

As late August turned into early October, the girls of Minerva's Hall declared Tiffany Magna Cum Laude. Her legend began on the cement stairs of her new home.

The autumn sun baked the cement paths and the circle of dorm buildings blocked any wind. At the entrance was a slight girl, with her own roller bag. She wore a plaid dress, knee socks and a white, arm-length blouse. Her dark hair was tied in a neat single braid that dropped halfway down her back. She could be mistaken for a girl starting a Catholic school, instead of a young woman on her first day of college. She was sweating, eyes wide, mouth open and shoulders drooping.

Tiffany stood beside her and waited. She listened to the sounds of birds singing from branch to branch. She imagined how the sun reflected her frizzy, blonde hair and hoped it worked. Taking a few slow breaths, putting on a smile, she started.

"This is going to sound silly but can I pull your bag up the stairs?"

The girl started—now aware of Tiffany, with her brave face mask and an outfit that she hoped said she belonged.

"What?" she asked, brushing the sweat from her brow.

"It's a good luck thing, you know. Let me pull up your bag."

"They have a ramp."

"Yeah, but if we wanted to do things the easy way, we'd have stayed home, right?"

"Uh, I guess, sure," the girl said, taken aback.

Tiffany squatted as if getting ready for heavy lifting, put her hands on the handle of both roller bags and started pulling—clunk, clunk, cluck, cluck. She exaggerated every step and paused for effect to catch her breath. It did the trick. Soon enough the girl was beside her in the shade of the building.

"Let me get the door," she said, now lighthearted.

Tiffany was quicker and opened the door with a foot. She was sweating a little now herself but her smile was real.

“Welcome to college. I’m Tiffany”

“Thanks, I’m Mary.”

Thus began the legend of the girl who was everyone’s friend. Only when she was in her room did Tiffany acknowledge to herself that the bags were heavy. She texted Mandy to say she was settled in.

[i got my own room on the third floor lots of stairs]

[achievement unlocked]

In very little time, Tiffany’s room was a safe space for half of Minerva Hall dorm. By floorspace, it was the largest room in the building but the ceiling arched down like an attic space. It left room for only one bed, dresser, and desk. This made it a solo room, but the perfect place for friends sharing stories sitting on the floor.

“Do we have any of the same classes?” asked one of her many visitors.

“I’ve got the normal kind of classes,” Tiffany half answered, intentionally vague.

“Yeah, but which ones? I want to make a study group.”

“Who are your teachers?” Tiffany asked back.

“Carter for Comp, Farzad for PreCal and Miller for US History.”

“I have Composition with Carter.”

“I was hoping you had Farzad. PreCal is murder. I just wanted to get it over with.”

Tiffany looked down and then to her desk.

“Let’s get something in the calendar.”

“We can just pick a time,” the girl said.

“No, no, ‘the duller pencil has a better memory than the sharpest mind.’”

“What?”

“Sorry, it’s just a dumb thing a teacher would say over and over,” Tiffany said, blushing. “But for me, it is true. If I put something in the calendar, it always happens.”

Tiffany sat down at her desk and opened a pen case with neatly ordered colored highlighters. The girl stood over her shoulder and whistled in appreciation.

“Whoa, that’s detailed,” she responded. “Color-coded, too. You must get really good grades.”

“The most important thing I learned in high school,” Tiffany said. “I’ll make the study group highlighted pink.”

“Shouldn’t that be your date color,” said the girl, with a giggle.

Tiffany put on a regretful smile. “I promised my dad I wouldn’t go out with any boys my first year.”

“A whole year! What are you going to be a nun?”

Tiffany threw a shirt over her head as a makeshift veil—looked up to heaven, put her hands together as if in prayer, and said with mock sincerity “Oh daddy, I’ve never even kissed a boy!”

“You’re bad,” said the girl, joining in the laughter.

“I’m not that bad.” Then adding with a sly smile, “but not that good either.”

In the evening, Tiffany texted Mandy.

[im gonna be in a eng comp study group i might text u 4 smart things to say]

[you can come to DSPS]

[when hell freezes]

[did you know in Dante's Inferno that hell is cold?]

