

## **The Hug**

At my sister's memorial service, I got hugs from practically every girl in her class, including Bethany Combs, Sandy Wu and Conchita Gonzalez. And we're talking full hugs here, with tits pressing right into me, especially Conchita's. I know: utterly inappropriate to fixate on tits at a time like this. Trust me, I get it. I hate me, too. And yet, loathe me if you will, the tits were there, and I could not but notice them.

Hormones happen. Sixteen, I had yet to touch any actual tits. The only unpixelated ones I'd ever even seen were affixed to immediate family members. These are, of course, the kind of creepy details you don't share with anyone but a best friend.

Someone with whom you have spent many subterranean hours on the topic of tits. But my best friend, Leon, was not at the memorial service.

Leon was, unfortunately, with my sister, Rachel, when she drowned. We were at the lake at the end of the summer. I got to bring Leon, and my sister got to bring her best friend, Daphne. On the trip's last night, Leon and my sister snuck out after

midnight for one last swim. Rachel dove off the pier like a wild woman and just never came up, Leon said later, shivering, a rough blanket around his bare shoulders, his tears glistening red in the wavering glare of ambulance lights. When they found my sister's body, she was naked. So Leon was not invited to the memorial service.

Get a hold of yourself, I thought, staring at the shiny black shoes I never wore. You should be thinking about your sister, not tits. And definitely not your sister's tits. But a sister's tits are pert conundrums. I would try to ignore them – and her – by day, and they would show up – unbidden, unabashed, unbrassiered – in my dreams. Sick, I know. But I would see my sister's tits in waking life with more regularity than you might expect. And not by any skulking around in closets or anything like that. Rachel was, despite her DNA, what you would call a free spirit. My parents and I are all small, chubby, bespectacled folk. The proverbial gypsies were often invoked with Rachel. She was tall and lithe with unmitigated black eyes, and she liked to prance about the house singing, untroubled by melody or clothes, cackling at our prudery.

But back to the hug. I know it's pathetic, but Conchita's hug was like a major life-event for me. It wasn't just about the tits, either, okay? The hug from Conchita came after embraces from Bethany and Sandy and several others. I couldn't help it: after all the contact with girls I could otherwise never have hoped to have touched, I wasn't exactly aroused per se. But I wasn't exactly unaroused, either. I'm sorry. I suck. Sixteen.

I could almost hear my sister say, "Just go jerk off and get that disgusting look off your face, you little freak."

We had been bickering since I was three and she was four. At the lake that last night, Daphne shook me awake from a dream of guess-whats and asked if Leon was there. I rolled away and reached for my glasses and saw that he wasn't.

"Your sister," she laughed. "Should we go join them?"

I unzipped my sleeping bag, enraged. Leon was my friend, not hers! If she wanted to swim so badly, she should have done it with stupid, fat Daphne. But of course it was not about swimming. As with every toy I ever loved, she had to put her greedy, grubby little hands all over Leon, ruining everything.

Sorry. I was trying to talk about the hug. I expected Conchita to pull away, perfunctorily, after a second. Or else to recoil in disgust at what she brushed against. But when her turn to offer condolences came, Conchita reeled me in tighter than anyone else had – she smelled like lavender and licorice –and said, "I'm so sorry, Dylan. Rachel was such a strong personality. We'll miss her so, so much." I was releasing my tension, but she yanked me back in. "If there's anything I can do, anything, just text me or give me a call or whatever. Anytime."

Now she stepped back, but still held my baggy suit about the biceps. Her brown eyes shone into mine; we were the exact same height. It was strange to see her in a black dress. It took all my willpower to hold her gaze. For a crazy second, I wondered would she go to the prom with me.

"I'm serious, okay?"

"Okay, thanks," I muttered, amazed.

Of course I didn't have her number. And you couldn't exactly ask for it as you stood beside your stricken parents as a line of theatrically somber 17-year-olds shuffled up to say how sorry they were that your sister was dead.

I wanted to discuss with Leon the ins and outs of whether one really could text someone who said something like that at a time like that. And if one could, and if one did, what would one actually text? And how would one go about getting the number in the first place? But Leon, as I said, was not there.

Tommy McFarlane was, though. Next in line, he loomed over my father, shaking his hand. Unsure whether he should hug my mom or shake her hand, he just glowered at her, mumbled something and moved on. Why on earth was Tommy, a thick-necked, crew-cut lout, who wore a sweatshirt to a memorial service, entitled to handshakes from the family, while Leon was exiled? Leon had just skinny dipped with Rachel, after all. Tommy had done much more than that.

