



*Jill's Ad Pages Suffer 10% Decline*

*— AdAge, October 2004*

**I**t started like any typical workday. At about ten minutes past noon, I chugged the last drops of my Diet Coke just as the elevators opened onto the eighth floor. I had forgotten my ID and had already been subjected to everything but a cavity search by building security. So I was relieved to see that the usual box of copy paper was propping the glass door open. The eighth floor didn't have a receptionist, so if the box of copy paper wasn't there, I'd have to call someone to let me in. Not a big deal, but I liked to keep my arrival into the office as inconspicuous as possible. Which, in actuality, was impossible. It was impossible due to 'the walk.'

Because of the layout of the floor, there was no way for me to get to my office without being accosted by nearly every staffer along the way. Not that I had anything against my staffers – most of them I really liked. But 'the walk' was just a ritual that made the act of getting to my office and, then, actually getting some work done, an even longer, more

drawnout time-consuming process than it already was.

I suppose I could avoid the problem by getting into the office before anyone else. Which meant before 9 A.M. Which was completely, absolutely out of the question. It's not that I was a total diva about early mornings; it's just that after benefits, parties, and late-night live television interviews – all to keep the magazine's PR profile up – combined with my lovely insomnia problem – I needed a few extra hours of sleep in the morning.

So to deal with 'the walk' as graciously as possible, I sometimes liked to picture it as a 'red-carpet' kind of walk. Celebrities who arrive at the Oscars, for example, don't stop and chat with every person waiting on the sidelines. Otherwise they would never make it into the ceremony. But they oh so nicely blow them off, cheerfully waving and smiling, stopping only to offer a brief pose or sound bite.

So I put on my best red-carpet smile, pulled open the glass door, and started 'the walk.' As I approached the sea of cubicles, I imagined the alt-funk blaring from a staffer's radio to be sweeping orchestra strings. I pictured the unflattering fluorescents to be bright spotlights. And instead of must, dust, and rotting lunches, I tricked my nose into believing that the stench in my trail was some A-lister's expensive French *parfum*. The cluttered stacks of CDs, books, and back issues became ivory pillars, lining the way. But the Sharpie-defiled Britney Spears poster plastered near the conference room . . . that always stayed in the picture, ensuring that my red-carpet smile stayed in place.

I know it's all a terribly egotistical fantasy, but the illusion amused me. And it gave me my game face – the jeez-Jill-is-

so-pleasant-and-cool-and-in-control visage behind the smile. I needed it so much more now, since our managing editor recently had jumped ship. Without her, I had a lot more work and . . . one less barrier from the accosters.

Their barrage began.

‘Jill! Will you be able to look at my copy today?’

‘Jill! What do you think of this as a “Hoax” for the March issue?’

‘Jill! Do you think I’ll be able to get your approval on this layout? It ships tonight.’

I sailed on, smiling, responding in rapid fire. ‘Heeeeey. Hi. Leave the copy with Casey. Yeah, good “Hoax.” Later, I promise.’ I practiced my Queen Elizabeth wave. The fantasy was especially useful in making the utter crappiness of the floor melt away. When Nestrom Media first bought us, we moved to the fifteenth floor, sharing it with *Fashionista* magazine. But that didn’t last long. I could tell by the fashionistas’ consistently disgusted scowls that they couldn’t bear our tattoos; piercings; cheap, multihued haircuts; and general slovenliness for long. Before I knew it, we were being kicked downstairs, shoved in a corner behind the cafeteria, between the supply guy and the check-cashing lady. Now it couldn’t be any clearer where *Jill* fit into the hierarchy of the Nestrom magazine empire.

Just a few more feet to go. And the onslaught continued. ‘Jill! Do you *really* want me to call back Katy Hanson’s people and tell her we’re not interested in having her on a cover? Really?!’

That one stopped me in my tracks, snapping me right into reality. It came from Rosario, the entertainment editor. ‘Yes, really!’ I snapped.

‘But her album just hit number one,’ she halfheartedly pleaded. ‘And you said we had to start thinking a little bit more mass appeal for the covers.’

I looked at Rosario, her blue hair matted in all directions. She of all people should know better, I thought. She was a downtown girl – a dj, for crying out loud. I guess she misunderstood me in last week’s meeting. ‘I meant someone more along the lines of a . . . Jennifer Aniston,’ I explained. ‘Definitely *not* a cheesy reality show winner. The only way that Katy Hanson would end up on one of our covers would be via a cover line reading 10 REASONS WHY KATY HANSON BLOWS.’

With that, I continued making my way to my office when I felt a furry presence brush my ankle. I stopped again and stooped to pick up Ruggles, Kyra the photo editor’s dog. I had no choice but to make Ruggles the office mascot since Kyra brought her in every day, despite more than a few threatening letters from HR. I held the Yorkie to my face, expecting a kiss. But she just yipped at me. I sighed before I tossed her back on the floor. No matter how hard I tried, that dog just didn’t like me.

Casey, my assistant, perked up when she saw me approach. I gave her my best don’t-let-*anybody*-in look when I reached my office. She knew better than to join the conga line from hell trailing after me, and she usually waited for me to get settled before she confronted me with anything, no matter how urgent. I could tell by her exasperated expression, though, that she had some really pressing, and probably unpleasant, news.

Within a second, Casey was in my office looking me up

and down with her big brown doe eyes. She shook her head. 'Of all days for you to arrive looking like Mary-Kate Olsen dressed you,' she said, referring to my ratty jeans and my stretched-out, extremely vintage yet very comfortable V-neck sweater. 'Get to the fashion closet and the beauty closet, now.'

'Oh, shit,' I said.

'Yeah,' Casey confirmed. 'Liz's been calling all morning. She – *and* Ellen – want to see you right away. Like, half an hour ago.'

I trusted Casey's urgency. She was always looking out for me. Even though she was a few years my junior, in her early thirties, she had a wise, motherly way about her, which contradicted her hip, petite, girlish looks. The best thing about Casey was that she was extremely grounded. She worried for me, put out fires, cleaned up messes, played my 'bad cop,' and only occasionally broke a sweat. She was also one of my few confidants, and her sardonic sense of humor never failed to cheer me up, even on the most dire occasion. Somehow, she was even able to juggle raising two kids in addition to taking care of me. And sometimes I thought she could read me at least as well as my husband.

My phone rang insistently. Casey picked it up. 'Yes, Liz, she'll be there in just a few minutes,' she said, rolling her eyes. 'She's already on her way,' she added, giving me a gentle push toward the door.

'Any important messages?' I asked as I headed off.

'Richard Ruiz,' she called after me. 'He wants to have dinner. Oh, and did I mention that Liz and Ellen want to see you *now*?'

