

Girl Club

Marilyn sat on the edge of her bed in sweats and a wife beater. She had a nice pair of slacks and a few button downs to choose from, but her mother had insisted on getting new clothes for her interview. She expected a blouse and skirt. It would be easier to talk her down to just the blouse than to refuse the clothes outright. When it came to the Women's Society, Gloria Willis was a force to be reckoned with.

"Marilyn?" came her voice with a knock on the door. "I've got the uniform!"

"Uniform?" she asked as she opened her door. "Isn't that a bit premature?"

"Yes, well, you'll be needing your own once you get in," Gloria explained herself. "And it'll make a good impression. You're a Willis woman, after all. Now go change!"

"I have nice clothes," Marilyn argued as her mother shoved a bag of clothes in her hands.

"Not how I mean it," Gloria snapped back.

"If I get in," Marilyn corrected. She hadn't fit in at the Women's Society even back when she was a little girl that could be wrestled into dresses. Gloria raised an eyebrow at her, like this was a confidence issue.

"The uniform could've waited," she continued. "I could go in the outfit I wore to Emma's wedding."

"Mary, honey, that outfit's just..." The corner of Gloria's mouth drew back in a grimace.

"Masculine?" Marilyn supplied. "I looked just as good as any of the guys there. Just because I came alone—"

"I understand you like women, but could you at least dress like one?" Gloria spat. Marilyn paused. She put the bag of clothes on her bed.

“Mom. We’ve been over this.” They’ve been over this again and again since she came out in her teens. Close to two decades of rehashing the same argument. “This doesn’t have anything to do with—”

“Just this once?” Gloria pleaded. “For me?”

She brought her hands up to hold Marilyn’s shoulders, eyes gentle. She smiled softly up at her.

“Just for the Women’s Society. For our family’s reputation.”

Marilyn nodded and picked the bag back up. Her mother took her victory with grace, shuffling out of the room and closing the door gently.

Marilyn dumped the uniform out on her bed. It was an all-white ensemble, just as she had seen in her childhood, but the Society tended to update the uniform every few years, following fashion trends she couldn’t wrap her head around. The current edition was a polo tank and a tennis skirt, made of slippery knit fabric that reminded her of a swimsuit. She shucked off her sweatpants. The skirt had built-in shorts, which helped hide her boxers as she bunched them up inside. She could bear it for one day as long as she didn’t look at herself.

The polo tank was cool as she slipped it on over her undershirt. Her mother didn’t say anything about shaving, so she would just keep her arms down to hide her pit hair. Her leg hair was on full display, but that might be easier to get away with. All she had to do was get there, get gracefully rejected, and tell her mother she tried.

As she left her room to walk downstairs, she passed by the family pictures on the hallway wall: Grandma, great-aunt Kristen, auntie Tracy, Mom, the uniform changing with the decade but all in Women’s Society white, and all standing in front of the same church where meetings were held. She lingered in front of the picture of their family, Mom and Emma and her, from back when they were young. Mom’s hair was still black. Emma stood in front of her, grinning at the camera with her one front tooth. Little Marilyn was shifting awkwardly at Mom’s shoulder, smile polite and nothing more.

Her mother was waiting for her, watching from her seat in the kitchen.

"It's the skort version of the uniform. They have a regular version, but I didn't get it. I know you, sweetheart."

Marilyn kept her eyes down as she ventured into the kitchen. She heard Gloria sipping her coffee. She dug her hand into the drawer with all their keys, letting the harsh sounds of metal on metal ground her.

"Yes. Thank you, Mom," she said brusquely.

"You look lovely," her mother added. Marilyn marched out the front door without replying.

Her truck sat in the driveway, dark gray and mud stained. It was one of the few trucks on the road that used the bed for equipment. When in the middle of a job, like she was now, it would be filled with roof tiles tucked under a tarp. A lot of her tools were relegated to the backseat. There was a sealed tub of flashing cement, a caulk gun, a long-handled hammer. Between that and the dark upholstery, Marilyn looked out of place in her own truck.

She gave herself five seconds, forehead pressed to the steering wheel, to just breathe. Then, she shoved the key in the ignition, cranked the engine, and drove.

