

Graduation Day

The pinnacle of the students' career had been reached. At the top of the academic ladder they were now poised to move on to bigger and better things. Into a bold, new world full of adventure, wonder, opportunity, and...

“Pussy.”

Adrian bit at his thumbnail absently. During the motion of bringing his thumb into his mouth he became distracted for a moment, staring at his bicep while he rapidly flexed and relaxed the muscle. He had previously ripped the sleeves from his baggy, gray school coveralls for just this purpose.

Paul slapped the hand from Adrian's mouth. “How do you know? You've never been outside, neither.”

“Cause, dummy, it's all over the damn TV,” Adrian said.

The two boys argued across a red Formica table top. While there were six seated at their table, the two leaders normally dominated the mealtime conversation. Their four companions watched the exchange intently.

“There's pussy all over the place.” Adrian nodded as he continued his lecture. “See, once we get out there, it's one big party fellas. Don't believe me, check that shit out right now.”

Adrian pointed to the TV closest to his group, to a beach scene playing across the screen. A sea of bikini clad bodies stretched from one side of the frame to the other, tanned and shining in perfection. Drinks were held aloft while a dance throbbed through the crowd in waves.

“I think I've seen that one before.” Paul squinted his eyes at the TV.

Adrian snorted, one of the nameless four seated to his left coughed out a singular laugh directly following his leader.

“Can't you read, dummy?” Adrian shook his head in disgust. “It's brand new, says so on the TV right now.”

“I can read!” Paul's face burned red.

“Oh, yeah?” Adrian sneered. Three of their four lackeys snickered.

“Yeah!” Paul sputtered. “It's just that faggot Taylor walked in front of the TV!”

Paul half stood from his bench seat, pointing at an unfortunate young man who happened to be carrying his lunch tray underneath the television screen. Neither Taylor's height nor his

average girth would have precluded Paul from seeing any of the text that scrolled across the bottom of the program.

Regardless of his guilt, Taylor exhaled softly, his eyes immediately cast downward as he tried to escape from the multiple, predatory gazes which now fixed on him from Adrian and Paul's table.

"Out of the way, Gaylor!" Adrian threw a bread roll full force toward Taylor's head.

In less than two and three quarters seconds the other members of his table followed suit, laughing all the while. A table full of girls adjacent to the offenders laughed hysterically and pointed while Taylor tried to ward off the incoming food without the use of his hands.

Taylor ducked and shuffled off toward the back of the cafeteria as quickly as he could. He didn't cower, he didn't cry. He only repeated an activity that had happened more times than he could remember.

In the rear of the cafeteria, Taylor plunked his tray down next to two other young men. They ate in silence for the better part of five minutes. Taylor raised his eyes from his food and looked to his friends.

They were the antithesis of the Adrians and Pauls of the world. Where their rivals boasted chiseled good looks and hard bodies, Taylor and his ilk had been saddled with features that were either too big or too small. Too short or too tall. In other words, not perfect at all.

"You think Adrian's going to stay and teach?" Oswaldo, the largest of their triad swallowed from his glass of water.

"Dunno," Taylor said. "Either way, not like we'll have to deal with him."

On cue, a noise erupted from the front of the room. Adrian and Paul both stood, drinking heavily from large red cups, racing to see who could finish their beverage first.

All three boys quieted their conversation until the noise around them subsided. Jericho, Taylor's only other friend in the world, opened his mouth to speak, revealing his hopelessly crooked teeth.

"We'll always be dealing with someone like him." Jericho scraped his spoon across the bottom of his tray, trying to pick up the last traces of his lunch.

"Wonder what beer tastes like?" Oswaldo watched the tail end of Adrian and Paul's drinking contest before a look from one of Adrian's cronies sent Oswaldo's eyes back to his own group.

“Maybe if we ever won a challenge in class we’d find out.” Taylor’s voice sounded more resigned than sullen.

“I won one once.” Oswaldo started to retell his favorite story, but thought better of it. “But that was before we were beer-age...”

Oswaldo looked longingly back over in the direction of the most popular table in the room. A single file line of girls started to walk by the table, led forward by a broad-chested, shirtless man in his early twenties. He stopped the girls in front of Adrian and Paul, who began to clap and cheer wildly.

