

Umoja?
Or
Our First College Party

“What are you going to wear?” I poked my head into the open doorway of Brittany’s room, my body still out in the hallway.

“This.” Brittany struck a pose in her black mini skirt and white tank top. God did I wish I could look that fabulous. I first met Brittany at a softball tournament over the summer. Even then, dressed in the same uniform she had worn for the past three games, her lashes were long, eyeliner smudgeless, ponytail bumpless, and sparkly headband as radiant as her perfectly straight teeth.

“Heels?” I looked at the multi-colored pile of heels on the floor.

“No, flip flops. Heels will be too much.” Wait, so the leopard print bra under the white tank top wasn’t already too much? Welcome to college.

“K, cool. Come get me when you’re ready.” I sprang back from Brittany’s open doorway and back down the hall to my dorm room. Maybe Brittany had it right, but maybe she didn’t, and I wasn’t about to get it wrong on this particular night, so I hung a hard left into the stairwell and climbed the flight up to the next floor.

“Hey, Taylor...um, Bean?” Our coach loved the idea of calling little five-foot tall Taylor by her lifelong nickname. I was under the impression that we were supposed to do it too, considering he never introduced her as anything other than a legume.

“Come in!”

I opened the door gently, peeking my head in behind it. I hadn’t spent much time with Bean yet, given that we had only been at college for four Freshmen Orientation filled days, but she was already an instant hit with the upperclassmen. Bean’s dad was Mexican and her mom was Japanese. Combine that heritage with growing up in Los Angeles and she was always the most beautifully tanned Bean at the party. It was probably for the reason that I was exactly one foot taller than her that we would become inseparable. “Hey! Oh, hey, Laura!” Laura was situated on the futon underneath Bean’s lofted bed. “What are you guys wearing?”

“I’m thinking shorts and a cute shirt, and heels.” Bean was straightening her hair in the full body mirror, which she only took up half of. I could probably stand behind her and straighten my hair in the same mirror without a problem.

“I’m wearing this. Is this okay?” Laura’s Oklahoma accent was as thick as her curly brown hair and she was showing about as much skin as a nun.

“Yeah, I think you look great. Okay, I’m going to go finish getting ready. Meet you outside in...” I glanced at Bean’s SpongeBob alarm clock, “oh gosh, twenty minutes! I gotta hurry, bye!”

Hustling back down the stairs to my room, I flung my door open to face the mess of clothes that I had strewn all over the floor and bed. Despite the mess, my room was still the largest of the five freshmen joining the team this year. Our softball coach was a retired lawyer and had persuasive skills that were off the charts, so he worked his magic to find us decent rooms and roommates.

I had literally pulled out enough jeans, tank tops, and dresses to clothe a small country, but this was no time for a rash outfit choice. The five of us freshmen were preparing to attend

our first softball team party and this was a crucial chance for first impressions. You don't work your butt off to make a college softball team and then hope your teammates hate you.

I definitely couldn't rock a mini-skirt the way Brittany did. Then again, I didn't even own a mini-skirt like the one Brittany did. But jeans would probably be a safe bet, so I slid my waspy five-foot-eleven frame into my favorite pair of Rock and Republic jeans. Wait, these were like \$200 jeans. Yes, I had gotten them half off, but that was beside the point. Would I be "that girl" in the way too expensive designer jeans? This was a valid concern, except that I was going to a party at a college that cost nearly \$50,000 a year to attend. I (aka my parents) practically paid \$3,000 per class, so I guess I probably had the right to wear my Nordstrom Rack half-off Rock and Republic jeans if I wanted to. Except right now I didn't want to, because the Pennsylvania humidity was making me sweat like a whore in church. So I stomped out of my Rock and Republics and nakedly flopped down in my desk chair. This was the 21st century and there was no problem that couldn't be solved (or created) without a little Facebook stalking.

I clicked quickly through pictures of the girls on my team, analyzing their "Going-Out" looks on the classic "Sweatpants to Slut" Scale. With enough data to make my next attempt, I spun around in my chair and scanned the room. Denim skirt and white tank top? Casual, cute, and capable of passing as either "I made an effort" or "I just threw this on." It would do.

