

## BENJAMIN REED

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### 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.

“What’s your daily?”

I set my plate on the coffee table. “You’re the one who gave it to me.” Dad says Debate has taught me to argue, but in reality I learned everything I know from him.

“Indulge me,” he said, crossing his arms.

I sighed. “Twenty-one hundred calories on days I work out or have P.E., seventeen hundred on days that I don’t. I had P.E. today.”

“That’s a pretty generous allowance.”

“Says you.”

He checked his watch. In defiance, I laid a piece of Swiss cheese over a water cracker and popped it into my mouth.

“Theresa, it’s my job to know what’s healthy.”

“You’re a motivational speaker, not a dietician.”

“I’m a consultant,” Dad said, abandoning the back of the sofa for the kitchen. He pulled a mineral water from the fridge. “Honey, I just want you to consider that you won’t have the same metabolism in a few years. And it may come as a surprise.” He paused, and I could tell what was coming next: “When your mother—”

“Hey,” I said, cutting him off but not turning around to look in his direction, “You don’t see me in a muumuu, do you?”

I heard the heavy *thunk* as he set down the glass bottle a little too quickly on the granite countertop. “Don’t call them that.”

Dad says diets don’t work. He says it’s irrelevant whatever diet is popular at any given moment since there’s only ever been the same five or six; they just get repackaged and recycled in and out of popularity. And the cycle never stops because they’re all only partially effective. It’s all in his book. Anyway, food-based diets don’t work because what’s broken isn’t people’s bodies, but their minds.

Dad’s PhD work was a study on twenty-six people who all lost dramatic amounts of weight after surviving plane crashes and other near-death experiences. That’s how he met Mom. Even if you’re my age, you’ve probably at least heard about the 2020 fire

in the Clearmount Tunnel. Mom was one of the last people to drive all the way through before a gasoline tanker crashed and exploded. I always wonder how Dad feels that he only met Mom because a hundred people got incinerated. Anyway, what Dad sells is spiritual reinvention. He tries to replicate the nature and intensity of near-death experiences through a technique he calls “repetitive suggestion,” but lately that’s gone out of fashion in the industry. He’s downloaded every new Self-Help and Eastern Medicine book he can find, trying to formulate the next big thing in Body Adjustment Consultation. Over summer he started reading about hypnosis and asked if I wanted to be his assistant. I said only if he cuts me in half with a saw.

We were having lunch on the lawn on the courtyard when McKenzie asked me for the seventeenth time, “Rese, do you know what you’re going as to the dance?”

“I haven’t decided yet,” I said.

“There’s only two days left,” Haylie said, peeling the aluminum foil lid from her plastic cup of yogurt.

“I know.”

Last year I wasn’t allowed to go to the Halloween dance. The year before, when I was a freshman, I went as a dead Marilyn Monroe. I wore a peroxide wig and a dirty white dress and painted my face with a makeup kit called “Zombie #3.” The kicker was that I fashioned a necklace out of old orange prescription bottles, which I filled with Sweet Tarts and assorted colors of pez. Sister Catharine wanted to give me a two-day suspension. Dad got me off the hook by explaining that I was “acting out.”

Haylie lay back on the lawn with her shoes and socks off so her ankles wouldn’t get tan lines. She let her dark hair cover her face. Haylie has great hair, naturally.

“I’m going as a slutty nurse,” McKenzie said.

“Well, I figured you’d be going as slutty-something,” Haylie said, laughing.

“Fuck you, bitch.” McKenzie said. “That’s the whole *point* of Halloween. What are *you* going as?”

“Not telling,” Haylie said through her hair. I could see her neck flex as she smiled. “I don’t want to spoil it.”

McKenzie turned her attention back to me. “So what can St. Theresa go as?”

“Actually, now that you mention it, a slutty Mother Theresa sounds fun.”

She didn’t laugh.

“Or,” I said to Haylie, “Maybe I could borrow your old Catwoman costume?”

Haylie propped herself up on her elbows, her face still mainly hidden by hair. She said, “Rese, it’s like a size two.”

On my way to Debate I stopped in the bathroom to top off. That’s when you only puke up a little of your last meal. McKenzie taught me how to do it. It’s not bulimia, since you don’t clean out your stomach. Although it does make it difficult to keep track of calories.