“...And before we were sex age.” Oswaldo grimaced.

“Wonder what it’s going to be like, out there?” Jericho gestured his head toward the TV.

Taylor shrugged. “Yeah, but how would I know what to expect? Even teachers’ never left the school yet.” He cast a glance to the shirtless man directing the girls through the cafeteria.

Oswaldo finished the last few bites of his lunch. “Probably more of the same, you know?”

“Yeah.” Jericho looked down at the table and ran his finger over the surface.

“Maybe not...” Taylor silenced himself before finishing his thought.

Jericho looked to his friend hopefully. “What do you mean?”

Taylor’s brow knit. He hunched lower toward the table top. “It’s just that, all these shows on the TV, I don’t think they’re new.”

“But it says right on the TV, Taylor.” Oswaldo raised one eyebrow. “Right on the TV, says ‘live’ and today’s date.”

“I know, guys, but...” Taylor looked from side to side quickly. “We’ve been watching these shows our whole lives, you sayin’ you never seen the same one twice?”

Jericho pursed his lips in thought. “I don’t know. Maybe teacher’s right. Maybe if we spent as much energy on our classes as we did thinking we’d win some challenges.”

“Yeah.” Taylor said softly. He took a look over his shoulder at Adrian, who now had one of the girls from the line sitting on his lap.

“Maybe.”

“Okay, class.” The teacher raised two meaty paws in the air to get the class’ attention. “Listen up you little knuckle-fucks! You need to be quiet while I teach you, okay?”

From the back of the classroom, Taylor watched Adrian and Paul settle into their seats. The room quieted enough for the teacher to continue his lecture.

“Okay, you guys need to pay attention, because I’m teaching you stuff that’s going to be important in your lives, okay?” The teacher pivoted around and picked up a single sheet of paper from his desk.

“After the challenge, the following girls have been selected and need to come see me: Tracy and Angela.”

Taylor felt a surge of jealousy in his stomach. From opposite ends of the class room giggling bubbled from two separate groups of young women.

“And for the challenge today – your last challenge here at the school – we have...” The teacher narrowed his eyes at the sheet of paper in his hands. His lips moved soundlessly for a moment.

“Swimming,” he finally said. “Alright, you heard me, people. Let’s get down to the pool!”

Cheers and shouts burst from almost all of the students who rose from their seats to exit the room. A crowd quickly formed at the door where the group’s mass exodus bottlenecked. Taylor stood from his desk and waited patiently in the back of the gaggle for his turn to leave.

The teacher stood, shirtless as ever, watching the crowd filter through the door. He crossed his arms over his chest, eyeing Oswaldo suspiciously. Deep in the crowd, Oswaldo still cheered long after the initial excitement of the impending challenge had worn off of the others.

Taylor looked at his feet and shuffled out of the class, his mind wandering.

“What are you doing, Taylor?”

“Huh?” Taylor looked up from the floor to find one of the teacher’s large hands held up in front of his chest.

The teacher wore an incredulous expression. “You don’t even seem to care anymore, bro.”

“I care.” Taylor nodded half-heartedly.

The teacher sighed. “Let me see what’s in your pockets.”

“Just what...”

“Now.” Five pops sounded as the teacher cracked his knuckles.

Taylor jammed his hands into the two, large hip pockets of his coveralls. Digging for the meanest of moments, he returned them to the teacher. In his left, he produced nothing, in his right, a coverless paperback book, the glue of the spine split and fraying with age.

“Ugh.” The teacher exhaled and put one hand to his forehead. “Taylor, what I’m trying to teach you here is important for your whole life, okay?”

With one hand, the teacher plucked the dying paperback from his student’s hand. He carelessly waved the volume while he admonished the young man, grey and brown pages flailing helplessly.

“It’s important to learn your words, okay? And it’s important to learn your maths, but when you’re not even paying attention during weights or giving it your all during your cardio, it’s time to get your shit together, okay?”

Taylor nodded quickly, his lips sealed shut.