I picked up the pace, fully aware I was most likely facing

another ass chewing. I'd been getting at least one a week since the incredibly brief honeymoon period with Nestrom Media had ended. The postcoital glow hadn't even lasted a month before my new bosses began to lay into me about 'making some changes' and 'getting those ad numbers up.' At first, they were all spirit – 'rah-rah, we're a team; we're the best and we're going to get better.' They threw money at me like they were printing it themselves. I had a budget for clothing, primping, dining, and entertainment that seemed near impossible to spend. Even my staff members were allowed to expense 'twelve working lunches' per month, when they would binge on everything from sushi to porterhouse steaks. If someone on staff was having a birthday, corks from the finest champagne would pop and cake would be delivered from the city's finest bakery. If it was someone senior enough, or someone like Casey, I'd be able to expense a very nice gift, like a Prada wallet. My office looking a little drab? They allowed me to hire an interior decorator to spruce it up, and I put a feng shui expert on the tab while I was at it. If I received a lot of swag at Christmas, I could hire three cars to take it all home. They were only eighty dollars an hour, after all. Did a Nestrom editor need to hop to Paris for a meeting? 'Take the Concorde, for Christ's sake!' T.J. Oldham, the company's chairman would say. Nestrom editors never, ever, ever flew coach.

But of course, there were enormous puppet-like strings attached to all of it. Soon that team spirit and devil-may-care attitude with money devolved into a far less subtle, 'make us more money already, bitch' attitude. When the ad numbers weren't breaking world records, every other day I was

subjected to a new mandate, budget cut, or system to implement. If I wanted to reshoot a cover, for example, I now had to beg for it, or use mediocre shots because Nestrom wouldn't want to spend the money. Long gone were the days of adding bells and whistles to an issue – like releasing two different covers, or including a flashy fold-out cover. I now had to fight for such 'extravagance,' as they would call it, while *Fashionista* never seemed to have to fret about any expenditure. (Sometimes I even suspected that cutbacks were made to *Jill* to compensate for *Fashionista*'s elaborate spending.) But I took it all in stride, curbing my habits a bit, too, being a little more conscientious about my spending, when expenses for the whole magazine – and staff – were suddenly scrutinized. I listened patiently, letting the suits feel that they were contributing something, then did what I pleased. After all, my name was on the cover, not theirs.

Nostalgia for the careless, decadent 'old days' still plagued me as I dodged two dozen verbal bullets before I finally hit the fashion closet. Full of cast-off freebies and fashion shoot leftovers, these closets were godsend in emergencies like this. Stepping inside and closing the door behind me, I ripped off my Pumas, jeans, and sweater, leaving them in a heap on the ground. I rifled through the racks, coming upon a navy blue Marc Jacobs skirt in my size. That would do, I thought. As I began to pull it on, the closet door swung open. Sven the art director stood in the doorway. 'We have to talk about the December fashion layout,' he said. 'And if it ends up that Rosario can't get anyone better, I think I can do something with Katy Hanson.'

I defiantly put my hands on my hips, standing there with

nothing on except my lacey pink bra and the Marc Jacobs skirt. 'Later, Sven,' I said, in my best I'm-in-charge-here voice, despite my scanty attire. The minutes were ticking away, and I didn't want to give Liz and Ellen any more reasons to get riled up. 'I promise. And drop the Katy Hanson thing,' I added, giving him a pleading look. I loved him dearly but I had bigger issues to deal with at the moment than our next cover model.

Sven still lingered, turning on his European charm. 'What if we did something completely against her image?' he pressed. 'A tasteful nude, perhaps, with her hands obscuring her breasts. I could light it like a Mapplethorpe. What do you say?'

'No,' I insisted. 'I'm not putting Katy Hanson on the cover just because you want to see her boobs. Plus, we've already got a ton of letters complaining about the abundance of breasts in the last few issues.' Sven definitely appreciated the female physique. A little too much, I'd say. I didn't mind skin in the magazine, but it was my opinion that most women don't want to see perfect 34Cs on every other page.

With that he gave up, yet he still lingered in the doorway. 'Suit yourself,' he said, shrugging.

I quickly pulled on a cranberry and pink, spiral-patterned Anna Sui blouse; found an appropriate pair of D&G shoes; and pushed past Sven's tall, blond frame to get next door into the beauty closet. There, I combed out my hair, which was looking like a wet golden retriever's pelt; grimaced at my dark roots; made a mental note to ask Casey to get me in with my colorist; and put on some lipstick and a swift paint of mascara. I checked myself in the mirror. Almost decent. I was ready to face the Stepford Twins.

That was my secret nickname for Ellen Cutter, CEO and president of Nestrom Media, and Liz Alexander, *Jill's* brand new publisher, who had arrived shortly after the Nestrom Media purchase. If Martha Stewart, Kappa Kappa Gamma, and Park Avenue had a ménage à trois, Ellen Cutter would be the resulting love child. She had that affluent, blond, bland, studied ivory girl quality, a society carbon copy that made her a bit of a wallflower in the hipper Manhattan media circles. But she was smart, in a benign, conniving way. She had a way of making herself look real good, and taking credit where credit was not due – at least that was what the word that had drifted over from *Charisma*, her last tour of duty, was. Ever since her supposed efforts quadrupled *Charisma's* ad dollars, she was the industry's reigning despot with a smile.

When Ellen first came on, I was impressed by her efforts to get to know me and actually secretly imagined that she seemed a bit starstruck. There were several lunches, a few postwork glasses of wine, and a couple of events where we gravitated toward each other. Underneath her WASPy exterior, she even showed a bit of an edge, like when she admitted going to a bondage club in my neighborhood. Was I crazy to think that we could get along? It seemed so now.

Liz Alexander had been Ellen's number two at *Charisma*. She was also her number two before that at *Joy!* And the duo even started out together, years ago, at some small food quarterly that no longer exists. She had reddish brown hair, straight as a pin, like Ellen's, and piercing green, Siamese cat eyes, with a stare that was always mistrusting, and sometimes downright frightening. Liz also had a conniving quality, but as the weeks went on, I found it wasn't nearly as benign as

Ellen's. I knew from about day two that I had to watch my back around Liz Alexander.

Liz had a certain holier-than-thou, putting-you-in-your-place attitude and she immediately started playing power games with me. For example, she'd never pick up the phone when I'd call. She would have her assistant answer, then grill me about what the call concerned before she'd take it. And if Liz ever called me, it was never directly. Her assistant would ask me to 'hold for Liz Alexander,' and Liz would never get on the phone until she was certain I was on the line. But after about the third time her assistant asked me to 'hold for Liz,' I cut her off and told her that I didn't have time to hold for anyone, and if Liz really needed to speak to me she could call me directly herself. And whenever we met, there was a little power play about who was coming to whom; Liz *always* wanted me to come up to her office. But after a while I'd occasionally insist that she come down to me, especially if the meeting involved other members of my staff, despite her audible sighs of protest. It was stupid, and catty, I know. But catty people needed to be given a taste of their own kitty litter.

Dreading my latest interaction with her, and Ellen, I hurried out the glass door, nearly tripping on the box of copy paper along the way. An elevator door was just sliding shut, so I jumped at it, sticking my hand over the sensor. 'Thanks,' I said sheepishly to the crowd inside as the doors slid open. When I went to push the button for the thirty-third floor, I realized I had gotten on an elevator going down.

