

**FIRST PLACE
HIGH SCHOOL
11TH & 12TH GRADES**

**CAPPUCCINO GIRL
◀by Allison Burg▶**

I don't usually drink coffee. I don't even *like* coffee, really. Actually, I'm rather against coffee now that I think about it. The way America worships Starbucks, Dunkin', and Tim Horton's absolutely disgusts me. We. Are. Pathetic.

But for some reason entirely unknown to me, I was compelled to stride into the cozy little coffee shop across the street from my apartment last Tuesday and purchase a double trouble super vanilla chilla almond mocha and everything-under-the-sun cappuccino. I honestly had no idea what to get, or even how to read the menu for that matter, so I just got what the guy in front of me ordered and paid for them both. It was a spur of the moment type thing, you know. Cost me six ninety-freaking-five apiece though. I still don't get what it is about this stuff that drives everyone to such fanatical addiction. It really is just brown muck with whipped cream on top to me. I forced half of mine down just because I felt like I should be drinking it if I was going to claim a chair, but I ended up throwing the other half away to keep myself from vomiting.

I guess, overall though, the shop itself wasn't so terrible. It was a little too crowded for my liking, but most places are nowadays. It smelled nice and played decent music, and the atmosphere was a chill enough for me to get a little work done on my laptop in one of those oversized armchairs beside the fake fireplace. It was pretty fun actually. I sat there, acting as if I was one of those fraught damsels in the movies who hangs around that fireplace pretending to nonchalantly do work on their computers but who are really just counting down the minutes until Mr. Right and true love and happily ever after come marching up to them with their favorite latte in hand ("Oh how did you know?!") and whisk them off in his Ferrari to a city of happiness and sunny days. Or something like that. Whatever, I don't think I pulled it off very well anyways. I'm just not a coffee shop kind of girl.

You know what else I don't usually do? Read the newspaper. It's just another one of those things I'm not into. Why I opened the newspaper that morning as I munched on my Cocoa Puffs (yes, Cocoa Puffs- get over it), I simply don't know. Actually, you know what I just realized? I bought a cappuccino AND read a newspaper in a matter of approximately two days... egh.

So anyways, there I was eating my breakfast, when I happened to stumble across the personal ads. Just another pitiable creation of our "mighty" country. And there it was- "LAST TUES, 8:45 pm – BOOK BIN CAFÉ, Want to thank you again for the cappuccino. You made my day. Haven't been able to get you off my mind, especially your hair. Went back three times to look for you. Kicking myself for not asking for your phone number. Chris. Box 8281 "

My stomach dropped. I... was cappuccino girl. Dammit.

Who did this guy think I was?! I don't normally buy things for strangers on a whim. I don't normally hang out in coffee shops. I don't normally read the newspaper, *especially* not the personal ads. AND I DON'T EVEN LIKE CAPPUCCINOS!

My dog, Max, let out a concerned yelp as I hyperventilated in the middle of my cramped kitchen. I smiled. He knew me too well.

“Relax pup, I’m fine... Just a little shaken that’s all...” I breathed a deep sigh, attempting to re-collect myself and figure out what to do next. “Everything’s gonna be fine, don’t worry,” I said as I stroked his head, the assurance in my voice directed more at myself than at him.

You see, I’ve never really been very good at the whole “interacting with males” thing. Probably because I still haven’t mastered the whole “being a girl” thing yet. Yes, I’m perfectly aware that I am twenty-two years old, thank you. I’m also perfectly aware that I should be over this gaucheness by now, thank you again. But I just never got the hang of it I guess.

It’s been this way for as long as I can remember. I think I scare them. You laugh, but I’m one hundred percent serious-o my friend. I don’t care what people think of me. At all. And I think maybe, guys are intimidated by that. Because I’m not one of those girls who wears mini skirts and pink sweaters just to broadcast that she’s female and yes, has an ass. One of those girls who laughs at things she doesn’t understand, or laughs simply because she’s uncomfortable with the silence. One of those girls who hangs out in coffee shops. I’m just not the kind of girl that fits into society’s mold I guess you could say. And *that* is what scares off most members of the male species. I’m too different for them.

But whatever, like I said, I’m perfectly content the way things are. The only problem is, I don’t exactly know how to go about interacting with men, or how to respond to situations like this one.

