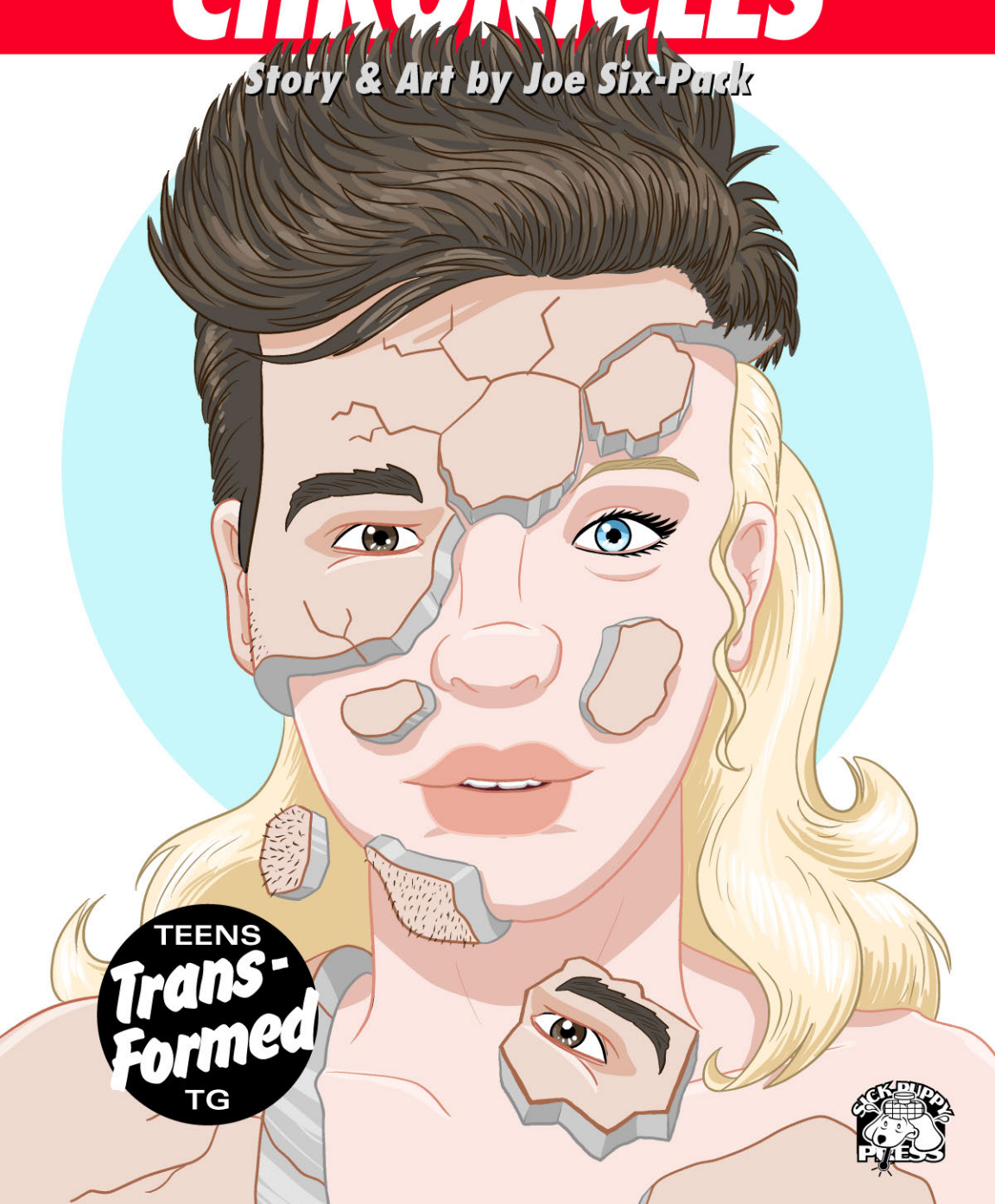


ADULTS ONLY

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**



2019 Digital Edition

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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.”

