

ECDYSIS

"I really don't want to be out tonight," I groaned. Why does it feel like no one's ever listening?

Daisy started intensely at her phone as we walked hurriedly across the street. "DAMN IT!!" She exclaimed, "Misty swore she'd be coming tonight and now she says she's not sure because her stupid boyfriend might be coming over."

"Isn't she supposed to break up with him?"

"God—it can wait until after the party, it's bad enough that Stormy cancelled on me at the last minute too."

"Daisy, her dad died."

"Like a week ago, get over it and live your life already!"

In all of the realizations I could have had in that moment, only one sprung to mind: *God my friends have really stupid names.*

Daisy picked up her pace until she was almost at a light jog. "If I don't show my face with at least five other girls at this party tonight, my social status will be RUINED."

Watching "teen" movies growing up taught me one thing: there is a social ladder in high school, and there are ridiculous codes one must keep up with in order to climb that ladder. I never believed any of it to be true, but here I was: following Daisy McDougal to what promised to be the *craziest* party of the year, in a night that could make or break how we were to be viewed for the next two years of high school. I found it hard to swallow that any of this was real and that, more over; I was actually "in" with the "in" crowd.

As time passes, each generation finds a fondness for the one that came before it. I was fortunate enough to turn 16 at the same time that the '90s have become the "in" decade. My penchant for floral, dark colors and a biting sense of sarcasm turned me from what, ironically enough would have made me an "outcast" in a '90s high school movie, to a full-fledged popular girl. I didn't question it, I only openly cynically criticized it—and that only sent my "cool-girl cred" soaring. Somewhere, Janeane Garafalo was turning in her monotone, feminist, B-listed grave.

Daisy and I approached our destination, the last house on Maple Avenue. A near giant-sized terracotta house with all the works: a perfectly manicured front yard behind a white picket fence, a stone-

lined walkway that leads to a porch adorned with hanging plants and a two-seater porch swing—Americana at its architectural finest. Surely the family to whom this house belongs has probably acquired an innumerable amount of cherished memories behind the bright red door of this house. Birthdays, anniversaries, Thanksgiving dinners with twelve, maybe fifteen people crowded around the table, a brand new puppy in a basket on Christmas morning. Now, tonight, behind these same walls new memories will be made: memories of lost virginities to regrettable partners, memories of that indiscernible taste mixed in a red solo cup of Keystone Ice, and then, of course, the blackouts, where no memories will be made or recalled at all.

It's weird how what seems so idyllic on the exterior can house such depravity on the inside.

“Like a fucking David Lynch movie.” I didn’t realize I was speaking out loud. I did that a lot, it made me quirky to my new group of peers, but now it just ticked Daisy off—everything seemed to get under her skin tonight.

“What did you just say?” She whipped around, as if I had said the unspeakable, like wishing a plague upon her family or insulting her new Michael Kors purse.

“Oh, uh it was a—“

“Davey fucking Lynd better not be here tonight after what that asshole pulled on me last weekend. He knows better than to show his face at a party that I’m going to!”

“Oh, no, no, Daisy—not Davey Lynd. David Lynch—he’s a movie director...”

“OH MY GOD SHUT UP,” Daisy had finally reached her breaking point. “Can you not waste my time with your weirdness when we’re right outside the party, please? UGH it’s bad enough you’re the only bitch I’m bringing with me tonight, but sometimes I don’t know why I’m friends with you at all.” She stormed up the pathway and onto the pleasant American porch, right up to the welcoming, patriotic red front door.

Daisy’s words stung me like salt and vinegar chip-residue in a freshly opened paper cut. It shouldn’t have been that big of a deal to an aloof, uncaring, newly-popular teenager like myself, but it was. If her diatribe wasn’t bad enough, our quickened pace caused some tiny beads of sweat to form around my hairline. I scrambled in my purse to find a tissue; any sign of bodily functions was sure to make Daisy flip her shit even more. I tried to plan what any cool ‘90s girl would do, but I was conflicted:

Surely Daria Morgendorffer wouldn't care if someone saw her perspire, but I was a misplaced Angela Chase living in a Cher Horowitz world. So, while I could mock other girls for freaking out for experiencing normal human behavior, I still had to follow the strict popular girl mores myself.

