

## The Golden Palace

by Joe Six-Pack

An aging movie palace sees it's days coming to an end. But one last miracle of the silver screen has yet to be seen.



When it was built, back at the turn of the century, The Golden Palace was the home to the city's own opera troupe. The players were well known around the country, and even garnered some international praise. And as befitting such a prestigious ensemble of entertainers, a grand theater was built to showcase them. It had two balconies, eight private boxes, velvet lined seats and a huge curtain with a mural of the city's history on it. The furnishings were intricately carved and

painted. The acoustics impeccable. And the entire building appeared to have been gilded in gold leaf. It truly was a palace.

As the menace of moving pictures destroyed live performances, the stage was cleared and a screen of shining silver was raised on the boards where once thespians and singers had treaded. The curtain was taken down.

Yet the theater thrived. Ushers walked you to your seat and smiled pleasantly. Freshly popped popcorn, cigarettes and candy bars were plentiful and cheap in the lobby. Families sat together to watch films and couples hugged each other with the lights turned out.

The Golden Palace was the unrecognized the hub of the city. The latest and grandest epics of the day were shown there, gathering the young and the old, the rich and the poor, the loved and the lonely. In the darkness, men and women fell in love. Children screamed and cheered. And everyone else basked in the glow of a dream world, as a doorway to imagination opened up for them twice nightly. Three times on Saturday.



As the eighties rolled around, though, the Palace was crumbling in neglect. It went out of business a few times, every time to be rescued and then fail again. Finally, it fell into the hands of a chain, and was refurbished. The frayed velvet chairs were removed and replaced with plastic seats. The gold leaf painted over. The balcony

closed. And the whole theater was divided into three parts to accommodate multiple screens.

By this time, several multiplex theaters had opened up out in the suburbs, and at the malls. No one ever came to the Palace anymore, unless they had to. It was cramped, it was dingy and the screens were small. The ticket price was the highest in the area, and the place was frankly depressing. It was in its' last years. The only time people ever really discussed it was to talk about when it was going to be torn down - or what else could be built there of value. A parking lot, perhaps?

\*\*\*

Summer was here. And Mike Prager was at a low point.

It was the second week of summer, and the edict had come down from his parents: get a job. He was only sixteen, and thought getting a job was something you did out of college. Well, wasn't it? He argued and he argued, but it was clear he had no real say in the matter. He was too old for camp and young enough to still get into a lot of trouble. So the folks decided the best thing was a job for Mike.

He trudged around town avoiding asking anyone for a job for an entire week before he was given a deadline. At which point, he walked into the lobby of The Golden Palace. Of course, it was called the RNG Multiplex Centre now. They had a small, battered "Help Wanted" sign in the small, broken ticket window.

The theater manager was unimpressed by Mike, who was obviously not interested in the job in the slightest. But he did register a pulse, which beat out any other takers. So Mike got the job. In quick order he was given an unwashed uniform and told to be here the next night at five.

On his first day at work, Mike wasn't much eager to get on with it, and was twenty minutes late. The manager, his name was Dan, was actually slightly impressed, as the staff average was a half hour late. It wasn't a terribly eager or motivated bunch who worked there.

He was directed to a small changing room where he was to fit into his uniform. It was a standard issue movie uniform, maroon with gold trim and a fringe on the shoulders. He wore a black bow tie, a white dress shirt, and black pants. The outfit was topped with a maroon and gold usher's cap. He felt like a fool.



Being a shade early, he had the room to himself, and stuffed his regular clothes into the provided locker. It was a cramped little room, and Mike decided that arriving a little before everyone else on his shift would be the only way to keep some privacy. There just wasn't enough room for two in there.

Mike then took a deep breath and headed out for his first day of work.

\*\*\*

In the glory days of The Golden Palace, the foyer and the isles were never more alive than when a romantic film had been playing. Adventure films drew boys. Crime dramas drew men. Musicals drew women. But romantic films drew couples. And they made couples as well.

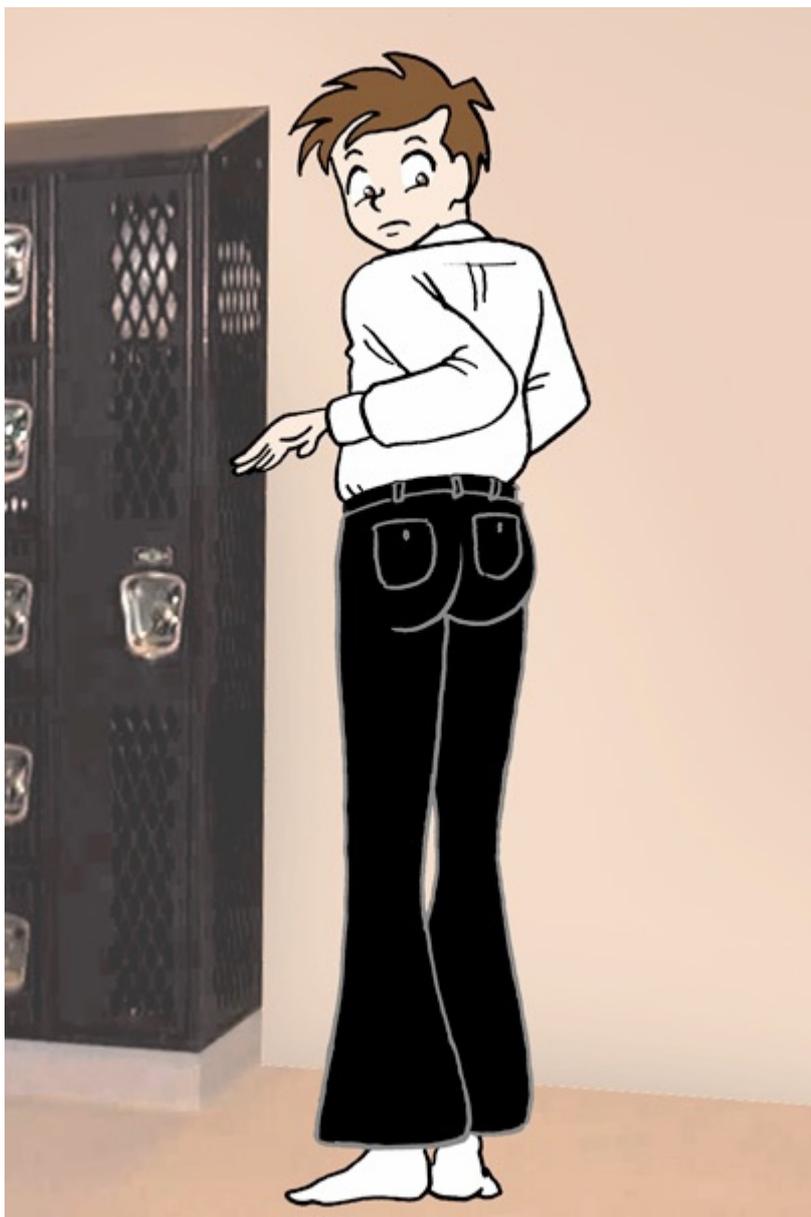
The theater was alive and vibrant on nights like those. The part it played in the lives of those who kissed in the shadows was just as a backdrop, but it still played a part. And over hundreds, if not thousands of nights like that, is it possible a little bit of that romance and kindling of love could have become a very part of that building?

