

The Lie That Stood in a Bubble

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On the work-truck stereo: An alluring rendition of Korn's "A.D.I.D.A.S."—acronym crucial—as covered by Erasure Huddle, drove Jeffrey Royce to sing the chorus aloud: "All Day I Dream About Sex, all day I dream about fucking!"

He drove the utility import he'd inherited from his parents, beside a woman who'd been lately hired to clean up around the roofers at construction sites they visited. It made the company look progressive, is what his boss had said. The janitor's name was Sandra and she was about as chaste as anything, Jef figured, judging by her chubby appearance and prudish demeanor. She was a born-again Christian, not quite a M.I.L.F. yet old enough to be one, older than him.

"All... Day I... Dream A... bout Sex!" he persisted, blowing off steam from yet another day in the sun. Once, Royce did dream about sex all day long. Before adulthood/the real world, and its complications, overrode the natural instinct to procreate plus practice a lot for procreation. As a father of two at age 26 he found he could on occasion resist the override.

They were listening to Kid Keen's podcast, since they were too far from the Belling campus to listen to the live local radio show done in-studio. He learned that Sandra too had attended Bell U., before being institutionalized after a drug-hazing; she'd moved back in with parents to begin her "recovery". Blah, blah. Then:

"My first boyfriend from Belling did something to my vagina, something horrible, with his streetlamp-shaped penis!"

Jef judged the situation again. He was instantly curious. He propositioned her, to play the field. Sandra accepted. Jef pulled onto a quiet rural road and they enjoined. It was awkward (empty beer cooler) because Sandra was actually quite tight. She was tight enough to cause discomfort on his condom-encased shaft, the slot-like bulge of her tube squeezing him uncomfortably on either side; not the top or bottom, but on the sides.

"How was it for you?" she asked, innocently.

He had faked his orgasm despite her petite (Jenn-like) boobs encased in a see-through white sportsbra. "A cunt is a cunt is a cunt," he replied.

"Just take me back to my parents' house."

He did as instructed.

"Miss Shagryne thanks you," she said as she exited the work-truck.

Miss Chagrin—what kind of a remark is that? thought Jef. Sounded like something his mom or dad might've said.

Now, Royce had no living parent to cling onto—he lived with his ex-lover's parents but had no relationship with them other than convenience. Yet his first name his parents had chosen after an alterna-grunge song; he was glad to have the “one-F” Pixies-song distinction to remember them by, several years after their deaths. They had taught him nothing about the real world... except that fucking made the world better. He “always fucked,” on a whim, maybe due to them. He'd fucked his almost-fiancee Jenniffer that way, at first. Now, this one. Losing Jenn was the best thing that'd happened to him; his new surrogate parents were his ex's parents, plus his Belling U teachers, followed by his supervisors at work.

He missed Jenn a lot, if he allowed himself to think about her; losing her was the worst thing that'd happened to him. Both he and Jenn had “peaked” in grade 9, managing to maintain their respective popularity until graduation despite most of the homecoming-court peers growing taller, bigger, stronger, faster. For a while it bothered Jef, mostly because of the singsongy hot-air from junior gossipers who could only speculate, never having worn his shoes. After a while, everyone tries on other peoples' shoes, he'd discovered during his peak; now, he'd traded his collegiate loafers for a stronger pair of cross-trainers having soles with grip. After college and early-career jobs, it all mattered less than his relationship with Jenn after they dropped out of Belling to raise the girls.

Six year ago in their just-off-campus apartment, delicate Jenn-the-almost-fiancee had told him that she was pregnant, morosely. This was roughly two weeks after Jef had “accidentally” had sex with a teen living by herself in a unit of their off-campus housing. (Pay it no mind, now that it was over? was *her* standing line of questioning.) He chose not to think about any of it. Instead: What would prevailing society do about this new godly intervention, of a child? Would he be forced to take a job to support the dizzying obligations of creating offspring? As sophomores the waifish couple knew only that they would not marry, and continue to rent the apartment under her name, because aside from their cars, student loan debt from a private college would be their biggest burden as a young couple with child(ren). His parents had left him only the utility truck.

