

**Excerpt from**

**Reverse Psychology: A Novel**

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“Would it kill you to put on a little lipstick?” she barked. “Jesus.”

Never mind my greasy hair. Or my pimply face. She only let me take baths on Saturday. Most nights she would chase me around the apartment and pin me against a wall. She would take her razor sharp, fluorescent pink painted nails and pop my zits. I still wasn't allowed to wash my face on weekdays either.

“What, d'ya think I'm made of money? You little idiot. I can't pay da water bill!” Mom yelled.

Sixth grade in Florida sucked. My fat, reeking body. The awkward globs of flesh on my chest. Walking every day from portable to portable for class. Overflow, Mrs. Knight said. Because all our parents *had* to have us come here, she'd say, slamming her textbook.

In class, no one wanted to sit next to me. The kids snickered at first. The teachers stood by. They said nothing. They did nothing. The snickering became taunts.

“Stuuffffer!” they would stage whisper as they walked past me. They held their noses. My teachers never called home. Never sent a note to Mom or tried to reach out to her to see what the hell was going. In my Goodwill clothes and dilapidated shoes, they just assumed I was poor and, oh well guess there's nothing we can do about that.

“Jeffrey!” Mrs. Owens seethed. “Go to the principal's office!”

Jeffrey had flicked a rubber band at Kirk, who'd been running around, holding his nose and pointing at me, saying, “P.U.! What stinks around here? Gross.” Without so much as a glance at Mrs. Owens, whose pudgy face was red with irritation, he morosely walked to the door. He wore a brown mullet and his older brother's well-worn hand-me-downs.

“Yeah, go back to your trailer park,” Ricky sneered. Kirk gave him a high-five.

The gifted students at Pine Valley Middle School were supposed to be from Fairfield. They were supposed to live in big houses. Have doctors for dads, and mom that sat on the PTA. You went through the extra teacher training to get away from the poor kids. Our presence was an insult.

I was lonely. I was made fun of every single day. A group of kids found it funny to spit sunflower seeds at me after lunch. Once you were done eating the portable cafeteria, you were supposed to go outside until the bell for class. It was awkward to stay inside with the lunch crew staring at you from beneath their hairnets, so, each day, I ventured outside. A walking train wreck. A bull's eye on my forehead.

Kirk was terribly short. Not quite a little person, but no taller than three and a half feet. And who could he possibly make fun of? There was certainly no one littler? But, oh, there was

someone big, fat, and smelly wearing an old lady blouse and too-big shorts with grungy shoes. Bull's eye.

I thought about beating him up. But what would everyone think of me? Nobody liked me, but a couple of them tolerated me during class projects. If I beat up someone small like Kirk, what would happen? Even nice girls like Eve and Rosie wouldn't talk to me! And, what if I got suspended? What about all the classwork I'd miss while I was home? Could I still get into college?

I'd read about Harvard—the best school in the country. Only the smartest people went there, and dammit, I was going to go there too. That way, I could take care of Mom when she got old, and maybe I could help my baby brother John go there, too.

But, my resolve broke.

“Hi, my name is Marla and I'm stinky. You can smell me from a mile away!” Kirk and his pals exploded in laughter.

I spun around. “Now, that's enough!” I shouted and lunged at Kirk. I grabbed him by his shirt collar and pinned him against the side of a portable. Students were rushing past on their way home.

His mahogany eyes exploded open with fear. I pulled my hand up and back and clenched it into a fist. And I just stood there, frozen in the tropical heat.

If I was going to hit him I would have by now. Kirk knew I wasn't going to. A smile blinked across his face. He laughed. I let him go.

I slumped away, embarrassed.

“Haha!” Kirk shouted with glee. “Did you see that? Stinky couldn't even hit me. Ha! Ha!”

I trudged to the parent pick-up area. My backpack felt like a boulder on my back, pressing down endlessly on my spine. Mom was waiting in her once black, now base-coat gray, Mercury Topaz, with John in the front seat.

“Moh-ders pick dere chil'ren up from school. See? I'm a good moh-der,” she explained to me as I climbed into the back.

I stayed quiet for a moment. Even without my backpack on, I could still feel it pushing down on me.

“Mom,” I finally said, “Kirk won't leave me alone.” Mom doesn't cry, so I don't.

“Mah-la, he just wants to date you. Look at your ta-tas!”

“But...” I was confused. “But, Mom...”

“¡*Qué* but *ni* but! He has a crush on you.” Mom turned up the light FM station.

Right, everyone wanted to go to the movies with fat, dirty, smelly Stuffer. Well, at least tomorrow I’d be clean. I was going to go see Rob after school. Mom made sure John and I were clean when we had to see our dad. I really didn’t want to go, but I would get to see Annalise. She was my friend at Rob’s house. She lived next door. Last weekend she came for a sleepover—it was my first sleepover but I was too embarrassed to tell her that. Mom was really mad.

“Ooooo-eeee!” she screamed. “Don’ you t’ink you’re gonna do dat shit in my house. ¡*Qué sucia y freca!* You do that lesbian shit at yo’ fah-dur house. He’s responsible.”

