

The Scholarship Student



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What's an eighteen-year-old high school graduate supposed to do nowadays? Apply to Columbia or Stanford? Journalism at Northwestern? Or how about some kind of practical training? Maybe as a website designer or an accountant or an insurance broker. Of course, you could always try to hire on at the same dependable company where Dad worked.

Yah, right. The future's so bright you have to wear shades. Nothing but fabulous fat options everywhere you look.

For Cary Miller, it was hard not to be uniformly bitter and dejected about things. The last year of high school felt like a jail sentence. One thing he was definitely *not* going to do: waste four years of his life getting a useless degree from his loser hometown university. Why work all summer long waiting tables, or stocking shelves at Walmart, for *that*?

Some people had it made. Like Ken Supilniski, the smartest kid in the class. Mister Science. He'd won a state competition for original science projects. And then he won a national contest, which came with a huge scholarship at Princeton. The guy just wasn't human; he got a hundred percent in everything, even English Lit. Then there were the rich kids, like Jodi McSherry and Cam Broderick. No matter what their grades were, they were going to get into any university, any program they wanted: MIT, Columbia, Berkeley... Their parents would just pay the shot.

Cary's grades were good, but not great. A's and B's. If you didn't count Math and Chemistry, he had an average of 3.81. But of course, you had to count them. Anyway, the real issue was money. He didn't have any. And neither did his mom. That was just the way it was and always had been.

He could hardly blame his mom. Kay had gotten married before she even finished high school, to some control freak who was eight years older than her. He worked at the grain exchange and didn't want her to work. So she stayed home and did nothing for five or six years. And then he dumped her. Then she worked at JC Penney and a bunch of other retail stores for ten years, just making enough to live on. By the time she met David Grove, Cary's father, she was almost 35. He was a sports agent, or at least he pretended to be. He knocked her up and then married her. Then she had Cary. That marriage lasted for a little over five years, just like the first one. After five-plus dutiful years of staying home and caring for the child, making meals and doing the cleaning, getting by on almost nothing, Kay got dumped a second time. Grove left town, left the state and never came back.

Cary hadn't seen or heard from his father since. "Why did you marry such a jerk", Cary would ask his mom, when he got a little older. "So I could bring your sweet face into this world", she'd answer, brightly. "No, seriously", Cary would say, insistently, wanting to understand. His mom would look away. "I was almost 35", came her answer, in a quieter tone. "I didn't look so great anymore. I had a low-paying job, no parents alive. I lived on the poor side of the tracks. I wasn't much to write home about, that's for sure. I wanted to have a family. And I did. I had you."

Inwardly, Cary deplored his circumstances - the stifling, shabby apartment he lived in with his mom, the cheap clothes he had to wear, the lack of money to do things any ordinary kid would want to do. But he resolutely kept those feelings to himself and lived without self-pity, determined to make something more of himself in life, to do better, to rise above his upbringing. Somehow.

All things considered, what could Cary have expected his mom to do? Encourage him to apply for any bursaries and awards that were available? He'd already done that. Appeal to sources of charity? They'd been doing that for years, just to get by. It had gotten more and more humiliating to Cary as he got older. How much could you expect other people to do? A person had to help himself.

It was in late March, in the midst of a miserable cold winter, when the idea occurred to Cary. That morning, Ken Supilniski's scholarship to Princeton had been proudly acclaimed over the school's PA system. Mr. Foster, the stodgy old principal, ended his speech with a cheesy word of encouragement to the rest of the slugs at Grand Forks High. A few hours later, during the lunch break, Cary found himself once again in the Guidance and Counselling Office, for the hundredth time. He'd gone carefully through the glossy awards guides many times, and he knew exactly where to find the description of Ken Supilniski's award. After wistfully re-reading it, with a combination of envy and admiration, he glanced at another listing.

It was a scholarship listing his eyes had passed over many times in the previous months: a full-ride at Harvard. While most of the awards were out of reach because of his less-than-dazzling grades, this one disqualified him on more direct terms. It was exclusively targeted at students from the 'LGBTQ community'. For the first time, the thought struck him. Why couldn't he simply represent himself as being gay? Who would know if he was telling the truth or not? Certainly not the committee in Boston where he would be sending the application. Maybe his grades were good enough relative to the LGBTQ population. None of the fags in *his* school were breaking any records, that was for sure. What was the worst that could happen? That he wouldn't get it? Big deal. Just like all the other awards he wouldn't get.

Sure, it was dishonest. He wasn't gay. But what difference did it really make? Nobody else knew that. How would you know if somebody was gay? You'd have to walk in on him having sex with another guy; giving it to him in the butt, or with the guy's dick in his mouth. Wasn't that the actual definition? Well, there was no guy who could testify he'd had sex with Cary, but so what? The selection committee wasn't going to poll the whole school or the whole city to find out. They'd basically have to rely on his word, on the case he made in his application. And he could spread it on nice and thick.