

Editor's Note: If you thought the ending last issue was rather abrupt, it was. Your editor goofed. This story goes on for 30 Chapters. So, without further delay, let's get back to our story.

Chapter 7

I had supper on the table by the time Pa got home: a casserole, candied carrots, tossed salad, rolls, jello with fruit cocktail. I rarely eat at home. I rarely eat. As soon as I called everyone to the supper table, I went to my room and put on shorts, halter top, and running shoes. Ma and Pa and Clorinda and Tammy Mae were already chowing down when I went out the door.

I run about three times a week. Folks in my neighborhood are not health conscious. They tend to sit in front of the television set and drink beer; they look at me as if I were crazy when they see me in my Nikes and shorts.

I made a point of jogging by Johnny Ray's house, which is only a block or so from my parents' place. I wanted to check on his car. If Bobbo Joe had really sugared Johnny's gas tank, he wouldn't be going anywhere in it for quite some time, and that might mean that my job was safe for a while. There was, of course, always the danger that Johnny would blame me for his troubles. He usually did.

The Jetta was in the yard with the hood up. Johnny was halfway in the engine compartment. His broad backside spanned nearly the entire length of the grill. His feet were off the ground. I walked up and leaned over the fender.

"Hello, Johnny Ray."

He was red-faced and sweating. His hands were black with grease, except for the knuckles, which were bright with blood. "Go away, faggot," he sneered.

"Johnny Ray, we need to

talk," I told him.

"So talk. Then get away."

"Johnny Ray, I don't know what kind of thing you got about me and have had since I was five and you were six."

"Simple. Never seen a faggot before."

"No, that's not it.

There must've been some reason for you wanting to play doctor."

He climbed out of the engine and stood facing me, panting. "Goddamn you," he spat. "You're not a woman. You're not a man. What the hell are you? Why the hell do you exist?"

"There's no need for us to be enemies," I told him. "No need at all."

"So long as there's such as you on this earth, and there's such as me, they will be enemies."

"Johnny, I don't want to fight with you. I could be your friend, if you would just let me. But it takes two to be friends."

"I'll never be your friend."

"Fine then. Just leave me alone."

"No."

"Okay, then, I want to give you a friendly warning. I'm not going to put up with you messing with me. You'll be sorry if you do. Why don't you leave well-enough alone and get off my case? Eat your lunch by yourself. Stay away from me and Mary June Cunningham. Leave me alone at work. That's all I ask."

"I'll go where I damn well please and do what I damn well want."

"Okay, then. Have it your way." I peered at the engine. The head was off. The cylinder walls were covered with sugar, caramelized by the heat of the combustion chamber. "Locked up, is it?"

"Yeah," he said glumly. "And I can't figure out what that brown stuff is. And what the hell business is it of yours,

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by Dallas Denny

anyway?" he added belligerently. "You've had your say. Now go away."

"All right," I said, and did.

The next day at lunch, Johnny sat down across the table from me and drank my milk. "I go where I want," he said. "I do what I please."

"Yeah, you're a real man, all right," I told him.

"Damn straight. And let me tell you something. That Mary June Cunningham, she's not a bad-looking chick, for a bull dyke. She just needs a real man to put the meat to her, and she'd forget all about the likes of you. I'm planning to have her. I'm going to take her away from you."

"Johnny Ray, you'll never get Mary June to look at you twice. And as for being a real man, you couldn't find your pecker with a magnifying glass."

Johnny had become awfully peculiar about his masculinity. He reached over the table and grabbed me by the collar of my blouse and pulled me right across my brussels sprouts. He would have decked me right there, except that I butted him in the face with my head and bloodied his nose. Two teachers were close, and grabbed us before things went any further.

We wound up in the principal's office, me with vegetable stains on my sweater, and Johnny with a handkerchief to his nose. Mr. Mendez looked at me and sighed. "Sykes, what are we going to do with you?"

"As far as I know, there's not a school rule against eating lunch. That's what I was doing when Johnny grabbed me."

"He claims you insulted him."

"The truth hurts sometimes."

"Your mouth," he said dryly, "has a tendency to get your ass in trouble. It has just done so again. I'm sending you home for five days for fighting in the lunchroom. I'm sending Johnny Ray home for five days also."

"That's not fair," I protested. "He started it. He sits down across from me every day and eats half my lunch and gives me a hard time."

"Laura, you are a disruptive influence in this school. Now, I know you tend to mind your own business, but when I have teachers and good students getting in trouble over you, then I must look at what is for the greater good. And it would be for the greater good if you would conform, or, failing that, if you would leave. Why don't you just be a boy? Maybe you wouldn't get picked on so much."

There were tears in my eyes. "I can't be a boy. It isn't in me. I look and act like the other girls. Why don't people treat me like a human being?"

"The world isn't perfect, Sykes."

"Hell no, it's not, and you aren't either, or you wouldn't be doing this to me."

"My decision may not be fair," he grunted, "but it's final."

Chapter 8

I didn't want to go home, for the school secretary had called and told Ma about my suspension, and I knew she would yell and scream at me. When Pa found out— well, he would smack me, or more likely take the belt to me, and I was in no mood to be beaten. I was only eleven-thirty (I eat early), and I didn't have to be at work until five, but my uniform was in my car, so I drove out to the truck stop, thinking I would sit at the counter and sip on a drink and talk to the other girls and maybe flirt with the truckers until it was time to go to work.

As soon as I entered the dining room, I knew the word was out. All the other waitresses were acting funny. Snelly Gossett just stared at me, and Mary Brandon and Genieva Grossman, bitches both, were too nice to me for something not to be the matter. Tally Andrews, all giggles and blushes, took my order, and then Mr. DiPoulo and Murray the manager, walk-in cooler lovers both, came to the counter and told me I was fired.

