

Fiction

*The following is an excerpt from
The Problem, an unpublished novel
by Dallas Denny.*

The Problem

by Dallas Denny

School is okay because I spend most of the day in a gifted program, studying science and math. Usually, I am allowed to be unusual. But Miss Leoretta MacKenzie, my English teacher, is a stone bitch. She's got no eyebrows.

"Please read the next section, Mr. Sykes," she says. A loud snicker comes from Johnny Ray's direction.

"Mr. Sykes!" she snaps. I blink my eyes. "I'm sorry, Miss MacKenzie," I say. "I didn't realize you meant me." It was halfway true. As I don't fancy myself much of a Leroy, the name just sort of washes over me without sticking. Miss MacKenzie knows this, and she knows that using the name Laura Ann will get my attention right away, but she has a moral compunction against calling me by my rightful name. The second day of school I shaved off my eyebrows and drew them back on with black pencil just like she does and put up my hair in a bun like hers and she dragged me down to Mr. Mendez' office on account of it. Mr. Mendez is the principal and he looked at me and then at Miss MacKenzie and then at me again. "Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery," I said, and got sent home for three days.

MacKenzie has had it in for me ever since, and so I get picked on a lot in class. Today, she tells me to read the poem I picked for the class assignment.

"I have seen the best minds of my generation..." I begin, and she goes white underneath her war paint.

"Stop!" she cries, and I know I am one step away from saying hello to Mr. Mendez. "I won't allow that filth read in class!" She snatches up the little red book and waves it in the air. "This poem," she tells the class, "was written by a homosexual man, a pedophile, a degenerate who was taken to court on obscenity charges."

"He won," I say dryly. "The name of the poem is 'Howl,' by Allen Ginsberg," I tell the class, so that everyone can write down the

name and try to find a copy as soon as school is out. "I got it at Millstone Bookstore."

"Mr. Sykes," she says, "Please accompany me to the principal's office."

"You wouldn't like the ending anyway," I tell the class, and go with her.

Mr. Mendez is not happy to see me, but he will not suspend me, for we have come to an agreement of sorts. "Miss Sykes," he says, when the MacKenzie has told him what I have done, "you will remain after school for one hour every day this week and next."

"His name is Leroy, Mr. Mendez," says the Mac. "Calling him Laura or Miss Sykes is giving in to his delusion that he is a girl."

Mr. Mendez glances at three boys from shop class, sitting

uneasily in folding chairs in the waiting area. They are there to present him with a lamp made from a bowling pin. Every year the shop class gives him a lamp made from a bowling pin. I wonder where he keeps them all. He gets up and pulls his office door to so they won't hear. "Dammit, MacKenzie, this child is not psychologically a boy. It serves no purpose to cause him stress by refusing to call her by the name she chooses—he chooses—she chooses."

Mr. Mendez is not naturally so liberal; he comes about his opinions the hard way. On the first day of school, I had found myself in his office.

"Very clever disguise, Sykes," he said to Elizabeth Fenner, who was there to see him about working in the school office. Liz turned white and gave a sort of sob and ran out into the hallway.

"I'm Laura Ann Sykes," I told him.

He stared at me and then took me into his office and closed the door. "Your name," he told me, "is Leroy Sykes."

"Legally it may be," I said. "That's only because my pa has one judge all tied up and hamstrung and the other is mad at me."

"Be that as it may, you will dress as a boy at all times. Trousers. Shirts. Socks. You will wear no makeup. No jewelry. I'm not going to make you cut your hair, but I do expect you not to tease it up so. You will use the boys' bathroom. You will take physical education with the rest of the boys." He looked at my folder. "Scratch that. I see you're down for swimming. You will wear a boy's bathing suit. You will use the boys' locker room. Do you understand me?"

