

S.W. Campbell

Spirit Week

Monday was jersey day. The football and volleyball players wore their uniforms and everyone else wore whatever they might have. Jacob wore an old Seahawks jersey that belonged to his brother. It was a little big, but it did the trick. Tuesday was cowboy day. Jacob didn't have much that was cowboy, but his mother made him a hat out of a Pepsi box. She did it so quickly that it was obvious it wasn't the first one she had ever made, though Jacob had never seen her use that particular skill before. Wednesday was makeup day. Jacob didn't do anything on makeup day.

Jacob purposefully got to school a little later than normal, not walking in the big heavy doors until after first bell. Prior to first bell the halls would be filled with students, bullshitting and gossiping. After first bell the halls were always mostly empty, the last few stragglers scrambling within the three minute timeframe to make it to their desks before the ringing of the second bell. Jacob walked slowly between the identical rows of lockers, counting the seconds in his head so he could time it right in order to avoid getting a tardy. Beside each home room door was a bulletin board, covered in swaths of colorful paper and decorated

with cut out characters and bubble letters outlined in glitter. Slogans like “Go Falcons” and “Crush the Bobcats” provided about as much inspiration as could be expected from a middle school homecoming.

Jacob stopped outside his home room door. A trickle of iciness moved down his spine and his hand trembled a little when he swept it away with the back of his shirt. The bulletin board by the door was covered by an expertly rendered falcon, diving downward towards a cartoon bobcat whose features were contorted by a comical level of horror. The falcon looked like it could've been a photograph, made up of layers of paper and ink, all placed with a perfect machine like precision. Along the bottom of the board were the signatures of those who had created the masterpiece, one larger than all the rest. Jacob took a deep breath, let it out, and opened the door.

Nineteen faces, plus the teacher's, turned as one when Jacob walked in. It was a strange sight to behold. The girls mostly looked normal, though half had added extra garish layers to the ones they normally wore. Even Kaitlyn G, whose parents were famously fastidious about such things, had been allowed a thin layer of rouge. In sharp contrast, the faces of the boys looked foreign and out of place. The gambit ran from just lipstick to layers that would make a drag queen declare it a little overdone. Some had their new features applied with an expertise that suggested the involvement of sisters or mothers. Others were obviously more inexperienced slapped together parodies.

Before the door even closed itself, Jacob heard the hiss. An angry buzz of contempt from the front row that couldn't be held in. The eyes of his classmates were largely indifferent, though some showed disappointment, but Madison's eyes were pure anger and hatred. Kaitlyn T leaned over and whispered something in Madison's ear, but Madison refused to turn her baleful gaze away from Jacob. The door clicked shut behind him. The second bell rang. At the front of the room, Mr. Estevez started taking role.

Madison skewered Jacob with one last look and then turned around. Mr. Estevez didn't put up with disruptions. Jacob hurried to find his seat in the back row, more icy fingers of sweat getting squashed when he sat down.

As Mr. Estevez went through the morning role call, Jacob eyed his home room peers, looking for any other allies in dissent. From the next desk over, Aidan leaned over, his voice a barely audible whisper.

"You should've just done it."

Jacob didn't turn his head to look, but through the corner of his eye he could see Aidan's mouth was a mass of bright red lipstick that extended far beyond the confines of his lips.

"I didn't want to."

"She's pissed."

Up in the front row, Jacob could see the back of Madison's blonde head, sitting perfectly still and ramrod straight.

"No shit."

Mr. Estevez slapped his hands together.

"Do you have something to share with the class gentleman?"

All eyes turned towards the offenders. Both Jacob and Aidan shook their heads.

"Then I suggest you zip it."

The eyes turned back towards the front. Aidan hissed out of the side of his mouth, drawing out the words as though they were just an exhale of breath.

"Piiiiisssseeee ooofffffff."

Jacob ignored him. Every student in the classroom had on makeup but him, with the exception of Nicky, and nobody ever expected much from Nicky. He was weird. Mr. Estevez finished up the morning announcements. Jacob hadn't heard a single one. The big man in the front of the classroom clapped his hands again.

“Okay, get to it.”

Home room was for reading and finishing up assignments. The moment Mr. Estevez clapped his hands, Madison rose from her seat and started moving towards Jacob. Her face was set in stone, but her wrath burned brightly from her eyes. Some teachers were pretty lax about home room, luckily Mr. Estevez was not one of them.

“Ms. Lewis, what are you doing?”

Madison's head spun around, the anger disappearing into a sweet mask of innocence.

“I was just going to help Jacob with his homework.”

Mr. Estevez gestured towards Jacob.

“Is Ms. Lewis going to help you with your homework Mr. Gunderson?”

Jacob screwed his face into the best look of confusion that he could manage.

“I'm reading today.”

Mr. Estevez shrugged.

“Get back to your seat Ms. Lewis.”

Madison shot Jacob a sharp look and stalked back to her desk. A couple of the other girls shot him similar looks as well, just for good measure. Aidan spoke out of the corner of his mouth again.

