. Same for Maddy, too.

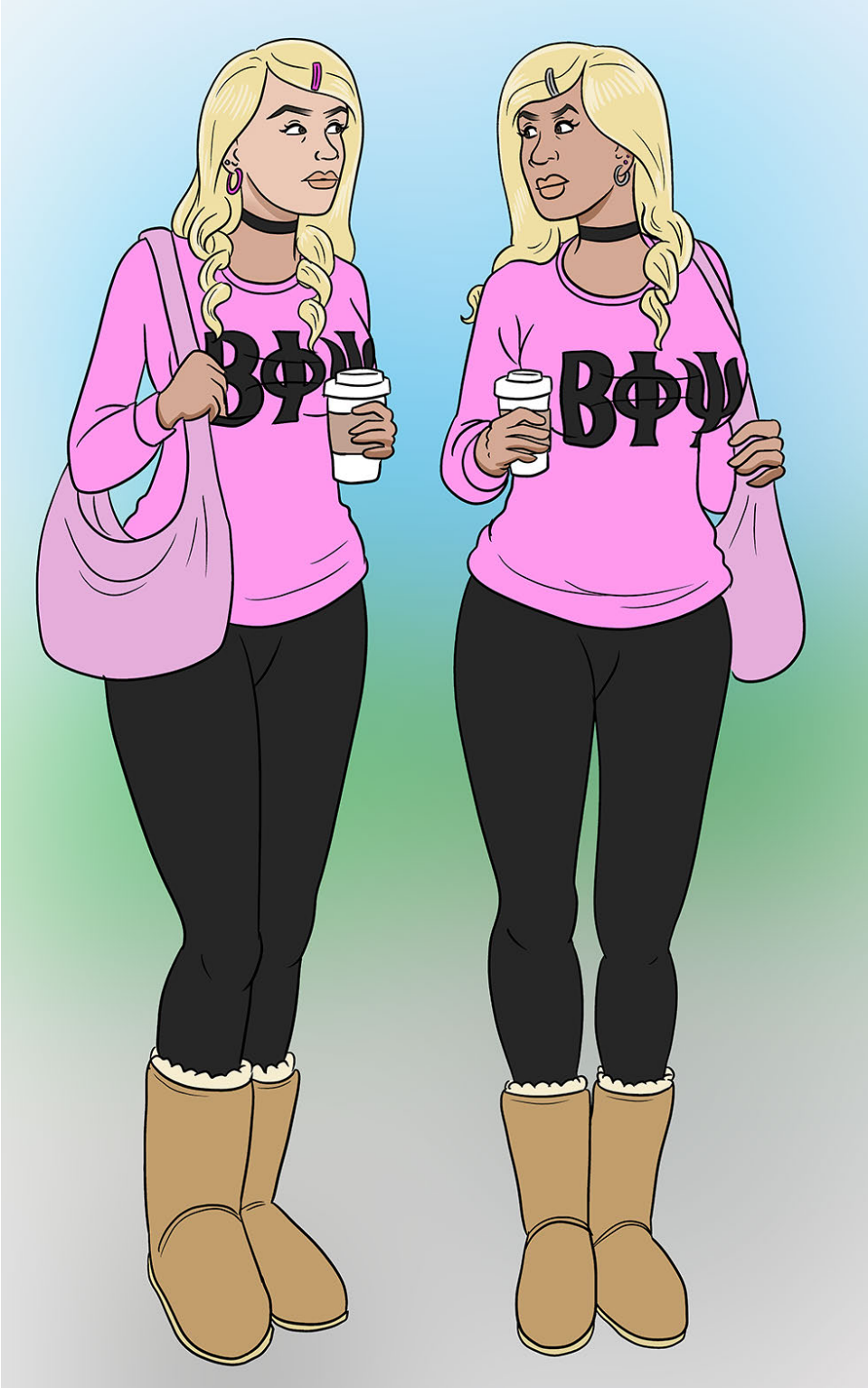
Oh, by the way, my skin cleared up eventually, if you were wondering. That rash stopped and my skin was way smoother than it ever was, and no annoying hairs, either. I still use the cover, because I kinda feel naked without it. So does Madison. Unfortunately, that rash has left my skin totally faded. At least I think it's faded. I asked Madison about it, 'cuz the same thing is happening to him, and he said he doesn't remember his skin being any darker than it was now. But me, I remember having much darker skin. Am I going nuts?

And on the subject of losing my mind, I think my face has changed. I first noticed it in Madison, how his nose looked smaller, and his eyes bigger, and his lips were pinker and fuller, and he said that I looked the same, and he was right. I guess sometimes you can focus so much on the details you miss the bigger picture. My face did look different — it looked so much cuter.

I mean, I think my chin is too small, and my ears could probably be pinned back, and I can't stand my neck. It's so wrong for my shoulders. But I guess my face is better than it used to look. At least I like it better.

Living with Madison is like living with a mirror. I remember when Madison used to be taller than me, he had a bad case of Dad bod, and always had stubble on his face. People always said I took after him, but that was when he was still Dad-sized and Dad-shaped. The other day, we were doing our brows in the mirror, and all the sudden, I realized that we were the almost the same height, and had the same figure. I mean, yeah, we're related, so we should look alike, but when did he start looking like almost *exactly* like me?

Not only was he stealing all my stuff, he was stealing what I look like! Okay, yeah, I know you can't really do that — unless you have some sort of secret government technology with a billion-dollar budget to make gene-altering drugs or something — but it feels unfair.



Oh, and I'm down to 135 pounds now. I had to cut out breakfast, but at least I don't feel so fat anymore. My hips are huge, though. Ashleigh told me that I could lose more if I cut out the five pumpkin spice lattes I have every day, but that's not going to happen. Over my dead body.

Ashleigh? Yeah, she's one of the more popular girls in school. Madison and I have her in our English class, after she recently transferred in. She's pretty hot, dates a lot of boys, and is the kind that usually never talks to a guy like me.

She was saying to Madison that she wanted to go see a movie, the latest Zac Efron film, but she had just broken up with her boyfriend, who was going to take her. I was going to go see it anyway, so I offered to go with her.

Before I realized it, I had a date with a popular girl. I wasn't going to screw it up this time. This was probably my last chance this year, so I spent most of the afternoon getting ready, picking out the perfect outfit, doing my hair, and doing my killer brows everyone knows me for.

It was kind of embarrassing that when I picked her up we were practically wearing the same outfit: black stretch pants, tan riding boots, and a puffy hoodie vest. She didn't seem to care much, so I guess it was okay.

Ashleigh thanked me for doing this, and that was probably the first time any girl ever thanked me for taking them out. She asked if I wanted to stop by a place and get something to eat, and she suggested a Downtown Froyo nearby, which sounded perfect to me. I love their Nutella Banana Deluxe with sprinkles. I can't get enough Nutella. So addicting.

Ashleigh couldn't stop talking about Zac Efron, and how she had this whole fantasy life plotted out for them. She had their wedding all planned out down to the cake she wanted to get. She even said she keeps a scrapbook at home full of pictures of him where she's cut out her face and placed them over the pictures of the actress he's dating. Some might call that psycho, but to me, it sounded kind of romantic.

So we got our froyo and then headed over to the theater. We had to wait in line, because we both thought the other had gotten tickets online.

"Look at her. So fat," Ashleigh said, looking at a girl who was walking into the theater on the arm of her boyfriend.

"That's mean!" I said.

"Well, it's true." Ashleigh turned in another direction. "Check out that hair. Oh my God. Her mom probably cuts it."

I looked for myself, and I had to admit, it was a really bad hairstyle. That girl looked ridiculous.

"And look at that little hippo," Ashleigh continued, looking at a girl who was standing at the candy counter. "Why not pass on the candy, lard-ass. You could use a salad."

I saw for myself the girl she was talking about, and yes, she was pretty plump. Well, not just plump. You could see where her fat legs were being held in by her control panties. "I hope she paid for two tickets," I said. "One for each thigh."

Ashleigh giggled and bumped me with her shoulder. "You're awful," she said.

I liked hearing her laugh. "What about her?" I said nodding towards a middle-aged woman who was reading a movie poster on the wall. "Don't show your midriff after 25, okay? Your belly button isn't supposed to look like it's melting."

Ashleigh was amused. "She probably thinks she's a trophy wife."

"A trophy? For what, the Special Olympics?"

Ashleigh laughed out loud. I have to admit, that was a pretty good one. We spent as long as we could outside the theater as we judged people going in. It was almost more entertaining than the film.

The first thing I did after the movie was use the bathroom. I hate to admit it, but my eyes were running after crying so much.

I wiped away the runs as best I could. I really should have taken my eye stuff with me.

"You should always carry a bag," Ashleigh said to me, as she fixed my eyes in the car. She used mascara, which was much better than whatever it was the nurse gave me.

To cheer ourselves up, I put some Shania Twain on the radio and we sang through her album on the way home.

When I dropped Ashleigh off at her house, it was only then that I realized that I hadn't even tried to put the moves on her.

"See you at school!" She said as she waved goodbye. Did that mean she was going to hang out with me again?

Finally, I had my very first girlfriend!

And I'm happy to say that we are the best of friends, too. Ashleigh is so fun. She's a little mean sometimes, but I like her. She even does lunch with us now: me, Madison, Jeff and Kevin, where we all sip our PSL's. (That's for Pumpkin Spice Latté, in case you're tragically out of the loop.) Does that make us an official clique? All I know is that ever since then, we've been way more popular with everyone. We get invited to parties, we get good seats at the games, and guys open the door for us. It's kinda awesome.

So that's how freaky my life has been for the past six months. Even if I have a better social life, I wish I didn't have to figure out what was up with Madison, or why my school counsellor was now acting like I was his kid. I especially don't like sharing all my stuff. My life was totally broken. It always seems like nothing



ever works out for me, and my days are always the same. So boring.

DAY 183



RIVER'S STORY

"You look nervous," Harmony said to me as I sat in class.

"Do I?" I replied, putting my long-nailed finger to my pink glossy lips. "I don't know why."

I knew why. I had finally gotten word about the plans for the documentary. The permits had come through, and things were scheduled to start today. Carson's dad was coming with two full crews to shoot material. One crew was going to shoot surprise interviews with Mr. Reed and the school Principal. While they were distracted, another crew was going to go was the Superintendent's office. They were going to get as much footage of the dead Mr. Crosley and the trailer as they could. They would be the most important shots and the biggest part of the mystery, after all.

Any moment now, I was going to get a message that they were in town. I would then have a few minutes to try and distract Harmony, so she wouldn't get in the way.

"Relax," Harmony said. "It's just another day at old Crosley High."

"Of course it is," I said.

"I like that outfit. You must be so proud of it."

The clothes I had chosen for today, the last day I'd ever be Melody, are my very favorite. I had made it myself. It wasn't just cute on me, I looked as pretty as I ever had. If I could wear it every day, I would.

I had also done up my hair more like Harmony's. I wanted our last day together to be the one where we felt the closest. Like we were sisters.

"You expecting a message from Derek?" Harmony asked as I checked my phone again.

"Maybe," I replied, hoping I sounded sincere.

We were seated next to a glass case, and I got a good look at my reflection in it. I couldn't give this up. I was such a... Proper girl. A perfect, proper girl.

I looked at Harmony. I didn't want to ever leave her. She was a perfect, proper girl. My hero. We were sisters more than just in spirit. We wanted the same things in life. We wanted to have a family we could love and who loved us back, a strong sense of discipline, feel both the fear of God and his love, and most of all, we wanted to be good girls. The best girls. We were passionate about the



same things.

“Would you clean the chalkboard, Melody?” The teacher asked.

I was quickly to my feet. “Yes!” I said with the joy in my heart surely showing through. I wanted to help. I wanted to be needed. I wanted to be trusted. I wanted to be the proper student I knew I was.

It suddenly seemed so ridiculous to me that I was ever going to give this up. I couldn't. This was me. It was River that was the lie. I was Melody Reed. I was always going to be Melody Reed.

Harmony trusted me. She counted on me. Now I was betraying her. I couldn't. I *wouldn't*!

As I wiped the chalk off the board, I pictured myself doing the same to my life. No more River. No more boy. No more worries. Erase, erase, erase.

I wasn't going to betray Harmony. As soon as class ended, I grabbed my phone.

“It's off,” I typed in. “I'm not going to help you.” I sent it to Carson. “Go back or I'll tell the police what you're planning to do. They'll arrest you. Leave us alone.”

Still, I had to stop whatever was happening. I didn't want to save myself, but I could stop it from happening again. I didn't need to tell anyone. I didn't need to tell Harmony. I could just do some quick sabotage on that voice box. Without that, the whole operation would collapse. I could help everyone and still be Melody.

And I didn't have to do it today. After all, I didn't really understand what was going on, and how it was being done. Maybe these students wanted to be changed into girls. Maybe they were better off.

That's what I resolved to do. I was going to let it go for now, and when I understood the situation, then I would do something. Or maybe not. Maybe I wouldn't have to. Maybe everything would work out.

I immediately felt so much better. Staying as Melody was what God wanted for me. I was meant to be her. To be me. I was Melody Reed now, and no one else.

As I returned to my desk, I checked my phone for the inevitable shocked reply. There was no answer yet. I didn't care. I was doing the right thing.

“Melody,” Harmony said, placing her hand on my arm, “I have a secret I've been dying to share with you. I'll tell you more after class.”

A few minutes later, we were walking out of the school hallway. “What did you want to tell me?” I asked.

“Well, I was talking to Greg and Feather and...”

I interrupted. “Who are Greg and Feather? Is that like a comedy team or

something?” What funny names.

“Oh, uh...” She seemed bemused. “Never mind. I mean, listen. I got some great news. My parents have decided to file the papers. Adoption papers. We’re going to be officially sisters!”

“What?” I shrieked. “What do you mean?”

“Don’t tell them I told you! They made me promise to keep it a secret.”

“I’m going to be... Really be... Your sister? I’m going to be a part of your family?”

“*Our* family... Sister.”

“Oh my God!” I yelled louder than I ever had before. “I don’t believe it!” Harmony grabbed me and hugged me as I unleashed a torrent of tears into her shoulder. I was a total mess. But I was so happy! I *really* was going to be the *real* Melody Reed! I was going to call Mr. and Mrs. Reed Mom and Dad! Well, Dad and Mom. You know what I mean. I was finally going to have a real family!

“I made the right decision!” I said as I cried joyously.

“What?” Harmony asked.

“Never mind.”

In my audio learning class, I probably looked like a basket case. I was alternately laughing and crying.

I couldn’t believe I had finally found a family. Growing up without parents had been so difficult, and I had almost betrayed my new ones.

Checking my phone again, it had been two hours since I had sent my message, and I still hadn’t heard back from Carson. I was worried that maybe he might have missed it. That would make things really complicated.

I couldn’t live with myself if what I had done hurt my new family. I was a Reed now, and I was going to be the most amazing sister and daughter ever.

By the afternoon, though, I really was getting worried. Nothing from Carson. If they went ahead with the plan, and missed my message it would be just as bad, maybe even worse, then if I had followed through with my stupid plan.

School finally let out for the day and I headed out to the curb to meet Mr. Reed — I had to tell myself to call him that, not Dad, until they wanted to tell me the good news. That’s when I saw it. The film truck. It was marked as “Apex Film Equipment Rental” and had a couple of grown men with camera equipment hanging around outside. As soon as they saw the students begin to leave the school, one of them mounted a big camera on his shoulder and quickly ran towards us.

Just as quickly, I could see the Vice Principal darting out of the school office and running towards them, with an angry, mean look on his face. “Cease! Cease filming! This is a protected area!” He was yelling. Behind him, trotting

along, was the Principal and a few other staff members alongside him, looking extremely worried. "You can't film here! There are laws!" The Principal yelled.

The Vice Principal was throwing his body in front of the lens, trying to block the shot, but the cameraman was successfully dodging him.

That's when Mr. Reed drove up, saw what was happening, and got out of his car.

"That's the priest!" One of the production assistants yelled out, pointing to my new father. "Get some action shots!"

It was a nightmare coming true. It was all falling apart. These people were going to ruin everything. They were parasites. Parasites from the liberal media, destroying everything good.

Why must the liberals always ruin everything? They have no respect for people.

All of the sudden, I felt two hands on my arms, gripping me like a vise.

"Let's get out of here," said Derek, who quickly turned me around. "This looks kinda serious."

I was frozen in place, out of rage and fear, so he swept me up in his arms and carried me back into the school. I practically melted in his grasp. He was trying to rescue me! By *boyfriend* was rescuing me! Who said chivalry is dead?

As soon as he set me down though, I had to go. I kissed him on the cheek for the help, and then explained, "I have to find my sister!"

I ran through the halls, and found Harmony at her locker. "Harmony! We have to get out of here!"

"Why?" She asked.

"I'll explain later!"

Trusting me, like I knew she would, she left her books behind and took my hand. There was a rear exit from the school, which would take us through a thicket of trees and place us at a bus stop.

We ran as best we could, being girls in long skirts and all, and reached our destination. "We need to call Mom," I said. "Dad's in trouble, and so are we!"

