

A Lesson in Sex and Deceit

My seventh-grade teacher, Mr. Robertson, separated the boys from the girls when we lined up to walk home for lunch. When the bell rang, he dismissed the girls. This was unusual, and we boys looked at each other, wondering what was up. As we filed out of the room, he handed each of us an envelope. “A signed permission slip is due by the end of the week,” he said.

Outside the school, we congregated in a large group, the rules governing schoolyard cliques temporarily suspended. Several girls joined us, wondering if we were in some collective trouble. We showed them the envelopes addressed to our parents. Usually when a notice was sent home, the flap was tucked inside the envelope. These envelopes were sealed.

Roberta, laughed and said the letter was about sex. She reminded us that the girls had received a similar envelope two months earlier. Not long after, word got around that the letter was about ‘the facts of life.’ Dwayne, an older boy held back to repeat seventh grade, told us during recess that the girls would learn about their periods. What was he talking about? I wondered. The only periods I knew about were at the end of sentences.

I hoped that Roberta was correct. Finally, I thought, I’ll learn something to fill in the blanks. I decided to wait until Dad came home from work before showing the letter to my parents. I’d ask him to sign my permission slip.

Back at school, the classroom buzzed with details from the letter. Some of the boys had asked their mothers to sign their letters at lunch, and these circulated around the class. The letter explained that a meeting for boys was scheduled to show a filmstrip about ‘Human Sexuality.’

“I know all about it,” Dwayne bragged. “I attended the meeting last year and I don’t need a refresher course.” He acted so much older than us, I wondered if he’d been kept back before.

A local doctor was scheduled to lead the meeting. The school administration encouraged fathers to attend with their sons. I wondered what Matt Bushnell would do. His father had died two years ago. Surely his mother wouldn’t come. Maybe an uncle would stand in for his Dad. The meeting was the first Saturday in March, two weeks away.

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I knew about erections and their inevitable habit of occurring at inopportune moments. In fact, they were a nuisance because, when I had one, I couldn’t pee. Growing up with a younger sister, I knew girls were different from boys and that there were some things one shouldn’t do around girls. Last year at the cabin my parents rented each summer at Long Lake, my sister and I were getting dressed after swimming. As a joke, I demonstrated how I could hold up a towel with my erection. And it was a *damp* towel. I subsequently learned too late that my sister could not keep a secret. She was convinced she’d go to Hell if she didn’t tell our parents everything. That evening, Mom asked to speak with me. Alone. She wasn’t angry, but she made it clear that my behavior that afternoon was unacceptable and better not happen again. Mom was the disciplinarian and it seemed appropriate she was the one to reprimand me. Perhaps Dad hadn’t heard about the incident, but even if he had, he always left the unpleasant discussions for Mom to handle.

At twelve, I was clueless about sex and what I’d overheard didn’t make sense. I’d grown up with a sister, so the physical difference between boys and girls was no mystery. However, despite my ‘A’s in math and science, history and reading, I never questioned *why* there was a difference. I sensed there was information missing that I needed to know, but I couldn’t

formulate a question to ask, even if I'd dared to ask it. I assumed the difference in anatomy was a quirk of Nature that adults no longer found relevant. The bits of information I picked up in seventh grade listening to older boys only confused me more. Then the letter from school promised to change everything.

What was the state of my knowledge about sex the day I received the envelope? During recess, if the playing fields were muddy, students stood on the concrete between the main building and the temporary classrooms set up in trailers in 1956 to accommodate the increase in children born after the war. The older boys separated into cliques to discuss sports, girls and sex. Those of us not in a clique due to age or low social standing made do talking with each other or with girls, playing marbles, or swinging two ropes for girls to skip double-dutch.

Occasionally I wormed my way into the outer circle of a clique and picked up some whispers about sex before I was discovered and kicked out. But hearing information piecemeal only created more confusion. Once, I heard Dwayne recite a poem:

In days of old when knights were bold
And sheiks were not invented,
They wrapped a sock around their cock
And babies were prevented.

I laughed with the other boys, but I didn't understand what Arabs had to do with it or how a sock prevented babies. The one thing I did know was to play along and not to ask questions. Ignorance was preferable to ridicule. A valuable lesson I learned early in life.

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'Human Sexuality' Saturday arrived; a mild spring day with the ground muddy from the melting snow. The sound of water dripping from roofs into gutters came from all directions. Dad dressed in a business suit, white shirt and tie. He wore a pair of snow boots with metal clasps that

snapped shut. I was in my Sunday school clothes and a sweater Mom had knitted for me. At the last minute, I couldn't find my boots, so I borrowed my sister's. They were dark blue with a pink band around the top, but when I pulled my pant leg over the boot, the pink didn't show.

I assumed my father would drive the car, but instead we walked the quarter mile to school. I worried that we'd be late. I hated walking into a roomful of people staring at me.

The school playground was at the end of our street. Fog drifted across the field swirling around us as we kept to the cement path to avoid the mud. My father and I didn't speak, and I had to run at times to keep up with him. My sister's boots clomped on the asphalt. They were too small, and my feet hurt.

The meeting was held in the combination gym/auditorium. Several classes of seventh-grade boys from neighboring schools were also invited. I'd never seen them before and the prospect of anonymity was a welcome surprise. Most of the seats were taken. I wanted to sit in the back row, but Dad walked to the front where two empty seats were on the aisle. Looking down, I avoided the eyes of anyone I knew, embarrassed, as if caught someplace I shouldn't be. I wanted to be invisible.

