

IN THE PINES

I had rode out to Dale Norman's Christmas tree plot where I helped with the coning and shearing. On Mondays the Normans were in Dogtree, cleaning their stables, so it was nice and quiet out here. You could read comics, draw, throw rocks, pick pine cones off with your BB gun, or pretty much do whatever you wanted, even sing loud. Nobody's gonna hear you. The trees even muffle the crunching of the cones under your shoes. All you can hear are the crickets chirpin' an' dragonflies buzzing, it's so quiet. An' the occasional grackle cacklin'. I never seen anybody else come out here during the day, though I heard guys'd bring their girls out here at night. No other kids but me would dare come out here because they're afraid they might catch some rock salt from old Dale. I always wore the same plaid fishing' hat when I came so's Dale or his boys would know it was me and wouldn't take a pot shot.

Today I had something else in mind, though. I was what my brother Steve used to call "feeling randy." Not sure who Randy was but I guess he kept his hands busy. There was nowhere safe a guy could jerk off during the day at our place. Not in the house or the shed or even up on the flat roof of my grandad's garage. Grandma was crippled and grandad was always drunk and passed out or in town waitin for the bars to open. It was safe to do stuff like shoot marbles or play with army men or even sniff glue and drink Ever clear and Kool-Aid, but you had that three-story boarding house across the alley where people could look right down on top of you.

I leaned my bike against the trellis Mrs. Dale had put in, with the Morning Glories and wisteria climbin all over it, so there would be a nice spot to sit and take a break. It was covered and had a bench and cuz it faced east, was cool in the afternoons and a much appreciated addition. Sometimes the flowers smell could be a bit much but I can think of worser smells so, no real complaint. Just make sure not to sit in any fresh bird shit cuz they like sittin there too. It was hard work out there but they paid good and Mrs. Dale would bring out a big Igloo full of Lipton iced tea, with lemons even.

I reached in my saddlebag and fetched a big old oil rag and the magazines I'd bought from Bob Vestal. He's in 8th Grade and he's got a girlfriend. Said he didn't need these anymore. His brother told me he stole them from Earlie's candy store. Said when Earlie went in back to get some more popcorn for the machine, Bob went back of the counter where they kept the girlie mags and swiped some. Just stuck em under his sweater. Bought some popcorn and just stood there reading comic books until some other kids came in before he left, so if old Earlie noticed em missing, he'd suspect them, not Bob. Of course, he tells me about this five-finger discount AFTER I paid \$2 for em. Used, even.

I found me a good spot where the ground was pretty even and put down the rag. I knelt down and started flipping through the mags to see who was gonna be my date today. The Playmates were friendly looking but they looked more like dolls than real people. I certainly never saw any women who looked like that. Not even on television. Steve said after they take the pictures they pain over them to make em look perfect. That's probably where that term 'painted ladies' comes from. But the girls in Swank looked like trailer trash. I think they painted in some good teeth on a few of them. A lot of them were probably alcoholics and drug addicts. I decided to go with one I'd never used before. Kathy, a brunette. Her tits were smaller than the others, which was still pretty large, though. I liked her face a too, even though it sort of looked like if she opened her mouth she'd have fangs. She sorta resembled Vampirella. Now that thought made her even more attractive.

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I was just getting ready to unhitch my Lee's when I heard sound of tires in the dirt. I scooped up the magazines and shoved em under a corner of the cloth and stood up to see who was coming. It was that Kate Gordon, the girl who lived catty-corner from us. She was a year ahead of me - 7th grade. I didn't really know her at that well. We played softball together a few times and went fishing with some other kids once. She seemed real nice, girly, but also sorta a tomboy. Her family only moved into the neighborhood about a year ago. My mother didn't like them. Said they talk like none of em ever went to school. They were from around Texarkana, on the Arkansas side.

Kate stuck out her legs and, using her Keds for brakes, came to dead stop not two feet in front of me, sending up a big cloud of dirt.

"Hey." she said, out of breath.

"Hey. What're you doin' out here? Do you know the Normans?"

"No. Who're they?"

"They own this patch. I work for em, sometimes."

"Oh. I just ride wherever. I like to see how fast and how far I can go. I like to go tearin' through these rows and dodging the pine cones."

"They're fir trees, not pine."

"Oh, OK. Back home we call cones pine cones. How come the town is named Pine Grove then?"

"Cuz it wasn't named for this here farm, which didn't even exist back then. Aren't you a bit old to be riding a Barbie bike?"

"It's not a Barbie bike. This is a Schwinn."

"Well, it's pink and you got those streamers on the grips, so it looks like a Barbie bike."