\*\*\*

Amazingly enough, Mike had been working at the theater for more than a week without getting fired or leaving. He found his job agreeable enough, in that he just stood at a box two feet away from where they sold tickets and then tore the tickets in half. It seemed like a silly thing to do, but he was being paid for it. And with so little being asked of Mike, he was able to just scrape together enough energy to do the work with a minimum degree of proficiency.

The only thing that Mike had found problematic about the job so far was his inability to scam some jujubees from the candy counter. And there was also that thing with the lockers. They were old and rusty, and the handles had long since fallen off the doors. Mike found by digging his fingernails on the edge of the door, he could just barely open it. He resolved to grow his nails out a little more to make it easier in the future.

But on this particular day, after prying the locker door open, he found something a little strange inside. The jacket and his dumb little hat were just as he had left them. But the pants - they were different. He really didn't think much was up until he had them all the way on. They were oddly tight around his waist and hips, but loose and flowing on the legs. They also seemed to be made out of a much lighter material than whatever his regular pants were made of. And Mike took a few

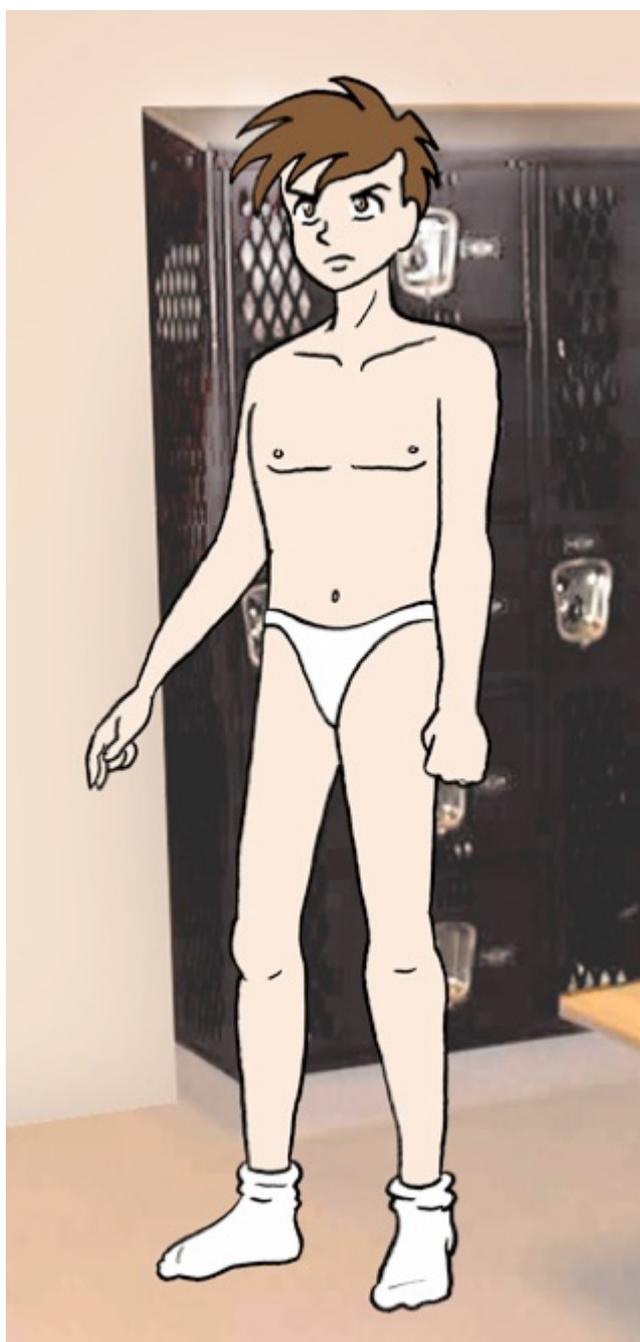


minutes to figure out that they were supposed to zip up the side rather than trying to twist the belt around to the front where the fly was supposed to be.

Mike poked his head out the door and tried to see if anyone was waiting for him. This seemed like a joke of some sort, something that was supposed to give someone a good laugh. At his expense.

Well, let them. Mike could easily sue these jerks for harassment or something. If somebody was setting him up, he'd just smile and walk away. Then tomorrow, bang! A million dollar lawsuit. So Mike closed his locker and headed out into the lobby for another night's work, hoping it to be his last.

Yet at the end of his shift, not a single person had commented on the pants. Not a coworker, not the manager, and not even the customers. He'd even forgotten about them himself, after a few hours. And to be perfectly honest, the lighter fabric was a lot less suffocating than that heavy double-knit polyester of his usual pants. So if nobody said anything, maybe he'd just wear them again tomorrow. Why not?



As he had begun to get back into his street clothes, Mike noticed another problem. His boxers were nowhere to be seen, and in their place were a pair of white briefs. Well, not briefs exactly. These looked a lot like panties to him. They were just white and cotton, like briefs were, but these were shaped and cut like panties. And there wasn't a "Y" front for easy male access.

Obviously, someone was setting him up for something. There was a plan behind all this.

But it was quitting time, and Mike didn't like spending a second at the theater over. So screw it. He put on the panties, then the rest of his clothes, and left for the night. He'd deal with this later.

\*\*\*

In movies, as with any kind of theater, the critical, analytical patron can always find errors and omissions. They can find disturbances in reality as they know it and they can spot the slightest incongruence in even the most enjoyable of films. Even the most beloved of stories will have moments where the emotion of the scene can override common sense.

And in the catacombs of a building that had seen thousands of such performances, it was not unreasonable to think that such things could happen here - even in the material world.

\*\*\*

"Oh, I remember this place." Said Patty. She tugged on her husband's arm for recognition.

He wasn't in a very reflective mood. "Been here

forever." Rob said in reply. "Wonder what they'll build here when they tear it down?"



"Mom? Dad?" Mike said, upon seeing the couple. "Man, I asked you not to come here!"

"Just wanted to see where you were working, Mikey." Rob, Mike's Dad, said.

Patty, Mike's Mom, was as equally unapologetic. "You worry so much. We're not here to embarrass you."

Of course, for any teen, the very fact that parents existed was embarrassment enough.

"Whatever." Mike slurred. There was no point in arguing now. "I need your tickets."

