The Things We Don't Talk About

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When I was in the fifth grade, I fell in love with Emma Larke. She had this dimple on her right cheek from being chased by her sister into the corner of a nightstand. She used that dimple as her show and tell when she forgot her t-shirt from England. Her front tooth was chipped from falling onto the cement during a game of four squares. I was there and saw the whole bloody scene. She didn’t cry.

In sixth grade, her parents divorced and she moved with her mom to Washington. I was devastated. My best friend Mark and I sat on our bikes across the street from her brick house and watched the movers carry boxes out and into a big moving van. Emma saw me and came over. She gave me a piece of paper with her new address on it and told me to write her. I did every day for the first month then continued with weekly e-mails until she moved back to Chicago five years later. Five years after she moved back, we got married and it has been for better or for worse.

“What’s an onomatopoeia?” She asks over the sound of the water colliding with the plastic curtain and tub basin. “You know what an onomatopoeia is. You were the English major.” I knick my chin with the razor and watch as the blood drips into the sink. “Damnit Emma, have you been using my razor to shave your legs again? The blade is dull and I just changed it yesterday.”

“Is it when a word is spelled the same backward as forward? I don’t remember.” She hums the same song she always does in the shower, it’s by Frank Sinatra, but I always forget the name. I can see her silhouette through the fogged up curtain. She’s ignoring me again. I step over the piles of clothes and reach for the curtain. As I pull it back, she shrieks and covers her chest with her washcloth and a soapy hand. “I have soap in my eyes! Close it!”

“Why are you covering yourself?” I laugh as I open and close the curtain fast. For the past seven years I have seen every freckle and blemish on her body. I’ve watched each bruise or cut appear and disappear from one thing or another. I’ve seen each sunspot, which made itself known in October after her tan finally wore off, yet she’s still shy around me.

“Just close it, Kevin!” I laugh again and close the curtain.

“Why is your chin bleeding? Don’t get it on the hand towel. There are cotton balls and alcohol in the cabinet.”
"A word spelled the same backward as forward is called a palindrome. An onomatopoeia is a formation that expresses how a word sounds, like splash or something. Stop watching those soap operas. They’ll make you stupid.” I grab the cotton balls from the cabinet and press one against the cut on my chin. The alcohol stings.

"I don’t think that’s the name."

"Of course you don’t, sweetheart."

"What’s that?” she asks while poking her head out from behind the curtain, her eyes closed and scrunched up to keep the shampoo from getting in.

"I didn’t say anything. Hurry up, we have twenty minutes.”

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While accelerating to blend into the flow of Chicago rush hour traffic, I watch as the buildings move in slow motion against the dark clouds. The smell in the air reminds me of the ferris wheel ride we took on Navy Pier when I first told Emma I loved her. She threw up over the side from too much Gin. She coughed and wiped her mouth with her sleeve. Smiling at me, she said it back, but when she tried to kiss me, I wouldn’t let her. I don’t love you that much, I had told her while holding her hair back as she threw up over the side again.

"I was reading Cosmo last night and it said the average person spends two fifths of their life thinking of sex. Do you think that’s right?” She’s playing with the heat button on her seat.

"Check for candy before you do that, the last time you turned the seat heater on, you melted three of my Junior Mints. And why do you read that shit? It’s boring women spreading boring non-sense at five dollars an issue. You’re practically paying some big-shot to chew up and spit out your college degree while simultaneously making you feel horrible about yourself.”

She unbuckles her seat belt and lifts herself up, checking for the candy underneath her. "I don’t think I think about sex that much. Maybe when I have nothing better to do. Do you think about sex that much?”

"Not too much I don’t think, but right now, I’m picturing you naked, and a half hour ago, while I was pumping gas and you were walking in to pay, I was picturing you naked. That’s a spectacular thing, if you ask me.” Emma blushed. The redness started in her ears and made its way like syrup over her entire face.

"Do you really do that? You’re disgusting.”

"Why is that disgusting? I think it’s perfectly normal and healthy to think about you naked.”

"No, not that, you have Junior Mints and French fries in the seat.” She lowers the window and throws them out.
“What the hell, Emma? I could have eaten those.” I take out a full box from beneath my seat and pop a couple in my mouth. I tap her on the leg, she looks at me, and I stick my tongue out.

“Don’t be gross. You have to take exit seventy-nine. Eighty closed last weekend.”

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“So when are you guys going to make some grandchildren for me to spoil?” Dennis suffers from dementia, but today is a good day, so conversation is bearable. “Kevin, do you know what that flap is for in the front of your underwear?” Then again, maybe not.

“Well, it’s for easier access when you have to use the bathroom, I suppose.” God. This was going to be a long meal. It must have come out sarcastic because Emma pinches my leg under the table.