“Damn, Gaylor,” the teacher flipped quickly through the pages, his brow knit. “No wonder everyone thinks you’re a fag. This isn’t even good, why would you waste your time reading when it’s not even a sexy-book?”

Taylor shrugged. The teacher took a moment to stare at his hopeless pupil.

“Just get down to the pool, okay? Give it a hundred and ten percent and maybe you might win one challenge before you leave this school.”

The last challenge of their scholastic career went as disastrously as a challenge could, even for young Taylor. As always, he ended up being teamed with Oswaldo and Jericho. During a moment of excitement, before any of their team had even touched the water, Oswaldo jumped in the air, cheering wildly in anticipation of a competition he was predestined to lose.

Misjudging the trajectory of his considerable mass, Oswaldo came down full force on Taylor’s ankle. Now swollen, black and blue, Taylor’s ankle had been rendered useless.

Oswaldo helped Taylor along, walking through the cafeteria to their customary table in the back. Taylor gripped Oswaldo’s shoulder, hopping on one foot. The three boys walked – or hopped – wordlessly to their destination.

Once seated, they waited impatiently. They didn’t bother to try and speak to one another over the noise of the other tables. Adrian led the rowdy crowd from the front, screaming at regular intervals, “GRAD-JU-A-SHON!”

His chant caught on like wildfire, within moments the entire room, with the exception of Jericho and Taylor, stood on their feet, pumping fists in the air with each syllable.

“Grad!”

“Ju!”

“A!”

“SHON!”

Their chant grew in tempo and intensity, until at last the door to the cafeteria opened and the room burst into an explosion of noise. Their teacher ran into the room, arms raised in above his head, screaming along with his students in red-faced ecstasy.

But just when it seemed as though the noise would blow the roof from the top of the building, a hush washed over the crowd. Scattered whispers punctuated the silence, Taylor swiveled around on the bench and faced the front, but he couldn't see what was happening in the front of the room.

A sharp wince escaped Taylor's lips as he stood on his good ankle to try and see what had captivated everyone's attention.

“Okay, everyone, it's graduation day!” The teacher clapped his hands twice.

That's when Taylor noticed the object of everyone's curiosity.

A man stood behind their teacher. He didn't wear the grey school coveralls as the rest of them did. His dress looked so odd; dark blue pants of some sort of thick cloth and a short sleeved, red button-up shirt.

But his face held Taylor's attention more so than his clothes. His greasy black hair, speckled with gray, framed a face covered with fine lines and creases...

“What happened to you?” Paul's face contorted in a sneer.

Several of his classmates joined in laughter. The strange man's lips curled into a smile.

“Oh, nothing can't be fixed young master, I assure you.” He smiled impishly and shuffled backwards, closer to the cafeteria's exit.

The teacher punched Paul in the chest sharply, sending the young man back a full step. Sullen, Paul rubbed the sore spot.

“That's enough, it's time to settle down, okay? Everyone needs to get in a straight line and follow Mr. Hess, here. He's going to take you to the bus and then to the port, where...”

Their teacher sputtered, he appeared to be choking back tears. “Where you’ll get to go party. So don’t waste this opportunity, okay? Get out there and show the world what you’ve learned!”

Applause and cheers burst from the crowd in appreciation of their teacher. So taken with emotion, the man muttered his apologies for “Crying like a bitch” and excused himself from the room, waving a final good bye.

True to his last instructions, the students lined up by the cafeteria door and followed Mr. Hess, their new leader out of the dining area. Familiar halls swept past them, Taylor could hear others in front of them in the line sharing memories of their beloved academy.

Taylor and Jericho remained silent.

Oswaldo looked back at his two companions. For a second he opened his mouth, ready to share his favorite story with them again before deciding against it. He turned his eyes back to the front.

Mr. Hess opened the doors to the outside and the students dutifully followed him out into the grounds. Students gasped in awe at the sight of a long, tall bus parked in front of them.

“Whoa.” Jericho’s head pivoted from side to side as he took in the vehicle.

“Yeah, pretty cool, huh?” Oswaldo smiled. “This is going to be awesome, guys.”

For a moment, hope bloomed in Taylor’s heart. What if it was going to be different now? What if things in the outside weren’t like they were in the school?