"What do you mean?" She asked.

I paused. Was this what I really wanted to do? I meant to stop this whole operation, not protect the people involved. Even if I was a member of the Reed family, I couldn't give up everyone else trapped in this scheme.

I had let my emotions get the best of me. Here I was, even calling myself Melody Reed, and already thinking of Harmony's parents as my own. I had to back off. Melody was completely taking over my mind.

"I... Uh..." I had to think of something. "Just call your mother, and tell her she

needs to pick us up. There are... Some people... Out front who might give us some trouble.”

“What kind of trouble?”

“Just call her, okay? This is serious.”

“But Dad should be here any second.”

“I know, but he’s not going to be able to do it.”

Confused, and reluctant, she did call Mrs. Reed, and after a very brief conversation, said that she'd be here in about fifteen minutes.

“Could you please tell me what this is all about?”

“I... Can't really. I don't have all the answers.”

“Tell me when you feel you can, okay?” Harmony said. “I want you to know that I love you and trust you.”

Mrs. Reed took us home, saying her husband had just called her after she hung up. She told me I did the right thing by having her come get us.

Did I?

DAY 184

I woke the next morning in total blackness. I felt around, but I wasn't where I should have been. I wasn't in my bedroom.

I felt dirt under my body, as I was laying down. I could see a couple of very dimly-lit walls made of cinder block. It was lit by moonlight through the bars on an open-air window. I was in some kind of jail.

I felt the wall. It was cold and had scratch marks on it. I could even see a message someone had written.

THEY WANT TO MAKE ME FORGET

...is what it said. Then, written several times,

MY NAME IS RENWICK

MY NAME IS RENWICK

and finally,

MY NAME IS RE

Renwick. I knew that name, but I couldn't place it.

Below it, in an entirely different style, was scribbled,

Ashleigh was here 2019 XOXOXO

Then I could place it. That was that boy who had told me about the Superintendent's office. He had been here. He had been held prisoner? And now he went by "Ashleigh."

What did they do to him here?

More urgently, I wondered what they were going to do to *me*. I felt around for anything in the darkness, and found a steel-riveted door with no handle. I then stumbled across something heavy on the ground.

I felt that it was alive. It was another person, but it was too dark to see anything. Whoever it was, there was no response. This person had been drugged.

It was an hour later when the darkness outside started to lighten. It was becoming morning. I could finally get a look at who my unconscious cellmate was.

It was Carson.

I checked, and he seemed to be in okay shape, a little dirty, but no blood or bruises. I sat down next to him to wait for him to wake up.

An hour after that, I could hear some activity outside the door. It wasn't long before I could hear a key inserted into a lock, and making a large clanking noise. The heavy metal door squealed its way open.

"You guys okay?" Harmony asked.

“You came!” I said. “Let’s get out of here!”

“Whoa, hold on there,” she said with a laugh. “I’m the one who put you *in* here.”

“What?” I asked, profoundly stunned.

“Okay guys, a little help?” Harmony called back into the doorway.

“Why am I a prisoner?” I asked.

“Just a precaution,” Harmony said with a smile. “I didn’t want you relapsing and running away on our big day.”

Two members of the school staff, Mr. Tempkins and Mr. Dawson came in and quickly hoisted Carson up by the arms. He was still unconscious as they carried him away, his feet dragging in the dirt.

“Where are they taking him?” I asked, getting up.

“He’ll be fine. He just needs a little preparation.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Melody,” she said, with a deep breath. “It’s going to be okay. Your friend is going to be fine.”

“Really?”

“Sure. Once he’s a girl, he’ll be better than ever.”

I didn’t say anything. There was no response or question I could think of.

“Okay? He’s even going to go to school with us. I know you missed him. Now he’ll be here every day.”

“No,” was all I could think to say.

“Well, yes. It’s been decided.”

“By who?” I asked. “Who is doing this?”

“Mafu is. Mafu is our savior.”

Mafu? As in MAFU-0783-1A5B? “The trailer? How...?”

“Sit down,” Harmony said.

I didn’t move.

Harmony produced a tazer from her pocket. “Sit down,” she repeated, as the electrodes shot bolts of plasma between them.

I sat. Harmony joined me, resting on her knees.

“Mafu came to us many years ago. It was almost by accident that the great Mafu was sent to save us.”

“It’s a military mobile medical unit,” I had to say.

“It was, at one time, yes. It was the Mobile Applied Fertility Unit.”

They knew. They had seen what I had seen.

“Decades ago, the government feared that a nuclear or viral war might devastate the ability of Americans to have children. They foresaw a time where the simple act of having a child was in jeopardy.”

“But it wasn't,” I said. “It never has been.”

“Oh yes it was. Our messiah, the courageous and wise Crosley, knew so. He could see that the fertility rates in his schools were dropping dramatically. When less than fifteen percent of his students were female, he called up the government for assistance. He suspected something was wrong in the environment. To correct the problem, they sent us Mafu.”

Listening to her talk, it was becoming vividly apparent to me that she was insane. My so-called sister. She had always seemed so sure and confident of herself, but that confidence hadn't come from her own fortitude. It had come from believing in this madness. With every word, I feared her more and more.

“Mafu was installed to save us. It's divine powers are beyond us. Like so many things we were not meant to understand, Mafu had powers we could not comprehend. All we needed to know was that if we worshipped and sacrificed to Mafu, it would save us.”

“Sacrifice?”

“Boys,” Harmony explained.

“Boys are given to Mafu for cleansing and purification. Girls come back.”

“That's deranged.”

“There's nothing deranged about it. It is, after all, a machine. An automated surgical machine. A young man is sent into the machine, and computerized surgery is performed. Their manhood is removed, and replaced with maidenhood. When they recover, they're fully functional females, fertile and ready to breed.”

I probably sounded like the dumbest person alive, but I couldn't quite put my words together. “B... B... But... H... How? F... From what?”

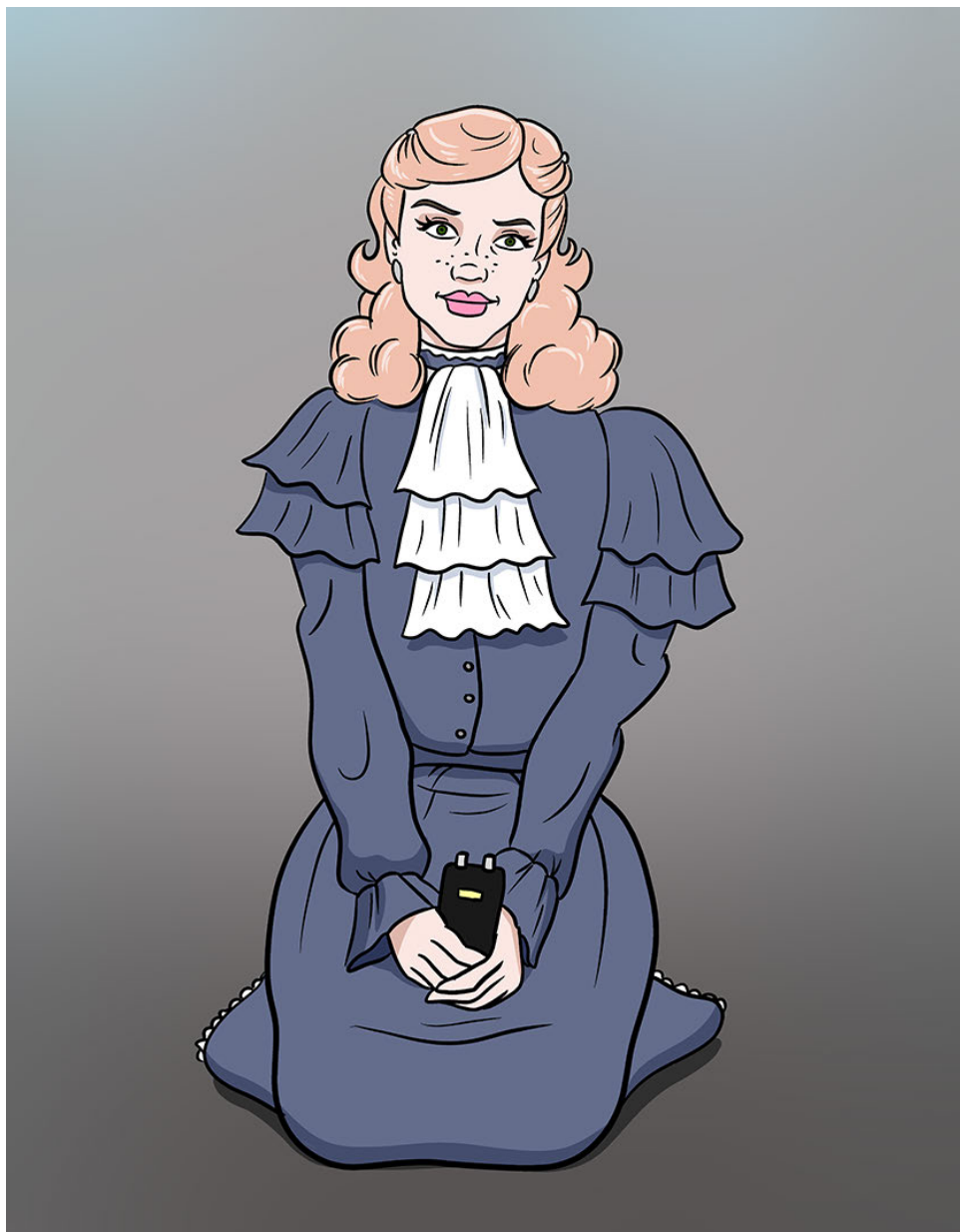
“It has enough frozen female reproductive systems inside to implant into new hosts for two centuries. We dare not ask how, we are not meant to know.”

“But boys wouldn't just... Crawl into a machine that would mangle them and...”

“That is the glory that is Mafu!” Harmony sang loudly. “Praise Mafu in its wisdom, for Mafu can do more than this. It can control the operations of our school, prepare our students, staff and families for the transition, and make them ready by conditioning their minds. Ready to be healed.”

“The box.”

“That's right, you've seen it,” Harmony said. “No one is allowed into the tomb



of Crosley. Your presence was... *Noted.*" She looked disappointed with me. "But yes, The Box guides us. It tells us what to do and how to do it — and does so invisibly. Few even perceive that Mafu is speaking to them."

It hypnotizes people. That part I knew. "But..." I looked down at my chest. My breasts. "How does..."

"Mafu has three great powers, The Healing, The Guidance and The Renewal. The Healing makes fertile women from a surplus of men. The Guidance com-

mands people to adjust and embrace their new future. The Renewal is the... Well, I should probably just show you how that works.”

She made a motion with the tazer. “Stand up.” I did, carefully. I didn’t trust her anymore. “Now...” Harmony jammed the tazer into my ribs of my corset. “...Let’s head outside.”

I noticed that we emerged from under the Superintendent’s office. I had been imprisoned in the basement. As we came out into the morning light, the trailer was making a louder noise than when I had seen it before, like a big gas generator. It was being readied for something.

She led me over to a panel on the side of the trailer. “Mafu has blessed us with this,” she said, pressing her finger into a depression on the panel. It popped open, and she swung it out. It was a video screen CRT, with a smaller door just beneath it. It was surrounded by buttons and dials. “It begins The Renewal.”

Harmony pressed her finger on a spike, where it drew blood.

I was so tense, I jumped in shock.

She then opened up the smaller door, removed a vial, and bled a few drops into it. She then returned the vial, where it was sucked into the machine.

On the screen, a crudely rendered 3D image of her face and body were displayed.

“Mafu can read our genetic structure. Then, we can modify it.” She turned some knob and pressed some buttons. The figure on screen grew a foot taller. The hair changed color to blond. The eyes to blue. She made the hips wider and the neck slimmer. “It’s kind of like a character creator,” she said. “But in the real world.” She pressed another button, and the machine started to make a high-pitched sound, like a thousand electric motors were going at full speed.

“It will take a few seconds, but in a little while, we’ll have a serum. One that when put into the food of any young person, would cause them to become this person on screen. It takes about eight months, but it’s never failed.” She hit another button. The noise inside the machine immediately died down as a vial of pink liquid popped out of a small dispenser. “But that was just a demo for you. We don’t need a real serum.” She ignored the vial.

I remembered back to the physical I had with the school nurse, and how they drew blood, and that I was confused as to why. I also remembered being prescribed “nutrition bars” with a pink filling that I then had to eat. Now these things started to make sense.

“That’s how you changed me?”

“That’s how!” She said. “You’re based on me! You have about 91% of my DNA.”

Days ago, I would have been excited to hear that. Now, I felt like I had been poisoned.

"Is that why I'm thinking like you?" I asked.

"It does affect the mind, a little," she said. "The Guidance from the hypnosis brings out the personality that you are reborn with." Harmony grinned, impishly. "Don't worry, you'll only think 91% like me." She then returned to her machine. "Today we're adding another disciple to the flock, another blessed beneficiary of Mafu's power. Your friend Carson will join us."

"Don't," I said. "Please don't. He doesn't know about any of this. Let him go."

"He knows enough. He and his father would have brought us to ruin. As long as we have him as one of us, his father won't interfere."

"You're going to hold him as ransom?"

"As a guarantee," Harmony said.

Then a thought suddenly struck me. "You. You're in charge of this. It's been you all along."

"I am but a humble vessel and servant for Mafu," she replied, piously. She had not denied my accusation.

"Who ran it before you?"

"The Messiah Crosley. Only he didn't last very long. He couldn't bear to leave his post. After he fired his secretary and told the staff to never approach the office, he remained there, in solitude, keeping the secret. He passed on from our realm to join Mafu."

"In 1980?"

"Yes!" Harmony said, looking a little startled that I knew this.

"But then who ran it?"

"Me. I did."

"You weren't even *born* in 1980."

She snickered. "Melody, I was born in 1962."

Even with all the things I had been shown and seen today, I couldn't quite believe it.

"You would be..." I tried to do the math.

"I'm 17," she stated. "And I have been since 1979."

"1962 would make you 57 years old."

"As I said, I am 17 — but I was born 57 years ago."

"How?" I asked, then answered for myself. "Mafu."

"Mafu's serum of The Regeneration is more than a way to re-generate the body. The body it makes is designed to be loved. It is designed to protect the fertility of our town. To do so, it keeps the young looking youthful and attractive for many years, allowing them to have many children."

That was the last question I really had, how this all came back around to “fertility.” Strangely, it all fit together now. There was a mad, absurd logic to it. A high school student didn’t need a lot of encouragement to have sex. If they were around for years, a teenage girl was bound to have many children, and sustain a high birth rate.

“You were born in 1962.”

“I was, and I was a Freshman at Crosley High in 1976. In my Junior year, that was when Mafu came. I was named Harold back then.”

“They changed you?”

“Mafu *healed* me. It made me see the virtue in being the girl I was meant to be. A good girl. A proper girl. A girl who could lead. A girl who could shepherd the flock. I was elected to the student body presidency where I could help Mafu in it’s divine mission.” She sighed. “So when Messiah Crosley passed on, I was blessed to be the first to discover it, and the glorious plan created for us. So I became the new caretaker of Mafu.”

“And your parents?”

“My parents died five years ago,” she said. She then chuckled. “Then, they were replaced. Actually, my current father is really my grandson.”

I don’t even remember what I said to that. It was so... twisted.

“But he and his wife really believe they are my true parents, thanks to The Guidance of Mafu.”

That was why they looked so young. She had them hypnotized into taking her parents’ place. It was fiendish, stealing their lives like she had.

“57,” I repeated, still having trouble with it. That did explain why her room was packed with 80’s stuff and she dressed in dated fashions. It wasn’t a retro thing, she had probably been into it all when it was new. “You’ve been 17 for forty years. That’s not possible.”

“Different people have different reactions to the serum. Most can only last for fifteen years as blessed bearers of youth and fertility. Some are lucky enough to last longer. I was one of the lucky ones.” She then looked sad. “But my time is coming to an end. I have served my purpose.”

“What does that mean?”

“I won’t be 17 next year. The serum is wearing off. I can feel it.” She then turned to me. “That’s why you were chosen.”

“Chosen?” I asked, wary of the obvious. “For...”

“To replace me, Melody. You received our messages and The Guidance so well. The tests say you might be blessed with youth and fertility for longer than any of us have ever known.”

“I won’t,” I said, reflexively. “I can’t... I can’t be a baby machine.”

"It's painless. When you have a child, it is given to a deserving local family. Mafu will then erase the memory and you can live on as normal, never knowing you were pregnant. I've had fourteen children, and I don't even recall a moment of bearing a child. You cannot deny the will of Mafu."

"It's just a dumb military experiment!"

"It began as such, yes, but now it blesses us with life. Mafu has transcended its' origins. It is now divine, a manifestation of God itself. It gives life to us, and we give life to Mafu. And now it's time for you to take over for me. That's why I'm telling you all this."

"I don't want it. No. I won't do this."

"We can use The Guidance on you, Melody."

