

# BUBBLES REBOOTS!

## **Liberty High School Patio**

### **Lehigh, Pennsylvania**

#### **(Back in the day.)**

Sandy caught sight of his curly head of hair bobbing through the cluster of teenage smokers gathered on the Liberty High School patio and flicked her cigarette to the bricks. “Look alert, Bubbles. Here comes your dorky tutor. Pretend to be studying.”

In fact she was studying – maybe not math, but her nails - a frequent pastime for then seventeen-year-old Bubbles Yablonsky who was laying down the last coat of Purple Passion, not allowing so much as a drop to touch her cuticle. You couldn’t buy that kind of skill. Though, on second thought, she supposed you could for fifteen bucks down at Nails by Clare on Stefko.

“Josh can relax,” she said, blowing on her artwork. “I’m on my way.”

“You’ve been here for twenty minutes.” Sandy checked her watch. “No, a half hour. Your session is almost over.”

“So what? It’s senior skip day, spring fling, whatever. Anyway, it wouldn’t hurt him to leave the library once in a while.”

Bubbles eyed her tutor’s narrow face, so pale and serious as he pushed his way through the crowd of D-student slackers smirking at his obvious disgust. Josh could have been somewhat good looking if he made an effort, ditched the wire frames and maybe

wore something besides the same red-plaid shirt and scruffy jeans every single freaking day. He was tall and thin and way too uptight.

“Also, he needs to get laid.”

“So now you’re the sexpert, say?” Sandy snorted, though that was only because like Josh, she, too, was a virgin. And none too happy about it, either.

Bubbles stroked her basketball of a belly. Unfortunately – or maybe, fortunately - it was hard to remember, exactly, what had happened her first time. Lehigh University senior – and accidental father of her child – Dan Ritter had assured her she’d had a blast. But all she could remember was the funny chemical taste of the fraternity’s cherry Kool-Aid before everything went black. Should have known better than to drink from a green plastic garbage can, she guessed. Also, the guy offering it to her with two beer cans strapped to his head might be been a warning flag as well. Note to self.

Josh dumped his heavy backpack onto the patio with a declarative thump. “What the hell are you doing?”

Wasn’t it obvious? She held up her hands. “Five more minutes and we can start.”

“Five more minutes and we’re done. It’s not like I have all the time in the world to wait for you. It just so happens that my oboe lessons start at four.”

Sandy bit her lower lip, hard.

Bubbles batted her lashes, thick with Maybelline ultra black mascara. “Sorry, Josh, I...”

“You’re always sorry. What you’re not is at all interested in passing. You are going to fail Math for Morons and they won’t let you graduate.”

“Who cares? High school is so over.”

Twirling the paper thin gold band on her left ring finger, she daydreamed of her magical future as Mrs. Daniel Ritter with a nice ranch house and bright green lawn in some fancy suburb like Trexlertown, far, far away from her mother's dark, cramped row home on West Goepp.

And why not? Their future looked super bright. Dan had applied to a law school down in Schnecksville he'd seen advertised on the back of a matchbook and had already been accepted without having to take test or anything!

Of course, she would have to be the sole bread winner for three years while he got his degree, but no problem. With her cosmetology license from Vo-Tech and a steady clientele down flooding the new Quick Cuts at the Lehigh Valley Mall, they'd be just fine. Sandy was even talking about opening her own salon in a few years and calling it something exotic like The House of Beauty.

That's not to say Dan was perfect. Like any new wife, she harbored a few niggling concerns. One was that her husband preferred to sleep at the frat house even after their (literally) shotgun wedding at the end of Genevieve's musket. Dan said it was better for him to stay closer to the library where he was often holed up poring over *Current Affairs*, though when Bubbles went to search for him there one day, upon learning that she was his wife, the librarian presented her with a \$125 bill for fines he'd racked up over the five years. (Took him a little longer to graduate, he was so academically inclined.)

Never mind. Soon Dan would be out of college and no longer obligated to take phone calls from that annoying study partner of his, Trixie, with her crazy middle-of-the-night exam anxiety.

She rubbed her belly absently and Josh's cheeks went bright red. "Even though you're pregnant, that's no reason to give up on school," he said. "You never know. You might need to get a higher degree someday."

"Pshaw." She rolled her eyes and realized, with some urgency, that she was starving and in desperate need of a pee. "Gotta go," she said, dropping her capped nail polish into her bag and rising rather awkwardly on her wooden Candles. "See you around."

"But..." Josh gaped, speechless.

"But, nothing. Nature calls." And without a thought, she planted a light kiss on his cheek before toddling off.

They watched her and her swollen belly waddle toward the parking lot, her white skirt so short it barely covered the tops of her thighs, her Barbie pink tank top riding up over her bump to reveal a smooth patch of skin. Even back then, Bubbles avoided the uniform of her fellow students, the super skimpy jeans shorts and faded Ts, her aversion to cotton or any natural fiber (or, for that matter, hair color) already well established.

"I failed," Josh said, his shoulders slumping.

Sandy gave his arm a sympathetic squeeze. He'd tried so hard to help. But Bubbles was just impossible when it came to anything remotely school related, especially now that her already struggling brain was fogged with visions of darling onesies. "Don't be bummed. She can get her GED."

"That's not it."

"What is it then? You're suddenly all depressed."

He said nothing for a minute and then, gently fingering the sticky mark of her lip gloss, murmured, "I love her."

“Who?” Sandy asked, scanning the sea of smokers scattered about the school patio.

“Bubbles.”

“Bubbles?” No way. “As in *our* Bubbles?”

He nodded. “I figured someone should know in case we never see each other after graduation and I die and she wants to come to my funeral.” Then, as if just realizing what he confessed, he swiftly added, “Don’t tell her. Ever. Promise.”

“I won’t.” Though, that was debatable. This was huge news. *Huge.*

“I mean it, Sandy. I’ll have to kill myself if this got out. Bad enough that a nobody like me would have a crush on a bona fide princess.”

Princess? Sandy reassessed her best friend, now kicking open the rusted door of her Camaro, her overly bleached blond hair brittle and slightly orange in the May sun. “Not sure she’s a princess. Most princesses don’t go around with broken mufflers and overdoing it on SunIn.”

“That’s what people don’t get about her. She’s awesome. She’s beautiful and kind and, actually, pretty smart.” His gaze didn’t leave until the Camaro did, pulling out of the Liberty High parking lot with a screech of tires and a patch of rubber.

Sandy squinted. Surely, he was referring to someone else.

Then again, Josh wasn’t exactly the most reliable judge of character. She’d heard he’d come from a messed up home, a father who’d split when he and his younger sister were still in diapers, thereby forcing his mother to go on welfare and move into the projects where she made ends meet by offering discount music lessons.

Still, you had to admire a guy from a background like that who decides to put his nose to the grindstone and graduate at the top of his class. He even got into Penn State

full boat which was like the most impressive scholarship anyone in Liberty had won in the school's entire history.

He bent down and retrieved his backpack listlessly, as if all the energy had been drained from his being. "Anyway, she's a married woman and, soon, a mother and next to that I'm...just a kid."

Sandy couldn't stand to see him so down. "Josh, you are the smartest guy I know. Unlike the rest of us, you'll go to college and soon Bubbles will just be a distant memory."

"No. I will never forget about Bubbles. She's meant for me and me for her. Just that our timing - *my* timing - sucks. But, hey, welcome to the world of Josh Simon. Where nothing goes right, ever."

Except that about things not going right, it turned out he was very, very wrong.

