

J O E S I X P A C K

***CHANGED
AND
REARRANGED***

**“Wrongs Make Wright” by Joe Six-Pack
A Stories of the Supernatural Book**



2011 Second Edition

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WRONGS MAKE WRIGHT

A hotbed of intrigue, boiling emotions and powerful men, this was a dangerous place to be. Ambition ruled here, where the slightest mistake or capitulation to human weakness would destroy you. In this den of base instinct and cruel reality, there were two men who stood above the rest, puppet masters that manipulated the masses to unwittingly do their bidding.

That was just the way fourth–period English class was at Middleton High.

What made it worse was no one in the room was aware of it. Everybody thought this was just another dull class, three periods away from the beginning of the day, and the last period before lunch. They suspected nothing.

Matthew Wilke was a Sophomore, a 15 year old who was the top student in this class, and the top student in the school. Hell, the whole district. He was a young genius. His life was all about school. As such, there was no such thing in his life as ‘free time.’ He was either in class, hanging around teachers or studying at home in the darkness. He worked from dawn until late into the night seeking perfection in his knowledge.

Every night at two in the morning he would curse the onset of sleep, an inexcusable intrusion on his studies and a painful reminder of how susceptible he was to being just as ordinary as everyone else. Slumbering, like the common people. Sleep was the most egregious flaw of human design. It made his skin crawl.

His rival sat across from him in class, a 16–year old Junior by the name of Christian “Chris” DeVray. He was the cool, calm and collected kid who sat in the rear corner of the room, seemingly disinterested with being taught – but consistently producing top marks. He seemed a natural learner, never having to even spend a moment on homework or studying.

He was the sort of person who never really sat in a chair, he just slouched his way into it. His eyes never opened beyond sleepy slits. And he didn’t talk a lot, he kept to himself and traveled his own path. In other words, every girl in school had a crush on the handsome enigmatic loner. But few were brave enough to ask for a date. And if they had, they would have been turned down. Chris’ sublime tastes ran a little older than teenage girls.

Both Chris and Matthew were passing this class – as every other class they attended – with A plus pluses. And although Chris barely could be bothered to keep awake for the entire day, Matthew was using every ounce of his willpower at his disposal. Because he had one goal. Not only to beat Chris in any given contest, but for once and all demonstrate that he should be taking classes at the local college.

That was his big ambition. To dump these simpletons and go to college just like those young brainiacs he was always reading about. The ones who graduated college at sixteen, and got Ph.D's at eighteen. That was his place in life, and he knew it. If he could only convince the imbeciles who ran this daycare center they called a school.

"How is everybody doing today?" said a man in a beaten old suit. He had entered the room slightly nervous and flustered, obviously out of his element. "Can everyone take their seats please?"

He was instantly recognizable to the students as the Assistant Vice Principal, an older balding man who usually spent his time behind a desk. That he was here was an intriguing turn in an otherwise standard-issue day. It meant that something was up.

"I'm sure you notice that your teacher, Mr. Lumbregadious isn't here today." The man said. The class suddenly looked around, just now noticing that the teacher was indeed missing. They hadn't really cared enough to check. "Mr. Lumbregadious has been put in the hospital for some emergency surgery on his heart." He paused to let the expected shock and gasp for his teacher's well-being to pass.

The room was silent.

"Anyway, I'm sure you all wish him the best. So today, we'll be watching a video." He walked over to a waiting A/V cart and wheeled it in front of the class. "You'll have a substitute for tomorrow."

With that, the class collectively checked out for the rest of the period. Cell phones were opened discreetly, notebooks were prepared for doodling and desk space was cleared for resting heads.



"Let's just face facts, Matt. You wouldn't want to," Chris said after class. He clearly wasn't delighted with the fact that he was having a conversation with this kid.

"Who says?" Matt objected. "Besides, I'm not arguing if I would like it or not. What I'm saying is I could. The school counselor even thinks so."

"I'm not taking Mr. Ragweed's opinion for anything," Chris said, leery of bringing the sandal-footed hippie-child counselor into the discussion. "That's yer problem, Matt. You're always dealing in the hypothetical. You're never in the real world with the rest of us."

"Whatever," was all Matthew could say. "All I know is I could teach that class just as easy as anyone else."

Chris wanted to drop the subject. “So you said a thousand times, Matt. I’m not arguin’ that point, dude.”

“You don’t think I can, do you?” Matt cried.