It’s not like I’m twenty-two and have never had a boyfriend before or anything. No, it’s not like that. Relationships just don’t work out for me I guess. My first boyfriend was in the fourth grade and his name was Timothy. Not Tim, *Timothy*- get it right. He had freckles and big chunky glasses and we both sat under the tire ladder making castles in the woodchips at recess every day without saying a word to each other. I tried to hold his hand one day. He never came to make castles with me again.

Then in high school, I was with this guy named Brad for like ten months (which in high school terms, is practically the equivalent of marriage, in case you forgot), but we never really talked all that much either. I’m pretty sure he was just in it for the sex. Which is kind of why I was in it too, now that I think about it. But I’m not a whore or anything, don’t get the wrong idea. Anyways, he hit me one day, but I don’t even remember why to be perfectly honest. All I remember is I hitting him back. He cursed an awful lot and that was the end of that relationship. He came to school with a black eye the next day, and I overheard him telling all his friends he fought off some big bad football player from our rival school. I smirked to myself and never talked to him again.

I dug a pen and a piece of junk mail from the mountain of assorted garbage (bills, stamps, expired pizza coupons, loose paper clips, you know) that had accumulated beside my toaster oven and purposefully sat back down at the table.

“Hmmm... Chris...” I said aloud to Max, who was still staring up at me uneasily. His tail began to wag back and forth fervently, like an automatic broom sweeping the dust off my outdated kitchen tiles. I chuckled. “Yeah I think Chris fits him well too.”

I stared at the back of the junk mail, working out the kinks in my plan. I had as far as writing something back to him figured out, but it was the whole *what I’m writing* part that

remained undecided. A little happy face whose persistent smile seemed disproportionate to its small head beamed up at me shouting “OPEN ME NOW, HUGE SAVINGS INSIDE!!”

“You know little guy, I think you’d be better off if you didn’t try so hard. Maybe if you weren’t so ridiculously obnoxious you could blend in with all my other cold, mean, serious looking mail and I just might open you by accident. Maybe if you tried to be like all my other mail, I’d give you a chance. I’m sure you could fool me.”

Max nudged my elbow as I got in the junk mail man’s face, as if to remind me that I was talking to inanimate objects again.

“Haha, thanks buddy,” I laughed to Max. He was way too smart for a dog.

I began writing...

“ CHRIS from the Book Bin Café- You’re welcome for the cappuccino. I hadn’t had that flavor before, but it was absolutely delicious, so thanks. Book Bin’s a great shop isn’t it? I just love it there. Not sure what else I should say here... looking forward to seeing you around again sometime. ☺ ”

Charming, reaaaaal charming, I thought sarcastically as I dropped the letter in my mailbox. *Sounds just like you!*

I could barely even remember what this Chris guy looked like, to be perfectly honest. I didn’t pay him much attention really. He was sort of tallish but not so tall that he would stand out in a crowd, and had dark hair that was kind of tossed over his eyes. I’m pretty sure he was on the skinny/scrawny side, but I’m not positive. He sure does buy freaking expensive coffee though, I remembered that much.

Even though I had gotten a good laugh out of it, I sort of forgot about the whole Chris ordeal after that day. I assumed my letter had gotten lost or Chris decided he didn’t feel like pursuing me after all or something of that sort. But it didn’t bother me much.

A few days later, I saw a girl come bustling out of the Book Bin, shielding herself and her giant Styrofoam coffee cup from the wind, and I realized I hadn’t checked my mailbox since I sent that letter. Maybe Book Bin Chris had finally replied to my outrageous piece of bullshit!

I grabbed my mail and flipped through the bills rather quickly. No Chris. To my surprise, I actually felt a little disappointed. Whatever. I collapsed on the couch and cuddled up with Max, and began mindlessly flipping through channels.

But just as I had gotten comfortable (isn’t that always how it works out?), there was a knock at my door. Max beat me there, trying to sniff out the stranger through the oak barrier. It was my neighbor, Andrea, who robotically handed a letter addressed to me and turned back towards her apartment without saying a word to me. She gets my mail by accident all the time, and apparently it annoys the living shit out of her. It cracks me up when she’s all grumpy like that though. I tossed the envelope on the kitchen counter without even looking at it and flopped back down on the couch.

