

(tw: derogatory language)

Not Fooling Anyone

By Graham Griffith

“KIIS FM,” says the voice on the line, coarse and mechanical.

Jamie’s heart pounds beneath his ribs. It’s six a.m., and he doesn’t want to wake his mom.

“Hello,” he whispers, tingling with anxiety. “Can you play the new Amy Grant?”

“Sure thing,” the woman says, snickering softly, subtly mocking his request, and most likely, his clothes, his shoes, his haircut, and his Trapper Keeper. She ends the call with a final slight:

“Thanks for calling, missy. It’s coming up soon.”

The line goes quiet, and Jamie *wants to die*.

As he sets down the phone, he tries to process the exchange. He knows it’s not cool to love a Christian pop singer—if his friends found out, they’d laugh him out of sixth grade—but this bitch was judging him, too. And her comment at the end—did he sound like a girl, or was she calling him fruity? He couldn’t quite tell from her tone.

Thankfully, the shame fades as quickly as it came. He feels a small sense of victory for calling, for finding the strength to confess his obsession, even to a heartless she-devil. With any luck, they’ll play his song before school, before he’s forced to shift his shape.

He sits on his bed, stroking the sore on his cheek, telling himself that today will be better. Not like yesterday, when an eighth grader chased him from the bus stop, fists flying, screaming ‘faggot’ with bloodshot eyes, his trailer trash girlfriend cheering him on. Jamie doesn’t know what makes him a target. Is it the way he styles his hair, his bangs stiff with Aqua Net? Or the way he talks, his tongue slipping slightly on his s’s?

As the radio buzzes softly in the background, Jamie gets dressed for school. It's usually the same ensemble, a pair of shorts and a Billabong t-shirt. Sometimes Quiksilver. That's what everyone wears, and he wants to fit in. He wants to be liked.

Just check his cassette collection: mostly hair metal bands like Poison, Slaughter, and Warrant. To his friends, these bands are a religion. The Air Guitar their Sign of the Cross. But Jamie loses interest when they switch on MTV. He's confused by the women in their videos, the not-so-virgin Marys with ridiculous tits. Sure, Jamie chirps along when they sing "Cherry Pie," but he doesn't really want a slice.

Last week, as they zig-zagged their bikes down the alley, they met Jamie's neighbor Randy. If anyone's a fairy, it's Randy, talking like a valley girl and blasting "Vogue" from his bedroom window. In a desperate attempt to prove himself, Randy whipped out a Playboy. The one with Madonna on the cover. As they huddled around the magazine, their eyes bulging, Randy kept saying how sweet their pussies must taste. Jamie could tell that Randy was pretending, but he kept quiet, careful not to cast the first stone.

Back in the present, Jamie's mom beckons from the kitchen. He can picture her scurrying about, shoving a bagel into the toaster, setting out the Fruity Pebbles, putting on her makeup for work. Jamie bends down to tie his laces, and a sharp pain quakes across his spine. He can't tell his mom that he fell off the roof. She'd blame herself for not being there, as if she had a choice. As if she could afford a babysitter.

It was just after school, and his mom was still at work. He was playing with Nathaniel, his dreamy best friend, on the fractured slab of concrete between the apartment and the garage. They were tossing a tennis ball onto the roof when the ball got stuck above the gutter. Eager to show his friend that he was brave, Jamie climbed atop a heavy wooden table to the roof. After rescuing

the ball, he sat at the edge, wary of the distance to the ground. Before he could jump, he lost his grip, plummeting ten feet, his back cracking against the table. “You can cry if you need to,” Nathaniel said, gentle yet direct. And Jamie broke down, abandoning his masculine façade. A plight that should never plague a twelve-year-old.

Jamie straightens his back, pretending it never happened, as one ear bends toward the radio. He thinks of Randy and Madonna, and his own guilty pleasure. Surely Amy Grant isn’t as gay as Madonna. *Right?*

As his mother shouts after him—“It’s nearly time to catch the bus”—he tosses his backpack over one shoulder. Frustrated and impatient, he calls the station again, and after a few busy signals, he finally gets through. “KIIS FM.” It’s the same miserable woman as before.

On a whim, Jamie disguises his voice, lowering his pre-teen squeak to a tenor. “Can I make a request? Can you play the new Amy Grant—”

“Yeah, I got it the first time you called,” she growls, and Jamie’s face turns pink. “You’re not fooling anyone, honey.”