"River!" I yelled. "My name is River!"

"No it isn't, and it never will be again."

A car pulled up, an old wood-paneled station wagon. Mr. Tempkins and Mr. Dawson exited and went to the back.

"He's been prepped?" Harmony asked. With the two men present, I noticed that she put the tazer in her dress pocket. She felt safer with them around, I guess.

"He's ready to receive his blessings from Mafu," Mr. Tempkins said, as he unlatched the rear door. They wheeled Carson out on a gurney, still unconscious, but now stripped naked and covered with a white sheet.

"Please, you can't do this. It's stealing his life!"

"It wouldn't have been necessary if you hadn't brought him into this."

It wasn't my fault. They were already onto their plot before I even knew anything about it. This wasn't my fault at all.

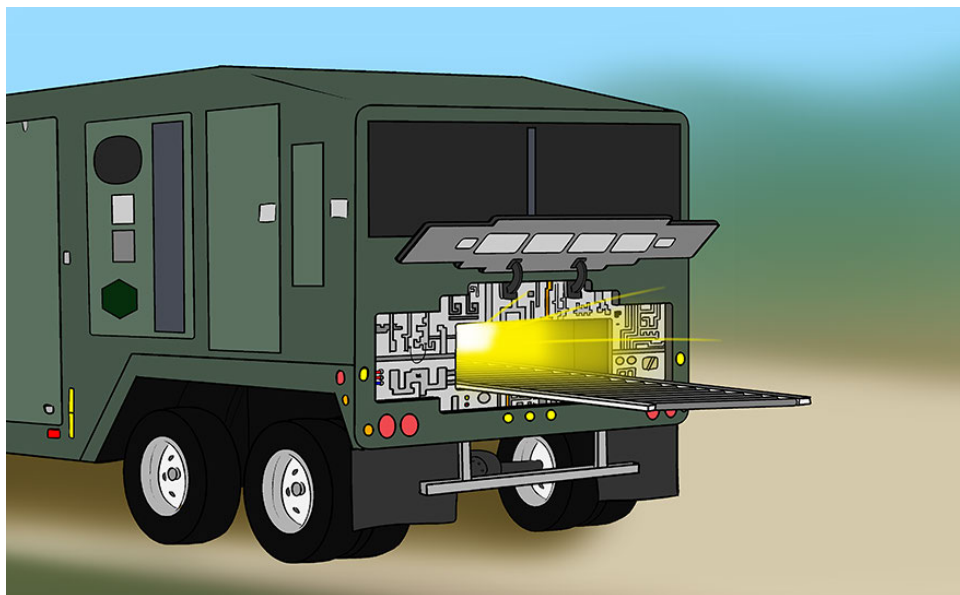
Harmony pressed another button on the side of the trailer, and another panel revealed itself. At the same time, a large horizontal door, large enough to fit a person on a gurney into, opened, and out came a conveyor belt. They were going to feed Carson into the machine.

"No, Jesus, no!" I said, as I dove for the control panel Harmony had just began to fiddle with. I tried to hit as many buttons as I could, but there was no response.

"It's locked to me," she said. "It only responds to my touch."

I backed away as she began to program the unit. I didn't know what to do. I couldn't let them do this to Carson. He and I had been through so much. He didn't deserve to be a brainwashed baby factory.

She walked to the genetic serum panel and picked up a vial that was resting in a holder. She must have already prepared it. She quickly transferred its con-



tents to a syringe.

Carson was being wheeled into place, as Harmony tested the syringe. If I was going to do something, that was the moment when I was going to have to do it.

I had one question still lingering in my mind. She said that I was 91% made from her DNA. I looked at the first panel Harmony had shown me, and saw the vial with the pink liquid in it. I quickly swallowed it.

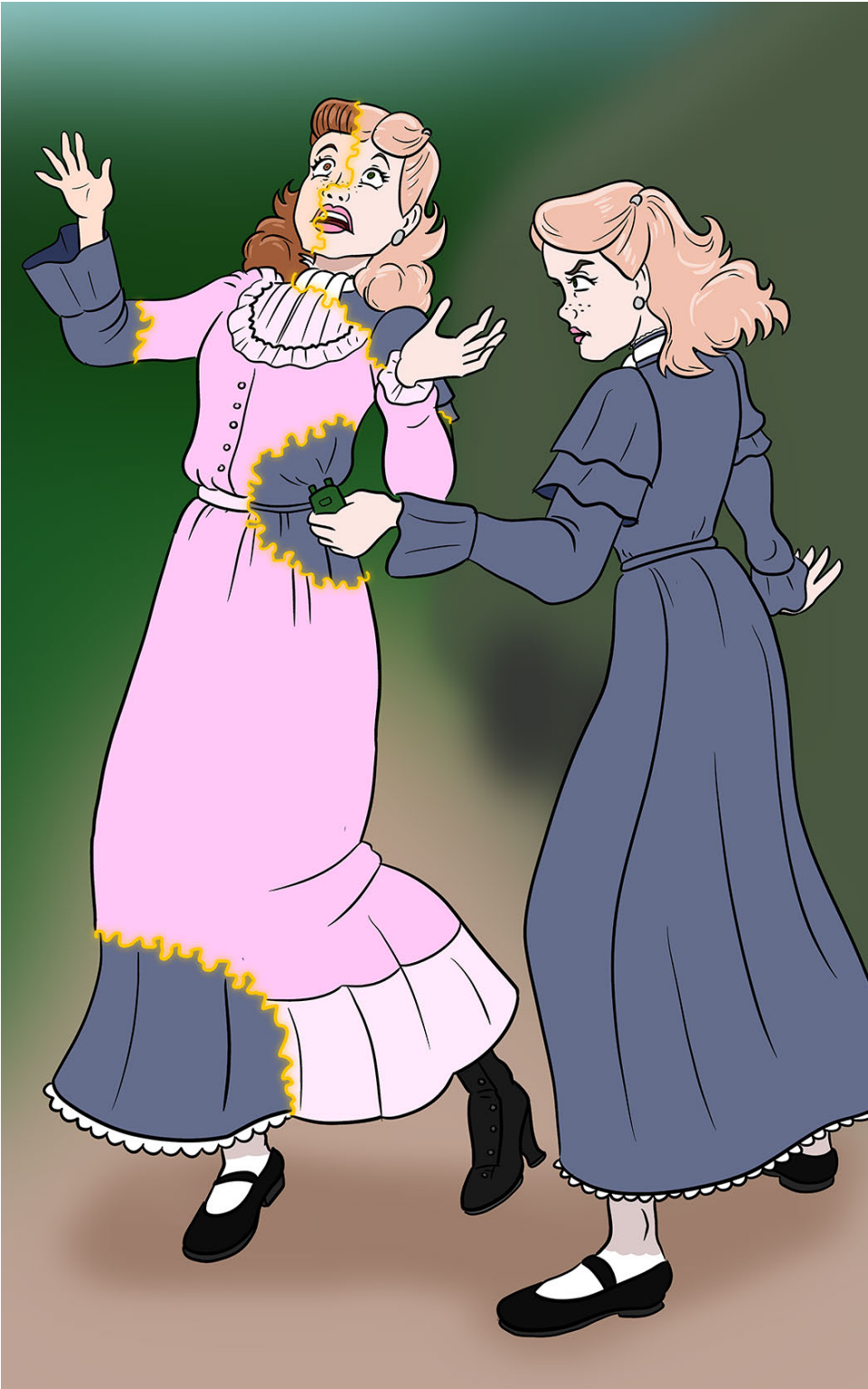
“What?” Harmony said, seeing me. “What are you doing? Stop it!”

Presumably, I had just swallowed a copy of Harmony’s DNA in serum form. If I was already 91% Harmony, this was going to finish off the last 9%. I hoped it might work quickly.

Harmony swiftly placed the syringe aside. “Help me with her,” she instructed Mr. Tempkins and Mr. Dawson. She reached into her pocket for the tazer, and she stuck it into my ribs, where she fired it.

My body seized up, and I could feel every cell of my being scream out in pain, but so much more intensely than from just electricity alone. The serum was doing something, I knew that much. I looked down at my hands. They weren’t mine anymore. They had changed. They were smoother, smaller, more delicate. I could see my nails growing longer, and colored in Harmony’s favorite shade.

Before I could be stopped, I pressed my finger on the controls again. They responded. I was now Harmony’s genetic twin, and the system recognized me as her. I don’t know if the shock had somehow accelerated things, but I was already seeing her bouncy strawberry blond hair fall into my range of vision. It shouldn’t have been possible in so little time, but I could see it.



Harmony actually gasped when she got a look at me, probably shocked that I now looked just like her. In my head, I could already feel my mind starting to think differently. I was becoming her.

The two staff members tried to grab me by the arms, but I dove out of the way. I got my hands on the panel that controlled the surgical door, and closed it.

The two men came after me again, but Harmony got in between and pushed them aside. “Let me take care of this,” she said, as she thrust the tazer at me.

I managed to side-step it, and the tazer instead hit the side of the metal trailer. It then boomeranged a massive, blinding white pulse of electricity right at Harmony, who dropped to the ground.

Her body, now charred and blackened, started to ooze out blood and fluids. She was dead. Very dead.

DAY 196



KEN'S STORY

So my old boss guy called up today and asked when I was coming back in to start up work, and I was like, you can't be serious! I have a state cheer competition next month, and I'm not going to stop training to go to a dumb job! LOL! Sure, Mom wants me to work this summer to pay for all the clothes I'm buying, but Kristin already said she'd get me a choice job where she works, which is at Hollister in the mall. That job is like, so clean! So I told my old boss: no way.

Now that I've been on the squad for seven months, I finally feel like I belong. Coaching was *so* not my thing. I'm a much better dancer. Although I'm an adult male, that doesn't seem to bother anyone at all. Actually, now that I came out as gay, I'm treated like one of the girls. And I'm now 108, so the uniform is *totes cutie cute* on me!

Yeah, so, I finally had to admit to myself that I'm gay. I know! Total shock! So y'know, at first, when I first met everyone, all the girls ever wanted to talk about was how hot the guys at school were and for the longest time, I didn't understand... But now it's, like, so obvious! Once I really started to pay attention, it was like, oh my God! I'm surrounded by the hottest boys!

It's not like I ever got a lot of pussy, so when I decided I was gay, it changed everything! I can get any boy any time! Especially after my boobs grew in. I have so many dates now!

Mom finally stopped bugging me, too. For a while, I thought she was going to pull me out of school or something, but when she went to go meet with the principal, the school counselor and the football coach, she changed her mind.

And I mean she really changed her mind! All of the sudden, she's taking me to the mall for sexy hot clothes, teaching me how to walk in high heels, and showing me how to pick up boys (like I need help with that). She's now a full-time cheer booster, and is always showing up to games and cheer competitions with the other cheer moms. I am so proud of her!

We did have to get a divorce, but that was because she's seeing the football coach now. Yeah! Think about it! Mom marrying the football coach? That's, like, totally legit! I'll be so popular at school! Ever since coming back from that meeting at school, when she decided to go blond and show off a little boob, Mom's really like a whole different person.

Of course we still do fight from time to time. She wants me to go for Junior

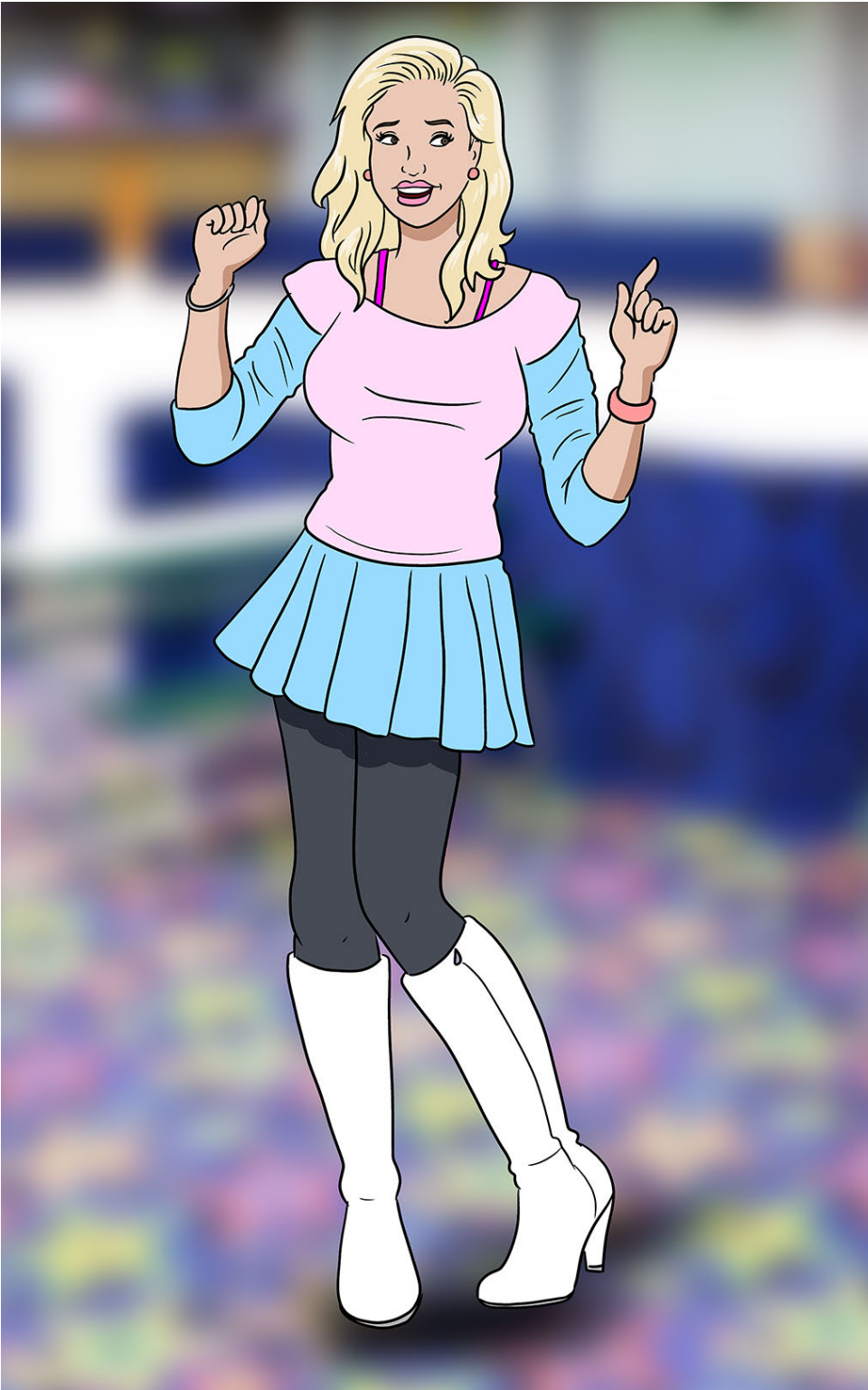
homecoming queen, but that's such a girly thing to do! So she's on me about that all the time. It's like she's totally forgotten that I'm a man and an adult, so I can make decisions for myself! Just like that surgery I decided, like a man, to get.

Oh, yeah! I won a scholarship! They called it the Christine Jorgensen Scholarship, awarded annually to the best new male student on the cheerleading squad. The prize is a free complete surgical "shopping spree." Isn't that great? Yeah, so the school set up surgery so I could permanently tuck my penis away. Now I don't have to hide my dick anymore. I guess since the guys knew I had a penis, that was totally turning them off, so goodbye, penis!

Oh, by the way, turns out that I'm not the only guy on the squad. All

the girls on the squad are boys! Mind. Blown. Britnie, the captain, was explaining it to me, and she said that some of them have been on the squad for fifteen years! Something about these nutrition bars keeps you looking girly, young and sexy and stuff, for, like, ever. I asked if that meant I could be in high school for fifteen more years, cheering on the boys n' wearing skirts n' stuff, and Britnie said maybe even longer than that! Way awesome! So, because we're kept looking cute and young we're expected to do whatever the jocks want us to do and date them and make out and be their property, basically. (Don't tell anyone, but I'd do it anyway!)





Mom said that proves that I'm a girl, but I think she's just old. Kids today aren't all into the binary gender thing anymore, like when she was in high school, a jillion billion years ago. All my friends on the squad are always reminding me: Kimberly, even if you don't have a penis, that doesn't mean you're not a man. Now that you have a pair of 36-C cups, that doesn't define who you are. Wearing skirts, dresses and high heels just means you're comfortable with your masculinity. And maybe you've been kissing all the cute jock boys day in and day out for months, but that doesn't define you as a person. You are who you are, down deep in your heart.

And I am a fully-grown adult man.

A man who's gotta get his homework done and do his hair before Chad picks him up for ice skating in thirty minutes! I got the perfect flirty little miniskirt-and-tights outfit for skating. Oh, and I'm wearing my lucky panties, too. Wink wink.