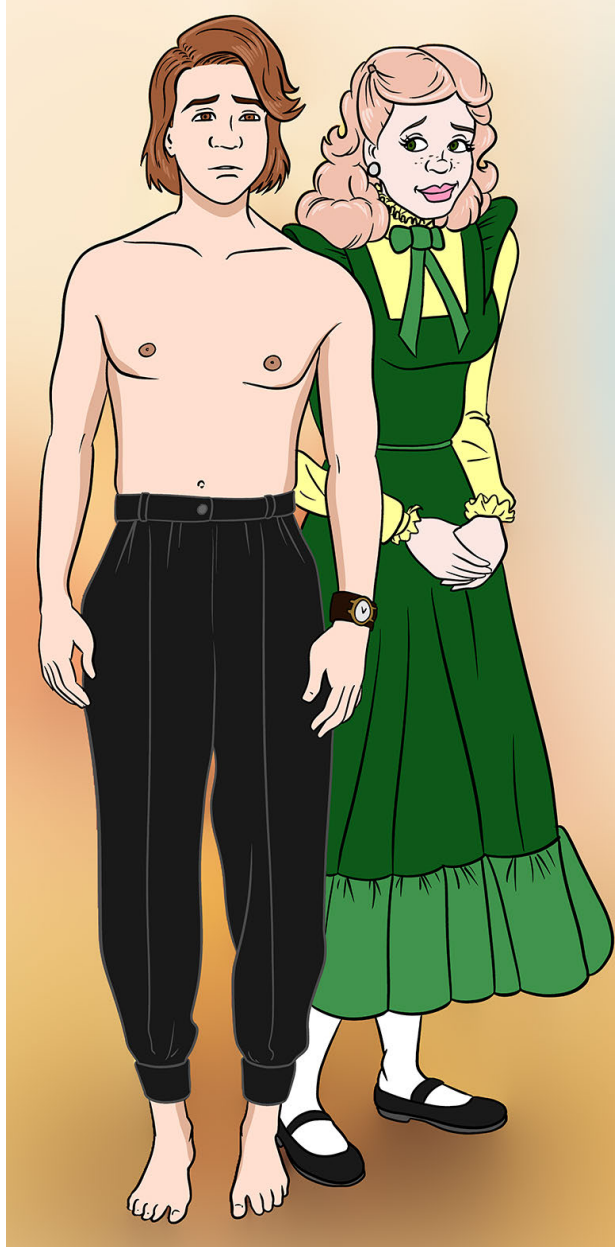
Cute girls do not often tell me to put on clothes, so I was helpless to do exactly what she asked me to do.

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.

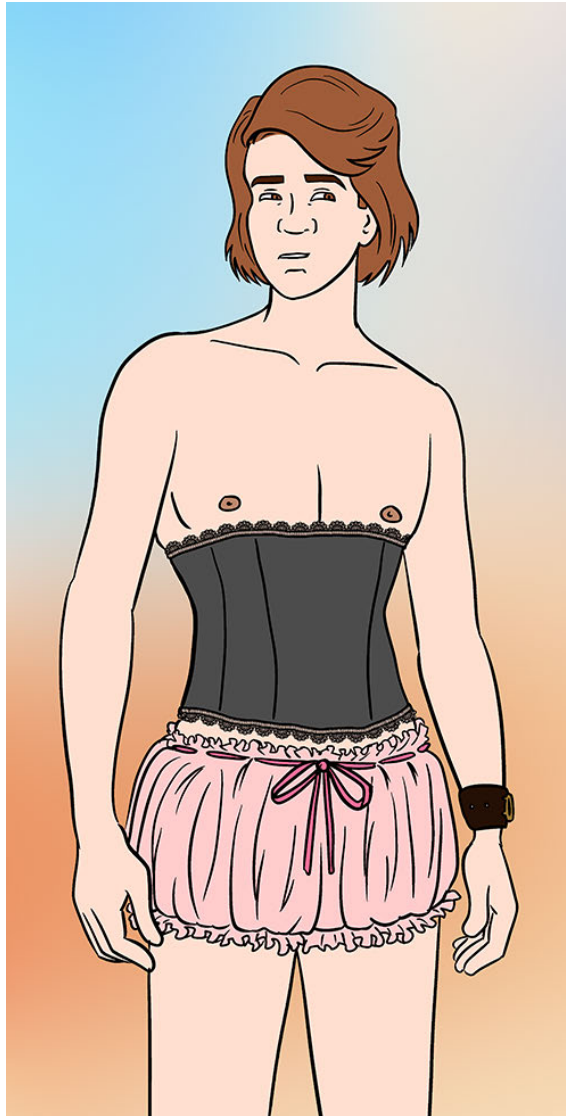
"I don't like the way this falls. You know what you need," Harmony said, as she tugged at the shirt. "A corset!"

