

JAMES J CRAFT

**LITTLE MISS-
TER POPULAR**

THE STEPMOTHER SERIES: BOOK 2

by James J. Craft

illustrations by rocketdave



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LITTLE MISS-TER POPULAR

Candace Childress had a problem.

Since splitting up with her husband five years, she had watched her son go from hero to zero. The guilt of allowing it to happen ate away at her decent Catholic soul. How did she let her child slip away from her? What had caused his slow but sure retreat from life? Was it something she did?

True, she had divorced from her husband Abe, which wasn't something many Catholics approved of ... and the reason for the divorce was adultery, which was also frowned upon ... especially since *she* was the adulteress ... and then there was the fact that she had committed adultery on her husband ... with another woman ... *that* certainly wouldn't win her any points with the Pope, now would it?

But in Candace's mind it had ended up being the only option.

Abe, her husband of fifteen years and the father of her child, simply couldn't give her what she wanted. At first she had *thought* that he could – after all, she was a recently hired teacher at the local high school and he a Professor at the local state college. He knew a lot of things, something about every subject, she thought.

All you had to do was ask him.

At the beginning of their courtship, she thought it was his best characteristic. But by the end of it, his know-everything attitude proved to be a little much.

Candace had felt restless, wanting a life beyond just being a sounding board for Abe's endless monologues about trivial information. She could only pretend to be interested in his arcane knowledge for so long. That restless feeling grew stronger and stronger within her as every day passed. So it wasn't long before she started to express her feelings to the new chemistry teacher that was just hired at the school.

The new teacher – a feisty, sexy, full-of-life blonde named Gina – was everything that Candace had once thought herself to be. Only now, after having given birth at the age of nineteen and raised a son almost on her own, she thought of herself as a sad, talentless, complacent housewife and boring English teacher.

No wonder her son was now acting the same! Sad, talentless, complacent and boring.

A massive lack of confidence.

Candace had seen what a lack of confidence could do to a student, having worked in the high school for so many years now. She was truly concerned that she was raising a child who was – perish the thought – unpopular.

But Leon's Dad, in his typical fashion, wasn't interested in any of it. "Just leave him be," he said, "He doesn't need any of your lesbian voodoo crap to fix him. With my luck, you'll somehow turn him gay..." he grumbled.

"Abe," Gina looked across the table at her lover's ex with a steely glare, "How could a couple of lesbians make him want to be with a m..."

Candace cut her partner off before she got herself in trouble, "Let's not get off topic, shall we?" she sighed. She knew that bringing Abe and Gina into the same room was a recipe for disaster. Frankly, she would have rather just met with Abe one-on-one. But Gina insisted on helping with Leon. Candace knew that Gina simply wouldn't take no for an answer.

She turned lovingly to her 'civil partner' and smiled, "Is there anymore coffee love?"

Gina grumbled and stood up from their kitchen table and went to find replacement coffee on the counter, while Candace lowered her voice and spoke directly to Abe, "Abe, this is serious. You know as well as I do that Leon is showing all the signs of clinical depression. We really need to move quickly on this. What about his future? What about college? Don't you think he needs this?"

Abe furrowed his brow. His ex-wife had a point, but he wasn't sold on her fiery blonde-bomber of a wife's solution.

"Never. I'd never let my flesh and blood be subjected to the sort of thing you're suggesting!" Abe was barely able to keep his voice quiet enough to not be heard. "What *she's* suggesting..." He motioned at Gina who was returning with the coffee carafe, "Is tantamount to brainwashing. While she may think that she's doing some grand favor to all the little high-school girls that she's 'treating'..." he made quotation signs in the air as he spoke, "it's still unethical – and illegal – and I'm certain that if your boss knew what you two were up to..." he let his voice trail off in a threatening tone, "Let's just say if he knew what methods you were using in your so-called 'Confidence Club', he wouldn't be very impressed."

In fact, he would certainly have her fired.

That didn't stop Gina from defending her pet project. "The 'Confidence Club' has proven results!" She said, with conviction. "It's helped dozens of young students break out of their shells and realize their full potential!" Gina had begun an informal gathering of students who she had picked out from her classes with the idea that she could use her talents to shed the shyness and awkwardness teenager can sometime find themselves prisoners of. As far as the outside world was concerned, the 'Confidence Club' was pure altruism.

As far as Gina was concerned, it gave her an excuse to satisfy her deep need to meddle in other people's lives and feed her inner control-freak nature. But no one else needed to know that.

Abe sighed, "Let me make another appointment with Doctor Kerman..."

Gina scoffed and rolled her eyes. Doctor Kerman, also known as the oldest psychiatrist in the country, had already had his shot at fixing Leon. *Several* times.

She looked at Candace, "You're not seriously thinking about doing that, are you?"

Candace turned to her wife and shrugged, "I don't know Gene," she used her lover's short name, "I mean... maybe he can do something new that he hasn't tried yet."

Gina scoffed again, "Oh sure," she shook her head angrily and sipped her coffee, "You won't let me try some mild clinical hypnotherapy, but you'll let Doctor Zivago turn him in a... a... medicated *zombie!*"

"I think you're being a little overly dramatic dear," Candace tried to calm her partner down.

"A little?" Abe muttered as he took a swig from his java mug.

"Now don't you start!" Candace scolded her ex, "She's only trying to help..."

"Oh, *now* you take my side..." Gina complained.

Candace looked up at the ceiling and sighed, "Oh my God, you two..."

"Fine," Gina sneered and she slammed her mug on the table, then stood up and left the room.

Abe gave Candace a '*what's her problem?*' look.

"Just go, Abe," she sighed as she rubbed her temples, "Just go, go and make an appointment with Kerman..."

Abe nodded and stood up from the table.

"But *so help me,*" she began as her former spouse made his way to the door, "If that *quack* can't do *something... anything...* with our son..." she paused to make eye contact with Abe, "Gina's ready to go, and I don't care *what* you tell my boss... my son's future is *too* important."

Abe nodded silently, then left.

Candace took a deep breath and lowered her head to the table.



Leon glanced around Doctor Kerman's waiting room. He sighed. He didn't like being here, but also didn't want to disappoint his Dad, who seemed *certain* that *this* session would somehow be different from all the other sessions that he had attended here.

Leon knew that it wouldn't.

There wasn't anything emotionally or mentally wrong with him, he just was just a loser, and no psychiatrist was going to be able to cure him of *that*.

"Hiya there Leo," the Doctor smiled as he came into the reception area to collect his next patient, "Whaddaya say we go have ourselves a little chat?"

The Doctor was a little over-the-top in his enthusiasm, and again, Leon didn't want to disappoint, so without correcting the Doctor's erroneous use of his first name – again – he sighed, forced a smile and followed the shrink into his office.

"So tell me what's got you so blue, kiddo," the Doctor said as the two of them sat in the wood-paneled room.

Leon shrugged, "I dunno... it's my parents really..." he sighed.