“Piiiiissssseeeedddd Ooooooofffffff.”

Jacob pulled his book out of his bag and started to read. He had a hard time concentrating on the words. It seemed like every time he looked up he caught somebody glancing at him. The moment the bell rang he was up and moving, escaping out the door ahead of everybody else. It did no good. Madison caught him by his locker, Kaitlyn T and Emma flanking her on either side. The halls were a sea of done up faces, not one of which seemed to care about what was about to happen. The three girls moved in close. Kaitlyn T had a little extra on, like she wore when she went to a school dance. Emma had gone all out, bright red lipstick and thick mascara laced with sparkling golden glitter. Madison looked no different than she did any other day. A pointed finger graced by bright blue nail polish poked Jacob in the chest.

“Why aren’t you in makeup Jake?”

Jacob hated being called Jake. Madison always called him Jake.

“I didn’t want to.”

“Everyone else is doing it. Don’t you care that you’re screwing this up for all of them?”

Jacob let out an audible sigh. Madison jabbed her finger into his chest again.

“We’ve got a real shot of being declared the home room with the most spirit this year. Mr. Estevez already said we have the best bulletin board, but we need everyone dressing up if we want to win.”

Jacob did his level best not to roll his eyes.

“So what?”

Madison jabbed her finger again.

“Everyone else is doing it.”

Jacob tried to stand a little straighter.

“Nick isn’t doing it.”

Madison's eyes narrowed.

"Is it because you're worried people are going to think you're gay or something? Is that it? Are you a homophobe Jake?"

Jacob felt trapped. He felt a compelling need to smack Madison in the mouth, or at least push her out of his space, but of course he didn't. Such things were completely unacceptable. Instead he just squirmed. Madison leaned in close. Jacob refused to lean away, taking pride in what defiance he could muster. Madison's voice was icy cold.

"Counts at third period. You better not screw this up for everybody."

Kaitlyn T pulled on Madison's shoulder.

"The bells going to ring. We better get to class."

Madison gave Jacob one last look, and then turned and stalked off towards her locker. Jacob took in a deep breath and let it out, and then headed off towards his own first period class. He got to it just as the bell was ringing. Mrs. Russo was already at the board writing out equations. She didn't even bother to turn around when Jacob walked in. Only about half the kids in Remedial Math had on makeup. The only person that was also in Jacob's home room was Nick. The next hour was a blessed sanctuary from the world outside. For the first time in his life, Jacob wished that Remedial Math would last forever, but the bell rang as it always did. Jacob got up, stood for a second by the door, and then made his way as quickly as possible to the safety of the boy's bathroom.

Ethan from home room was taking a piss at one of the urinals. He turned and noticed Jacob the moment that Jacob stepped up to his own urinal. Ethan was wearing bright red lipstick and thick mascara

laced with sparkling golden glitter. Jacob stood by the urinal and pretended to pee while Ethan went over to the sink to wash his hands.

“Emma says you won’t put on some makeup.”

Jacob did his best to concentrate on his imaginary stream of urine. Ethan let out a sigh.

“Look, I know it’s stupid, but couldn’t you just do it?”

Jacob didn’t look back.

“I don’t want to do it.”

The sink turned on and then off again without the comforting splat sound of the soap dispenser. Jacob could feel Ethan staring at the back of his head.

“She’s not going to let it go.”

“It’s a stupid theme.”

“It’s just fucking makeup.”

“Girls always wear makeup.”

Ethan sighed again.

“Just put some on. It will make things easier for all of us.”

Ethan’s footsteps stalked towards the door. Jacob fixed his pants and flushed the urinal despite the fact that it was still empty. The bell was going to ring soon. He had to get to class.

History had a lot more kids from home room in it, but thankfully not Madison. Kaitlyn T and Emma were both in the same class, but they always sat near the front. Kaitlyn T kept her eyes on the board, but Emma kept looking back, giving a snake like smile of delight. Jacob couldn’t figure out what the hell was

going on with that. He leaned over and bumped Aidan, who just like home room, sat in the desk next to his. He kept his voice as quiet as it could go.

“Why the hell does Emma keep smiling like that?”

Aidan didn't move his head.

“They got Nick.”

Jacob rose up higher in his seat. Nick was sitting one row back in the corner furthest from the door, his greasy hair framing his face. Smears of red lipstick were smeared across his lips. He looked like a demented clown. Jacob lowered himself back down.

“How did they get him to do it?”

Aidan shrugged and then went completely still. Mr. Gladstone was starting to ask questions, and he had a habit of calling on those who weren't paying attention. Emma kept looking back with her vile smile, at least until Mr. Gladstone called her name. After that she kept her eyes riveted to the front of the room. However, such solace was short lived. The big hand moved its way around the clock at a rapid pace despite each minute feeling like an eternity. The bell rang. The classroom emptied into the hall. Kaitlyn T sidled her way next to Jacob, a sweet smile across her face that did little to relieve the sudden wave of tension brought about by her proximity.