"Hey! Leaving at 9:15 right?" Paige burst through my door as I flung myself across the room to grab a towel.

"Yeah, um, it's 9:10," I glanced at my clock and then back at Paige's stretched out, navy blue sweatpants and Green Lantern t-shirt. "Are you almost ready?"

"Yep, just gotta change. Meet you guys out back." So, Paige was getting ready in five minutes. *Did I just totally overthink my outfit?*

"Ready?" Brittany appeared in my doorway. *Guess not.* I looked down at the cherry red platform heels on her feet. *And I guess we decided heels weren't too much, after all.* I slid my feet into a slightly more subtle pair of sequined flip flops.

"Ready!"

We stomped down the stairs and pushed through the heavy, fireproof exit door to find Laura, Bean, and Paige waiting for us. Paige had changed into a saggy pair of boyfriend jeans and a Superman T-shirt. Her sun bleached hair was slicked back into a low ponytail. The only make-up on her face was Chap Stick. "Got the map?"

"Yep." Brittany held up a wrinkled piece of notebook paper that looked like it had been ripped out of a legal pad with no time to spare. We formed a circle around it.

"Wait, so, they gave this to you and then just drove away?" I could tell Laura was nervous. She hadn't had a sip of alcohol in her whole life and I got the impression they didn't have many parties in Oklahoma. They didn't have many gay people either, which is why Laura didn't see the irony that Paige was wearing "boyfriend" jeans.

"Who gave it to you? The seniors?" Bean was standing on her toes trying to get a good look.

"Yeah, Kelly texted me to come outside and then she was in her car with the other seniors." Brittany was running her fingers through her deathly straight hair.

"And they said be there at 9:30?" I've always been a fan of promptness.

"Uh huh."

“Okay, well we need to go this way. They live down there.” Paige snatched the map from Brittany’s grip and motioned us down the road that looped behind our dorm.

“How do you know that?” Bean wobbled on her four inch heels, still trying to peek at the paper.

“Because I went there on my recruiting trip. Let’s go.” Up to this point, I had spent pretty much my whole life as the ring leader, so having someone else take the lead was kind of a treat. And who was I to argue with the girl in the Superman T-shirt?

The dimly lit road was lined on one side by an ominous, forested hill and on the other by the towering, stone dorm buildings. It would have been creepy except for the number of chattering freshmen making their way to parties. I watched a girl in the group in front of us yank repeatedly down on her skin-tight mini-dress, her ankles wobbling loosely in her heels. Guess Brittany’s outfit wasn’t as outrageous as I thought. The girls around her were dressed to the T in equally eye-catching outfits. Was this how people dressed in college? My mother would kill me. And even worse, our little freshman gang had it all wrong. Despite what would become our most endearing habit of walking in height-order, we were the most miss-matched group of wanderers any fraternity party could ever see. My lanky five-foot-eleven frame went shoulder to shoulder with bleach-blond Brittany; to body-pierced, tatted up, and apparently undercover superhero, Paige; to naïve, pin-curled Laura; and down to little five-foot-nothing Bean, practically running in her heels to keep up with us. We were both a walking AT&T commercial and an ad for campus diversity. And I had just spent the last hour trying to find an outfit to help me fit in.

“Okay, so, we go up.” We had reached the end of the narrow road, and our only options were down towards the run down student houses off-campus, up towards the fraternity houses, or back to the safety of our dorm rooms.

“Wait, are you sure? That’s where the frat houses are. They wouldn’t live up there.” More importantly, we were banned from going up there. Freshmen weren’t allowed on Fraternity Hill for two weeks.

“Yeah, this is *this* intersection,” Paige exaggerated her point to the daddy-longlegs looking figure scribbled in the middle of the paper. Awesome, let’s just draw more attention to ourselves by standing in the middle of an intersection arguing over this map that looks like a preschooler drew it. “We go up. Come on.” Paige charged up the hill, her jeans sagging around her hips. Brittany was right behind her, texting feverishly while Bean, Laura, and I exchanged nervous glances.