He tore them in half and handed back the stubs, as he did a few thousand times a day. Mike just tried to keep his focus on his job,

even when he could clearly see out the corner of his eye that his Mom and Dad had approached his manager and were pointing back at him. Sheesh. Did adults have no shame? Who knows what they were asking his manager. "Does he comb his hair?" "He doesn't slouch, does he?" And such.

Finally, after his parents lingered in the lobby for far too long, they wandered into one of the theaters. He checked to see what was playing, and saw it was "Princess Diaries 3." Obviously, his folks weren't here for the entertainment. It was a total spy mission.

Inside the theater, Patty and Rob watched the screen, as the wacky hi-jinks of a young street smart girl is weaned into high society as the princess of a small sovereign nation. The film stunk to high heaven.

But it did get Patty thinking. She had hoped when she was pregnant to have a girl. Not that she didn't love her beautiful boy any less than a mother could - but still, there was this unanswered question in the back of her mind. What would it have been like to have a daughter?

And to her side, Mike's Dad was having similar thoughts. Why was he saddled with this lazy,

shiftless good-for-nothing lump of a son? Now there was a real kid on screen. A lively, energetic, happy kid who was smiling and laughing. Not like that mumbling hip-hop loser that lived in his house. What he wouldn't give for a spunky girl like that one in the movie. That would be a kick in the pants now, wouldn't it? God knows she would smell better than what's-his-name. 'M' something. Mike.

"Having a daughter would be so nice," they both thought to themselves at the same time. "Or at least Mike could try and be more nice. Like a girl."

\*\*\*

As Rob and Patty got back into their car that night, the tall, proud profile of The Golden Palace loomed overhead. It had seen many people com into its' doors with one way of thinking, and then seen them leave thinking differently. Movies changed minds. And Mike's parents definitely had different ideas in their heads after visiting.

\*\*\*

Mike was wondering what his parents thought, what with the mounting collection of panties that were showing up in the laundry. He'd come in with his regular underwear to work and then after his shift, they'd be gone. It has been more than a week now. Fortunately, Mike knew that this part-time job wasn't worth the frustration of trying to figure this little mystery out. So he just let it slide.

But surely his Mom had noticed something odd? Even just yesterday, he had volunteered to help with the clothes washing (for the first time in his life, actually) to see what was happening. And Mike watched when his Mom just folded his panties flat and handed them over to him without comment or so much as a blink. Well, parents were tolerant these days. Maybe they just didn't want to damage his self-esteem or something.

Whatever the reason, he was glad he didn't have to answer any questions. Really, he didn't have answers anyway.

Because those panties just kept appearing in his locker after his shift. Day after day. He'd put his old tattered boxers in, and when he'd return to the locker, he'd find a fresh pair of panties waiting for him. It was like The Tooth Fairy had a long-forgotten and slightly warped cousin, The Panty Fairy, who was watching over him. And in actually, he didn't have a pair of his old boxers left. He had run though them all. He had to wear the little panties in to work now.

It had altered his life in several subtle ways, this underwear mischief. For one, he never went to the bathroom at a urinal anymore - somebody might see something. It was stalls and sitting down for him. He had also taken to shaving himself down there. It just looked weird to have a scraggle of hair poking out when he had the panties on. He didn't shave himself clean, mind you, just a little trimming. To make everything look neat.

But on this night, the great undie swipe mystery went up a notch. Several, in fact. Because when Mike got back to his locker, and pried open the door with his long fingernails, he found just what he was expecting. Panties. And something he wasn't expecting.

A bra.

Now this was getting ridiculous. Whoever it was that was doing this was just challenging him outright. Mike was half inclined just to wear it. That'd show... well, whoever. But this was just a step too far. Wearing something under your pants no one can detect was one thing, but wearing a bra was just asking too much.

He thought that until he realized he had to leave for home. Looking around the changing room, there were no trash cans. There was no place to dispose of this... thing. So, what was he gonna do? He could stash it in somebody else's locker - but no girl worked here, and the sudden appearance of a bra in a locker would be suspicious. And because he was the only one in the changing room at this time, it implicated him. Mike. They would know it was him who had put it there.

And as for stuffing it in pocket, forget it. he could he easily spotted or could have it just fall out and into plain view. How could he explain that?

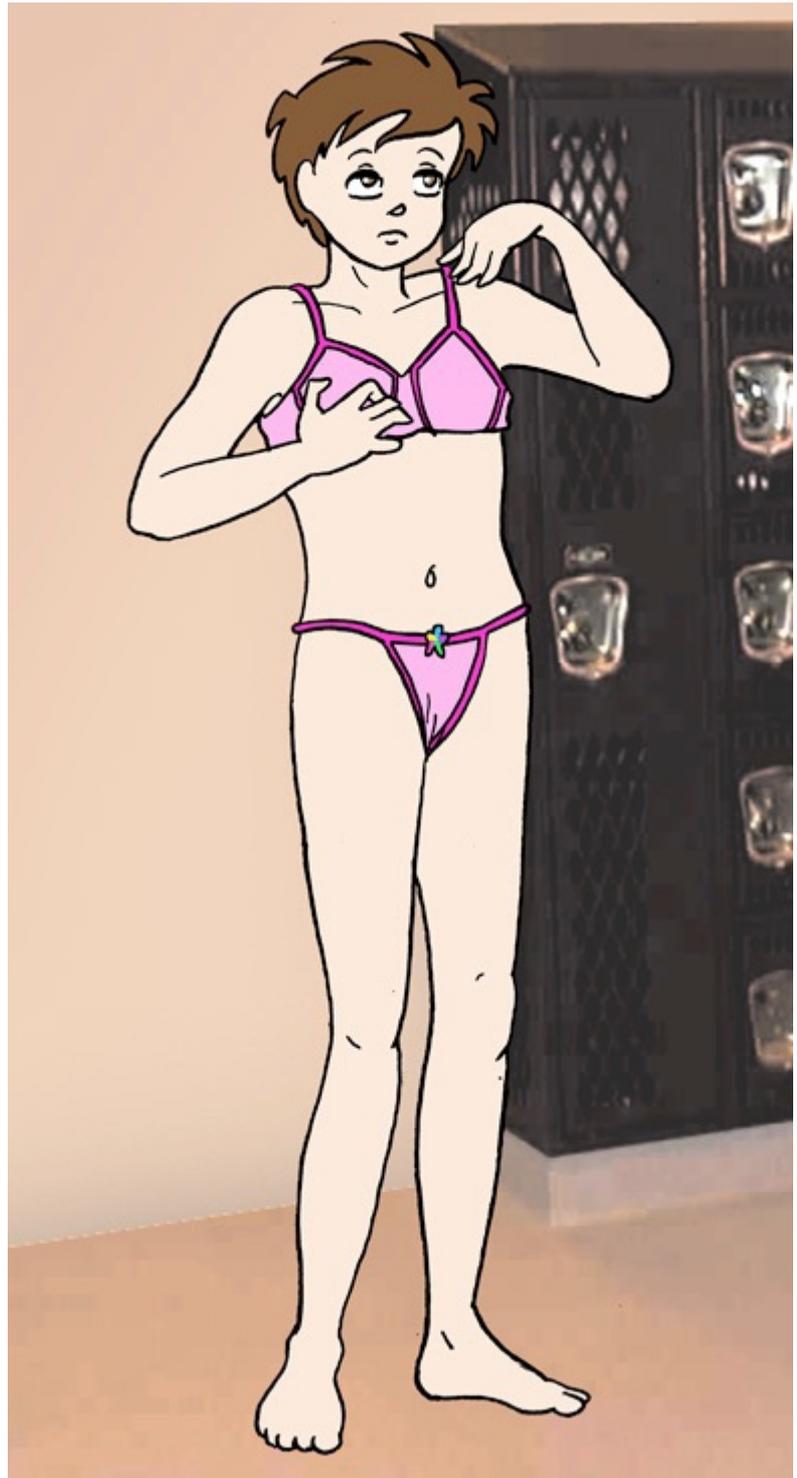
So he had no choice. He had to wear it out of there.

