

all fags go to heaven

Nick Malone

The first-grade perv was named Zachary Cordova. It wasn't that he was ever mean to girls—like boys who like you are supposed to be—but that he was just *super* handsy, and those hands were always covered in hot Cheeto dust. He had spiky blue-and-blonde hair and T-shirts that said things like “EAT. SLEEP. RAWK. REPEAT” and “WILL TRADE PARENTS FOR VIDEO GAMES” (the latter of which *really* shows a profound lack of self-awareness on the part of both six-year-olds and the people making these shirts). Making girls squeal and running away was his vice. He'd sidle up to Sally or Becky Anne or Nina and say things like:

“You like my *bawwwdy*?”

“Let's go somewhere we can be *alooone!*”

Or, my personal favorite, “Do you know what *SEX IS!*?” often paired with a gap-toothed smile and wocka-wocka arms.

I was forced into a playdate with Zachary once, and it all made sense: his Playstation had games where girls in bikinis played volleyball and people shot guns out of cars and said “*Fuck you, kike,*” whereas my dad had to have a thirty-minute talk with my mom before he would let me buy the clean version of the new Britney Spears album.

Regardless, I somewhat unwillingly assumed the role of the Protector of the Girls, the guardian angel who liked the things that girls liked, and sort of talked like a girl too. Girls felt safe with me, away from Zachary's

Cheeto-tinged advances, and I felt safe with them—they didn't want to play baseball when they came over; they wanted to pretend stuffed animals were getting married. Some of them even guest starred on my under-the-bed radio show, which had recently expanded to include collapsible blanket studio walls and a very comfy beanbag chair from IKEA.

Zachary strolled up and wiggled his fingers like he was casting a spell on My Girls, and they shrieked and squirmed and buried their faces in the crook under my arm. *This is what being a boyfriend must be like*, I thought to myself, and checked my fingers for Cheeto dust before I vomited in my mouth.

When I was nine years old I grew an affinity for reading things that I shouldn't have been reading. I suppose it was better than what some other kids do to rebel at that age—*reading*, what a badass—but I was determined to learn about things on my own. My mom tried to have the birds-and-bees talk with me, assisted by a colorful book featuring a fat couple with ludicrous amounts of pubic hair that went on a date, took a bath together, and then copulated in a way that was all smiles, almost goofy. I was *not* having it. I sprinted into my room and shut the door, completely uninterested.

"You're going to have to learn about it someday, and the computer isn't going to tell you the right stuff!" she called upstairs.

Fine, I thought. If the computer was wrong, then the book with the hairy Italian butcher and *the* lady who inspired the phrase, "it ain't over till the fat lady sings," was most *certainly* wrong. I had seen the sorts of things that were sex before, and that was *not* it. My best friend in the third-grade class—who had recently taught me the word "cunt" behind the bushes at recess—was of the school of thought that sex came down to peeing in or on someone's vagina. This seemed to be the most reasonable explanation I'd heard thus far.

It started off innocent enough: I was at an advanced reading level in school and I struggled my way through every book that hinted at giving me the insider knowledge I needed to decipher sex.

Cold Mountain: Mountains meant boobs, and boobs meant sex. Nothing there.

1984: Surely someone born in 1984 was old enough to know something about it. Not much in the way of sex there either.

Moby-Dick spoke for itself.

Then I stumbled upon *Tropic of Cancer*.

My jaw dropped as I read, knowing that I had found the truth about everything.

It was a nightmare. Lizards and bats shoved up the ass, ripping off pubic hair and pasting it on the chin of a friend, chewing up and swallowing parts of someone's vagina, in public *or* in private. It remains unclear what "come" is, but there is a terrible lot of it. After a good fifteen minutes of frantically searching for the stork that eventually delivered me, I closed the book and knew that I could *not* tell the friend who thought it was *just* about pee. It was about so much more than that. Sex was about *pain*.

"Do you want me to choke you?"

"What?" he asks, through a grunt of pleasure.

"I don't know if you're into that, but I mean, do you want me to choke you?"

His hand cradles my face and tilts it to meet his dark eyes as his head lifts slowly off the pillows.

"Look at me," he says.

"Do I have a choice?" I say, half-laughing, my hand gliding up and down his thigh, not wanting this to end, not wanting to have ruined my first time.

"I'm serious," he says, squinting as he stares directly into my eyes. "You don't have to do anything you don't want to do."

"I know," I say, shrugging off his earnestness. Who knew the next time I would be able to practice the make-or-break skill of having real sex with a person?

"Hey," he says with an urgency I'd never heard out of him before. He is always so relaxed, so nonchalant about what he wants from the world. Things come to him and he accepts them as they do. What a crazy thing.

"I really like you," he says, his voice soft again.

"I really like you too! What's the big deal?"

"Come here."

I do as I'm told and come and join him, feeling the rusty cheers and squeals of the futon ripple through my joints. We share a moment of silence with our faces mere millimeters from each other. I can't tell whose breath is whose. We lie staring at each other for a moment too long.

“You’re shaking,” he declares, draping his arm over my shivering body and pulling me in, matching up our limbs.

“Yeah, I’m just really nervous that my breath smells like dick now.”

He kisses me over and over, mumbling and laughing, “Shut the fuck up!”

I want to stop my mind from running off the rails, but it feels like little bolts of lightning are bouncing off the plates in my skull, zapping synapses and flooding my brain with chemicals, like my nervous system is hosting the Puerto Rican Day Parade.

“Don’t you want me to finish? I mean, don’t you want to finish?” I stare right at him, inquisitively, almost frustrated.

“I want *you* to relax. And I am not gonna stop kissing you until you do.”

He keeps his promise.

“Better?”