Approximately forty-five seconds later, it occurred to me that I hadn’t looked to see who the misplaced mail was from. Which meant it could be from Chris.

I leaped up in excitement at my realization, feeling a little foolish for my excessive enthusiasm. But I shrugged it off, this new game was fun.

I snatched the letter off my counter as I flailed my arms around to keep myself from slipping on the linoleum. Box 8281. Yep, it was him.

“ Your letter made my day, again. Still can’t stop thinking about you... You never told me your name though? I’d really love to get to know you better. Chris. ”

Hmmm, this was a fun little game I had going here. I brainstormed what I should say to him next...

“Chris- My name is Ashley. I like going to the movies and shopping for clothes. I like to play tennis. I like apples and strawberries, but not bananas. I never eat breakfast, but I drink a lot of coffee. I like reality shows and going to the beach.... So when do I get to know you better?”

Was that good? I couldn't decide.

It sounded good I guessed, except for the fact that my name isn't Ashley, I hate movies and shopping and all sports, I really do like bananas and cold weather, and the first thing I do every morning is eat a bowl of sugary cereal. Oh and obviously I think coffee is repulsive, incase you missed that before. I felt a little guilty for playing him like this, he seemed perfectly harmless and innocent, but I shrugged it off.

Shame tugged at my heartstrings for the next few days as I debated whether or not I should have mailed that letter from “Ashley”, but I knew a coffee shop boy like Chris would never stick around if he knew what I was *really* like. He'd run just like everyone else, and where would the fun in that be? But boys like Ashley's. I could be Ashley if I wanted.

A week passed, still no sign from Chris. *Maybe I couldn't pull off Ashley so well after all*, I wondered. It was foolish, I know, but as the days passed, I grew more and more anxious about Chris seeing right through my letter. Maybe he knew I was trying to fool him and knew I was actually a crazy careless kook. I even went to the Book Bin to look for him twice. TWICE. I felt stupid.

I poured myself a bowl of Cinnamon Toast Crunch and wrapped myself up in a blanket. Max sat patiently by my side, hoping I'd let him drink the milk when he was done.

“Aren't *cats* supposed to beg for the milk?” I laughed as he lapped it up out of my emptied bowl happily. When he had finished, I tackled him. He tried to lick my face and beat his oversized paws against me as I tugged at his ears. He snarled playfully and I snarled back.

A sudden vigorous thump against my door signified that Andrea must've gotten another piece of my mail again. No one else would ever knock that exasperatedly. It was the same four consecutive whacks every time. I laughed as I shoved Max off of me and skipped to the door.

Andrea looked surprisingly even more cross than usual, which I found quite comical. I acted as cheery and smiley as possible, just to further tick her off, as she begrudgingly thrust the letter in my direction.

“Why thank youuuuu, Andrea,” I said with an excessive amount of enthusiasm. She grimaced and turned back to her apartment. “Twenty bucks says she leaves the next one in flames at my doorstep,” I chuckled to Max.

I looked down at the letter and all the air was suddenly sucked from my lungs, leaving them shriveled and helpless inside me. Chris. His name scrolled through my head as I ripped open the letter. I didn't kid myself anymore, I wanted to know what it said. Had I fooled him?

“Ashley- You have a beautiful name... More about me you say? Well, I happen to thoroughly enjoy winter, as I am a very talented skier, if I do say so myself. I also like Chinese takeout and hot chocolate. I like painting, but I'm not very good at it. I don't like movies, or shopping, or television

but I do like apples, bananas, and strawberries. I like sweatshirts, but not the kind with zippers. I like hats, and guitars, and erasers, and I like you... When can I see you again? Chris.”

Aw, he really likes me, I thought to myself. I blushed, even though there was no one around, as I re-read the letter again a good solid three times. I continued to smile as I thought about Chris and everything he had said, until it dawned on me- it wasn't me Chris was complimenting, it was Ashley. Chris liked *Ashley*. Chris thought *Ashley* was beautiful. Chris wanted to see *Ashley* again.

I sighed. Well, what would *Ashley* do now?

I took out a piece of paper.

“ Soon. ”

I forcefully put the whole ordeal out of my head for the next few days, too nervous to think of what would happen next.