[not going to happen but ill use that in my group.]

Over time, Tiffany's Mr. Brian quotes became a big hit, especially with Mary. She would write them down on 3x5 cards along with Bible verses.

"When you fail to plan," pause for dramatic effect, "you plan to fail."

"The job put off," in a twangy accent, "is the one that takes the longest."

"A little rest, a little folding of hands... and midterms come to you like a thief in the night!"

At that one, Mary clasped her face and laughed too hard. The other girls weren't mean but she didn't fit in. Sometimes they would tease.

"Mary, Mary, quite contrary."

"Bloody Mary"

And, of course, "Virgin Mary"

Nothing worse was said around Tiffany. She thought it must be hard to have a name like that. But that was better than being named after a mother who ran off. Tiffany didn't hold on to that thought.

[my group is helping with eng comp u talk to todd?]

[no more than normal hes around plenty being perfect but im in an app making project with frankie. its actually interesting]

[frankie? sorry]

[kid can code]

Sometimes, not trying to be, Tiffany could be mean. The girls who didn't need to be in a dorm but wanted the college experience rubbed her the wrong way.

"My parents got me a tablet for college," someone said—taking a picture of her prepped meal with her new phone. "But I don't really like it."

"The struggle is real," Tiffany would say, not looking up—never putting on a smile to sweeten the sting.

Maybe, someone would take their car to town to shop for a new outfit. Other girls would say how cute it was or ask for a ride next time. Tiffany would say something like "the best style money can buy" or with a perky voice "Oh my God, thanks Dad!"

After the last one, the girl jerked as if struck and she ran to her room, slamming the door. Everyone's eyes were on Tiffany. Stunned by the reaction, she knew she crossed a line but didn't know which one.

"Her dad died last year," Mary whispered to her.

[am i a bitch] Tiffany texted that night.

[totally]

[no serious do you ever think you're not good enough.]

[my parents are chinese. B stands for BAD GRADE]

[sorry i was just thinking what if my dad died.]

[heart emoji call me]

From outside of her room, people couldn't hear the whispered conversation but could sometimes hear the sobbing. Tiffany's open door stayed closed that weekend.

One night, That Girl had an audience of blushing but hypnotized girls. Any group large enough had That Girl—the one who kept a body count; who would kiss and tell, and demonstrated how to put a condom on a banana. Tiffany didn't think she was a prude. She watched reruns of *Sex and the City* and did some things in high school. This girl did all the things and talked like she was trying to break a record.

Mary walked into the common room—saw That Girl making a gesture with her hands and mouth—retreated turning bright red. This caused a roar of laughter but Tiffany slipped around a back way to her room.

Tiffany put on a warm, big sister face, standing at the door.

“Going to pray for us sinners?”

“We're all sinners,” Mary said, with pointed eye contact but then looked to the ground. “Sorry, I know I grew up sheltered.”

Tiffany sat on the bed next to her and rested a hand on her shoulder. She gave a little squeeze and Mary looked up at her.

“Me too, in my own way,” Tiffany said and then added with imagined wisdom, “but you know that most of that stuff is made up, or at least exaggerated.”

“I hope so but...” Mary said, not seeming to know how to finish the sentence.

“Mr. Brian said, ‘college is a good place to figure out’ and ‘we learn longest what we learn hardest.’”

There was a hard laugh. That Girl had followed the two and was standing at the door with everyone behind her, grinning.

“I want to learn things the long and hard way!” That Girl said, running in and tickling both girls.

Laughing, shrieking and pushing her away, Tiffany said, “You’re so gross.”

Letting herself be pushed away and now the center of an audience, That Girl started to sing “All you need is love!”

Someone else retorted with a different song lyric.

“This love is good. This love is bad. This love is alive.”

Soon everyone had a turn with a love song from their own playlist or something their parents played.

“I can love me better.” From the girl who got dumped.

“What’s love got to do with it?”