Shit.

When I reached the bottom, I gave another sheepish smile

as I let everyone out and got back in. I frantically pushed the 'door close' button so I could have an express ride. For once, luck was on my side.

When I finally arrived on the thirty-third floor, I took a deep breath, stepped out of the elevator, and gave the receptionist my most confident grin. 'On my way to see Ellen,' I said, as if it wasn't a big deal at all. My stomach's incessant churning, however, betrayed the truth.

Now it was time for my 'Miss America' walk. I felt on parade as I glided past yet another sea of cubicles, but these cubicles were painstakingly neat with gleaming, polished wood trim. My heels sunk into the plush, thick new carpeting, so I had to concentrate extra hard on walking without tripping. I held my head high, taking in the décor – original, signed masterpieces and sleekly framed covers of best-selling issues. I noticed that not a one of them was *Jill*.

Continuing my pageant stride, I nodded at Michelle, Ellen's assistant, as I flitted past. 'She's expecting you,' she said dryly.

I gave a quick, assertive knock on the door and opened it before receiving a response. 'Hey,' I said, as nonchalantly as possible, when I entered Ellen's spacious lair.

Ellen was sitting at her desk, with Liz looming over her. They looked up in unison from the paper they were studying, as if they were some kind of pearl-wearing, two-headed monster.

'Please take a seat, dear. We may be here a while,' Ellen said, nodding toward the Eames chair placed on the other side of her desk. Ellen was my peer – thirty-eight years old at the most. So her sudden, condescending way of calling me

'dear' made my skin crawl. Liz's green-eyed glower on top of that made me want to jump right out of it.

Ellen adjusted the crimson hair band that kept her unmoving bob in place and perfectly matched her red sweater set. I noticed Liz had recently gotten her hair cut into the same severe lines, a style that said, 'I'm not only frigid, I'm a control freak, too!' Though today she opted for an unflattering, diarrhea-colored cashmere turtleneck, Liz was also fond of sweater sets. Two bitches in a pod, I thought.

'*Jill* is in serious trouble,' Ellen started gravely, yet calmly. 'Ad sales have been dropping.'

'Plummeting is more like it,' Liz added snidely. 'Existing accounts are complaining about the recent content. And forget about getting new accounts.'

This was getting to be like *Groundhog Day*. We'd had this discussion before. I made my usual retort. 'But circulation is up. Newsstand is up -'

Before I could even finish, Liz interrupted: 'We're talking about ad numbers, Jill.'

Fine, I thought. Let's talk about ad numbers. I was the only one who was selling ads, it seemed. When I showed up on ad calls, I didn't leave without closing the deal. Liz knew it. And so did Paul . . .

Where was Paul anyway? In the good old days, Paul Thomas, Nestrom's creative director, would have been my ally, sticking up for me in situations like this. Now, the Twins didn't even invite him to meetings. Still, I thought of what he might say. 'Are we approaching the right advertisers?' I asked. 'And have these complaining accounts ever bothered to look at a copy of *Jill*? Do they understand what they are buying

into? It's not for everyone. It's not *supposed* to be for everyone.'

'It's not only the advertisers, Jill,' Ellen continued, giving me a cold stare. 'Nymph Airways is upset about that stewardess story. They don't advertise in *Jill* but their CEO is extremely well connected.'

Liz jumped in. 'And Watley Brown is infuriated that you printed her photo shoot rider. Her publicist called Ellen last night and threatened to cancel all of her clients' upcoming interviews and shoots for not only *Jill* but *Fashionista*, too.'

'Liz, you know as well as I do that publicists are full of shit,' I scoffed, knowing that the only reason they brought it up was that someone was pulled from their biggest title because of lowly *Jill*. 'The minute she has a C-lister she needs to promote, she'll be back. Besides, that's what Watley gets for her ridiculous demands. I mean, two dozen lavender-scented candles? Peruvian peaches, pitted while facing east, cut into precisely half-inch squares, and marinated in honey? A six-pack of purified oxygen in ten ounce cans complete with attachable face mask? That woman is insane! And the readers should know it.'

'That's really beside the point,' Ellen continued evenly. 'And we can't change what's been done. But I've been looking over the next issue's cover.'

She pulled the layout from a folder and stood it up on her desk. She read from it in a halting, disapproving monotone.

'How to sleep with someone famous.' Long pause, accompanied by a tense glare from Liz.

'His penis is not a toy.' Pause after nearly choking on the word *penis*. 'Or is it?' she finished. Pause. Glare.

Ellen continued, 'Another reason *not* to quit smoking.' Another, even longer pause. Another, even longer glare.

'We need to tone these down, Jill,' Ellen said.

'*Way* down,' Liz echoed.

I knew how to play the magazine business game. It was all about ad sales; I knew that. But it was also about keeping expectations in check. And it was also about targeting the right advertisers for your publication. *Jill* was a niche publication, and when conceptualized, its circulation was never meant to be more than half a million. Eight years later, we even topped that, closing in on 800,000. And the advertisers, for the most part, understood that *Jill* wasn't at all like the other glossies out there. *Jill* was unabashedly unapologetic about making young women feel good about themselves instead of pointing out their flaws. *Jill* had models of all sizes and color in its pages, not just the stick-figure heroin addicts the other publications favored. *Jill* favored subversive celebrities. And our core advertisers knew it.

'Come on, those are all obviously tongue-in-cheek. And what about our readers?' I asked. 'Toning down the coverlines will alienate them.'

'Readers don't buy ad space,' Liz said smugly. I wanted to strangle her by her string of pearls. She had no idea how to – or to whom to – sell the magazine. Not to mention that before she arrived the publisher, in essence, deferred to me. An editor at my level – with her own name on the magazine – should have the power to admonish the publisher. Liz apparently thought it was the other way around.

'I'm not saying you have to tone down the content,' Ellen said, softening a bit. Sometimes I thought she actually did get

what the magazine was originally about. I thought about our onetime camaraderie. How did she get to the point of calling me 'dear?' 'But we do have to tone down the coverlines,' she went on.

'We . . . can't . . . put . . . the . . . word . . . *penis* . . . on . . . our . . . covers,' Liz said in a staccato so tense I thought she was being anally tortured.

It was a losing battle; I knew it. 'Okay,' I conceded, 'I'll tone them down.' I'd use 'wanker' instead of penis, then. I'd find ways to keep them *Jill* quality. I started to get up.

'That's not all,' Ellen said, and I shrunk back down in the chair, waiting for the other shoe to drop. 'We need to get you a managing editor in place right away.'

'I agree,' I said, relieved, thinking the worst was over. 'I've got a pile of great resumes on my desk.'

'There's someone in particular whom I would like you to see,' Ellen said. 'I've already set up an appointment for you to meet her. Three P.M. Tomorrow.'

