

## Ohrail Sex

We're all crammed into this tiny kitchen, Mamaw, Mom, my two aunts and me. Mamaw stands at the stove stirring a giant pot of boiling vegetable soup, fist on one big hip, a cigarette dangling out of the corner of her mouth. She's got this unspoken motto, 'if it hurts, feed it,' and her frame confirms that belief. There are a lot of big-assed women in my family. I may be the exception, but only because food holds no lure for me. It's a worry to my mother.

The rest of us sit around this tiny round table, drinking coffee and popping the last of the green beans from the garden to put up for later this fall. I'm peeling potatoes for the soup. Papaw and the menfolk, along with my boyfriend, Ricky is squeezed into the living room watching football. It's a fracas in there.

Mamaw has been unusually quiet, and we're all worried sick about her. She's having these fits of confusion. The last hospital test showed abnormalities in the brain, which we all know isn't good. So we're here, and Ricky and I are coming back at the crack of dawn tomorrow to take her into Louisville to see the Doctor, since he has a car, I don't have classes till Tuesday, and everybody else has to work. It's weird, all the quiet in the kitchen, because normally Mamaw's the biggest talker and half the time doesn't care who's listening. She talks to herself like the world agrees.

Her hands are scarred from bacon grease and early years of cotton picking. Aside from the bottles of Tab stacked in the fridge, cigarettes are her biggest habit,

but not because she's addicted. She never inhales. Back in the 40's some Doctor told her cigarettes were good for the nerves, so she sets one between her lips when she cooks or washes the dishes. She says her nerves have been bad since her first husband, Sonny J died unexpectedly after World War II. She was six months pregnant with my Aunt Sally, her youngest girl, and had two more mouths to feed with no widow's pension, no social security, no nothing. Mom and her sisters are all Sonny J's kids and Mamaw had three boys with her second husband, my Papaw, but this ain't no Brady Bunch.

Today, she's been staring into the soup like it's going to conjure something up. It's not till Mom asks what's on her mind that Mamaw turns and looks squint eyed at her three daughters. "I was reading this article the other day about ohrail sex. Just what is that exactly?"

She picks up the half drunk bottle of Tab from the center of the stove and takes a swig. Even though I am almost twenty years of age, she ignores me. She thinks I'm too young to know. We stare at her in shock. First, there's a pause as we all try to figure out what on earth she's asking, then an aha moment where we all know exactly what she's asking, and finally the realization that somebody has to answer her. Mom and her sisters exchange shocked looks. I am a breath away from a snort, but don't want to draw attention to myself. Mom screams with laughter, grabs her crotch and runs for the bathroom. She's not coming back.

My face is hot. I pray Ricky doesn't come in here to see what the ruckus is, but the men are riveted to that game. If anybody in this kitchen looks at me hard they'll know my secret. A week ago, I had my first ever orgasm. I finally let Ricky use

his tongue on me and it's all I've been thinking about. I didn't know it would be like that, like riding a wave, not that I know anything about that since we live in a land locked state. I did spend some time this summer at the new swimming pool that has a wave machine over at the Marriott, so I figure that must be the sensation, free and wild, riding a forever wave. Smooth, like a good cup a coffee topped by a Reese's peanut butter cup, so rich and sweet, that you just want to wallow all up in it and never leave the ecstasy.

Ricky and me have been together 18 months now. I met him at a bar named Bambi's on a Sunday night where they let underage kids in to dance. I danced the last song with him, which happened to be the Donna Summers hit, "Last Dance." Afterward, he picked me up and ran to my car in the rain. He wouldn't let me down until I kissed him goodbye, so I did because who wants to drive home soaking wet? All that sounds romantic, but if I'm honest the kiss wasn't great. He called afterward, and I agreed to go out with him mostly because he made me laugh. He's got a mean imitation of Mohammad Ali.

Ricky is hoping tonight will be the night to consummate what we started. We still haven't gone all the way. I'm staying over at his place since we have to get up so early. Now he's gone out and bought champagne, and the new Michael Jackson album. It's thoughtful, I know, but I'm nervous about all this planning. It feels like he's lining something up, like it's the scene of a crime instead of something that should just come natural.

