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When I Was Your Age I...

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“Mother! Mother!” I saw my daughter charge through milk bottles, old raggy coats, and kittens on the porch and push the sagging screen door open.

“Yea?” I smiled watching her prance about breaking her self-made, “ladylike” rules.

“I’m a runner-up for homecoming queen! I can’t believe it!”

Homecoming queen. Stumbling out of the woods, shouting for seeing a raccoon family, discovering a new mushroom, arranging an ecology program, I could understand. But she had come home entranced by the prospect of becoming homecoming queen!

“And I’ve just GOT to find a beautiful dress to wear! I’ll buy more lipstick, perfume, and nailpolish!”

Boring. Again I was listening to someone talk about cosmetics. But this time it was my daughter.

“That’s nice, Tamarra.” I could feel the old plastic smile creep onto my face to hide boredom. I hadn’t pulled that smile out since high school. And now I was bringing it out for my daughter.

“I’ve just GOT to tell, Cindy!” Tamarra bounced upstairs over the debris of shoes, clothes, tennis rackets. I watched her artificially curly hair leap from her back to the top of her head like a slinky. I had to smile a semi-bitter smile—but still an attached smile.

We had moved here when her father died; just one year ago, I can’t help feeling it was fortunate Jim died—I miss him—nothing would replace the hollow underwater feeling I had now, but this new Tamarra wouldn’t understand. She would worry about what her friends would think. Her friends. Such peculiar people ....

“Mother!” Tamarra charged into my thoughts, scattering them across the room. “Cindy's having a party Friday! Can I go?”

Parties. Maybe I could still relate with her . . . Maybe we still had something in common . . . the Castle, a broken down building far from the world’s traffic. Walking past it through fields, feeling the air
breathe autumn on your face, gathering dead wood for the fire, finding a place with trees nearby. Pulling a log out of the woods for Fire’s home. Encircling the heat, talking and laughing by the semi dark camp. Drinking wine, vodka, beer. The scent of marijuana flowing past or stopping to talk individually. As the party dissolves, staggering about picking up assorted bottles and finding orphan ones to adopt temporarily.

Tamarra, misinterpreting my silence, added, “Don’t worry; Cindy’s parents will be there.”

“Oh . . . you’re having it at her house?” The Castle dissolved into the birthday parties I had always detested.

“No! . . .,“ she laughed. “Oh don’t worry . . . I’d never go to some hang-out or . . . or something . . . can I go?”

I looked at her eager, bright eyed expression, like a small girl wanting to see caged animals.

“Sure.” I could feel a sigh coming and grabbed it back, just before it hit surface. She bubbled again and hopped upstairs to tell Cindy.

Friday rained an assortment of colorful leaves all about me. My eyes read hazy as I mopped my face in the leaves and rolled about with the kittens, all with fiery standing fur and brilliant eyes.

The sun claimed this my day of contemplation, but I had a lot to do before the Wildlife Preservation meeting. Dragging myself up with this thought, I started toward the house . . . the glistening sweet pond beckoned me . . . rolling my jeans, I accepted, doing the jig with the ducks. And I laughed for another hour . . .

“Mother! . . . I’m home!” She barged onto the back porch and on seeing me wallowing on the muddy bank squealed, “Mother! People will see! Have you no dignity? How can you act like a common slut or something?”

Hiding my surprise at her sudden, or seemingly sudden, change of ideas, I calmly shook the mud off, pulled my jeans legs down, brushed the leaves from my hair and asked, “What—exactly—is a ‘slut’?”

Tamarra blushed, giggled and replied, “You know . . . a . . . a woman who doesn’t save herself for marriage . . . a woman who isn’t clean . . . I didn’t really mean you were one . . . it’s just . . . well . . . embarrassing to see you sitting in the middle of a mud puddle with
dogs, cats and ducks .... Cindy's mother would never dare do some-
thing like that!"

Anger blazed through my wet, numbed body, but logic (where it
came from I'll never know) told me to stay down.