Abortion was out of the question, according to Jenn, who'd insisted that the all-too common procedure would be similar to “eating fetus” and she wanted no part of cannibalism. Jef did try to understand why she thought this—for one, sometimes mommy doggies suckled on the encasements of fresh pups before devouring each of them in a methodical way, disposing of unwanted birth-residue along with the pup-births, in one of the goriest solutions available to any new mother who wishes to remain childless. Hence, her view...

Why Jenn had turned almost overnight from a pro-choice liberal into a conservative pro-lifer had less to do with right-to-life of the unborn than with the gift and promise of starting a family, for her, figured Jef. He was excited too. It would be fun to see his genes with Jenn's genes, amalgamated into a composite of the two of them—or perhaps into somebody unlike either of them. Maybe they would create a catalog model or a giant athlete! This was a ready way to play god and goddess.

How many women could refuse a child if gifted with one? Jef could not guess. Maybe scads of females were committing abortion on airs, sympathetic with dogs devouring their own pups, on trend and in tune with the new ideology of these fast food times: A fetus is only human if it's breathing and bloody in the maternity ward, according to liberals. Were these baby-killers chillingly dismissive, or simply unaware, of the gestation period of human life? He knew that a fetus can mentally process any Mozart (or alt-grunge tune) it hears in the womb. Schooling a child without including this knowledge would be inhumane.

Everything a pregnant woman engages in engages with the fetus, rearranging its neurology, according to authorities on the subject. From arguments, and make-up sex, to the naptimes, to errands in the station wagon or S.U.V., to soccer-mom stuff, to library runs, to tailors, to shoe repairers, to a nostalgic live band, to a get-together that barely resembles anything from the good old college days, to the narthex at church, to the continuing ed class at the community college, to the fudge cake conglomeration that might've made a mil, to and of course daily meals, daily frottage, daily slumbers... the fetus is actively learning. Even tricky intellectual pursuits of the mother cause growth in the unborn, mapping its brainwaves for life. (Scientologists, he'd learned, require absolute silence around any pregnant woman, lest the child be unduly scarred.) (The downside of Scientology being those Sharon Tate murders in 1969, with the occupants of the bungalow saying nothing as the Manson Family creepy-crawled, lest the fetus "hear" extraneous noise!) (Serious doubts over the mental health of society began to rattle him, when he confronted the murderous aspect of sucking out "tissue" to rid the mother of a biological destiny, with the father having nothing to say in this matter, apparently.) Jef for the first time felt strongly on an issue—he felt political about abortion now—he was insanely glad that Jenn kept their child despite them being just 20, unprepared for life, dependent on student loans. Having a family early could work out in his favor! Besides, he was getting bogged down in his studies and thought maybe one class a term would be more his style than full-time student. He could and would get rehired as a roofer, to start with; being slight of build and light on his feet had more advantages than looking good in all garments from any store-racks in his size. Most of his wardrobe consisted of grunge attire: that perfect blend of gothic chinos (with wallet chain), thick socks, safety-toe work boots, and tee-shirts overlaid with plaid or denim shirts and canvas jackets. He'd been preparing for most of his teen years to become a warehouse worker, maybe. College education being secondary, even tertiary.

Yet Jenn became weirder as the pregnancy progressed, worse after the baby was born. She became her extra-f-fucked name, for whatever reason (they'd decided against naming the child Adidas, and chosen a generic moniker, spelled correctly; it was against his instinct but he gave in to Jenniffer's wish). The baby was a robust number of pounds, at least eight, at birth. Which made her an immediate talking point of her parents—the two of them being slim and unaccustomed to the heavy things that accompany a bigger body; she did have their _____ eyes.