Back in the hallway I saw the janitor using a solvent-dampened rag to clean the “Moooo” off of Candace’s locker. So far he hadn’t done much more than translate the message into dark, overlapping swirls.

Poor Candace. I should have been more empathetic. The first time the OHF lowered the healthy weight limit for girls in my height range, it was by five pounds. Suddenly I was six ounces from a burka. That was eighth grade. My chest still gets tight when I think about that Weigh-In. What if I’d had seconds at dinner? What if I’d been constipated?

At first Dad had really coached me to lose the weight. Not just the five pounds I needed to feel safe, but the ten pounds I needed to get securely into the lower half of my index. That was the summer Mom died. I was at the cemetery with Dad and our whole family, and I was just bawling uncontrollably as they lowered her casket into the ground. I wondered how I was going



to live without my mother, and how many calories I was burning by sobbing.

On my way to Debate I spritzed my mouth with cinnamon breath spray, and did it again, just to be safe, right before I walked inside. I was a little late. I slipped across the room quietly, took my seat, and put on my ‘listening’ face.

We have to practice arguing whatever topic is picked for the big Lincoln-Douglas tournament held on some nearby college campus each semester. I was hoping it’d be abortion, but whoever decides these things had decreed: “Resolved: A free society’s regulation of a citizen’s health and body size constitutes an impingement of their personal liberty.” Mrs. Marton said the National High School Forensics Council was trying to offset flagging interest in L.D. by choosing a superfluously controversial resolution.

That Wednesday we were supposed to work on opening arguments. There were twelve of us in the class and we’d already drawn lots the week before to determine who was going to argue which side, Pro or Con. Shelly Morgan, the little starlet of the theater department (who still orders her skirts and blouses from the Junior Miss section of the St. Mary’s uniform catalogue) had drawn Pro. Shelly rose from her desk and strode to the varnished lectern at the front of the room.

She read from her sheet of filler paper: “The protestors of the OHF policies are not radicals, be they on the streets or in the halls of congress. They descend from a long and storied tradition of civil rights warriors like Harvey Milk and Malcolm X. The OHF has no right to regulate people’s bodies, or their diets. Nothing is so personal as food.”

This went on for six minutes. After, instead of just telling her how bad she was, Mrs. Marton only told Shelly she went over her time. Then it was Julia Korczynski’s turn to argue Con. Julia’s almost as big as Dad used to be, one of the three or four girls at St. Mary’s who’ve been in modesty gowns since forever. She has robes in every imaginable color and pattern—puce, indigo,

chocolates and burnt oranges she only wears in autumn—and galaxies of matching accessories.

Julia made her way to the lectern and flipped her corn-colored hair behind her shoulders, revealing silver hoop earrings as wide as sand dollars. “The actions of the OHF are perfectly legal and in accordance with our national interest. Despite accusations to the contrary, the OHF has not taken away our essential liberties. Clothing is *not* speech. It is not protected under the First Amendment. Ask any girl at a Catholic high school.” Titters crossed the room. She read on: “Consider the continued health of open discourse, our most basic right as Americans. The fact that protest still thrives is evidence that people are *encouraged* to question and deliberate the OHF policies.”

It was true, I guess. The Secretary of Health and Fitness says the more people discuss the dangers of obesity, the less likely people are to *be* obese. So deliberate away! That’s actually what it says on the OHF billboard by our town’s exit off the highway. There are two guys arguing, face to face, only they’re standing on OHF scales. They’re both dressed in slacks with dress shirt collars folded over their necklines of their sweaters. They’re frozen as they harangue each other, one red-faced, the other shaking his fist in the air, but there are three layers of progressively fainter body outlines radiating from each them, with only their trim, inner bodies (also clothed) in dark, full color, as if they’re rapidly slimming down just from shouting at each other. The actual phrase on the billboard is “Open Minds, Smaller Waistlines: Deliberate Away!” Which is a metaphor, obviously. Yelling only burns like a hundred calories per hour. You’d lose your voice before you even worked off lunch.

Julia approached her summation: “I admit that some unredressed issues remain. No broad policy is perfect. But our lives, collectively, are better than they used to be. Consider any American History textbook. Two-thirds of our population were once dangerously overweight. Today that figure is fifteen percent and dropping. Once, obesity-related mental health issues were the

fifth highest cause of suicide. Today it's not even in the top ten. And who can forget the horrors of Turkey and Iran? To think, our leaders might not have had to deploy nuclear warheads if ninety per cent of men and women otherwise eligible for enlistment hadn't been too heavy to make the cut for boot camp."