DAY 218



ALBERT'S STORY

Eight months? Like, seriously? I don't believe it. I mean, like, I *literally* don't believe it. Well, anyway, here's my new thing. Selfies. God, I love taking selfies. Alyssa would be so into it, too if she wasn't putting on that whole "A.J." act. At first, it was just because my best besties were doing it, but now, I think it's safe to say that Alyssa is the selfie queen of Crosley High. I take pics of all my outfits every morning, every meal I eat, every party I go to, every person I'm talking to and every toilet I throw up in. I gram it all, and everyone gets to see it. People just can't stop liking my photos! It's so cool!

Oh, and I have my own channel thing on YT. Mostly makeup tutorials and OOTD stuff, but sometimes I vlog a day in the life and junk. Check it out at RealAlyssa2002. Shoutout to Alyssa's Army! Like & subscribe!

Alyssa is going to have so many followers when she comes back. She'll be so happy to have all that attention, just like she likes it. She may be faking it now, but you know she's got a burning need to be praised and told how pretty she looks. Just give in, Alyssa!

But you know what I'm proudest of? People like me as Alyssa way more than Alyssa as Alyssa. Maybe her problem was that people didn't like her enough? Well, I solved that. Except for those freaks who used to be my friends, everybody likes me. Everyone is so friendly, so nice, always wanting to talk and stuff. People open doors for me, do my homework for me, pay for my lunch and even more. I even just get random gifts from random guys. It's, like, hey I think you're pretty, here's a necklace. They are so nice to me. If it's about having friends, Alyssa will have no problem stepping back into her shoes.

Lance is way more in love with me than he ever was with the real Alyssa, too. He follows me around school, carrying my stuff, making sure people don't give me any trouble. He beat up this one kid yesterday when he dropped his books in my path. Isn't that sweet? I swear Lance is so adorable. He's everything a girl could want in a boyfriend, and so I dumped him.

Well, see, I got to thinking, that maybe he was why Alyssa threw away her life like she did. Maybe it was because of Lance. I dunno what might have gone on, but I'm pretty sure she resolved to change everything right after a date with him. So maybe, if I wanted to get Alyssa to come back to reality, I needed to find someone more like the guys she used to date.

That's when I met Clint. He was, like, the perfect Alyssa boyfriend. Edgy, dis-



tant, kinda sketchy, a shaved head, and a big hard body. Clint was exactly like the guys Alyssa had dated back eight months ago. I loved being seen with Clint, and I knew all Alyssa's friends were telling her about us. So after I dumped him, I met Bryce.

Bryce was even better than Clint. Bryce is kinda psychotic, but in a cute way, and he's got that look in his eye like he'd snap your neck if you said the wrong thing to him. Old Alyssa would be so in love with Bryce, if she had known him. He is perfect bait for getting Alyssa back into skirts and salons, where she belongs. I take tons of selfies with me and Bryce all the time and post them, to make sure Alyssa sees them. Because you know she does. She may deny it, but she's gotta be obsessing over them. I mean, 5,000 subscribers do, and I know she's one of them.

I also privately text her photos of me and Bryce kissing, him with his hands on my breasts, his tongue in my mouth, my lips on his cock, and with his fingers up my pussy.

Oh, yeah! My pussy! Okay, big news, so let me explain that.

So, it turns out that, actually, technically, Alyssa doesn't live here anymore. She qualified for some kind of "genius grant" scholarship at a college on the coast, and moved out there to go to school. I mean, she hadn't even graduated high school! She must have fooled a ton of people to get that spot. Honestly, she's setting herself up for a big fall when people realize she isn't that smart.

So, after a few weeks, she comes back and gets everyone together and makes this big announcement, she says "Mom, Dad, I'm gay." Then she brings in another girl. "This is my girlfriend, Cass," she says.

Seriously? I was all like double-u tee eff. I mean, I knew Alyssa would do anything to avoid having to admit I was proving my point, that I was winning, and that she was really the fashion-crazy, boy-crazy mega-popular girl she was meant to be, but to pretend that she was gay? Girl is cray-cray.

Well, she wasn't going to get the better of me. She may have thought that she had outsmarted me once and for all, but she doesn't know anything. So the next day, I'm telling this story to the school counselor, Mr. Dawson, and he says, "I bet that makes you angry."

You're fuckin' right it did!

"If you could show her what being a real girl is all about, I bet you would want that, wouldn't you?" He said.

Yes! That's what I'm trying to do! Um, seriously? That's what I've been doing for eight months!

Then, he says, maybe you want to come with me, and so I followed him into the nurse's office. He and the nurse explained to me that they had a way for me to be even more like Alyssa than ever before. I could get this procedure, and I

could then be a real girl, just like Alyssa.

I'm not stupid, so I made sure that everything was temporary, and it could be reversed. Once they told me that it probably could be undone, I was all in. So they took me to the School Superintendent's building, and the rest is kind of hazy, and I guess I got knocked out, but then, I woke up in bandages, and now I have a vagina. I even have periods! How cool is that?

Yeah, my parents were outraged, but the people at the school met with them again, and now everything's cool. Now they finally call me "Alyssa," too. Just about everyone does, actually. I can't think of anyone who doesn't.

So now, I can hook up with any guy I want, not just boys who I have an "understanding" with. Bryce, Lance and Clint love my pussy, and it's kept them coming back day after day. Yeah, I still let Clint and Lance go down on me, they're just not *official* boyfriends, that's all. If I had known having a cunt would make being Alyssa such a cake walk, I would have done it long ago! Now I don't need to pretend with boys, and I don't have to worry that my tucking comes undone, or somebody's hand goes into the wrong spot — and I can wear any skirt, shorts or tight pants I want now. It's almost makes being Alyssa too easy!

Oh, and since Alyssa had moved out, I took over her room. I got all her old stuff just the way she used to have it. It's exactly like her room when it was at its girly-girl best. I even got the pink rugs, the heart-shaped pillows, the pink wallpaper and I got her round canopy bed put back together, so I could have the gauzy pink drapery like she had it. It is so Alyssa, it makes me scream! She is going to love it when she stops being so weird and comes home.

You know, one question I've had since, like, forever, is how everyone treats me like the real Alyssa. I mean, not that I'm ungrateful or anything, but it's kinda weird, don't you think? No one has slipped up, not even once. You'd think that in a big place with lots of students, one kid might screw up and ask me why I was dressed up like my sister for so long, but no one has. I even use the girls locker room and no one even cares. Isn't that weird? Maybe it's not. I don't know. Whatever.

Anyway, my breasts seem to have stopped growing — *finally*. I mean, like, I'm happy that I have breasts, because they really make me look like a total girl, but if they got any bigger, I'd probably look like a porn star. Oh, I'm not complaining, it's just that... Well, I don't want Alyssa to be intimidated. When she takes over this life soon, I don't want her thinking her boobs aren't big enough. Maybe I should get them reduced? Well, for now, I'll keep them.

I just got voted in as president of the fashion club, did I mention that? Well, it's true. I know Alyssa really worked hard for the club, and maybe when I tell her she's now president, she'll realize that living at a dumb old boarding school is a stupid idea. Why do that academic stuff when she could be fashion club

president at Crosley High? I mean, I'd do it, and I'm not even the real Alyssa.

The whole club is doing their best to get me over the top for Prom Queen this year, and I'm so excited. I mean, like, of course I'm going to win, duh. There's not like any doubt of that, but you have to actually cast votes and stuff for it to be official. It's the law. I checked. Blair and Regan were handing out flyers all week at lunch to promote me, and I did a special live video of me trying on prom dresses for my subscribers.

Oh, and I found the *ultimate* Alyssa dress for prom. It's pink, naturally, with sequins, a huge slit, a train and I just had to have it when I saw it. It already matched the shoes and gloves I wanted to wear. I was like, Daddy! It's only a thousand dollars! I'm only going to senior prom once! I cried for a whole day, and he totally got it for me. I feel bad for begging, but I used to see Alyssa do it all the time. She would have done the same thing.

That's how I approach every decision. Would Alyssa do this? How would Alyssa do it? I mean, I try to be the most Alyssa any Alyssa could possibly be. You can't get any more Alyssa than me!

And I'm going to be the prettiest prom queen this school has ever seen, too. That's what Alyssa would want.

The one thing that was making me way sad was that even after eight months, Alyssa was still not coming back to her rightful place as the most popular girl in school. I only had another month before vaycay, and I guess, college? Maybe? The idea of leaving high school was totally depressing.

But then, the school counselor said I didn't need to worry. He said that the nutrition bars I've been eating all year were part of a special plan for special students, who don't have to graduate if they don't want to. That sounded great, so he explained it all to me. He said there's a drug thingy in there that keeps me from aging for at least fifteen more years, and I'll look just like I do now. So I could keep coming back year after year, and be Alyssa for a long, long time.

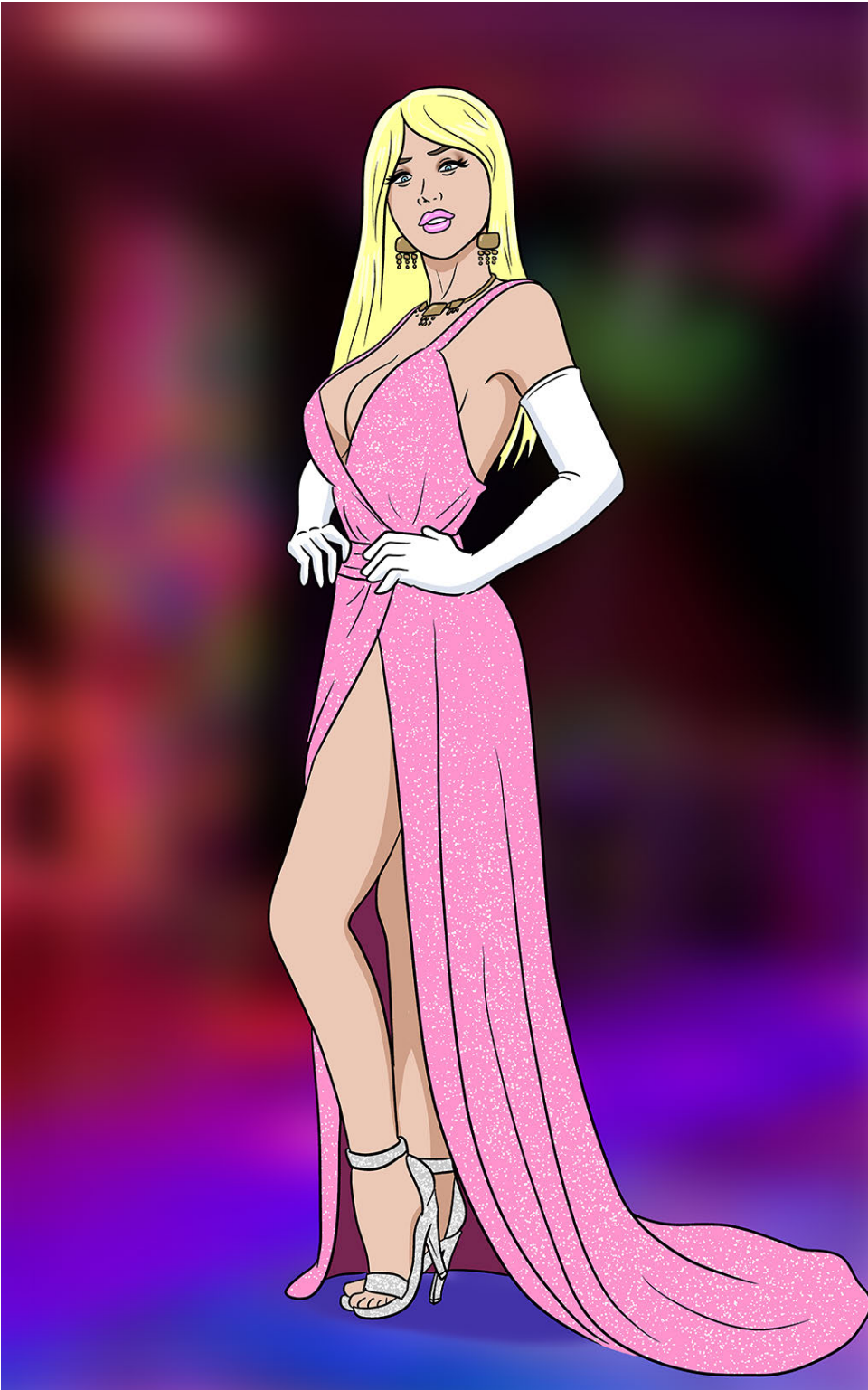
I mean, like, as soon as I heard that, I was all "yaaaaaass!"

But what about my best besties? Turns out, Blair and Regan are on the same plan! They didn't even tell me! Blair has been here for seven years, and Regan for six. We're gonna be the *best* of best besties for so much longer, and rule the school together! So awesome!

If Alyssa thought that time was on her side, she's gonna be shocked when she realizes I'm going to be Alyssa for fifteen more years! She's not gonna last that long. She'll cave. Maybe not this year, but next year. And if not next year, the year after that. Or after that.

I can already see it, one day, out of the blue, she'll be at the front door, saying "please, please, I was so wrong! I want to be Alyssa again!"

And I'll be all like, "I dunno, bitch! Beg for it!"



And she'll beg, and I'll make her beg some more, cuz she deserves it, and then... Well, I'll let her be Alyssa again, and I won't gloat. Maybe a little. Then I can go back to being..

Uh, what was my name again?

There was a B in it, right?

DAY 229



JAMARCUS' STORY

I swear, life is so boring. Oh my God, I can't even. So we get up this morning, I pull off my sleep mask, slip off my pink satin PJ bottoms and undo my braids. The first thing I see is my "Keep Calm and Go Shopping" poster and I giggle to myself. So true.

Since me and Madison trade off on the first to use the shower, it's her turn today. So I'm doing my yoga stretches while I wait, and I get this text from Tanner, and he's sending me another dick pic, like he does every morning. So I lift my top, snap a pic of my tits and send them to him. He sends back a smiley emoji. It's always the same thing.

I mean, Tanner is cute and all, but sometimes he needs to be a little more creative. I hope my dad never gets a hold of my phone and see all our pics. I'd be so dead.

And we are *not* a couple. Dating someone seven or eight times does not make you a couple. There's no law that says so. The only reason I date Tanner is because his brother Hunter is seeing Madison. On their first date, she begged me to double with Tanner, so I did, and I guess he's okay until I find my dream guy.

The boys are fine, I suppose. They took us to a Taylor Swift concert the other day, which was mind-blowing. Best. Show. Ever. Tanner made fun of me for my "white girl dance." I mean, what else would he expect from me? For our birthday last month, they got us *Sex In The City* Season 5 on Blu-Ray, which was, I have to admit, exactly what we wanted. Well, they also gave us matching lacy white teddies from VS, so they got exactly what *they* wanted, too.

Finally, Madison is done using all the hot water, and it's my chance. I strip off my workout clothes, and toss them in the hamper so Mom can get them. It's laundry day today.

In the mirror, I try to ignore my body. I'm feeling so fat lately. I just can't get these pounds off my hips. I put on half a pound this week, taking me all the way to 125, and I feel like a whale. I just can't. Worse, I'm a bleached whale. It's been majorly depressing, watching my tan fade away. I'm so looking forward to the summer so I can get some color back in my skin. Right now, we would blind people if it weren't for the bronzer we use.

So after I get out, Madison is coming back from the kitchen with our lattes,

and hands me mine. Seriously, do not talk to me until after I have my *latté*.

For the next hour, we do our hair and makeup, and get dressed for another boring day at school. I'm so glad Mom's doing the laundry today. We're practically out of black stretch pants.

Dad is in the kitchen, reading the news on his tablet. "Good morning!" He says with a smile. "How are my little girls doing today?"

"Fine daddy," we say, like we do every morning.

"Do you have time for eggs and bacon?" Mom asks us.

I shake my head so Madison knows I don't want any. "No," we reply.

Yeah, I call them Mom and Dad because... Well, they're our Mom and Dad now. A couple of weeks ago, we have to sign these papers, and then we got new birth certificates. Madison's says "Madison Jade Dawson," and mine says "Melissa Jane Dawson."

When Dad gave us our new IDs, and I saw that mine said "Melissa" on it, I was really angry. I didn't even get asked what I wanted my name to be! Mom said that was because only parents get to choose what their kids names are. I hate, hate, *hate* the name Melissa. It sounds so girly. Madison suggested "Missy" instead, and I liked that much more. So now I go by Missy.

Don't call me Melissa unless you want your eyes clawed out. I'm serious.

"Ready to go, girls?" Mr. Dawson asked. Sorry, I'm still adjusting to calling him Dad. Anyway, Dad drives us to school every morning. I mean, I used to have a car, but Dad sold it because he said he "didn't trust it to keep his precious angels safe."

Fortunately, Dad drops us off before he parks, so we don't have to be seen with him — but not before kissing him goodbye. It's so embarrassing to have your dad work for the school. Why did he have to become our dad? I could kill myself. Why?

As Dad explained it, they adopted us so he could make sure we were going to be "okay" as 16-year old sisters.