I snapped my bubble gum and bent over and ran my hand up and down my calf like I had seen Andrea Ammonds, the school tease, do. The effect was not wasted on Mendez. He swallowed hard and tugged at his collar. I straightened up and looked at him coolly. "Mr. Mendez, let me make something clear. There is only one part of my

body that makes me a boy. I look like a girl without makeup on. Without jewelry. In boys clothes. I sound like a girl. I smell like a girl. That's because I am a girl."

"Nevertheless, you will do as I have said."

Johnny Ray is going through the same kinds of changes that I did, and it's scaring him to death. He's eating like a pig to cover up his chest, trying to keep anyone from finding out about it. He doesn't have any idea why it's happening. He hates it, but if he would quit stealing my milk every day, I wouldn't have to dissolve pills in it and he would grow up to be a man instead of whatever it is I am turning him into.

I grinned at him. "The boys' bathroom?" I got up and opened the door and made a clicking sound at two boys who were walking down the hall. They stopped and stuck their heads into the office. "Mister Mendez tells me I gotta use the boys' room. Either of you interested in comin' along to see whether I'm a pointer or a setter? After that, we'll run along to the gym and you can see me in the pool, topless."

They hollered and grinned and grabbed my arms and started to pull me along towards the bathroom, and that did it. Mr. Mendez and I had obtained an uneasy truce that day; I was allowed to be me, so long as I was not deliberately outrageous. I was even allowed to use the girls' bathroom. Sure, he had sent me home for three days for sassing Miss MacKenzie, but that was because of my smart mouth and my cheap shot at Miss Mac. Now, he was reading her the riot act.

"Leoretta, it avails us nothing to persecute this child. Please take her back and try, just try, to teach her a little English. Call her by whatever

name she wants. It won't hurt anything. Be a teacher. Teach. And you—" he looked at me heavily—"If I hear of you doing anything else to antagonize Miss MacKenzie, I will require that you cut your hair before returning to school."

Well, I could have had it lots worse. Having to stay after school is no fun, but it beats having to explain to Pa why I got suspended. Pa is a liberal man with a belt or a razor strap.

Every day at lunchtime, Johnny Ray sits down across the table from me and eats his food and part of mine. He's done it since third grade. His Jetsons lunch box long ago gave way to an Igloo Lunchmate which would hold even Jethro Bodine's meal. Johnny is a big eater—he was even when we were playing show-and-tell in the ravine behind the playground. At five-six and three hundred pounds, Johnny has turned out to be a real four-by-four. He was always chubby, but something has happened in the past year or so to make him puff up like a marshmallow man. It's my fault that he's as big as he is, and if he should up and kick off like Uncle Bob, why, I would feel right guilty about it.

Johnny Ray is just a miserable person. All his life, ever since the show-and-tell incident (which was his idea), he has gone out of his way to make me unhappy. He could sit anywhere in the lunchroom, but he delights in tormenting me, keeping my friends away. I think he lives vicariously through me, for he always wants to know who I've seen and what I've done. I can tell that he thinks of me as a girl, but he calls me Leroy. "Howdy, Lee-roy," he says now. "Your friend Bobbo Joe felt you up lately?" His cheeks are rosy, like two apples. He keeps his hair cut short in a burr, but he is looking more and more like a girl. It worries him, and it's why he's getting so fat—to cover up his breasts, which came out of nowhere last year and which keep getting bigger and which embarrass him to death in gym class.

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answer to who I was, I read everything I could and watched the TV talk shows. Nowadays, anytime I hear of crossdressing or transsexualism or any related thing being the subject of a talk show, I'm sure to record it with my VCR. Most of all, I know now just who I am. Maureen is a crossdresser who loves herself and that is because she adores the feminine. Wonderfully, too, she is genuinely

sympathetic to other crossdressers, and transsexual people, she-males and anyone who is in a special situation where sex and gender identity are concerned. To all of you reading this, Maureen sides with you. After all, I owe it to you to understand and empathize with all of you.

