

Sorry, But You Asked

by G. J. Crespo

Helen Hernandez stared at herself in the mirror, deciding whether or not to put on makeup for her big night on the town. Her friend Jimmy had asked her out for Chinese so they could catch up, but somehow some of his buds had invited themselves to go along as well. If it was just going to be Jimmy, she wouldn't bother but, with a bunch of guys she hardly knew joining them, she had to make some kind of statement.

Her mother knocked on the door jamb and crossed the room to sit on the edge of Helen's bed. Helen watched her mother's reflection in the mirror. "It's weird having you around on a Saturday night, Mom. You sure the restaurant can survive without you?"

"I hired a manager so I can spend more nights at home. She'll be fine without me looking over her shoulder."

Helen picked up her black eyeliner. "What do you think, Adele on 25 or Chrissie Hynde on her first album cover?"

"I don't know. What are you doing tonight?"

"Just going to Mandarin Garden with Jimmy and some of his baseball bros."

Her mother shrugged. "I guess Chrissie, then. Adele is more foie gras and duck confit."

Helen smiled as she rimmed her dark brown eyes in black. "You know, most people pair food with wine, not makeup."

Her mother stood behind her and re-braided Helen's long, dark, curly hair. "Mija, food creates atmosphere. You dress to match the environment that you're eating in."

Helen swiped her lips with Chapstick. “Well, I think the atmosphere tonight is going to be hoodies and jeans and, if I’m lucky, no butt-crack sightings.”

Her mother sighed. “I thought you were going to socialize more, make some new friends and go to parties.”

“Doesn’t hanging out with Jimmy count as socializing? Besides, I graduate in two months. I think if I was going to make any new friends it would have happened by now.”

“No, Jimmy doesn’t count. You’ve known him your whole life. His mom and I used to bathe you guys together when you were babies.”

Helen rolled her eyes. “Okay, that story has been told way too many times. I think both of us would be happy if we never heard it again.”

Helen pulled her favorite jeans from the pile on her bed: once black, now faded gray with the knees worn through from age and abuse, not because she bought them that way. She finished her look with scuffed-up Doc Martens, her favorite Clash t-shirt, and a broken-in flannel.

She grabbed her mom’s old biker jacket from her closet, filling the pockets with her phone, wallet, and other essentials for the night. “You sure you don’t want me to stay? Dad’s not going to be home from the game until late. What are you going to do all by yourself?”

“Absolutely not. I’ll just use the time to snoop through your drawers and read your diary.”

Helen laughed. “If you’re that bored you can organize my socks and fold the laundry on my bed.”

Her mother gave her a kiss on the cheek. “Give Jimmy my love and remind him he’s invited to brunch tomorrow.”

Jimmy arrived ten minutes late, which was early for him. Helen climbed into the front seat of his truck and gave him a nod. “S’up, bruh?”

Jimmy laughed and put the truck in reverse. “Where’s that coming from?”

“I don’t know, isn’t that how guys talk, all grunts and head butts?”

“Actually, it’s a sophisticated series of belches, farts, and ball-scratching. Try to keep up.”

“Sounds more like I’m going to need to keep my window rolled down. Before I forget, my mom’s doing brunch tomorrow and you and your folks are invited.”

“Already marked on the calendar. I love your mom’s brunches. She hasn’t had one in ages. What’s the occasion?”

“She’s trying to spend more time with me before I leave for college. She even offered to do a fancy graduation dinner for my friends, like I actually know anybody that would show up. I just told her to invite the aunts and uncles. And your family, of course.”

Jimmy pointed to her neighbor’s house with his chin as they drove by. “What about JT? You guys used to be tight.”

Helen shook her head. “Ugh, let’s not talk about JT tonight. Who else is going to MSG Garden?”

“Just Sully, Jonesy, and Snapper.”

Helen gave Jimmy a hard look. “I thought you said Sully wasn’t coming.”

“Snapper invited him this morning, so I couldn’t tell him not to come. What’s the problem with you two anyway?”

“I don’t know. I barely know the guy, but he’s given me attitude for like the past year. If I have to put up with him and his stink-eye all night, I swear I’m going to punch him in the balls.”

Helen stared out the window. Sully wasn't in any of her classes, but he hung around with Jimmy, so she knew him well enough to say hi in the halls. Sometime last spring he started ignoring her or worse, giving her dirty looks for no good reason. She would have asked him what his problem was, but her life had been in major chaos at the time and she didn't have the energy for high school boy drama.