Some girls applauded. Shelly Morgan simmered. Mrs. Marton told Julia she didn't think "unredressed" was correct usage, but otherwise she did a very fine job.

I couldn't help myself. I raised my hand.

"Yes?" Mrs. Marton said.

"What's her value?"

"I'm sorry?" Mrs. Marton paused. She did that thing where she blinks while looking right at you, as if she wants to see you in a flickering light.

"I mean, it's just a little unclear. We're supposed to have a moral value behind our argument, even if it's not stated." Nobody said anything. They just stared at me. My voice shook a little, but I managed to get out, "The resolution says the OHF rules limit 'personal liberty.' But all Julia argued was that clothing isn't speech. That's only part of the First Amendment."

Mrs. Marton sighed. "I fail to see your logic."

"I don't know—what about eating?" Here I blushed—it's hard to mention food while a Heavy is in the room, it just is. "I mean, is *that* speech? Or what about religion? What if wearing something other than a gown—or eating—is part of your religion?"

I heard stifled laughter. Mrs. Marton burned. "I am just at a loss for words, Theresa. Frankly, I think that's a disrespectful, borderline abusive thing for you to say."

"What? I—"

"Julia is a prized member of the forensics team. She has as many wins and trophies as anyone else in this room. For you to suggest—"

"Suggest what? I just meant her argument didn't have a clearly-stated value."

Mrs. Marton crossed her arms, livid. Thank God there was only two minutes left in class. She turned her back to me and launched into a long digression on how important it is to consider all peoples' feelings, how it wasn't until she was in high school that they finally took the words "rotund" and "corpulent" off the SAT, even though testing theorists had already proved such words make overweight students feel bad about themselves, lowering their morale for the rest of the test and depreciating their score. I peeked at Julia and saw her nodding in agreement, the whites of her eyes turning pink.

In the hallway after class Julia shoved me with her shoulder and said, "Your breath stinks, bitch."

Haylie and McKenzie skipped last period to get their teeth bleached for the Halloween dance. Since Dad was at a conference, I had to take the bus home. I saw Candace's red robe at the bus stop from a block away. I sidled up next to her to offer the words of encouragement I'd practiced as I approached:

"You'll be out of that burka in no time."

At first she flinched, then she saw me and gave a tight smile. "Oh, hey Theresa. Yeah, thanks. That's what everybody keeps telling me."

A couple kids waiting for the bus sneered at us, but I just sneered right back. They were boys from the public school. When the bus came, the boys pushed past us to climb the steps and stood just inside the yellow line painted on the aisle behind the driver. "Sorry," one of them said down to Candace. "Bus is full." He had freckles and spiky hair and wore jeans and a leather jacket, and I hated him instantly. "Yeah," his friend seconded him. He was black with designs shaved into his head. He cackled and said to Candace, "Sorry, Tubby. Looks like you'll have to wait for the cattle car!"

I looked to the bus driver, but she only averted her eyes. She should have done something. She was in a gown too. But she just closed the doors and drove off.

“That was so rude,” I said to Candace, but when I turned around she was already walking down the sidewalk, past the display window of an antiques store. “Hey,” I called, “Wait up!”

Candace paused as if suddenly burdened. “Yeah,” she said, turning. “What?”

“Where are you going?”

“I’m walking home.”

“You live this way?”

Candace leveled her eyes at me. “We’ve lived in the same neighborhood since elementary school.”

“Oh,” I said, affecting Haylie’s practiced absent-mindedness. “Right. I forgot. Hey, I’ll walk home with you.”

As we walked down Park Street I kept catching people staring at us from passing cars. I saw a woman in a coffee shop pause while handing money to the cashier, practically breaking her neck to get a look at us through the coffee shop’s window. If Candace noticed any of this, she didn’t let on.

We finally got to our neighborhood. It was true, Candace lived just around the corner from me. I chatted her up in front of her house until she had no choice but to invite me inside. I thought we were going to hang out and maybe talk about school but as soon as we got in her room Candace ripped off her gown and threw it contemptuously into her closet. She plopped down on her twin bed and folded herself over, burying her face into the unmade sheets. I don’t know why, but I was surprised that she’d been wearing shorts and a t-shirt underneath the gown, not her uniform.