“Be nice,” she whispers.

“Yeah, I know it makes it easier to piss, I’m not stupid, but what is the name of it? Does it have a name?” Dennis looks at me with eyes like a child. He’s waiting for an answer.

“I don’t call it anything. I guess I’ve never thought about-”

“I saw the hockey game on the television the other day. Bondra scored a couple points. He had an excellent shot.”

I know Emma got her good looks and need to redecorate every six months from her mom, but she definitely had her dad’s listening skills and attention span.

“Yeah I sa...”

“Have you talked to your mom lately, Em?”

I lean back in my chair and admire the deep mahogany table that match the woodwork in the doors and trim around the windows. The wood floors must have been polished recently because it smells like lemon oil and my socks slide over it easily.

“I talked to her on Sunday. She’s fine; said to say hello. I think Kevin and I are going out there for New Year’s. We’ll leave on the twenty-seventh after spending Christmas with you.”

Emma’s mom left Dennis when he started to get sick. She couldn’t handle it. I guess she missed the “in sickness and in health” part.

Dennis’s live-in nurse/maid brings out a salad and fills our glasses with water. She has a lazy eye, and I never know which one it is, so when I talk to her, I just stare at her eyebrows. She winks at me and puts her hand on my shoulder. Emma giggles because she’s been convinced the nurse has had a crush on me for years. She’s maybe ten years older than Emma and me; in her late thirties I would guess. I sometimes see her look through Emma’s cell phone when Emma leaves it on the table by the front door.

“That will be nice for you. New Year’s on the Pacific will be an excellent thing to bring you two together, maybe even make me a grandchild.” The whole making of grandchildren is brought up every Sunday when we have dinner with him. He sometimes raises his eyebrow and jabs
me in the side with his elbow. A cigar and mustache would complete his creepiness.

"Well dad, Kevin and I want to save up a little more money and get out of the apartment. There isn’t enough room there for a baby.” She smiles at me and rubs my inner thigh, under the table. We have a spare bedroom. It was painted yellow the week after we found out. It has elephants and balloons near the ceiling and a wooden rocker still sits in the corner. We use it as a storage room for things we never use and never will, but refuse to throw out. The nurse feeds Dennis his salad.

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"Let me feed my damn self!” His outburst startles us all, but the nurse keeps force-feeding him like he’s three. “You can only offer me a knife to cut my heart out!” I laugh at this and Emma grabs my inner thigh hard, making me stop quickly. The nurse drops the fork at the sound of a buzzer and goes into the kitchen. “She is going to be the death of me, Marie.”

Emma’s smile fades a little at the sound of her mom’s name. He calls her Marie all the time. The first month Emma and I lived together, he would call and ask for Marie, and I’d tell him he had the wrong number. Just because he had dementia didn’t mean he didn’t have a sense of humor. We got caller ID soon after.

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I’m lying in bed and she’s brushing her teeth. She leaves the water running because she hates the sound of brushing. I told her, it doesn’t matter if the water is on or not, she’s still going to hear the brushing inside her head. But I gave up a long time ago. As a pre-sleep ritual, Emma checks every window to make sure they’re all locked. I try telling her no one can get to our apartment on the twenty-eighth floor of our building, but she never listens. It helps her sleep at night.

I hear her opening each mini-blind and then unlocking and locking each lock. Her feet scuff against the floorboards as I see her shadow come down the hall and she stands in the doorway, looking or listening. I can’t see her face in the dark. After a moment, she crawls into bed. Starting at the foot of the bed, she makes her way up to me on all fours. Her hair is all messy and falling around her face. I tell her this is when she looks the prettiest; no make-up, but she doesn’t believe me. I tell her anyway. She’s wearing my boxers and a tank top. "I wondered where those went," and even though I whisper, it still sounds too loud compared to the quietness of the room. Her teeth catch the light coming through the blinds.

“Where what went?”

I make a quick move, and she’s on her back. She’s laughing again and her whole body shakes underneath me. "We need some twinkle lights in here.” She looks around the room, straining her neck to see past my back. “They’re more romantic than candles, and you know I always forget to blow them out.” I laugh, thinking about the time she left one burning while we were at work and it melted down the coffee table onto the
carpet, making a murder scene of candle wax. I roll onto my side, and scoop her into me. Her hair tickles my nose, and I’m consumed with the smell of lilacs.

"I can pick some up on my way home from work tomorrow. Do you want the white or colored ones?" She breathes in deep and sighs, her whole body moving against mine. She moves closer into my side, bringing my arm under her neck and intertwines her fingers in mine. She squeezes them, and I squeeze hers back.

She wants the white ones.

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