

## Sex and the Single Eight-Year-Old

By the time my family moved to Washington state, I thought I had a pretty good handle on the whole sex thing. I had recently turned eight, and, before we left Texas, a group of older (i.e., nine- and ten-year-old) girls had revealed to me the hermetic knowledge of reproduction: I discovered, for example, that the penis was not covered in long fur but instead could be broken and was covered with beads (from “boners” and “balls,” I assume). They also disabused me of my long-held notion that men and women tinkled together into the same toilet in a strange sort of potion-making baby ceremony. Rather—they didn’t have it all wrong, after all—the father stuck his penis inside the mother. This seemed a far sight easier than standing and aiming a thin little stream of pee, trying not to make an enormous mess of the whole business. This made me less skeptical of the toilets in our latest Navy-issued house, and I felt relieved that I wouldn’t have to worry about such things until much later, when the blood came.

My new understanding, however, did not include any notions of friction or orgasms. If I’d had this information, I perhaps would not have come to the conclusion that women who used tampons must have been constantly in the throes of passion. I scanned women’s faces in the grocery stores, believing I would be able to identify these hussies who had strange cottony sex in public, without a partner. But most women seemed normal, and I began to feel sorry for the tampon salespeople, wondering how they made their money.

I had few friends in Oak Harbor at first and could play only so many rounds of Hungry Hungry Hippos with my three-year-old sister, Breonny, so, armed with new information, I made my toys develop another level of companionship. My Barbies, for example, had a lot of discreet encounters under the bed. A narrative accompanied every tête-à-tête, and the plot was almost always the same: Ken and Barbie began by kissing and then moved through very elaborate foreplay measures, such as Ken’s “accidental” unsnapping of the back of Barbie’s cherry-patterned date dress. It ended with a clandestine consummation that I didn’t enact, primarily because I wasn’t sure how the physics worked but also because I held a strange conviction that naked plastic people were entitled to a measure of privacy.

I had played Disreputable Barbies a few times before, while we still lived in Fort Worth, but I’d left that friend behind and now played these games alone in my new neighborhood. We moved right before Christmas break, and my mother thought it silly to enroll me in school for such a brief period, so we’d been there about a month before I attended my new second grade. In the meantime, I needed a friend nearby, so I stood out in my front yard and watched kids walk by after the bus dropped them off. I scanned each to determine his or her pal potential. Having identified a respectable-looking blond girl who seemed about my age, I accosted her the following day. After a few preliminaries, we determined that it would be in both our best interests to play together.

The next afternoon, my mother escorted me the half block to Jaimie’s house. When Jaimie and her mother, Audrey, opened the door, my mom thought Audrey seemed familiar. They searched their brains until they realized that my parents had sold a used white Ford to Jaimie’s parents the year before, when we lived in Colorado. This is not as outlandish as it may seem—as Navy men, our fathers moved us from base to base, so to be

---

stationed in the same place twice was not an absurd coincidence. But the car thing pushed fate a little further. Jaimie and I embraced our destiny and headed for her bedroom.

Jaimie's status as an only child helped her accumulate great mounds of stuff. I envied her collection of Care Bears and Popples and Pound Puppies. She not only had Strawberry Shortcake but her entire entourage as well, and they all still smelled bright and fruity, unlike my pitiful nude Shortcake, which my sister regularly mauled. All of the Barbie shoes sat on Barbie feet; at Jaimie's house, no one would swallow them and produce little parti-colored turds embedded with tiny pumps and sneakers. Jaimie lived in a magical fairyland where you could actually eat whatever you produced in your Easy-Bake oven, and you didn't have to share.

Jaimie wasn't spoiled, though, and she proved a generous playmate, allowing me to clothe and unclothe whichever dolls I wished. Though a mighty third grader, she didn't lord her whole-year age advantage over me, and we quickly became best friends. She even shared my interest in sordid games. The very first time I went over to her house, we lined up her teddy bears and allowed the other stuffed animals of similar physiology (bunnies, dogs, lions, etc.) to hump them. We made up a story that essentially involved improving the teddy bear DNA pool, though we didn't couch it in those terms. The animals seemed happy, and we left them to their business.

I wouldn't say we felt sexually aroused by any of this, but it was certainly titillating. Naughty. We knew better than to get caught sticking Ken's hand down Malibu Stacy's bikini bottoms, and we kept careful watch when we played this way. But most of our games didn't involve putting Raggedy Ann in compromising positions. Mainly, we just put on too much Blue Moon eye shadow and sang Madonna songs off key and mixed and matched Cabbage Patch outfits. We spent most weekends at one another's houses, planning for our future as world-champion cheerleaders.