"Uh-huh" Doctor Kerman nodded, "And how does that make you feel... their reaction to you and your feelings that is?"

Leon was unsure what he had just been asked, but was too insecure to question, so he began to give the psychiatrist what he figured were the exact answers he was looking for.

He told him, again, about how the early years of his life had been happy. At least he *thought* they were. He told him how he had felt the most connected with his mom, even though he knew she had spent the first twelve years of his life, carefully constructing the illusion of a happy family for his benefit. He lamented to the Doctor how it had all come tumbling down in the past few years since his parents had split up.

Leon figured it would appear to be a pretty standard thing. His father, the workaholic professor at the local college and his mother, a caring teacher at the local high-school, had somehow caused whatever it was that was affecting him since the breakup of his family unit, and he blamed them both equally for different things... and *that* was why he had started to retreat socially.

The psychiatrist nodded his head and took copious notes all through the session, and would later report to Leon's father that a) it was normal for a boy in his circumstances to behave as he was, b) he would bounce out of it and c) if he started to carve the eyes out of pictures, or if neighborhood cats started to go missing that he would prescribe something to help the situation, or call the police, depending on which was easier.

Abe, of course, happily presented the Doctor's findings to his ex-wife and her same-sex partner, soon afterwards and asked that the issue be laid to rest.

As an educator, he knew the downside of a student like Leon being 'labeled' in the system. "It was something, as you know Candace," he said to Leon's Mother, "That once started, can never be stopped, and never goes away."

Candace rolled her eyes. She didn't want her son labeled either, and was put-off by her ex's position that their son was either perfectly fine or totally crazy, but nothing in between.

“Fine,” she sighed finally, “We’ll do it your way.”

Gina’s groan of disbelief could be heard a block away.

“What the hell do you mean?” she scolded her partner once Abe had left, “We’re just going to do nothing?”

Candace paused before replying, turning to her Leon with a smile. “Why don’t you go play some video games dear?” she said soothingly.

Leon nodded. He knew she wanted him to leave the room so that she and Gina could argue about his so-called problem. He pretended like he didn’t know and smiled back, “Okay Mom.”

He made sure that he closed the door the to his room just a little harder, to signify to his mother and stepmother that it was now ‘safe’ to talk about him.

“Look,” she said to her partner with a stern tone, “Abe’s a friggin administrator, he’s forgotten all about how to actually help children any more. The only thing he knows how to do is write up suspensions and save money on pencils. He’s wrong, and his quack shrink friend is wrong too.”

Gina looked surprised at Candace’s opening statement. She had expected something completely different.

“You know it, I know it, hell...” she paused then looked up towards Leon’s second-story bedroom, “I sometimes think even *he* knows it. But his Dad...” her voice trailed off, “Abe just can’t bear to be wrong. It’s just not in his DNA.”

Gina nodded, she liked what she heard, so far.

“So this is what we’re going to do...” She began, as the two of them developed a plan to enroll their son/stepson into the confidence building program that Gina was administering at the high school.



The next day, during his second period spare, Leon, as instructed, went to his Stepmother’s second-floor chemistry classroom to attend his first meeting of the ‘Confidence Club.’

Why they put chemistry labs on the second floor, I’ll never know... he thought to himself, if anything goes wrong, all those chemicals will go flowing down over the heads of whoever is in the classrooms underneath them.

Inside the lab, Leon saw two other students, girls, sitting awkwardly opposite each other, with an empty chair between them.

His gay Step-Mom smiled as he entered, “Leon! Welcome” she motioned him to sit between the two girls. Both looked, like he, to be ‘outsiders’. He knew the look well. Frumpy, unfashionable clothing, down-trodden facial expressions, avoiding eye contact... yep, they were certifiable geeks... just like him.

Gina had begun the Confidence Club three years ago, in her first year of teaching at the school. She had convinced the administration that helping kids make the difficult transition from childhood to young adulthood was paramount to the school's mission. What she didn't tell them was how exactly she was going to do it. Even without details, she was given a reluctant blessing from the school principal.

"I first want to welcome you all here," Gina smiled, "To begin our sessions, I've developed a little bit of a team building exercise." She walked the group over to some of the lab's workbenches. There were assembled a few materials. "Let's all work together to make some refreshments." Leon looked at the glass containers for a moment, then turned back towards Gina who was scribbling notes on her clipboard, as if to say 'seriously?'

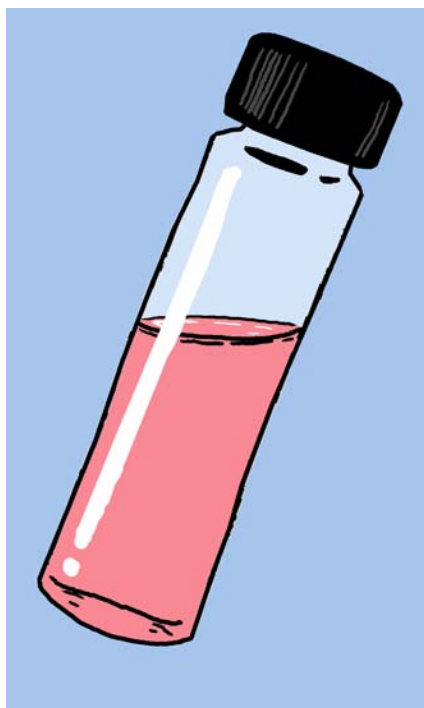
She smiled again, "Go ahead dear." It was more of a command than a request.

Leon looked back at the vials and beakers, paused, then sighed. The instructions were relatively simple. They were making, if he was right, a soda of some sort. His job was to carbonate the drink with a pressurized carbonation device, the red-haired girl's job was to mix together the sugars and acids, and the dark-haired girl's job was to mix the flavors. Leon unenthusiastically went about the tasks, and successfully kept the whole exercise from being any fun at all.

He watched as the sweetener concentrate was being made from fructose and phosphoric acid. At the same time, the flavors were mixed together, which were "artificial strawberry substitute" and other oils that usually made up the flavors of soft drinks. One vial, which he couldn't quite identify, was bright pink. He figured it was the artificial coloring. Finally, the girls gave him the result of their work and he put it in the carbonator.

It burned slightly, and tasted of a strong strawberry flavor. They may have been a little off from the recipe. It made his nose tickle and his stomach bubble slightly, but truthfully wasn't too bad.

"Leon," Gina smile as she took the beaker back, "This is Alexandria and Mina," she pointed to the two girls on either side of him. Alexandria, a tall auburn haired freckle-face, offered a nod of 'hello' as she adjusted her thick-rimmed glasses, while Mina's greeting was more subdued, as she looked so completely terrified to be there. Leon





suspected that the dark-haired girl might make a dash for the door any moment.

Not if I get there first, he thought to himself.

“Hi,” Leon offered a friendly wave, “I’m Leon... and it’s five years since my last friend,” he joked with the two to break the ice. Alexandria and Gina both laughed, while Mina continued to stare nervously.