"Pink is my favorite color."

"All girls say that. It ain't my favorite, I can tell you that."

"Boys like blue."

"I don't like blue, either. Green is my favorite color. Maybe because I got green eyes."

"Lemme see." She just let her bike fall down and got right up in my face.

"Oh yeah, they are really green. That's pretty. I never seen green eyes before."

"It's the rarest eye color. Only one out of a million people got em. Well, maybe not a million, but a big number."

"I got blue eyes. I guess that means you don't like em."

"No, blue eyes is one blue that looks good. But I wouldn't be caught dead on a blue bike and I will never drive a blue car. Your eyes are almost transparent."

"They're pale blue. I don't think they're rare though. Least not in Arkansas."

"Never been there, so I couldn't say. I think we got more brown eyes around here than anything. Course there's fewer white folks in Pine Grove than a lot of places in this part of Texas, so I guess that makes sense."

"My boyfriend back home had brown eyes. He was part Indian. Cherokee, I think."

"You've had a boyfriend already!?"

"Sure. Whew. I'm thirsty now, from ridin up and down, and all this dust."

"I got a thermos of tea. You can have some if you want."

"Thank you. That's right nice. You're a nice kid. Most of the boys around here are just hoodlums. I don't like them."

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"Well, I don't like being called a kid. I'll be in Junior High this fall."

"I'll be in in 8th grade."

"That's what I know. You're always gonna be a year ahead of me. Unless you flunk out."

"Or if you do." she said, with a smirk.

"I hope that don't happen," I said. My parents would kill me. For real. Hey, are you wearing pajamas?"

She had on some kind of fuzzy orange thing, sort of like a one-piece swimsuit, only made out of a towel.

"It's a romper."

"Like the tv show Romper Room"?

"Ha ha, yeah. My mom got one for both me and my sister at K-Mart the other day. It's real comfy. Do you like the way it looks."

Maybe it was because the weather had just turned hot enough for summer clothes that I only just noticed she'd developed quite a bit since last fall. She did not look like any other 12-year olds that I'd seen. She looked a lot older, like maybe 14. Long legs and a short body, skinny, except in the boob area. She was actually better looking than a lot of the girls in *Swank*.

"Yeah, it's ... nice," I said. "Goes with your strawberry hair. I don't really think about girls' clothes that much."

"Just what's under them, right? Ha ha. I bet bikinis get your attention, though." She grinned.

"Bikinis are nice, definitely. I remember you wore one to the lake last year."

"You noticed, huh?" She made a goofy face and fluttered her eyelashes, which looked to be pretty long. They might even be real.

"Kind of hard not to. The other girls had shirts and jeans or dresses on." I think she likes to show off that she's prettier than other girls.

"I can't wear that one anymore. I grew out of it." She cocked her head sideways, like a goose does when they're lookin for a mate.

"You don't have a shirt on." she said.

"Well, it's hot today."

"And you're all sweaty." She ran a finger slowly down my chest to my belly button. "Why do boys have nipples?"

"That's a dumb question. I'm sure I don't know. You ain't got any shoes on. It's dangerous to ride a bike like that. I got a big scar on my ankle from when it got caught in my brother's spokes." I don't like lookin at people's bare feet. When you think about all the stuff there is to step it just ain't a pleasant thing to think about. I couldn't avoid noticin that Kate's toes had pink nail polish on 'em. Well, most of it was chipped off. Her feet weren't ugly like most I've seen but they were kind of weird. All her toes are even. Must be hard to get shoes to fit.

"Watcha doin out here today, Jimmy?"

"Nothin much, I just like being alone out here."

"You reading some magazines?" Damn, the breeze had partly uncovered them!

"Just some ...catalogs."

"Can I see?" She craned her neck over my shoulder, touching it.

I shifted my position a bit. "No, nothing you'd be interested in. Just guy stuff. Fishing tackle and whatnot."

"I can see what it is! It's naked ladies! Playboys! Were you playing with yourself?"

I blushed. "No! Of course not!"

"Or were gettin ready to. It's no big deal. I read that everybody does it. My mom got me a book about

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sexual development and stuff. I play with myself too."

I was too embarrassed and too shocked to say anything.

"Do you think I'm pretty?"

"Yeah, I guess so. Sure."

"You're tan already," she said, tracing an S across my chest. She was getting awfully touchie-feelie. It made me nervous. It wasn't like regular horsin' around kind of stuff.

"I been working in the field a lot. Been planting cabbage."

"I haven't been in the sun yet. I'm all white, see."