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.

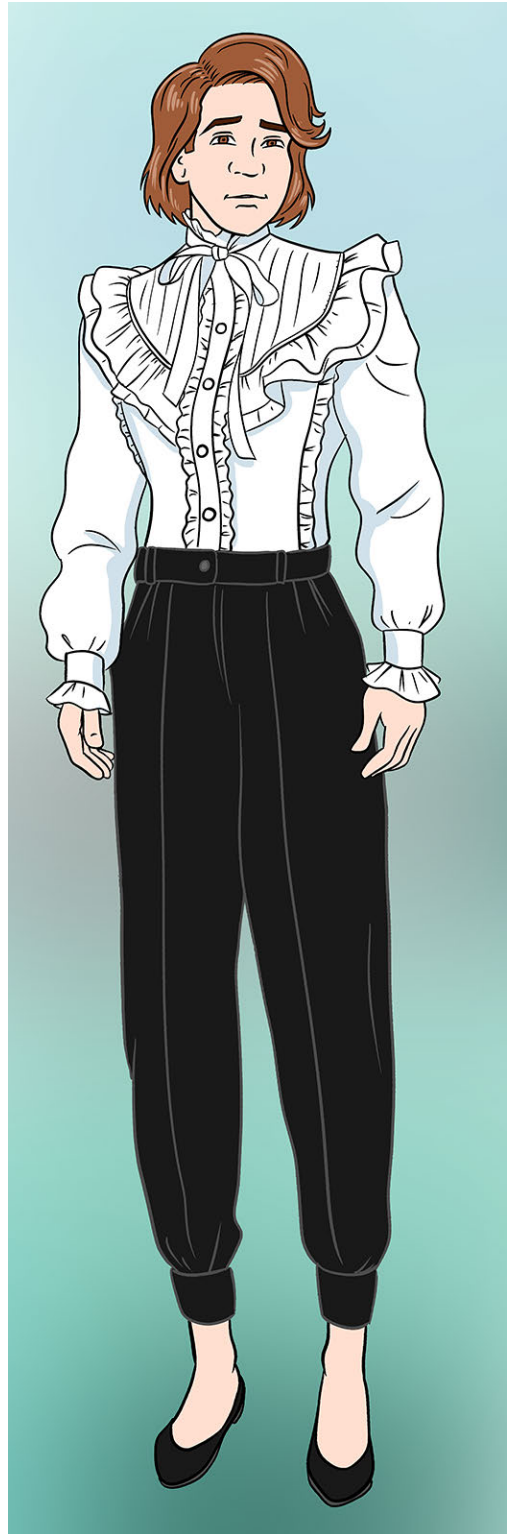
This whole experience had been a rush of emotion. I felt a little humiliated and degraded for dressing and undressing in front of Harmony, and I felt more alive than I had for a long time wearing these clothes and the undergarments beneath them.

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 were 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.