Our school is known for its huge Greek population, but it is really very unfortunate that the fraternity houses are situated on the face of an incredibly steep hill. It is practically impossible to look cute in your denim-skirt and white tank top while hunched over and heaving up a hillside. I stared down at the pavement, trying to control my breathing in a desperate attempt to minimize how hideous I looked conquering this hill, when I noticed the dark circles appearing on the street.

“Ohh, shiiitt!” Bean scurried for cover under a tree as rain began to land on her perfectly poofed hair. Laura, Brittany, and I were not far behind, hopelessly covering our hair with our hands as Paige clutched the map to her chest and jogged after us. We reformed our circle around the map in hopes that some hidden directions might reveal themselves. We had made

it far enough to have absolutely no idea where we were and certainly did not recognize any of our fellow students sprinting past us for cover from the rain.

I looked down at my phone, 9:28. Shit. “Do you guys think we should call Kelly? It’s 9:28 and there is no way we are going to make it to her house by 9:30.”

“No, no way. We can’t call for help.” Brittany was swooping the dripping make-up from under her eyes as the rain began to fall harder, shaking the leaves of the tree above us.

“I think we should call.” Laura looked at me in agreement. What else we were going to do? We were 100% not where we were supposed to be (let alone *allowed* to be) and if we had any chance of saving our hair, we needed solid directions to this house.

“Paige, you do it.” Feeling a little bit annoyed that Captain Paige had led us up to some random intersection on the side of a hill between Kappa Alpha God-Knows-What and Delta-Where-the-Fuck-Am-I, I decided it was only fair that Paige make the call.

“Alright, fine.” Paige pulled out her phone and wandered a few steps away from the group. The rest of us cowered together, watching each other’s make-up slide down our faces.

I had been wondering about the possibility of being totally, completely, and brutally hazed on my first night with the team. The horror stories were endless – humiliation, getting written on, being forced to finish a keg between the five of us. Of course my mother had already given me the lecture: “You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to do.” But it is always more complicated than that, and there was no time like the present, huddled together in the pouring rain, to pop the question. “So, do you guys think they will make us drink?”

“Probably.” The confidence in her response made it clear that Brittany was not nervous about what the upperclassmen might do to us, or at least she pretended not to be.

“I have been really worried about that. They can’t make us drink, right?” I didn’t know how to answer Laura’s question without breaking the news that she certainly wasn’t in Oklahoma anymore.

“Hi Kelly, it’s Paige.” We quieted down to listen to our fate. “Yeah, Paige the freshman.” Not a good start. “Yeah, we aren’t gonna be there at 9:30.” Maybe we should have had someone a little more apologetic make this phone call. “Because we don’t know where we are.” Oh my god. “I don’t know. We are by some Greek house...I think it says, like, Um-oo-jah?” I hung my head. This was it, we had blown it. They were going to hate us. Paige hung up and casually slid her cellphone into her back pocket.

“So, what did she say?” I smiled, determined to keep this light hearted. I had worked my butt off in high school and had been way too serious. This was the beginning of the secret commitment I had made to myself to have a little fun.

“She’s coming to get us.”

Brittany rolled her eyes, “This is so embarrassing.”

“At least it’s kind of a funny story. I mean, it’s our first memory together!” Maybe this was a little too peppy for only our fourth day together, but I was raised on a healthy diet of stress, pep, and Pleasantville, so I couldn’t help myself. “Come on, this is cute. We will totally be talking about this our senior year.” And we would be. “Paige, where did Kelly say she is picking us up?” Not that Paige’s main superpower was sense of direction, but I thought I would at least ask. She didn’t know, so we started our way back down the hill, ducking from tree to tree for cover, taking turns holding on to Brittany and Bean so they wouldn’t slip on the wet cement in their stilettos.

We had made it almost back down to the intersection where we had made our initial wrong turn when a pair of headlights came flying around the corner. "Is that her?"

"I can't tell." We all paused, soaking wet and staring awkwardly at the car coming our way, a mismatched, sopping wet, height-ordered vision illuminated in a pair of headlights. Five stupid little freshmen who couldn't find the party.

The passenger's side window rolled down to Kelly dressed in jeans and an ancient looking team softball t-shirt. "Silly little frosh," she smiled. "Come on, get in."