“Look, I gotta get to my next class, Matt.”

“I could! Why do they need to hire a substitute and waste taxpayer money! I could teach English better than anyone they’re ever going to find.”

“Great,” Chris said, accelerating his pace to try and break from his preoccupied classmate. He was getting a little angry, and that bothered him. He didn’t like getting wrapped up in bad vibes. They weren’t even really friends anyway, so why did Matt keep hanging around?



“I know that lesson plan back and forth!” Matt said, sitting himself down at Chris’ table. He was interrupting a perfectly good tuna sandwich. It even had little bits of celery to give it some crunch. Now, with his concentration broken, he could no longer appreciate it. Chris’ arms dropped in exasperation. He abandoned his food and excused himself.



“I’m going to go to the principal and ask! I really will!” Matt said, catching up with Chris between bells, two periods later. Chris ducked into his next class to avoid him.

He had a bad feeling that this wasn’t going to be the last he heard of this.

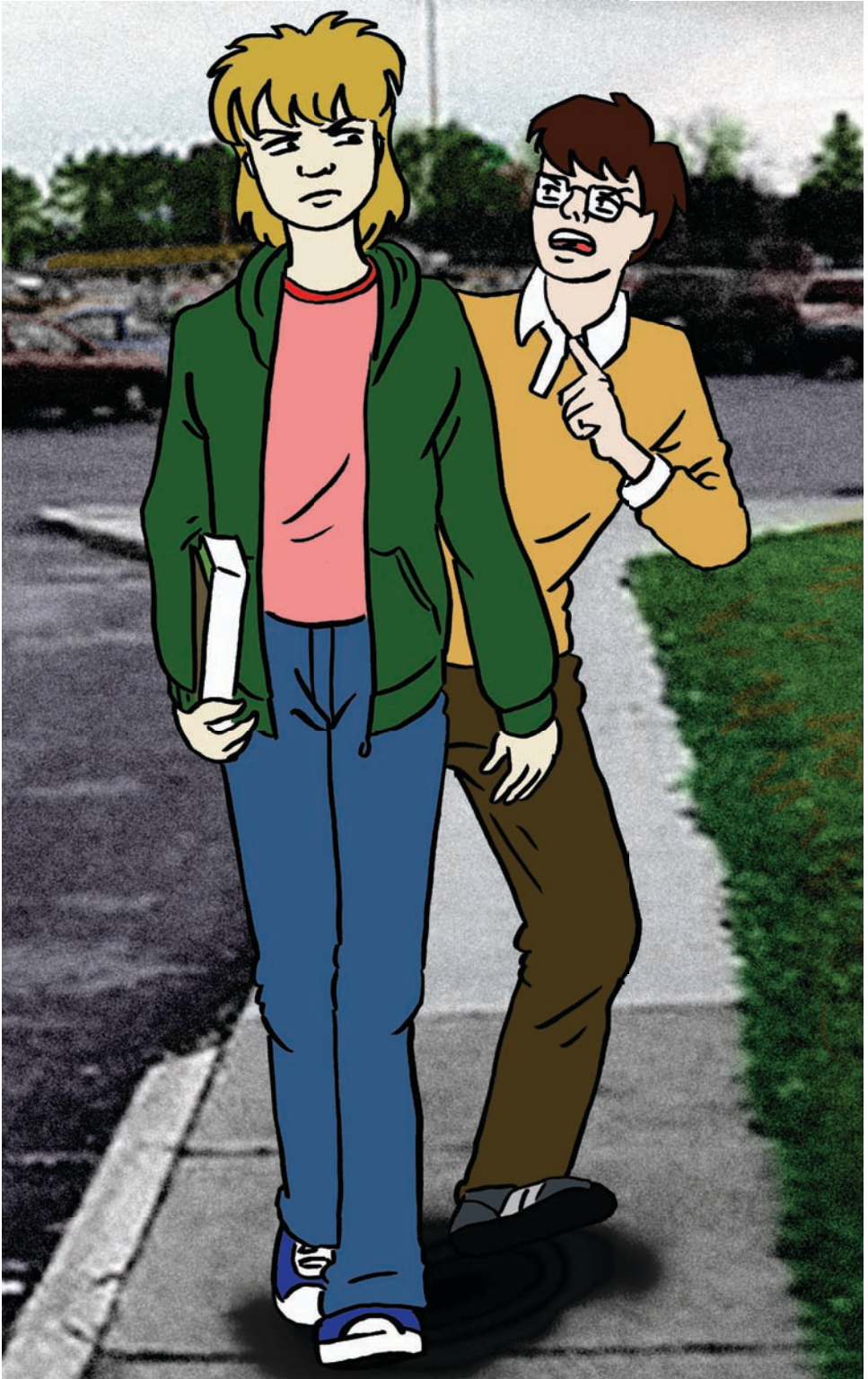
That was confirmed when he looked at the small window inside the classroom’s door to see Matt’s beady little eyes staring through it, while pointing at him.

