Loose Lips Sink Ships

by BJ Hollars

I asked the Eskimo if he'd ever seen a vagina before.

"Because I can show you," I whispered.

Albert Huffman, a recent arrival to Hamden via Alaska, was not, in fact, an Eskimo at all, though I would not learn this until dinner.

"Well? You wanna to see it or not?" I asked, tapping my foot. I checked my watch. It was sixth grade recess. Mr. Kenning would blow the whistle any minute now. This vagina wouldn't wait around forever.

He mumbled an okay, so I motioned for him to "step into my office, soldier," and he followed me over to the bush beside the slide. I told him to squat low where nobody could see us. The branches hid us pretty well, dousing us in half-light, and we sat on mulch chips with our legs crossed Indian style. The whole world smelled like pine trees.

"Now, I'm not sure what you Eskimos have in the way of vagina," I started, "but here in the U.S., it looks like this." He waited, and I clapped my hands together and then split my paired hands in a V like Spock. I told him to do the same. I tilted my hands sideways and shoved my V into his V. Then, I told him to open up his palms and take a gander. He moved back some, then peered in at the shadowed hole we'd created.

"Pretty sexy, huh?"

Albert waited a moment, then closed his palms.

"I guess I really don't see it."

"Whatdya mean you don't see it? Whatdya think it's supposed to look like?"

"Well, I guess I just expected...more," he said quietly, readjusting his shorts. "Since people are always talking about it and stuff."

"More like how, Albert?"

"I don't know…shinier, maybe. Or sparkly."

"Sparkly!" I laughed. "A sparkling vagina? You Eskimos, you're about as dumb as rocks." I crouched to crawl out of the shrub.

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“Alaska's part of the United States,” he informed me, picking at a root.

“You talking to me, Eskimo?”

“You said,” he explained, glancing up, “that vagina in the U.S. might be different than other vagina, like the kind in Alaska. But Alaska's part of the U.S. too.”

“Well of course it is,” I groaned. “Jesus H. Christ.”

When Kenning blew the whistle, I told the kid to follow me. It was lunchtime, and I informed him that there wasn't any whale blubber for miles, and if he wanted to learn to eat the hot lunch and be normal like me, then he'd better stick close. I'd direct him to the meatloaf.

“I packed my own lunch,” he said quietly. “See?” He held up his brown bag.

“Yeah, okay,” I rolled my eyes. “But that whale blubber's not gonna last forever.”

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And then, I discovered the difference between Eskimos and Alaskans. And also, that his dad was my dad's boss.
Dad manufactures parts for handicapped people. Mostly shins and knees—pretty much anything from the thigh down. Since he worked there, we got a pretty good discount on Mom's leg.

“You mean to tell me that an Eskimo makes better legs than you?” I questioned. This was at dinner, as Dad fumbled with his hotdog. He said that sometimes being the boss wasn't about making the best legs.

“He has more managerial experience, that's all. So they shipped him down here.” Then he informed me that not all people from Alaska are Eskimos. I laughed like he was joking, but then he got out the encyclopedia to prove it. I stared at a picture of a non-Eskimo family pumping gas into a truck.

“Well whatever your boss is,” I grumbled, slamming the book, “his son's kind of a dud.”

“How so?” Dad asked, but I said I wasn't sure. Did he want me to say that stupid Albert didn't even know what a vagina looked like?

“Well you should be nice to him,” Mom said. “Since your father works with his father. Try to make him feel welcome.”

“Oh I'll make him feel welcome, all right,” I chuckled.

Dad pointed a fork at me.

“You better, pal.”

I grinned. I pointed a fork back.

Dad and I ate Mom's cooked carrots until we felt like barfing. We didn't tell her that. We just smiled and I said, “Mmmm,” over and over again until Dad told me that was enough.

“Honey,” Mom said to Dad midway through the meal. “You mind taking a look at the leg later? It feels strange.”

“Strange how?”

She tapped it beneath the table. “I'm not sure exactly. A little off. Hollow, almost. ” She was talking about the fake leg; the one God gave her after He took away the real one in a car accident back when I was in the third grade.

“After dinner,” he agreed, smiling, forking a carrot.

“No rush,” Mom said. She rose, then lumbered to the living room, collapsing on the couch. “We're not going anywhere.”

From our place at the table, Dad and I could hear the TV blaring, all those cowboy bullets zinging past one another. A few more bites, then Dad put down his fork.

“All right. Better go check on that leg,” he said, nodding to me like a doctor on his way to surgery. I smiled as my father moved to the living room. He bent to my mother's leg and ran his hands up and down the wooden shaft. From where I sat, it looked sort of stupid, like he was trying to shine a baseball bat or something. But a few minutes later, when I looked up again, it looked less stupid, like he was just trying to push a little life into a dead thing. Which, I guess, maybe isn't so stupid after all.

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At school the next day, in science class, Mr. Kenning announced that we were going to discuss the wonders of electricity.

“Boooring,” I moaned, giving it two thumbs way down.

“Jackson, would you care to explain to the class just how electricity works?” Kenning asked.

“Sure,” I said, scooting back my chair and standing. “You see, you flick a switch and then the lightbulbs start to buzz.”

I bowed.

“Nope. Want to try again?”

“Magic?” I guessed.

“Closer,” he said, beginning to pace, “only there are electrons involved, and conductors.”