The gym was strangely quiet without the shouts of boys playing basketball, the thump of the ball, and the squeak of sneakers on the wooden floor. Although tall for my age, I didn't enjoy playing basketball. I especially hated playing on the 'skin' team which played without shirts. I was ashamed at how skinny I was. And why didn't I have hair on my chest like the older boys?

A young man in the center aisle was threading a filmstrip through the projector. I was always disappointed when a teacher showed a filmstrip rather than a film because a filmstrip was never interesting, and, in the darkened room, I had to fight to keep my eyes open. When the man turned on the projector, a hush of expectation swept through the room. A bull's-eye appeared on the

screen which he used to focus and level the projector. To the left of the young man, I saw my teacher, Mr. Robertson talking with his son. Before he noticed me, I looked away and slouched in my chair.

A rasping sound erupted from the speakers above the stage. The sound was turned down. An older man with white hair and a wispy beard stood at the lectern scanning his notes. When he was ready, he cleared his throat. “Can everyone hear me?” A boy seated in the last row shouted “No.” The man adjusted the microphone in its holder and tightened a screw. “Now can you hear me?” There was a chorus of “Yes” and a few whistles.

“Good morning,” he said. “I’m Dr. Webster.” He cleared his throat again and looked down at his notes. “As you young men grow up, your body changes—” The microphone shrieked with feedback and he made a further adjustment. “As I was saying, your body changes and you begin to develop secondary sex characteristics...”

Pictures of the female and male reproductive organs were cartoons. Too bad. I had hoped for graphic photos. A drawing of a cross section of the male organ was unsettling and looked painful. Then, we saw a photograph of tadpoles. They had long tails but hadn’t yet grown legs. The doctor said these creatures were called sperm and they whipped their tails back and forth in the race toward the egg.

Cut to a cartoon of the egg waiting patiently in something called a fallopian tube. The egg was drawn to represent a princess seated atop a castle wall. The drawbridge was down. The next diagram showed a mob of invading sperm. Then a close-up of a sperm, dressed like a prince, crossing the moat. “Once a sperm enters the egg,” the doctor said, “the egg no longer allows any other sperm to enter.” In the next cartoon, the drawbridge was raised. The princess was smiling. I found all this hard to believe. Surely the other sperm were smart enough to find another way

inside. And what if two sperm raced across the drawbridge at the exact same time? These were good questions for the doctor, but I wasn't going to ask them. And where did the sperm come from anyway?

After a few more diagrams showing the fetus developing in the womb, the lights were turned up and the instructor asked if there were any questions. Absolute silence. The radiators along the wall hissed and clanged. A few coughs and the clearing of throats. Just before the silence became unbearable, Mr. Robertson stood up. "Doctor, I think some of the boys may not know how the sperm gets inside the woman. Would you address this?"

The speaker hesitated and swallowed. "Of course." He took a deep breath, and the audience leaned forward as if sucked toward the front of the auditorium. I listened carefully. You do what? Does he know what he's talking about? You put it where? And then what happens? It does? I was dizzy with information, then I remembered to breathe. And Mom was worried about what I did with a damp towel!

When we left the gym, a few boys ran ahead, shouting and laughing as if the information were nothing new. How much had they already known? Other boys, acting cool and nonchalant, talked quietly to friends as if saying, "That was interesting, but let's get together for soccer this afternoon." The rest of us were silent, concentrating on thinking and walking at the same time. I nodded to the boy who sat behind me in class. He nodded back but said nothing. I wasn't the only one who was speechless.

Dad and I crossed the field back the way we had come. The sun, directly above us, had burned off the morning haze, leaving the trees, fence, and houses in sharp relief as if I was looking at the world with new eyes. My questions had been answered, but another set were already waiting off stage. The facts made sense in theory, but what did I *do* now?

My father spoke once on the way home. "If you have any questions, come and ask me." His tone was perfunctory. These words were the beginning and the end of the discussion. I was scornful; this was something he had to say. If we never discussed the simplest emotional issue, how would we ever talk about this? I knew I'd never ask him any question about sex even if my life depended on it.

At home, Mom asked me how it had gone. I ignored her and went directly to my room. "Did you learn anything?" she called after me with a laugh. In my room, I silently mimicked her words, exaggerating her facial expressions. I changed out of my Sunday clothes and grabbed the ring of cards and the punch I used to record the payments of my newspaper customers. I adjusted bicycle clips around my pants.

"See you later." I went straight to the front door to avoid looking at her or Dad. "I'm collecting for my paper route." I closed the door with a bang before they could reply. Suddenly I was very angry. I had been deceived and kept in the dark.

It reminded me of adults justifying their lies about Santa Claus: "We lied only to bring joy to children at Christmas." But I also remembered walking home one day in second grade, when Kathleen, the girl across the street, told me Santa didn't exist.

"Of course, he exists," I argued. She's nuts, I thought.

Kathleen laughed and told me to ask my mothers

"We were going to tell you after Christmas," Mom said. I was stunned by the deception. And humiliated that I'd fallen for a story that, on rational examination, was obviously a hoax. And laughed at by a girl I liked who thought *I* was crazy for still believing such nonsense.

All this time, sex had hidden in plain sight behind a flimsy curtain of silence. Only after wallowing in ignorance and tormenting myself for nearly a year, had the curtain been pulled aside with a smirk and a laugh. Hoodwinked once again.

I stayed out the whole afternoon. After collecting, I sat on the fence facing the highway, waiting for the delivery van with the afternoon papers. When an older boy rode by on his bicycle, all I could think was, "He already knows about this." Or when watching a man getting out of his car, I was amazed: "He's known about this for years." And when I threw a newspaper onto the porch of a house where young children played on the lawn, I watched them for a moment, then shook my head. Another generation of suckers!