"I'm sorry, but I'm not Cindy's mother ... you did similar things
yourself before ... before we came here."

One mistake. I said it like an accusation.

"I know, but I was young ... I mean, things are different now."

"Why?"

"It just is ... it's ..." She turned around, hesitated and picked up
Delilia—the cat she had barely talked to after six months of living
here. "Can I go to Cindy's early?"

"Yea." This time I allowed myself to sigh, but waited till I was far
enough into the thicket before releasing it completely. I then went
to check on the wounded squirrel. As I quietly moved toward her,
she raised her soft brownish red head, and calmly, with trusting eyes,
watched me gently examine her wounded paw. I was right. We would
have to say goodbye soon—probably tomorrow.

I sat with her, stroking her soft, but still coarse, fur, and watched
the sun disappear behind the earth.

Tamarra was already eating dinner when I came in. I hauled out an
apple, some brown bread and cheese, adding a glass of wine.

"Want some?"

"No thanks ... Cindy said she is afraid some of the boys will bring
alcohol—or, even worse, marijuana or some other drug."

"What makes her think that?"

"Well, she used to be friends with this guy John ... but then he
started getting into all sorts of trouble ... and he's coming."

"Then why did she ask him?"

"Well, he trapped her in the hall ... she always tries to avoid him
but she banged into him in the hall and so she ... well, she couldn't
very well not ask him ... could she?"

"Hummm ... what will they do to him if he does bring some-
thing?" Here it comes.

"Don't worry ... they'll probably just make him leave."

Relief devoured most of my tension. I finished eating, and started
the formula for the motherless puppy I had found.
“Yuck! . . . this story’s disgusting!” Tammarra flung her magazine across the table, turned away from it and sat scowling.

“What’s wrong with it? . . . What’s it about?”
“‘A girl who acts like a little whore—and doesn’t get married or ANYthing!’
“Oh.”
“I mean she lived with men!”
“Humm.”
“Did people really do that back then? And smoke marijuana illegally and drink before they were 18?”
“Yeah.” Where is she getting this? What is she leading up to? . . . maybe I can divert her. “What do you think about marriage, Tammarra?”
“Oh! It would be wonderful! Cindy has been looking in catalogs at all the dresses . . . she’s going to let me borrow them.”

Thinking I succeeded in maneuvering her thoughts, I went to feed puppy. He had long, wiggley fur, and a tail almost as big as his body. He laughingly hobble-limped forward and slurped his formula all over his white freckled nose.

“Mother!”
“Sweet puppy, I’ll call you Jim.”
“Yeah?”
“What does a marriage license say? . . . Could I see yours?”
Jim started choking, giving me an excuse for delay. But it wasn’t long enough.
“Well . . . Tell me where it is and I’ll get it myself.”
“Tamarra, I . . .” I what?
“Yea? . . . . Where is it?”
“I don’t . . . I don’t have one—I never did.” If she had been ignorant until this point, my silence filled her in.
“Oh, mother!”
“You need to remember . . . we loved you just as much—maybe more—than married people.”
“All my friends parents are married.”
“Cindy’s mother is divorced.”
“But when she had Cindy she was married.”
“And now she’s divorced.”
Jim stopped chewing my sweatshirt, and curled up in my lap for sleep.

"I'll be back by twelve."

"Right."

I opened my eyes to the morning moon and rain clouds. On missing the bluejay's yell, I glanced at the clock—4:17.

I put on my blue flannel, elephant decorated dress, found my shawl, ignored shoes and crept out to see the squirrel.

As I lifted the cage door, she jerked awake, sending a clatter throughout the woods. Reluctantly I stepped aside. She looked at me, comparing me to the opened cage and darkened thicket. She leaped out onto the dewy grass, and hobbled over to the edge of the woods. With coarse fur sending waves down her spine, she turned back. Her eyes glittered at me and blinked. My cold body was warmed by it, and the sun overtook the rain.