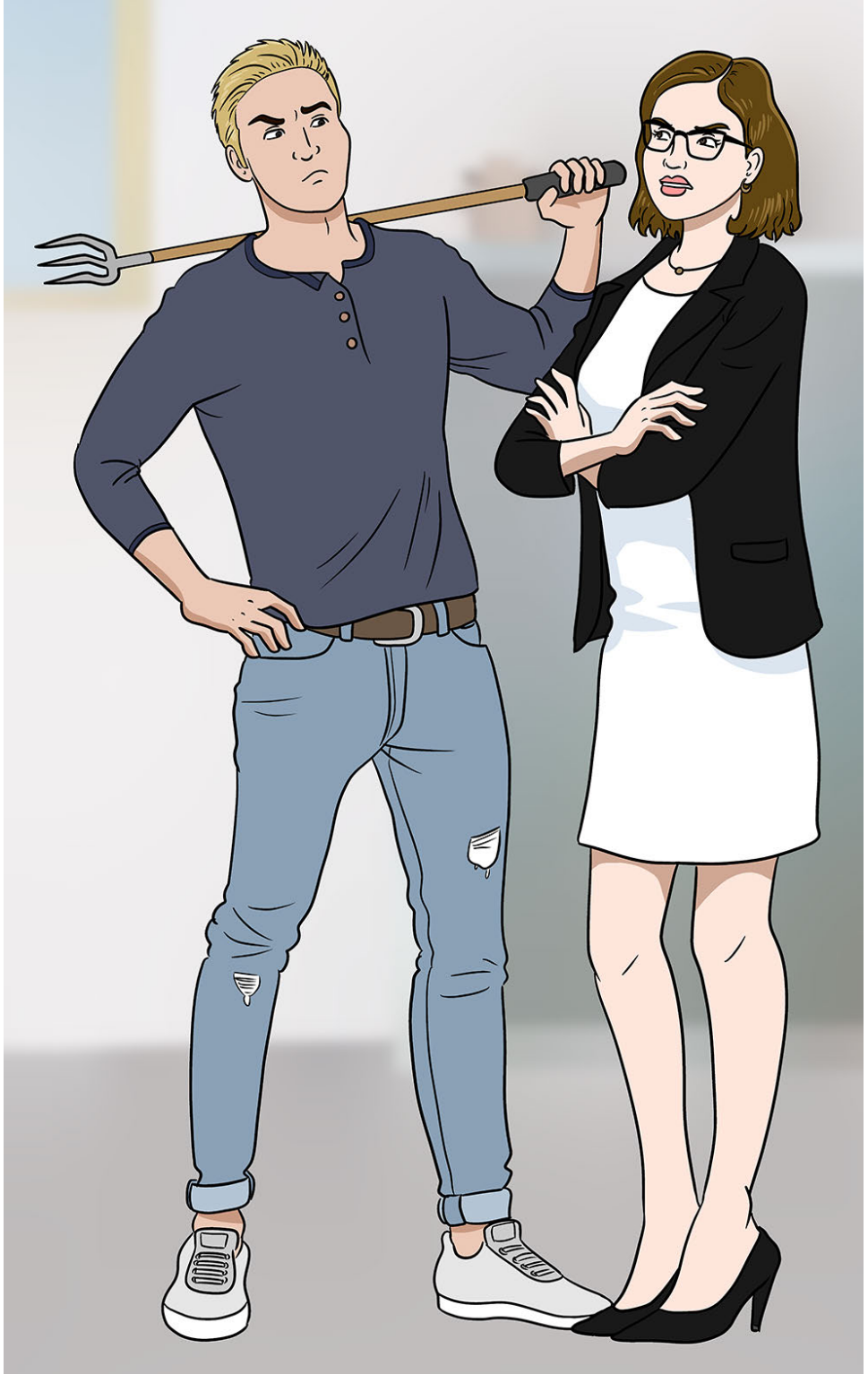
My wife, Nora, she does pretty good too. She's a lawyer. She usually pulls in six figures a year, but she works hard for it. We plan to have a child at some point, but like I say, I'm not much for kids.