Mamaw sits in the chair Mom left vacant, and stares the other two down. She's not talking anymore until she gets answers. Somebody is going to have to

speak up and it's not going to be me. That would just upset her, and she worries enough about everybody as it is. She used to line us up outside the bathroom door every Friday night after the church fish fry, and dose out Milk of Magnesia by the tablespoon to six grown kids and their spouses and offspring. I hid out front in the bushes, but she always found me. This woman is determined to keep us all alive.

"You read an article about what?" Sally Anne asks.

"You heard me." Mamaw says.

Sally's mortified. She puts her head down on the table and shakes it back and forth, one long no. She's easy to mortify. Just say her name loud in a crowded room, and she goes all white and shaky. Mamaw says she's like that because she's the baby that never knew her daddy. I don't know, I think some people are just like that.

I'm still a virgin. The oldest one I know. Here I am a sophomore in college, not a single soul in this kitchen was a virgin for as long as me. Mom got pregnant on her 16<sup>th</sup> birthday at the drive in movies where Arrivederci Roma was playing. It was the first time she had sex, and she got me. She tells that story like a warning. She and Dad ran off to Tennessee where they didn't need parental consent and came back hitched. My grandparents were so mad nobody let them in. My parents spent their first night of marriage sleeping in the car in the alleyway behind the house, Mom throwing up the whole time. But I digress.

Maggie, she's the middle sister, is shocked at Mamaw's question like the rest of us, but not for the same reason. She wants to know how Mamaw got to fifty-five years of age without knowing more about sex. "Mom! You don't know what oral sex is? Do you know what a blow job is?"

“Why would I ask if I knowed what it was?”

A couple of years ago, Mom, Mamaw and me were driving to South Carolina to see my great grandmother, Mama Lane, and I asked Mamaw if she was a virgin when she got married. Mamaw laughed! “A virgin? Hell no!” That really bothered Mom who always felt bad for getting pregnant so young and then, being the first born, finds out she probably came from the same circumstance as me.

In the living room somebody’s on the ten- yard line, which judging from the noise, is a good thing. Maggie starts asking basic questions like “You know how many holes a woman’s got, right Mom?”

Sally raises her head like it’s a pop quiz and answers “Two!”

“Two?” I jump in, “we don’t have two holes!”

“Yes we do,” she says, like she’s the expert.

“I assure you we do not.”

“Oh really Miss Scholarship to college? How many holes do you think we have?”

“What hole do you think babies come out of Sally Anne?”

Sally and I have a mind-boggling fight about pee holes and their flexibility, or lack thereof, while Maggie explains to Mamaw in detail what a blowjob is. I just want Sally to shut up so I can listen. Since Mom is the oldest of all six kids, Maggie and Sally act more like my sisters than my aunts. I remember them as young, and they remember me as competition.

I know Ricky wants me to give him a blowjob, but I worry about gagging, plus I don’t know how clean it is. I almost did one night. I was planning to, but then he got

drunk and called me a fat ass, so the mood was gone. He isn't usually like that. Usually he leaves me little notes everywhere telling me I'm beautiful, or reminding me to have a good day. He frets over me.

I do love him, so I can't explain why I've waited. Both my aunts married at 18 to have sex, but Maggie is the only one still married to the same man. Sally Anne is on her second marriage to a guy we all secretly call Butterball because of the shape of his head, and he cuts up food for her. None of us knows why. My parents got divorced when I was 12, which was for the best. No more threats with the butcher knife, no more belt whooping's, no more dinner at 5:30, and no more liver and onions. Thank God! Mom's gone through some bad spells with the bottle. Every once in a while she'd go on a bender and me or my aunts would have to go pull her out of some bar to get her home. I spent my junior and senior year living with Mamaw so she could get back on her feet.

Papaw hollers out from the next room, "One of you girls bring us some beer." I hop up and grab a couple of six packs of Old Milwaukee from the fridge, take them into the living room, stepping over everybody to hand them off. Ricky pulls me down on his lap for a kiss. I give him a peck so as not to endure my uncles' endless jokes. They're like a pack of wild dogs when they get together.

"Have you told Ricky why you were nicknamed Bone Woman in high school," my Uncle Junie Bug asks.

He thinks he is hilarious. I slap him on the back of the head on my way back to the kitchen and they all roar with drunken laughter until Papaw yells at them to shut up so he can hear the game.

