

Slippery Things

Lane Baker

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This book is dedicated to Kevin Baker-Cross
and Madalyn Lee Baker-Cross.

CHAPTER 1

Larissa Locke slouched in the awkwardly uncomfortable chair across the desk from Assistant Principal Walter Miller for about ninety seconds without either one saying so much as a word. Larissa could tell the administrator's eyes focused on her with laser-like precision, but she simply wasn't in the mood for eye contact.

“So, Larissa, was it your feces?” Mr. Miller asked for the third time in a row.

If he thought repeating the question was going to get a rise out of her, he had another thing coming. She could work a fierce poker face like the best of them,

especially when someone was trying to rile her up.

After another twenty-or-so second stand-off, he droned on, “You know, for a stunt like this, normally I would suspend you. But after looking at your behavioral history this year, expulsion is not out of the question.”

Larissa offered a faint shrug, as if to say, “Is that the best you can do?” Then she pretended to mull over the faded certificates on his wall and the gaudy pattern of the window curtains behind him.

“I’m really wondering what it was that made you act out in this way. What has Christy Carmichael ever done to you?” he implored.

This, of course, Larissa didn’t answer either, but acted as though she suffered from a hearing disability. This evidently perturbed him, because he tapped his pencil on the desk at an increasingly rapid rate. In truth, Larissa was devastated to have been caught. The knot in her stomach felt like a tumor, and she couldn’t wait to get home, crawl into bed, and curl up into a ball. Maybe even cry. But for the moment, she had to keep her game face on.

“Personally, I find this disturbing,” the middle-aged assistant principal continued. “Really disturbing. Perhaps I should recommend a psychiatric evaluation.”

Disturbing? In what kind of special bubble does this man live? A snicker unintentionally escaped her lips, causing Mr. Miller’s eyebrows to arch as if someone had just cut in front of him in line at Starbucks. After a beat, he leaned back in his chair. “I reviewed your file, Larissa, and I know you weren’t always like

this. What's going on?"

Walter Miller really wasn't really a bad guy, but of course the students all made fun of him regardless. He would lurk around campus all solemn and severe, but when speaking with him one on one, you could tell he clearly wanted to be liked. Except when you were in trouble. Then he was like a shark sniffing blood in the water.

"Was it your feces?"

Larissa began to feel sorry for old Mr. Miller, given he was trying so earnestly to get to the bottom of things. Life surely amounted to no bowl of cherries for him either. If so, he certainly wouldn't be wiling his time away in this cement prison known as Westlake High. So for better or worse, the adolescent finally met his gaze. "You're just dying to know, aren't you?"

He leaned forward abruptly in his chair. "Let me give you some advice, Larissa. The more you talk, the better. Insolence is only going to make matters worse. Like I said, expulsion is not off the table."

"No, it wasn't my feces. Hope you're not too disappointed. Can I go now?"

"How are things at home?"

"Fantastic. Can I go?"

"Larissa, what's going on between you and Christy? What were you trying to tell her by dumping... manure in her locker?"

Larissa gave Mr. Miller the once-over, and for dramatic effect, adjusted herself in her seat. "You know, you look like you've lost some weight," she said. "Have you been working out?"

“Don’t change the subject on me.” Mr. Miller was clearly familiar with this type of evasion strategy.

“I like the new haircut too. Shorter definitely makes you look younger. Are you trying to make a good impression on the new men’s volleyball coach? Or is it that foxy male secretary? What’s his name?”

“My personal life is...”

“None of my business, right?”

Mr. Miller took a deep sigh and shook his head. “We have a psychiatric social worker affiliated with the district who could do an evaluation,” he said. The administrator glanced at the student’s open file on his desk, probably for dramatic effect as well. “You know, I do have reason to suspect there could be a mental health issue at hand. I believe you know what I’m talking about. Now, I’m only going to ask you one more time. Why did you...”

“She screwed my boyfriend without a condom. There, are you happy now? Christy Carmichael is a boyfriend-stealing skank. Her vaginal cooties are spreading through campus faster than last year’s outbreak of crabs. But does she get called into the office? No. Does she get expelled? No. Does she get a psychiatric evaluation? Of course not.”