Well, maybe he had choices, but for some reason, they didn't come to him. So Mike slung the bra around his shoulders and shimmied into it, making very sure he had it aligned properly. And that was important because... Well, it just was.

Fortunately, Mike found it very comfortable and virtually forgot that he had it on. He didn't remember until he was going to bed that night, when he saw it next. He shook his head for being so forgetful and then tossed it into his panty drawer.

\*\*\*

Brandon Whiting was a third generation Golden Palace kid. What that meant was that his parents had met and fallen in love at the theater. And his mother's parents and his father's parents had done so as well. In fact, if a building could take credit for being responsible for a human life, Brandon was a prime candidate. Because it was under this ceiling and under the reflected warm light of a movie that those young kids had first looked into each others' eyes and realized they were destined to spend the rest of their lives together. And where they had decided that the truest symbol of their love was to create another life.





And so, forty years after his grandfathers and grandmothers had visited The Golden Palace, Brandon was here as well. Alone. Working the artificial butter pump.

Brandon was an employee of the RNG Multiplex Centre and was just as depressed about it as everyone else who worked here. It was a go-nowhere low-expectations no-money job, and Brandon was just as enthusiastic about it as he would be planning his own funeral. Maybe that's why he was the only one who ever really talked to Mike. They both shared the same hopeless apathy about work.

However, being a third generation progeny of The Golden Palace, Brandon could have felt a sense of entitlement. Entitlement to the things his parents and their parents enjoyed. Not to say he would think that the building was somehow responsible for finding him a girlfriend - because that would be silly - he just would have felt a certain anticipation that the same things that had befallen his ancestors were coming to him.

Well, he would have felt all this if indeed he was aware of any of it. Parents are not generally in the habit of telling their children where they were conceived, so Brandon was totally ignorant of his link with the place where he now worked.

And if The Golden Palace could sense such thing, it would have sensed the bleakness

of his life, the hopelessness of his future and the loneliness that would surely, slowly twist him into a bitter man when he grew up. And if the theater had sensed that, it might have also sensed that it had to help, or, felt an obligation. Maybe it had already started in on such a plan.

\*\*\*

When Mike woke up in the morning, he was in a bad mood. He had spent the night tossing and turning in his bed, unable to really fall asleep. Mike usually just slept in a t-shirt and his boxers, but now he was just getting so damn itchy and hot. He needed to find something thinner and smoother to wear to bed. It was either that or never get a good night's sleep.

And when Mike stepped in to the shower, he couldn't help but notice that his dandruff shampoo had been replaced with "Herbal Honey Organic" shampoo. Too late to stop the shower and go out and get his usual stuff, he made do - begrudgingly. The stuff smelled like flowers and he knew that's what his hair was going to smell like for the rest of the day.

He didn't mind it. He liked the smell. But it would really tick him off if he got any compliments for it.

Mike finished up by using the puff sponge and the body wash that had also mysteriously replaced his soap and washcloth. And now his whole body smelled like flowers as well. His mother was responsible for this, he just knew it. It was her unsubtle way of telling him he needed to wash up more often. She was always saying that. Just like she was always saying he needed to cut his hair. Although she hadn't been saying that lately, for some reason. And it was all the way down to his chin.

He got dry and pulled on his panties. He hooked his bra on as well. By this time, Mike had just as many bras as he did panties. And he didn't even notice that they all matched. Why he was bothering with wearing a bra was a question he chose to ignore. Part of him knew that he wasn't the bra-wearing type, as he was a guy and all. But at the same time, he felt so self-conscious when he didn't have one on. Without it, he could feel his shirt rub up against his nipples all day long. And his nipples were getting pretty irritated. It was odd how he had never had any problem with them before, but wearing the bra seemed to keep him comfortable.

Besides, there was just something indecent about going braless. Like he was advertising himself to people. It was just too... was 'racy' the right word?

Mike killed most of the rest of the day lying around the house. There was nothing to do. He got so bored he even helped his mother out with the cooking. And he cleaned up his room as well. In fact, he was really pleasantly surprised at how much room there was when you took all that old useless sports equipment out of there.

The remaining hours were spent going out of his skull, reading his Mom's stupid magazines, applying some clear polish to keep his long nails as strong as they could be, and watching those mind-numbing soap operas.