I got that nickname because I am so tall and skinny. I struggle to eat. Food gets caught in my throat. It's like something is wedged there that makes it hard to swallow. I was 92 pounds my senior year of high school. Everybody was upset, which made it worse. Mamaw told me to ignore them and every night she drew me a hot bath and bathed me like she did when I was a child. She sat on a small white wooden child's chair with her rump hanging off each side, her knees up against the rust stained commode, scrubbing my body with nubby cotton washcloths till I was fresh pink. She'd have that cigarette in her mouth, the ash growing longer and longer until I was sure it would fall into the bathwater. It never did.

After, she tucked me between clean sheets and spoon-feed me whatever was left over from suppertime. She'd talked about growing up poor. She told me how they ate what they grew or killed, and still she was always hungry. Said it was the only complaint she ever had against her Mama - that there was never enough. She talked until I would eat. Sometimes it took two hours to feed me, but she did it until I came around. Now I am of normal weight, but I still can't see myself clearly. There's always that little question in the back of my mind wondering whether or not I am repulsive.

In the kitchen, Maggie has moved the lecture on to how a man pleases a woman. "Do you know where your clitoris is," she asks.

Mamaw has no idea where, or even what a clitoris is. She didn't even know she had one. Sally rolls her eyes and bolts to go sit with Butterball in the living room. Maggie, sitting in the chair next to Mamaw, pivots, gives a look out to the men to make sure nobodies coming, pulls up her skirt, spreads her legs and yanks her

underwear to the side to show Mamaw this little button at the top of her vagina just under the lips, the vulva to be precise, which is the area from the perineum to the mons pubis. I learned that much in biology. Mamaw sets down her drink, and bends over to see. I'm leaning in too. I'm not gonna lie, I don't know where mine is either. None of us has ever been shy about our parts. Mamaw doesn't even close the bathroom door to do her business, just hollers out orders from the toilet, but Maggie takes brazen to a whole new level.

"It's like magic Mom. This little thing here, if you rub it long enough, it gets hard and swells like a mini penis. This tiny piece of flesh holds the key to amazing!" Satisfied she has pointed it out properly, Maggie adjusts herself, and proceeds to tell Mamaw she deserves more than she's getting, tells her she doesn't know what she's been missing all these years, and that it's the woman's job to teach a man how to please her. They don't know I am in the room anymore, which is fine by me. Mamaw says nothing, just lights another cigarette and goes back to the soup. I know I could ask Maggie about sex, but she's got a big mouth and I don't relish the aftermath. Maggie once told me she likes when her husband talks dirty to her, but he won't do it because he finds it embarrassing. Imagine how he would feel if he knew she was spreading that around.

After that whole craziness is over, we all eat soup, and cornbread, and pie. When everybody leaves, Ricky pulls me into the alcove off the kitchen, near the backdoor, and tells me he misses my smell. I start a fit of giggles.

"What's so funny?"



“Just something Mamaw said, I’ll tell you later.” She’s is an ongoing source of amusement for him. Once, she told him she rubbed WD40 on her sore knees because she heard it was good for joints. Swore it helped. He tells everybody that story.

“You ready to go?”

“Let’s help clean up first.”

Ricky wipes the table, and I help Mamaw with the dishes. She washes and I dry as we watch the last of the light fade over the hill out the window. Soon it will be daylight savings time again. She stares out at the cool of the day, hanging on to a clump of silverware, and when I ask if she’s all right, she says wearily, “Yes, child, I’m alright,” but I know she’s lying. I catch Ricky’s eye, and we finish in silence.

After, I pull him aside. “She’s not right.”

“She is awful quiet.”

“I think it’s better if I stay with her, and we can be together tomorrow night. Is that okay?”

“You’re killing me, you know that?”

“I’m sorry. I just don’t know what else to do.”

I know he’s frustrated, but he is good about it, and tells me I’m worth the wait. I give him a long kiss cause I feel bad for him, and ask him to get my books from the dorm so I can study while Mamaw gets her tests done, then I stand in the driveway waving until he is out of sight.

Mamaw and I have our baths after Papaw goes to bed. She lends me one of her cotton nightgowns she keeps in a suitcase under the bed. We’re sleeping in my old room because we don’t want to wake Papaw in the morning, since we’ve got to

get up early for the two-hour drive to the city. I know she's scared. I am too; I can't imagine my life without her. Mamaw is my mainstay.

