

BENJAMIN REED

THE WEIGH-IN

Over the weekend the Office of Health and Fitness lowered the Maximum Body Mass Index for girls ages fifteen to seventeen, so when Candace Perkins came to school on Monday she was in a modesty gown. That's what you're supposed to call them, 'gowns,' even though everyone calls them 'burkas.' Which is a little strange, since burkas cover everything but your eyes, right? The modesty gowns are basically just robes. Dad calls them 'muumuus,' but said never to tell anyone he calls them that. He's right though, they do look like muumuus. The modesty gowns required by the OHF let you see the person's whole face and head, their necks, and their hands, which if you ask me kind of defeats the purpose.

When I saw Candace Perkins trudge through the front doors of St. Mary's Girls' School in a burka, I thought she was going to get in trouble. I thought it was a gag, or a protest. But then I noticed her downcast eyes and how fast she was walking to her locker. I was surprised. I never really thought she was that heavy, that she'd been on the edge.

McKenzie Hill finally took a break from going on about the Halloween dance to clutch my arm in her French-manicured talon and say, "Oh. My. God. Theresa, did you just *see* that?" McKenzie stared at Candace who, in her dark red robe, was trying in vain to get lost in a crowd of crested blue blazers and plaid skirts. "Oh my god," McKenzie said again. "I would die. I would just kill myself."

"Really?" I said.

"Oh shit, Rese. I'm so sorry. I didn't mean—" McKenzie's face was earnest and contorted between falling locks of hair so red it was orange, her pink lips pursed into lustrous contrition. My lips were thinner, but the same shiny pink. It was the new gloss

McKenzie, Haylie and I were all wearing. It was called “Cotton Candy.” It tasted like cotton candy.

I got to be friends with McKenzie Hill and Haylie Bauersox because I had to drop AP Algebra. I just couldn’t keep up. When I got sent down to Ms. Anderson’s College Prep Math, the only open seat was in the back of the class, next to Haylie and McKenzie. I assumed they’d make my life hell, but I had all of CP Math in middle school and ended up helping them more than Ms. Anderson. They didn’t even make fun of me when they found out I’d taken Debate as an elective.

They’re really not as bad as everyone thinks. Haylie’s a model, and last summer she got flown to St. Barth’s and then Fiji. McKenzie’s super cute too, just not the way Haylie is. McKenzie’s dad owns an oil company in West Texas. Her parents divorced last year and right after that she got her own 5-Series as a reward for passing her driver’s test. She and Haylie usually give me a ride home and at lunch we eat together on the patch of lawn in the school’s main courtyard. Technically, hanging out with them makes me popular. I used to eschew all that superficial stuff like makeup and popularity. Then I found out all that superficial stuff looks a lot different from the inside. And anyway, I’m positive it wasn’t Haylie or McKenzie who used a black marker to write “Moooo” across Candace’s locker. That happened on Tuesday. Candace had only been in the burka for two days.

I’m not even sure how you get a gown, or rather, how the gown gets to you. I guess the Office of Health and Fitness express mails them to your house, after your scale sends the OHF your Weekly Weigh-In data. In our town we do Weigh-In on Thursdays. Sometimes it’s kind of a pain to get home before the ten p.m. cutoff, but it’s not as bad as when everybody in the country had to weigh in on Friday. People didn’t realize the government servers were crashing. They thought their scales were broken. They unbolted them from their bathroom floors and took them down to their local OHF office to be replaced or serviced. Not that you could have blamed them. Nobody wants to lose their driver’s license or

pay higher taxes. But now that different area codes do Weigh-In on different days, everything seems to work fine.

The only class I have with Candace is P.E., on Tuesdays and Thursdays. That Tuesday, probably while someone was defacing her locker, Candace came out for roll call, not in the tiny gray jersey trunks and her thick, too-tight, reversible P.E. t-shirt that's blue on one side, green on the other, but in her red gown. Coach Donnetta doesn't make girls in gowns do normal P.E. They're allowed to walk on the composite track around the soccer field at a brisk pace, all period, just as long as they don't stop for anything.

I was the first person dressed for roll. But since Candace didn't have to dress, she'd beat me outside and was already walking her laps. It was just me and Coach Donnetta on the playground, where the grid of roll call numbers are painted on the asphalt. She was in her usual P.E. attire: ankle socks and Nikes, polyester softball trunks and a white knit polo with the St. Mary's logo stitched over one faintly elaborated breast. Coach Donnetta told us the day before that girls with even roll numbers needed to wear their shirts blue-side out, odds were to wear green. We were going to play dodge ball. I stood on the faded number seventeen with my green side out and asked her, "Isn't it ironic that overweight people don't have to do P.E.?"