“Hey,” he suddenly realized, “Mina... Gina... Gina... Mina” he motioned back and forth between his step mom and the nervous girl, causing another giggle from lanky Alex.

“Now Lee,” Gina said in a serious tone, “As much as I admire you breaking the ice like that,” she smiled authoritatively, “You know you have to call me Ms Middleton. We can’t have students calling teachers by their first names... no matter *how* confident they are.”

Leon nodded in acknowledgement. As he did, his brain felt like it was swimming a little bit in his skull. He felt a little dizzy.

“So since this is our first meeting,” Gina began, “I thought we might just watch a quick little video about confidence and what it is, and why we need it. And that will pretty much be it for the day, okay?”

She rolled the TV cart to stand in front of the trio of misfits, and handed them each a pair of headphones, “So we don’t disturb anyone else,” she smiled as they each placed the set on their heads and began to listen to the short film on why confidence is important.

During the presentation, Leon kept tapping his headset, as he thought he was hearing other voices in the speakers. It became such a distraction, in fact, that the video seemed to be over before he even knew it.

“Well?” Gina asked as she took the headphones back from each of them, “Why is confidence important?”

Alexandra threw up her hand.

“Yes Alex?” Gina smiled.

“Because how others perceive you is based on how you present yourself,” she paused to take a breath, looking up into the upper corner of the ceiling, as if the answer was somehow continued there, “and... how you present yourself depends on how much you believe in yourself.”

She sat back in her chair looking exhausted.

Leon and Mina scrunched their faces.

“Leon? Mina?” Gina read their confused expressions, “Do you have something to add?”

Mina shook her head vigorously. Leon also responded with a negative head shake. Alex had pretty much said what he was thinking. In fact, she had said *exactly* what he was thinking... right down to the exact words. He looked at Mina, and could instantly tell from her expression that she was having the same sensation.

It kind of freaked each one of them out, just a little. But being introverts, none of them had the confidence to say so.



“So...” Leon’s Mom asked him as they sat down for family dinner that night. It was he, his mother, and her wife at the table. “How was your first Confidence Club?”

“It was good,” he said as he heaped potatoes onto his plate.

“What did you learn?” she continued.

“Oh,” he shrugged, as he stuffed his mouth with food, “Not too much. Just that how others perceive you is based on how you present yourself and how you present yourself depends on how much you believe in yourself.”

He stopped eating and stared at his mother blankly. He hadn’t even thought about what he was saying, the words just came out. He then glanced at his stepmother, who was trying to hide her smile as she cut her chicken breast with a very dull butter knife.

“Oh!” Candace smiled, “Well that’s certainly a lot for the first meeting. What else did you guys do?”

Leon regained his composure and took another bite, “Oh we had some soda thing Gina made us make.”

Candace nearly choked on her food, “What?” She spat, turning to her partner, who was averting her eyes even further.

“Yeah,” Leon continued, “It came out kinda strong, but not too bad really.” He scraped another spoonful of potato from the plate, “In fact... I kind of liked it.”

He shrugged and plopped the utensil into his mouth happily as his mom glared at her wife.

Later that evening, Candace suggested that Leon go play video games in his room and that she would finish his chores in the kitchen. Without hesitation, the boy, as any boy in his situation would do, gladly accepted the offer.

Once Candace heard the door close upstairs, she turned to her partner with a ferocious glare, “You gave him the stuff!”

Gina seemed to back away from her wife, as if fearing for her life, “No hold on a second... we agreed that...”

“Strawberry soda? You gave him the formula! The pink formula! We agreed to help him with his confidence, not to do *this*,” Candace cut her off, “If Leon’s Dad ever found out... he’d *kill* us.”

“Abe will never find out,” Gina dismissed her mate, “Abe isn’t concerned with anything other than himself.”

Candace shook her head, “I don’t know Gina... you’ve never had a boy in the program like this before. You have *no* idea what the outcome could be!”

“Candace,” Gina took her partner’s hand in her own, “The outcome will be a confident, popular child... just like all the others have been.”

Candace recoiled her hand, “But the others have all been *girls* Gina... and I don’t know if you noticed... but my son is not a *girl*.”

With that, she turned and stormed out of the kitchen, leaving her partner standing with a dirty plate in her hand.

Gina sighed. She knew the program was going to help her step-son. She knew it was the best way. So when Leon was the most popular kid in school, Candace would be apologizing for ever doubting her.

At least, she *hoped* that’s how it would go.



The second meeting of the High School Confidence Club took place a week later back in the chemistry room. Mina, Alex and Leon began with a glass of burning, bubbling strawberry soda. “You made so much, and I don’t want to throw it out,” she explained.

Once they had watched the requisite video on how to be confident – again – Gina brought in a ‘special guest.’ The three members of the club were a little confused to see Kelly Woods, the single most popular girl in the school walk into the classroom.

Kelly, by the expression on her face, was equally confused.

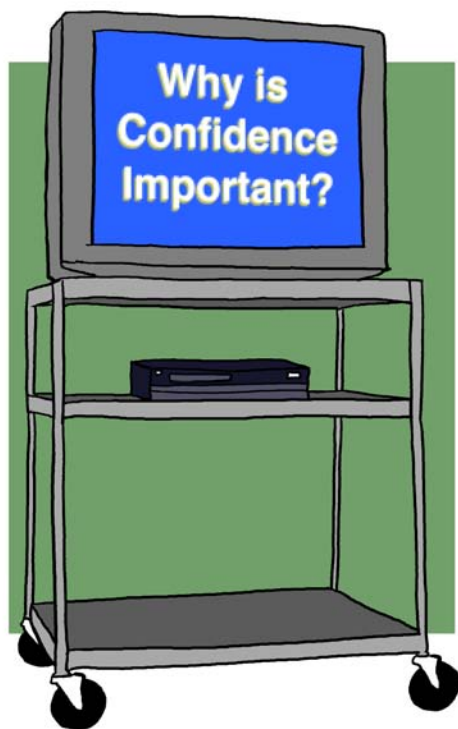
“Um,” she looked at Gina, “What are *they* doing here?” he pointed Mina, Alex and Leon.

Gina grimaced, “*They*... are the students are that I want you mentor on fitting in and being more popular Kelly.”

Kelly had a horrid look on her face, like she had just be asked to pour raw sewage on the floor and walk through it, barefoot.

“But you never said...” she began to whine, but Gina cut her off before the sentence lasted much longer.

“What I *said*...” the chemistry teacher spoke with a stern tone, “was that you could likely pass my chemistry class – which you have



failed to do the first three times – if you helped me coach these... less fortunate students...” she pointed at the surprised trio, “to be as confident and stylish as you are.”

Kelly huffed, “Oh my gawd,” she whined again, “Are you like... blackmailing me or something?”

Gina grinned, “Not at all dear. You can graduate without passing my course, can’t you?”

