

## Sex Talk

The boy can't sleep when his father doesn't come straight home. He gets caught up in the shadows from the hall light and the headlights rolling across his bedroom wall. And the sounds—cars passing, his brother's whistling asthma, and the creaking floor as his mom climbs out of bed and walks to the back door to see if his father is home yet. Sometimes he holds up a hand and stares at the hall light through his palm. When he does this, it looks like the skin between his fingers is on fire.

He hears boots clunk up the back porch, a pause, then the kick-off of snow; the back door opens and, after a few seconds, the man is inside, clearing his throat. First one boot drops, then the second. Heavy feet pad through the house, and the boy imagines him listing, tossing his coat on a chair. And then he's in the doorway of the boy's bedroom, silhouetted, his cowlick an erupting sunspot in the glow. *You're awake*, he says. *Good. We need to have a talk. You know*—the man leans against the doorjamb, wipes his mouth, pats down his hair—*a woman is not a pinball machine*.

The boy doesn't sit up so much as pull back, so that he's leaning against the headboard.

*No, see... women don't like it from behind. I've been meaning to have this talk with you. You're at the age where you probably have a lot of questions.*

The father comes inside the boys' room and it's like a dirty wind has rushed down the alley between their beds. The air is thick with cigarettes and beer and smells the boy doesn't know yet. The man pauses over Jakie's bed. *Jacob asleep?*

I think.

Jakie sleeps through everything. The boy always hears his father come home but Jakie sleeps through it and the next morning wants all the details: What did he say? Did he slur his words? How long did it take him to get inside? Jakie believes he's some kind of scientist, always measuring things and trying to figure what causes different reactions, as if there's a hidden world behind their father getting drunk.

*And it's awful easy to get caught up in the nipple, the boy's father is saying now, his head on a swivel. But it's that area around the nipple, that's where a man can make a cool living.*

Truth is, the boy doesn't mind so much when his father comes in his room and talks because then at least he knows he's made it home. It's the other nights, when the phone rings so late and his mother mumbles under her breath and cries over her coffee the next morning—those are the nights he doesn't like.

*Don't manhandle them. If you're gentle, they're the key to the pants.*

If he's awake when the back door opens, the boy starts counting how long it takes his father to get inside and close the door. It was Jakie's idea, like ticking off seconds between lightning and thunder. Jakie thought it might help determine how many beers their father has had: three seconds at the door equals three beers. Jakie made a chart one time. He put door time on there. And word slur. And rubber face. When their father has rubber face, Jakie said, it means at least five beers.

*Don't grab and clutch. Pet. Flutter. Use the back of your hand.*

The boys have debated how many beers it might take for their father to hit them. Jakie came up with the question when he made his chart. Their dad has never hit them, but Randy next door, his father hits him all the time. Jakie's theory is that their father simply hasn't had enough beers to hit them yet. Jakie is nervous about things like that, and he believes he can estimate anything, including the number of beers that might make their father hit them. He wants to put it on the chart, so they know what to watch for. Jakie believes that everything can be explained. He is still such a kid. One time they asked Randy how many beers it takes before his dad hits him with the belt but Randy said he didn't know because as soon as he hears the refrigerator door open, he pretends to be asleep.

The man sits on his son's bed. It sags under his weight. He runs his hand through clipped furrows of dusted black hair. And he lets out air, like a balloon going flat.

You should go to bed. Mom's waiting up for you.

*Not 'til we've finished our man-to-man.* The father picks up a green army man from the floor and stares at it. It's a bayonetter. Sometimes there's an extra tab of plastic between the bayonetter's helmet and his arm. When he was little, the boy used to chew on the tiny plastic flaps and rip them free with his fang teeth. He used to think he had extra sharp fang teeth.

This bayonetter has a little flap around his helmet that glows in the back light of the hall like a halo. The boy wonders what his father would do if he grabbed the army man and bit the plastic halo off its head. He already thinks his father believes he's some kind of weirdo, so he would probably just shrug. His father was in the Army, in Vietnam, but he rarely talks about it, except to say that it was mostly boring, and nothing like in the movies. One time, an old friend came over and they told each other stories about Vietnam, but they never mentioned guns or shooting. It was boring. They drank five beers each before his father's friend said something about "ginks" and the boy's mother sent him and Jackie downstairs to play ping-pong.

*Here's another thing. When you get going, hold yourself up with your arms. Don't just lay on top of her. A woman's not an air mattress.*

Not an air mattress.

His father coughs. *That's right. It's all friction.*

The boy didn't tell his father, but Vietnam was the country he did his social studies diorama about. He made a rickshaw and sprinkled rice and even used some of his army men. When he did his report, he found a book in the library that said some Americans shot women and children. He figured these were the ginks his dad's friend talked about.

*When I was young, I was confused about sex. There's just so much you don't know when you're young. I couldn't ask my dad. You can ask me anything.*

After his father's friend left, the boy thought a lot about Vietnam, especially when he and Jackie had the army men out. He used to imagine that if he were in the Army he would be extra careful not to shoot women and children. When they played, he would usually be the tan army and let Jackie be the green army, even though there were more green soldiers than tan. He also let Jackie think that both sides were American—otherwise Jackie wouldn't play. He knew it didn't make sense that Americans would fight each other, but in his mind, Jackie was really the Germans, and not the stupid ones from *Hogan's Heroes*. The army men with pistols they called captains and the ones with flamethrowers they called lieutenants, but Jackie saw a war movie with English guys and began calling his flamethrowers *left-tenants*. For a moment, the boy wonders if his father knew any *left-tenants*. But he never knows what his dad is going to want to hear about. One time, he said that a kid at school was as pretty as a girl and his father got a disgusted look on his face. The boy wanted to tell his father that thinking a guy at school looks like a girl doesn't make you a queebie or something, but he figured the sooner he dropped it, the better.