I call Ricky and say goodnight. He tells me he called my friend Anna and she dropped my books at his place, then puts in a request for hoecakes for breakfast. Mamaw never turns down a food request. I tell him they'll be hot and ready when he gets here.

"Kinda like me right now?" he cracks.

"Yeah, like you, right now."

"Woman, you really are killing me."

"Tomorrow," I promise.

Once we're all tucked in, Mamaw takes out her teeth, and puts them in a water glass on the side table before she flips off the light. The moon shines full through the window, lighting a path to her face. I can't be sure, but I think she's talking to me when she says real low, "Sonny J came to me through the T.V. set last night, told me it's almost my time."

I say, "What?" And ask if she's all right.

She looks so sad, but then she laughs and rolls toward me in the dark.

"I tell you what, I don't think I'll be able to look that Maggie in the eye anymore ever since she told me she does that oral sex."

I want to tell her about the wave. "Maybe we ought to consider what she says as fact Mamaw? I mean, what if it's fact?"

She laughs, runs a rough hand over my head, plants a wet kiss on my face, and whispers to me like we're sisters, "I can't hardly even look at that thing, let alone touch it." I drift to sleep watching her breath.

I don't know what time it is when I wake, but it's dark out, still the middle of the night. No light comes from the window, only the quiet sound of a light rain. The weather has turned. When I finally adjust my eyes, I see Mamaw standing at the foot of our bed pointing a gun at the window. Mamaw's. Got. A gun. It's the family hunting rifle, and she's got it pointed toward the window next to her side of the bed. She's a crack shot. I've seen her bust a stack of soda cans off a fence post 25 yards away.

When I sit up, she says low, "Somebody's out there. I'm gonna go see who it is. You stay here and keep quiet. Don't wake up Daddy; you'll give him a heart attack. Ten years ago, Papaw had a bad heart attack, and now, Mamaw's really strict about sudden scares, and she's cut the butter in her recipes by half. Nothing bad is going to happen on her watch.

In the dark I hear a light tap on the screen, and someone call my name. The voice, a girl's, is recognizable. I hop across the bed on my knees, part the curtain and see my best friend from college, my Sorority Sister, Alpha Delta Pi, Do Or Die, Anna Banana. Banana is not her real name, obviously, but I like how it rhymes with Anna, so now she is, and will always be, Anna Banana to me. I lift the window and she says quick, "You can't be the last to know, I'm not going to let that happen." I don't register what she is saying because she is about to get shot. I push my head to the screen, and see Mamaw at the side door lifting the rifle.

I whisper shout, "Don't shoot! It's Anna!"

Anna falls to the ground and covers her head, like that will stop a bullet.

I hear Mamaw say, "Lord child, what you doing out here? You scared us to death."

Anna gets her bearings, and I can see in the yellow light of the kitchen she's upset. She keeps apologizing for waking us up, but Mamaw puts on the percolator and says, "I wasn't sleepin' and ain't plannin' on it now, so we might as well sit and hear what you got yourself in a fuss about."

I know she wouldn't have come all this way if something hadn't happened.

"Just say it," I tell her.

Anna levels me with an eye-to-eye stare. "You know the Lambda Chi's are throwing a party tonight?"

"So?"

"Well Ricky was there. And he left the party with a freshman girl. That red head."

That red head is in the theater department. Her name is Linda or Leslie, something like that. She slept with one of the guys at the fraternity who has a girlfriend, and when the girl confronted her about it, that red head told her that her boyfriend was good in bed. She would know the difference between good and bad in bed. The red head is making a path straight through the male population of Western Kentucky University.

Mamaw gets up, sets the gun upright in the corner and leaves the room. When she comes back she has her purse, and her coat thrown on over her gown, "Go on and get dressed. Let's go see."

Anna scrambles up alongside Mamaw, and together they are waiting on me to move. I pull on my jeans and in minutes we are in Anna's two-door green Dodge with the heat blasting, Mamaw in the backseat. None of us say anything the whole drive to Ricky's place. It takes about twenty minutes. He's got a tiny one bedroom on the main floor of an old Victorian house four streets over from my dorm. I've got a key.

We pull up in the alley behind the house, and Anna stops the car, throws it in park and asks, "What are you gonna do?" The rain is really coming down now.