'Fine,' I said, looking at my watch. 'If that's all, I really need to -'

'That's not all,' Liz said, her eyes demanding that I keep my ass firmly planted in the Eames.

Ellen gave me a half smile. I was squirming inside, but there was no way I would let it show. Something bigger was afoot, though I couldn't imagine what it could be.

'The magazine needs to look more mainstream,' Ellen said, as she again fiddled with her hair band.

*Mainstream*. The word made me want to unleash a primal scream. *Jill* was the antithesis of mainstream. My magazine had full-on fatty recipes instead of diets; makeunders instead

of makeovers; disarmingly revealing celebrity profiles instead of fawning puff pieces; and writers who were a bright band of personalities, not just bylines.

‘I’m not saying the magazine has to *be* mainstream,’ Ellen went on, as my blood boiled. ‘It just has to *look* a little more mainstream.’

‘It needs a total redesign!’ Liz blurted.

That was it. ‘What?!’ I exclaimed, so bewildered that my jaw nearly fell into my lap. ‘That’s just not necessary!’

‘It’s not open for negotiation, Jill,’ Liz barked nastily. ‘It’s an absolute must. And it needs to be done in six weeks.’

‘Six weeks?!’ I was approaching primal scream pitch, so much so I thought I’d shatter Ellen’s sparkly glass windows. This time I stood. I clasped my hands together so they could not see them shaking. As much as I hated confrontation, I had worked way too hard to be talked to this way. ‘Why six weeks? There’s no way!’

‘There’s *always* a way,’ Ellen purred, keeping her cool. ‘I’ve seen it done, even more drastically, in less time.’

‘I need it to sell for January,’ Liz snapped. ‘*That’s* why it needs to be done in six weeks.’

Ellen went on, ‘So let’s get ourselves a new managing editor. And let’s get the redesign under way. *Asap.*’

I was speechless. I didn’t know how to respond. I just stood there staring at her in shock, still convinced there was *no way*.

‘The woman I want you to see is from a small publication, *New Jersey Lighthouses*. But she’s *vastly* talented,’ Ellen went on, tidying her desk and not giving me another glance.

Liz continued to glower, adding, ‘You’ll see; new blood will be good for *Jill.*’

A lump started in my throat. A lump of rage that I knew would eventually manifest into tears. *New Jersey Lighthouses*? Were they on crack? Even worse – a redesign? In six weeks?!

‘No, I don’t think so,’ I said, shaking my head. ‘I think *Jill* is fine the way it is. I don’t understand why you’re trying to turn it into exactly what it’s not supposed to be. *Jill* isn’t *Charisma*!’

‘It certainly isn’t. And like Liz mentioned,’ Ellen said, ‘it’s not up for discussion, Jill.’

A small laugh escaped my throat. I didn’t really mean it to, and I certainly didn’t feel amused, but it was all so absurd. They had to listen to me. Didn’t they? I was the magazine’s creator and founder; it was based entirely on my vision. *I* was *Jill*. They weren’t. And there was nothing they could do about that.

Ellen finally met my eyes. Calmly, quietly, she folded her hands together on her desk. It seemed she was reading my mind. ‘I understand that *Jill* is your baby, dear,’ she said, trying to soothe me, ‘but the magazine’s personality doesn’t have to be so tied to yours.’

There it was. The other Manolo Blahnik had dropped. And it was a particularly pointy, spiky-heeled one. And I couldn’t believe what I was feeling. I was hurt. That was a direct insult to *me*. They didn’t like my magazine because they didn’t like me. Not only did I want to cry; I wanted to quit right on the spot. But I quickly thought of the repercussions . . .

Josh hadn’t been working all that much lately. We had a hefty mortgage. And we were spending an obscene amount of money on fertility treatments. There couldn’t be a worse time

for me to walk out. But I would be damned if I'd let them control my magazine.

'Six weeks,' I choked out in concession. 'I'd better get started then. Is that all?'

'That's all, Jill,' Ellen said, cheerily, while twisting her pearls. 'I knew you'd understand, dear.'

As I left her office, I was shuddering inside, holding back the tears that were welling and threatening to spill all over my loaner blouse. I was amazed at how much the Stepford Twins were able to shake me. And I hated myself for it. But I wouldn't cry just then. I couldn't. There was no way I'd give them that satisfaction.

I left the Thirty-third floor as quickly as I could but I was still in shock when the elevator hit eight. I couldn't even spend time preparing for 'the walk.' I just did it.

It was amazing how the 'red-carpet walk' turned into a 'perp walk' in just thirty minutes' time. Which meant that Casey must have warned everyone to back off. As I passed the sea of cubicles, my staff members turned down their faces, like ostriches ready to bury their heads in the sand, instead of wearing the usual pounce-ready expressions. How much did they know? I was humiliated. But more than anything, I was pissed off.

Redesign. I had to do it. And there had to be a way to compromise. Approaching Casey, I called out, 'Cancel every single meeting I have for the next few weeks,' before I sought refuge in my precious, albeit dumpy, four walls. I was never so thankful to have a door. I slammed it shut.

Casey tentatively tapped on it immediately after I closed it. 'Every single meeting, Jill?' she asked gently, opening the

door a crack and sticking her head in. 'Are you sure? Even the ad calls?'

'Especially the ad calls,' I snapped, holding strong. While I did a redesign, Liz would have to sell ads for once.

Casey's head disappeared as she quietly reclosed the door. I wanted to let the tears come right then, but I fought them. Because I knew when they came, they wouldn't stop.

I spun around in my chair and studied the framed cover of *Cheeky* magazine, *Jill's* predecessor. It was my very first cover, as an editor-in-chief. Then I stared at the framed *Time* cover, with my beaming face looming over the words JILL WHITE, MEDIA WUNDERKIND. I sighed wistfully. Boy, was I young, then. I barely even knew what I was doing. Back then, I was actually encouraged to be flippant and irreverent.

How times had changed.

Shaking off the memories, I finally got myself together and buzzed Casey.

'Hey,' she answered, concerned.

'Hey,' I said. 'Whenever you're ready, come on in and we'll discuss the day.'

She hung up and within a second my door was opening. She had a hopeful smile on her face. 'We're getting barbecue for lunch if you want in,' she said, knowing hush puppies might cheer me up.

I thought on it. 'Maybe,' I said, 'but I'm not all that hungry.'

Her voice became suddenly singsong as she glanced down. 'Oh, Ruggles is here to cheer you up,' she said. 'How'd you get in he -?!'

She suddenly screamed, releasing a shriek that would

make a dog's ears bleed, before jumping onto my coffee table.

'What?!' I cried. 'What?!'

Casey was frozen, her face a mask of horror. 'Rat!' she spat out finally. 'Rat!!'

I climbed on my chair and looked down.

Yes, there was a Ruggles-sized rat, in all its fat, furry, twitchy-nosed, red-eyed, fang-toothed, and bald-tailed glory. There had been several sightings of said rat by several staff members ever since we'd moved. But neither I nor Casey had ever encountered it. Until now.