One afternoon I came home with a little booklet from school designed to warn children against child molesters and abusers. It talked about your private areas, the ones covered by your swimsuit, and how no one was supposed to touch you there—or anywhere, if you didn't like it. Jaimie and I were in my bedroom, playing in my “dress-up” clothes, a mélange of garage-sale castoffs my mother had collected for me. We stood there in our Underoos, hoping to find some new ball gown we hadn't noticed in the sixty-two previous times we'd gone through the clothes in that box. Jaimie noticed the booklet on my bed.

“Hey, what's that?” she asked.

“Oh, it's one of those things they give you about not letting strangers touch you and stuff.”

“Let me see.”

We read the booklet sitting on the floor. When we finished, Jaimie had an idea.

“I'm going to lay down here and you lay here.” She lay down on the floor of my closet and pulled a Holly Hobby blanket on top of her spindly body. She wanted me to lie on top of her, on top of the covers. I did so, booklet in hand. We began to reread the story, and she told me to read it aloud and tell her it was wrong, that you should let people touch you.

“Okay,” I said, eager to contribute. “I'll be the dad and you'll be the little girl.”

---

I read, telling her it was okay, that everyone should feel under her swimsuit. I didn't touch her myself, but I lay on her, my dark hair touching her light hair, our breathing close and thick. When I finished the book, I looked at her for a moment, silent. Then I kissed her cheek and got up.

This was more than a game our mothers wouldn't approve of. It was a game I didn't like myself.

We agreed to put the incident behind us, and, as children are masterful forgetters, we remained great friends. If anything, we played our "acceptable" games with greater enthusiasm, leaving the seedy ones behind.

A few weeks later, Jaimie was again spending the night at my house, and we had been told repeatedly to go to sleep, but we continued twittering, laying like long dolls in my double bed.

"And do you know what the teacher did? She made Annabelle explain to the class what the pad was for, and she was so embarrassed. I'm never going to the fourth grade if I have that teacher," Jaimie said.

"That's so retarded."

"Bethany Ellen Lee!" my mother yelled from the hallway. "That is not appropriate language."

"I wasn't saying a person was retarded, I said something they did was retarded." I awaited the verdict on this lame-but-true excuse.

"Fine," she said, softer this time, from the doorway. "But go to sleep, girls. You have to be up early." Due to some inexplicable generosity, our mothers had allowed a weeknight sleepover, but we were taking advantage. She left, closing the door and sealing in the darkness.

A few minutes later, Jaimie broke the quiet. "Bethany, has anybody ever touched you where they weren't supposed to?"

"Not really. One time my dad's friend Ephraim touched my bottom, but it was an accident. Has anybody touched you?"

"No. Well, yes."

"Who?"

"You have to promise not to tell."

"Okay, I promise."

"Swear to God."

"Swear to God." I said this meaningfully, knowing that swearing to God was a sin.

"My . . . my grandfather. But if you ever tell anybody, I won't speak to you ever again. Ever. We won't be best friends anymore."

"Okay. I won't. Don't worry." A moment passed. "Did he hurt you?"

"Sort of. Not really. Let's go to sleep."

She drifted off, but I stayed up for hours. I knew I had to tell—even when I'd promised and sworn, I'd known I was lying—but I also didn't want to lose her friendship. My mother had warned me about such things, as had teachers, and the ill-fated booklet. Their stories had one common denominator: if someone touched you, you should tell, tell, tell, until someone believed you. They emphasized this belief, as if it would be difficult to

---

secure. While everything I had been taught related to someone hurting *me*, I understood that it applied to this situation; Jaimie couldn't tell, and she was asking me to tell for her. Except that this would be our last sleepover if I did.

She didn't see her grandfather often, I reasoned, so maybe it could wait. Maybe she'd be safe, and when she wasn't going to be, I could step in.

I mulled over this solution at school throughout the day, but I realized it couldn't wait, and I ached to get home and hand this millstone to someone bigger, more capable.

My mother was in the kitchen, tired from caring for Breonny and Brier, the baby. I told her I needed to talk to her, employing a level of gravitas that I can only assume was very unusual for an eight-year-old, because she dropped her sponge and turned to face me.

I told her about Jaimie's grandfather. She asked me to help dress Brier while she called Audrey. For whatever reason, she chose to meet Audrey and tell her in a park. I remember watching Audrey's outline crumple to the ground against the evaporating light. Jaimie and I stood with Breonny on the sidewalk, yards away from our mothers.