No one knew all the songs, and no one knew how to sing, but everyone cheered. When Mary took a turn with a “How deep the Father's love for us” everyone smiled and That Girl gave a raucous “hallelujah!”

With a start, Tiffany realized everyone was looking at her. A dozen smiles waited expectantly. She managed to put on a sarcastic smile and sing out “love stinks!” Everyone laughed and the game continued.

That evening she typed the text [when was the first time you saw someone kiss] then deleted it.

When everyone around her had been singing loud, proud and off key, Tiffany remembered being three or four years old, looking at her mother’s tongue in the mouth of some strange man. She jumped on his motorcycle and they roared away. Tiffany remembered covering her ears. She never saw her mother again.

The mobile home was quiet after that. She remembered liking it, being able to color and play with her dolls. No one yelling or throwing things.

After a few days—not realizing what changed—she saw her dad quietly crying in his chair. “Sometimes Love Just Ain’t Enough” was playing on repeat. He was staring at the door stone-faced, but tears were streaming down his face. Tiffany didn’t know Daddy could cry. She curled into a ball at his feet and started to sob herself. The song played two or three times while they both cried. Him not knowing what to do and her not knowing what else to do. Then he stood up, pulled out the CD slowly, and smashed it on his knee.

Tiffany remembered looking up at her Daddy uncertainly. He had put on a fake smile, like a mask.

“It’ll be okay, pumpkin.”

After that it would always be “sweetheart” and “angel” and “honey.”

[did u know I was named after my mom] Tiffany hit send.

The night midterms grades were emailed, Tiffany wanted to talk about anything but grades. She didn’t think she was the only one but took the lead. Inspired by a rerun of *The Office*, she quickly drew up posters that said “Minerva’s Hall Magna Cume Laude!!! 6 pm.” On it she included a picture of some kind of award with a dove at the top.

She spent all day telling people. “Magna Cume Laude Awards, six tonight. See you in the Common. Bring a friend!”

She made copies and walked through the dorm handing copies to everyone. She slipped them under closed doors and taped them in the bathrooms. At 5:45, the Common room was stuffed with freshman girls, double sitting on sofas, bringing some of their own chairs and standing around.

Tiffany mixed around, making friendly contact with everyone. She complimented a top, acted astounded by the turnout and thanked someone for a simple favor. To those she might have offended, Tiffany put in extra and put

on the most sincere looking face and hugged warmly. To those with the best grades she'd insist they not talk about grades.

"Welcome to the first official Minerva Hall Magna Cume Laude!" she cheered at the start. She read the room as equally ready to join in or to duck out. "Those of you at the halls, I need you to be security. No one leaves tonight without your own official Magna Cume Laude award."

Tiffany was never a cheerleader but knew how it worked: make moving eye contact, high-volume, high energy and keep it moving. She explained the rules: everyone gets a turn to be awarded. They went to the kitchen and the rest stayed in to think of an award that the girl would be given. Tiffany got enough support from others who were natural extroverts or just as interested in avoiding the email with their grades. She smiled imagining that she was starting one of those school traditions that people would continue to do and never know who started it.

The awards were fun, friendly, and sometimes true. That Girl was awarded for her devotion to the gym, another for her extra clean room, and one for the hardest schedule.

Some which were equal parts venting but given with cheers and groans. There was the girl who snored, the one who woke up earliest and the one who hogged the bathroom. Tiffany was glad she wasn't the one who got the award of most worried about grades.

For Mary's choice, Tiffany had to rein in some of the more malicious. Someone said "most likely to get married." Someone else wanted to say "least likely to cuss."

"No, no, no," Tiffany insisted and got allies to support her. "There is no girl who was better named."

Mary would take it for a compliment and those who teased her about her name would get just a little bit of satisfaction.

When it came for Tiffany's turn, she was thinking something to do with her drawings, Mr. Brian quotes or best calendar. But the overwhelming and

enthusiastic response of the Magna Cume Laude of the whole Minerva Hall dorm.

Later, alone in her room, she'd look at the Instagram pictures people posted and find out what her real smile looked like. Her phone buzzed—an email from the college, the midterm report cards.