“You think you’re better than me?” Chris would have heard him say if any sound could have gotten through the door.



Matt’s voice came from behind. “You still don’t think I can do it, do you?”

It was after school, and all Chris wanted to do was get away. He tried to jump on a bus that he wasn’t even supposed to be on, but decided against it. Who knows where he was going to end up. On second thought, anywhere was better.



“*Fine!*” Chris barked uncharacteristically. “I bet you can’t tech English class! Is that what you wanted to hear?”

“I knew it!” Matthew growled. “I knew it *all along!*”

“Oh, *man*, just leave me alone,” Chris begged. He broke into a rare gallop to get to his bus home and leapt for the door like it was a sanctuary.

Still, even as the bus pulled away, He could see Matt running pathetically alongside. His thin frame was not built for any physical activity beyond tying his shoes. He was a discombobulated mess of flailing limbs, dropping books behind him as he ran. “I’ll show you! I’ll show you!” He yelled in his nasal whine. “Just you wait! *You’ll see!*”



As Chris stepped off the bus the next morning, his 1/8-awake self proceeded on his usual trudge to his locker before classes begun, but was then interrupted. By screaming.

In the direction of the noise, he saw a crowd had gathered. It seemed to be watching something happening. Just another school fight? They usually didn’t merit such notice. Despite that, Chris grumbled and headed over to investigate.

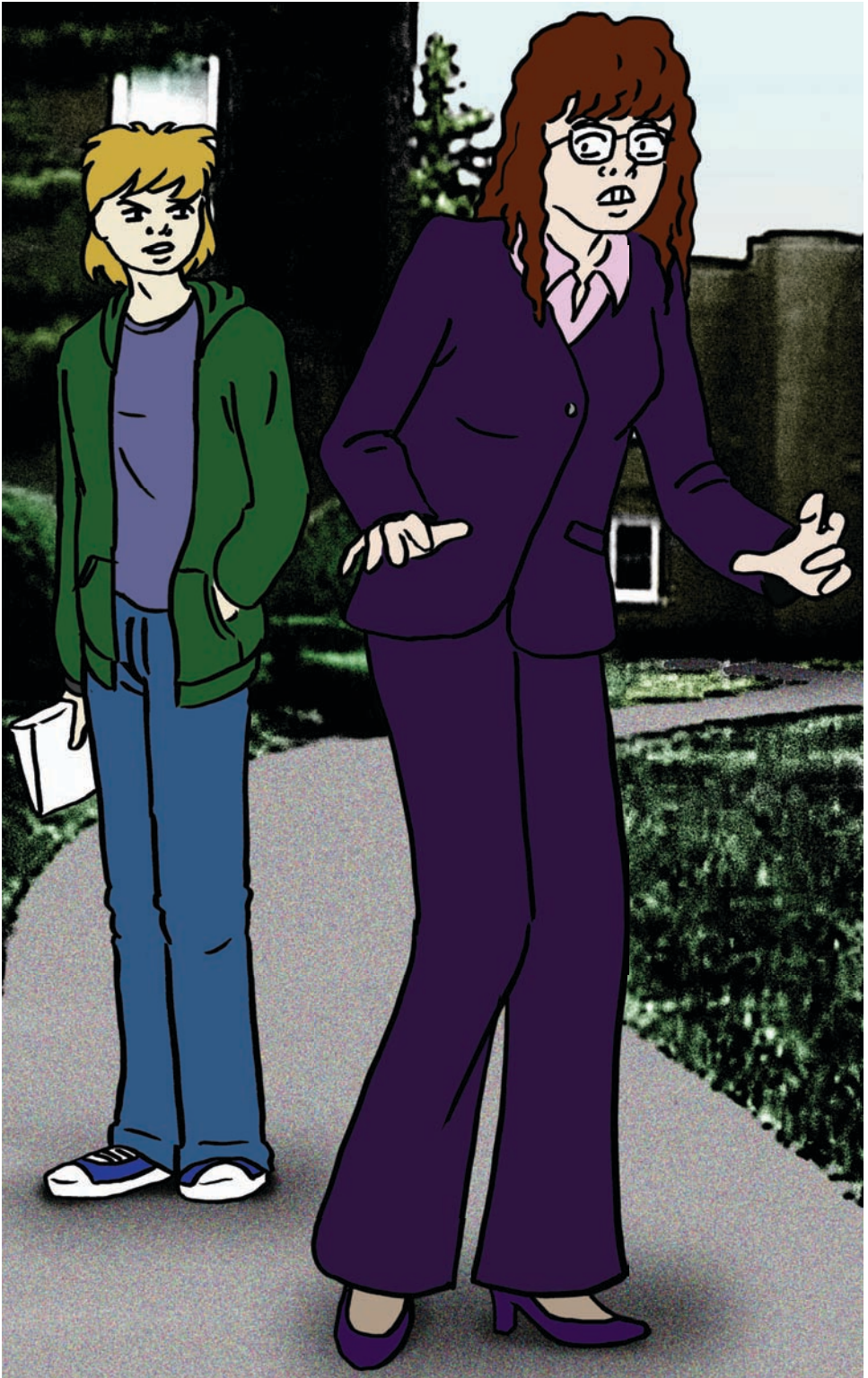
“Let me go! Take your hands off of me!” Came a screeching voice at the center. Chris weaved and wove through the crowd until he could get a decent look. “I’ll have you brought up on charges!”