Coach Donnetta lowered her clipboard. She looked annoyed. "It's not ironic. For people like Candace, it's more important to maintain a moderate but constant metabolic baseline. I only hope she's taking long walks in the evening as well."

The rest of the class emerged from the exterior locker room doors on the south wall of the school, spilling out onto the playground like blue and green candy. I pulled my trunks out from where they'd gotten caught in my ass and asked, "Wouldn't it make more sense to have her do the same exercises as everyone else, only with more, you know, exertion?"

"Once you get to a certain point, no. Steady walking is better for Candace than running up and down a basketball court until she sprains her ankle." As the other girls arrived and stood on

their numbers, Coach Donnetta took roll, reprimanding Stacey Thomas for wearing a normal blue t-shirt instead of her reversible. But it was half-hearted. Everybody was thinking about Candace and watching her steady, crimson orbit around the soccer field.

Coach Donnetta led us from the grid to where the dodge ball “court” (a big, bisected square) was painted on the ground. I used to like dodge ball, when I was a kid, but now all I could think about was not getting my nose flattened. So I basically hid behind the other girls on my team. A few minutes before the period ended, Coach Donnetta trotted out to the field to release Candace from her umpteenth cycle around the track. I paused to watch them amble across the field and I got stung in the face by a red rubber ball. I didn’t feel the warm seep of blood until after I tasted salt on my lips.

Coach Donnetta took a Kleenex packet out her pocket and had me sit beside her on the asphalt with my head tilted back and a twist of tissue in my nostril. We watched the winning team mercilessly pick off the remaining opponents, the blue team, who cringed and cowered until a hail of red rubber pummeled them out of existence.

Coach Donnetta idly flipped through a field hockey rulebook and said, “At MacMillan,”—that’s the boys prep academy across town—“the football players don’t have to wear modesty gowns. They can get as big as they want.”

I made a nasal protest.

She said, “It’s not as unfair as it sounds. The linemen who don’t get scholarships have to register for a special camp the summer after they graduate. They do twice-daily workouts to burn off the weight and take classes to learn how to eat like normal people. And still, most of them leave in gowns. So it’s not like they’re getting a free pass.”

“I already know about the camps,” I managed, gently palpating my nose. At night the campers have to sit through motivational speakers. That’s what my dad does. He talks to crowds and counsels individuals. He used to be fat but now he’s a consultant. He keeps

a picture of himself from when he was over three hundred pounds. It's framed, hanging over the sideboard in our living room, just past the entryway. In the picture his multi-chins hang over a t-shirt that's stretched so thin you can see a large elliptical shadow over the cave of his navel. I've begged him to take it down but he's proud of it. McKenzie says it's grotesque. Haylie said she thought my dad was hot until she saw the old picture. Last year St. Mary's hired him to give us a talk as part of Body Image Week, and he projected the same photograph onto the wall of the gymnasium. It was twenty feet high. Like McKenzie says, I could have died.

After Haylie and McKenzie dropped me off at home I meant to ask Dad how people actually get gowns, but when he came out of his office and saw me snacking on the sofa, he made that tsk-tsking sound.

"What?" I asked, showing him the food. I had a little plate of water crackers and celery sticks filled with fat-free cream cheese, a bunch of organic green grapes, slices of Swiss cheese and a few olives.

"You know, you're not going to be able to eat like this forever."

"Dad, I'm not one of your clients." Then: "I'm hungry."

Dad lingered. "So this is dinner?"

He was in his khakis and a freshly-ironed pale blue oxford button-down, open at the collar, his phone hanging in a plastic holder clipped to his woven leather belt. His gray-flecked hair was moussed. That meant he was on his way to go "preach to the Heavies." I wasn't allowed to tell people he used the term 'Heavies,' either.

I looked at the plate and quickly tabulated the calories, adding what I'd already eaten. It's a gift I have, like how some people can balance their checkbooks at a glance. "Dad, there's only four hundred calories here."

He scoffed. "Try five-sixty."

"No way."

"I'll get the food scale."

"You'll just find out how wrong you are," I said.

To read the rest of this story, click this text to order a copy of *West Branch Number 70* through *West Branch Wired*.