

The Reporting

For A., it all started a little before 11 a.m. on March 20, 2017. A junior at Albany High School, she had just left her third-period culinary arts class when she was met by a group of girls, most of them Black. “OK, we’ve got to tell you something,” one of them said. “Like we have to tell you.”

A. waited impatiently. It was probably just some kind of boy drama. But it wasn’t — not the kind of boy drama she was expecting, anyway. There’s a racist Instagram account, the girls told her. A bunch of people are following it. And there are pictures of you on it.

Everyone at school, it seemed, had at least two Instagram accounts — the curated one that your relatives and people from other schools could see, and a more informal “spam” or “finsta” account for posting memes, rants and candid photos for your inner circle. But this account was something else.

Two of the girls in the hallway, one of them Black and one Asian, were the ones who had seen it. Over the weekend, they had been hanging out with one of their close friends, a biracial white and Mexican boy whose nickname was Murphy. (Because they were minors at the time, all the young people in this article are referred to by their initials, middle names or nicknames.) Murphy and the two girls had gone to see the movie “Get Out,” and afterward, he had shown them a private account created by another friend, a Korean American boy whose middle name was Charles. It featured memes about Black girls’ hair, about slavery, about lynching.

Most of the girls gathering around A. were in tears. They had known Charles and many of the account’s 13 followers for years. A multiracial group of extended friends, they had slept over at one another’s houses, hung out together in class and at lunch, lounged around after school watching movies. Several of them were even planning to go to prom together.

A. was the only one of the girls who wasn’t surprised. She slammed her fist into a wall. I should have listened to my mom, she thought. I should have done something to prevent this.

A. remembers feeling out of place in Albany from the time she transferred into the school district, in the third grade, and the feeling intensified when she went to high school. She had a Black father and a white mother, and it seemed clear to her that she wasn’t the kind of girl that Albany boys liked. Those girls wore Lululemon leggings, tossed their long, straight hair over their shoulders, laughed when boys teased them or put them down. Those girls were smart enough to get into a good college but not outwardly so smart that they made people uncomfortable. A. was never going to be one of them. It wasn’t just her brown skin or her curly hair or her voice. It was something in the way she held herself. Her friends described her as “strong,” “funny,” “sarcastic” and “straightforward,” but beneath the confident exterior she was on shaky ground. Her father had died suddenly just before she started high school, and she had been struggling with depression ever since.

The problems with Charles and his friends had started a couple of months before. She was in Algebra 2, deep in her own thoughts, when she felt a hand in her hair. It belonged to a white boy she sort of knew; they had friends in common. She swatted the hand away. Being pawed like this wasn’t unusual: Whenever she changed her hairstyle, someone’s hands would be in it. She wasn’t about to make a big deal about it — it was the middle of class, and anyway if she got into it with everyone who tried to touch her hair, she would be exhausted.

Then a friend showed her a video of the entire interaction that Charles had posted on his finsta. He had captioned it, “Touching the Nap.”

She confronted Charles on Snapchat, and after some back and forth, he deleted the video. But a few days later, she heard that Charles had posted another classroom photo of her on the same account. This one just showed the back of her head: her bun, her ear, the hood of her sweatshirt. The caption asked whether the photo was of her or another Black girl in the junior class, as if they were impossible to tell apart.

This time she confronted Charles in person and made him delete it. “Don’t post anything else,” she told him. “We are not cool. Don’t talk about me.”

But the feeling of being watched lingered. It made it hard to go to school. Eventually, at her mother’s urging, she talked to Melisa Pfohl, then assistant principal, about what had happened, but she insisted that she didn’t want the school to take any action. “I didn’t want more repercussions,” A. told me during one of many interviews over the ensuing years. Pfohl remembers wanting to respect the autonomy of a teenager who said she preferred to handle the situation on her own because the people involved were part of her social circle. While it seemed like “a messed-up” thing, Pfohl says now, “I didn’t know it was forecasting anything at the time. I sure wish I would have.”