Chris finally did get so see what was going on. The security officer who guarded this end of the East hall was holding a young woman by the wrists as she struggled to free herself. She was dressed in a somewhat dated and ragged pantsuit that was too big for her, and was in great danger of ripping it – or having it ripped for her.

“I’m the substitute teacher for Mr. Lumbregadious!” The woman cried. “This is no way to treat an adult!”

Chris immediately realized who it was – then tossed the idea right out of his head for being truly ridiculous. A scant moment later, he retrieved the idea from the round file and examined it more thoroughly.

“You don’t have the proper I.D., ma’am, and you cannot enter onto the school grounds,” the security guard said, with little effort or emotion. For the stoutly built man, restraining the woman was not so hard as to cause him to even blink. He headed her out to the parking lot by practically picking her up and turning her in that direction. “Now, if you need to make arrangements, you’ll have to call the district office. That’s all I can help you with.”



So with a hearty shove, the woman tumbled down the sidewalk on her heels, furiously trying to maintain balance. Almost immediately, the crowd of students swarmed around, threatening to instigate a truly uncomfortable situation.

“Back off!” Chris said to the mob, holding them off just with the conviction in his voice, apparently. “Let’s get on to class,” he said. Puzzlingly enough, the students immediately turned around and left as if nothing had happened.

“As for you,” Chris said to the woman who was trying to get away unnoticed, “I think we have to get you home...” he intensified his tone, “...*Matt*.”

The boy in the pantsuit – who certainly was Matthew – spun around in horror, nearly knocking himself out from under his wig.



Chris needed answers. “You honestly thought you could...” He paused. “Check that. What *exactly* were you thinking?”

“Nothing,” Matt mumbled to himself. He really wasn’t in a mood to talk. His plan never even considered that he would actually get caught. It was a perfect plan. Now that he was taking this cab ride home, he wasn’t eager to say anything loud enough for the driver to hear.

“You didn’t think you could really teach our class, did you?” Chris asked, knowing the answer.

Matt suddenly came to life. “See! You don’t think I could!”

“Fuck,” Chris muttered. “I don’t fuckin’ believe you.”

“Well, I *can* teach that class!”

“You dressed up as a substitute teacher, were going to sneak into school...”

“It would have worked if that stupid rent-a-cop hadn’t...”

Chris held his hand to Matthew’s face to indicate an end to the debate.

“Dude, you’re wearing women’s clothes.”

“Well, I couldn’t pretend to be a twenty-something *man*, so... the logical thing to do was...”

“Logical,” Chris said to emphasize the word.

“Hey, if I had pulled it off, you would have said I was a genius,” Matt replied.

“You’re smart, Matt. I’ll give you that,” Chris said, shaking his head. “But you sure don’t think things through, do you?”