Daisy was livid at this point. "Are you just going to stand there like an idiot or are you coming in?" She exclaimed before turning to the door. Just as Daisy was about to knock, I felt a flash of panic take over my whole body. "Uh, Daisy," I dared to inquire, "are you sure this is the right place? It doesn't look like anybody's home."

"Shut up, of course this is the right place. And it doesn't look like anyone's home because the lights are off to keep the cops away, duh. Is this seriously the first party you've ever been to?" Daisy chastised me.

I could have asked why there was no music was playing, or how the lights being off would be less of a tip off to cops than caravans of teens that should have been pouring into the house, but none of that seemed to really matter, and Daisy certainly wasn't going to answer to all of my naïve questions. We were two girls entering a huge, possibly empty dark house on a secluded street at night, wearing short skirts our mothers would cringe at the thought of. But we were here, and turning back was not an option.

Neither was calling the cops. Or my parents. I mean—would YOU want to be known as the school snitch?

I turned to ask Daisy a question that was probably of some importance, but not nearly as important to her as getting her drink and dance on as quickly as possible. I had to play it cool, stop being such a worrisome bother. I opted instead for a quip, "looks like a dive—right?" Daisy didn't respond. In fact, she wasn't even there, she had found her way in and was probably already mingling with the entire football team.

I cringed at the thought of having to pretend I cared about football for the sake of saving (and then ultimately sucking) face.

My stomach felt in knots at the prospect of having to drink some shitty vodka one of the jocks stole from his parents' liquor cabinet.

I wanted to cry when I remembered that she wouldn't be there. She never would be at any of these stupid parties.

There's a rhythm to social gatherings such as this one. You mingle, flirt, pretend you don't want to try any alcohol, get "charmed" into doing shots with the rest of the high school glamorati, have muscle-bound mongoloids hold you upside down during a keg stand, get "drunk" and end up in a room with Timmy Touchdown as he makes clumsy passes at you, hoping that Harry Hail Mary is jealous about dumping you for Gabby Gonorrhea—a cheerleader whom you're not talking to this week. Next week, she'll be your best friend and someone else will end up on your shit list.

It's not so much a rhythm as it is a formula. Every Friday night it's the same thing. These are the nights that make up the best years of your life. 'Cuz Lord knows for most of these people, it's not going to get much better after high school.

I thought about her again. Her smile. Her eyes. Her books. I thought a lot about books. How much I really miss having the time to read them. I missed reading them for—believe it or not—*fun*, and then talking to her about those books. I missed hanging outside 7-11 discussing music. I missed talking online when it was too rainy to go outside. I missed genuine conversation. I missed all of that boring crap I've had to leave behind.

Why did I have to leave it behind? Why did they set their sights on me; was it my horn-rimmed glasses? Mom said they'd make me stand out but I didn't think they'd skyrocket me to high school superstardom. Was it my mix of flowery dresses and combat boots? Daisy told me I was rad like Tavi Gevinson—who was that again? It couldn't be my whiter-than-white flesh that almost seemed grey against my burgundy-red hair. Who was I again? I lumbered up the steps and into the house, my skin feeling not like it belonged to me—a strange sensation but one I had grown accustomed to as of late.

I passed the threshold and scanned the space before me. It was so dark I could barely see anything as I desperately searched for a sign of Daisy's bleached blonde hair. If I'm not right beside her throughout this night, hell is sure to break loose. There she was, dancing by herself. I was so fixated on catching up to her I didn't have time to survey the scene, nor did I realize that the music sounded a lot less like top 40, and a lot more like dark noir movie soundtrack. I felt unsettled, even more so than I usually do at these gatherings, but this time the need to leave was urgent.

"Daisy," I managed to choke out, "I'm outta here." My ears started ringing, "ok, Daisy?" I nudged her, the uneasy feeling in my stomach growing more and more steadily. It took a few moments of pulling

my collar like I was doing some awful, sweaty Rodney Dangerfield impression and nudging at thin air before I realized Daisy was nowhere to be found.