I didn’t really know what a lesbian was or why it was bad. But John looked so scared when the vein in Mom’s neck popped out, that I stayed quiet.

“And anothuh thing,” she steamrolled forward, “I am NOT driving you to school for dat *Diz-nee* trip. You can fuhget about dat. Have yo’ fahdur do dat.”

“Mom, that doesn’t make any sense. He’s all the way in Fort Palmetto-”

“Want me to call yo’ fah-dur? Coward, why are you afraid of him? He’s yo’ fah-dur.”

She called Rob, and he agreed that I could sleep over at his house in Fort Palmetto and he’d drive me back to Pine Valley to get on the bus for Disney World that left at 7am.

I really hoped Rob wouldn’t remember that he’d ask to chaperone the Disney trip next week. Well, I would just tell him that it was too late, that we missed the chaperoning deadline.

Yeah, I was going to Disney. Rob insisted that John and I go on field trips.

“Marla,” he slurred handing me the form. “I don’t want... you two to be any different from... anyone else in class.” He took another slug of his Budweiser.

I didn’t want to talk that night. I plopped myself in front of the TV. *Animaniacs* blared from the screen.

“Here! Here! Have a snack. Mmm,” Mom said, bringing me an oversized bowl of Lays potato chips. The dim light shined off of the greasy sides of the bowl. I wolfed down the chips, and walked into the dirty kitchen for more. Mom was broiling a small, minute steak for the three of us to share and placing a mound of frozen French fries into the old deep fryer.

“A wedding present,” she liked to remind me. “From Jim Simons.”

We angled the dining table and chairs around the TV for dinner. After, John and I would sit on the floor and do our homework on the coffee table. Homework was easy, but I lost points on my homework log.

“*Qué!* What is this shit? Puh-lease, Mah-la. I ain’ signin’ nothin’,” Mom said week after week.

“B-b-b-ut it’s for school,” I’d stammer.

“How do I know dat? I don’ sign nothin’. Have yo’ fah-dur sign it.”

“But it’s supposed to be every week—”

“Tell yo’ fah-dur!”

“How will you succeed in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade if you can’t do something as simple as getting your homework log signed!?” Mrs. Knight would seethe at me on Mondays. Wielding her fat, red pen she’d mark up my journal with X’s, each one bigger and madder than the last.

After I finished my homework that night, I was allowed to have a bath. I went to bed in an oversized man’s work shirt that we had gotten for free. It had holes near the collar and came down to my knees. The thing with Kirk was quickly becoming another piece of the mosaic. It was just another reason to feel anxious at school. My palms already sweated all day. I rarely said a word to anyone. I would sit at my desk and marvel at the way other students laughed and talked. I was mortified, sure, but that wasn’t out of the ordinary. I slept soundly.

School the next day was a blur to me. I stepped into my mind and stayed there all day. It was safe there. I daydreamed about Harvard, with its rust and gold trees in fall, its powdery snow in winter, little green buds in spring. I thought about Dave in my homeroom class, who I liked. Before I knew it, the bell rang at four o’clock and the day was over. I guess that people stared at me and said things about me, but that was most days anyway. I chose that day to live in my head so I didn’t notice.

Rob came over around 4:30 and picked John and me up. I hopped into the front seat and of the ’84 Grand Marquis. It was bright silver with a maroon vinyl interior. Rob didn’t believe in air conditioning, so we would sit and swelter on the ride to his house. Mom didn’t even have A/C in her car, so this seemed, well, normal.

The dash had an AM/FM radio and an analog clock, the fancy kind without numbers, only four sticks to denote 12-3-6-9 o’clock and two thin silver hands rotating around.

The car rides were godawfully quiet, with 101.5 LiteFM playing in the background. Mom played the same station in the kitchen and in the car. John and I quickly learned all the words to songs like “You’re the Inspiration,” “(Last Night) I Didn’t Get to Sleep at All,” “Love Will Lead You Back,” “She’s Like the Wind,” and “Too Many Walls.”

“Look at the scenery. Enjoy the scenery,” Mom instructed John and me to do on these achingly uncomfortable rides. I looked at the clock. It was only 4:45. That was... 27 hours and 15 minutes until John and I would be home again. I kept track that way all weekend. I’d wake up the next morning, and be excited if it was after 8am—that meant it was less than 12 hours before John and I would be home. Once we got back into Rob’s car to drive home to Mom’s on Saturday night I would reset my math to keep track of the 30 minutes from his house to her apartment.

It sucked that I would have to see Rob again that Thursday. But at least it was a short trip. And Mom had come up with an idea for us to get some money out of it.

“Mah-la,” she said to me, her eyes like saucers, “Tell him you need school supplies. Somet’ing for a project. Like \$20.”

Rob picked me up and we went to dinner at Paisano’s, his usual Friday night hang out.

“So, babe,” he slurred. “We’re going to Disney tomorrow. I haven’t gone in—God, how many years...”

“Uh, Dad?” I started weakly.

He slowly moved his eyes to focus on my face. “Yeah?”