"I told you I would never speak to you again if you told," Jaimie said. She must have heard that phrase somewhere—"I'll never speak to you again"—because she kept saying it exactly that way.

"I had to," I said.

"Why?"

"I thought you weren't gonna talk to me."

"I'm not. This is it. This is the last thing I'm saying."

"I figured if I told, it wouldn't happen anymore." A pause. "Is that a good enough reason?"

Jaimie turned to me, eyes shut, and went "Hm-mm-hmm" from behind her closed lips. She turned and smiled at Breonny, whom she typically ignored. "Let's do 'Ring Around the Rosie.'"

"Okay!"

They twirled beside me, and I watched Audrey pace next to the merry-go-round.

"Ashes, ashes. We all fall down."

Afterward, we went to Jaimie's house, and Audrey calmed, or perhaps merely went into some kind of shock. She moved into the grateful mother role, giving me strawberry tea and assuring me of Jaimie's future forgiveness.

I would later learn of Audrey's private guilt. A few years before, a neighborhood girl had accused Audrey's father of molesting her, and Audrey had defended him ferociously, bolstering her case with the fact that he had never touched Audrey, or, at that time, a very small Jaimie.

Maybe his drive for little girls didn't kick in until Audrey was older, or maybe he had some bizarre set of scruples that barred hurting only his own daughter. Regardless, Audrey's attack on a child who had no reason to lie would cause her more sorrow than she ever could have anticipated.

Jaimie made a point of letting Breonny mangle her Popples while I watched. She was testing me, hoping I would apologize for my breach of childhood secrets, but I qualified each apology: "I'm sorry, but I had to."

---

Eventually, this would be good enough. Jaimie would get counseling and move across town, where I didn't see her as often, though we still spent the night together sometimes. Her parents went out of their way to be kind to me, and I usually left with a stomach full of Lucky Charms (a luxury not allowed at home), having had a makeover, possibly even carrying a sheet of My Little Pony stickers. I sometimes caught her father, Jack, looking at me from across the room or the dinner table. If he caught my eye, he'd give me a half smile, with the corners of his lips turned down.

Jack had hurried back halfway through what should have been a six-month stint on an aircraft carrier to comfort his family. Technology in the mid-eighties still couldn't provide Audrey with a way to call Jack while he was on the ship, but she could send a telegram. Originally, she planned only to tell him to rush home, having contacted the appropriate people to release him from his duty for the time being. My father, however, keenly aware of a man's fears at sea, convinced her to send this, the briefest possible version of the story: COME HOME IMMEDIATELY. JAIMIE MOLESTED BY GRANDFATHER. Few things, my father said, would upset a man more, but at least he would know his family was alive.

Jaimie and I didn't play any kind of dirty games after that, nor did I play them with any other friends who'd been molested. Their numbers grew throughout childhood: Abby, whose parents had divorced when her mother discovered her father making Abby perform fellatio; Hannah, who insisted that the man who asked her to press her budding eleven-year-old chest against his back was "sweet." There were more. So many. They all had details they shared willingly, gratefully. I felt guilty I wasn't one of them and shame for even pretending to abuse someone who understood the real thing.

I wish I could say this experience kept me from making Funshine Bear and Tenderheart do the horizontal mambo, but it didn't, though I did it alone after that. Or with someone whose innocence wasn't suspect—once a cousin, once a boy I'd known since birth. We were children; we had questions. We needed to tell stories to make real what we did and didn't know.

Then, too, I often wished that I had been molested, instead of Jaimie or the others. I tell myself that this is due to something akin to survivor's guilt, knowing they didn't earn this treatment and thinking I could have handled it better, that I would have told immediately and gotten a smaller piece of this evil. Though these elements exist, my reason for wishing my own harm has an additional, ignoble aspect: it would give me an excuse—for the self-pitying depression I've floundered in since third grade, for the imprudent sexual behavior of my mid-twenties. I felt (feel?) that I deserved it, and I've wanted a story that made sense out of my own adult fuck-ups.

Despite my guilt and shameful desires, I know Jaimie needed a story, too—one where someone couldn't really hurt her, where the man was small and thin and a Holly Hobby blanket would keep him at bay. Where power was made only of a few sheets of paper, and it could be burned, misplaced, forgotten. I have a story of my own, but it's all beginnings and no endings:

Once, I was a father.

Once, I told a child to let me molest her.

Once, I laid my body across a little girl, and she breathed.