

OLIVE PERSIMMON

Unintentionally Celibate

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First edition

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The Incident

I just wanted to be a normal kid. But normalcy was meant for other people. Not for future Unintentional Celibates.

My only goal was to complete middle school without an emotionally scarring episode. I wanted to fly under the radar, unknown and undiscovered. As a fat kid, that was the only way to escape the teasing of my peers.

The universe had other plans.

It's unreasonable to think that a batch of lotion can "go bad." But that's exactly what I thought on the day of "The Incident." If I had been thinking a little more rationally, perhaps I would have realized the smell was the dog shit all over my leg.

As always, I was running late for school that day. After pressing snooze on my alarm too many times, I frantically jumped out of bed. I had ten minutes before the bus came. I threw on some clothes and flew out the door. As I sprinted wildly, my Windbreaker billowed behind me. I ran through my

neighbor's backyard and arrived at the bus stop just in time to see the magical yellow glow one house away. The bus came and I entered, sweating and panting heavily.

Struggling to catch my breath, and straightening my glasses, I took my normal seat.

There was an obvious hierarchy on the bus in regard to seating. The cool kids sat in the back, the almost-cool kids in the middle, and me dead in the front. I couldn't figure out why my tremendous talent in classical theater roles and my affinity for the children's show Zoom didn't push me into middle school stardom. And I hate to brag, but the hottest boy in school did ask me out on a date...and although he was joking...and although his friends laughed about it rather loudly at lunch...it still counted, damnit! In my mind, I was backseat material. In everyone else's minds, I didn't belong on the bus at all.

A few stops later, my almost-cool-but-not-cool-enough-to-sit-in-the-middle friend Christa sat across from me. She pulled out her new Bath & Body Works lotion. In those days, lotion and body-spray products were like crack in East Cleveland. Everyone had some; everyone wanted more. The only acceptable gift for any girl's birthday was more scented lotion or body spray, and it certainly couldn't be an off brand.

Christa pulled out a brand-new bottle of Vanilla Breeze lotion and generously offered me some. I took a large portion and coated my hands and neck.

"Dang, Christa. This new scent smells great," I said.

We quickly moved on to other subjects and pulled out our homework before arriving at school. While struggling with a division worksheet, we noticed an offensive odor wafting up toward our noses.

"Oh my God. What is that smell?" Christa said.

“Dang. It’s terrible!” I said, scrunching up my nose.

We complained for another three minutes before deciding to investigate. After a minute of contemplation, I came to the only conclusion I could think of. “I think it’s your lotion. You must have gotten a bad batch.”

Horror struck Christa’s face. It was the worst thing that could happen to anyone in middle school.

“OHMYGOD Are we gonna smell like this all day?” Christa cried, her dreams of preppy popularity slipping between the cracks.

“I dunno, but if I were you, I would throw away that lotion.”

We both exited the bus, attempting to cover the smell with other body lotion. We borrowed three different kinds from other girls but nothing made it disappear. We entered school together, met our friend Billy, and sat at a lunch table in the cafeteria before the first bell rang.

After a minute, with the typical tact of a seventh-grade male, Billy said, “What smells like shit?”

Embarrassed, Christa clammed up. I waited for her response and when it didn’t come, I stated very matter-of-factly, “Christa got a bad batch of lotion. It goes sour after it touches your skin. We both used it.”

“Gross,” he said, plugging his nose dramatically as the bell rang.

In the hallway on the way to my first class, I heard two popular eighth-graders comment about the odor.

“Why does this school always smell so fucking bad?”

“Ya, man. It smells like farts.”

I turned tomato red. I cursed Bath & Body Works, cursed Christa, and cursed the Good Lord himself for getting me into this situation.

I finally made it to first-period geography where I sat in front of my friend Tim. I opened my pencil case and pulled out my packet of colored pencils. Today we were coloring a map of Argentina. My geography teacher was super weird. He was really into coloring maps and was literally obsessed with Alec Baldwin. He had a signed napkin from Alec framed on his desk and a taxidermied cat who had been named Baldwin. After someone complained that he had no pictures of female role models in the room, he hung a picture of Sacajawea. "We can all learn from Sacajawea," he said.

He loved the Milton Bradley game "Cootie." He always picked his favorite students to play. Nobody liked to be picked.