But next came anyways...

“ How about Friday night, 7:30, Book Bin? ”

I held the letter lightly in my hand, hoping the wind would take it away suddenly and rid me of this confusion.

Shit shit shit shit shit shit, I haven't been on a date in years! I thought. I had no idea how to act, what to wear, what to say... My panic came to a sudden halt- this was a date, wasn't it?

But not only did I have to figure out what to say and do in this situation, I had to figure out what *Ashley* would say and do in this situation. *Ashley* would pull off the Yes-I-look-like-a-movie-star-without-even-trying look and make all heads turn as she walked into the Book Bin that night. *Ashley* would be charming and witty and flip her hair all cute and it would drive him wild. *Ashley* would spark some fascinating and intriguing conversation to show of her intelligence and genuineness. *Ashley* would make him laugh. *Ashley* would be irresistible from the very beginning. But I was just me, I was no Ashley. And Chris had fallen for Ashley.

I had to tell him. He'd be disappointed, and so would I, but I couldn't keep being Ashley. I couldn't be more different from an Ashley and I knew it was unfair of me to keep playing him like this. I may be different, but I'm no bitch, that's for sure.

Friday night went by in a blur. As tempting as it was to wear an Ashley-like pink sweater, I stuck to my “no more bullshit” plan and dressed in my usual garb. I got there around 7:40, still not sure exactly what I was going to tell him. I looked around, but couldn't locate his face. *I couldn't've forgotten what he looks like that bad could I?* I thought nervously. I sat down on the same oversized armchair I sat in the first time I went into that shop. The day this whole thing started...

I waited in that chair like one of those foolish idiot moron dumbass damsels from the movies who I had previously so despised. I was disgusted with myself- it wasn't like me at all. I didn't just wait around hoping for things to happen to me. So I walked home and shared a bowl of Trix with Max.

I couldn't believe I had gotten stood up. Actually, I believed perfectly well that I gotten stood up. What baffled me was that *Ashley* had gotten stood up. She was everything a guy wants, everything a girl should be.

The more I thought about it, the more I was disgusted with myself for letting something like this happen. I tried so hard to forget about the entire thing that night. I just didn't want to think about it anymore. I laid with Max and read an entire Harry Potter book that night, which was actually rather successful in clearing my head.

But of course, the things we try to forget about always have a way of coming back to us in the end. I tripped on the front steps on my way home from work the next afternoon and whacked my head on the newspaper box. Which made me think about newspapers. Which made me think about personal ads. Which made me think about Book Bin Chris. Damn you train of thought.

I hesitantly grabbed my mail from the office and brought it up to my room, too scared to even look at it.

I gently closed the door behind me and glanced down at the top letter. Chris. Of course. I thudded my back against the firm oak door and closed my eyes. I considered not even opening it really. I started to wonder what *Ashley* would do, but dismissed the thought immediately. I needed to decide what *I* was going to do, and stop being so caught up in *Ashley*.

I opened the letter.

“Ashley- Sorry about last night. I didn't mean to bail, really... Anyways, I'm writing to tell you that I think you're beautiful and it's been great writing to you and all, but I really don't think this is going to work out. You just... you seem like every other girl I've ever dated, and at this point in my life,

I'm really looking for someone different. Someone out of the box. I hope you understand, it's nothing personal. I would say I'll see you around the Book Bin sometime, but I actually hate coffee shops. It's been nice getting to know you. Chris.”

I sighed in disappointment, a microscopic twinge digging into my chest. I felt an indescribable amount of stupidity flowing through me, keeping me alive like oxygen. My body was thriving on stupidity.

“Ashley” had been a joke from the beginning. She was only a silly game that I couldn't resist partaking in. But in the end, she broke me down, took my independent, carefree personality and smashed it to smithereens like an antique vase under an iron hammer. My character and vitality was disseminated across the kitchen floor in tiny, infinitesimal pieces as I crouched down and attempted to scotch tape them back together. I sighed again.

Who had I been kidding? I was no peppy, cute, giggly, attention-loving, cheerleader cappuccino girl like “Ashley” had been. No, I was an entirely different breed. I was loud and outspoken, spunky and creative, carefree and perfectly content with who I was. And apparently I had needed nothing more all along.

