

Dance Dance

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As Barbie sank deeper, Jessica started to whimper. Behind Barbie was a shipwreck: an old cannon with cannonballs, surrounded by seaweed and squid. “Oh, Ken,” she said, in a silly high-pitched voice, posing a scenario wherein Barbie was penetrated by a squid. “It wriggles around just like yours does.” Barbie would also, apparently, wrap the cannonballs in seaweed, exclaiming, “they feel just like yours.”

After we shut down the PC game, having been called by my parents, I was left with a funny feeling low down. The solving sensation hovered just out of my reach, like an unfulfilled sneeze.

The playroom at her house seemed bigger than the school assembly hall. In the sunken area in the middle, surrounded by carpeted steps, we ate popcorn and fizzy sweets whilst watching *The Princess Diaries* and *Miss Congeniality*. Jessica could watch TV without limits, and also fetch a Coke or a 7UP from the drinks fridge in the pantry whenever she pleased. I never watched broadcast TV, and was allowed fizzy drinks only on holiday.

Occasionally her brother, Nick, would come in. He was just a couple of years older, but seemed much more — Adam’s apple already protruding from the fuzz darkening his chin. He would attempt to wrestle the remote off Jessica, or else lounge on the sofa. It was from him I first learned the word ‘whore’.

“What’s a whore?” I asked.

“Someone who takes dick for money,” he said, his can fizzing where he popped it open. This explanation lodged in my brain like a foreign coin stuck in a vending machine. It was like when I first heard about a blow job. It was inconceivable, that such a relation had been dreamed up between people.

Sometimes, he would come in with a friend. They would manspread on the sofas as we played Dance Dance Revolution on the flashing plastic mat.

“Hey, you gonna dance for us?” the friend called. He whispered something to Nick, and they both laughed.

“What?” Jessica asked, turning to them, flushed. “What did he say?”

“He said,” Nick said, in a slow voice, as if spelling something out to an imbecile, “you should do a lapdance for us.”

They laughed.

“I don’t know what a lap dance is,” Jessica said.

Nick leaned back against the sofa. “It’s when a woman grinds her arse against a man’s rock hard cock.”

I had that strange feeling again, of something foreign lodged in my body. I looked at Jessica, her horrified yet mesmerised gaze, at the boys who peered down at us. “That’s disgusting,” she said, finally.

“One day, you’ll love it,” Nick said, glancing at his friend, who stifled a laugh. “All women do.”

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Jessica’s mother loved animals. A whole room downstairs was piled with mesh cages, within which dwelled gerbils and hamsters. Occasionally they were allowed out on the floor, rolling around in a little transparent ball. I was charmed by this: how the animal could explore the human-sized house, safe in its little bubble of pink plastic.

A lean-to was stacked high with hutches, full of guinea pigs and rabbits, which on occasion we were allowed to get out and stroke. Around the house, tall plum trees grew. One

summer we climbed up ladders and picked them, filling several baskets. It was the first time I had eaten a plum.

Sometimes our other friend Georgia would come, and we would have sleepovers. I realised it was possible to stay up all night, wide-eyed in the playroom, playing Truth or Dare. Eventually Jessica's Dad would pop his head in, and tell us to go to bed. This was the only time I recall ever seeing him. We'd crash on the bunkbeds in Jessica's surprisingly small room, her cassette tape of Pollyanna on the recorder. Jessica would fall asleep immediately, gently snoring, whilst I lay till the cassette clicked off, watching the contours of the alien room emerge from the dark.

Her mother had a pad taped to the wall in the kitchen entitled *Chopin Lizst*. I knew that Chopin was a composer, but that was the first time I had heard about Lizst.

Sometimes, we went to Georgia's. There we would wake early, when we were allowed to eat Cheerios and watch cartoons, another novelty forbidden in my house.

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When I went to secondary school, I lost touch with them completely. It never occurred to me, not that there was any bad blood. I slid over them with the ease of water over a pebble.

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I cannot remember how many years later it was when my mother told me that Georgia's mother and Jessica's father had been having an affair.

It had been going on on for years, all that time when the three of us had been friends. Now, they were together. My parents took Georgia's dad's side. He was certainly more present than most of my friend's fathers — most of whom I could not say I had seen, let alone name.

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Years later, I saw Georgia's mother on a train platform in the city. In her anorak, she looked small and old. I watched closely, and sure enough, after a while, appeared Jessica's father. They waited like that, side-by-side, with briefcases and matching jackets. I could not match the glamorous forbidden lovers with these grey people . It was like a morality tale. I watched them get on the commuter train together, their feet hitting the step at the exact same moment.