I slung my St. Mary’s blazer over the chair at her writing desk and sat gently on the corner of her bed. At first I thought she was crying, but Candace didn’t make a sound. Her body didn’t shudder with sobs or anything. All she said, muffled by pressing her face into her rumpled comforter, was, “It’s so fucking embarrassing.”

Candace didn’t look that fat. But then, the only fat people I normally see are in our doorstopper of a history textbook, and the picture of my dad, so maybe my impression is skewed. It’s not

like you can tell what the protestors on TV actually look like, the way the news pixilates their bodies. But it was plain where Candace's back was pushed out into little rolls by the compression of her bra, and her how her thick thighs gathered into her knotted knees. She didn't have a big belly, or even the cellulite that, in bad lighting, you can see rippling up the backs of my own thighs. But her soft upper arms hung perceptibly out and over her elbows, and the fat on her throat pooled into a soft collar where her neck joined her collarbones. Those were the dead giveaways.

Candace remained folded over. I read the spines on her bookshelf and took an inventory of her posters. Candace had a four-foot mirror on the back of her bedroom door. That's when I got the idea: "Can I try it on?"

Candace raised her head. Her face was red and puffy. "You're kidding."

"No. I'm curious."

"You're curious about what it's like to wear the burka?"

"Yeah."

Her face was a blank. I was about to tell her 'Never mind, forget it,' when she shrugged and said, "Suit yourself. Ha. No pun intended."

I got up from the corner of Candace's bed and retrieved the gown from where it lay under the hanging plaid skirts and pressed blouses.

Candace watched from the middle of her bed. "My mom cried when she got the email from the OHF. My dad went out and bought like a hundred dollars worth of fruit and different kinds of lettuce."

"I almost had to wear a burka, once," I said, holding the gown up to shake out its wrinkles. "When they first dropped the weight limit for my height."

"I guess I can see that."

Without even realizing it at first, I heard McKenzie's voice trying to escape through my mouth: *Fuck you, bitch*. But I caught myself; I told myself I was fine. Since high school I'd always

been safe, at least four pounds under the latest maximum, which everybody said would never be lowered again.

I put my head through the gown's collar. I could tell by how fast Candace was talking that I was making her nervous.

"Did you know that the city's water treatment facility goes ballistic all day long every Thursday? So many people are upchucking and forcing themselves to defecate before they weigh in they can barely handle the volume."

"I've heard about that."

I slipped the gown past my shoulders and let it fall over my clothes. I pulled my hair out from where it was caught under the collar and tugged at the fabric until it hung straight. The armpits were still warm from Candace's body, but the material was actually really nice. Some airy cotton blend. And even though the fabric was pretty thin, you couldn't make out the shape of my skirt or my blouse. My breasts were gone. So were my hips. I could have been naked underneath, or wearing a sweater. I would have looked the same either way.

"It makes me feel like I'm in a gospel choir," Candace said.

The deep red of the gown drew out the blue in my hazel eyes and made the streaks of blond McKenzie had bleached into my hair seem radiant in the afternoon sunlight. I didn't look like I was a singer in a choir. More like a sacrificial virgin.

From behind my reflection Candace said, "It looks better on you."

That Thursday in P.E. we had to take the yearly Physical Fitness test. We get twelve minutes to run or jog four laps around the composite track circling the soccer field. If you finish the mile under seven minutes and can also do forty pull-ups and twenty-three pushups in under a minute each, the OHF will give you a thousand dollar college scholarship. Girls in gowns only have to walk the mile in under twenty minutes to pass. There's a special blue foam kneepad they use to perform their thirty partial

pushups. Instead of chin-ups, they have to hang from the bar for ten seconds before falling off.

Candace emerged from the locker room doors dressed in her taut gray trunks and the reversible t-shirt, blue side out. Her bare knees winced like faces. Coach Donnetta told Candace she could go back and get her robe, but Candace only nodded and lined up with the rest of us at the track's starting line. Coach Donnetta just shrugged and called the first girls' name. When she called Candace's name, Candace bolted out with a burst of speed everybody knew would be impossible to sustain. She even passed a few girls, temporarily, but by the time she finished her first lap you could read the agony on her flushed face. My name was called and I took off, and I didn't see Candace again until I passed her at the start of my last lap. By then Candace had resorted to a shuffling trot, her hands curled into weak fists, her elbows at her sides, her hair unstrung from her pony tail, her scarlet face hung down with her eyes barely open, as if she was not concentrating but napping, somehow, despite the runnels of sweat coursing down her pink calves.