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.

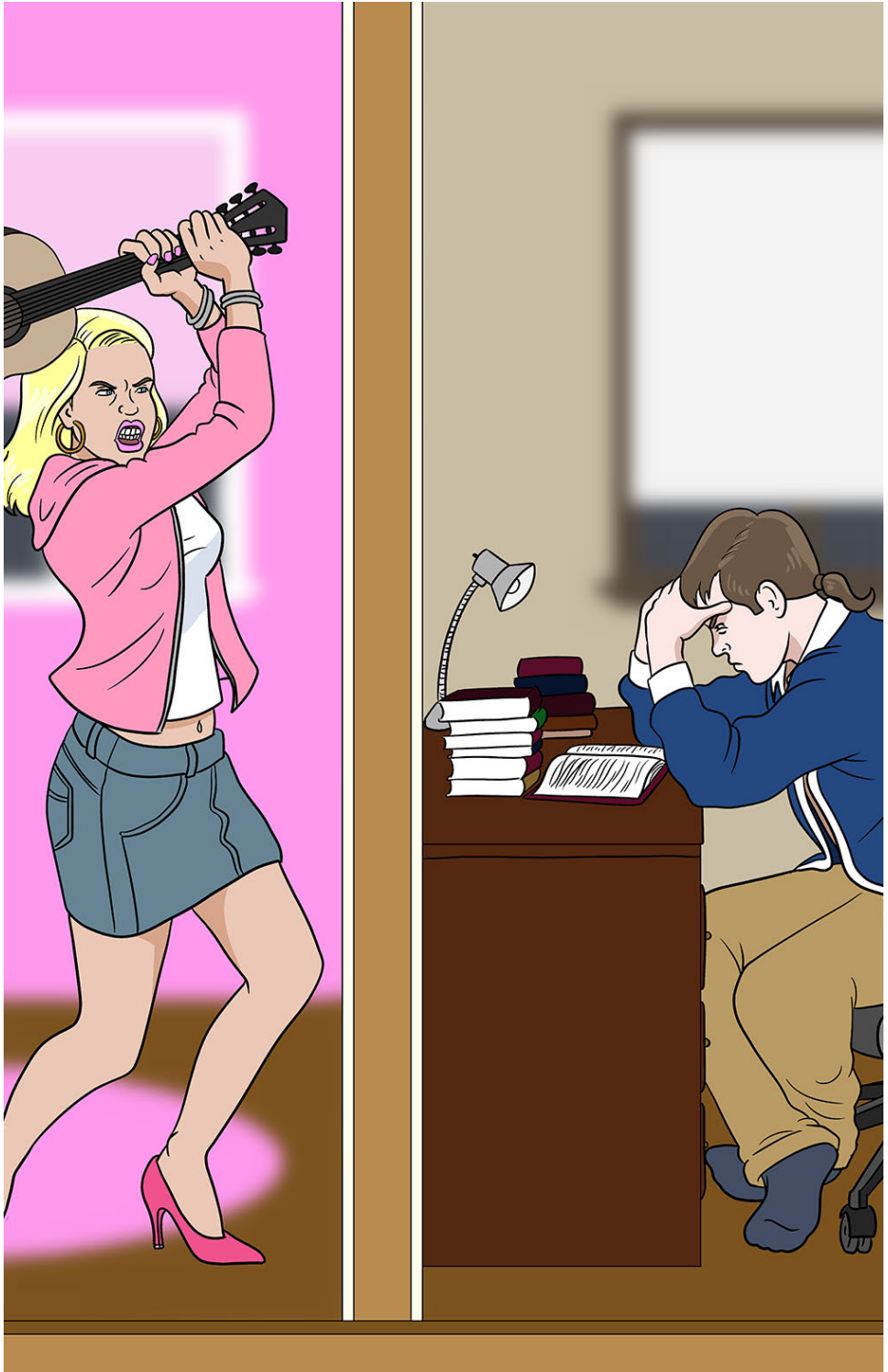
I sighed and went back to the book I was reading, Kafka. I had a paper due in two weeks, and I had only read this book once. I was not in the mood to be interrupted tonight, and I was simply not going to tolerate it.