I hadn't even thought what to do, but Mamaw says, "Go on in there, and see if he's with that girl."

I get out of the car, and trudge around the hedges and through the wet to his bedroom window at the front of the house. I cup my hands to the glass.

I wish I couldn't, but I see. I see what's going on in there. I see him between the legs of the red head. Even in the shadows, I see his perfect butt. I pull away and squat in the rain with my back against the house. Somehow this is going to end up my fault.

I wrench the key out of my pocket, and slip through the side door into the kitchen where it's dark. This is the door they would have come through because Ricky hates neighbors knowing his business. His jacket, and hers, are thrown on the futon by the refrigerator. Her jacket, so obvious, is pink with a fur collar. A red head

with a pink coat and a fur collar is definitely advertising something. I quietly grab her jacket and am out the door. I don't bother to pull it closed, what's it matter? I toss it up into the chestnut tree by the driveway. It snags a good branch and hangs. They'll find it.

I circle round back, climb into the front seat of the car, out of breath and drenched. The shiver runs deep inside me.

"He wasn't there."

Anna grips the steering wheel, "I saw him leave with her Peg! I saw him."

I shake my head, and Mamaw lets out a breath.

"I'm so sorry. Oh my gosh, I'm so sorry", Anna says.

I pat her knee. "It's ok, maybe he was just walking her home. Let's go. Let's just go."

The only thing talking on the way back are the windshield wipers swatting the rain.

When Anna drops us off, it's four in the morning. Mamaw lights a cigarette, and makes me a hot bath before heading to the kitchen to roll out the hoecake dough. By the time Ricky pulls in the driveway the rain has turned to sleet and I am bracing for the long ride ahead.

When he comes through the door I see he's wary, which suits me fine. He gives a, "Hello ladies," and sits down to eat.

Mamaw slides a plate of food and a cup of coffee in front of him.

"Rough night?" she asks.

Ricky confesses he didn't get much sleep. Mamaw sets a plate of food in front of me too, but I can't eat.

Papaw joins us at the table in his t-shirt and boxers, says hey to Ricky and fixes his coffee the way he likes it - three teaspoons of sugar and some milk. He has to be at the post office in a half hour for work. "Gonna be a cold one today. You go careful on that road son, you hear?"

"Yessir, I will. Got precious cargo."

That's when Papaw notices the gun propped in the corner. "Alma, why is that gun out?"

Mamaw looks at me and I look at her. Ricky stops mid bite.

"We thought we heard something outside last night."

"Woman, wake me up when you hear things."

"Old man, nothing you can do that we two can't. Wasn't nothin anyway."

When we're alone in the kitchen, Ricky pulls me to him wanting a kiss. I duck away. He asks if I'm ok. I tell him I'm just worried about Mamaw. That's a truth. I am worried. I'm more worried than I've ever been in my life. He holds me and says, "Aw baby, everything's going to be alright."

I say, "Yeah, I know," but now I'm crying, "I'm gonna sit in the backseat with her for the ride, okay?"

He wipes my face with his shirt and looks at me, searching. "No problem honey, whatever you need. We good?"

"Yeah, we're good."

So this is what it looks like when two people lie to each other. He lifts me off the ground, gives me another squeeze, and is out the side door to warm up the car. When Mamaw comes back, I see she is having one of her spells.

“Where we goin’, Peg?” She hasn’t changed out of her slippers. I don’t want to embarrass her, so I lead her into the living room and sit her on the couch. She’s confused and scared.

“We’re just going into Louisville to see the doctor. We’re going to get you fixed up. Ok?”

She nods. She looks so much older than fifty-five. I don’t know what that age is supposed to look like, but I am guessing, it isn’t this. I change her shoes. We climb into the back of Ricky’s Buick, and I pull Mamaw’s seat belt over and click it shut.

“Radio or no radio?” Ricky asks.

I look at Mamaw, who shakes her head. I tell him we don’t care, and he puts on the country station. The car edges out the driveway, as Willie Nelson serenades, “Mama don’t let your babies grow up to be cowboys.”

Just before we turn onto the freeway, I reach for Mamaw’s hand and squeeze it three times, our ‘I love you’ signal. She gives me one hard squeeze back, and we sit like that, hand in hand, all the way to the city.