The popular girl sighed, “No... you know I can’t”

Gina smiled bigger, “All I know... is that I am pretty sure you’ll pass this time around, after all the hard work you’re going to put into my little chemistry project here...” she pointed at the beakers on the counter that the three club members had emptied earlier, “You’d be like...” she paused for a moment to choose her words carefully, “like my assistant. And I can’t fail my assistant, now can I? What kind of a teacher would I be?”

Kelly shrugged, looking defeated, “I dunno... a... bad one?”

Gina looked shocked, “You’re not saying that I’m a bad teacher are you Kelly?”

“Oh-no Ma’am...” the easily confused senior shook her head vehemently.

“Good,” Gina smiled, “So You’ll help me to help Alex Mina and Leon to act and dress a little more like they were popular, right?”

Kelly nodded, “Sure. Whatever.”

“Good,” Gina smirked as she turned to her ‘club.’ “Well, there you have it gang,” she said, “Kelly here is going to be your new style mentor... you guys listen to whatever it is that she says and you’ll be popular and confident in no-time flat!”

The three club members nodded in agreement.

“Um... Ma’am,” Kelly said, “Uh... I’m not sure about Lou there,” she pointed at Leon, “I mean... I can help the girls... but I’m not sure what I can do with a guy.”

Gina called her over and whispered quietly in the bubble-headed girl’s ear.

“Oh!” Kelly said as she turned to look at Leon, “Really?”

Gina continued to whisper as Kelly obviously stared at her, “Oh... wow. Okay,” she nodded than turned to address the club, “Well, okay then girls... and Leo,” she smiled, her vocal tone akin to how a kindergarten teacher address her students.

“Uh,” Leon spoke up, “It’s Leon.”

“Okay dear,” Kelly smiled, as if never hearing him in the first place, “So um... let’s talk about fashion... okay?”

Gina nodded approvingly at the blonde as she began an introductory course on fashion basics for the three misfits.



Days later, Leon approached his mom one early evening with a quandary, “Mom,” he began, “I need some help.”

Candace was surprised. She had never, ever, since her son’s birth, ever head him ask her for help. Never with homework, never even with tying his shoes. He had been painfully independent for his whole life.

So now, for him to ask her for help... she was shocked, and extremely excited to be able to help him.

“What is it dear?”

“Well,” he sighed, “It’s my clothes.”

Candace’s eyes grew wide. *His clothes?* She replied his concern in her head. *The first time he needs help and it’s with his clothes?*

“Your... clothes?”

“Yes, well my clothes aren’t portraying me in a flattering light anymore,” he looked up into the corner of his eye as he spoke, as if searching his memory for what to say, “so I need some help... and some money.”

Candace rolled her eyes. This was obviously part of Gina’s confidence building experiment, “Well,” she smiled, “I think this is something that you should ask your stepmom for help with.”

“Huh?” Leon replied.

“Your stepmom,” she repeated, “You know... Gina?”

“I know who my stepmom is Mom,” Leon shook his head, “I just didn’t expect you to...” his voice trailed off, “No problem...” he stopped and smiled, “I can ask her...”

“Ask her what?” Gina’s voice startled them from behind.

Candace turned to her partner with a sly smile, “Oh nothing... you’re stepson here just needs some help with his fashion sense... and I figured it would be a good bonding exercise for you two to go through... you know... to help build that bond between you two...” she grinned sarcastically. Candace knew that Leon’s terrible fashion sense drove Gina nuts.

“Oh...” Gina forced a smile, “Sure Leon... what did you have in mind?”

“Well,” the boy’s face lit up, “Kelly... from school? She said that I needed some new jeans... that these ones were so... uh... ‘last year’ or something?”

It looked like he wasn't too sure he believed what he was being told... but, yet... felt the need to do it anyway.

It was exactly the kind of behavior that Gina was hoping for.

"Well sure honey..." she smiled at her stepson, then over his shoulder to her partner, "I'd love to help you get some new jeans."

Candace just shook her head and rolled her eyes as the two of them left the room.



The following week was tougher for Leon than he had anticipated.

He had gone shopping with his step mom, just like Kelly had suggested, and purchased the latest style in jeans, which Kelly had also suggested... three pairs to be specific, but the effect was not what he had led to believe would happen.

Instead of suddenly being one of the 'cool' kids, the other students at the school seemed to be taunting him even *more*. Leon thought for sure that with his new jeans... and the new shirts he had purchased, that at *least* the taunting and teasing would stop.

But on Monday, his slim-fitting skinny jeans and tight t-shirt had people pointing and laughing, and even elicited the occasional lewd comment. The boot-cut low-riders he wore on Tuesday seemed to garner him a less vocal reaction, with only silent laughs and leering gazes.

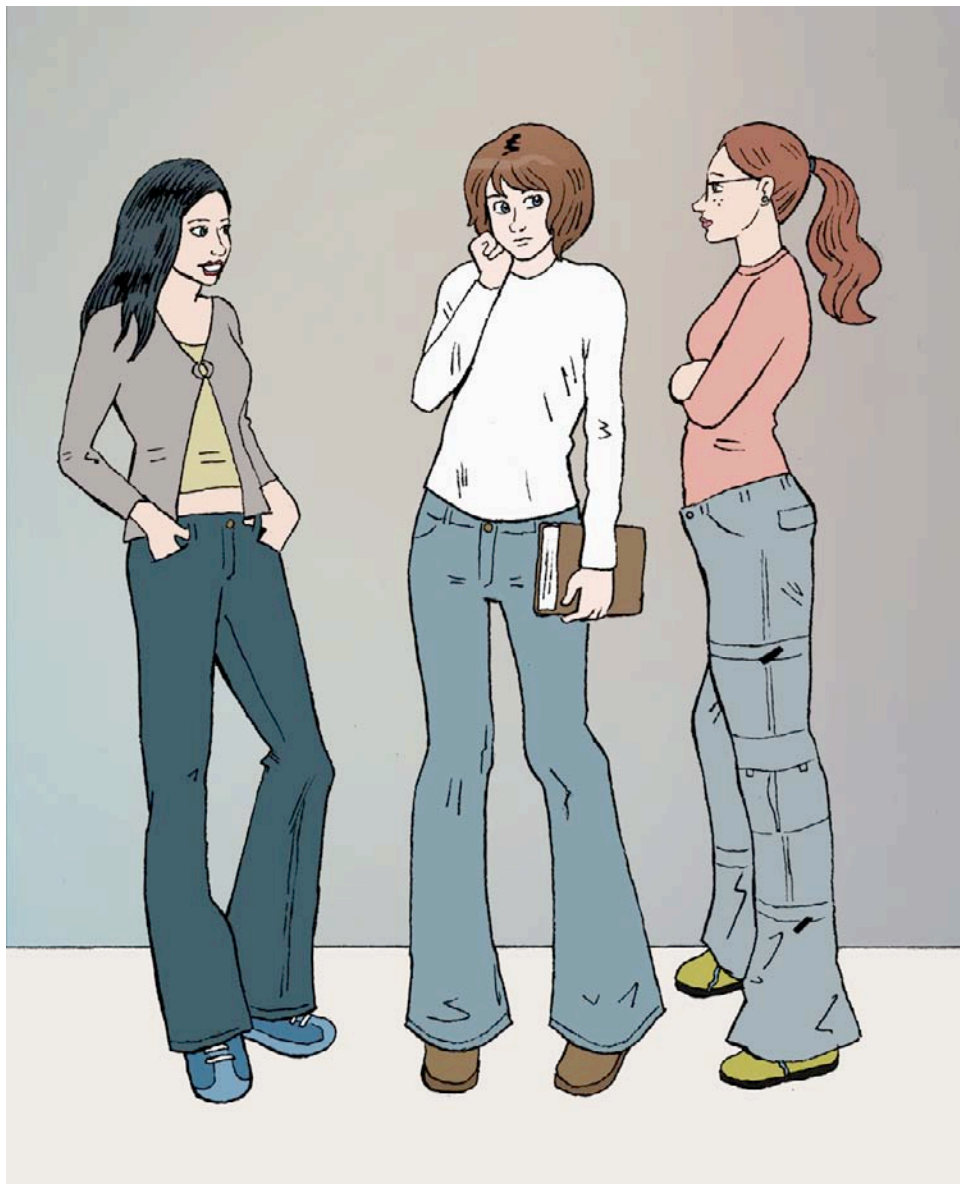
By Wednesday, Leon was thankful that his hip-hugging flares and knit white long-sleeve shirt were only causing people to whisper quietly to each other as he passed them in the hall.

