

The Investigation

By noon, the girls' distress had attracted the attention of the school's administration. Pfohl and the school's other assistant principal, Tami Benau, ushered them into a conference room. Everyone was talking at once; many were crying. The chaos made it hard to piece together a narrative. Eventually, Benau went to interview Murphy, the boy who revealed the existence of the account, while Pfohl distributed photocopied forms for recording student complaints. Only a couple of them had seen the account firsthand, but now the others remembered the questionable comments and racist jokes they had shrugged off in the past. Everything looked different today.

The problem was, they didn't have any evidence. Already the 10 or so girls in the conference room were starting to feel hopeless. It would be their word against the boys', and then everything would go on as normal. Still, they wrote down what they could on the forms:

Private Instagram account of disgusting racist images about multiple black girls in my grade making my very close friends ball their eyes out and have fits of rage.

I've heard multiple racist comments made to my friends.

This also affects me b/c I am a Black Girl, already am self conscious of myself.

One girl, Kerry (a version of her nickname), hadn't gone into the conference room. She was close friends with both A. and Charles. The daughter of immigrants from Thailand, she was known for being such a good sport that her friends teased her constantly, particularly about her refusal to say anything bad about anyone. Now she was thinking about how she could get copies of what the other girls had seen on Murphy's phone.

As she walked to her fifth-period class, she pulled out her phone and found the Instagram account the girls had been talking about. It was private, so she couldn't see the posts, but the app listed the people she followed who also followed it. One name stood out: a boy of mixed Asian, white and Latino descent who would later be identified in litigation as John Doe. Kerry hardly knew him — they had spoken only once or twice — but they were mutuals on Instagram, and another friend of hers, Rosie (a version of her middle name), had dated him briefly. Both of them were in psychology, her next class. When she walked into the classroom, she asked Rosie to borrow Doe's phone and then meet her in the restroom.

Doe and Rosie have different memories of what Rosie said when she approached him. Rosie, who is white, says she asked him straight up: "Kerry says there's this weird racist Instagram account you're following. Can I look at your phone?" Doe remembers her offering a made-up excuse, something like, "Hey, my phone just died, and I need to call my parents." They agree that he unlocked his phone and handed it to her.

Minutes later, Kerry and Rosie were standing in the middle of the girls' bathroom, their heads bent over the borrowed phone. Kerry took pictures of the screen with her own phone as Rosie scrolled through the account. Some of the posts were the kinds of things you might see on any other high schooler's account — memes, guys roasting each other, the regular kind of dumb. But the rest were shocking: a half dozen posts mocking different white and Asian girls at the school for their weight or other aspects of their appearance. Worst of all was the overt, unfiltered racism: Black men being lynched or beaten. Jokes about the Ku Klux Klan and racist slurs. A screenshot of the Snapchat conversation between Charles and A. about the hair-touching video that was captioned, "Holy [expletive] I'm on the edge of bringing my rope to school on Monday." A photo of another Black girl and her Black basketball coach with a noose drawn around each of their necks and the caption, "twinning is winning."

"It was so much worse than I anticipated," Kerry says. "I didn't think I would react that badly, but I was physically shaking."

They didn't have much time. If they were gone for long, their teacher would notice. Rosie scrolled; Kerry photographed. She took pictures of the most offensive posts, roughly two dozen — about half of the total. She

took pictures of the comments and the list of followers. Then she sent them via AirDrop to Pfohl and some of the girls.

As A. sat in the conference room, going through the images, she had trouble taking in what she saw. Then she saw a familiar photo. It had been lifted from her own Instagram account — her favorite picture from a trip to Lake Tahoe with her best friend. It had been paired with a photo of a gorilla. “I just got this stomach feeling of like, Wow, basically anything I do is not going to be good enough for these people,” A. told me. “I can’t even take a picture of myself in the snow, looking how I look, and post it on Instagram.”