Jef Royce was the more maternal, as it turned out. He quickly dropped three classes, keeping only his quantum mechanics course, to care for the colicky infant. In addition to big-bones, the baby also cried continuously. Doing a jig worked as well as coddling, to subdue the child, which meant that Jef could design his own program to

be a dad. He loved this aspect—doing a “running man” impersonation—now was his chance to rethink those underage years of choosing a school and its debt, in favor of a minimum of classes while keeping his day job to pay for rent and utilities and food and parties and yes, now, a little girl. She grew faster than either he or his wife could ever expect... she was an Amazonian warrior already, with two parents who resembled (in their own words): a size-2 Jennifer Anniston and a boy-sized (14x?) Christian Bale, the latter a downsized version when he lost all that weight for a movie role. Life was funny, the way it provided small parents with big babies and vice-versa.

Before long, just after his daughter began to speak in monosyllables, Jenn got pregnant again. By then the three of them were still living in the off-campus apartment near campus despite both of them reducing their course-loads to one class. They were championing a modest move to the heart of Capitol City, and renting one of its exquisite lofts replete with amenities (—using their student loan monies, they could afford a solidly middle-class lifestyle—), when the second child was born. This one was also a big girl, to the delight and dismay of Jenn’s mom and dad.

Renting the ritzy loft never happened. Instead, Jef moved in with his ex’s parents because Jenn one day packed up her things and deserted him and the toddler and the baby. As the girls grew, Jef told them only this: “Your mother is off visiting the rainbow people.”

In his mind, the girls knew their mother was safe, adventurous, intelligent. In his mind, Jenn was overwrought and unattainable due to her anarchism. He in truth had no idea where she’d gone, after dropping everything connected to Belling and instructing her parents to ignore any contact attempts by Jef, the aggrieved spouse-to-be. He could never be bogged down by harboring notions of a mother’s disgrace. He shied away from decrying her, destroying her, in a discussion group for single dads. His memory of the rainbow-haired woman included silhouettes of her poring over texts while she lounged casually and strangely while fully dressed on their shared bed, juxtaposed with a few glimmering moments in which she played the vixen. Her dyed hair remained with him despite meeting her months before she made a rainbow of her hair.

“She’s off visiting the rainbow people,” Jef would repeat, whenever his girls inquired about their mother. It was a lie and it stood, remained standing. He had no clue as to where Jenniffer went... aside from her seasonal phone calls to check on her parents or on her daughters (during which she sounded distant or annoyed or not-herself) he never heard from her. Yet this too was part of life; no guarantees, no formulas. Jef’s daughters’ grandparents were fine babysitters and teachers if asked. As the years rolled by, he began to rely more and more on his ex’s mom and dad.

When the eldest was five-and-a-half, and the younger four, Jef decided to begin dating again. Hence: the encounter with Sandra in his truck. His job as foreman for the roofing crew paid well enough, yet it was the cruel absence of a family feeling that sent him running amok. Despite all, Jef was lonely. And he needed his daughters to have a loving home-life; daycare at the elementary school was bad enough. The girls, for their part, did invest their faith in Jenn’s parents, as well as in their doting father,

who was doing everything he could to keep them happily ensconced in all the fabrics and plastics of contemporary society.

One day at home Jef watched his eldest daughter draw a stick mommy, using a _____ crayon. She put a cornflower blue dress over the figure, then added a rainbow of squiggles for the mommy's hair. When she drew her daddy she used _____ because his skin was tanned from working construction in the sun. His dark curly hair came up in little tufts like flames from his ears and forehead. She gave her daddy bronze clothes, "to hide the dirt". Then she colored some emerald zigzags for a lawn, drew some burnt sienna birds in the shape of a V, and used silver to create puffy clouds. The girl scribbled her little sister into the scene, and again picked up the _____ crayon to put herself in the picture, wearing the magenta halter top and white shorts Jef found so frequently in the laundry bin. She colored four sets of royal _____ eyes at the same time, then four sets of _____ noses, then four sets of orange-red lips. Then she made a triangle on her head with the _____ crayon, since it was almost Halloween.