I take a deep breath in, survey his room and begin searching his eyes for the catch.

“Yeah.”

“You should come over again tomorrow. And you should call me tonight,” he says nodding, as if speaking to a toddler.

There is no catch.

“Seriously. I get it,” he says. I feel like he really does.



In the seventh grade, every Friday after school, we walk to the grocery store and get a package of raw cookie dough and two Shasta colas for twenty-nine cents each. Once everybody has their goods stored away in their backpacks, we get on our bikes and pedal as fast as we can to the park with the plastic turtle and the sandbox in the middle. We have a special tree there that is only structurally sound enough to carry the bodies of eight middle-schoolers, so each of us has a dedicated spot. Caroline is in gymnastics, so she goes all the way up to the top branch, which we all secretly think is a little much. Michael likes to be in control of the cookie dough, because he usually buys it—he is the only one of us with a job. He walks two Pomeranians and one Newfoundland, never at the same time. Benny sits on the bottom branch, because he is afraid of heights, but he’s probably my favorite of the bunch. I’m somewhere in the middle, and my girlfriend, Mazie, sits next to me. Michael and Caroline are also boyfriend and girlfriend, but they fight a lot.

“Truth or Dare?” Jennifer, the only blonde in our group, pokes me and wiggles her eyebrows. She talked to me earlier in the day—Mazie and I have been boyfriend and girlfriend for two weeks. It was time to hold hands and she was gonna make it happen.

“Dare,” I say, ignoring the blaring sirens going off in my heart and the sticky lagoon of sweat forming under my arms, which has only very recently started to smell bad.

“I *dare you* to hold hands with . . .” Jennifer pauses, which is a really good disguise to make sure Mazie doesn’t catch the trickery, “. . . Mazie! For fifteen seconds.”

All is silent in the tree.

I turn to Mazie and shrug, clenching my teeth and flashing a look that probably reads somewhere between having just chomped on a canker sore and actively shitting myself. She sort of smiles and takes my hand. The countdown begins and I do not squeeze or show any interest in her, or her hand, whatsoever.

“. . . Three, Two, One! *Awww!*” goes the chorus.

Later, I walk Mazie home and we do not hold hands. “I’ll see you tomorrow?” I toss at her, and she nods. She understands what I really mean is, *thanks for letting me sweat in your palm*.



Something about seventeen made me feel invincible. The world was so big and beautiful that it seemed all but impossible for it to be against me. I was full of this wild energy that made me want to dance and be seen and play it cool. Shoulders back, eyes harsh, arms up to the ceiling of every room, like I’d been electric since the second I was born.

My mom would drop me off in front of my friend’s house and I’d hide in the backyard until she drove away. I’d round back to the front and perch myself on the front steps, waiting for Matty to roll up in his steel-blue station wagon with rust on the fender. He’d jump out, open the door for me, blast the White Stripes on the highway, and sing to me like we were the only people in the world. His voice was my favorite thing about him. It was my favorite thing in general.

“Hello operator!” he’d scream. “Can you gimme number nine!? Can I see ya later?! When ya gimme back my dime!?”

He’d drive us into the city and we’d ride the trains all night until we

found just the right hole-in-the-wall pizza place or donut shop to satisfy our sweet tooth, then we'd run around again and keep on satisfying it. He held my hand the whole way and I felt my love for him start in the top of my head and spiral all the way down my spine with a *plunk* at my feet, like a gumball machine.

We dove into bars on Halsted where they played live blues and the median age was 50, sneaking through the back door and standing tall, leaning on the bar like we were regulars. We swiped half-full gin and tonics and slammed them before anyone saw. He swung me around on the dancefloor and we did the twist and we slow danced like grownups—his left hand on my waist, mine on his shoulder, our hands clasped together leading our bodies as one on the right. We fooled around in the bathroom stall while the line stretched down the hallway, our eyes wild with drunken delight. We didn't mind a crowd. I never stopped smiling.

It came time for me to go back to my friend's house where I slept over as a decoy to lead my mom off my trail, and we sauntered through the Blue Line tunnel, his arm around me, planting messy kisses on my neck and pulling me in tightly. Our legs crisscrossed over one another, stumbling and laughing through the fluorescent light.

"We get it, you're fags!" gurgled a brown-haired man in a Cubs jersey, walking behind us, brown-paper-bagging a 40-oz of Corona. He was stumbling even more than we were, propping his limp, thin body on the filthy walls of the tunnel.

"Suck a cock, I don't give a shit, but don't make it my business."

I turned to Matty, smiling big and bright. I loved scaring them.

"I'm *done* being polite! I'm fucking tired of being *nice*!" he hissed, spilling his beer for the rats.

I leaned forward and kissed Matty on the mouth with gratuitous tongue. I reached down and groped him, took a pull out of my flask and passed the shot into his mouth, making sure to keep eye contact with The Guy Who Is Done Being Nice. My face drips with sweet, dark gold nectar and I spit at him. He swings his arm at us somewhere between aggressively and dismissively, and returns to rest in his delirium. Those poor people.

I sit across from Matty on the train back home. He's drifting in and out of sleep, taking breaks from passing out with his head resting against the glass divider to open those sweet eyes just barely at me, casting a face

saying everything that I always wished somebody would say without saying anything at all.

He says *you and me together makes being alive real*. He says *you are not dirty and you are not broken*. He says *I do not have to do research to know how to like you*. He says *you can get most things you want if you just ask*. He says *you can take your time*. He says *you make me feel warm and that is most of what matters*. He says *you are sex and you are love, even if who comes after you may not be both*. He says *we have been through so much to get here*.

The world beneath me rushes and rumbles, gliding with a silver fluidity that begs to be heard. All fags go to heaven, even if we can only have it on Earth.

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