The landscape disappeared under a blanket of night. Taylor tried to keep focused on every detail of the world around them as they drove on, but it became impossible once the sun had completely disappeared under the horizon. No longer able to spy on an unfamiliar land through a dirty window, Taylor rested his head on the back of the bench seat.

His whole body lurched forward smoothly, Taylor grabbed his chair.

“What’s happening?” He looked to Jericho, who was equally as startled.

“I dunno. Maybe we’re not moving anymore?”

Taylor nodded. The rumbling noise from the front of the bus stopped, Mr. Hess stood from the driver’s seat and waved to get everyone’s attention.

“Almost there, young masters. I’ll take you to the locker room, where you’ll get some proper clothing on, then it’s off to the port!” He laughed, it came out as a high-pitched, wheezing sound.

Everyone on the bus stood and waited their turn to exit.

“Proper clothes? What do you think he means by that?” Jericho looked down at his coveralls.

“Think we’re going to get clothes like the people on TV?” Oswaldo’s face lit up.

“Guess we’ll find out.”

The line had left them, Taylor motioned for Oswaldo to start moving from the bus to catch up.

“No time to dawdle, young masters, no time at all,” Mr. Hess chided the three boys as they stepped down from the bus. “All right, follow me, follow me.”

They stood in a cluster on the dusty ground outside of a strange, industrial complex. Taylor couldn’t tell what was happening inside, only that it was very loud. Mr. Hess jogged to the front of their group, waving for the students to follow him.

Hess took them up a ramp made of metal grating, all the way until they reached a large set of metal double doors that opened upon their approach. Pushing inside, the students found themselves inside a large locker room, as promised by Mr. Hess.

Standing on a bench by a row of clothing racks, Mr. Hess whistled to get their attention once more.

“Almost there now. Just time for a change into some traveling clothes, you’re not students anymore, are you?”

Adrian and Paul exchanged high fives.

“Look on the rack, find yer size, put it on and head out of the doors to my left. You can just leave your old uniforms; you don’t need them anymore, do you?”

Mr. Hess smiled broadly and hopped down from the bench, he slunk out of sight, presumably to wait for them by the exit.

Taylor walked up to a rack and inspected the garments. They were coveralls as well, but made of a slick, shiny blue material he had never encountered before. He hesitated for a moment to put them on.

“Kind of funny on the sleeves.” Jericho already donned his new clothes, he pointed to an odd fold of the sleeve right at the end by the wrist. Small, blunt metal teeth ran along the whole edge of the cuff.

“Maybe that’s just the style!” Oswaldo shrugged as he finished stepping into his blue suit.

Taylor unbuttoned his familiar clothes and put on his new ones, realizing that he really had no choice in the matter. He delicately inserted his foot, the ankle screaming pain at him the whole way through the leg of the coveralls. As much as he hated the school, in the pit of his stomach he wanted to ask Mr. Hess if he could just go back.

Oswaldo went ahead of them, hopping with excitement. “Come on guys!”

The rest of the group had already converged on the exit doors. Mr. Hess again stood in the front, ready to give instruction.

“My boys in one line to my left, my girls in another to my right.”

Scattered groaning came from the crowd.

“Oh, come now.” Mr. Hess cooed, “Just part of the process, you’ll all be back together in no time at all, no time at all.”

“What do you think happened to his face?” Jericho whispered to Taylor, still staring at Mr. Hess.

“Who knows?” Taylor said quickly. “I’ve never heard of anything like that. Maybe it’s a sickness?”

The crowd milled and tried to correct itself according to Mr. Hess’ instructions. Twice Taylor felt a jar against his injured ankle, twice his vision erupted into sparks and he wanted to scream in pain.

Somehow in the commotion, Taylor and his two friends ended up right behind Adrian and Paul in the line. Their class now divided between males and females, Mr. Hess opened the double doors by slapping a large, metal plate set into the wall behind him.

Taylor peeked around those in front of him to see the open doorways. A rush of cold air blew past his face. A metal partition in the center of the two doors showed that the boys would be going in a different direction than the girls. Flickering, colored light spilled on the floor from the doorways.