And here he was, poking around my office like he owned it.

I suddenly felt like I was going to vomit.

Jumping down from my perch, I rushed past a still-quivering Casey and raced down the hall, out the glass doors, across the vestibule, to the ladies room. I burst into a stall and heaved my morning Diet Coke in a splashing rush into the porcelain.

After another heave, I took a few deep breaths. I perked up a little. Nausea . . . now that was a good sign. A *great* sign. I felt instantly a whole lot better. Suddenly, the Stepford Twins didn't seem all that important.

I let out another deep breath and pulled down my skirt. *While I'm here, I might as well pee*, I thought.

But the next thing I knew tears were flowing down the Anna Sui blouse in a veritable monsoon.

I had gotten my period.



*Local Girl Awarded Full Scholarship  
to Connecticut Prep School  
— Athens Daily Banner, August 1979*

**Y**et another unsuccessful fertility treatment. And yet another not-so-veiled threat from the Stepford Twins. It was shaping up to be a great day.

To take my mind off the failed fertility treatment, I focused on my interaction with Ellen and Liz, which plunged me into a real depression. I thought of that Talking Heads song 'Once in a Lifetime' with David Byrne's bewildered voice questioning: 'How did I get here?' Thinking on it sent me back to the darkest period of my life.

I was fourteen, fresh out of a commune in rural Georgia.

Yes, a commune. Not the David Koresh, religious cult kind. It was a hippie, antiestablishment, grow-our-own food, conserve-energy, homeschool-our-kids kind. And it provided a somewhat happy, if unorthodox childhood, for me and my younger brother, Alex.

My parents were from the Northeast. They met when they were both on the tenure track at Yale – Mom as an art instructor, Dad as a philosophy professor. At the encouragement of one of their mentors, they left the rigidness of academia behind for communal life on a farm right outside Athens.

Whenever I think of my mom in those days, I picture her in low-slung hip-huggers with her hands caked in mud. She had long, straight blond hair; a perpetual tan; and deep, thoughtful dimples that came out whenever she concentrated really hard, like when she was working clay.

Pottery was her first love. I honestly think she enjoyed tossing pots more than spending time with Dad, me, Alex, and all of us combined. She would spend hours in the pottery shed, and sometimes I thought if we didn't go in to get her she wouldn't sleep, eat, or do anything else. When we would distract her from the spinning wheel, she'd seem like she was emerging from a coma, blinking and staring at us, like she had no idea who we were. The funny thing was, very few of those pots would actually make it to the kiln. Many of them sat unfinished, air-dried, and crumbly, lining the shelves and waiting for what, I never knew. I don't think Mom knew, either.

Dad was covered in hair. He had a head of brown spirals that reached down to his shoulders; a chestnut coat of fur on his chest; and a bristly russet beard and moustache, which made his piercing blue eyes, stand out even more. He had an offbeat sense of humor, a strong mischievous streak, and a quick and articulate tongue. He loved to get in tête-à-têtes with anyone who would listen. When the others at the

commune became weary of his rantings, Dad would pull on his tweed blazer with the elbow patches – his only blazer – and go over to Athens and engage local students in his favorite coffeehouse. Sometimes he'd be gone for a day. Sometimes he'd be gone for a few days. But he'd always come back from those jaunts elated and rejuvenated. Whenever we would happen to be in town with him, young girls would rush up to greet him. 'Hey, professor,' they'd call between giggles, even though he wasn't one – at least not anymore. Not that Dad was a liar. But his ego would allow him to pad the truth a bit, and I knew those young girls were tasty feed for that hungry ego. Mom knew it too, though she'd go throw some pots and forget.

Dad was a great teacher, though, and schooling on the commune was probably far superior to that of the average public school. Not only did we learn all of Shakespeare's plays by the time we were eleven, but we honed our math skills, debated politics, painted, drew, sculpted, built, and fished, which was my favorite thing to do.

Whether I'd go out in our self-made rower with Dad, Alex, or alone (despite her earthiness, Mom had prissy tendencies when it came to fish guts), I found fishing to be the best escape of all. It was quiet. It was challenging. Everything except the mossy lake seemed far away and unimportant. And it was the one time when I felt completely myself, comfortable in my skin. Plus, there was nothing like landing a bass or a trout bigger than Alex's, and basking in Dad's proud smile.

But communal life wasn't all idyll. Deep down, I knew both Mom and Dad believed that it could provide a better, simpler, more tolerant, more equal, less evil life than the

outside world. But no matter how much they tried to shun reality, it would inevitably creep in.

Work on the commune could be tiring. And as tolerant and mellow as everyone tried to be, there were frequent squabbles. During those times, Dad would talk about moving into town. But most of the townspeople weren't welcoming to having people like us as neighbors. The university set were the only people in town, in fact, who wouldn't mutter 'dirty hippies' when we passed by. The problem was that housing near the university was expensive.

So we stayed put, probably for much longer, than we should have. To cool off from disputes with the others, or just to remedy their restlessness, my parents would simply take off, sometimes for days on end. They'd drive miles to see a Grateful Dead show or leave to join a protest. Many times we had no idea where they were going, but we always knew why they left. And although Alex and I felt comfortable with the others on the commune, we still couldn't help but feel left behind.

Through it all, my parents never let go of the esteem of academia, which is why they encouraged me to apply to Northeastern prep schools. 'You need to see the world in other ways, too,' I remember Mom saying, perhaps a little too urgently.

'You can always come back, if you want,' Dad pointed out. 'But you need to go beyond the bubble. A great education starts with seeing all views. And there's a lot to be said for a good education,' he'd add wistfully, making it clear where he'd rather be. I wondered if their sending me off was fulfillment of their lost dreams. It was almost as if they were

too committed to the communal lifestyle, or too proud to admit that it might not be working as they had hoped. More likely, I think neither of them had the energy to leave for good.

In spite of everything, I was proud of my upbringing; I still get sentimental about it even today. Too many times in my life I have become homesick for its simplicity – which is ironic because soon after my acceptance into prep school, I resented everything about it.

My parents couldn't have been prouder when I received a full scholarship to Hillander, the exclusive Connecticut prep school that was the alma mater of dozens of presidents, captains of industry, and Pulitzer Prize-winning writers. Though I doubted I would eventually fall into any of those categories, I was optimistic about the opportunities that were sure to come along. Even more exciting was the fact that I had never been around so many people my age. I was eager, and ready, to make a lot of friends.

It didn't quite turn out that way.

On the day I left the commune, my parents loaded me, Alex, and my duffel bag into their junky old van and we drove all the way from Athens to Washington, D.C. My parents and Alex stayed there for an antinuclear protest. I went to Union Station and got on a northbound Amtrak.

When I arrived in Connecticut at the station nearest Hillander, I asked the ticket clerk for directions and I walked three miles to campus. Along the way, I admired the golds, oranges, and browns that stretched along the tree-lined sidewalks, and I liked the crispness of the autumn air and how the wind caused the leaves to swirl around my feet. I

have no idea how long it took me to get to campus, but I do remember the awe I felt when I arrived.

