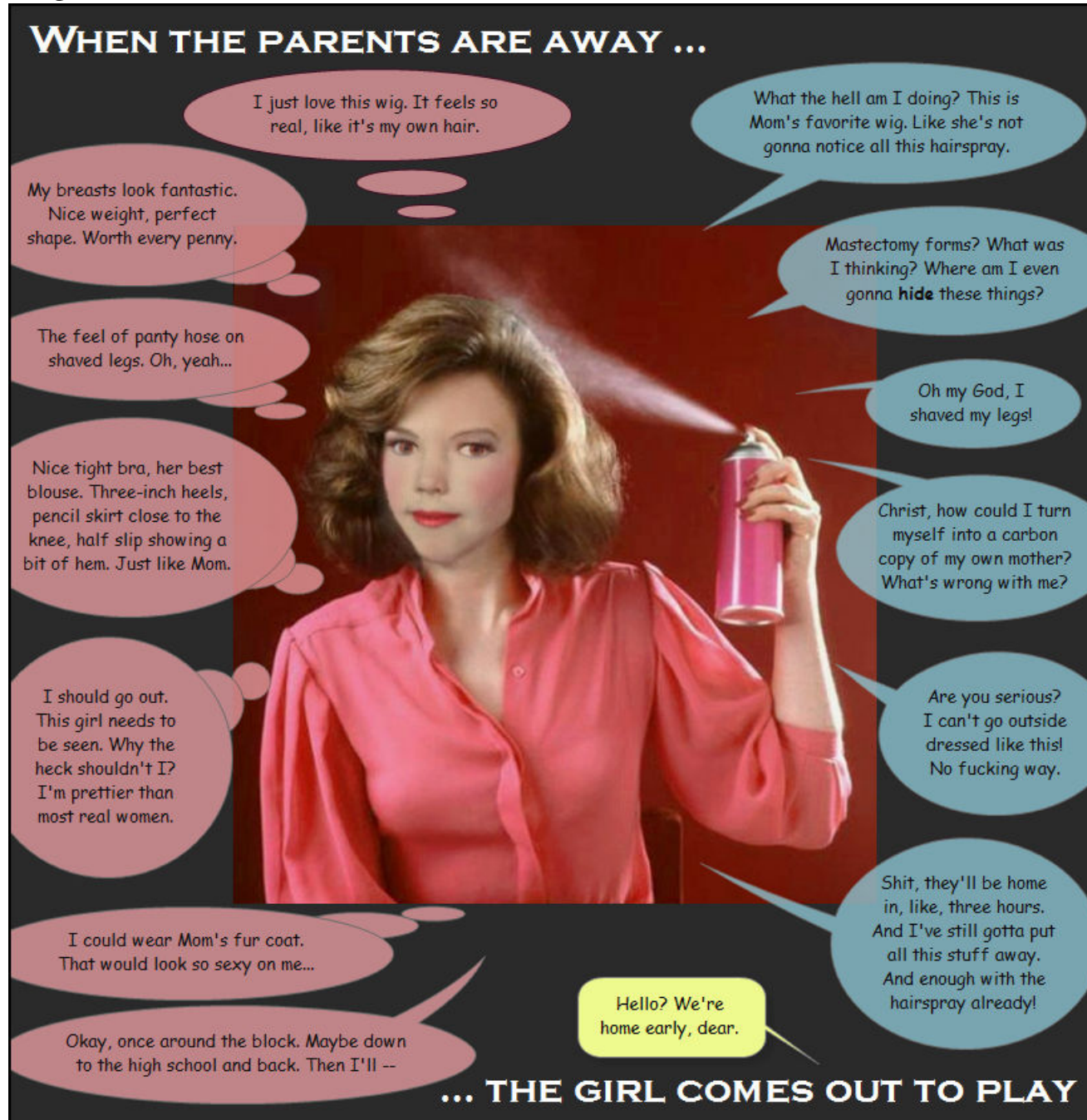


by Amanda Hawkins

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Caught Take-2: Brunette



I'm caught. There's no time to change, much less clean up and put the clothes away. So I have two choices: fess up and admit that I'm a big fat sissy—or bluff. What do I have to lose?