"Look what I made," She said, craning her neck upward from her chair. (Standing, Jef was only a bit taller than she.) "I'm a witch 'cause I'm casting a spell to bring mommy home."

"Is that our family?" her father asked, innocently and nicely, he thought.

She clutched the drawing close to her chest. "I messed up," she murmured while crinkling its edges. "I tried to make it perfect!"

Jef parted the girl's fountain of hair, and lifted her head toward him with a scarred yet handsome fingers. She started quaking.

"I miss Miss Shagrynnne," the girl wailed.

"Your daycare librarian at school?"

Jef's daughter nodded, her curls bouncing in the fray, as it hit him: That's who! He'd been mulling the Miss Chagrin—Shagrynnne!—comment of Sandra's for days. Everything fell back into place.

"Are you sad, because she fell into a coma?"

"Daddy! How could she fall into one of those?"

Jef fell into a reverie of quasi-anonymous faces and insinuations. "Why are you still single?" they'd repeatedly asked at school and at work. "You're a good-looking guy, hey, you're not one of those confirmed-bachelor types, are you?" they'd rudely insinuated. Yet dating again was difficult. How could he ever replace Jenn with someone as crude and bizarre as Sandra?

His older daughter—whose chubbiness suddenly reminded Jef of Sandra—slid off his lap, wiped her nose with a forefinger, then pranced off out of the room with:

“One bubble crashes into another bubble while bubbles appear all over... Some connect like the dots but most do not, you bubble-head.”

A *Playboy* subscription went to Jef Royce no matter what; he'd kept one since embarking on the Bell U scheme to enjoy his erudition, while still in high school, underage. He sighed and ransacked the heap, finding the January/February 2015 issue that talked about “Low T” and the raging testosterone/steroid epidemic, alongside full-frontal blow-ups of a sexbot female and extra pages of her nude posse. It also contained an interview with Dan Savage, the famous “Dear Abby”-type blogger /satirist/ columnist. Jef dozed off, reading this passage: “Basically, kids, there’s a switch in your brain that you can consciously flip, and it makes you gay. It’s a choice you make. So let’s have them make the choice and prove it. The fly in the ointment is that some of them are closet cases, so they could probably do it and claim they won the argument. But at least we have videotape of them sucking people off.” *Closet cases? Who?* “Look at Marcus Bachmann, Michelle Bachmann’s husband. Anybody who has gaydar—anybody who has *eyes*—looks at him and sees a tormented closet case who has externalized his internal...”

Then, Jef’s youngest child charged into the kitchen. She grabbed for his tie, stubby arms discarding the *Playboy* onto the table in front of them, because she had a riddle to share.

“What is the riddle?” Jef asked.

“Daddy, you’ll never guess this one, not ever,” his littlest child said.

“Try me,” said Jef.

“What’s the only, only, only time a liar never lies?”

Jef put on a cheerful face of inquisitiveness. “I can’t guess,” he said. “When is the only time a liar never lies?”

Giggling, this the second child burst, “When they call themselves a liar!”

Reminded again that pure love between parent and child does exist, Jef sighed deeply and, feeling his system generate some of that love, pulled his daughter onto his lap. He stroked her pudgy jaw, gazed into her trusting eyes.

Her wavy locks the father then crushed into his fists—he’d twisted the kid’s hair into braids the night before, but they’d been undone by this morning—until the child began to whimper.

Expelling air, the man loosened his grip and smoothed the scrunched strands back into place. He decided never to tell her she stood less right than wrong of conscience; he decided to let her be, inside that precious bubble.

“Did you know that your mom and I almost named your sister Adidas?”

“You did what?”

“We almost named your sister after an athletic shoe.”

“Did I have an almost-name?”

“Yes, you did.”

“What was it?”

“Korn, with a K.”