Jonesy and Snapper were shooting hoops in Snapper's driveway when Jimmy pulled up. They piled into the back seat of the truck arguing about who won the game and offered fist-bumps to Jimmy and nodded to Helen.

Snapper buckled himself in and said, "Why do you always have this country shit on? Don't you have anything good to listen to?"

Jimmy said, "My truck, my music, you know the rules." Helen wasn't a fan of country, but she got the rules. They applied in her van as well. If you wanted to ride with her, you listened to what she wanted to listen to.

Snapper said, "Yo Jim, did you see Jonesy's head? The boy got himself a perm."

Jimmy turned on the overhead light and looked in the mirror. "What the hell did you do that for? Good thing you wear a hat most of the time."

Jonesy said, "Don't you guys know nothin'? Perms are it. Back me up, Hernandez."

Helen caught Jimmy's eye roll before she turned to respond. She peered at the tight, blonde curls piled on top of Jonesy's head with the sides cut in a fade. He looked cute, but she wasn't going to tell him that. "Dude, I *do not* speak for other girls, but as long as you like it, who cares? If you want, I can recommend some products to keep it from frizzing on you."

Snapper said, “She’s just saying that because she doesn’t want to hurt your feelings. Trust me, you look like a poodle on a stick.”

The two guys started a shoving match so Helen turned her attention back to the road ahead. A wave of unease washed over her as they turned down Sully’s street. Jimmy pulled up in front of a sprawling ranch house and took his phone out to send Sully a quick text.

Sully came out a side door of the house and lumbered down the driveway. Like Jimmy, he was a big kid, but unlike Jimmy, who was all muscle, Sully carried some of his weight in his gut. Sully spotted Helen in the front seat and stopped short. She watched him scowl before he opened the back door and climbed in, making sure to bump her seat back as much as he could in the process.

He returned Jimmy’s fist bump, but said, “You didn’t say SHE was coming.”

Jimmy shot back, “You didn’t ask. If you got a problem with it, you can stay home.”

“I’m just saying a warning would have been good.”

Jonesy laughed, “Why, were you going to put on a tux for the occasion? All you wear are Star Wars t-shirts and hoodies.”

Snapper jumped in. “Maybe he has a Boba Fett shirt he’s been saving for a special occasion.”

Sully snarled back, “Like you two losers know how to dress.” He pointed a finger at Jonesy. “What the hell did you do to your hair? You look like an idiot.”

Jonesy patted his curls. “Don’t be jealous, Sully. I can hook you all up with the salon if you want.”

Snapper snorted, “Hell no, one poodle on the team is enough.”

Helen could see Jimmy trying to catch her eye, but she stared straight ahead and kept quiet the rest of the trip. The guys joked and talked baseball and left her alone until they pulled into the restaurant parking lot.

Jimmy hung back with her while the others rushed ahead. “Don’t let Sully get to you. I don’t think he meant anything.”

“Don’t make excuses for him. He was being a dick.” Jimmy started to say something, but she cut him off. “Don’t sweat it, I deal with asshats like him all the time.”

The hostess sat them at a U-shaped booth, and Helen slid in between Snapper in the middle and Jimmy on one end. Sully wedged himself in across from Jimmy and they had a brief shoving match with the table until they split the space difference between them.

Jonesy sorted through the pile of menus. “She didn’t give us a drink menu. I was going to get a beer.”

Snapper laughed, “With what? Your fake ID doesn’t even look like you and with that mess on top of your head, there’s no way they’d serve you.”

That got him a shove. “At least I don’t think I’m a gangsta rapper. Have you guys heard his latest? It sounds like he recorded it from under his bed.”

“You don’t know nothin’. That’s the way it’s supposed to sound. It’s low-tech, lo-fi, DYI. You just wait, I’m going to be the next big thing.”

Jonesy leaned over and caught Helen’s attention. “Yo, Helen, you’re an impartial judge. Listen to his so-called musical stylings and tell us what you think.” He tapped and swiped at his phone and handed it to her. “Machine Gun Kelly here goes by LilSnap.”

Helen pulled earbuds out of her coat pocket, plugged them into the phone, and tapped play. Jonesy and Snapper both stared at her, waiting for her reaction, but she ignored them and focused on the music. The vocals were muddy and lyrics were what you'd expect from a seventeen-year-old boy, but the melody was good. When the song was over, she handed the phone back. Snapper said, "Give me your honest opinion."