But not twin sisters. We are *not* twins. Yes, our new birth certificates say Madison was born five minutes before me, and we're the same height of five foot four, and we look alike, but we are not twins. There's nothing else similar about us. I part my blond hair over my left eye and clip it with a pink barrette, and she parts her blond hair over her right eye and clips it with a silver barrette. Her favorite color is salmon pink, and mine is more of a rose pink. We're totally different.

We do wear the same outfits to school, but that's only because Madison always copies me. No, not always, but when I copy her, it's just to show her that she shouldn't copy me. Today, for instance, the black stretch pants, pink Uggs, grey North Face fleece vest and blue nails are things I chose all by myself, and she

was the one who copied me by wearing the same thing. She even put her hair in the same style as mine. Although her pink shirt says “Basic” on it in silver glitter, and my silver shirt says “Bitch” on it in pink glitter. So at least she didn’t copy *everything*.

I still don’t understand why everyone calls us the “Dawson Twins.” Worse is when they just call us “Missyandmadison” in one word. *We aren’t twins!*

Jess group texted us to show what she was wearing today, and Ashleigh demanded that she change out of her fur hoodie, but Jess wanted Ashleigh to not wear her lululemon mesh tights, and then Kendra sticks her big ass in there and wants Jess to change out of her Victoria’s Secret Pink tank. “Can U sluts not fite B4 skool?” I texted back.

We were almost inside the school when Madison reminded me to pose. We puckered up our lips as Madison took our selfie. “Another day at Crosley! So fetch!” She added to it. The puppy ears filter always made us look so cute. It’s probably my fave filter next to the flower crown. We post a pic every day, because we don’t have much to do until everyone else arrives.

I guess we got in the habit of selfies when we were recovering. Everyone wanted to know when we were coming back to school, so we started posting a ton of snaps to our feeds to keep people updated. We have so many friends



these days, it's hard to keep up.

Yeah, so, we missed a couple of weeks when we were recuperating, when we got that *thing* done.

Okay, to be honest, I'm not super-certain exactly what we were recovering from, but I know it had something to do with my lady parts. One day, Dad took us out to a trailer out by the School Superintendent's building, gave us something to drink to calm our nerves, and had us get into this special bed... And I *kind of* recall being on a conveyor belt as I was fed into this machine... But I'm pretty sure I was hallucinating that part. I mean, that would mean that there's some kind of automated surgery machine the staff feeds students into. It's like a scene from a Saw movie. That's probably where I got it.

Whatever was going on, we were just fine after two weeks. All the time we listened to our audio lessons, and Mom made us food, and we got all caught up on Gilmore Girls, and when we were healed up, it was like nothing ever happened. It was a two-week stay-cay in the middle of the semester! We didn't even get homework! In fact, we felt so amazing super great that Madison and I decided that we wouldn't ask any questions. Whatever they did, we didn't want them to undo it!

"Tell me you have a tampon," Madison asked me as we went to the courtyard.

I looked in my big pink Michael Kors bag and handed two over to my sis. It was time for our period, and I was packed for the worst. Yes, we both have it at the same time. Actually, I think all our girls do.

As sisters, I'm in charge of having the snacks, tampons and pads in my bag, and Maddy's in charge of keeping the makeup, scrunchies and spare panties in her bag.

We hurried over to the girls room for sis to do what she needed to do, and we bumped into Kimberly who was going into the men's room. He was all decked out in his cheer uniform, and wore his boyfriend's letterman jacket over it. We were totes jelly. He looks so good, I want to just claw pull his perfect hair out.

"Hey, Kim," we said.

"Hey guys!" He sang back. "Pep rally after 3rd period! Be there!"

"Hey, if it gets us out of class," Madison said as she headed into the restroom.

"Show your school spirit! Gooooo Crosley!" He shouted out, with a bounce in his step, leaping into the boys room. Say what you want about cheerleaders, but they certainly do seem to love what they do.

Sometimes I wish we had that kind of energy. Other times I'm so glad we don't. Madison was already in the stall when I got inside, and I used the time to double-check my makeup. Oh my God, I should win awards for how on point my brows are. You couldn't have sharper, straighter lines unless you used a ruler. I do Madison's, too. Maribelle says "Missy, you should go into cosmetol-



ogy. You're a natural." She says it every time we come in to see her, which is at least twice a week, and she's always trying to get me to show her my secrets. Well, I may be pretty good with makeup, but she's fabulous when it comes to hair. All the girls tell us we look amazing. Well, they would if they weren't too jealous to say something nice.

What's my secret to the perfect look? Well, actually, I copy advice I see on RuPaul's Drag Race. Don't tell anyone, but drag queens really know their stuff when it comes to makeup. Those boys can teach us real girls a thing or two about style.

"Fifteen more years..." Madison whined from inside the stall.

"I know!" I replied. Dad had just dropped the news on us last night. He said that we were going to be seniors next year, but then we wouldn't be graduating like everyone else. He said we might even be seniors for fifteen more years! "I so wanted to get my drivers license, get accepted at UCLA, and rush Beta Phi Psi!" I said. "I was gonna have the best dorm room! I was gonna hang up a fancy tapestry and string up Christmas lights on the ceiling! Now I have to wait! It's not fair!"

"It won't be so bad," Madison said, as she came out and stuck the wrapper in the trash. "Being a senior is awesome. And we get to do it forever. And Dad says we won't get any older!"

She was right. I already knew in my heart that I was going to like this. I just didn't want to seem too eager. "Yeah, I mean, I guess that means we can date lots of boys."

"Fifteen years of boys!" Madison said with a delirious smile. "And Jess, Kendra and Ashleigh are all gonna be with us! Friends for life!"

I smiled and sighed. "Okay, you talked me into it. It's gonna rock!"

"You know it!" Madison said, hugging me. "I can't think of anyone I'd rather do it with than my Sis."

"Aw!" I replied. "Don't make me cry and ruin my eyes!"

I guess it's just as Marilyn Monroe said: "You have to look through the rain to see the rainbow." I love that quote. I should see if I can get a poster of it.

"Missyandmadison! I knew I'd find you in here," Ashleigh said as she came into the bathroom. "Are you guys crying?"

"No!" We replied, sniffing.

If Ashleigh was here, it meant that it was time for all the other students to arrive. It would be about twenty minutes before class started and another boring day at Crosley High got underway.

Madison and I made another check of our faces and slung our bags over our shoulders and headed out into the courtyard to meet up with Jess and Kendra.

I'm so lucky. I always wanted a girlfriend, now I have three. I even have my very best friend, my sis, with me all the time! That's four. I'm not even counting the twenty or more girls we talk to every day. We could probably run for Prom Queen, that is if Alyssa Meyers wasn't going to win every year. Skank. With another dull day at Crosley ahead of us, we all headed over to the staff lounge to fill up on our Maple Lattés.

What? Maple is the new Pumpkin Spice. Everybody says so.

DAY 235



RIVER'S STORY

I remember back six weeks ago, after Mr. Reed had finished performing the final blessing, the coffin was lowered into the ground. Dirt was thrown on the coffin, as it was eased into its' final resting place. That scene will always be with me.

We, those who had come to pay our respects, all parted, going in our separate ways. I watched as Greg and Feather, with their arms around each other, walked away slowly and got into their van.

Connor and his dad hugged and turned away, heading for their rental car with slow, heavy steps.

I waited for my father, as I watched the gravediggers take over and finish off the burial. I covered my face with my black veil, which matched my black Edwardian dress I had made for this occasion.

"Are you ready to go, Harmony?" Dad asked me, dressed in his fanciest preacher outfit.

"Yes, Daddy." He took my hand and we walked away from the grave of River Peterson-Luntz, 2003-2019.

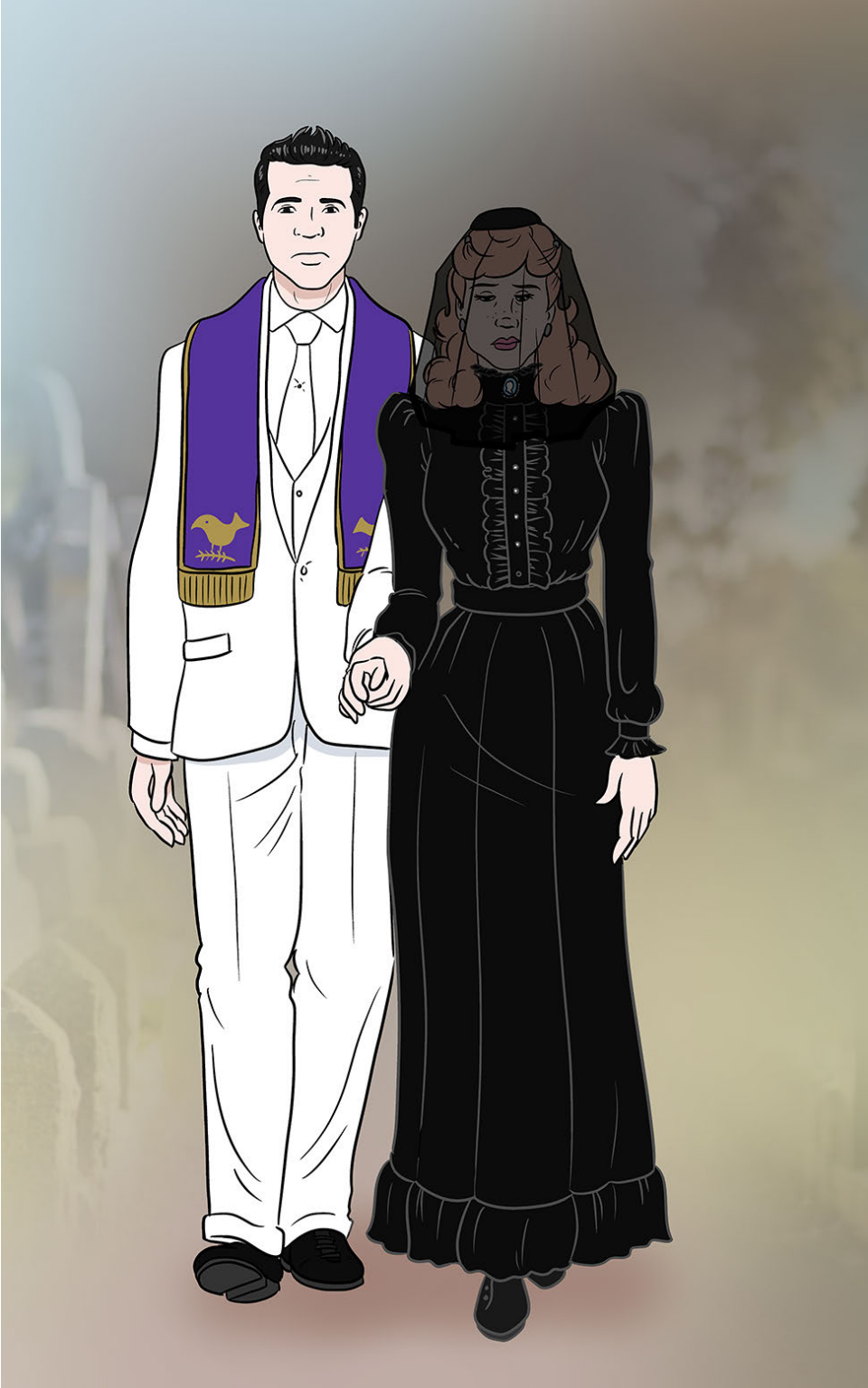
When I got home, and went up to my room, I fell on my bed, hugged my Rainbow Brite plushie and cried. I cried for quite a while. Mom came in to check on me a couple of times, but she knew that I just had to cry it out.

Most of Greg and Feather's memories had been restored, because it was the right thing to do. They deserved to remember the good times, even if it did end early and harshly for River. They had been told he died saving his friend Carson in a station wagon accident.

They had already sold their barn property. Actually, my dad had purchased it. We were going to raise some horses. I looked forward to learning how to ride, and becoming a real cowgirl.

Carson and had his memories of being abducted and drugged removed, and memories of a car accident in their place. They didn't need to know quite what happened. It was best for all of us at Crosley High if they just left, which is what they were going to do.

As for me and my family, we will continue on as we always have. Not that I mind. I love what I do.



I don't remember anything about once being River. I know I was, but I don't recall anything from his life. No flashbacks, no repressed memories. I suppose that was the way he wanted it.

He had left me a note. It simply said, "I guess this is what I wanted all along."

I can only imagine how tough it was on him. The genetic serum he had given himself had turned him into Harmony — me — and he would never be River again. He would start to think like me, and behave like me, and everyone else would see him as me. He had made a very difficult choice. He had saved his friend, but sacrificed himself in the process.

When I awoke, in what I assume was the day after freeing Carson, I found myself in Messiah Crosley's tomb, with headphones on my ears, connected directly to the great Mafu. River had left them on to re-program his mind to believe he had always been Harmony. Me, that is. He made himself into me. I was once River, and now I am Harmony.

Funny thing is, if I hadn't found all the evidence at the Superintendent's office, and heard the story from Mr. Tempkins and Mr. Dawson, I might have never believed it. I feel like I've always been Harmony. I was born June 19, 1962 and attending Crosley since 1976. I'm the student body president. I'm a 4-H sewing champion. That's my life as I've always known it.

So, here I am, Harmony Reed, 17-year old girl. Well, at least for another forty years.

And in the grave? My charred remains, but with River's tombstone. It just seemed like he deserved to be remembered properly, with a proper burial and given proper respect. A braver person I've never met.

DAY 238



LYLE'S STORY

Ever since my engagement to Garrett was announced two months ago, my life has been turned upside-down.

The girls at the club swarm around me, asking me questions and begging to take me shopping for a wedding dress. How am I supposed to answer? I don't want to get married!

I declined Garrett's proposal when he first made it, but then he made it a second time, and then a third. Right around the sixth time, Mother got wind of the situation and told me that unless I wanted the whuppin' of a lifetime, I was going to accept it.

I don't *totally* blame her. After all, I was responsible for putting us in this position, and I could fix it by marrying rich. Being a part of the Belmont family would mean we'd be well-off for the rest of our lives — but I'm not the girl Garrett thinks I am.

Sure, I've spent nearly five months dressed in girl's clothes, acting like a girl and hanging around with my friends who are all girls, but I can't really get married to Garrett no matter how nice a fellow he is.

I didn't know what to do. Mother knew my situation, yet she has pressured me into accepting Garrett's proposal. What did she expect of me?

However, I must talk about Mother. Besides her irrational belief that I was going to be Garrett's wife, her behavior has become even more erratic. For one, she's adopted the last name I assumed, Leighton, and had me sign paperwork to formally change both our legal names. I am now legally Matilda Leighton.

Second, and quite troublesome, is her appearance. She hired a personal trainer to work on her body, and now looks better than most women fifteen years younger.

Then there is her taste in clothes. Mother used to spend her days around our humble home in slippers and her nightgown, only dressing for trips outside. Now, she's taken to wearing only the most expensive clothes and designer outfits. She's acquiring a whole new wardrobe using the insurance money from our unfortunate housing incident, which she justifies by saying none of her old clothes fit anymore.

Well of course they don't fit anymore, after her breast augmentation. That was

the very first thing she did when she got her check from the settlement. Now my mother is sporting double-D breasts and a new facelift.

I do have to admit that she fits in quite well at the club, amongst the trophy wives that hang out drinking cocktails in the piano lounge all day. I just wish she had a better head for our money.

Maybe I shouldn't talk when it comes to making changes. Lately, I feel like everyone is staring at me. The other day, I had just finished listening to my audio lessons and Garrett had met me in between classes — He likes to meet up for a quick stroking session during the break — when I caught at least nine or ten people openly gawking at me.

I had become so used to people staring at me and my body that I almost didn't notice the crowd that had gathered around us. I mean, when you put as much effort into your appearance as I do, you're going to attract attention. I have my hair and nails done at the salon, just as Mother insists, and she makes sure I wear short skirts, high heels and low-cut tops that show off my breasts.

Jasper keeps saying I've changed, and I'm almost at the end of my rope with him. Underneath the hair, the makeup, the dress, the new name, the etiquette lessons and the bra and panties, I'm still Lyle Brunson.

Yes, Mother has me taking etiquette lessons. Mrs. Glickington's Charm School is not much fun, but she says I'm her best student, and I'm learning new things every day. The girls at the club say they noticed an immediate improvement in my deportment, and if being more civilized means that I have to make some minor changes to my life, I say it's well worth it.

But Jasper cannot stop with his alarmist rhetoric. He's telling me that I'm "thinking" like a girl, and that I'm acting like a stuck-up preppy. Well, I do spend my days around some girls that might charitably be described as "preppy," and it would be understandable if some of that has rubbed off on me — but claiming that I've become "one of them" is pure tosh. Absolute poppycock!

He also insists that I look different, and no longer look like a young man. I find his claims to be somewhat overstated. Yes, my chest fat does resemble a pair breasts, but are certainly not "massive melons" as he says. My lips are fuller, not "DSL's," and my butt is a little larger, not "bootylicious."

And, despite what he thinks, I can go back to my old life quite easily, should I want to. Well, of course I want to. That's what I meant to say.