His fellow club members, however, were most impressed by his wardrobe changes.

"Oh my goodness," Mina smiled, "I love your jeans," she said as she and Alex met up with the boy. She looked down at his pants... nearly identical to the dark denim pair that she herself had just purchased. She had ditched her frumpy hoodie in favor of a cute midriff-baring camisole top under another long sleeve shirt worn over top, but left nearly unbuttoned.

Leon looked nervous as Alex looked him over. She had worn a nice new pair of cargo pants and a fashionable top that looked very similar to the one that Leon was wearing. Which was a good thing... wasn't it?

Both of his fellow club members seemed to be standing taller than they used to... as if they were more confident in themselves. But Leon wasn't there yet. The three solid days of jeering and leering had actually left him feeling *less*



confident about himself than when he wore his regular old nerd clothes, as Kelly had called them.

“I like your hair,” Mina smiled.

“Uh... thanks,” Leon subconsciously rubbed his earlobe. He had taken extra time that morning to carefully brush it. The result was shiny, longer, and neater looking. It was still quite unruly, yet he was headed in the right direction. ‘It all happens at different paces for different people,’ Gina had said.

Leon hoped it would happen for him soon.

“Hey Leona!” Edgar Canes called mockingly as he passed the group, “I like your fag jeans!”

The football team captain was surrounded by a group of ‘popular’ people, including much of the football team... *and* an uncomfortable looking Kelly Woods. She was his girlfriend, actually. The two of them had started dating in grade nine.

“Don’t be so mean Eddie,” Kelly said, “He’s part of a... program or something. He’s getting better.”

Edgar stopped in his tracks, as if the opportunity to continue the insult was too good to turn down, “A program?” he scoffed, “What is it? A ‘how to be a queer’ program?”

The rest of his group broke into laughter. The rest, that is, except for Kelly. She just rolled her eyes and walked away.

“Wait, Kelly!” Ed called after his girlfriend, “It was just a joke! I don’t think he’s really a homo... it’s just his jeans are...” the footballer’s voice trailed off as he chased after his girl, “Hey Kelly! Wait up!”



The Confidence Club met later that day, with Kelly looking *very* embarrassed as she sat next to Gina as the club’s technical assistant.

“So,” Gina began the conversation after they three members drank up their sodas and watched the club video for the third time, “How was last week? I see that you all have done a great job in listening to Kelly here,” she looked left to the cowering girl, “So how has it been?”

“Well,” Mina began, “I have to say that I feel *great!*” she smiled, “I love my new look and I can’t help but smile at people,” she paused for a moment and blushed, “especially boys.”

Gina laughed at Mina’s reaction, “That’s *great* Mina. Well, you certainly are holding yourself higher and acting like you have more confidence.” She began clapping, which caused the others in the room to join into a small round of applause.

“Alexandra?” Gina turned to the red head to the left of Leon, “How about you?”

Alex shrugged, “I’m okay, I guess.”

“Just okay?”

She shrugged again, “I’m feeling a little better anyway. And I *do* like my clothes now...” She turned and gave a half-smile to Kelly, who in turn nodded

her head and smiled appreciatively, “But I’m not in the same place that Mina is”

“Well,” Gina smiled at the progress that was being made, “That’s okay. We’re all progressing at different rates... right?”

She turned to her stepson, “Leon?” she continued, “How about you? How are you finding things?”

Leon sighed. He could see that Mina and Alex were *actually* getting what she had intended for them to get... but he... he was just getting worse.

“It’s been a rough day for Lee,” Kelly interjected, “I think we still need some work.”

Gina was surprised that the popular girl was sticking up for someone that she previously would have considered ‘below her.’ “Oh?” She said.

Mina nodded in agreement, “Yeah,” she said, “He’s still finding himself I think.”

Alex nodded with the group, “He’s definitely finding himself.”

Kelly smiled. She was used to people agreeing with her, but never by actually supporting her argument.

“I think we need to work a little more on his look,” she smiled, “Maybe get him some new shoes... fix his hair... you know... stuff like that...”

Gina smiled to herself. The popular girl was offering to help her stepson, the unpopular guy, to be more popular! What could be better?



“We need to go shopping,” Gina announced to her spouse as she entered the kitchen that night.

Candace turned and stared at her partner with disbelief, “What do you mean? For Leon? Didn’t you just buy him some new things?”

Gina nodded as she poured herself a cup of coffee, “Mmm-hmm,” she said, “We sure did, but it’s not enough. He needs more stuff.”

Candace rolled her eyes, “Gene,” she called her wife by her pet name, “You *just* bought him three new outfits. Good lord,” she mumbled as she dropped three chicken breasts into the skillet for dinner, “How many clothes does he need to be popular?”

Gina stirred her sugar and milk into the coffee, then added more milk, then stirred again. She looked perplexed that the milk wasn’t turning the coffee lighter, so added more milk again, “I don’t know,” she shrugged, “But I’ve got

him working with an expert... and she says he needs a few new things... so we're getting them."

"Kelly Woods is *not* a style expert, Gene," Candace replied as she seared the outsides of the breasts, "And we're not *made* of money... as important as this project might be to you... we *aren't* made of money." She watched as Gina took a sip from her mug, then proceeded to spit it into the sink, "Oh, and that coffee has been sitting all day. I made it fresh this morning..." she looked at her watch, "that's *ten* hours ago."