Tim and I were exchanging green colored pencils of different shades when he said, "Man, it smells like cheese in here."

I looked around, making sure no one else was listening, and replied hastily, trying to downplay the situation. "Oh, it's just my friend's bad lotion that I used this morning."

Tim scrunched up his face.

"That doesn't make any sense. Why would lotion smell like cheese?"

I sent him a nasty look and said defensively, "It was a bad batch. It spoiled or something and now it smells. It goes sour when it touches skin. I don't know. Maybe someone got the mixture wrong, Tim!"

My aggressive whispering finally drew the attention of our creepy teacher.

"Olive and Tim, Argentina must look pretty blank with the amount of talking you're doing. Silence is golden; let's get rich," he said in his monotone voice.

Tim waited a few minutes before whispering back. He couldn't leave it alone. "No. It really smells like rotting, molding,

disgusting cheese. I've never smelled anything so bad in my whole life."

"Yeah, Tim. I already told you, the lotion went bad. LET IT GO," I said, furiously coloring the borders.

Then, in the next fifteen seconds, "The Incident" came to a head. Tim slowly looked down at the floor by my desk. His face began to change, with a span of emotions. It went from confusion to understanding, and then to laughter. He grinned before saying the terrifying words that would chill any middle-schooler:

"Um, I'm pretty sure the cheese smell is coming from the dog shit all over your leg."

I looked down. Dog shit was splattered up the back and side of my left jean leg.

I panicked.

Middle-schoolers are the worst people on the planet. If anyone found out about this, I was done.

I knew I needed to go to the bathroom to clean it but if I left in the middle of class I would draw attention to myself. I looked at the clock. We still had fifteen minutes till the end of the period. I agonized about what to do. "Wait it out. Go now. Wait it out. Go now." Time passed with infinite slowness. Minutes felt like hours as it was now glaringly obvious that there was dog shit all over my leg.

"I'LL KILL YOU IF YOU SAY ANYTHING!" I frantically scribbled on a note to Tim in green colored pencil.

Finally the bell rang. I bolted to the bathroom. I grabbed a wad of wet paper towels and ran into a stall to clean my leg. After ten minutes, I successfully got it off, leaving a giant wet spot where the poop had been. I breathed a sigh of relief. Tim was the only person who knew my secret.

The bell rang while I was still in the bathroom, so I was late to my second-period art class. By the time I arrived, the class was already working on magazine collages. We were creating artistic vision boards of what we wanted our future lives to be like. I tried to enter discreetly and take my seat by the window. While everyone was busy cutting out pictures of hot models, I quietly ripped out some perfume samples. I started rubbing them down my leg.

I smiled, relieved. I was going to get away with it.

Until Tim came over.

The little son of a bitch.

“Why are you rubbing perfume samples all over your leg?”

I flashed him a look of fury and indignation.

“Must be to cover up the dog-poop smell!” he said, bent over with laughter.

I looked around to see if anyone had heard.

The closest person, Michelle Altieri, was too engrossed in her search for the perfect magazine husband.

Tim saw me glance toward Michelle. He understood what was at stake here. We were friends. He didn't want me to fall any lower on the popularity scale.

He stopped bringing it up openly. But he was a middle school boy, which meant he couldn't let it go either. Instead, he spent the rest of art class bringing me additional perfume samples, laughing every time he dropped one on my desk.

* * *

I lost contact with Tim after high school. We didn't speak for

years until, at the age of twenty-five, I moved to New York City, where Tim was a professional musician. We reconnected one night at a bar close to my apartment. After a few hours of childhood reminiscing and nostalgia, I turned to him and said, “You know, you were present for one of the most embarrassing moments of my life.”

“What are you talking about?” He looked confused.

“When I had dog shit all over my leg and you kept bringing it up in art class.”

“I don’t remember that at all. Why did you have shit on your leg?” Tim asked sincerely, sipping a beer.

“You don’t remember? In the seventh grade?” I said.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

I reminded him of the story and he laughed as hard as he had the first time. Enough time had passed that I was able to laugh about it too. I had come a long way since middle school.

I was surprised that he didn’t remember but I guess that’s a pretty good life lesson. In middle school, a leg full of shit is the end of the world. But that kind of stuff only lives on in the hearts and minds of traumatized nerds everywhere.

I’m even considering joining a dodgeball team.