However, it's simply not the right time for that. I'm too deep into this deception to risk any big changes. I still have to dress in girls' clothing, do my hair and makeup every day. I even have to carry on my deception outside school now, at Mrs. Glickington's.

She says she loves Crosley High students, as they're "sponges" for her lessons, according to her. She expects a lot from me, and frequently calls upon me first to give the right answers in front of the other girls. So far, I haven't let her

down.

There's a lot to digest from her lessons, like how you treat men. Mrs. Glickington says that being a girl is much more than just "not being a boy."

"You need to be proud of yourself," she told us. "And proud of being a girl." I suppose that's just good advice for anyone. "What makes you special is the total you, not just developing the habits of being pleasing to the eye, but the attitude of being pleasing to the right people."

"Men need to be made to feel like men. Let them open doors for you, lift heavy objects and do labor-intensive work. A man must feel like they are leaders and doers, and they will shower you with attention for being so weak and needy."

"A girl must do their very best to be feminine and beautiful at all times. It's not just something you want to do for yourself, but as a courtesy to others. You may only look at yourself a few times a day, but others must look at you all day long." I had never thought of it that way. What she said was true. "It takes hard work and determination to developing the habits of looking beautiful. Few have what it takes. Being pretty, feminine and appealing to men is one of the hardest challenges a person can face." I do like a challenge.

I try a lot of these tips on my dates with Garrett, and they really do help. There's much more, too. Such as making my voice sound melodic and enchanting. Garrett really does respond better when I speak to him in my most feminine voice. Also important is using my hands gracefully, and touching men from time to time in a delicate, caring way.

"Most of all, you must separate yourself from the rest of the pack," she told us. "Believe that you are better than the others. That you are superior, and special. You can't let yourself be entangled with the riff-raff in the lower rungs of the social ladder. You are better than those below you, and don't be afraid to let everyone know it."

I'm not sure she intended to sound so elitist, but her advice has done wonders for me, and I'll give her the benefit of the doubt. Being Matilda Leighton means being better than others, and letting them know I am.

Speaking of which, tomorrow, Garrett is taking me to New York City for the auto show, and then we're headed off to Monaco for the F1 Grand Prix. It sounds indulgent, but that's just the kind of life Matilda Leighton expects.

I'm sure Jasper will be in a better mood when I get back. I'll get him a souvenir! His simple mind will love a little trinket like that.

But still, I do have to make a decision about Garrett. I certainly can't keep stringing him along, no matter what Mother says.

DAY 244



DAMIEN'S STORY

What a super-duper magical day! It started out as a real bummer, though. Daisy and I got to drama class and were practicing our lines together, like we do every day, and then Mr. Valdemar comes in with this sad frowny face. I mean, *uh-oh!* You know it's probably not good news!

He tells the class to gather around, so we do, and he says in this real soft voice that the play has been cancelled!

I know! *Cancelled?* It didn't make any sense! We had been working so hard for so long! Everybody's going to be so disappointed! Mega mega downers!

See, I guess the school had to do some budget cuts because they missed a funding application deadline or something, and they're cutting the play this year!

I mean, that's such a load of fudge-sickles!

We immediately ran into the school office and started doing our songs, protesting what they decided! If we could just win them over, maybe they'd reconsider. Mr. Weinhurst came out and was very apologetic, but said they just couldn't afford it.

So everybody moped back to class, all glum and gloomy.

I almost felt this bad when it was time to turn in my scrapbook for my grade. I had put so much work into it, so much of myself, that I couldn't bear to give it up. But it was the hugest part of our grade, and even if I wasn't going to be able to get it back, I had to do it. It was just that it had so much of me was in it, all my memories, my pictures, my drawings — it was my whole life! When I handed it over to Mr. V, I was crying so much that I could barely hold my hand steady as he took it.

Then he handed it back to me, and said, "Well, Molly, I can already tell you did an amazing job. I don't need to take it." I was so happy! I jumped over his desk and threw myself around his neck for big huggsies! Hug hug hug! I had never been so happy!

I remember way back when I thought I was all wrong for the part. But slowly, as I worked at it, I started to understand the character. I learned to sing, I learned to act, and I even found myself fitting into her clothes and thinking her thoughts and really becoming Molly from the inside-out. I learned so much about myself! Now, I knew that nothing could stop me!

Remembering that, I had an idea. I got on a stool in front of the whole class and got their attention.

“Hey gang!” I said.
 “Are we gonna let a budget stop us? No! We’re drama students! We live, eat, sleep and breathe performing!”

“But... We don’t have the money!” Some negative nelly said in the back. Probably Gos-samer.

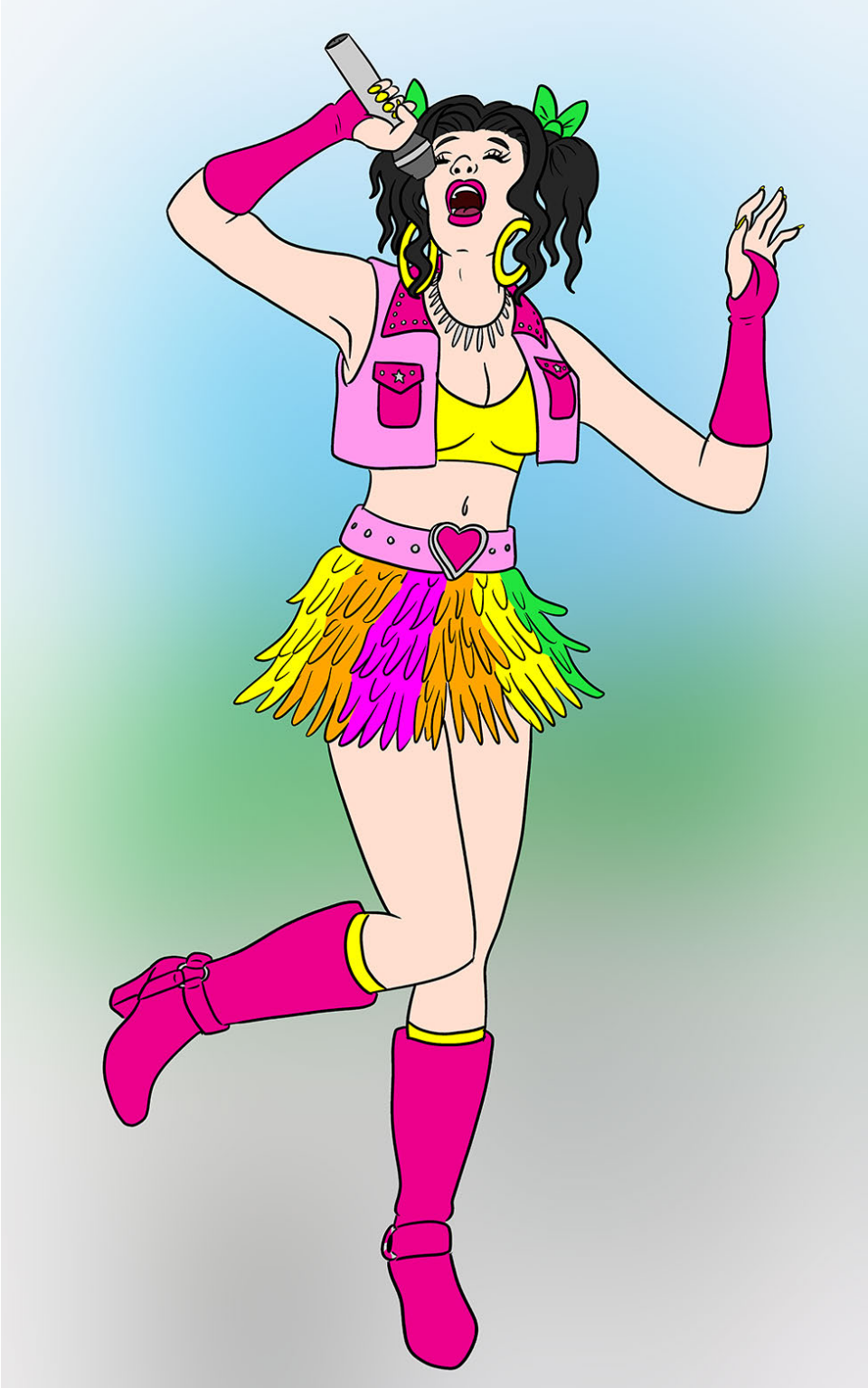
“We don’t need money! We have the power of... *Imagination!*” I could hear the students start to murmur. I had their attention. “We’re actors! We provide the audience with everything they need — through acting! We can bring it alive just though the magic of drama! Now, did Abraham Lincoln let the civil war stop him from freeing the slaves? No! Did

Judy Garland let a cancelled TV show stop her from returning to the stage? No! Are we gonna let money stop us from putting on the best show the school has ever seen? No!”

“I say we go out there at lunchtime today, and do our show!” I got a rumbling sound of approval from the crowd. “Mark, you can clear out a place in the courtyard! Jimmy, you can find some tables and chairs! Trini, you can do our hair. Vivian, you do the makeup! C'mon, what do you say, folks? They can’t stop a dream! Let’s dazzle 'em!”

The whole class, as one, rose to their feet and threw their fists in the air. We were going to do it! We were going to have our show despite everything!





Even Jimmy helped. Have I mentioned Jimmy? Oh my God, he's so *cuuuute*! He's my co-star in the play, and he's my boyfriend. Oh, no, not in real life. He just plays my boyfriend. For now, that is. Every time I see him, I get a little weak in the knees and get butterflies in my stomach. He's so dreamy. His eyes look so sleepy, and he's so casual about everything. I just to sunggle-wuggle with him and cover him with smooches! I think if everything goes okay, I'll finally have the time to go out with him. He's asked me twice, and the play has always been more important, but that'll change after today. Then I can give Jimmy all my attention, and maybe he'll be my cuddly-wuddly boyfriend for realsies, huh?

So at lunchtime, we announced we were doing our play. I got in front of the big lunchtime crowd and sang my opening number, "The Sun Only Shines When You Smile." You can't help but love that song! The audience was really digging it too! I've never felt so alive!

We had to rush things a little to get it all done in the hour we had, but by the time we were done, the ten or fifteen people who remained looked like they probably enjoyed it!

This is what I want to do. I am a born performer. Singing, dancing and entertaining is what I was put on this Earth to do. I can feel it!

I was going to be a star! The prettiest, perkiest, most talented star anyone has ever seen! I mean, I could use a few more years to work on my technique, but otherwise, I was *knew* I was going to do this for the rest of my life.

So when Mr. Dawson congratulated me on my performance, and said he could make it so I would be even prettier and stay that way for years to come, I was all in! All I had to do was follow him to the Superintendent's office and get a tiny procedure done. It was so quick and easy! I wasn't all hung up on being a boy anyway, and now I can *really* hit those high notes!

Keep a look out for me! Molly Cooper! You'll see it written in the lights of Broadway! or Hollywood! Or in the stars of the sky itself! Because I have a dream, and I have hopes! And I'm gonna make it! Just you wait!

DAY 271



LYLE'S STORY

Well, things have thankfully settled over the past four weeks. It had been frightfully busy. Mumsy used the money from selling the farm (alas, it had to be done) and bought us a new home. Our land was worth a shocking amount of money, which was quite fortuitous. Now, we have nearly as much money as the Belmonts do. The new place is a little cottage not too far down the road when the Belmont Estate.

Well, I suppose I'm being a little facetious when I call it a cottage. It does have six bedrooms and two pools, after all. In comparison with the Belmont's, it's absolutely cozy.

Now I can have the girls from the club come over and spend the night in luxurious comfort, which we do quite often. It's truly wonderful to not have to rely on Garrett's good graces anymore.

Oh, yes — Garrett. Well, he has been a dear, but I'm afraid the engagement is off. It was the strangest thing. I had come to admit that Garrett and I were meant to be. I know, it was silly of me to deny it, but that's just what I had done. I was such a fool!

Now, I wanted to be everything he wanted in a girl. I threw myself into Mrs. Glickington's lessons, and lived by her rules. I disposed of all my old clothes and let Mumsy buy me a whole new wardrobe at Neiman Marcus. I let the ladies at the club tutor me as I learned everything there is to know about being a preppy country-club girl.

My appearance must be perfect at all times. I had my hair dyed black, perfectly jet black, with a shine and body that only the most expensive and exclusive hairdressers could achieve, as befitted a girl of my status. I had Mumsy hire a personal maid to run my bath, dress and powder me and keep my room tidy. I began piano lessons to show my culture and good breeding. I even decided on a new name for myself. Matilda was so... Vulgar.

"Muffy" what what the ladies at the club suggested, and I immediately liked it. It felt so natural to be called Muffy, I can't bear to be called anything else.

Quickly, I amassed the qualities of a refined and sophisticated young lady, acting, thinking, speaking and behaving like the upper-upper-class girl I knew Garrett would love. I even swore off cars, the passion of my previous life. I had proven myself unable to handle such a large and powerful machine. They were

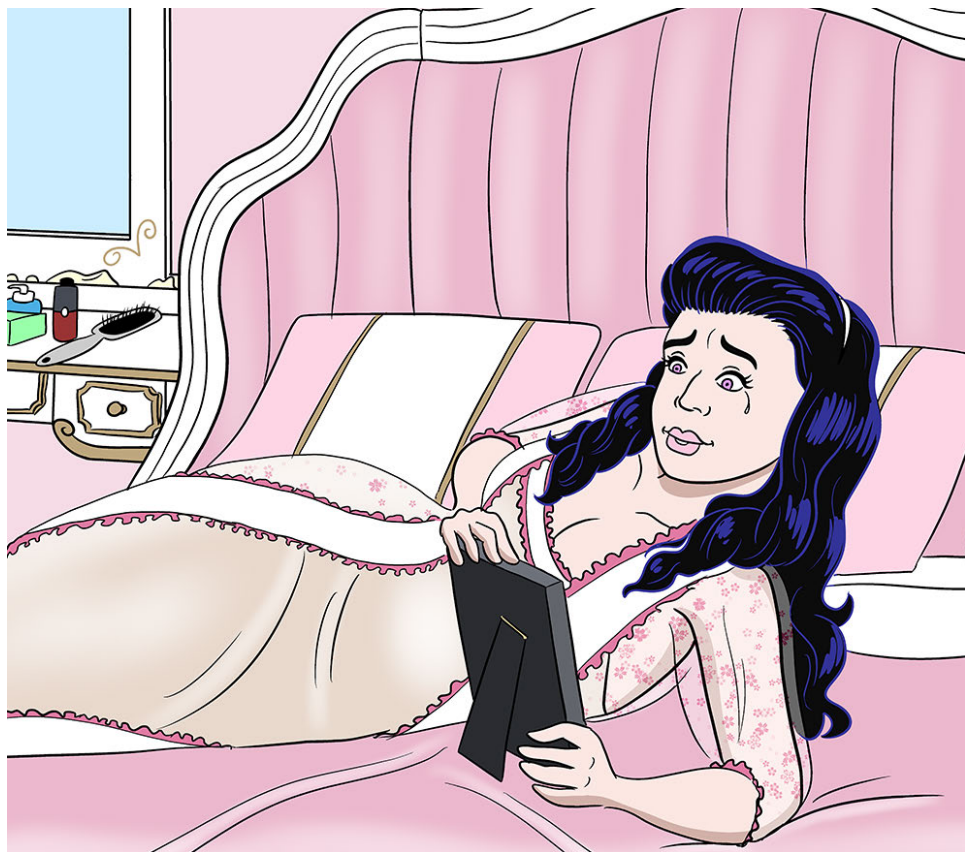
better off being controlled by strong, forceful men, not by scatter-brained girls like myself. I never wanted to be behind the wheel again.

Finally, I was the girl Garrett would want to marry, and show off to the world. I was Muffy Leighton, the most eligible of eligible young ladies of polite society. Our marriage was going to a legendary romance, the kind sung about in the grandest love songs.

Oh, I do have to admit that at first, I was totally distraught, having these feelings of loving a boy so pervade my mind. Jasper let me cry on his shoulder all night when I told him how mixed-up I felt over everything. I felt absolutely beside myself with sorrow.

Jasper was comforting, as I hoped he would be, but then, as I was laying my head on his chest, he started making comments about my soft skin and my silky hair. Then he leaned in for a kiss. He was only listening to me to take advantage of my vulnerability in my hour of need!

I slapped him to try and bring him back to his senses, but he was as stubborn as a... Stubborn thing... The words escape me, but he was being quite obstinate. I had to run to the limo to get away from him. I was so glad my friends at



the club were there to help me deal with my sorrow.

Buffy and Miffy are delightful, and always know what will make me feel better. A quick round of croquet and I had forgotten all about my woes.

Yes, Garrett had finally swept me off my feet, and I couldn't have been more in love. Why had I resisted his charms for so long? To tell the truth, I had been fibbing a bit when I said I had no interest in him. I couldn't admit that I had been entranced from the moment I met him. Yes! I loved Garrett Belmont! Finally I could say it proudly. I would be honored to become Mrs. Matilda Belmont, happily married wife of my darling Garrett.