Mr. Hess inclined his head toward the doorway. “Go on now, I have to make sure everyone gets in safely. You’re on your way now, just step in line and wait your turn! Congratulations and good luck!”

“Graduation!” Adrian called from the front of the line. The other students followed in his wake, hollering and cheering. Arms raised over his head, Adrian led them into the doorway. The students behind Taylor and his friends pushed, sending Taylor staggering on his injured ankle once more.

“Gah!” Taylor cried out in pain, doubling over.

Oswaldo quickly helped him back up. As they moved forward, the corridor quickly narrowed enough that they had to walk single file. The only light in the walkway came from images dancing across the walls, larger than life. Scantly clad woman moved and seduced the young men, removing articles of clothing at regular intervals.

“Getting hot in here, whew!” Adrian shouted his obvious approval, fanning himself with his hand.

Taylor noticed a bulge from the front of the young man’s new jumpsuit, he quickly averted his eyes.

The line stopped.

Taylor tried to look around the bodies in front of him to see what had caused the blockage. Only Paul stood between himself and Adrian, Taylor could see a set of shiny, dark curtains. They parted momentarily while their class leader stepped behind them.

After a small moment, Taylor heard an excited shout from Adrian and the line moved again, just enough for one person to advance. Now closer, Taylor could hear a woman’s voice coming from the front.

“Just put your feet on the red circles...”

It didn’t make any sense, what was going on behind the curtain?

Another moment, another movement. Paul moved to the head of the line. He shoved the curtains open and charged inside, the heavy drapes closing behind him.

“Hey, you’re a cute one.” The voice started in.

A mechanical whir drowned out the rest of the words, Taylor strained to hear but couldn’t make out another sound.

“You’re next, buddy!” Oswaldo slapped Taylor excitedly on the back of his shoulder.

Taylor’s heart beat hard enough that he felt it in his ribs. His hands trembled uncontrollably. The mechanical whirring ceased, the voice rang clear again.

“Hey, you. Step on in, don’t be shy.”

The voice sounded husky and full of desire. Taylor's fear began to turn to curiosity, he hopped over to the curtain as steadily as he could. Half holding and half moving the curtain, he stepped through to other side.

A blackened doorway stood no more than three feet in front of him, cool, dank air rushed in on him. A sour, mildew smell rode on the currents into his nostrils.

"I like your style." The sexy voice jerked Taylor's attention away from the door to nowhere and over to his left. On the wall another image of a beautiful, naked woman spoke to him.

"What's your name, Graduate?"

"Uh..." Taylor hesitated, unsure if he should speak back to the image. "Taylor."

The image flickered for a second.

"Taylor, eh? Sounds hot." The woman leaned down, pushing her bare breasts together. "I want to meet you, Taylor, for real."

"Okay..." Taylor blushed.

"Just put your feet on the red circles for me."

Taylor looked down to the floor leading into the darkened cavern. Two dull metal rails about two feet and a half feet apart ran parallel to each other and out into the void. A glowing red circle punctuated the floor by each one. Each rail began to vibrate, a deep hum rising from each.

Stepping with his right foot onto the rightmost circle, he tried to gently place his left foot down on the other.

"Look out behind you, lover."

Taylor twisted around, a metal plate attached to both rails came up from the floor and smacked the back of his heels.

"Shit!" Taylor cried out as the force penetrated his left ankle.

"Grab on to the handles, baby."

Two metal bars descended from the ceiling. Hooks at the ends of each must have been the handles Taylor's virtual girlfriend had referred to.

"Can you just hold on a second?" Taylor meekly bent over to inspect his injured ankle, moving it from the red circle to take any weight off of it.

“Just have fun and enjoy the ride,” the woman flickered in and out of existence again. “Taylor. I’ll see you when you get over to my side.”

Metal smacked against metal, a sharp sound that lasted less than a second. A metal cuff secured itself over Taylor’s right ankle so quickly his eyes didn’t catch the movement. Shocked, he looked upward to the handles. Similar cuffs stood empty on the spaces where his wrists should have been, had Taylor grabbed the handles like he had been instructed.