“Well, you see...I mean... we didn’t get the chaperone slip in on time, so you can’t chaperone.”

“Were you ever gonna tell me?” He sighed. “Look, I’ll talk to your teacher in the morning. What was her name?”

“Um, I think Mrs. Knight is going.”

He looked away thoughtfully for a moment. “Good,” he finally replied.

My stomach was in knots. I barely slept that night.

The next morning we pulled up to the seemingly innocuous white-washed stucco building. There were two buses purring on the curb outside the school’s front doors and a couple of dozen of 6<sup>th</sup> graders buzzing around. More cars were pulling up behind us.

Rob parked and I scrambled out. I saw Mrs. Knight, her short blonde bob and sunken blue eyes shrouded in dark circles checking names off of a list.

Rob was charming. John and I saw countless women faun over him- our stepmother, his secretary, his girlfriends, his neighbors. I didn’t get it.

“Oh, you guys have the best father!” they’d gush. “I’ve heard so much about you two.” This was followed by a big, toothy smile.

Rob leaned over to me.

“Which one is Mrs. Knight?” he asked through a tight smile.

“Th-the blond lady,” I stuttered.

It was hard to imagine Mrs. Knight as ever being pretty. Rob sauntered up to her and started flirting with her like she was the belle of the ball. And, well, she laughed. Mrs. Knight never laughed. Ever. Not even as a child I’d bet. He then turned his attention to my math teacher, Ms. Hogan, a first year teacher right out of college. She would never tell us her age in class, but she must have been about 23 or 24, with long wavy black hair and disarming blue eyes that leapt from her tanned and freckled skin.

After a couple of minutes of talking, Rob waved me over.

“I’m sorry,” Mrs. Knight was saying in a lilting voice she never used in the classroom, “but the county won’t allow you on the buses. There’s no room.”

“That’s okay,” my father said cheerfully. “I’ll just follow you in my car.”

My teachers were caught off guard. Mrs. Knight recovered first.

“I suppose,” she started slowly, “that’d be alright.”

“What d’ya think, babe?” My father turned to me.

Time to act. Time to pretend.

“That’d be great!” I replied just as brightly, fake smile on my face.

My heart in my stomach, I boarded the bus. The cool kids sat in the back, so I knew to snag a seat near the teachers upfront.

Rosie came over and sat down next to me.

“So, this is gonna be a lotta fun, right?” she asked rhetorically.

I looked up at her dancing blue eyes.

“Yeah, totally.” I managed something of a smile and looked away.

“You should totally come with us on the rides today,” she said.

The shock must have assaulted my face.

“I mean—uh—if you’re not meeting friends there,” Rosie kindly added.

“Yeah,” I said slowly, “I guess I can.” The words didn’t sound like my own.

“Great!” Rosie replied. She spun around and got on her haunches to talk to Eve and Sandy behind us.

The bus started moving. My father, my tormentor, followed behind the rambling vehicle for four hours to Orlando. He drove all the way, bought his own ticket at the gate. Thankfully, he disappeared. I don’t know whether he decided to spend the day schmoozing Ms. Hogan, who would tell me several times over the next month how wonderful my father was, or if he found a place somewhere on the grounds that would serve him beer and he drank all day. I didn’t know and I didn’t ask.

Somehow, Rob found me with the girls around lunchtime.

“Hey baby,” he said to me with his usual afternoon slowness. Rob broke his fast everyday at noon with a beer, and he talked and moved much slower for the rest of the day.

“Um, hi Dad,” I said weakly.

“Girls,” he said with a flourish. “Get whatever you’d like.”

The ladies looked at him with question marks in their eyes.

“It’s on me!” he said with a bright smile.

Rosie glanced down at her shoes. Eve fidgeted. And Sandy picked at her blue nail polish. They looked the way I felt around Rob.

“Oh, um, that’s really nice of you, Mr. Conroy, but our parents gave us money. It’s okay,” Rosie finally said.

“C’mon, it’s on me. Save that money for some ice cream later.”

Rosie, then Sandy, then Eve looked at me for confirmation. Their nerves, their confusion, filled the humid air.

“It’s okay,” I said my voice barely more than a whisper. I nodded at them. “Go ahead.”

Rob awkwardly joined us for lunch. I tried to act normal, I think we all did, but it was too bizarre. Rob disappeared again after lunch, and we all pretended like nothing out of the ordinary had happened.

Getting off the bus, home again in Pine Valley, Rob collected me and we drove to Mom’s.

“Well, that was fun. Did you have fun, tootsie?”

“Yeah, Dad, it was great,” I said. It had been, until he nearly wrecked it.

I kissed Rob good-bye, careful to turn my face as he crashed into me, and briskly walked into the apartment.

“Mah-la! How was it?!” Mom yelled for Rob’s benefit.

I floored it down the hall to relative secrecy. I told Mom everything.

“See, Mah-la?” she said when I finished my breathless story. With a big grin on her face. “You should invite your fah-dur to t’ings. He’ll pay for you. He takes *good* care of you. See? He loves you.”