The towering gray stone buildings with venerable ivy-covered walls were just like the academies I pictured from books like *A Separate Peace* and *Catcher in the Rye*. I noticed a group of clean-cut boys crossing the quad on a tour, and I wondered which one would become my Holden Caulfield.

Everything was so different from Georgia. It was colder, for starters. I noticed that the people moved in a quick, serious manner, not slow and ponderous, like at home. Though it was fall, there was still plenty of greenery on the grounds, but whereas Georgia was emerald, Connecticut was pine. The dissimilarities alone showed me that I certainly had a lot to learn. But that was okay, because I loved to learn. I was hungry to know the world beyond hippie communes.

My excitement quickly melted away, however, the minute I arrived at my dorm. I'll never forget the looks on the faces of my roommate and her parents when I stepped in the door.

'Hi! I'm Jill!' I said excitedly, as I tossed my duffel on the floor.

Their expressions displayed a combination of fear, horror, and having eaten bad shellfish.

'You must be Alissa,' I went on, despite the awkward silence.

'Yeah,' the girl answered numbly, as she and her mother simultaneously looked me up and down. Alissa was all angles and edges: straight, blunt-cut blond bob, with each hair perfectly aligned; sharp but pretty features – pointed nose, prominent chin, triangular cheekbones, big square white teeth. She was topped off by confident, narrow shoulders

helming a tall, thin frame, and if it weren't for her giant, round boobs, we probably even would have worn the same size.

But I was flat as a board and much more reedy all around. Plus, it didn't look like we shared the same taste in clothing. Alissa wore a perfectly pressed plaid skirt and neat navy crewneck sweater. That, combined with her mother's Chanel suit, and her father's sweater-vest and bow tie ensemble, made my Goodwill turtleneck and carpenter pants look even more ratty.

'We're the Fords,' her father politely said, snapping out of his own fugue state. 'Of Boston.'

'Oh,' I said. 'My parents were in Boston last year. For a Dead show.'

I noticed Alissa stifle a giggle then, as her mom opened the door and peered into the hallway. Her expression was more perplexed than ever when she pulled her head back in. 'And where *are* your parents, Jill?' she asked.

'Oh, they're in D.C.,' I explained. 'They dropped me off at the train station there.'

Mr Ford blinked. Alissa looked at me like I was growing another head. And Mrs Ford's face again went the fear, horror, shellfish gamut.

'Alone?' Mr Ford asked. 'You came up here *alone* for your first day of prep school?'

I didn't see the big deal. I was used to doing things on my own. 'Sure,' I answered weakly. Then I turned my attention to unpacking, trying to focus on anything but their stares.

Alissa and her parents did the same, diving into six suitcases and several large boxes. There was a bag of hair

products, accessories, and styling tools; another bag of nail polish, compacts, lipsticks, and creams. There was one big bag just full of shoes – clogs, boots, loafers, sandals, sneakers, flats, pumps, slippers, and even golf shoes.

And then there were the clothes. Dozens of sweaters in colors I never knew existed. Skirts – short, long, midi. A dozen firmly pressed khakis, all the same color. Hangers full of starched Oxford blouses. Cowlenecks. Turtlenecks. V-necks. Izods. Tenniswear.

‘I don’t know where we’re going to put all of this in this tiny room,’ Mrs Ford harrumphed at one point.

‘You can put some in my closet,’ I kindly offered, since I had taken up only five measly hangers.

By the end of the hour, all of the closets and drawers were filled, but discomfort still took up most of the space.

Alissa looked so spooked at the prospect of living with me that I thought she might repack right then and there and follow her parents out the door. Instead, she stepped outside to bid her parents a tearful farewell. As they closed the door behind them, I couldn’t help but tiptoe over to hear what they were saying.

I quickly wished I hadn’t.

‘It’ll be fine, honey, I’m sure,’ I heard Mr Ford mumble.

‘I’m just not sure how I feel about my daughter living with a charity case,’ was Mrs Ford’s haughty reply, before another horrified sob escaped from their daughter.

And so I was marked from day one. A ‘charity case.’

For the next four years, I searched the campus up and down for anyone, girl or guy, to befriend. The guys wouldn’t give me a second look. They were rich, cultured, clean-cut,

athletic and wanted girlfriends who were more feminine versions of themselves. The girls were all Alissa Ford clones, many of them Hillander legacies with family lineages that rivaled the House of Windsor. They treated me like if they got too close they'd catch poverty or, worse, unpopularity. They were confident, preppy, catty, and intimidating. It was an entire school of Ellen Cutters and Liz Alexanders. Even the less thin, less rich, less popular girls wouldn't associate with me for fear of becoming even more unpopular.

They had a million nicknames for me. 'Blue light special' referred to my Kmart wardrobe; they called me 'Daisy Mae,' because of my southern twang; and when I dumbly, naively shared details of my upbringing, they started to call me 'that Amish girl.'

I tried my best to change and fit in. There wasn't all that much I could do about my wardrobe, but my hair took up a good amount of time. I went into town one day and got a cheap cut from the local barber school. I wanted graceful 'wings' like the other girls in school. 'Layer it like this,' I told the student, insecure with her scissors, while showing her a picture of Jaclyn Smith. I ended up looking more like Patti Smith. Then a week later, I tried to fix it with a perm that could only look good on a poodle.

I bought cheap make-up at Woolworth's: pale pink lipstick, shocking coral rouge, fire engine red nail polish, midnight black mascara, and eye shadow – robin's egg blue, of course. Somehow, it never looked right, either, as much as I tried to copy the Hillander style.

My other attempts at fitting in were just as disastrous. I tried out for the tennis team, but even a fuzzy yellow ball

could humiliate me. The rest of the school, it seemed, had been playing since in utero. Instead, I got really into music. On my lonely jaunts into town, I'd pick up a few cool used or remaindered albums at a dingy old record shop where I liked to kill time with the old hippie who ran it.

And I had a job at the library, which not only was great for extra cash, but it was where I'd always run into my secret crush: Walter Pennington III, a tall, handsome, and extraordinarily down-to-earth member of a high-profile political family. Walt had thick brown hair; a square jaw; and hallow, thoughtful eyes. But I fell for him because he had a layer of depth that no one else at Hillander seemed to have.

Walt was constantly checking out books, but not the usual guy books like *Lord of the Rings*, or anything by Robert Heinlein or Ernest Hemingway. He preferred reading the modern dramas of Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, and Edward Albee. But his absolute hero was Sam Shepard.

'They say he's going to win a Pulitzer this year,' I said shyly one day when he checked out a copy of *Angel City and Other Plays*. Suddenly, Walter Pennington III, who never before noticed my existence, was talking to me.

Nearly every day he hung around the checkout desk and we discussed plays like 'Buried Child,' and 'Cowboy Mouth.' 'He's just so quintessentially American,' Walter said fiercely. 'There's something at the core of his work that speaks to the tragic American psyche.'