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 lummocks 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.

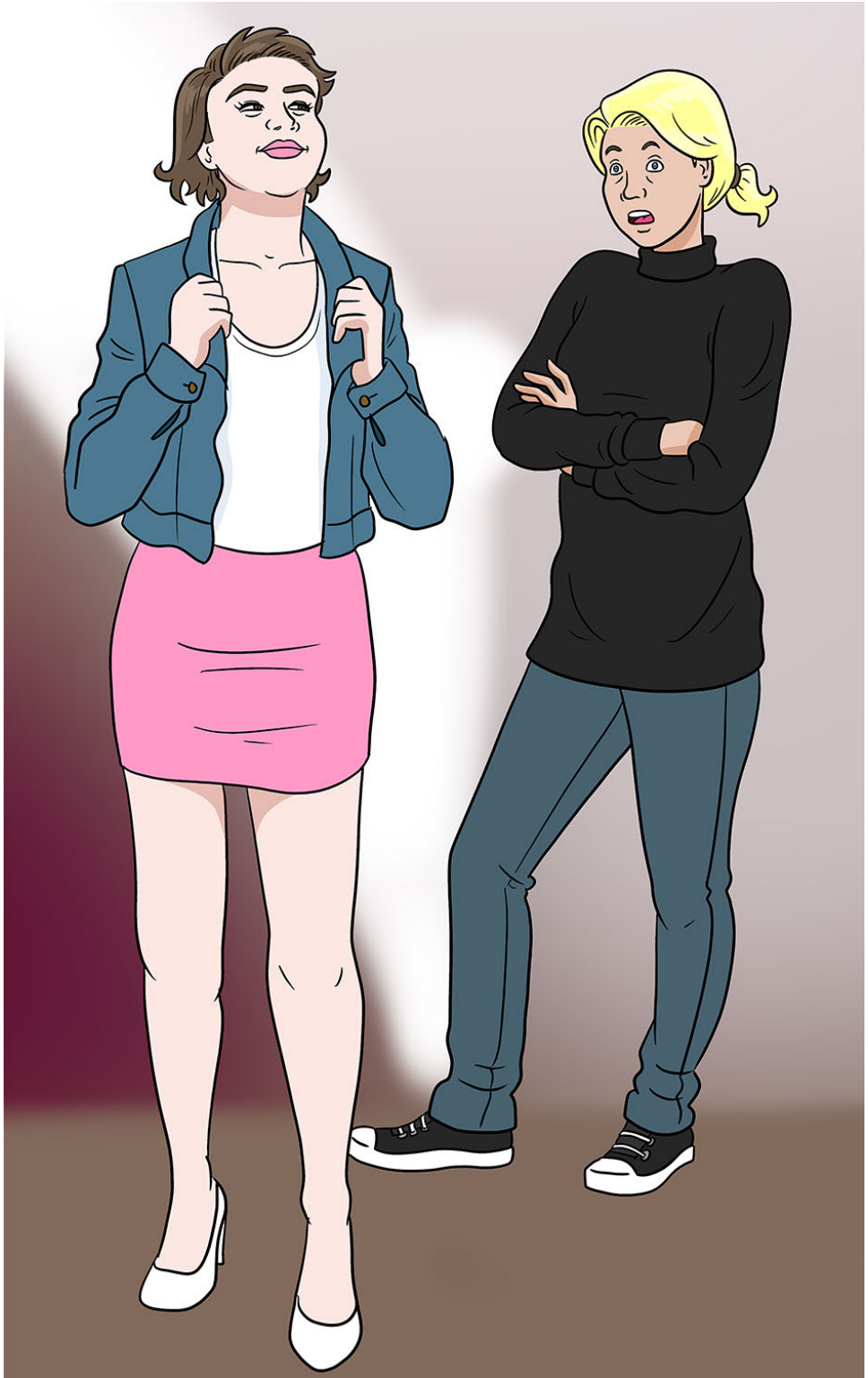
So this evening, right on time, the front doorbell rang. "Alyssa," My father called up the stairs. "Your date is here to pick you up!"