Gina coughed as she poured the remaining 'coffee concentrate' down the drain, "Well I don't care what it costs... I'm not going to let your son..." she paused, "*Our* son, grow up as an outcast."

Candace wrapped her arms around her partner, "I know babe," she whispered in her ear as she kissed her cheek, "I know... but just don't let it get out of control, okay?"

Candace went back to her sizzling breasts. "It's bad enough that I'm allowing you to 'treat' him like the others... don't make it worse by forcing him to dress in a way he doesn't want to..."

Gina chuckled, "But that's just it babe," she said, "I really think he's starting to *like* dressing more in-style. I think he gets a real kick out of it."

Candace shrugged and continued to prepare dinner, "If you say so..."



Later that week, Gina, Kelly and Leon *did* go shopping, much to Candace's chagrin, at one of the popular stores in the mall that Kelly often frequented.

"Do I have to come inside with you guys?" Kelly asked as they approached the boutique.

"Why wouldn't you?" Gina frowned.

"It's just that..." Kelly looked around, "I've got kind of a rep, you know? A reputation?"

Gina furrowed her brow further, "You're going to have a reputation as a girl who failed chemistry and never graduated if you *don't* come with us..." She let her voice trail off, fearing that she was raising her voice too high.

She was.

Kelly sighed, "Oh... all right..."

The three of them soon entered the high-end shop and purchased a few new 'key' pieces as Kelly referred to them as, to help bolster Leon's budding new look.

It was a look that Gina worried, slightly, Leon's Dad would question when Leon went to spend the weekend there. That was this upcoming weekend, as was the norm on alternating months that end in odd days between certain numbers.

...It was complicated.

Abe was certainly aware of the difference in his Son's appearance when he picked him up Friday after school. "Holy moly!" he exclaimed as Leon climbed into his father's German sedan.

Leon looked worried, "Um... hi, Dad," he said.

Abe took a second look at the boy's bell-bottom jeans and new thick-soled black platform shoes with a thick, raised heel, "Well look at you!" he chuckled, "Looking all spiffed up."

Leon's look of worry turned to confusion, "Spiffed?"

Abe maneuvered the car through the streets of their town, "Yeah, spiffed... you know... spiffy. Don't you know what spiffy means? My goodness... the vocabulary that you young folk have today isn't nearly as vast and deep as you'd have us believe it is, now is it? Spiffy..." he paused to make a left turn, nearly cutting off two other cars in the process, "Spiffy... is another word for fashionable... or trendy, as I suppose the new pants and shoes that you've purchased are."

Leon shrugged, "I... guess"

Abe chuckled condescendingly, "Well boy," he scoffed, "You can't 'guess' at being fashionable... you either *are* or you are *not*, and judging by your clothes, I can only assume that the trend of bell bottom trousers and elevated platform shoes has finally come back, and that you are trying to make a statement about your knowledge of the trend by wearing them."

Leon shook his head and looked out the window. He hated these car rides. As much as he loved his dad, because he was, after all, his *dad*... he hated being trapped in a confined space with him for very long. Leon knew, at an early age, why his mom had left.

Abe was an ass.

"You know that I used to have an extensive collection of clothes like those," he pointed at Leon's pants, "In fact, I bet I still have a pair of two somewhere, if I really looked hard for them. I wonder if they would still fit? I'd offer them to you, but I doubt you'd fit in them. You've got your mother's frame, slight and small. You'd never be able to keep the pants from slipping off without a substantial belt."

Leon sighed, "Oh... darn..."

"If the trend is going to be long term though, you might want to check and see if they have any value... you know, at a thrift store," Abe continued, "Those vin-

tage items can often fetch a pretty penny.” He chuckled to himself, “Funny how they call old crap clothes ‘vintage’ huh?”

Leon pondered opening the car door and throwing himself out into on-coming traffic, but instead chose to simply pretend to care, “Yeah Dad... it’s hilarious.”

“Now don’t get cheeky with me boy,” his father’s mood changed quickly from jovial to angered, “That kind of tone might be acceptable with your mother and her ‘special friend’ but it will not be tolerated in *my* household... is that understood?”

Leon placed his fingers around the door latch, paused, then returned them to his lap, “Yes Sir” he sighed.

“Good,” his father smiled, “Now when we get home, I’ll show you where to look for the clothes in question, and you can dig them out, catalogue them, get some pricing based on comparable items online, and determine a value for the inventory, understand?”

Leon rolled his eyes, “Yes Sir,” he said again.

It was going to be a *long* weekend.



School, and all of its ‘complexities,’ even for a student of questionable popularity, was a welcome relief to Leon Monday morning as his father dropped him off.

True to his word, Abe had Leon go through boxes and boxes of old clothes to find if his stash of ‘vintage’ clothes were of any value. Much to Abe’s disappointment, many of the clothes were in fact from the eighties, instead of the seventies, and thus weren’t the goldmine of value that he had hoped for.

Hidden in the stash, however, were a pair of jeans that Leon recognized as something that he could actually wear. They were flared jeans that must have belonged to Leon’s mother... and had somehow been packed away prior to his parents splitting up.

The jeans fit tightly in his waist and butt, and flooded out over his new shoes. He was wearing chunky wedge-heeled platforms along with a three-quarter length sleeved shirt.

Kelly applauded his growing fashion sense when she saw him in the hall.

“That looks awesome, Lee,” she beamed. She was proud to see her ‘student’ was actually starting to gain a fashion sense of his own... even though it *was* a little effeminate. But who cared? Even a slightly effeminate version of Leon was better than the geek he used to look like, as far as she was concerned.

“Yeah, awesomely gay!” Edgar piped up from beside her, “Where’d you get those from Leona, the *queer* shop?”

The football captain laughed at his own joke, looking around to see who else had joined in.

“Leave him alone, Eddie,” Kelly scowled, “He’s not gay. He’s fashionable.” She turned back to Leon, “Those are awesome vintage jeans by the way, what a great score. I don’t wear anything but vintage fashions. They’re way cool.”

Leon sighed looked over at Edgar, “Well at least *some* people think it’s cool.”

Edgar’s eyes flashed with rage and he leapt forward, pressing a terrified looking Leon into the bank of lockers behind him, “What’s *that* queer?”

“Eddie!” Kelly yelped.

“Mister Canes!” a loud voice thundered behind them.

The entire hall turned to see Gina standing, arms on her hips. Ed relaxed his grip on Leon, “Sorry Ma’am,” he smiled, “I misunderstood what he was saying.”

“Ha!” Gina retorted, “Well don’t misunderstand me... if I see you touching another student like that... *any* student, you’ll find yourself in detention for the remainder of the football calendar.”

“Ha!” Edgar replied, “Like Coach would ever let *that* happen...”

“Want to try me?” Gina glared sternly at him.

Edgar glared at the chemistry teacher for a moment. If it weren’t for the fact that she was a hot lesbian – *which he totally digged* – he would have ignored her completely.