“I wouldn’t have had to do this if you hadn’t forced me to prove my point!” Matt kicked Chris in the leg, like a petulant child. “Asshole!”

Chris used every bit of his energy to keep from doing something truly nasty to Matt. Because if he wanted to, he really could.

The taxi stopped in front of Matthew's house, and Chris was able to scrape together enough of his spare change and lunch money to take care of the cabbie.

"So, get out," Chris told Matt.

"Lemme check," Matt said, surveying the street for people. "Hokay," he said, consenting to idea. He tucked the heels under his arm and sprinted for the front door of his house, leaving Chris behind.

"You're welcome," Chris said to himself.

Matt fumbled with the keys and before he could stick them in the lock, the door opened for him. "And what exactly are you supposed to be?" Matthew's mother said sharply, waiting for him.

"Mom!" Matt yelled. "But your car is gone! You're not *supposed* to be home!"

"I took the car in to get fixed..." She replied, her voice dying off in a sea of unanswered questions. Like a lot of mothers, she decided to just skip over her confusion and go directly to anger. "*Matthew Thomas Wilke!* Have you lost your mind?" She planted her hands on her hips as her eyes lit up with fury. "Your father is turning over in his grave!"

"But M..."

"I don't want to hear one word out of you! *Not one word!*" She barked. "You go right on up to your room and change! And then, you better have one *good* explanation for..." She stopped for a moment. "*Is that my old pantsuit?*"

Matt didn't answer as he schlepped on up to his room, humiliated.

Outside, Chris was waiting for Matt to come back out and help him with the fare, apologize, or at least wave him off or something. But it slowly became apparent that nothing like that was going to happen. Showing uncharacteristic impatience, Chris flipped open his cell phone and dialed Matt.

"*What?*" A sulky, angry Matt said when he answered.

"Dude," Chris said. "Did..."

"*Just fuck off Chris!*" Matt yelled so loud Chris could hear it both on the phone and out the windows of the house. "You've really screwed up my life this time!" The line clicked dead.

This time? "*This time?*" Chris yelled into the air. When had he ever done anything to Matt? He kept to himself, didn't talk much to anybody, and barely ever even exchanged so much as a glance with Matt. If Chris hadn't been checking his emotions, he would have crushed his little cellular phone with his one hand.

This wasn't the first time that little prick had made trouble for him. Matt had accused Chris of cheating on the first big test of the year, simply because Matt was too conceited to believe someone was as good as he was in English. Then,

in order to secure a position at the top of the grade curve, Matt had even asked to see Chris's school records in an attempt to have him transferred to a less advanced class.

And now, this was all he could stand of Matt. This was the limit. He had put up with his shit long enough.

"Yes?" Matt's Mom said, as she answered the door.

"Mrs. Wilke?" Chris said. "Do you have a minute?"

Mrs. Wilke wiped her fevered brow. "This really isn't a good time... Aren't you... Aren't you one of Matthew's classmates? Do you know anything about..."

"This will only take a minute, Mrs. Wilke. I need to talk to you about Matt. Please pay attention."



It wasn't long before Matthew heard the heavy, measured steps of his mother coming up the stairs. He could only wildly speculate about the size of the ass-whooping he was about to endure.

When the knob turned on his door, his heart just stopped beating, and a deep chill went from his chest right through the pit of his stomach and down to his toes.

"Matthew," his Mom said, coming in.

"Wh... Who was that at the door?" Matt said, trying to delay the inevitable for at least another second.

"There was no one at the door. Don't try and change the subject." She walked over to Matt's desk chair and sat down. In real life it took no more than a second, but to Matthew it lasted hours. Hours to build up even more fright and fear inside.

She raised an eyebrow and smirked when she finally spoke. "Why have you taken off your lovely clothes, Matthew? Don't you like wearing them?"

"I can explain, Mom..."

"I don't want explanations," she cut him off. "Frankly, I have no idea how to handle this sort of thing." She let out a heavy sigh. "What would you do in my place? A son that has suddenly shown an affinity for wearing my clothes?"

"Mom, I don't... I'm not..."

"I'm not going to be interrupted again, Matthew. Is that clear?"

Matt nodded yes.

"Good." She crossed her legs and leaned back in the chair. "I've decided that the only way to deal with this problem is to see it through to its conclusion."

“What...” Matt started to say, before the angry glare from his mother’s two fiery eyes stopped him.