She took a breath and chose her words. She liked Snapper. He was decent as far as high school guys went, but she never saw any benefit in blowing smoke up someone's butt. "I like the melody and you have a decent beat, but you gotta work on your words, dude. What are you trying to say? What's your message besides some girl has a fine ass?"

He furrowed his brows. "What if I say she has a pretty face?"

Helen patted him on the shoulder. "Think deeper, LilSnap. You can do it."

The waitress showed up and Helen swore they ordered half the menu. She'd seen how much one boy could eat hanging out with her neighbor JT, but the amount four guys could consume was obscene.

The food came quickly and everybody busied themselves reaching and passing and filling plates. After about half the food had disappeared, they slowed down enough to talk.

Sully said, "What's the deal for the game on Monday? How are we going to beat those jerks from Tech?"

Helen remembered something she had noticed the last time Jimmy had pitched, but Sully cut her off. "I was asking the people who actually know something about baseball."

Jimmy kicked him under the table and said, "Don't be such a d-bag. Helen knows her shit when it comes to baseball."

Sully made a lip fart. “Yeah, right. Just because you watch a few Sox games with your daddy doesn’t make you an expert.”

Jimmy gave her a nudge, “Go ahead, say what you were going to say.”

She shook her head. “No, what could I possibly have to offer all you *real* experts? I only go to Fenway so I can take selfies from the Green Monster.”

Snapper tossed a spare-rib bone at Sully and turned to Helen. “I want to hear what you have to say. I see you sitting up on the hill watching our games. Tell me something I can use on Monday.”

Helen gave it some thought and said, “Fine, but only because I’ll come down and strangle you if you pull another bonehead move like you did on Tuesday.”

“What? You mean when I overthrew first?”

“Yeah, you’re a decent shortstop, but you’re no Derek Jeter. You had time to set your feet before the throw, but you tried to pull off that dumb-ass jump-throw shit and you sailed it over Sully’s head and let a run score. Then the guy that got on base scored after that. You lost by one run, so *your* error cost you the game. Get the out. Don’t be trying to look cool doing that jumping shit when you got two outs and somebody on third.”

Jonesy and Jimmy laughed and gave her fist bumps. Helen gave Snapper a nudge with her elbow. “Sorry, but you asked.”

He hung his head, but he was smiling. “Yeah, I did. Do Jimmy next. Tell him what he’s screwing up.”

She turned to face Jimmy. “You want my opinion?”

He shrugged and said, “It’s not like you won’t give it to me anyway.”

She nodded and said, “True enough. I noticed you’re telegraphing your change-up. Every time you throw one near the end of the game, someone gets a hit. Last time that guy from Catholic took you out of the park. I’m too far away to see what you’re doing but the other teams are figuring it out and it’s costing you.”

Jimmy smacked the table with his hand and smiled. “Dammit, you’re right. I’m always getting hit on that pitch at the end of the game.”

Jonesy leaned forward. “We should have you sitting on the bench with us. Tell me what I’m doing wrong.”

Helen laughed. “Yeah, like I want to be anywhere near you guys spitting sunflower seeds all over the place.” She took a sip of her soda. “Buy yourself some sunglasses. How many times did you lose the ball in the sun this week? The glare in left field is brutal right now.”

Jonesy blushed. “I have sunglasses. I just keep forgetting to bring them out with me.”

Jimmy laughed. “You forget your glove, your hat; we’re going to start taping them to you.” He turned to Sully. “How about Mr. Girls-Don’t-Know-Shit-About-Baseball over here?”

Helen stared Sully down, knowing whatever she said would probably get a negative reaction, but the truth was, Sully was a good first baseman. She took another sip and put her glass down. “Actually, out of all of you guys, Sully has the fewest errors and the best batting average.”

Snapper said, “He does not. Jimmy has a better average.”

Helen shook her head. “Not really. Jimmy has more RBIs, but Sully has a better on-base percentage and has more runs scored.” She held up a finger and said, “The only thing I would say is you leave your foot on the bag too long. All you need is to have some tool spike you and you got a shredded ankle and miss the rest of the season.”

Sully let out a snort. “Whatever. I’ll give you credit for spotting Jimmy’s problem, but the rest of that stuff Coach yells at us about all the time.”

Helen reached for the last chicken finger. “Well, sounds like you listen to Coach really well because you all keep making the same mistakes.”