*You're going to start having fantasies you can't get out of your mind. And confusing dreams. You know what I mean?*

I dreamed once that I had a really sharp toenail that could kill people.

*You'll have dreams where you're with a girl and you'll wake up and the bed is sticky. I just want you to know that dreams like that are okay.*

Down the hall, the bed squeaks, his mother apparently trying to catch his father's attention, to let him know she's still up. But he ignores it or doesn't hear.

*There's nothing wrong with that. It's just your body's way of testing the equipment. Letting a few workers slip over the border. There's no harm in it. And don't feel bad about cranking your handle in the shower. Or in the basement.*

Okay.

*Nothing wrong with that. Paint the pan. Trim the sail. Whittle the stick.*

I'd like to whittle.

*Sure you would. You got questions? Oh, and people will tell you things, that's the worst. Don't listen. If they say you can get the drips from a toilet seat, that's not true. Crabs, yes, but you can usually take care of that by trimming the foliage. Got it?*

Got it.

*Or let's say someone in boot camp tells you that if you jizz on a piece of bread and feed it to a girl, she can get pregnant. That's not true.*

The boy stares at his father, thinking about the parties his parents have sometimes, where the men go out to drink beer in the backyard and the women sit around eating little cakes.

What kind of bread?

The man shrugs. *I don't know. Any bread, I suppose. You got any other questions?*

No. No, I think that's it.

The father leans back against the wall and sighs and closes his eyes. *Don't be nervous. Sex can be a great thing. You just have to remember—*

Women don't like it from behind?

The man opens one eye and looks at his son with it. Then he opens the other eye and looks down at the army man in his hand.

*I get so tired,* he tells the army man. His jaw hangs, as if it's too heavy to close his mouth.

You can go to bed. Mom's waiting up for you.

The man smiles at his son, then leans back against the wall and pretty

soon he's breathing heavily. When the boy is sure his father is asleep, he slips out of his covers, climbs around his father, and pads across the floor and down the hall. His mother is lying on her side in bed, her fingers gripping the comforter like she's looking over a fence.

*Is he asleep?*

Yeah. On my bed.

She sits up and smiles the way she does when Jakie does something cute. *Don't be angry with him. Your father—*

We had a talk.

*He works so hard. I guess it's just easier for him to talk to you after he's been drinking. When he was a kid, it wasn't easy for him the way it is for you and your brother. His father wasn't around.*

I know.

*So, what did you talk about?*

You know. Guy stuff. Sex. Bread.

She sits straight up. *What?*

You know. Sex and bread and stuff. He shrugs.

*Honey, what exactly did your father say?*

Oh, regular stuff. How women don't like it from behind.

She stares at the boy. Then she stands. She takes his hand and he is surprised how firm her grip is. They cross the hall. She lets go of his hand and shakes her husband's shoulder. *Mel. Come to bed, now.*

He opens one eye, then the other, and smiles at his wife. *Hey beautiful, like he's surprised she would be there. I was just dreaming about you.*

His wife pulls him up off the bed. *Come on. Let the boy sleep.*

*But we're having a talk.*

*For God's sake, he's only nine.*

The man looks at his boy like that can't be right. He stares as if he's just been told their son is a giraffe. Then he rubs his whiskered jaw, one corner of his mouth turned upward. He laughs as he climbs out of his son's bed.

The boy checks to make sure his bed isn't sticky before he climbs in.

His father stands above him. *I... uh... you know... everything isn't so... uh.... Do you have any questions?*

*Come on. He has school tomorrow.*

The man nods sharply, then reaches down and takes the boy's hand. His eyes are blue and steady and he shakes his son's hand and it's the same way he shakes his friends' hands, as if he's passing on information, some code, and it's thrilling to the boy, the feel of his father's thick

hand, the skin rough and scabbed. His knuckles are frayed knots and his hand is huge; it seems to weigh more than the boy does. He thinks it's no wonder his father is so tired, lugging around these two wrecking balls. When they let go, the man's hands swing back to his side. He trudges down the hall toward his bedroom, bumps into the wall and steadies himself.

It's warm in the boy's bed, where his father has been lying. He closes his eyes and tries to start his dreams—red glowing army men move silently across a huge diorama beneath a full moon—but then he senses someone blocking the moon and he sits up.

Dad?

*Are you still awake?*

What's the matter, Mom?

*Nothing. I just—*. The hall light surrounding her is different, easier, almost liquid. She doesn't come in, just stands in the doorway, hair settled on her shoulders, the light diffuse around her. *See, the thing is—*. But, again, she doesn't finish. The boy thinks that the older people get, the fewer sentences they finish. A person is lucky to get anything at all from older people.

*What your father was talking about, it's complicated. You know that, right? There's a lot more to it. Do you understand?*

Sometimes women like it from behind?

She seems to startle herself by laughing. His mother doesn't laugh as often as his father does, and the boy wishes he knew exactly what he did, so he could do it again on those nights when his father doesn't come home at all. *Go to sleep*, she whispers, and then she turns around. Her hand stays on the doorframe for an extra second, but then, even it is gone.

He waits to hear his parents talk, but the only sound is the creak of the box spring as his mother climbs in on her side. And it occurs to him that maybe his father's thick hands are the reason he drinks beer and bumps into walls and comes home late every night. And he thinks that one day his own hands will be that thick. At first, he dismisses the thought as stupid, the kind of little-kid idea that Jakie gets. But when the house is completely still, the boy holds his hand up to the hall light. Fire burns between his skinny fingers.

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