Candace finished the mile in eleven minutes and thirty-seven seconds. For her last fifty meters we all gathered to cheer her on, Coach Donnetta bent over and practically screaming as she watched the figures climb on her stopwatch. Candace made it and we all cheered and patted her on her sweaty back. But then she collapsed, face-down on the turf. At first Coach Donnetta thought Candace was just being dramatic.

"Okay, Candace, we get it. Good job. Now get up and walk it off before you tighten up."

Candace didn't move.

"Candace, I mean it. Get up and go get some water."

Nothing.

Coach Donnetta jogged over to where Candace lay and knelt beside her. "Candace?" There was fear in her voice. Coach Donnetta gently shook Candace's shoulder. Her jostling hand



caused little waves to ripple through Candace's broad back, all the way down to her lifeless ankles. "Candace!"

With some effort, Coach Donnetta rolled Candace onto her back. Candace's face was as gray as her gym shorts.

The ambulance came a lot faster than I expected.

Candace would be fine, we were all assured. Sister Catharine made an announcement through the P.A. speakers during last period. Candace just had an extreme case of dehydration. She'd be released from the hospital in the morning.

Candace had been dieting pretty hard and not watching her intake of fluids. In an email she sent me that night she told me the nurses were pumping her so full of saline it'd probably be months before she could get out of the gown. She included the combination of her P.E. locker and asked me to pick up her stuff. She wouldn't be coming back to school for at least a week.

I emailed her a short note saying Sure, no problem. Then I walked into my bathroom and took off my clothes for Weigh-In. I stood on the scale and stared intently at the digital display. The figure came up: 145.5 pounds. Still three and a half pounds under the maximum weight for a sixteen-year-old girl of five-foot-five and a quarter. My data was shot off to the OHF. The scale's display thanked me, and the screen blacked out.

Our gymnasium is also our theater, our assembly room, and our dance hall. Friday night, I could hear the thunder of bass when I was still a block away. I got in the long line of costumed students snaking from the entrance, but Haylie and McKenzie saw me and waved me over to where they stood, a few feet from the doors.

McKenzie made good on her promise and came to the dance as the sluttiest slutty nurse I'd ever seen. She wore a cartoonish red-crossed bonnet bobby-pinned into her ginger curls, her mom's red push-up bra making her b-cups practically spill over the plunging neckline of her partially-buttoned uniform. Her freckled legs were wrapped in white fishnets and she'd even

bought a pair of white patent leather pumps she'd probably never wear again. Haylie's surprise was a slutty Superwoman costume, her fake boobs bra-less in a blue half-tee that from a distance looked painted-on. Her bare midriff dove under a red skirt so short, you could see the crescent bottoms of her ass, wrapped in tight red panties that matched the red of the little cape hanging from her shoulders. The MacMillan boys in line gawked openly, and Haylie drank it up. McKenzie seemed tense, shifting her weight from one patent leather pump to the other.

"So what *are* you," Haylie asked, pulling the sleeve of my overcoat. "A flasher?"

"Yeah," McKenzie said, reaching out a hooked finger to tug open the lapels, "Are you naked under there? God, I hope you waxed."

I slapped her hand away, playfully. "You'll see."

"Another surprise," McKenzie said. "I hope it can compete with Super-Slut here."

"Shut up, bitch." Haylie said. Then: "Oh hey, look at that guy." They both turned to check out this muscle-bound MacMillan guy dressed as a Trojan warrior. He'd oiled his body, his deltoids gleaming mint green in the mercury vapor lights outside the gym.

We showed our tickets to the girls at the door, who sat on either side of Coach Donnetta at a table decorated with fake cobwebs and little plastic skeletons. Coach Donnetta was in a brown knit blazer and hunter green corduroys. She was almost jarring in her street clothes, which I guess for her *are* a costume. Coach Donnetta, who always volunteers to work dance security, silently assessed our costumes, lingering on Haylie's red vinyl boots. "Dyke," McKenzie hissed under her breath as we slipped past her into the strobe-lit gymnasium and the heavy, stomach-thumping intro to the next song.