Soon he was recommending other plays and playwrights for me to read. And when he'd return, he'd be genuinely interested in my opinion. I often fantasized about hopping on the train with him to New York to see an off-Broadway

production, then talking about it over espressos in a Village coffeehouse afterward. It was a nice fantasy. And sometimes in reality I thought he might actually be interested in me. There was just one problem with Walter Pennington III.

He was dating my roommate.

I was no competition for blond Alissa and her big boobs; so actually dating Walt would be impossible. But I enjoyed our friendship, glad for Walt's company when he'd seek me out in the library. And sometimes, if he came by the room and Alissa wasn't there, he'd look through my record albums and we'd talk about things like what we thought The Ramones's 'Chinese Rock' was all about, or how we thought Marc Bolan from T-Rex was cool. He loved to see which albums I came back with from the town record shop every week; he even borrowed a bunch.

We grew closer, and we'd confide in each other about our dreams. Walt told me that he wanted to be a playwright instead of following the political path his famously widowed mother had planned out for him. 'My mom will be crushed, but I just don't have any interest in politics,' he complained. 'I just don't know how to tell her that I don't want to major in political science in college.'

It was too good to be true, however. Our friendship came to a crashing halt, thanks to Alissa.

One day in the library, Walt was leaning over the counter reading me a scene from a comedy he was writing. We were sharing a laugh over a clever line when suddenly – thump! Someone tossed a tome onto the counter before me. 'Aren't you supposed to be working? Check this out,' a voice demanded. The voice belonged to Alissa. She turned to Walt.

‘And what are *you* doing here? I’ve been looking all over for you.’

‘I was just . . .’ his voice trailed off, for he didn’t know what to say.

‘Well, I need to finish my Shakespeare paper before tonight, or the whole weekend will be ruined,’ she snapped. ‘And I’d appreciate your help. There’s no way I’m ruining Spring Fling weekend for boring Shakespeare.’

Spring Fling kicked off with a Friday night dance, then a local beach party on Saturday. It was a big annual deal, a sort of pre-prom, and everyone went with a date. I started to get angry, thinking how unfair it was that Alissa would be frolicking in the sand with Walt as I sat in the dorm. I decided to busy myself with returns to put it out of my mind.

‘I mean, Jill probably has her paper done, right?’ she said just as I turned away. ‘Right, Jill?’

‘Uh, yeah,’ I answered. I had finished it a week ago.

‘So she doesn’t have any worries this weekend,’ Alissa said. ‘Who are you going to Spring Fling with, anyway?’ she asked snidely, knowing full well that no one had invited me.

My silence gave her the answer she sought, and a smug expression replaced the sneer. ‘Oh, so sorry,’ she said, in mock pity. ‘Maybe next year.’ Then she laughed.

‘Alissa, that’s not cool,’ Walt said meekly before she dragged him out the door.

The next day, Walt abruptly returned all the albums he had borrowed. He never approached me at the library again. And Alissa didn’t speak to me for weeks.

So I should have been suspicious when one night she said to me, ‘You know tonight is dorm ritual, right?’

I didn't know what she was talking about. 'No,' I said innocently. For a straight-A student, I was so stupid. 'What is it?'

'It's a bonding thing that's a tradition here,' she said. 'The girls do a silly ritual and vow allegiance to the woman named for the dorm so she won't haunt us during finals.' She added that Lisa, the sophomore who was the R.A. in the dorm and her good friend, was in charge. 'All I know is they will knock on our door to get us tonight. And we're to drop everything and go along.'

'Okay,' I agreed, knowing that not participating would surely earn me grief.

Then at 10 P.M., just as Alissa and I were turning in, the knock came. We followed the other girls down the hall and into the common room, which was pitch dark, except for the glow of a few candles. Lisa instructed us to sit, spaced out at least an arm's length in a large circle.

When we were all settled, she began, 'This is what you all must do to prove your loyalty to the Agnes Vance dorm at Hillander.'

I held back a yawn, hoping that this stupid ritual would be over soon.

She went on. 'I am going to blow out all the candles. Then you must strip down to your underwear. When I say, "begin," the first girl must take this crown' – she held up a golden cardboard hat from Burger King – 'and put it on her head. Then she must stand on one leg, put her hands in a praying position, and say, "I, state your name, am honored to be a princess in the court of Agnes Vance."' Then she must count until five, very slowly, and pass the crown on to the next girl.'

It sounded so idiotic, but harmless, at least.

Or so I thought.

Lisa went around the room and blew out the candles, and the room grew eerily dark. Whispers arose, but she silenced us with a command. ‘Strip!’ she shouted. There was some rustling around the room, and some embarrassed giggles, but silence fell when the first girl began her pledge.

It went on, solemnly, and before I knew it, it was my turn. Alissa, who was next to me, handed me the crown in the dark. I stood up. I balanced on one leg. I placed the crown on my head and put my hands in the praying position. I was doing it all by the letter.

‘I, Jill White,’ I said, ‘am honored to be a princess in the court of Agnes Vance.’ Then I counted, following the slow pace of the other girls. ‘One . . . Two . . . Three . . . Four . . .’

Before I could even say ‘five,’ the lights flicked on. And there I was, standing in the middle of the room, in my bra and undies, wearing a Burger King crown, balancing on one leg and praying. A peal of laughter arose from the rest of the girls, who were all clothed. ‘I knew she’d be wearing grannies!’ I heard someone say.

Then there was the flash of a Polaroid camera. The resulting photo was posted in the cafeteria the next day.

So Alissa had gotten her revenge. And any hope I had of being one of the girls had been dashed once again. I thought things couldn’t possibly get worse.

Then my parents visited. Unannounced.

They were on their way to Rhode Island for – what else? – a Dead show, so they decided to stop in and say hi.

I was in my room, reading, when I heard some giggles outside my door. The next thing I knew there was a knock on the door. I opened it to find my parents standing there, in all their bedraggled, tie-dyed glory.

A year before, I viewed them as my heroes. On that day, they were my bane. I once had thought my father looked like an enchanted woodsman. But seeing him then, his scraggly hair stretching past his shoulders, his unkempt beard sprouting gray, I thought he looked homeless. And Mom appeared pale, tired, and in an untouchable zone of numbness like never before.

Needless to say, I wasn't all that welcoming. 'Why didn't you call?' I kept asking, over and over. They could have given me a chance to prepare myself. Maybe I could have arranged to meet them off campus. *Way* off campus.

Dad plopped on Alissa's bed, putting his bare, dirty feet near her pillow. 'Did you put on a little weight, sweetie?' he asked.

I had. Fifteen pounds to be exact. So nice of him to notice.

Then Mom snapped out of her coma and spoke. 'What's happened to your hair?' she asked vaguely. She stepped closer and inspected my face. 'Are you wearing make-up?'