The waitress came by and asked if they wanted anything else. Everybody ordered refills, and the guys scraped the last of the food onto their plates. They sat in awkward silence until Jimmy said, “Did you see that kid on YouTube that took his clothes off and wouldn’t put them back on until some girl agreed to go to prom with him? He had a little sign to cover his junk, but man, there’s no way I’d do anything like that.”

Snapper laughed and said, “What was he going to do if she said no? Go to the rest of his classes bare-ass?”

Jonesy caught Helen’s eye. “What would you do if some dude pulled some crazy shit like that to ask you to prom?”

Sully muttered, “She’d rip the sign down and tear it up in front of everybody.”

Helen was about to answer Jonesy, but Sully’s comment made her stop short. She looked at him and said, “What are you talking about?”

Sully blushed red and stared at his plate. “Nothing, never mind.”

Helen wasn’t going to let him dodge the question. “No, you’re talking about last year, right?”

Jimmy said, “What happened last year?”

Helen kept her gaze on Sully, who wouldn’t look up. “Somebody thought it would be funny to put a sign on my locker after I got into this huge-ass argument in Psych class about prom.”

She pointed a finger at Sully. “Was it you? You weren’t even in my class, how did you even know about the argument?”

Sully still wouldn’t look up.

Snapper asked, “What were you even arguing about?”

Helen rolled her eyes. “It was stupid. I was just trying to make a point about how having a prom queen is completely outdated and judging girls on their looks or popularity is sexist and demeaning. Anyway, I get to my locker at the end of the day and there’s this sign with chili peppers all over it saying something about me being totally hot and it would be cool if I went to prom. I was furious.”

Everybody at the table stared at Sully. Helen said, “I was convinced it was Maddie or Trish, but if it was you, that was a dick move.”

Sully looked up and stared back at Helen. “Yeah, it was me, but it wasn’t a prank. I was asking you to go to prom.”

Helen slumped back in her seat. She totally had not expected that response. “Damn, Sully, I had no idea. I didn’t even see you.”

“I was around the corner waiting to see your reaction, but when you shredded the sign, I took off because I kind of figured what your answer would be.” Sully looked back down and poked at the food on his plate with his fork.

Helen looked at Jimmy, who clearly had no clue about the situation. She felt horrible because she knew the sting of rejection far too well. Helen turned back to Sully. “Look, I’m really sorry. I truly thought it was a bad joke. If I hadn’t just had a huge fight with the whole class, I wouldn’t have ripped it down. Besides, I figured I was the last person anybody would ever ask to prom. I’m not exactly a fancy-dress kind of girl.”

Sully shrugged his shoulders and looked up at her. “Whatever, it doesn’t matter anymore.”

Helen held his gaze. “It does matter. You’re clearly still pissed at me. I never would have hurt your feelings on purpose. I’m sorry, okay?”

The waitress showed up and asked if they needed anything else. They all shook their heads and she left the bill in the middle of the table. Helen got annoyed with Jimmy when he tried to pay for her.

“What’s your problem? I have money.”

“But I asked you out, you shouldn’t have to pay.”

“That makes absolutely no sense. Just tell me what my share is.” Jimmy rolled his eyes and told her to put in a twenty.

Out in the parking lot, Jimmy and Snapper got into a belching contest. Helen hung back when Jonesy joined in, not wanting to get hit by any flying debris.

Sully slowed down and walked beside her. “I’m sorry I said you didn’t know shit about baseball. You’re right about me keeping my foot on the bag too long. Some guy almost nailed me a couple of weeks ago.”

Helen shrugged. “I’m more worried about LilSnap and his dumb-ass jump throws. You guys have a shot at playoffs if you can keep the errors down.”

Sully nodded and paused, letting the other guys get further ahead of them. “So, if you hadn’t thought it was a prank, would you have gone with me?”

Helen wasn’t ready for that question. She thought for a second. “I guess after shooting my mouth off about prom being such a shit-show, I would have had to say no on principle, but I would have been nice about it.” They started walking again and Helen said, “So, are we cool? Do you forgive me?”

“I guess. You have to admit the sign was pretty good, right?”

“Yeah, not bad. The chili peppers were a nice touch.”

Sully smiled at her. It was the first one she’d seen from him in over a year. “At least I didn’t take off all my clothes when I asked you.”

Helen burst out laughing. “Trust me, that would have gotten you a solid no. Flashing your chili pepper is no way to ask a girl to prom.”

If you liked reading about Helen Hernandez, she also appears in my debut novel *How to Ruin Your Life in 140 Characters or Less*. Look for details on the Table for 7 Press website in June.