The gym was full of people in masks and capes, sparkling organza pixie wings safety-pinned to shoulder straps. The bleachers had been pulled out and were dotted with boys and girls in costume. A firefighter made out with a ballerina. The unfurled

bleachers both shrank and concentrated the dance floor, a space not much bigger than the basketball court. On the stage where St. Mary's had recently produced our all-girl version of *Bye Bye Birdie*, a d.j. mixed records on a turntable between two towering metal frames festooned with pulsating, multicolored lights.

It was impossible to have a conversation. Not that it was too loud, but no matter what Haylie or McKenzie said to me, even if we were all facing each other, what they were really doing was looking past me to ogle some boy walking through my periphery. Some of the boys were cute, I guess. But their costumes were all pretty conventional. There was a soldier and a bunch of cops, a Rocky Balboa in star-spangled trunks, a jade-green Incredible Hulk stealing sips from a plastic flask hidden in his underwear.

I followed Haylie and McKenzie over to the refreshments table. We each got a Diet Coke and checked out the other girls' costumes. McKenzie had called it at lunch on Wednesday: most of the girls' costumes were just slutty versions of something. There were slutty vampires, slutty cheerleaders, slutty librarians. More modestly, there were sexy fairies and ladybugs, hairsprayed beauty queens in handwritten sashes and recycled prom dresses. Shelly Morgan was a slutty meter maid, wearing what had probably once been a little boy's policeman costume. There was a slutty Dorothy, a slutty Little Red Riding Hood. McKenzie was pissed. There were at least three other slutty nurses.

"Hey," I shouted over the music, "What's more ironic—a Catholic girls' school hosting a coed Halloween dance, or that this is probably the only Halloween party in town without fifty 'slutty school girl' costumes?"

Haylie didn't hear me. She was too preoccupied trying to sip from her can of soda without losing too much of her ruby lipstick. McKenzie said, "Funny," though she clearly meant the opposite, then turned away to sneer at the dance's fourth slutty nurse, a girl named Abigail, who I actually thought was the best one, since her broach and lace collar—and the tiny, white square

apron over her black cocktail dress—declared her to be not just as another slutty nurse, but a slutty *Florence Nightingale*.

An Aquaman and a fighter pilot in mechanic's coveralls came over to the table to get snacks and flirt with Haylie and McKenzie, who more or less ignored them. Aquaman asked me what I was and McKenzie said I was Inspector Gadget. Then the d.j. segued into a bass-heavy club remix of "Touch Me Down There," Haylie's favorite song. It'd been her ringtone since I met her.

"C'mon girls. This is my jam."

I let them get ahead of me, then I pulled off Dad's overcoat to reveal Candace's modesty gown, allowing the hem to fall down to my ankles. I fluffed up my hair and ran out behind Haylie and McKenzie and started dancing. The gown spun quite nicely around my ankles.

The second they saw me, Haylie and McKenzie looked stunned. Their dancing slowed, like they were toys with low batteries. Then they stopped. So did everyone else, even the boys. My pounding heart lumped up into my throat and my cheeks get hot, but it was too late. I had to keep dancing. It was my only hope. The Wolfman and a sexy Bride of Frankenstein pointed at me and laughed. At least *they* get it, I thought. But two slutty Snow Whites stood stock still, crossed their arms and looked away in opposite directions, like bookends. What—were they *embarrassed*? Then the music stopped. I looked up at the stage and saw Sister Catharine in a witch costume standing next to the d.j., pointing a green finger right at me. Oh, Jesus.

The gym lights came up by a few degrees, enough so I could see Coach Donnetta stalking toward me in her civilian clothes. She grabbed me by the arm and yanked me toward the exit. "This is offensive, just *offensive*," she kept saying, over and over.

It took Dad forty minutes to get to St. Mary's. That whole time Sister Catharine left me alone to wait on the padded bench outside of her office, wearing my dad's overcoat unbuttoned over my tank top and shorts.

“Has she been drinking?” That was Dad’s first question for Sister Catharine, who hadn’t bothered to remove her pointed hat. I sat next to him in her office. Dad was in a pink oxford and khakis, his phone on his hip. Oh, right. He’d been hired to give a special Halloween talk to some overweight kids at the local Knights of Columbus.

“No, I’m afraid it’s more serious than that. Your daughter came to the Halloween dance dressed in another student’s modesty gown.”

Dad looked at me, confused. “How did you—Wait, what?”

