

Haircuts & Vaginas

James Roger Johnson

ONE SATURDAY MORNING IN 1953, when I was ten, my mother laid four quarters into my hand and dispatched me to get a fresh haircut before the start of school on Monday. Sam's Barber Shop and Shaving Parlor stood on 4th Street, just up the block from where we lived on the south side of Columbus, Ohio. The quarters jingled in my pocket as I entered the shop, a store-front establishment with generous windows, a ceiling of cream-colored, ornate tin tiles, and long poles supporting slow moving black fans. I was by far the youngest of the nine men in the shop and I tried to look grownup and nonchalant even as I squirmed into one of the black-vinyl upholstered and chrome-armed chairs against the wall.

To pass the time, I paged through a dog-eared copy of *Life Magazine* that featured the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II. While intent on learning about British royalty from the photo arrays, my eyes would surreptitiously glance at the wall calendar from Bernie's Garage and Body Shop around the corner on Jenkins Avenue. The month of August pictured a cocker spaniel puppy looking up at a young woman in tight denim shorts, her heavy breasts barely contained in an unbuttoned white shirt, and a red-plaid neckerchief tightly caressing her neck. Checking the oil under the auto's raised hood, she looked out at me as she bent over the green Chevy fender with one barefoot calf flexed daintily off the ground.

I startled as one of the three barbers, named Jake, caught me ogling the calendar; the heavysset fellow, sporting a narrow mustache and hair combed across his balding head, wiggled his eyebrows and called with a wicked twist to his mouth, "You're

next, Boy." I stood as tall as I could, crossed the black-and-white checker-board floor, and climbed up onto the booster bench that Jake had placed across the arms of the ebony leather chair. As he swirled the pin-striped sheet over my body, he asked my name. Looking up at Jake's looming presence, I answered in a wavering voice, "Roger."

After some small talk and the commencement of snipping my hair, Jake asked, "Well, *Roger*, you do know about that patch of skin between the anus and a woman's vagina, don't ya?" A snort from one of the men waiting their turn echoed off the high ceiling. I felt my face flush, and surely, silhouetted by the white sheet up to my neck, it betrayed my embarrassment. I stared past the other two occupied barber chairs to the red, white, and blue striped pole outside the storefront in the summer sunshine. It turned inexorably as the pungent scent of hair tonic assailed my nostrils. My awkward silence was punctuated by the snipping scissors of the other two barbers.

"Well, do you, Boy?" Desperately hoping the subject of the conversation would go away, I nodded my head, "Yes." Actually, my understanding of the female anatomy was limited at best and I unsuccessfully tried to envision where this space might be. I wondered how he could ask me such a question. No one talked to me about such things. Sure, my dad enjoyed bringing home from the factory what my mother called "off-color jokes," and I had heard my mother mention the word "vagina" in conversation with her women friends, but I had no idea exactly what she meant. I understood boys didn't have them; we had penises. A vagina was something

for girls. I had never seen an actual vagina, not even a picture.

But there was that one time, I did get a glimpse, at a dancing recital. Yes, my mother made me take tap dancing and tumbling. She mistook my avoiding cracks in the pavement as a sign that I had two left feet, and thought dancing and tumbling lessons would correct my deficient coordination. It didn't help any that the Jones' son, also named Roger, was attending the same lessons. I promptly ceased my crack-avoidance game, but too late; I was in for at least a year of lessons.

At an evening recital, the parents attended to the costuming of their children in a school cafeteria, the darkness punctuated by a few incandescent lights in white-enameled metal shades, dangling on long cards from the ceiling. One mother had her daughter, about my size, standing on top of a lunch table under one of the lights. In a demanding voice, she rebuked the girl for hesitating to disrobe to total nude. Every face of the forty or so people turned. My mother instructed me not to look. The few other boys that were there, including Roger Jones, had eyes glued on the hapless girl.

Jealous, I did grab a peek. Under the cone of light, her bunned, auburn hair glistened, but her head was bowed and her shoulders sagged like a defeated prisoner. And so much skin, goose-bumped from the chill of the unheated room; like a plucked chicken on display. Her chest was as featureless as mine, and with similar nipples. An innie belly-button resided on a small, protruding tummy, and below, in that secret space, was, well, nothing, an empty place, undistinguished. I thought vaginas overrated. I began a more intent study for something there, when the mother turned the girl to

facing me, her vacant eyes looking at me with a forlorn, trapped expression, a cringing look of sad resignation. I stopped peeking.

Jake continued, the tenor of his voice indicating his enjoyment at my embarrassment. "Well, *Roger*, if a poisonous snake bit a girl in *that* place, and you were to suck out the poison, which way would you put your nose?" Now there was outright laughter from the men.

The blood rushed to my ears and my scalp tingled. I must have been beet red, and I was again speechless. As a Cub Scout, I did know that you should suck out snake venom, but what did that have to do with my nose?

"Well, come on, Boy, what would you do?"

"I dunno," I said lamely, looking down to my lap, wishing I could hide beneath that sheet, tightly pinned around my neck. I felt captured and humiliated.

"The girl's going to die if you don't do something, *Roger*. Which way are you gonna' put your nose?"

"Let the boy alone, Jake," said Sam, the shop owner, from behind the barber chair next to the front window.

After a heavy sigh, Jake said, "I'll be right back . . . need to take my medicine." As Jake went through the door to the back room, I could see Sam in the mirror, shaking his head. After Jake returned, he shaved my neck, dusted me with talc, and applied tonic. With my inquisition ended, I climbed down, paid Sam the seventy-five cent charge and the twenty-five cent tip with the quarters my mother had given me, rushed out of the shop without looking anyone in the eye, and ran to my home at the far corner of the block.

I knew if I told my dad when

he came home from the factory, he'd go down and beat the crap out of Jake, or, if he went into one of his rages, he might even bludgeon Jake to death. But how could I talk about something so embarrassing? My dad might even think it was my fault that it happened, and punish me.

It was "my cross to bear" as my mother would say of unpleasant things endured. I worried all Sunday about how I would escape future ordeals. Maybe I could let other men go ahead of me if I was to get Jake, or I'd step outside at my turn, or I could escaped his chair when he retreated between customers to the backroom for his *medicine*.

Monday, on the way to my school across the street, I saw all the kids looking up the block at the flashing lights of an emergency wagon and police cars in front of the barbershop. My dad found out, that when Sam opened the shop that morning, he discovered Jake lying face-up on the backroom floor, dead of a heroin overdose. I didn't know about heroin, but I was intrigued that I knew someone who actually had died, and wondered what that was like.

I did not, however, have much remorse that it was Jake who had passed. The shop was closed for the week, and then never reopened. I didn't think much about Jake again. But, I did think about that girl who was snake bit. Why didn't she have any clothes on, and where was she when she was bitten? And, how did she ever get bit, in that particular spot, by a poisonous snake anyway? ■