“Couldn't you just wear a little makeup Jacob?”

Jacob kept walking, refusing to look over.

“I don't want to talk about it.”

“Everybody would appreciate it.”

“I don't want to talk about it.”

“Even Nick did it.”

Jacob glanced at Kaitlyn T for a moment. She was still smiling, bubbling over with goodwill and kindness. Jacob sucked in a breath between his teeth.

“I can’t do it.”

“Why not?”

“Because I’m allergic.”

“Really?”

Jacob glanced over again. He could see the doubt in her eyes.

“I’ve got to go to the bathroom.”

Jacob fled into the sanctuary. It was almost empty, everyone rushing to get to class before the bell. Jacob went over to the sink and looked at himself in the mirror. Two guys walked out the door behind him, their reflections revealing their gussied up faces. Jacob breathed in and out. His whole body was shaking. He willed it to stop. The boy looking back at him seemed unsure. The bell rang. He turned on the sink, turned it off without wetting his hands, and headed out the door.

Third period was English with Mr. Estevez. Almost all of Jacob’s home room fellows were in the same class. Mr. Estevez was standing in the hall, talking to another teacher. He looked over as Jacob approached the door.

“You’re late Mr. Gunderson.”

“Yes sir, sorry sir.”

Jacob opened the door and hustled towards his desk, looking at no one. He could hear the familiar hiss. He could hear her rise up and approach as he sat down. A finger with blue nail polish tapped his desk. He looked up. She was standing over him, an open tube of bright red lipstick in her hand.

“Just put on the damn makeup Jake. Everyone else is doing it.”

Everyone was watching. Madison’s eyes were smoldering. Jacob stared back, defiant and no longer caring.

“I’m allergic.”

“Bullshit.”

The exclamation echoed off the tiled ceiling. Madison gestured imperiously with the lipstick.

“Quit being a baby, just put a little on.”

“I’m allergic.”

Madison was visibly shaking.

“Mr. Estevez is going to come in to do the count at any moment.”

Ted rose up higher in his seat.

“No.”

Madison’s eyes were moist, almost overflowing with emotion.

“Just do it.”

“No.”

The door opened. Mr. Estevez started to walk in. Everyone turned towards the sound, everyone but Madison. She jumped at Jacob, the lipstick brandished as though a rapier. Jacob threw out his hand to

block, but it was too late, the lipstick smeared its way across his cheek and mouth. Mr. Estevez's loud voice bellowed across the room.

“Ms. Lewis, what in the hell do you think you're doing?”

Madison took a step back, tears flowing down her cheeks, her eyes filled with manic glee as she surveyed her handiwork.

“He's wearing makeup Mr. Estevez. He's wearing makeup.”

Mr. Estevez marched across the room. Jacob wiped his face with the back of his hand, smearing it with red. Madison was half laughing and half crying. Mr. Estevez towered over both of them. He pointed toward the empty desk in the front row.

“Sit down Ms. Lewis.”

The lipstick dropped from Madison's fingers to the tile floor. She gestured again.

“He counts. He's wearing makeup.”

“Ms. Lewis.”

“It's not fair.”

“Now Ms. Lewis.”

Madison's eyes were full of hate, pure and uninhibited. She swung around and walked imperiously back to her desk, her bright eyes challenging any to dare judge as she wiped the tears from her face. Everyone in the room suddenly found the tops of their desks to be the most interesting thing in the room. Mr. Estevez waited until she sat down, and then turned his attention to Jacob, who was still trying to wipe the lipstick off with the back of his hand.

“Go to the bathroom Mr. Gunderson.”

Jacob rose and did what he was told. He could feel everyone starting at his back as he left, with one set of eyes doing their level best to burn their way straight through him. He turned at the door. Everyone was looking, but Madison was the only one that he saw. Her face was a combination of vindictiveness and victim. Jacob could feel words forming in his gut. Terrible words. He could feel them rising to the surface. Madison's eyes narrowed. Jacob opened his mouth. Mr. Estevez pointed sharply toward the door.

“Mr. Gunderson. Bathroom. Now.”

Jacob took in a breath and let it out. He did as he was told. In the bathroom, he wet a paper towel and scrubbed the back of his hand, his mouth, and his cheek. The lipstick on the face in the mirror disappeared, but still Jacob kept scrubbing. He could still feel it on his skin. His stomach was twisted up in knots. His whole body was shaking. He forced himself to stop. He threw the paper towel into the trash can. He could still feel the lipstick on his face. He walked out of the bathroom and back to the classroom. He paused by the door and looked at the perfect Falcon on the bulletin board. Part of him wanted to rip it to pieces, but he didn't. Instead he absent mindedly scratched at his scoured cheek and opened the door. Mr. Estevez was reading in front of the class. Madison was sitting at her desk in the front row, prim and proper as a queen, following every word with apt attention. Jacob walked towards his own desk. Nobody looked at him.