I said, “Nowhere is it written that burkas can’t be worn by non-Heavies.”

Sister Catharine inhaled sharply. Dad said, “I honestly don’t know where she learned to talk like this.”

Sister Catharine walked us out into the main hall and led us to Candace’s locker. There was new graffiti. Someone had used a Sharpie to draw Candace as a round monk in a robe, complete with sandals and a triple-knotted cincture circumnavigating her hyperbolically inflated belly. Beneath it were the words “Friar Fat Fuck.”

Sister Catharine stood beside the image, glowering at me with a brown latex wart spirit-gummed to her green nose. “After tonight’s stunt, I’m not sure our Theresa isn’t the same person who’s been defacing Ms. Perkins’ locker.”

“I would *never* do that!” I looked to Dad. “You know I could never do that. Candace and I are friends.”

“No,” Sister Catharine said to Dad, “They’re not. Trust me. Your daughter’s peer group does not intermingle with girls who wear modesty gowns.”

“You don’t know anything about me.”

“I know you tried to humiliate Julia Korczynski in front of your debate class.” To Dad she explained, “Ms. Korczynski is another of our students who wear the gown.”

“She did *what*?” Dad asked, looking at me like I was a stranger.

“That’s not what happened at all!”

“What did you say?” he asked.

Sister Catharine peered at me down her bent green nose. “She implied that eating ... is Ms. Korczynski’s religion.”

Dad’s jaw fell open, and I did the worst possible thing: I laughed. “I’m sorry,” I said, trying to force my smiling cheeks to deflate, “But that’s not what I said.”

“Regardless,” Sister Catharine said. “I’m giving you a week’s suspension. Go get anything you need from your locker. I’ll have your assignments emailed to you.”

Dad just let it all happen. On the way to the car he said, “You know, they’ll probably withdraw my invitation to speak at your next Body Image assembly.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You’re sorry. St. Mary’s is one of my best gigs.”

“I wasn’t making fun of Candace.”

“Well, I’m not sure that’s the whole issue.”

We walked to Dad’s Mercedes and he hit the button to unlock the doors. We got in, and as the dome light dimmed he asked, “Is this about your mother?” I couldn’t see his face in the darkness. I almost said, “Everything’s about Mom,” but didn’t. Dad put the key in the ignition but didn’t turn it. We could hear the music thumping from the gymnasium. Finally he said, “You know, your mother was a very sick woman.”

“I know. Her mind was broken.”

“What?”

“Because she was so fat. Even after she lost the weight, her mind was still broken. Like you said.”

“No,” he said. He sounded angry. “Your mother had survivor’s guilt. It happens all the time.”

A couple blocks from school we passed under an OHF billboard that showed a buff guy with rippled abs relaxing on a chaise lounge, white sand and two sun-kissed girls in string bikinis reflected in his mirrored sunglasses. There was this ‘extreme’ font that screamed “Keep That Beach Body All Year Long!” and suddenly I knew why I was in trouble. Eventually Candace was

going to hear about me dancing in her robe and she'd probably think I was making fun of her. Which is dumb, because A.), I wasn't, I was doing the opposite, and B.), it's not like anybody except Mrs. Marton ever seems to care what does or doesn't hurt a Heavy's feelings. But I had a sick feeling in my stomach like the one I get when I realize I'm saying something stupid but still can't stop myself. My guilt was so obvious it was physiological. I knew there was only one way to apologize.

The following Thursday morning I sat on the couch in my sweats and t-shirt, eating a scrambled egg while surrounded by my books and binders and my laptop. Sister Catharine had made sure I was assigned extra homework so my suspension wouldn't "feel like a vacation." Dad waited until I started reading my history book before he left to meet with a grant writer for a foundation he co-chairs. After he left I checked my phone. There was a text from Haylie: "Sorry for no calls. But Mac and i talked about it + decided what u did waz pretty funny. Were doing pilates after school. Want to cum with?"

I deleted the text and walked upstairs with my history book under one arm. I opened my bathroom door on depressed my scale's On button with my big toe. The digital display lighted up, telling me I still had eleven hours and twenty minutes before cutoff. I judged the weight of the textbook. Probably five pounds, but maybe not. I grabbed my big bottle of shampoo, my full bottle of conditioner. With my clothes still on and everything in my hands, I stepped onto the scale.

I waited, breathless.