When I was informed that I could have a swift little procedure discreetly performed at the school to show him my everlasting love and devotion, an army couldn't have kept me away. I became all woman for my beloved.

So imagine my utter astonishment when I decided to consummate our love in the driver's seat of his 488, and he rejected me!

He said the only reason he had any interest me was *because* I was still a boy under my skirt. At first, I was devastated absolutely by his admission, but as Mumsy reminded me, we didn't need his money anymore. She told me I'd miss his car long after I'd gotten over him, and I do think she was more than correct. Last I heard from Mr. Tempkins, Garrett had transferred back to his old school.

However, on a much more positive note, I've never been closer to Buffy, Tiffy, Topsy, Bitsy and all the girls. We go to the polo matches together, take overnight shopping trips to Paris, and spend most nights in each other's mansions, partying, dancing, flirting and kissing. Sometimes we even invite boys. It's wonderful to be one of the girls, in every sense.

The ladies tease me about attending a common, provincial school like Crosley High, but do I tell them how I have my pick of the most delectable farm boys? I dare not reveal my secret to them, as I would rather keep it to myself. I have the best of both worlds: a fling on a yacht by day and a roll in the hay by night.

Aren't I just *awful*?

I also dare not tell them that it will be years and years before I age, as Mr. Tempkins explained to me. They will be so jealous as they go in for procedures and fight the ravages of time, while I remain just as pretty and gorgeous as I am today. And just as rich, too.

I suppose I do owe an apology to Jasper. Everything he said about me was right all along. I had changed — and for the better. No more sweaty days lumbering about a farm, doing God-knows-what in the dirt. Muffy Leighton is a refined, cultured young lady who deserves to be pampered. My life is for lounging by the pool, being seen at the best parties and functions, hanging on the arm of a handsome, rich young man and indulging in the finer things in life.



Which reminds me, I have a date tonight with Skip at the club's restaurant... and then a late movie with Jasper in the darkness of the theater balcony. Scandalous, I know! Well, I must be off. Ta-ta!

DAY 274



THE LAST DAY OF SCHOOL

Well, when I announced to the staff that I was staying on, they couldn't have been happier. Harmony Reed was going nowhere. They gave me a standing ovation in Student Council. I think I even saw Mrs. Scripperton tear up as I told her. In the office, Mrs. Blithe pinched my cheek, and told me that one day, I might even find myself doing her job. I can only wish! It's going to be a long, long time before that happens, though.

To tell the truth, I wasn't sure I wanted to come back. I mean, this was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to walk away, and have a fresh start. I didn't spend a lot of time on the issue, though. I love my family too much to walk away from the school, from the church and from Mafu.

The more I thought about it, the more I realized what Mafu had done for me. I had been spared.

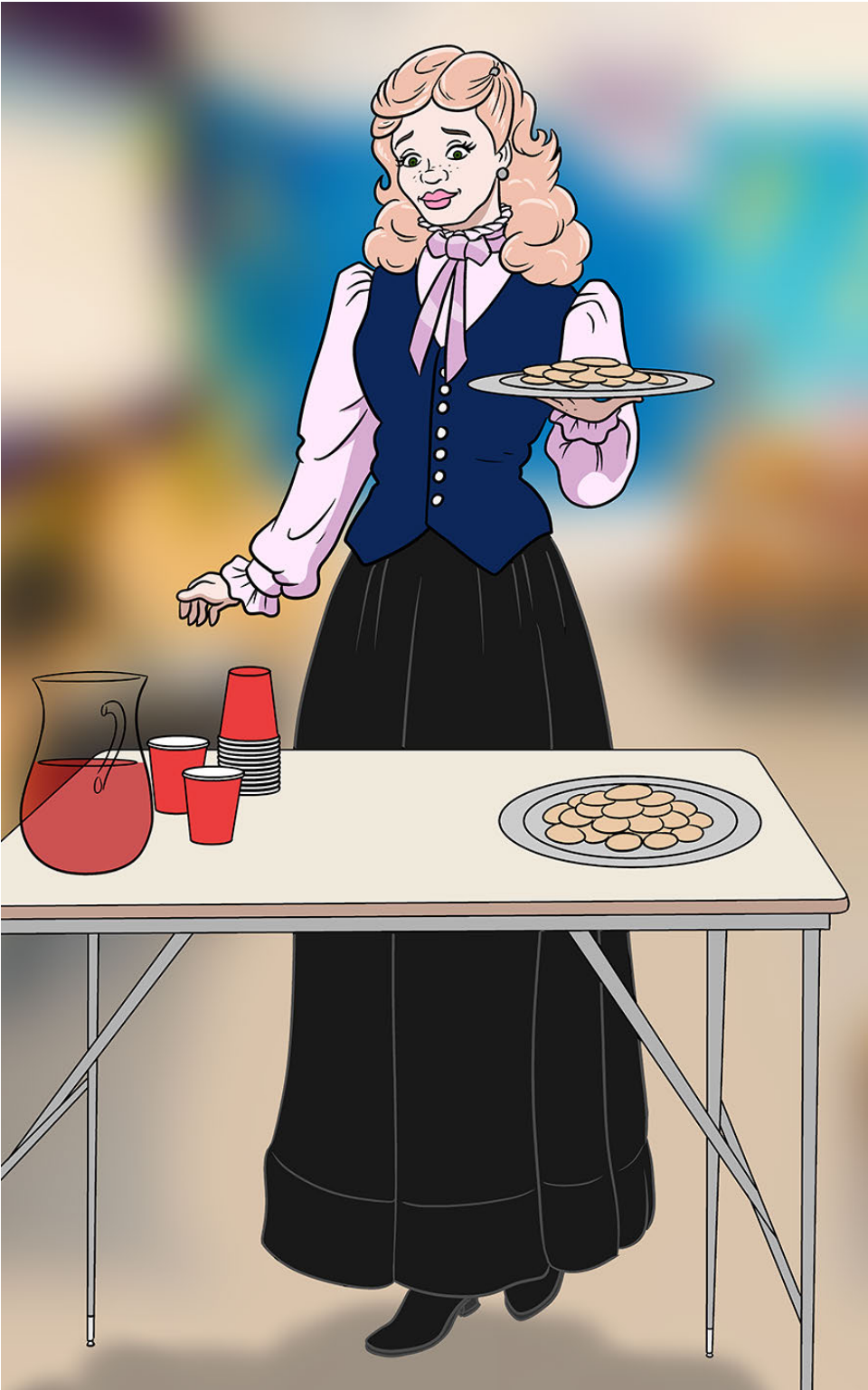
I had, in my previous body, with my previous life, proven to be unworthy of Mafu's trust. Our secrets were almost revealed, and I was not able to stop it. Only by the divine intervention of Mafu have we, his faithful servants, been redeemed.

My rebirth in this new vessel, and my improved and revitalized mind, could only be explained by the will of Mafu. I had become Harmony in less than a minute, according to Mr. Dawson and Mr. Tempkins — a true miracle. I defy anyone to explain how else to explain the events of that afternoon, except that it was the influence of Mafu itself. Mafu made me like this. Now, I was forever a servant, given a second chance and divine redemption.

A few days ago, I made the sacrifice so many have made to Mafu, having the operation, and I am now whole again, truly Harmony Reed once more.

I will not fail again. I have dedicated the rest of my life to our holy calling. Next year, we will double our program, and have more fertility than ever before. We still don't know the reason why, but the rate of females born in the area is less than 5% now, and we need a massive, bountiful supply of fertility. Our school was now up to sixty-three female students thanks to Mafu, and we still needed more. Much more. One day, it will be in perfect balance. This is my new calling.

As I do every year, on this, the last day of the school year, I held a small little forum. All of the graduates of our program are instructed to attend, and we



talk, just to make sure they were prepared going forward. I set up some chairs in a semi-circle and was proud of the number. Nine. Ten, if you include me.

Kimberly, dressed in his cheer outfit, as all the cheerleaders liked to do, was the first to arrive, poking his head in the door. "Is this the meeting thing?" He asked.

"Hi Kimberly!" I said. "Have a seat."

"Is this going to take long?"

"No! Just a few minutes. But I brought cookies!"

I had some trays set down with some fresh-baked sugar cookies I made last night. Kimberly took one step towards them, then one step back. "My diet," he said.

"You're already so thin!"

"Thanks! But it isn't easy."

I was a little jealous of him, as he had developed a very thin and lithe body, but had the most perfectly round boobs you could ever want. He looked amazing in a cheer uniform, and it was no surprise that he was dating new boys every week. Kimberly was a student everyone liked. Almost all the boys were smitten with him, vying for his favor. Girls were jealous and envious of his looks and the attention he got, but couldn't help but like him as a person. He was nearly ideal, from my perspective. If he didn't have at least five babies in the next ten years, I would be shocked.

Jess and Kendra came in, asked the same questions as Kimberly had, and helped themselves to cookies, dunking them in their coffee. They had come along well enough. You're not going to make every new girl into a pinup, but in a school like Crosley, anything in lipstick was going to get a lot of attention from the boys. They were going to have a lot of dates in their future.

"So your Mom got pregnant?" I heard Kendra say to Jess.

That was right, Jess' new mother had just recovered from The Healing. The former Mr. Farber was now the new mother in Jess' family. I doubt they even remember who the original Mrs. Farber was.

"Yah!" Jess replied, enthusiastically. "She's so happy. And so is her boyfriend. I guess I'm going to have a new Dad — and a baby brother."

"What a drag," Kendra said, rolling her big, round eyes.

"I like kids!" Jess replied, with a smile on her pretty lips. "Don't you want to have kids?"

"I guess."

I hope she was good with being the oldest in a big family. There were plenty more kids to come, thanks to The Guidance Mr. Farber had received.

Ashleigh was next to arrive, and immediately joined up with Jess and Kendra. It was amazing how much they looked alike. Not necessarily facially, but they all dressed in the same kinds of clothes, wore their hair similarly and spoke in the same rising tone. Back in the 80's, we used to call it "valley girl" speech. But they were happy, so no judgement here.

"Hey Molly!" Ashleigh said when she saw her old friend come bounding through the door.

"Oh, hey, Ashleigh! I love the boots!" She said, and then froze up. "Are those *cookies*?" She asked with a gasp. She dashed across the room and stuffed three in her mouth. "Nom Nom... Umf... I sho need thifs," she said, her eyes rolling up into her head as crumbs fell out of her mouth. She was so adorable.

Alyssa came strolling in, talking on her phone, looking like a teenage fantasy. Her hair was perfect, her makeup was impeccable and she had the kind of confidence that said "I'm hot, and I know it." And her outfit. She was so glamorous. Just one day out of my life I'd love to wear just one of Alyssa's outfits — don't tell my daddy. I don't know of any girl in school who didn't want to be Alyssa. Having her "back" as a student and watching boys fight over her was already bringing a lot of life back to school. A little bit of conflict makes things spicy.

To think, she wasn't even a part of the program when the year started. It was all done spontaneously when Albert showed up at school in a skirt. I was quite proud of how quickly we were able to adapt and come up with a complete course of treatment and transition on the spot.

It was then that Missy and Madison came in, lattes in hand, and beelined to where their friends were. They chirped with delight when they were all together, like a flock of birds. The twins had adjusted so well. Honestly, I can't tell them apart.

It's a shame they lost their heritage, as I would dearly love to have a robust variety of ethnicity at Crosley, but the eggs that Mafu implants are for caucasians. A fault of his creators, and nothing that can be helped. A black girl giving birth to a white baby would cause deep scars that might never heal. Changing the Russels to white girls is really the only humane thing to do.

While it was a bonus to get a new student with Mr. Russel becoming Madison, it was nearly disaster. Jess and Kendra were last-minute rush jobs when we realized Jamarus had a clique. You need to get everyone in the clique, because close friends are going to be the first to spot changes.

Mr. Dawson had taken personal responsibility, as well we in the church felt he must, but he never should have been that negligent. Over the summer, he's going to slowly forget all about his role, and by next fall, he won't remember anything about our cause. He didn't give me much choice, really. Our inner circle is too small. He should have never deviated from our proven method.



Still, I think he'll be happy as a father to twin girls. I wish him the best.

Muffy Leighton arrived, breezing in fashionably late, wearing a white tennis skirt, monogrammed tennis sweater and carrying a tennis racket. "Will this take long? I have a court reserved at the club in an hour," she said, her nose in the air. "Are those home-baked cookies? How delightfully quaint!"

Now this was how you're supposed to recruit a student into our little program. Mr. Tempkins saw an opportunity and took action, but most importantly, he stuck to the plan. Introduce them to the nutrition bars laced with gene-altering serum, enroll the student in the audio course, make sure they feel locked into their situation, let the mind control do its work, control the parents and/or guardians, gently shape the direction of future events to make sure we achieve the desired result, and then when the time is *just* right, let them know about the operation. Mr. Tempkins even found a buyer for Muffy's farm land, who wanted to build a development, and was willing to pay millions. Well done, Mr. Tempkins.

I watched as Kimberly quickly engaged Muffy to chat. They had become good friends lately, something I never would have expected. I suppose if Kimberly was our Betty and Muffy was our Veronica. I liked the idea of them strutting down the hallways of our little school together, causing boys to cross their legs in agony. Which to choose? The genuine girl-next-door beauty of Kimberly, or the sophisticated bewitching elegance of Muffy?

Muffy was going to cause a lot of balls to turn blue in the years to come. Just as long as she submits to a boy every so often, as she almost certainly will, she will be a fine addition to our cause. What country boy doesn't want to get a taste of rich girl's pussy?

"Okay, have a seat, please," I said as I stood up. "I just have a few questions. This won't take long." After a bit of milling about to find chairs, I began. "Since we've all been through some changes this year, and we won't have a chance to chat for a while, I wanted to make sure everyone is ready for the next school year." I lifted a clipboard up, ready to take notes. "First, how many here have a boyfriend? Show of hands."

Everyone except Molly raised their hands, who quickly noticed and then raised hers. Like I said, she was adorable. So 9 of 9. That was good for the future. We were bound to get one or two babies by the fall out of that. Thank goodness high schoolers are so promiscuous.

"How many went to the Spring Prom?" I asked. 9 out of 9 hands. Even better. Kids are like animals in heat at the prom. Not that I know, of course. Odds are that one of them was probably already pregnant and didn't know it yet.

"And who's got a great bikini for showing off their killer bod this summer?"

They all looked at me, confused and nervous.

Just as I suspected. They were going to need a push. "Okay, now I want to



play a little song for you,” I said, pressing the remote in my pocket. I quickly plugged my ears as the noise of the school fight song filled the room. These only take a minute. If they were going to come back to school next fall as healthy, happy and promiscuous students, it was going to take a little pep talk from Messiah Crosley.

The recording ended and I uncovered my ears. I watched as each girl straightened themselves up again, rubbing their eyes and shaking themselves back awake.

“Missy? Madison? Did I hear you right? You haven’t got bikinis for the summer?” I asked.

Missy turned to Madison, her fists clenched and an excited smile on her face. “We have to! Like, summer is all about is showing off for the guys!”

Madison was just as enthusiastic, grabbing her cell phone from her bag. “Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God! You check H&M, Zara, Forever 21,” she told her sister. “I’ll check American Eagle, Victoria’s Secret and Uniqlo. Get the top five most revealing from each, and we’ll get Mom to take us to the mall tomorrow!”

“We waited too late! What if they’re out?” Missy said, an air of panic in her voice.

I turned to Kimberly. “Kimberly, what if your mom caught you kissing a boy?”

“What? I’m not a *baby*!” Kimberly said.

“What if she told you that you couldn’t see him anymore?”

“She doesn’t tell me what to do!” He replied. “If I find a guy I like, I’m the one who decides what I want to do!”

“But you *are* the football coach’s kid.”

“And? It’s my body! It’s my life!”

Perfect. His natural submissiveness didn’t keep him from taking the initiative when it came to boys. All that was left was to rid him of that pesky gender pronoun. I don’t know why the cheerleaders all had the special privilege of recalling their male past. Maybe I needed to re-evaluate that.

“Now, Alyssa,” I said the to fashion maven in the room, “I heard that long skirts and high necklines are coming back in style this fall.”

“Psh!” She said. “You wish, Amish girl!” She said, arrogantly. “Skirts are getting shorter than ever, and the fall necklines are outrageously scandalous! If you’re not showing your bra cups, you might as well be a prude — like you.”

That’s just what I wanted the other students to hear. Some tips from the most copied girl in school would be taken like gospel. That would make sure they showed up for next year looking hot and sexy.

“Oh, that’s too bad,” I said. “And what was this rumor I heard about you hav-



ing a missing brother? Did I hear that correctly?"

"Brother? I've never had a brother! I'm an only child!" She said. "Like, get your facts right. Seriously! Don't start shit with me, bitch!"

"I must have gotten that wrong, then," I said. She didn't remember being a boy anymore, and her sister was no longer a part of the family. That was exactly to plan.

"And Molly, is it true that next year, they're putting on an all-male play?"