The building where the Women's Society held its meetings was a church, just like the three others Marilyn drove past on her way there. The sign in front of its parking lot was the only thing that separated it from a store or office building: "Service Sunday 10 A.M., Wednesday Woman's Society Meeting." Marilyn slammed the truck door behind herself and trudged her way inside.

Nothing had changed inside since she was a kid. It was the same impersonal gray carpet, same sterile white walls, and same over-air conditioned air that raise goosebumps up her bare arms and legs. It reminded her of the last time she'd been dragged here, shoved into a skirt and expected to make nice

with the “upstanding” women eating brunch. And just like she had when she was young, Marilyn made her way to the bathroom and hid.

She felt like a coward and hated it. She should’ve just said no, like she had been all these years—but the past month had all been nursing home waiting lists, final wills and testaments. It wasn’t happening now, but it was on the horizon, and who was Marilyn to turn down the one thing her mother had been asking her to do for years? And yet, for all that she loved her mother, why couldn’t she just suck it up and take her lumps? She was too old to be snubbed by tweens, and far too old to care about them snubbing her.

Then again, those tweens had grown up, too. Who knew how many of them were here?

While Marilyn was convincing herself that the bathroom was a waste of her time, the door opened, and in walked a woman with a bottle blonde bob, dressed in business formal. She couldn’t look her sister Emma in the eye.

“Marilyn? So Mom finally convinced you to give the Society a shot,” Emma said. She walked right to the bathroom mirror and pulled out a tube of makeup.

“Yeah,” Marilyn ground out. Emma was dabbing the makeup onto her face—Touching it up, somehow, but she couldn’t tell what difference it made.

“What about you?” Marilyn asked. “Are you... one of the judges?” Emma scoffed, then frowned. She’d smudged her makeup in some imperceptible manner.

“No, I’m not a member yet.”

“Really?”

“Of course not!” She rolled her eyes, not at all worried about the stick right next to them. “The Women’s Society isn’t a sorority. It’s for accomplished, adult women. I only just turned thirty.”

“Oh,” Marilyn said. “Mom didn’t bring it up.”

“Of course she didn’t,” Emma hissed. “For all your flaws, you’re still the first.”

“I—”

“Just go home and say you got rejected,” Emma cut her off. “Save everyone some time. The Women’s Society isn’t you.” With that parting blow, Emma capped her mystery makeup and strutted out of the bathroom.

Marilyn had never turned down a challenge from her sister.

Even with a new generation of women, the banquet hall matched Marilyn’s memories of it. Round tables with bleached white tablecloths, and almost everyone sitting at them looking much the same. Like she told her mother, the applicants were all wearing their own clothes. Only the members, circling like hawks with tablets and taking notes, were in uniform. One of those Society women intercepted her at the door, despite how quietly she had tried to enter.

“You must be Marilyn Willis, right? You’re quite late; you’re the last one to arrive.”

“Yep, uh, that’s me.” She shriveled under the woman’s gaze as she ticked something off on her tablet.

“Follow me,” she snipped. The woman paraded her through the entire room, to a table next to the far wall. Marilyn was a bulldagger in a china shop, and everyone that looked up from their conversations was waiting for her to crush a teacup so they had a good reason to kick her out.

And of course, she was assigned to Emma’s table.

“—it’s quick to whip up after work, and my husband just *loves* it,” she was saying as Marilyn sat. Some inanities about cooking, based on the prompt projected on the wall. Emma finished what she was saying before acknowledging that Marilyn was there.

“So lovely of you to join us,” she said. “Go on, introduce yourself. Are you still working at that... what, construction company?”

“Roofing,” she corrected. Emma knew what she was doing. This was a room for people with office jobs, for people that could go to work in pencil skirts instead of coveralls. Marilyn wasn’t ashamed of what she did, though.

“I’m in charge of some of our contracts now that the boss is getting older,” she added. To her surprise, the other women looked interested at that. Emma also seemed taken aback by their reaction.

“That sounds exciting!” said one of them in a soft voice—Valerie, if the nameplates at each seat were to be trusted.

“I just work in marketing,” she continued sheepishly. “Is it scary climbing up on roofs?”

“You get used to it after the first couple weeks,” Marilyn replied. Valerie’s eyes went wide, awe-struck, and she mouthed the word, “wow.”

“I kinda get that,” said the woman by the Isabella nameplate. She had long braids, and stood out in the overwhelmingly white crowd.