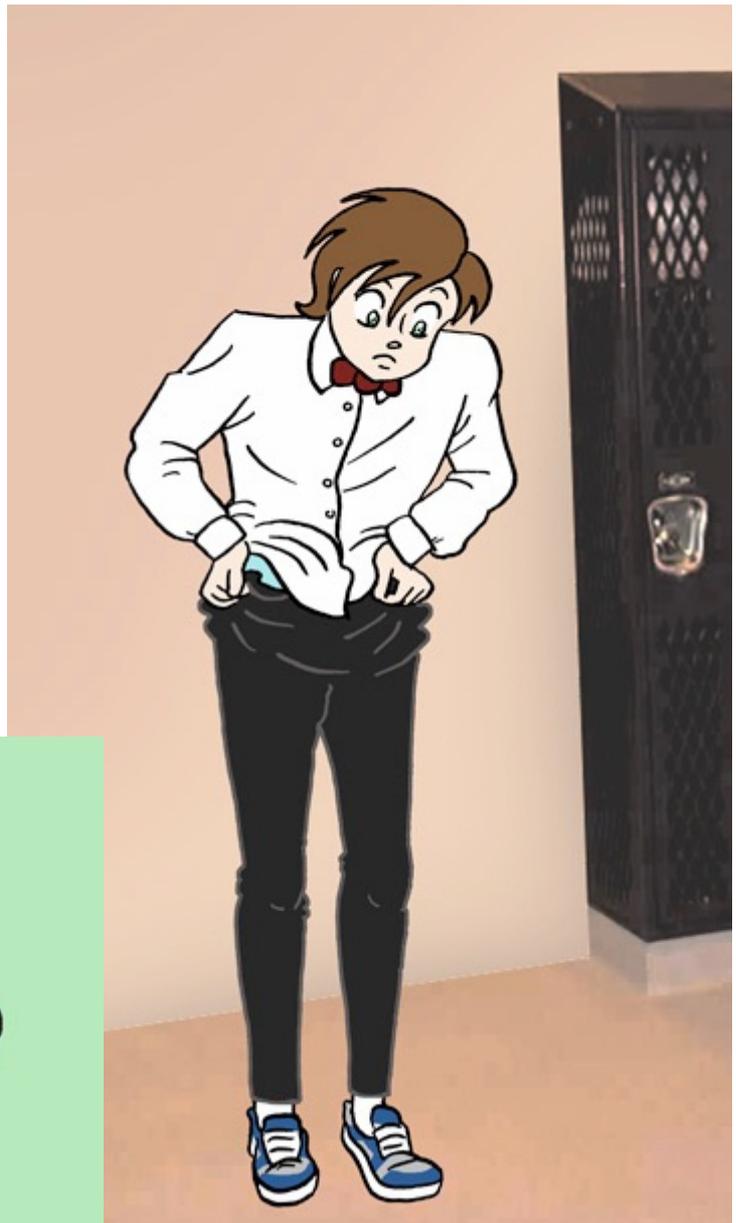
By the time it was time to leave for work, Mike was more than ready to go. He needed out. So when Brandon pulled up outside in his car to give him a ride, Mike didn't even question it. He didn't even think of why Brandon had showed up unannounced and uninvited. He was just glad he was there.

\*\*\*



Work was getting better in some ways for Mike, and in other ways it was getting worse. Brandon was definitely someone he could chew the fat with, and having someone to talk to certainly made the day go by faster. And even though he was loathe to admit it, giving customers a smile and being generally pleasant was making the job a lot easier. If he had only known that when he started, he would have been a lot nicer to everyone.

The thing that was getting worse was his continuing difficulties with his wardrobe at work. Where his work pants had been loose and flowing, they had started to suddenly get a lot tighter. Almost skintight. It happened gradually enough that Mike didn't really catch on for a few



days, but now he was keenly aware of it. His pants were too thin and too tight, and he hated them. But just as before, no one even seemed to notice in the slightest.

But then there was the business with his own clothes. His jeans were getting replaced, as well as his shirts. At first he thought he was just washing and drying them too long in hot water because they were shrinking. But he had been very careful when he was doing the laundry to follow all directions exactly. So that wasn't the problem.

Still, there was no doubt his shirts were getting smaller. His T-shirts were getting tighter, and the sleeves getting shorter. Worst

of all, his shirts were starting to expose his stomach a little bit, so short were they. Oddly, they still fit, but looking at them, they were definitely smaller. So he switched to wearing dress shirts. They seemed okay, but he could swear that he'd go in with a cotton shirt and come home with silk or rayon. And since when had he started to buy baby blue, lavender or pink? It was getting awfully confusing.

His pants were no help as they were getting even tighter. His classic Levi's 501's now read "519" on the label. "Low Flare" it also read. He'd never buy those, would he? They were incredibly tight all the way down to his shins where they flared out to cover his shoes.

Looking through his drawers these days, there seemed nothing that wasn't a victim of the mysterious clothes swapper. They were still kinda like his old shirts and pants, but at the same time, they had all become so... effeminate. Frustrated, he left home early to go shopping for some replacements before his shift began.

Unusually, Mike spent more than an hour in each of three different stores, trying stuff on and looking stuff over - but he hadn't bought a thing. He was used to knowing what he wanted, getting it and leaving. But now, he couldn't make up his mind.

With nothing to show for his afternoon, he decided to stop in and get his hair cut finally. It was really out of control. What would his Mom say when he came home with a fresh haircut without any prodding? She might just explode.

"It's such a healthy head of hair." The stylist told him.  
"And it smells so lovely."

"Thank you." Mike replied. "I use Herbal Honey Organics."

"I love those. Have you tried the new botanical? It's just a miracle worker."

"I'll try it!" Mike said, promising himself to get some on the way home.

"Well, what can I do for you today?"

Mike had been leafing through a book of hairstyles as he had been waiting, but couldn't make up his mind. "I dunno." He shrugged his shoulders. "Just do what you want."

The stylist took a good look at what she had to work with. It was a light auburn that was well below chin-length. It was strong, thick hair with a nice sheen to it, but if this were a girl, she could definitely stand to have it lightened a shade or two. In fact, the stylist had the perfect hairstyle in mind for this head of hair. Except that it was the perfect style for a girl, and not for a boy.

With her client's eyes closed, she didn't want to disturb the peace by asking any questions. And to be truthful, she had a big one. She wasn't altogether sure this wasn't a girl. He or she had a kind of androgynous look. And doing what she did for a living, knowing the gender of your client was kind of essential. Finally, looking for any clue, she looked at the book her client had been looking at, and saw it turned to the pages for females. So she decided to go ahead with her first impulse.