That's when Alissa walked in. When she spied my guests, she was at first stunned – I had never had a guest, ever – then in fear for her life. At least Dad had the good sense to sit up and put his unwashed feet on the floor.

'Aren't you going to introduce us?' Dad asked, nodding toward Alissa.

I reluctantly, and hastily, made the introductions, as I pulled on my jacket, dying to get out of there.

‘Hey, Alissa,’ Dad said coolly, just before we were going to leave, ‘do you know where we might score some good weed?’

Her eyes were full of judgment as she gave a snotty laugh and snapped, ‘*What?*’ Suddenly, she was above smoking the occasional joint.

‘C’mon,’ I begged. ‘I’m starving.’ And I finally dragged them out of the discomfort zone known as my room.

I wanted to take my parents into town, but Dad insisted on staying on campus. ‘How often do we get to come here?’ he said.

So much to my misery, we ended up at the small café in the student union.

When we sat, Dad was preoccupied with appraising the students, reading the bulletin board, and getting up to chat with any professor who would walk through. Mom kept eyeing me questioningly.

‘Did you get a perm?’ she asked. Her earlier tone of disbelief had morphed into simple annoyance.

I nodded.

I knew what she was thinking. I didn’t even ask her if she liked it.

‘Just don’t forget who you are, honey, okay?’ she said, trying to be understanding, but still sounding very, very annoyed.

How could I ever forget who I was? My classmates were constantly pointing it out.

Like right that very second. A jock from my class, Judd Watson, walked in with his entourage. As he passed my table, he cracked, ‘Freak alert!’ to the hilarity of his cronies.

Mom grabbed my hand and softened. I was glad. I didn’t

need her judging me too. 'Are you making friends, honey?' she gently asked.

I just shrugged. Her comfort made me want to wipe off my make-up, let my hair go back straight, put on my overalls, hop in their van, and leave Hillander behind for good.

'Jill doesn't need to be friends with these stiff,' Dad said. 'She's smarter than them all put together. They're probably all Republicans anyway.' Dad's familiar, proud smile took over his face. 'Plus, we didn't send her here to make friends. Your grades with a Hillander education – there will be no stopping you in this world, honey. You'll leave every one of them in the dust.'

Then I knew – suffering through Hillander's hellishness would be easier than living with my parents' disappointment back in Georgia. So I stuck it out. When it came time to choose roommates for the next year, I boldly put in for a single, which sophomores rarely got. But miraculously, mine came through, most likely because every girl in the school doubled up with someone, anyone, so as not to get stuck with me.

So I spent the next three years in the solitary confinement of a single room, every night, every weekend, and every holiday. Yes, even holidays. My parents considered sending me a bus ticket for holidays an outrageous expense. So since they wouldn't go out of their way to bring me home, I never bothered to save up to buy a ticket myself. And no girl would be caught dead being seen with me, never mind inviting me to her home during breaks. So while most families were carving up a turkey carcass during Thanksgiving, I was sitting in my dorm room. Alone. I would while away

many of those hours studying, eating and sometimes I even cut myself.

The cutting started my first year – probably because it was my most traumatizing year, and probably because I wouldn't ever let Alissa see me cry. My pain and rage had to come out somehow, I guess. The first time I did it was when I came into my room one day to find her reading my journal, ridiculing it out loud to one of her friends. In it, I had written fictional fantasies of how I wanted my life to turn out, what I'd like my 'dream guy' to be like, and my opinions on everything. I even made lists, like this one:

*Things I want to accomplish in life*

1. *Skydive*
2. *Be a good mom*
3. *Start a charity*
4. *Start a magazine*
5. *Travel to all seven continents*
6. *Fall in love*
7. *Find a friend*
8. *Become more likable*

I'm proud to say that to date I've accomplished #4, #6, #7, and #1, not very long ago for a feature story in *Jill*. The list is etched in my mind still, as are the emotions I felt when I heard Alissa's mockery and peals of laughter. It brought back the agony of every social rejection I had withstood at Hillander in one moment.

Alissa was so focused on making fun of my journal that she hadn't even seen me standing in the doorway. Before she

could spot me, I crept back out of the room, so furious and upset that I locked myself in a bathroom stall. I remember sitting there numbly just waiting for the tears. But they wouldn't come.

Then I noticed a shard of metal sticking out from the broken toilet paper dispenser. I wiggled the metal back and forth, back and forth, until it snapped off. I ran my fingers over its edge, cutting my forefinger slightly, and watched intensely as the blood trickled down my hand. Strangely, it felt good. It felt cathartic. It was a relief.

Pathetic, I know. But it was the only way at the time that I would become distracted from the pain of being an outcast. As often as four nights a week, I'd hole up in the bathroom, now using a Swiss Army knife instead of the shard of metal, and cut – not enough to make the blood gush, though. No, I became an expert. I had practiced just the right touch. Just enough to make it hurt. Just enough to forget the real pain in my life.

I was bright enough to know that it was stupid. And I tried my best to taper off with other distractions, like music – and magazines.

When it was slow in the library, I'd pore over the glossies and mock them in my imagination. As I flipped through each page, examining each zitless face, each rail-thin frame, each blindingly white smile, I'd feel a well of disgust flood my soul. First, because I really resented not being anything like the models. But mostly, I was disgusted because I cared.

And I'd get angry looking at the flawless clothing. The perfectly applied make-up. The 'dream guys,' who were all Ken doll doppelgangers. I'd take the bogus quizzes, laugh at

the puffy celeb profiles, and make note of the lameness of the advice from the 'expert' columnists.

Then one night, in a frenzy of boredom, I started to describe what I hated about these magazines, and what I'd be interested in reading about. One sample entry:

*The latest Seventeen came in today. Why oh why do I subject myself to its inane, evil pages? Why do all these rags keep telling people how to be better? What if there were a magazine that just let girls feel okay about themselves? What if there were stories about useful things, like how to live with someone you loathe?*

Knowing now that Alissa was reading my journal, no matter where I hid it, I started to write to her directly, planting items that would infuriate her.

*Girls can be so phony. I was in the bathroom today when I heard Alissa's best friend, Tracy Fisher, talking with Alexandra Hunt. Tracy was saying how she couldn't believe Walt would date someone like Alissa, that they were totally wrong for each other, and that Alissa was looking fat lately, too. I mean, even though it is true – she has put on a few pounds – that's nothing that a good friend should say, right? I think I'm better off not having any friends here . . .*

I smugly snickered inside when Alissa had a huge fight with Tracy a few days later, and they stopped talking altogether. And I felt a terrific sense of satisfaction noticing

her eyeing her figure, and frantically weighing herself, from that day forward.

That's when I realized how dense Alissa was. She never figured out that I knew she read my journal, even when I out and out addressed her.

*I remember writing this another time: Remember my name, Alissa Ford, because one day, when you're fading into a life of country club obscurity as nothing more than a proper prop for an uninterested husband, you'll read it somewhere and wonder how the girl you pegged as such a loser could somehow come out on top.*

I wonder if she now remembers that passage as clearly as I do.