To put it another way, I used to look at women when I was small and tell myself they were lucky—

they got to wear stockings, so why couldn't I? The wonderful reality of today is that I do wear nylons almost every day and feel an incredible warm glow from being dressed. Given that, would it be right of me to say, well, I've got mine, now let the others fish? Uh-uh! I honestly feel a responsibility now, which is to love my other sisters as the best woman I can be! ♀♀

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Johnny eats fast, all business. Like always, he picks up my carton of milk and drinks it dry. He is always messing in my plate, too. Today, he reaches onto my salad plate and picks up a piece of carrot and licks the ranch dressing off it and puts in his mouth like a cigarette. I push the plate away from me with both hands, and he falls to, devouring what I have left unfinished.

I sigh. If Johnny has discovered where I work, he will have spread the news about my Problem. I dread the thought of going to work and facing the music. "Bobbo Joe's doings are his own affair," I say.

"That boy got some kind infatuation with you," Johnny leers.

"Don't you dare be hanging out at that truck stop," I tell him. "I'm already driving far enough as it is without you getting me fired so I'll have to go further."

"Them truck drivers," he muses. "Do they kiss on you and stuff?"

"Johnny Ray, you mind your affairs and I'll mind mine."

"Do you play with your titties?"

I look at him. "Do you play with yours?"

That gets him. He turns red in the face and gets up and staggers off.

Johnny's Ma has had him to the doctor, who can't figure out why he's developing in the way he's developing. I know; the reason is in my purse.

When I was thirteen years old, Ma started having hot flashes. It was a miserable time around the house, with her bitching and moan-

ing and telling us how lucky men (meaning me and Pa) were to not have the change of life. Doc Johnson ordered up some little yellow pills to cure her. Since they weren't pain pills and didn't do anything for her nerves, she soon forgot about them. But I knew that they were female hormones. I went to the library at the state university and found a big reference book that told about all kinds of medicine and read up on estrogens, and right then and there I decided that they were for me. I was carrying one in a baggie in my pocket so that I could match it up with the pictures in the book. I went right into the boys' room and into the stall and sat there and swallowed that pill. My hand was shaking so badly that I almost dropped it.

Now, thirteen year-old-boys don't look all that different from thirteen-year-old girls, at least if they haven't gone into puberty. I hadn't. I had a high voice and not even a single pubic hair. Within a month or so after I started taking Ma's pills, I went into adolescence, only it wasn't boy-type changes I went through, but girl-like changes. Because of the way I had dressed and worn my hair, I had sometimes been mistaken for a girl, but six months after I started taking those pills, there wasn't any doubt what I was. My hips swelled up and my nipples got tender and my waist drew in and I plumb turned into a young woman—except that I had the aforementioned Problem. I had been hoping that it would sort of

dwindle away and leave me with the other thing, but it persisted in staying the same while everything else was changing.

Pa whipped me when I got after my eyebrows, and again when I had my ears pierced, and once Ma snuck into my room and cut off all my hair, which just made me look like a bald-headed girl. They had me to the family doctor, who was at a loss about what was going on and just said that I must be a 'morphodite. He sent me to Doc Simmons, the shrink, who I've been seeing ever since. That was all Ma and Pa could think to do, and they've pretty much let me be a girl—not that they have much choice about it, 'cause like I said, I look like a girl no matter what I got on. They bitch when I wear dresses and makeup, but don't really stop me.

Johnny Ray is going through the same kinds of changes that I did, and it's scaring him to death. He's eating like a pig to cover up his chest, trying to keep anyone from finding out about it. He doesn't have any idea why it's happening. He hates it, but if he would quit stealing my milk every day, I wouldn't have to dissolve pills in it and he would grow up to be a man instead of whatever it is I am turning him into.

I should probably hate myself for what I have done to Johnny Ray, but I don't. He's getting exactly what he deserves. It's his just deserts for the miserable things he's done to me over the years. ♀♀