“I’m a chemical engineer,” Isabella explained. “I learned my lesson about lab safety pretty early on.”

“That’s cool,” Marilyn said.

“It’s cooler when you remember to put on gloves, trust me,” she retorted. The table shared a laugh at that. All except Emma, who squirmed in her seat. A woman named Eve with pink hair seemed to notice it, and antagonistically leaned in to continue the conversation that Emma hated.

“I’m a programmer. Freelance,” Eve said. “Nice to have my own schedule, but taxes are a headache.”

“They really are,” Valerie agreed. “I—”

“We should get back on topic,” Emma spoke over Valerie. She shrank down quickly, like she was used to this.

“Who hasn’t had a chance to talk yet?” Emma looked pointedly at Marilyn as she asked. The wall still read, “Cooking.” Marilyn wasn’t helpless in the kitchen, but she didn’t memorize recipes either. So, being put on the spot like that, all she could think to say was:

“Uh. So, what’s on the menu this morning?” She wanted to kick herself as soon as the words left her mouth.

“It’s... It’s pretty good!” Valerie said, just as awkward as Marilyn but still trying to help.

“If I didn’t have to drive myself back, I’d be thinking about the mimosas a little harder, y’know?” Isabella chimed in, smoothing things over more deftly.

“Oh, lucky me, my husband’s picking me up,” Emma said smugly. She punctuated herself with a sip of her mimosa. Before someone else could get the last word, a chime rang through the room and drew everyone’s attention to the front. The projector changed to the words, “Physical Examination,” and a woman wearing the Society uniform with pearls and white pumps. Marilyn gulped. She recognized her.

Ashleigh Rowan’s voice washed over her without sinking in. It had been years since Marilyn last saw her. Emma and the other women stood up, following directions she had missed. Marilyn bolted up to join them, but because she lagged behind, she caught Eve turning towards the door.

“Where are you going?” she asked.

“I’ve seen enough,” Eve answered quietly. “Already fought my way out of the boy’s club. Just wanted to see if I was missing out on anything here.”

If she was leaving, she must have had her answer. As the doors closed behind Eve, Marilyn longed to join her. Instead, she shuffled into the orderly lines the other applicants had gotten into. There just so happened to be room behind Emma, and she cursed her luck for it.

The physical examination printed on the wall meant that several Society women were going down the rows with measuring tapes, taking down notes of the applicants' hands, arms, legs, waists; every body part that someone decided could be used for a divination of femininity. When the examiner in Marilyn's row reached her, she sneered and moved on without deigning to touch her.

In the front row, Ashleigh herself was examining Emma. She moved slowly. Marilyn was just close enough to realize they were talking to each other.

"Why'd you put me at that table?" Emma complained in a whisper.

"Because you're getting in no matter what," Ashleigh whispered back. "The other candidates deserved to have a chance."

They tittered. Marilyn bit down on the inside of her cheek. Then, Ashleigh leaned in, smiling smugly, to say one last thing.

"You were right about your sister."

Marilyn shoved Emma into Ashleigh hard enough for them to both stumble. The room gasped. Marilyn was fed up with how these women saw her, what these women expected her to be. She ripped off those expectations with a snarl. Emma stared in horror and embarrassment as her sister stripped down to her boxers.

"What was she right about, huh?" Marilyn bellowed at Ashleigh. Her heels clacked as she took one step back, hand clutching her pearl necklace.

"Emma said I was an ugly butch? That I do hard work outside with a bunch of men? That I'm a dyke? You already know that last one, don't you, Rowan? You dragged my name through the mud after

you kissed who you thought was the Willis boy, didn't you?" Another round of gasps, and the murmur of gossip taking flight. Emma turned to her friend, jaw hanging low.

"I didn't—You're making this up," Ashleigh said. Louder, to the room, "This is nothing but slander."

"Fucking man up and own it," Marilyn barked. "Yes you did do that. You're the reason I dropped out of high school!"

"Ashleigh...?" Emma's voice was faint.

"I won't darken your door again. None of you saw me as a woman, anyways," Marilyn finished her tirade.

As she stormed out of the room, she kept her eyes on the floor. She couldn't bear to see how her tablemates were looking at her. They had been a bright spot in this whole ordeal, and Marilyn didn't want to know if they hated her when she looked like herself.