“Put the clothes back on, Matthew. If you’re curious about this side of the fence, the only way for you to settle the matter is to experience your fantasy.”

“My fantasy?” Matt yelped in surprise. “I...”

“Zip it, mister!” Mrs. Wilke barked.

“B...”

“Zip!”

“U...”

“It!”

“D...” And Matt gave up.

His mother sported a triumphant grin. “Now get dressed. I want you to help me make dinner.”

Matt groaned. he knew his mother, and it was going to take all night to get her to back off this crazy idea of hers.



So it was early the next morning, that Matthew was deeply regretting that all of his valid arguments had been rejected by his Mother. She was strangely intent on seeing this idea through. Usually it wasn’t that difficult to distract her, but despite several attempts, she remained quite focused on this task – the task of dressing up her son as a woman.

She wasn’t going to let him out of this so easily, it seemed. That much was clear to him now. Especially since his mother had woken him and dressed him this morning.

Matt’s method of dressing for yesterday’s debacle had been last-minute and haphazard – in stark contrast with the careful, patient, delicate and exhausting routine he was engaged in now. Fortunately his smooth, young face required little in the way of shaving, but it did seem to warrant plucking. Lots of plucking. Painful plucking.

After his eyebrows had been ravaged into spindly little wisps, his mother started in with a home chemical peel that felt like a million tiny bugs crawling on his face. After it got washed off, his face then felt like it was burning like a pig roasting on a spit.

Seemingly content with the pain she had inflicted on Matt’s face, his Mom then moved on to his body. His legs were lightly hairy and would have required only a quick whisk with a razor, but Mrs. Wilke opted for a wax instead.

Pain like that was never meant for a man to feel. Only the half of the species designed to withstand childbirth could do that on any sort of a regular basis.

That was nothing, however, compared to the embarrassment of having his mother dress him in her underwear, and shaping his stuffed cups to look more breast-like. It was a crushing blow to whatever budding sense of masculinity he was developing. Then, just to make sure that he felt just as bad on the outside as he did on the inside, his mother produced some sort of corset from the bowels of her closet.

Waxed, burnt and plucked, he then was stuffed like a sausage into the peculiar-looking garment and left to find his own way to breathe. Gasping for survival, his mother patiently waited before giving Matt a pile of pink to wear. Pink-tinted pantyhose went over his burning legs, providing a temporary coolness that felt good for now. A long, flowery calf-length dress which was suitable for costuming in a revival of "Oklahoma!" was draped over him. Mrs. Wilke then had Matt put on his wig of super-long, curly long brown hair – actually an old wig Mrs. Wilke used to use back in the seventies – and fit it in place.

Now feeling as low as he had in his life, his mother then handed him a nice pink pair of of



pumps for him to break his ankles in. Matt clumsily stuck his pink feet into them. After his mother had seated him at her vanity and given him a light brush of makeup and lipstick, “a weekend look” she called it, an old set of silver clip-on earrings, necklace, watch and bracelet seemed to herald the end of the procedure.

Matthew knew he had just these two days to either force his mother’s hand or negotiate his way out of this mess. He was lucky to have the weekend to come up with the brilliant and indisputable argument that he would need to get out of this mess. Just exactly how had this insane idea gotten stuck in her head?



“What are these?” Matt asked after finishing the vacuuming and dusting.

“What do they look like?” His mother answered while watching television.

“They look like all those stupid women’s magazines you get at the supermarket.”

“Well, that’s probably what they are, then.”

“Well, why are they in my room?” Matt asked, afraid he knew the reply.

Mrs. Wilke chuckled. “For you to read.” She diverted her attention from the ice skating program to briefly look her son in the eye. “I want you to get familiar with all the things women have to go through. Those magazines are a good start.”

Matt sighed. “That’s all very nice and vengeful of you Mom, and I’m awfully happy that you’re getting a good laugh out of this, but exactly how long is this gonna last?”

His mother laughed at that. “Oh I don’t know... It depends.”

“Depends?” Matt said.

“*Depends,*” his Mom said again. She returned to her TV. Matt knew that tone of voice. Once and a while, she’d get in this frame of mind where she was bound and determined to teach him a lesson. But she’d always back off before it was too late.

“All right,” Matt said, taking the magazines under his arm. “I’ll do what you want.” As long as he knew that his Mom hadn’t truly gone off the deep end, he’d make it through.