I return the hairspray to the vanity. Everything else is back in place. I grab a coat from Mom's closet, close the bedroom door, and shrug into the garment as I flee down the hall. Now all I need is a new identity. I think about whose name my parents might recognize, but not know in person.

Miss Mason, my guidance councillor from high school. It's been a few years, but I talked about her all the time back then. And she's young.

I meet them on the stairs. "Mrs. Hawthorne? I'm Laura Mason. The school asked me to wait for you here. I'm afraid there's been some trouble."

"Oh, my goodness," Mom says. "Is Sidney hurt?"

Dad stares at me. "How did you get in?"

"Oh, I had his keys." *Uh, where are they?* "I left them in his room—his wallet too."

"Where is my son?" Mom's gaze takes me in, all the way down, perhaps recognizing her coat and the shoes I'm wearing. I figure I might get away with that, but the wig is a whole different story. I hope it looks as real as it feels.

"Why would the school..." Dad shakes his head. "I mean, he graduated years ago—"

"He was caught trying to break in," I say quickly.

"Good heavens. That doesn't sound like—"

"The guard roughed him up a bit, but he got away. We didn't want to go to the police until we spoke to you." My lips are dry. "I'm sure he's fine, Mrs. Hawthorne. He's probably just scared."

"He dropped his wallet in the middle of a crime? Shit. The kid's not much of a burglar either."

"Oh, the guard took that, sir. Before—"

“And how did you get involved in all this, dear?”

“Well, I was at the school—”

My father smirks. “Dressed like that?”

“Father, please!” Mom turns back to me. “Er... Laura is it? A woman isn't going to wear that much makeup at school, now is she? Was this a date?”

“Well...” No going back now. “Yes, but I just had to pop in to my office and...”

My parents glance at each other. “Bull cookies,” Dad says. “Where the hell is he?”

My mind goes blank. “Who?”

“That damn kid! No job, no prospects—now he's datin' his teacher? I'll kill him!”

“Don't make a scene.” Mom sighs. “I remember how Sidney spoke about you, Laura. It was obvious he had a crush on you. Now that he's out of school, I suppose you thought it was okay. You're not that much older than he is.”

“So he ran off, huh?” Dad's giant fists clench. “Got caught foolin' around, then took off and left his girl to face us. My son is a damn coward.”

Mom's voice is gentle. “Is that what happened?”

I nod, my eyes averted. Dad just scowls.

Mom touches my arm. “We're not upset, Laura... Well, *I'm* not. But you really should have known better. Sidney is still just a boy. I don't think you should see him again. All right?”

“Uh, sure. Of course. I'm sor—”

She takes my elbow. “Off you go, dear.”

The front door closes behind me. Strangely, I feel only elation. I fooled my own parents! I button Mom's coat and float up the walk.

But as I move down the street, my steps falter. I'm all alone, no money, no ID, no place to go.

What the hell am I supposed to do now?”

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“Hello? Hello? Who is it?”

“Miss Mason? It's Sid Hawthorne, from school.” I stand close to the intercom, feeling exposed.

“Oh, yes... Sidney. Is something wrong?”

“I'm in trouble. Can we talk?”

Over tea, I tell her the whole story. “Well,” she says. “You certainly make an attractive young woman. If I didn't know... I'd never have guessed.”

I reflect on that while she rummages through her desk. I'm wearing makeup and I'm totally dressed as a woman, right down to Mom's lacy high-cut panties. Sure, I've done it before, but not in public.

“What's your name?” she asks. “Your girl name.”

I think fast. *Sidney?* Not anymore. “Cindy.”

“Well, you certainly can't go home, Cindy. Not with a man like that waiting for you. You can stay here.” She waves off my thanks. “Just for the night, mind you. After that... I know some people.”

She hands me a pamphlet. For a woman's shelter.

The next day I find myself in fresh makeup, a long dark wig and a little black dress that Laura can no longer squeeze herself into. It fits me perfectly.

Cynthia Hawthorne is a woman. She has her own apartment, her own wardrobe, a new identity, a new job—and friends who only know her as Cindy.

Sidney Hawthorne is missing. Maybe he's dead.

Me? I don't know who the hell I am anymore. ■