She pulled the romper's zipper down about halfway. I could see that she had more than just bumps.

Not like a pinup girl, but definitely noticeable.

I could feel my face glowing. I just stood there, frozen.

She kept playing with the zipper, up and down.

"My titties have grown a lot just in the last year, don't you think."

"It s-s-seems so."

"You wanna touch them?"

Wow, she is really bold! She has to be 14. Maybe got held back a couple of grades.

"I don't think I should." I said, looking down at my feet. And hers. She was balancing one foot on the toe and wagging it back and forth.

"Are you afraid to?"

"Of course not, I just don't think it's right. We're... neighbors." *Boy, did that sound dumb.*

"You're silly. There's nobody out here but us." She looked down and slowly unzipped the romper all the way down, past her belly button.

"Put your hand here." She placed my hand over one breast. It was real soft, kind of spongy. My thumb was touching her nipple. It felt kind of hard and was sticking up. She kind of shivered.

"You hand feels good."

"I think you should go home," I said, gettin more nervous all the time.

"No! You want me to tell kids you're afraid of girls?" She held my wrist to keep me from pulling it back. She placed her other hand on my chest and rubbed it. Her hand was cool and smooth. She didn't have any callouses.

"I bet you never even saw a girl naked - for real, I mean. I bet I'm the first one you ever touched, too."

"I'm only eleven! People here are nearly all Baptists. They don't even approve of kissing, 'ceptin if you're married."

"I'm Catholic. I'll kiss you."

I hadn't really kissed a girl yet. Or been kissed by one. I mean, you know, baby kisses, but not movie kisses. She let go my wrist and started pushing my hand down her front, til I could feel her patch. It felt a bit like corn silk.

"Rub here," she said real low like. She had my fingers between her legs, right over her *cooch*. They used that word in Swank for girl parts. She leaned into me. I was just kind of wigglin' my fingers down there when I felt my middle finger go in her slit. It was wet inside. Maybe she had wet herself. No, it was more oily, like the stuff that comes out after you get hard but before the *big* explosion.

She was gripping my arms and started moving her hips back and forth with her eyes closed. She kind of looked like an animal doing that. I started to pull my hand back. She latched on to my wrist again, and kept grinding against my fingers. It was *really* wet down there now and my finger kept goin further

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inside. It was really warm, too. I liked the way it felt in there. I started feelin a little dizzy. I closed my eyes, too. It seemed like my whole body was inside of her. It's hard to describe, sort of like when you're snug under a blanket, you know? I opened my eyes again. I was getting real excited watching her move like that and the way she was rubbing against me. She bent her head back and her mouth was open and sometimes she made like a gasping sound. I noticed that my hands were shakin'.

What if somebody else showed up and saw us? It would be like the worst trouble I'd ever gotten into in my life. She squeezed her legs together real tight and made a slight grunting sound. I kinda knew what that meant. I pulled my hand away. My fingers were all wet and smelled a bit like those wisterias. Looking at 'em made me want to go wash them as soon as possible.

"Mmm, that felt nice." She put her hands on my bare shoulders, then pressed her mouth against mine. Her lips felt like little pillows. She pushed the tip of her tongue into my mouth and touched my tongue. It was like a little shock, like that sting you get from the first sip of root beer. She leaned forward and for a second our bare chests touched. She was all damp and sweaty. She sorta bit my lower lip, not hard, just a nip. She tilted her head to the side and looked me in the eye.

"You like me?"

"Yeah, sure, why wouldn't I? I let you kiss me and I did what you wanted didn't I? I gotta go home now." She had got me all worked up. I went over and picked up my bike.

When I turned around, she had zipped herself back up. She was real pretty. I'd like to have a picture of her. Wearing that orange towel thing.

"Jimmy?"

"Don't call me that. I told you before, that's a little boy's name. I'm not little any more."

"I know that. *James*. Can we meet out here again? I'll rub you next time. I want to."

"I don't know. Maybe. We'll see." Man, that idea really appealed to me. I put my foot on the pedal.

"You better take these." She handed me my stroke books and the rag.

I stashed them back in the saddlebag. Now I felt ashamed for getting caught with 'em, not just embarrassed. But Kate never laughed at me or acted like there was anything odd about it at all. Still, I think I'll throw the magazines away. Or sell them.

"James?"

"Yeah?"

"You wanna ride back together?"

"Sure. I'll race ya."

She smiled and jumped back on her bike and we headed zig-zagging back down the row towards Midland road.

I guess this means I've had sex now. Sort of, half way anyway. I guess this counts. It's kind of confusing.

I wonder if this means Kate is my girlfriend now?