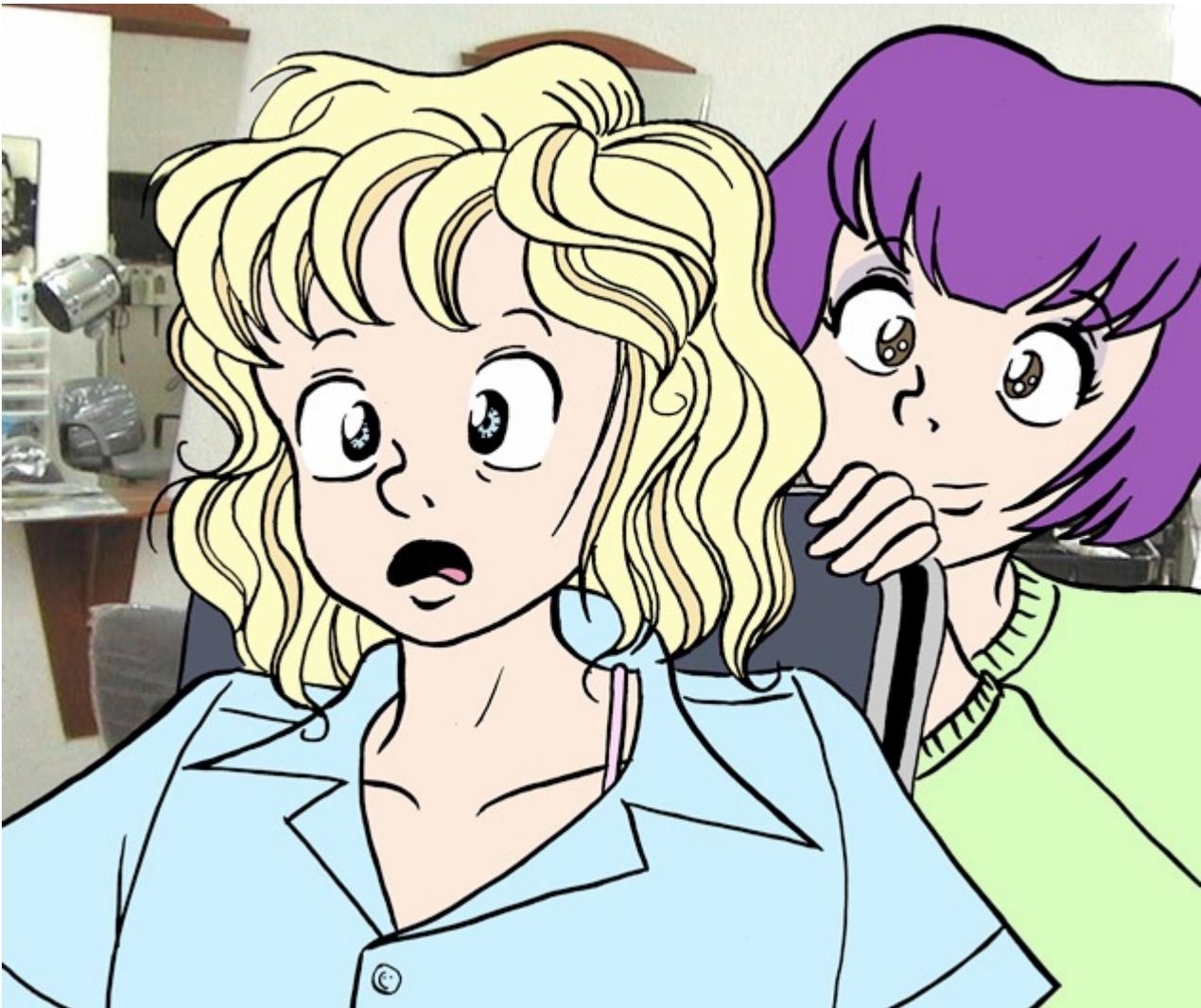
She went to work on her (his?) hair, and her fears were calmed when she put the first bits of color gel and foil into her clients' hair. Any real man would have objected to that right away. So she decided not to worry about it.

Eventually, Mike started a conversation. He talked about how he was going to be on the football team when fall came, and the stylist complimented him on not letting barriers of gender stop him from having fun. After all, even girls deserved to play football.

Mike agreed, but didn't see what that had to do with him. So he moved off that subject and started to talk about going back to school. Mike was looking at that with dread. The only cool thing about going back to school was seeing all the hot girls in those new clothes.

And that lead into a discussion on fashion, something Mike found he knew a lot more about than he thought. Maybe it was from reading those dumb magazines his Mom subscribed to. He was going to have to get his own magazines, unless he wanted to know even more about how adult women can lose weight and look younger.

Finally the stylist turned the chair around for the grand unveiling. This let Mike see himself for the first time.



Mike felt the blood drain from his face when he first saw it. His hair was outright blonde. It spilled over his face in curls and had pronounced poofy bangs over his forehead. Highlights were streaked in it. It was practically aglow. It was a girl's hairdo.

"What!?" He said, reactively. He couldn't find the words to continue. "My...!" He started to

hyperventilate. The world got a little out of focus there for a moment. Then he felt the blood rush back into his face. He was angry. Pissed.

But just as it looked like Mike was about to speak, something grabbed a hold of him and stopped him cold. His panicked eyes relaxed, and he took a deep, relaxing breath. Mike couldn't break his gaze from his own reflection. Then he turned a little to the side, and then to the other.

"I think it looks very pretty on you." The stylist said.

"It's wonderful!" Mike gushed, almost girlishly. "I love it!" It was a hard thing to admit, but it was a gorgeous hairdo. Absolutely breathtaking. Maybe not what he had in mind when he came in here, maybe not what a boy should wear, but...

How could anybody deny how stunning he looked with this hair, boy or girl?

Then the panic came back. Of course it mattered if it was meant for a girl! He wasn't a...

But that reflection was SO amazing. If he had seen some girl who looked like this, he would have instantly fallen in love. "Where did you ever get the idea?" He asked.

"Funny thing. I was watching this movie downtown at the old Multiplex, and there was this girl on screen who just had this incredible 'do. I've been waiting for exactly the right person to try it out on." She stopped to think for a moment. "It's weird. I once told myself I'd never copy the movies for my inspiration. But this time... It just lodged in my brain. I can't explain it!"

"Well, you should try it more often!" Mike replied. He couldn't stop looking at his reflection. What would his parents say? What would Brandon say? He certainly hoped he would like it.

At the counter, Mike happily paid the ninety dollars and picked up some conditioner. And some hairspray. After all, this was going to need some. And Why not a little bit of gel? And since there was a sale on finishing spray, some of that, too. Whatever it was.

The girl put everything in a bag and tossed in a free makeup set that was a giveaway for big purchases. Mike thanked her and was on his way back to work.

\*\*\*

As he made his walk back, though, that panic slowly returned. His hair was blonde. Curly. And very, very girlish. Was it right? No, it wasn't! It was wrong! It was a mistake. A big mistake. A VERY BIG mistake

Suddenly, Mike realized what a fool he had been. The hair was insane. It was unbelievable. He had to do something. He snuck into work by the side door and was in the changing room before anyone could spot him. He got out of his clothes and picked up his hat. He hated to ruin his style, but he wound it all up into a bun, which was neatly hidden under the cap. And why he knew how to tie his hair in a bun wasn't important right now. This was



an emergency.

He checked in the mirror. With most of his hair under the cap, it almost looked okay. You would only notice that his hair had gone blonde if you looked at it. That was the best he could do for now. Mike got his jacket on, and pulled up the incredibly tight black pants.

A knock came to the door asking why he was taking so long.

"In a sec!" He shouted back. There was no time to fool around now. When his feet got to the other end of the pant legs, he was shocked to see that there was no hole. They ended in feet. Like children's pajamas.

"Any time now, Mike!" His manager shouted angrily from the other side of the door.

"Fudge!" Mike said to himself. He just would have to go with it. He got his shoes on and went out to work.

"Problems?" The manager asked when he finally exited.

"Sorry." Was all Mike said.

"That time of month?" The manager asked. Mike blushed. What WAS his time of the month, exactly?