Smoke filled my eyes—that was nothing unusual, there was usually some bonehead stoner smoking a J in every corner of these stupid parties, but this was different. There was no foul skunk-like smell accompanying it, no smell at all really, just more of a thin fog. My arms felt clammy—but it wasn't from the sweat. They felt cold, as if a fever was coming on. If you were to prick my finger at that very moment, it seemed as though my blood would trickle out and become an icicle before falling to the ground.

Shit was getting weird, basically.

I stumbled backwards, attempting to remain graceful as I tried to feel my way in the dark towards the door. Instead of falling into the arms of a frat boy-in-training, I instead hit what felt like a series of metal bars. Then I felt it. A lick. A sharp lick, quick, across the nape of my neck. I swirled on my heels and turned to face the offender. *There are NOT enough Jello shots in the world to warrant that behavior.* I squinted in the dark fog to make sense of what I was looking at—it didn't help. Staring back at me were two piercing yellow-gold eyes. I got lost in that odd shade, trying to decipher who was behind that peculiar, piercing set of contacts. The tongue struck me again, a hard whip-like smack in the throat.

This was not a person. I had not been dealing with humans for a long time.

I found myself not only staring eye-to-eye with a pale grey iguana, but there were cages filled with reptiles as far as the eye could see. *Where the fuck was I? The bright pink flyer didn't say this was a theme party.* Where was Daisy? Where were those awful jocks and snotty cheerleaders I never thought I'd be hopelessly searching for?

Then I saw it. The sight I'd been pining for, but not anticipating to ever see: *her*. There she was, in the center of the room surrounded by smoke and cages. Her, in all her perfection and glory. Her, in all of her awkward, quiet angst. *What did they see in me that they didn't see in her?* She was radiant, and she was looking right at me. Not even at me, but through me. Why did I never notice her piercing yellow-gold eyes before? How had I talked to her so many times in the past without ever truly seeing her?

She inched closer and closer to me until I could feel her cold breath dance upon my skin. I could almost taste her pale pink lips—a desire I had never really thought of until this very moment. She stopped just a few centimeters short of my face and formed her eyes into a tight squint. She spoke:

“You’re not the only one that changes her skin just to fit in...”

I could see the snakes begin to rattle against their cages, hissing at me angrily. One by one and every reptilian life-form in the room began to shed, snakes bashing their heads against their cages to split open their skin, while the lizards began to nibble on the skin they had just discarded. I thought about what I learned in my fourth grade science class: reptiles performed this unsightly and strange ritual out of necessity: they outgrow their old skin and then feed on it for strength. In my fourth grade science class I also learned what a “virgin” was—and that I would likely be one forever, if I didn’t stop being “such a gross weirdo.” At least that’s what Daisy informed everyone of during my presentation on the extinction of dinosaurs.

Like those ancient, massive reptiles, the clock was ticking on my time here. I had been dancing too close to the sun, but the jig was almost up, and it was only a matter of time before I got burned. I thought I had been so fucking lucky—without trying I managed to trick everyone into believing I was the girl they wanted me to be. I had once been scorned by Daisy and her kin, but now I was one of them. I just had to kill off my former self to become just like the rest. But was I stronger for it? Typecast in the grand teen flick that is life, defined not by my likes, interests or personality, but instead by script-written counterparts?

I’ve worried so much about not caring and fulfilling the role mapped out for me that I’ve forgotten what it’s like to be me. The closest I came to caring was when I thought about her. *Am I happy?* I implored, but no one was there. She was gone. Just a small, yellow snake slithered across my boots.

I felt my skin finally peel off of my bones until I was nothing but a framework of a human being; a lanky, awkward skeleton wearing horn-rimmed glasses, a floral dress and combat boots. I don’t remember the rest of the night, the weekend, anything else. I went back to school on Monday a faceless skeleton. Daisy and her posse scoffed at my taking heroin-chic to a new level skinny and stopped talking to me. But no one noticed that I was no longer human, just a skinless pile of walking bones.

And I liked it that way.