“So what about a name?” Matt’s mother asked over dinner. She was trying to make conversation rather than talk about how horrible the dinner Matt had prepared was. It had started out as a stew, then became a soup, then a soufflé, and finally declared a casserole.

“What about what?” Matt replied. He wasn’t aware of how bad his food tasted. All he could taste was lipstick.

“I’m not calling you Matthew. In that outfit, it’s ridiculous.”

“We wouldn’t want to be ridiculous now, would we?” Matt snapped back

“You just bought yourself another hour in that outfit.”

Matt tried to look angry, but instead he was a little relieved. That meant that the end was coming, at the very least.

“Now what to call you...” Mrs. Wilke pondered. “When your father and I were coming up with names...”

Matt tried to think. What was a kind of female version of his name? “Matilda.”

“No...” His Mom went on, wincing at the thought. “Is was something...” She pointed her finger at him, as she remembered. “Erin.”

Ugh, he thought. “That’s stupid.”

“What we can do is get you a little name tag, and put it on your dress. ‘Hello, my name is Erin.’ You can wear that to school on Monday.”

“Monday?” Matt whined. “A *dress*?”

“Eat your food,” his Mom said with a hint of a smile on her face. “You take things too seriously.”



Matt found himself going to bed that night in an old nightgown, and dressing back up in another goofy dress the next morning. His tasks that day were the laundry and organizing the kitchen. It was innocuous enough, and wasn’t any big threat to ruin his weekend. Not any further than it was already ruined, at least.

He supposed that a lot of mothers with only male children probably have a little fantasy about having a daughter. Some might even have a complex about disciplining young boys by treating them like girls. Whatever the reason, Matt knew his Mom had too good a head on her shoulders to suspect any mental peculiarity. She was just having a little fun at his expense.

It still pissed him off, though.

He made quick work of his chores in the morning and veged in front of the computer surfing the internet for the remainder of the day. His Mom initially

pressed him on reading the women's magazines, but eventually gave up on the topic. By the time dinner rolled around, he was back in his old dirty robe, wig gone, frillies forgotten and his face scrubbed free of cosmetics.

His mother made the food tonight, not risking another mistake by her son, and they were right in the middle of eating it in front of the TV when the doorbell rang.

"Hey, Matt," Chris said, standing in the doorway in that casual manner that Matt envied and hated.

"What do you want?" Matt sneered. "We're *eating*."

"Yeah. Good to see you too, Matt." Chris knew coming here was a mistake.

"Nice robe. I just wanted to return this. You left it in the cab." He held out the English textbook with Matt's name scribbled on the front.

"Thanks a lot. I could have just gotten another one."

"Is this one of your friends, Matt?" Mrs. Wilke said, coming to the door.

"Hardly," Matt said, taking the opportunity to leave. He was quickly out of sight.

His mother wasn't expecting to be left alone with nothing to say, and tried to make conversation. "Do you go to school with Er..." She corrected herself.

"...Matthew?"

"Just dropping by to return something. Have a nice night, ma'am," Chris said, turning to the street.

"I'm going to bed, Mom!" Chris could hear Matt's yell through the still-open door. "Shut the door! Chris has to go home now!"

Chris turned right back around to face an embarrassed Mrs. Wilke.

"I don't..." Mrs. Wilke said, stumbling for words to explain her son's behavior. "He didn't..."

"That's okay, ma'am. I've known Matt for a while now. I know how he is." His eyes suddenly latched on to the woman, causing her to stand, frozen in the doorway. "I need to talk to you about Matt. Please pay attention."



"Are you up yet?" Matt's mother said, whisking the blinds open in his room. "You need to get up and start your beauty routine before you go to school. It takes time when you're a woman."

Matt's reality quickly flooded his brain. Here he was, Monday morning and his mother was still on the same kick she had been all weekend. Now, she was going to make him sweat by playing chicken with him.

He knew his mother, and she'd push it to the absolute limit, and then back down at the last instant. It was just a question of waiting to see how far she wanted to push him.

"I hope you don't mind if I take the car today, I need to do some shopping downtown. I'll drive you in and pick you up after school. Is that all right?"

"Yeah," Matt replied. His mother was just full of herself these past few days, thinking she was pretty funny. Next year, when he turned sixteen, he'd finally get his license and a car – and he'd be able to rely on himself rather than his erratic mother to get around. She was just pretending he could drive. At least he'd get a ride today instead of the bus.