Walter nodded blankly and jotted a few scribbles on his note pad. He then tore off a sheet and offered it to Larissa. “Suspended for the remainder of the week,” he blurted. “I’ll set up an appointment for you with the school counselor when you return on Monday.”

Larissa stood and snatched the paper, relieved the charade was finally over. “Have a fabulous day,” she

said. “And I mean it; the haircut looks fierce. Meow.”

Twenty minutes later, Gary Locke escorted his daughter through the double doors of Westlake High, into the drizzly Northern California air. Several of Larissa’s colleagues clapped and cheered during the parking lot processional, which made her feel like a bit of a star. Gary sensed she welcomed the attention, so he gripped even tighter onto her arm and picked up the pace. Once in the car and on their way home, Larissa turned her shoulders to face the window and watched the passing scenery, just as she had done a thousand times before.

“Larissa Abigail Locke,” her father began.

“Here we go,” she muttered just loud enough to be heard.

“Larissa Abigail Locke. That’s what I’m going to name the ulcer that’s burning a hole in the pit of my stomach.”

Larissa didn’t know what to say to this, so she just cleared her throat, trying to remain focused on the blur of the passing neighborhood. “Do you have anything to say for yourself?” her father continued, “Anything at all?”

Turning to face him, she offered, “Hey, didn’t you check your calendar? Today is national Chillax Day.”

Gary shifted his focus back and forth between his daughter and the residential street. “What on God’s

green earth has gotten into you?”

Grounded for a week amounted to a fairly light punishment, Larissa thought later as she unfastened her seat belt and lugged her backpack up the driveway home. After an awkward dinner with her father and brother, the knot still churned in her stomach, so she spent the evening in her room collecting mementos of her and her ex, Lance, placing them in a pile on her desk. Finally, at last, as the room drew somber with fading light, Larissa curled up into a ball on top of her bed and didn't speak to anyone else for the rest of the night.

That night Larissa had a dream. It seemed oddly familiar, as if she had experienced this dream at least once before. Her eyelids parted, and she saw the room glowing bright with amber light. Too bright to think clearly. She was laying in bed with the covers removed. Four middle-aged men stood before her wearing dull brownish-grey clothing and a pasty complexion.

Larissa tried to stand, but immediately found herself unable to budge. It was how she imagined the feeling of being paralyzed from the neck down. One man, who appeared to be the leader of the others was shining a pink light into her eyes, and two of the other men exchanged remarks in a bizarre foreign language. This leader, who had an inch-long scar on his forehead, retracted the light. “Sorry to wake you,” he said. “We'll give you a little something to help you go back

to sleep.”

“Why can’t I move?” Larissa asked in a panic.

“It’s only temporary,” replied the stoic man. “Nothing to get upset about. We have a medical expert with us to take good care of you.”

The man turned away to bark orders at a second figure, an older man with sunspots and white hair, who immediately brandished a thick, fleshy tube. This medical expert slid the tube into the teen’s left nostril, making her wince in discomfort. “I don’t want to go back to sleep,” Larissa screamed. “Leave me alone!”

“Just try to relax,” the medicine man replied in a reassuring tone.

“Do not get your panties in a bunch,” said a third figure, approaching Larissa’s side and resting his hand on her arm. Shorter and heavier with curly locks, he turned to his colleagues to explain. “This is a colloquial expression. A derivative of the British version, ‘don’t get your knickers in a twist.’ It’s used in jest to imply that a female’s overexaggerated response may twist her undergarments into an unbearable position.”

The medical expert nodded and ran his clammy fingers down Larissa’s throat to check her pulse, and then turning her head to the side, looked inside her ear. He spoke to the others in their abrasive language.

“I don’t need an evaluation,” Larissa said.

“It will be completely painless,” the man with the scar asserted. “You’ll see.” Larissa finally got a clear look at the fourth figure. He was slightly taller and paler than the others. There remained very little hair on his head, but his eyes were deep, dark, and fright-

ening. Expressionless, he seemed to look straight through to her soul.