Have I mentioned that Leon was African American? That didn't help. My parents are not progressive people. You could tell just having Leon as my best friend was more than enough broadmindedness for them.

The first time he came over for dinner we had a bucket of fried chicken. My mom whisked me into the kitchen and said, "Why didn't you tell me he was black? I'll have to whip something else up."

"What? Why?"

"Rachel, no!"

But she'd already snatched a drumstick and danced back out into the living room where Leon waited.

Reaching me at the memorial service, Tommy held out his hand and mumbled something like, "It's not right, Dylan."

Dylan, that was a change. Normally he addressed me as Dill Pickle. His grip was tight. I tried to pull my hand away, but he held it and said, "You get that, yeah?"

"Yes," I said. "It's not right."

"Don't worry, bro," he said, and let me go. I was already turning for the next shake when Tommy surprised me with a quick little half-hug, one arm on my back, ending it with an almost tender double-pat. Once, when I was a freshman and he a sophomore, he'd stuffed me in my own locker and was about to lock it when Rachel stormed in and saved me.

After the service, at the late lunch at our house, something weird happened. One second I was eyeing a piece of cheesecake, wondering if it would be bad form to eat it, the next I was crying like an idiot. Then practically hyperventilating. Some uncle or other led me upstairs and told me to lie down for a few minutes, poor kid.

I lay there, trying to think about my sister, but actually thinking about – what else? – the hug. And not about the tits at all, now, I swear. I was just thinking what a beautiful, cool thing it was for Conchita to do, to hold me tighter and longer than anyone else had, and to say such sweet, consoling words. I sniffled some more and texted Leon, "Where u at?"

"James Park, hoping," he texted back.

Hoping what? That I would text? No, he must have meant *hooping*. Though a nerd like me at heart, Leon shot baskets at James Park sometimes. His father forced him to. I snuck downstairs and out the side door. As I cut through the woods to get

to the street the park was on, I wrenched off my tie and threw it in the creek. I would tell Leon about the hug. He would get it. We were still best friends, after all, despite all that had happened.

“Would you touch Emily Johnson’s tits?” he’d asked me as we lay in our sleeping bags that last night at the lake before my sister snatched him away.

“What tits?”

“Ha. What about Greta Lutz’s?”

“Dude, she’s retarded.”

“She’s special.”

“You’re sick.”

“True,” he said and then, “Do you think you’ll ever touch any chick’s tits?”

“Shut up. Do you think you ever will?”

“Already have, Manchego.”

“Bullshit, Stilton. Who?”

“Forget it.”

“Who? When? Not Daphne? I’ll puke.”

“No. Forget it. I’m messing with you. Go to sleep.”

I was about a hundred yards away from the court when an SUV screeched to a stop on the street beside me. From within Bobby Turco’s red Tahoe, Tommy McFarlane popped out.

“Yo, Dill Pickle, what up?” he asked, checking left and right, blocking my way with a pink palm. “Where you headed?”

I looked in the vehicle. It was full of seniors from my school, jocks, guys who had given me wedgies and wet willies through the years, guys who had stepped on my glasses, called me Fatboy, fondled my sister. Assholes, all of them. One nodded at me. For some reason, I nodded back.

“I’m going to the park,” I said.

“What for?”

“To see Leon.”

“Not a good idea, chief. You don’t have to do that. Seriously, go back home.”

I must have been staring blankly, for he clapped his hands in front of my face and said, “Yo, you hear me? We got this. You can’t be here. Go home. Now.”

He gave my shoulder a firm, not unfriendly shove and scrambled back in the SUV. Before the door shut, Turco had the Tahoe peeling out toward the court.

Run, I thought. Cut through the diamond and run and warn Leon. No, no time. Get out your phone then and text him. Tell him to run.

“Fuck that,” I heard my sister say. My torso tightened. It was almost as if Rachel were hugging me from behind. With a grip five times stronger than Tommy’s across my chest, with tits ten times firmer than Conchita’s pressing into my back, she whispered wetly in my ear, “Let them do it, you fat pussy. Let them beat the shit out of that dirty little nigger who let me die.”

“No,” I said, breaking free. Running across the field, with a grace never before known to me, I unbuttoned my white shirt, got it off and began waving it by a sleeve in the air, whooping my crazy head off, my glasses joggling, my boy breasts

bouncing, as I sprinted like a wild man to the suddenly still basketball court, ready to give my best friend the heartfelt hug that would surely change all of our lives.