\*\*\*

Mike had had it with these stupid work pants. No, he didn't mind his tight jeans. They were cute. But these black pants for work were just getting ridiculous. Yesterday, they were so thin you could practically see through them. If this problem was going to get any worse, he'd have to just go out and buy a real pair of pants for himself.

So he was very disappointed to see that when he opened his locker on this particular day, he found those same super tight pants were as good as transparent. Maybe he was just wearing them out or something. Once he had them on, being very careful not to snag his nails on them, he was aghast. They looked like... they looked like... pantyhose is what they looked like. Of course they weren't, but that's what they looked like. To him. And his panties were totally visible.

About to give up, Mike caught a glimpse of something else in his locker. A small black piece of fabric. He had no idea why it was in there, but maybe he could use it. It was cut like a cylinder. Maybe more like a tube. And maybe, if it was just big enough...

Sure enough, when he got it on, it was perfect fit. The width of the tube was just big enough for his body. And resting around his waist, it was just long enough to cover up his legs down to the knees. This would save him from just exposing himself in public. What a lifesaver!

He checked himself in the mirror to make sure he



looked okay.

"Darn it!" Mike cursed at himself. Sure, the fabric tube thing was covering him up, but he had overlooked one important detail.

He had makeup on. He had just been fooling around at home, you know just experimenting. After all, he had that free makeup kit he had been given at the salon, and it was just sitting on his desk doing nothing. So he got a little curious. Was that a crime? It even came with a little instruction booklet. And with all those colors - it was practically begging to be used!



So he began trying it out. Investigating. Research. Whatever you want to call it. But he had a lot of time to kill, and Mike just couldn't resist using all that makeup. He had only done it a few times. Well, maybe four or five times. You needed to practice to get good at it. So, he was only practicing.

That still didn't explain why no one stopped him before he left the house. And why didn't anyone say anything when he came in through the lobby?

"Ready to go!" His manager shouted through the door. It was a statement, not a question. Now it was too late. No time to take it off. He had to go to work now. Maybe no one would notice.

\*\*\*

Why didn't anybody notice? Mike slammed his locker door shut angrily. He had all this makeup on, his hair was all nice and pretty today, and he smelled great - and no one even noticed! A whole shift out there on the floor and not a single word from anybody! Why did he even bother?

Sure, leaving the makeup was originally a mistake - but nobody noticed at all! That was over a week ago, and Mike had done himself up even nicer every day, hoping someone would notice! That's all he wanted, just some acknowledgment. He felt invisible. He even used perfume today, and still, not a word.

Mike dressed in his street clothes and wanted out of here. He put on his jeans, the ones with those

adorable flowers stitched on the back where the pockets should be, adjusted his breasts in his bra, unbound his hair, and pulled on his pink spaghetti-strap T-shirt ready to go. After touching up in the mirror, he was off in a huff.

When he got into Brandon's car for the usual ride home, he didn't even want to talk to him. As long as he hadn't noticed anything, he didn't deserve talking to. For all Mike cared, he could go jump in a...



"I like your hair, it smells nice." Brandon said.

Mike smiled bashfully at Brandon. "Thank you! But I didn't do anything special..."

Brandon leaned over to smell Mike's hair closer. "Mmmmm. I love that." He said. He then swerved sharply to avoid an oncoming bridge abutment, and returned his attention to the road. Mostly.

\*\*\*

Mike was a bit of a basket case that night. He barely said a word to his parents before spending the rest of his night in his room. He had let Brandon drive him home, and couldn't get the boy out of his mind. He had just started out talking to Brandon just to kill time at work. But now, all of the sudden, it all felt so different.

Brandon was no longer so easy to talk to. Mike was so worried about saying the right things, he barely could even utter a word to him anymore. Since when had he been no nervous about just talking?

And even worse, Mike had been spending more time than he should just THINKING about Brandon. Like about how nice he was to give him a ride. Did that mean anything?

Mean anything? How could a ride mean anything?

But did it?

Could it?

Mike was driving himself crazy. These were useless questions, and he had no need to know the answer. Yet he still desperately wanted to know the answers. His mind felt like it was about to split into two. He crashed on his bed, staring up into the ceiling. He had to think.



Ever since he had taken this dumb job, he had been acting like a different person. It wasn't just the indecisiveness - he had been behaving differently. And when he looked into the mirror these days, he was always shocked for the briefest of moments. He had the feeling that the person he saw wasn't himself.

Although, it wasn't like he was scared of these differences. He wasn't horrified with his new look. He liked it. It was pleasant. Attractive. Friendly. He liked being friendly. He liked the way people treated him now. He even liked life at home better. And he felt a lot better about himself.

It used to be that he'd only talk to people just to get them to do something. And then at some point, he'd say something stupid and insult them. Or even worse, just be outright rude to them. He had always hated that part of him, but he had long ago decided that was just a part of his personality that would never change. It was who he was, and he had better just let it go. That was just the way Mike was.

But now he had changed. Somehow. He didn't insult people anymore. He was complimentary and congenial. And when you were nice to people, they were nice back. And you could really get to know people that way. Actually, he had already learned the names of a few dozen regular customers of the theater. And he looked forward to seeing them again - just so he could talk to them.

Okay, maybe it was a little frightening, these changes. But as much as he wanted to back away from it, as much as he wanted to walk away and leave that job and all the people there, he just as much

wanted to stay.

All right, it was time to admit it to himself. He knew what was happening to him. He knew it full well. He was just choosing to ignore the obvious, because it was frightening. Because it was... tantalizing. Strangely bewitching. And lastly, because it was impossible.

But Mike did feel he needed to make a decision. Even as strange as his life felt right now, he seemed to think that he had a choice. And tonight, he would have to make that choice.

\*\*\*

The phone in the back office rang. Dan, the manager of RNG Multiplex Centre, rolled his eyes and made his way over to answer it. It was usually someone from corporate giving him a hard time about something or other. And this call was no different.

His regional supervisor was all hot under the collar about his hiring practices. Of all the people he had hired over the past six months, not a single one of them was female. Why wasn't he hiring women, the supervisor wanted to know. Was he having a problem adhering to RNG hiring guidelines?

Dan got off the phone, angry as hell. Was it his fault no one had shown up to apply that was female? Great. Now he was in trouble.

But tempering his anger was the distant sound of a movie showing in one of the theaters. Which was very odd. It was noon, and he was the only one in the theater this time of day. The first showing wasn't until 2:30.

So Dan got up from his chair and wandered over to Screen 2 with a high degree of curiosity. Oddly, a film was being played. Some old black and white that was... Hey, he knew this one. It was called "Somebody Wants It Hot" or something like that. It wasn't that bad a film...

"Well, nobody's perfect!" the actor on screen said, cheerfully.