The whole apparatus lifted upward. Taylor let out a surprised gasp, he stood and grabbed on to the metal arm circlets for support. Quickly, the metal plate from behind him slid under his feet and the machine set him back down. His right foot now supported by the plate and his leg restrained at the ankle, the device moved him forward.

From the wall, the image of the nude woman blew him a kiss. She disappeared as Taylor’s body moved forward, into the black.

Seconds ticked like hours, Taylor’s heart thumped. Almost a minute passed where his vision showed him nothing but blackness. His ears gave him naught but white noise, his skin told him that a small breeze touched him from ahead and his smell returned to him an odor of decay.

Finally, small, amber lights appeared in the distance, moving in a single file toward him. Taylor’s eyes quickly adjusted. The lights appeared to be on the ceiling, spaces between the points became visible and grew as he moved closer to them. Taylor looked down below, but could see nothing.

In front of him, Taylor could start to make out some shapes in the growing light. A large form – Paul, it had to be Paul – moved as well. His arms and legs were all four restrained, unlike Taylor he couldn’t move at all. However, it looked as though his midsection jerked from side to side.

Taylor’s brow knit. Why would he be struggling so much?

Paul’s platform rotated a hundred and eighty degrees, the apparatus now suspended the young man upside down.

Taylor’s breath caught in his chest. What was happening? Was this some sort of ride, like on TV? Holding on to only one of the metal wrist cuffs, Taylor leaned forward to get a better look. Paul now squirmed wildly; Taylor could almost hear his shouting over the noise of the rushing air and the deep hum of the machinery.

A silver flash of light from Paul's direction grabbed hold of Taylor's attention. In a single instant, light sparkled in a long arc by Paul's wrists and at his neck.

Paul's hands fell into the abyss, accompanied by his head. His arms dangled limply, leaking blood from neatly severed wrists and at his bloody stump of a neck. Suspended by the ankles, the machine carried Paul's limp body without further protest from the young man.

Taylor screamed out a sound only he could hear. He pulled at his foot, the only part of his body claimed by the machine. The circlet didn't budge and Taylor's foot was just millimeters too big to get free. The skin on his ankle pressed against the edge of the metal and started to tear. He gasped, but still Taylor pulled at his leg to free himself.

The apparatus began to rotate.

Taylor hunched over, gripping the circlet that held his ankle as the machine turned him upside down. Blood blossomed around his heel as he pulled ever harder to free his foot, not concerning himself with the consequences of falling from the device.

He almost had it. Taylor could feel his heel just about to crest the edge of the circlet, blood from torn skin lubricating his efforts. Three flashes of light, one from below and two at his sides sent Taylor screaming again. Wind blew past him from every angle.

Taylor dared to glance forward. Paul's body still moved forward under the dim lamps, a large conveyer belt appeared just a meter beneath them.

A loud metal groan preceded another flash of light. Paul's feet severed just above the ankles, his body fell down to the belt in a bloody mass. The machine's circlets released, discarding his feet off to the sides of the belt and into the black abyss beneath them.

Taylor yanked harder on his foot. His heel grew close, so close to freedom. A chunk of skin piled up against the edge of the circlet, shaved off by Taylor's struggle. Adrenaline killed any pain he should have been feeling, either on his skinned heel or his injured ankle.

His ears filled with a metal groaning. Taylor's heart skipped a beat. His heel started to slide the rest of the way through the circlet...

The last of the students had been seen off. Mr. Hess clanged up a metal gangway in the plant's interior. Eyes downward, he opened a tall, thin door at the end of a long, thin walkway. Slipping inside, he stepped softly up to the control station.

Mr. Hess cleared his throat and spoke as loudly as he could, "All in, Sirs."

Six narrow fingers extended from a lithe palm, three knuckles on each gray digit. They held aloft a block of chocolate, Mr. Hess greedily snatched it from the hand.

“Thank you, Sirs,” he said, his voice filled with awe and gratitude.

Mr. Hess inclined his head and slunk off to a distant corner of the control room, sitting down on a pile of dirty blankets on the grated metal floor. Nibbling at the treat, he watched his masters at work. His eyes welled with pride; he must have done very well this time to deserve such an extravagant reward.