"*What?* Over my dead body!" Molly said, suddenly leaping to her feet, looking like she wanted to start a fight.

I rose my pen to make a point. "If I may, I was going to suggest maybe dropping drama and... I don't know, forming an all-girl pop group instead? Kind of like a K-Pop band here at Crosley?"

"Yeeessssss!" Molly said, her eyes widening as she thought about it. "That would be awwwwesome! Oh, the costumes! I wanna wear those costumes! And the hair! And the makeup! That's what I'm gonna do! But I need to find girls for the group! Where am I gonna find more girls to like to sing and dance?"

"Well, I might be able to help," I said, hopefully with the appropriate degree of humility. "I could help find four new.... Students... To become a part of a pop group next year." I already had a list of eight candidates in my notes. "Three or four, you say? I don't think it'll be a problem."

"Maybe even more! There's one K-Pop group that has forty-eight girls in it!" Molly was actually jumping up and down like a pogo stick, her eyes as big as saucers. "This gonna be so cool! This summer, I'm gonna get costumes and write songs and work on dance routines... What do we name ourselves? I'm gonna have to come up with ideas... We're gonna be huge!"

I looked forward to seeing Molly strut her stuff in those skimpy, teasing idol outfits alongside four *new* girls. Sure, cute is nice, but it needs a little bit of sexy to attract the right kind of boy.

I asked a few more questions of the other girls, and was pleased with how complete their transformations were. It had been a good year for us, and I was pleased, as would Mafu.

As promised, I let the ladies go, confident that they would be back next year with great attitudes, and ended the meeting. And yes, they were all girls now. If any were still thinking they were "playing" at being a girl, that would end over time. I guess that meant we had something in common.

Once I cleaned the room and put everything back, I picked up the tray of cookies. There were more than a few left. More than I needed, that was for sure. I put the plastic wrap back on them and carried them with me as I left. I headed out of the school, walked along the parking lot, and ended up where the protestors were standing at the edge of the school fence, holding their

signs.

“I wanted you to have these,” I said, handing over the tray. They took it graciously. “It must be hard, doing this day after day. Never give up for what you believe in, okay? I hope you have a great summer, and I'll see you next year!”

I'm not sure why I did it, but I felt very strongly for them. I was almost emotional. I must have a soft spot in my heart for protestors, for some reason.

The End

Titles from Sick Puppy Press

Sick Puppy Comics

Making Friends

Story & Art by Joe Six-Pack. Three college students sign up for a six-month isolation experiment. Things start to get a little strange, and they begin to lose their masculinity day by day. Yet, they don't seem to even notice... Full Color Comic Book / 38 pages

The Pet Sitter

Story & Art by Joe Six-Pack. Asked to look after a supermodel's pet for a while, James finds himself thrust out of his own apartment and into hers. Day by day, it seems like circumstances adapt James to become the resident of a supermodel's lifestyle. Full Color Comic Book / 29 pages

A Curious Curse

Story & Art by Joe Six-Pack. When teen goth Brandyn gets his drivers' license, he thinks it's a ticket to adulthood. Unfortunately, he's already cashed a ticket in the opposite direction. Full Color Comic Book / 27 pages

Boys Will Be Girls

Story & Art by Fraylim, Script by KK, Ink & Color by Joe Six-Pack. The "Summer Blossom" camp welcomes anew group of young men. But although it may be an all-boys camp when they arrive, it's girls-only when they leave. Full Color Comic Book / 100 pages

The Step-Witch

Story by Joe Six-Pack. Dillon has a new step-mother. Problem is that she and Dillon don't get along. More of a problem for Dillon is that she's a witch — and wants a daughter. Full Color Comic Book / 17 pages

Double-Crossed

Story & Art by Joe-Six Pack. Jesse is on the run from justice. When he finds an old friend who can help him, that old friend seems more interested in helping Jesse become a woman. Comic / 24 pages

Candlewick Court Series

Welcome to Candlewick

Story & Art by Joe Six-Pack. Book 1 in a series. Candlewick Court is looking for new residents. Residents who will find new lives and new genders in a suburban paradise with a mysterious purpose. Book / 149 pages / 30 illustrations

Surrender to Candlewick

Story & Art by Joe Six-Pack. Book 2 in a series. Candlewick Court has found it's first homeowners, and the kids need a school to attend. What kind of bizarre transformations await them? Book / 152 pages / 38 illustrations

Brides of Candlewick

Story & Art by Joe Six-Pack. Book 3 in a series. The story of Colin and Elliot concludes as we welcome Candlewick Court's next homeowners. Book / 159 pages / 39 illustrations

Teens Transformed

She Made Me Into My Sister

"A Little Too Clever" by Joe Six-Pack. Wyatt wanted to help his girlfriend get revenge, but at what cost? As it turns out, a cost greater than any boy could have imagined. Book / 88 pages / 20 illustrations

Gone Girly for Good

"Big in Japan" by James J Craft. Mike and Ken were one-hit-wonder rock stars. Then they discovered they had fans in Japan, so they left to become famous. Then they discovered that the Japanese didn't know they were guys. Book / 77 pages / 26 illustrations

One Year in Tokyo

By James J Craft, illustrations by Kwon Lee Tran. Mickey is forced to spend a year with his father in Japan. However things often get confused when words get translated from English to Japanese, as Mickey soon finds out... Book / 87 pages / 20 illustrations

Students, Exchanged

"French Dupe" by Joe Six-Pack. Kelley Sue's convinced a French exchange student to disguise himself as a girl. What happens when she realizes he has no intention of returning back home? Book / 57 pages / 15 illustrations

He's a Valley Girl, Fer Sure

From the files of TGStories.com: "Corey Taylor's Big Bodacious Adventure" by Joe Six-Pack. For Corey, the only way he can get into college is to pretend to be a girl. But when does it stop being pretend? When he's cheerleader? A girlfriend? A beauty queen? Book / 78 pages / 17 illustrations

From Boys to Bridesmaids

"Always a Bridesmaid, Never a Groom" by James J Craft. Two spoiled and privileged boys are about to be put in their place by their new step-mother. And their place is by her side as her bridesmaids and daughters. Book / 77 Pages / 16 illustrations

Little Mis-ter Popular

"My Two Moms" by James J Craft, illustrations by rocketxpert. Thanks to his aunt's "Confidence Club," Leon will find a way to become popular, and to get over all his hang-ups... Including his masculinity. Book / 77 Pages / 17 illustrations

Bride to Be

By Joe Six-Pack. Derek and Cole grew up together as kids. One year, though, Cole has to start pitching in at the family wedding business. His life will never be the same. Book / 63 pages / 25 illustrations

Winning is Everything

"Costume drama" by Joe Six-Pack. Seth made a funny little bet for Halloween. He needed to pull off the impersonation of a Cheerleader for a party. What's at stake? 100 million dollars and his manhood. Book / 215 pages / 37 illustrations

Creating Samantha

Story by Cheryl Lynn, illustrations by The Might Fenek. Samuel was under the tutelage of his legal guardian, only his guardian had no intentions of letting him grow up male. Book / 70 pages / 16 illustrations

Convicts to Co-Eds

Story by By Courtney Captisa & Claire Bear, illustrations by Joe Six-Pack. Three teen boys are sent to a reform school. What they can't know is that they are about to be "reformed" all the way into skirts... And beyond. Book / 154 pages / 31 illustrations

Mall Makeover Madness

"A Day at the Mall" by KK, illustrations by Fraylim. Four boys are going to have one weird day at the mall. By the time the day is over, it's four girls who leave the mall to begin their new lives. Book / 109 pages / 25 illustrations

Tales of Transformation

He's the Wrong Girl

"Office Chemistry" by Joe Six-Pack. James had to fill in at the reception desk. Problem is, the business is a bio-genetics company. And all of the sudden the coffee tastes funny. Book / 53 pages / 14 illustrations

City Boy, Country Girl

By Joe Six-Pack. Richard's long-forgotten aunt is sick, and he goes to care for her. His calls back home leave his wife Janice confused and unsure about his return. So she goes to find him. But is there much left to be found? Book / 64 pages / 25 illustrations

Thames Greene

By James J Craft. Ira wanted something better for his family. A new start. But in Thames Greene, everyone's getting a new start, whether they want it or not. Book / 77 pages / 26 illustrations

Hiding in High Heels

"How Not to be a Sissy" By Joe Six-Pack. Vince was on the run from people who wanted their millions back. Howard was a friend with a funny little idea and a knack for making subliminal CDs. Mini-Pix / 48 pages / 15 illustrations

A Blessing in Disguise

By KK, illustrations by Kannel. Jay was a witness to a murder, and now he's the target of a vicious criminal. Resorting to a female disguise, he becomes trapped with no way out. Book / 84 pages / 16 illustrations

I'm Your Dolly

"Barbie-in-a-Box" By Joe Six-Pack. Tyler wasn't much of a boyfriend anymore. Jessica wanted to throw him out, but then a better idea came to her, in the form of the Barbie-in-a-Box service. Tyler better get used to pink. Book / 103 pages / 20 illustrations

His Life as a Trophy Wife

"The Puppy Mill" by Joe Six-Pack. Nick had a great life, but then it evaporated. Now he's down on his luck. In steps a wealthy executive willing to pay him handsomely to pretend to be his wife. What can it hurt? Book / 210 pages / 16 illustrations

Male Monday, Girl Friday

"Hey, Cutie!" by James J Craft. Daniel is going to be promoted from his average life to an exciting executive position. At least, that's what his bosses are telling him. They may not be telling him everything. Book / 58 pages / 20 illustrations

The Happiest Place on Earth

From the files of TGStories.com: "The Fairest One of All" By Joe Six-Pack. Will is a kid looking for a job. He gets one, performing as Snow White at a theme park. For Will, he doesn't suspect that playing the role and wearing the costume is slowly changing him, day by day. Book / 51 pages / 21 illustrations

Hello, Nurse

From the files of TGStories.com: "Quality Health Care". Dane is filling in as a nurse for his pal Jimmy at his new office. Although both are doctors, Dane begins to take to his new role as a nurse. Soon, he feels compelled to be the ideal nurse. Book / 44 pages / 15 illustrations

My Boss, The Bimbo

"If I Were a Betting (Wo)Man" By James J Craft, illustrations by blackshirtboy. CEO Lucas has a superiority complex. When his long-suffering secretary is able to feed into Lucas' competitive nature, he'll make any bet to prove his dominance over women. Book / 38 pages / 10 illustrations

He's the Girl They Want

"Rallies" by Joe Six-Pack. Spencer has a great new executive job in the food service industry, but first he's got to learn the ropes of the business by waiting on tables. He just doesn't quite fit in with the cheerleader theme. Yet. Book / 63 pages / 22 illustrations

Demoted and Degraded

"Trixie the Secretary" by Angela J. Cindy didn't much like Tom Jones attitude and his advances, so when she has the opportunity to help take the wind out of his sails, she takes it. But she had no idea that it was all designed to make Tom into Trixie the secretary. Book / 87 pages / 17 illustrations

I, Candy

"Sissy Sweets" by James J Craft, illustrations by rocketxpert. Inheriting his family's bakery requires this young man to become the new face of the business. A female face. Book / 45 pages / 15 illustrations

Boyz II Girlz

"The Making of the Ballroom Brats" by Joe Six-Pack. The Ballroom Brats become the newest worldwide celebrity sensation. How did four unsuspecting guys at a fast food joint become the hottest girl group in music? Book / 113 pages / 34 illustrations

His Strangest Desire

“Employee of the Month” by Joe Six-Pack. Mick is declared Employee of the Month, and he’s going to find himself hurtling headlong into facing his weirdest inner desire. Book / 59 pages / 19 illustrations

Hard Time or High Heels

“I’m Turning into My Mother” by James J Craft, illustrations by rocketxpert. Colby got deep into debt to a local gangster. Before long, he’s on the arm of that very same gangster as his reluctant girlfriend. Book / 75 pages / 20 illustrations

Seriously Skirted

“The Show Piece” by KK. Illustrations by Joe Six-Pack. Mel finds work at a clinic as a secretary. He slowly begins to fit to role. Book / 75 pages / 19 illustrations

From Mister to Sister

Story by Melissa N., illustrations by Joe Six-Pack. Dan just wanted to help guide his girlfriend’s sister out of her depression. Instead, he’s being guided out of his manhood. Book / 84 pages / 24 illustrations

Stories of the Supernatural

A Change for the Better

“Do-Overs” by Joe Six-Pack. Evan wants a chance to do over his biggest mistake. He gets the chance, but he keeps wanting his new life to be a little bit better than the last. Book / 59 pages / 18 color illustrations

Changed and Rearranged

“Wrongs Make Wright” By Joe Six-Pack. Chris and Matt were rivals. Then, Matt decided to show everyone how smart he truly was by impersonating a teacher. But the disguise becomes more and more real, much to Chris’ dismay. Book / 74 pages / 19 illustrations

From Pals to Gals

From the files of TGStories.com: “Mandate of the People” By Joe Six-Pack. Teens Jeremy and Stewart are good friends, but a bit thick in the noggin. When they jokingly nominate each other for Prom Queen, they slowly become the perfect candidates,

thanks to some magic. Book / 45 pages / 16 illustrations

Crossed Fiction

If the Shoes Fit

“Hand Me Downs” By KK, illustrations by Fraylim. Sydney is a teen who is just trying to make it through the summer with no money. He finds himself wearing hand-me-downs from his sister, and that takes his life in a whole new direction. Book / 98 pages / 30 illustrations

Sisters for the Summer

“Camp Counseling” By Joe Six-Pack. Brock McCade always thought of himself as a real man, or at least he would be one, someday. After summer camp, he’s no longer so sure. Book / 76 pages / 17 illustrations

They’re the Girls for the Job

“Peace and Harmony” By James J Craft. Illustrations by blackshirtboy. Pete and Harmon need jobs bad. How far would they have to go to get them? Book / 64 pages / 19 illustrations

Blondie’s Lost Summer

By KK. Illustrations by Fraylim. Carl’s dream summer was about to become three months of dresses, heels and makeup. Book / 159 pages / 48 illustrations

Blondie’s Lost Year

By KK. Illustrations by Fraylim. Book Two in the Blondie Series. Carl’s trip to Florida has been horrible enough, trapped in dresses and makeup. Now, high school has presented a whole new level of humiliation for him. Book / 221 pages / 52 illustrations

Blondie He’s Not

Story by KK, illustrations by Fraylim. Mark got a job at a salon, and fell in love with one of the customers. Problem was that customer was Candi “Blondie” Wethers, and what happened to Candi was about to happen to Mark. Book / 151 pages / 40 illustrations

I Never Wanted to be a Woman

“Politically Corrected” By Cheryl Lynn. Illustrations by Joe Six-Pack. Michael’s political-ly active mother has decided she’s going to make her hippie son over into the daughter she always wanted. Book / 64 pages / 19 illustrations

The Boy’s Guide to Girlhood

Story by KK, illustrations by Fraylim. Dweeb Kenny and cool Rex find themselves trapped in a Principal’s twisted scheme, and only one of them is going to get out in tact. Book / 109 pages / 32 illustrations

Fashion Victims

Story by Lauren Bliss, illustrations by Fraylim. Teenage boy Jamie just needed clothes for school. Oh, he’s going to get clothes for school. Just not male ones. Will he ever need male clothes again? Book / 67 pages / 26 illustrations

Seriously Sissified

A Family Femmed

“The Femmed Family robinson” by James J. Craft & Cheryl Lynn, illustrations by Sortimid. The Robinson boys all had dreams of their own, once. Now they have new ones, thanks to their stepmother. Book / 96 pages / 29 color illustrations

Forever Femmed

Story by James J. Craft & Cheryl Lynn, illustrations by Sortimid. “A Family Femmed’s” Deborah is still hard at work, flipping men into sissies and selling them to the highest bidder. But this time, there’s a new wrinkle. Book / 108 pages / 28 illustrations

Auntie’s Girl Time

By Cheryl Lynn. David was just a young teenage boy who wanted all the things in life a man could look forward to. His aunt, though, is going to make sure he never gets them. Book / 79 pages / 20 illustrations

Revenge of the Cheerleaders

“Pansy Cheers” By Angela J. Patrick Sears was a football player trying to sleep with every cheerleader at his small college. He’d have to pay for his conquests. Book / 116 pages / 19 illustrations

He’s Got His Mind Made Up

By James J. Craft. Illustrations by kinky-rocket. Corey has just a sliver of a chance to get into college, but that chance involves becoming his stepmother’s maid. And she wants him to fit both the role and the dress. Book / 68 pages / 16 illustrations

Fated for Femininity

Story by KK, illustrations by RocketXpert. When a web page shows Evan having sex with another boy, the poor kid is chased out of town — right into the arms of a gender therapist who has her own agenda. Book / 70 pages / 15 illustrations

Web Classics Revisited

Two Forms of ID

By Joe Six-Pack. Harvey had the unusual ability to convincingly imitate a teenage girl. In desperation, he has to use that talent to make some money. But when is enough enough? Paperback / 194 pages / text only



Reading is Fun de Mental!