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, Jamarcus."

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.

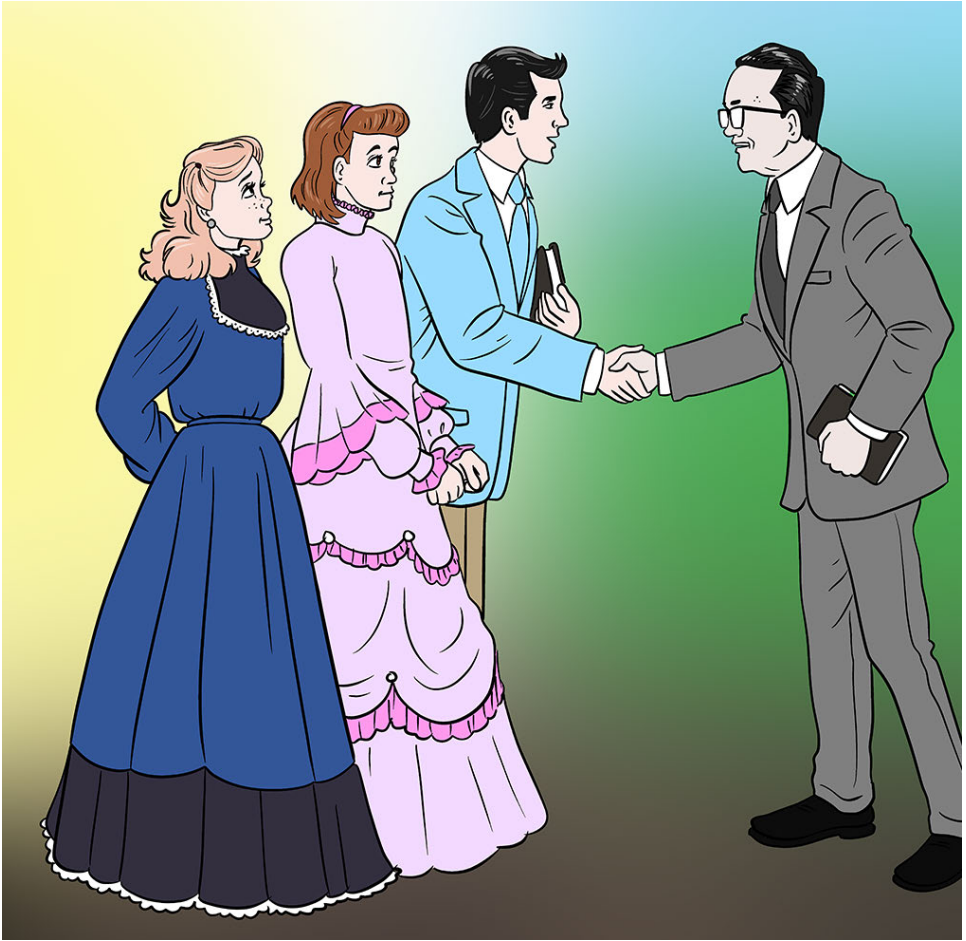
I knew I was betraying my parents, to a certain degree. They didn't know about me going to church. They're both atheists, and had raised me as such. But the idea of worship had really fascinated me ever since I met Harmony's family. I was excited to experience a church service for myself.