Matt stretched and rose from his bed, scratching himself and surveying the room. Sure enough, that pants suit was laid on a chair for him to wear. Matt snorted a laugh to himself. His Mom was going to try and scare him this morning.

"Better take your shower Erin, before it's too late," his mother said in passing by the door. *Yeah*, Matt thought, *she's really taking this to the limit*. Matt shrugged and took his shower and dressed himself in provided outfit. He also picked out the clothes he was actually going to wear today, so as to save time. He twisted the wig of long brown hair on and headed out.

"Ready?" Mrs. Wilke said as Matt came down the stairs. "I thought since you looked so mature as Erin, I'd just call you my sister."

"Whatever," Matt said, waiting.

"And you should just call me Susan."

Matt was impatient. "Yeah. Okay."

"You know, I have the perfect necklace to go with those earrings. Wait here and I'll get it." His mother dashed past him upstairs. Matt looked at the clock, and they were running pretty late. If he was going to get to school on time, they'd need to travel at light speed. As it was, he was already going to be late for first period.

"*Mom!*" He yelled. "We're gonna be late!"

His mother was already down at the bottom of the stairs, holding out a necklace. "I said call me Susan, sis. Here. Lift your hair."

Matt pulled the long hair from his neck to make way for the necklace, which Mrs. Wilke tied around him. "There. That looks good. Take a look in the mirror. Tell me what you think."

"We gotta get on with this, Mom!" Matt whined. "I can't miss all of physics class."

"But you don't teach physics, Erin."

“Uh, I don’t teach anything. Mom. I’m...” Matt then realized that she had picked up on what he was doing on Friday. He hadn’t told her anything about trying to be a teacher. “What are you saying?” Had someone told her about what really happened on Friday?

“Well, as a substitute, you only need to...”

Matt cut her off. “Stop messing with me, Mom. What’s the deal here?”

“I’m *Susan*, sis,” his mother cut him off. “Get in the car.”



Matt was begging and pleading. He was tearing at his mother’s clothes, clinging like a monkey to her side. “*Please, Mom!*”

“Hush,” she said.

“*I can’t go like this!*” Matt cried, tear welling up in his eyes. “*Please, Mom! Please!*”

“I told you – Erin – to call me Susan,” was all his mother said.

It was just getting more and more real to Matt. His Mom was dead serious about dropping him off at school like this. He had asked her to turn back in good humor. Then he politely asked again. Then he impolitely asked, and then he demanded. Then he tried begging.

Now he was truly desperate. Did she not realize how this was going to ruin his life? Not in a ‘teenage angst’ my-life-is-over sort of way, but in a real, tangible ‘ruin-my-reputation-for-all-time’ or a ‘tearing-the-fabric-of-the-mind’ way.

“I don’t know what you want to hear! Just please don’t make me go to school like this! *Please!*”

But it was too late. The car had already pulled up in front of Middleton High. Mrs. Wilke reached across the passenger seat and unlatched the door for her son. “Go on,” she said. “I’ll see you at four to pick you up.”

Matt didn’t budge. “Please,” he said, in a sober, beaten tone of voice.

Mrs. Wilke unbuckled the seatbelt for him. “I’ll wait here until you get inside. I don’t want you to meet with any trouble before you get in.” Still not moving, Matt’s Mom got a little more serious. “You can’t be late for your first day, Erin. Get a move on.”

With his body trembling, Matt stepped out of the car onto the sidewalk. His mother shut the door for him, and waved politely at her son. Then she waited for him to go into the school.

With the slowest, tiniest steps, Matt made his way down the walk way, hearing every scrape of his pumps against the cement as if they were being broadcast on loudspeakers. Where was that asshat rent-a-cop when he needed him?

He opened the door to the front office, where all late students reported, and went inside. Before he had to turn around the corner and formally enter the grounds, he took one desperate look outside again to see if that had persuaded his mother to pull away. It hadn't.

"You must be the substitute," came a voice at the front desk.

Matt's spine locked up. He turned around anyway, resigned to the fact that his life was going to end very, very soon.

"Erin? Hi, I'm Carol, I work the front desk here. Welcome to Middleton." She held out her hand to welcome Matt. He handled it like a live grenade. "I'm so glad we could get you on short notice. Poor George. Mr. Lumbregadious is one of our best, and I hope he gets well soon. You'll be handling his Advanced English classes, second, fourth, fifth and eighth periods, right?"