Suddenly, Dan shook himself out of his stupor. He had just zoned out there for a while. But the slapping of the loose film in the projection room told him the show was over. How it came to be shown was a mystery, but now it was time for the first shift to come in, and he needed to get ready.

First thing he needed to do was send a fax off to corporate detailing the hiring of that new girl. M... Mar... What was her name? She had been working here all summer long, and he still didn't know her name? He racked his brain. M... It started with an M...

Angie. That was it. Angie Prager. Cute little number too. And very nice. A great girl. The customers seemed to like her a lot.

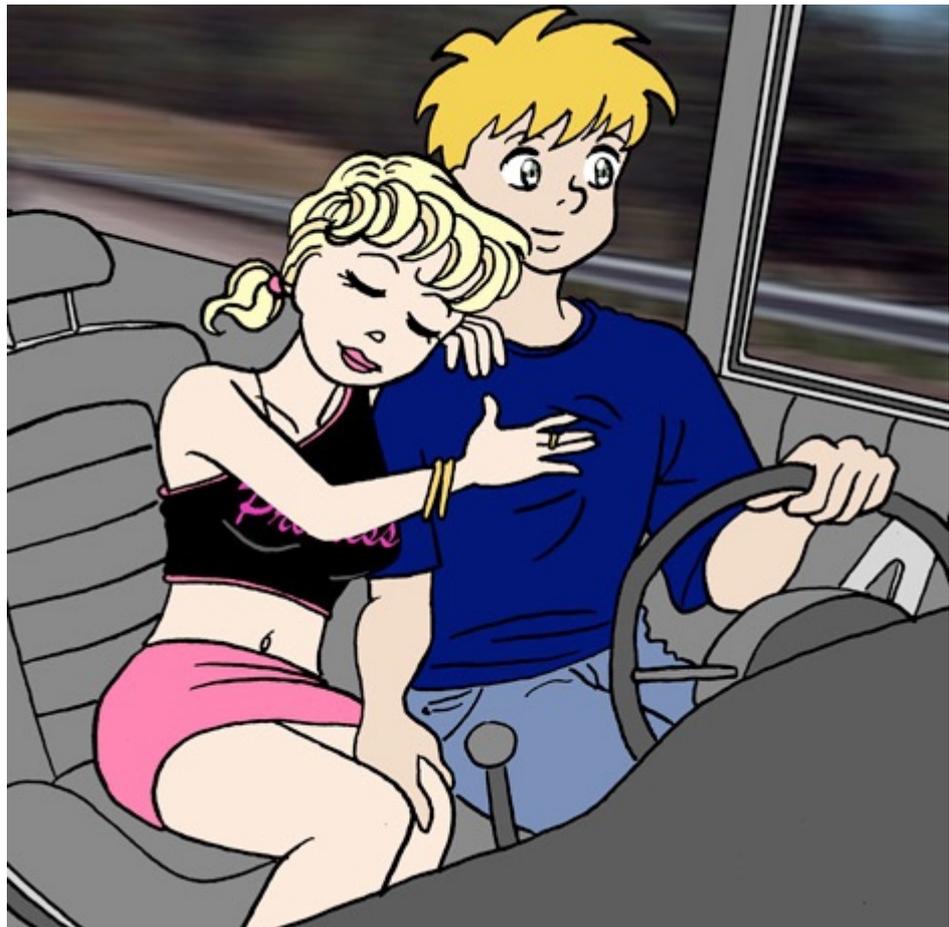
\*\*\*

Angie was sad to leave The Golden Palace at the end of the summer. But it was now going to be fall, and time for school. Which of course meant... shopping spree!

But it also meant leaving her job. She had made a lot of friends here, and Dan had even begged her to consider staying on part-time. But between school, studying, cheerleading - where was the time? Plus, this was going to be the best year ever at school. Over the summer she had finally blossomed into womanhood. Finally! And was looking forward to showing it off. She had the perfect bikini picked out for Spring break.

So she got into Brandon's car and they both waved their goodbye's to Dan as they drove off. It wasn't very long before Brandon's hand was on Angie's bare leg, where her miniskirt ended. And Angie leaned over to rest her head on Brandon's shoulder, rubbing his chest as he drove.

She never thought she'd ever meet a guy as nice as Brandon. And especially not at a summer job. She had just taken it to get her parents off her case. But it turned out to be a pretty nice way to spend your summer, kissing in the dark behind the curtains.



If felt kinda weird to Angie the first time she kissed Brandon. It was almost like it was wrong. Wrong to kiss a guy. Taboo.

But she got over that problem really quickly.

Now it was more a case of being allowed to spend enough time with each other. Daddy was always getting on her case about getting too "intimate" with a boy at her age. And Mother wanted to give her a speech on how to be a proper young lady on just about every single day, it seemed.

So even though she was technically not working at her job anymore, and technically Brandon didn't have to pick her up every night anymore - her parents didn't need to know that.

Funny how she never even really considered getting romantic with a guy before. But it seemed so natural now. And her guy was so great. It was like a door from a dream world had opened up and this angel had fallen right into her lap.

\*\*\*

The first two days of school were confusing and difficult for Angie. No one seemed to know her, and the computers couldn't even confirm that she existed. It seemed like the whole place had gone nuts since last year. No one knew who Angie even was. But that wasn't a problem for very long.

Just a day before it looked like Angie was going to be thrown out of school and investigated, the RNG Multiplex Centre announced that it was shutting down. Permanently. A flyer appeared all over town with the message. For it's very last day in operation, all movies were being shown for free. Anyone could come.

And they all did. In fact, every single member of the school attended, from student to teacher to administrator. When they all arrived that day, the manager, Dan, was surprised to say the least. He

hadn't told anyone about shutting the place down. That was a big secret. Yet all the people from the high school had these printed invitations to attend the last ever showings at The Golden Palace for free.

Not wanting to start a mob scene, Dan relented and kept the place open for one more day. All the school was treated to the last shows at The Golden Palace.

And when everyone came back to school the next day, of course they remembered Angie. She was Brandon's girlfriend, varsity cheerleader and one of the nicest girls in school. She was a lively, energetic, happy kid who was always smiling and laughing.

There were no more problems after that.

\*\*\*

And the very next night, just as the wreckers, cranes and bulldozers parked outside the RNG Multiplex Centre for demolition, the empty theater collapsed.

The bricks and mortar practically crumbled, disintegrating into dust. The inspectors would later note how every single piece of the theater seemed to have aged well beyond any reasonable expectation that it could have held together. Why, it looked like the building was made from stuff a thousand years old, it was in such bad shape. One engineer even said "It was as if it just decided it was time to go."

Eventually, the precise memories of that summer faded from Angie's mind. Brandon didn't really recall them that clearly either. But that's sometimes how movies are. You may not remember the actors or the stories, but how they touched you is something that never goes away.

The End.