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. It 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

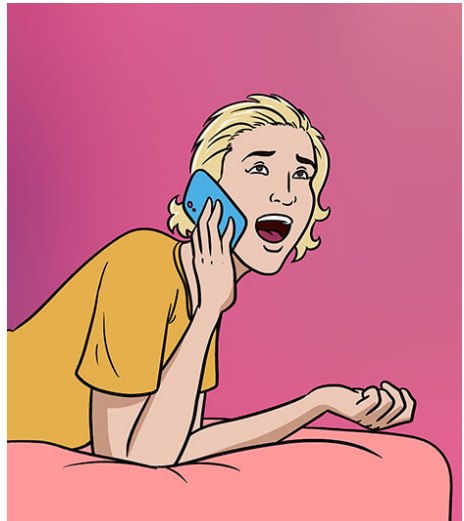


complaining about me growing my hair out, shaving my body, and how I looked too feminine. Feminine? Only a real guy who's confident in his masculinity can grow out their hair like this. She wouldn't stop complaining about it, so I went into the other bedroom. It was decorated for her mother when she 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.

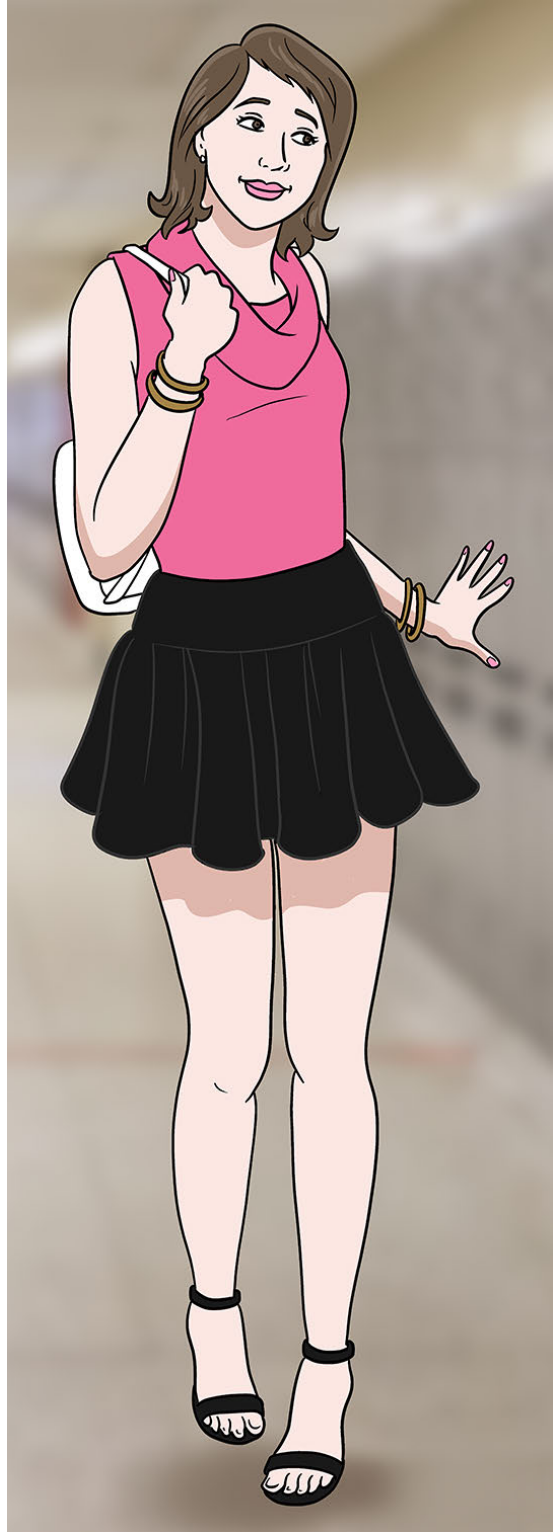
It was quite the operation, let me tell you, to leave the house in my usual garb and change clothes, do my hair, my face and still arrive before the first bell.

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.