That, and the fact that she had already successfully ruined the football career of one of the team’s best running backs, who had repeatedly ignored her warnings to stop banging the heads of the glee-club members into lockers.

She was known as a hard-ass – both literally and figuratively.

“Well?” Gina repeated, “Do you want to try me?”

Edgar decided to relaxed his stance, “Fine...” he took a step back, “You have fun with your little queer-club” he snarled at Leon.

Gina’s eyes grew wide with fury. She wanted to rip the jock’s head off for a comment like that... especially since the recipient was her step-son. But sadly, teachers decapitating students was frowned on in most parts of the world, including this one, so instead she decided to do something *else*.

“Mr. Canes!” she boomed, “For *that* hurtful comment, you’ve earned yourself a detention in *my* room during lunch...”

“What?” Edgar whined.



“Keep it up and I *will* have that little chat with your coach... now run along and don’t be late...” she pointed Eddie down the hall.

“Hey Kell,” he yelled after his girlfriend, who had abandoned the scene the moment that Gina arrived, “Wait up!”

Kelly looked over her shoulder anxiously, glancing from her chemistry teacher to her boyfriend, to Leon, then continued on her way, with Edgar silently chasing after her to class.

Gina turned and winked at Leon who was composing himself off after having prepared for a severe beating.

“Well I for one,” she began, “Think Kelly is right. Your vintage jeans are awesome! How awesome is it to find something that your Mom... er, or rather that was worn by one of your parents thirty-some-odd years ago? Pretty cool I say.”

Leon nodded. He wasn't sure if it was awesome or cool... or exactly *what* it was. But for now, it was whatever it needed to be. If it made his Mom and Step-mom happy, and if it got him hanging out with a few new friends... some of whom were the coolest in the school, than that was fine by him.



Leon's next lesson in 'cool' was the following Wednesday in the Chemistry Lab. After watching Gina's short video (which incidentally, Leon *still* didn't understand the point of, nor could he remember much from), and a glass of bubbling soda, Gina brought Kelly back into the room to talk about piercings.

Mina, Alex and Leon all gasped. *What the heck kind of club was this?*

“Not *those* kind of piercings,” Gina shook her head after reading their facial expressions, “Earrings... you know...” she turned her head from side-to-side to show off her large hoops. “A popular girl...” she paused, than corrected herself, “person... a popular *person*, usually has pierced ears. Be they a girl... *or* a guy.”

She smiled and hoped that no one would notice her slip-up.

“Um,” Kelly picked up from the Chemistry teacher, “That's right Miss, there are *lots* of guys with pierced ears... thousands... millions of them. It's very, very common.”

“Does Edgar have pierced ears?” Leon asked out of the blue.

Kelly looked at Gina, then at Leon, than back at Gina, “Um...” she began with a long pause, “*No*... he doesn't, but...” she looked again to Gina, as if hoping the Teacher would somehow throw her a life preserver, as she was obviously sinking deep.

“But,” Gina interrupted, “Eddie...” she paused looking up into the corner of her eye as her brain formulated a good reason, “...can't wear an earring because of he plays football.”

Kelly nodded, “Yes... that is right. He can't. There's um... no earrings in football. Not allowed.”

Leon scrunched up his face. He considered himself a fairly astute person, one who could tell when he was being given a load of 'crap,' and there was something about the way that Gina and Kelly were conducting themselves that made him suspect that they might be trying to give him such a load right now.

However, it was true that *lots* of cool guys had earrings... *and* it was true that Edgar played football, which could be dangerous for earring wearing.

“Let’s move on,” Gina said finally, “Alex, I see you’ve already gone and had your ears pierced, perhaps you’d like to share you experience with the rest of the group.”

The red-headed girl paused and thought for a moment, “Well,” she began after careful consideration, “I went... and I got them pierced. And it hurt... at first, but they’re fine now.” She looked around the group who were still staring at her, “And that’s all that happened.”

Kelly rolled her eyes and wondered if a passing grade was worth the hassle of what she was going through.

“Anyway,” Leon said, “I don’t care what you guys say, I don’t want my ears pierced.”

“Are you sure?” Gina said. “I think you’re just a little hesitant.”

Leon frowned. “No. There’s no way I’m doing that.”

Later that night, Gina, Candace and Leon were eating tasty salads when Leon turned to his mother and asked, “Can I get my ears pierced, Mom?”

Both Gina and Candace nearly spit out their spinach.

“What?” Gina asked, with Candace not far behind her.

”Just, you know, because it sounds like having earrings would help me, socially.” Gina looked at Leon. Leon looked at Gina, than back at his mom, “Well... it was an idea anyway. You know a lot of popular guys have their ears pierced.”

Candace nodded as she chewed her food before she spoke, “Uh-huh...” then she turned her eyes towards Gina, and glared as she spoke, “...and so do a lot of popular *girls*.”

Gina laughed nervously. Leon joined in, though not sensing the hostility that was bubbling between his two moms.

“Lee,” Candace finally broke the awkward silence, “Why don’t you go work on your homework and your stepmom and me will clean up?”

Leon smiled, “Okay Mom,” before leaving the table. Candace smiled.

Once her son was out of earshot, however, her smile melted away as she pivoted her head towards her partner, “Earrings?”

Gina tried to look calm, “What? You heard him... *lots* of cool confident guys have them... what’s the big deal?”

“The big deal,” Candace growled, “Is that my only son... is wearing the same flared jeans and platform shoes that I wore when I was his age, letting his hair

grow longer, and now supposedly wants to get his *ears* pierced... *that's* what the big deal is, *dear*"

"Candy," Gina replied, "You have to trust me on this... I'm just putting him through the same course that I've done for a dozen other kids, remember? Every single one of them has ended up being a *somebody* after joining the Confidence Club. Leon will be a new man when this is all done."

Candace *hated* being called Candy, and she knew that Gina knew that. "Well... Genie..." she used Gina's hated pet name, "*You* don't know what kind of 'man' he's going to end up being because you've never *had* a man in the program before. You've only ever had girls. And I suspect by the way things are going that Leon's soon going to fit *that* bill as well!"

With that, Candace grabbed her plate, and excused herself from the table, leaving Gina to contemplate exactly how far she'd allow Leon to go in the program.



That following weekend, Gina, with Kelly Wood begrudgingly in tow, took Leon to the mall to get his ears pierced. They had agreed that it would be a good idea to get Leon familiar with the salon in the mall, especially since his hair and nails were also in need of some 'maintenance.' And by 'agreed upon,' that meant mean Gina said so. And by 'maintenance', that meant some coloring and a manicure.

Both of the last two items were added after the beauticians had already installed Leon's new silver studs, and without his prior knowledge. Abe, Leon's father, would be the first to see the results when he picked the boy up that afternoon. He saw his son's new piercings, polished nails and most startlingly, a bright, flashy streak of blonde through the middle of this bangs.

"What the hell have those damn lesbians done to you now?" he gasped as Leon got into his Dad's car.