I took a sip of my Diet Coke and asked why.

Mr. DeePee cleared his throat and said, "It has come to our attention that— that you are not a woman."

"I'm only seventeen," I said. "Still a girl. I'm not hardly a woman yet. I won't reach the age of consent until next August." I pulled on my drink until the straw began making empty sounds.

"You know what I mean. We have no recourse but to let you go."

Murray stared at me helplessly. He looked as if he would like to get me in the cooler in place of Tally Barnes (he had tried before), to see for himself, but he was helpless in the face of Mr. DiPee. DiPoulo himself had a sort of pleading expression on his face, as if he were begging me not to tell what transpired while I was reaching for the cucumbers.

I glanced toward the door. I could see the back side of the "No Shirt, No Shoes, No Service" sign. It isn't strictly enforced. A group of construction workers was in a booth in the back, and I noticed that one of them was bare-chested. "You're telling me that you think I'm a man and that I am fired because of it."

"Yes."

"Do I look like a man?"

"No."

"Do I sound like a man?"

"No, but that's not point—"

"Do these look like a man's?" I asked, and whipped my top over my head. I wasn't wearing a bra, so my breasts were staring them right in the face, high and firm, with big brown nipples, which happened, at the moment, to be

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erect. Looking at Murray's face, I could see that they were not the only things that were erect. A ragged round of cheers came from the construction crew.

DiPoulo somehow got my top back over my head. Murray watched helplessly, wringing his hands. DeePee was starting to move me toward the front door when I heard a deafening whistle— one of those piercing ones that you seem to hear only in movie theaters. It appeared to come from the kitchen. Both DiPoulo and I turned towards the sound.

It was Bobbo Joe. He had crawled through the order window, knocking cheeseburgers and shrimp platters and liver and onions askew, coming to a stop on the counter near the pie machine. He was doing his old trick with the desert plate, but for some reason, his finger didn't look right. I looked harder, and I realized that it wasn't his finger. As we watched, his AmerIndian manhood, thrust through the hole in the cardboard, surrounded by whipped cream and topped with a maraschino cherry, slowly rose to full attention.

Chapter 9

Bobbo Joe and I were out in the parking lot, sitting on the hood of my Nova. "I always wanted to do that," he said.

"What?" I asked. "Stick your wanger through a pie plate and give the genital bird to your boss?"

"No. Make a futile, symbolic gesture."

"Oh."

"I didn't think about that fat fool using the telephone to check to see if I had put the word out about you."

"It's not your fault," I told him. "He always does this. He never stops until he gets me fired. I should have known he would call. And it was long distance, too. He did this to me, even though it cost him money."

"I'll get him for this," Bobbo threatened.

"He's in enough hot water as it is," I told him. "His car is going to need a new engine. He's suspended from school. Besides, the madder he gets, the meaner he gets. And the meaner he gets, the more grief he gives me."

The construction workers came out; they hollered and waved when they saw me. They started to approach, but Bobbo put an arm around me and gave them his Sitting Bull look, and they got in their truck and roared off.

Snelly Gossett stuck her nose out the door of the restaurant. "Laura Ann— or whatever your name is— your Ma is on the pay phone to you. Mr. DiPoulo is gone. Murray says you can come in and talk to her, but only if you promise to keep your clothes on." She looked at Bobbo Joe. "He says you can't come in under any circumstances."

"Don't you dare come home," Ma said. "Your pa is

almighty mad at you. When the school told me you were suspended, I called him, and he came home early. He swear's he's gonna make a man of you somehow."

There's nothing worse than Pa when he gets on one of his make-a-man-out-of-Leroy rampages. He's done it all my life. He begins by trying to get me to do some dumb father-and-son activity with him, like pitching ball, and ends up by whaling me to within an inch of my life because I can't do it to suit him. Pitch ball. I can't even throw overhanded. I told Ma that I was coming home anyway.

When Bobbo and I got to the house, Pa was waiting by the front gate with a belt in his hand. He started toward the car, but then Bobbo sort of unfolded out of the passenger seat, all 6'9" of him, and Pa stopped dead in his tracks.

"Don't worry about the Indian," I said. "I've told him not to interfere unless it looks like I'm about to kill you. But you're not going to lay a hand on me. I've done nothing wrong. You've beat me all my life, and most of the time I hadn't done anything to deserve it. It's past time it stopped. You've hit me for the last time."

He came around to take a swing at me with the belt, but I grabbed it and pulled it toward me and put a leg in front of him, and he fell hard. I stood back and let him get to his feet. When he did, the fight was gone out of him, and I knew that he would never try to hit me again.

He stood there for a moment, realizing it too, and said, "All right, then, if you think you're so big, get your stuff and get the hell out. You don't live here any more."

"I'm sorry I had to do that, Pa," I said, and went past him and into my room to pack my stuff.

The first thing I discovered was that the drawers under the water bed were empty. All the money I'd been saving was gone. The next thing I saw was that all my cosmetics, jewelry, and clothes were missing. Even my makeup mirror was gone. The room seemed empty, depersonalized, no longer mine.

Ma and Pa were sitting in the living room. I guess Ma figured that my expulsion from the household warranted her getting out of bed. "Where is my money?" I asked. "Where are my clothes?"

"Gone," said Pa. "We did it for your own good."

"That's my property," I told them. "It wasn't right for you to bother it."

Pa looked at me defiantly. "Well, we did, and there's nothing you can do about it."

They were sitting sort of huddled together, looking old and used up. Ma was bloated and puffy, and Pa was leathery and shrunken. I found myself wondering how I could have ever allowed myself to be beaten by such a pathetic little man. I stood over them like Godzilla stands before Tokyo. One part of me wanted to scream at them for messing with my stuff. Another part wanted to plead with them.