"It's nothing Dad," Leon shrugged Abe's reaction off as he buckled his seatbelt.

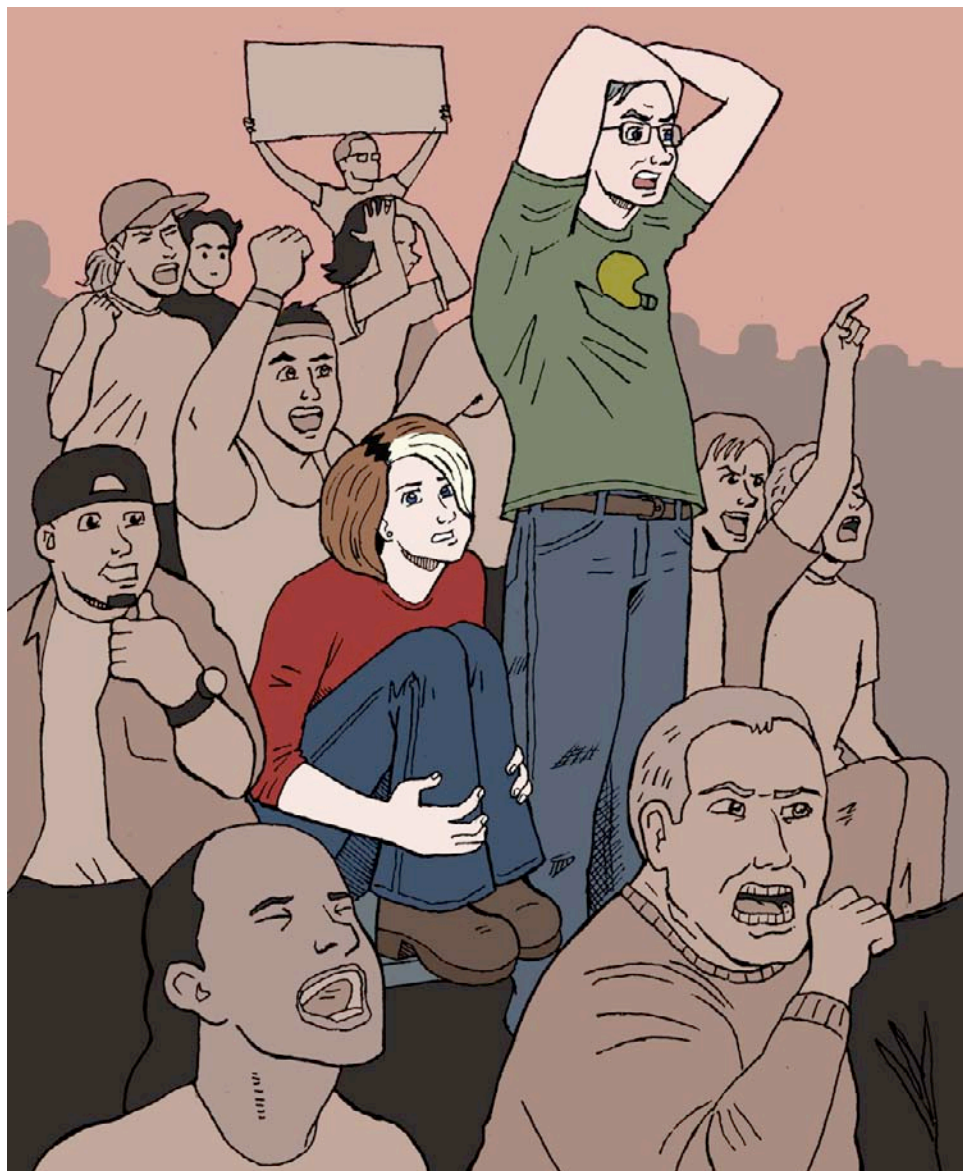
"Nothing my ass," Abe mumbled, "You know, when I was your age having *one* earring was cool, but only one. Those who wore two were usually playing for the other team, if you follow my drift. I suspect it's part of a plot for lesbians to take over the world. I mean, they're already taking over television... Ellen, Rosie, and that nasty dyke on that Glee Club show... what's it called?" he paused as he maneuvered the car out on the road.

"Um..." Leon paused, "Glee?"

“Yeah, that’s it...” Abe nodded, checking his mirror before he changed lanes, “And what’s all about? A bunch of pansies singing songs and acting queer... I tell you, it’s all going to hell.”

Leon rolled his eyes. *No Dad... hell is being locked in a moving car with you for twenty minutes*, he thought to himself.

Abe decided to try and compensate for whatever hair-brained global takeover scheme his ex-wife and her Lesbian partner were planning for his son, by taking him to a football game. Abe knew everything there was to know about foot-



ball... at least the theory of football, as he had never played so much as a game of scrimmage in his life.

Leon kept still and tried to avoid eye contact with the macho, beer-swilling, obnoxious loud-mouth blow-hards that surrounded him at the stadium... *and that was just describing his father*. The scene of a skinny, balding, bespectacled book-worm know-it-all, yelling at the players on the field, half-a-mile out of ear-shot, was both comical and mortifying to the boy.

Even more mortifying were the strange looks he was getting from the others around him. Disturbingly, Leon thought that they were looking at *him* and not his unbearable father – leeringly glancing Leon over, as if trying to decide on whether to flirt with him or fist-pump him.

It was absolutely strange and a little terrifying. At one point during the game, when it seemed the entire stadium erupted out of its seats, Leon found himself curled up in something of a fetal position, arms hugging his knees, praying that the game would be over and that he could go home and be alone.



“You took him where?” Candace asked. She had met her ex-husband at the door when he dropped Leon back home. Leon was pretending not to overhear the conversation from the next room.

Abe growled as he spoke. “The boy needs some male influences. Needs to do some *boy* things. And whatever voodoo lesbian crapolla that you two are up to, needs to stop,” Abe demanded, “Dressing that boy up in fruity pants and giving him a girly hair-do and sparkly earrings, is *not* the way to help the boy’s self-esteem. It’s just going to get him beaten up.”

“Will you give that ‘lesbians taking over the world’ shit a rest, Abraham?” Candace angrily fired back, “We aren’t trying to recruit men into the club... its girls-only.”

Gina nodded, “We tried it your way Abe, we did the Doctor thing... remember? It didn’t work. *This...*” she made a circle with her index finger, “so-called ‘lesbian voodoo crap,’ is already getting him in with a better crowd and he’s making new friends all the time, so just hold onto your shorts and be patient.”

“Be patient?” Abe retorted, “And watch my boy get turned into some kind of cream puff?”

“And what if being a cream puff makes him happy Abe? Wouldn’t that be okay?”

Abe threw his arms into the air and shook his head, “I can’t even win...” he sighed, “You gals have got it *all* figured out, don’t you? Turn him into a fruity little pretty-boy and make him popular. Fine. But don’t expect me to *like* it.”