“Listen,” I said, leaning forward in my desk, beginning the speech my father taught me. “You can put glasses on a pig, but it's still gonna be a pig, only it'll look smarter.”

Nobody knew quite what to say to that, not even Mr. Kenning. I leaned back, arms crossed, then winked at Albert staring blankly back.

At recess, when I asked Albert if he wanted to try again with the vagina, he said sure, that we might as well give it a shot.

“Until we get it right,” I ordered, “because practice always makes perfect.”

We rammed our V'd hands together and took turns peering in. He peeked first and stared endlessly into a cave of darkness and saw nothing.

“Quit hogging, my turn,” I said, then flipped our hands and investigated further, nodding. “Yup, there she is. Clear as day. Pretty as a peach.” He squinted at me.

“How do you know that's what it even looks like?” Albert whispered.

“Because that's what the older guys on the bus say,” I explained, exasperated. “Jesus H. Christ.” I slammed my hands down. “You just...you have to trust me on this one. You have to.” He said okay, he would.

“Really?” I asked, startled. “You trust me?”

He nodded.

“Like…you'd trust me with your life?”

He said maybe.

“Well maybe I'll show you something else,” I said, hesitating. “You absolutely positively sure I can trust you?”

He nodded.

I eyed him inquisitively.

“Because loose lips sink ships, you know?”

“What ships?” he asked. I sighed, stood up from those bushes, shrugged my shoulders. I looked to Mr. Kenning who was scanning the playground from just a few feet away.

“This one doesn't know the first thing about World War II propaganda,” I explained to the teacher, pointing to the bush. “Why don't we ever learn anything useful in science, like U-boats?”

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He said his parents always came home from work kind of late, and that it was okay if he got off the bus with me, as long as my parent's didn't mind.

“Mind? Are you kidding?” I said. “Your dad could fire my dad. You think they're going to say no?”

For the entire bus ride home, I lectured him on Nazi Germany and American propaganda, though sometimes we took breaks to try to listen to what the older guys had to say about girls—all things I already knew.

“Man, I would have done three kinds of nasty with Lizzy if it hadn't been for…well, you know,” a pimply one grinned to the others.

I jumped up, swiveled my head to them. “You mean the period, right? The period stopped you.” They laughed, then told me that little sixth graders shouldn't be so concerned with periods. “But you're talking about Lizzy, right?” I said, even though I didn't know Lizzy.

I turned back around like they said, then crouched low in the seat. I leaned over to Albert.

“See? I told you I know this stuff.”

When we reached our stop, we dropped our book bags over by the rain gutter, and I told him that if he was going to help me build this fort, then he had to keep the location secret from everyone else at school.

“I don't know how things worked back in Alaska, but it's not like I would go telling everyone about your igloo or whatever,” I explained. “So it's the same here.” He groaned, asked me to knock it off with the Eskimo stuff already. I grinned at him, snapping my teeth for no reason.

“So where's the fort?” he asked, and I turned, wiped the smile clean, then asked if he was blind. “Do you need glasses or something?”

There, in the woods behind my house, was a perfectly obvious pile of sticks that I'd fashioned into a fort. It wasn't much, but at least all the materials were there, and I figured we could put something together that would be fireproof at the least, and at most, bombproof.

So we dragged some tools from the shed and started chopping and hacking at things.

“Chop like this,” I explained, and then split some sticks in two with the dull axe blade. “You really have to swing it like you hate it. Show me how much you hate it.”

Albert was a pretty hard worker, and by five, we'd already managed a good foundation.

“This is the best part though,” I said, and then unzipped and pissed in a foot tall hollowed-out log. “Our toilet.”

Albert wanted to try, and so after me, he peed all over the thing, dribbling on the leaves.

“Pretty bad aim,” I announced, glancing at the wet wood.

“Yeah, my parents don't usually let me pee outside,” he admitted.

“Probably, in Alaska, your wiener would freeze off, huh?”

He said probably.

“Yeah,” I agreed. “I know how that goes.”

After we put the tools away and went back inside, Mom introduced herself, and when Albert glanced down at her leg she joked, “My husband says it's always best to try out your own product.” Albert stared at her like she was a robot, and I reminded him that it was just a leg and that it was nothing compared to what the Nazis did back in World War II.

Didn't he remember what I'd told him on the bus?

Mom changed the subject, and asked what we were doing out there in the woods. I glanced at Albert and reminded him to keep his lips tight.

“We were…deer hunting,” I said, then corrected, “No wait, duck hunting.” Ducks seemed more likely than deer.

“Any luck?” Mom asked, picking up the remote.

“Naw,” I said, “they're all really good hiders. Deer and ducks both.” I hustled Albert out of there before he cracked and screwed things up.

In the front drive, we shot some baskets until his dad came to pick him up. He wasn't a very good shot, but probably, they had to shoot baskets with snowballs back where he was from.

“Remember,” I said as his father's car slowed. “Just because you're helping me build doesn't mean you can go blabbing.” He said he knew, and that I didn't have to remind him every five seconds.

“Well I'm counting on you, soldier,” I said, giving him a salute. He waved goodbye, and, as his dad rolled down the window, in an attempt to be polite, I said, “Hey mister, my mom thinks you make a pretty great leg.” Then I waved and smiled until my face nearly split in two. I wondered if they made fake faces too.

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That night, after Mom and Dad interrogated me further about what we were doing in the woods, I grabbed some blank paper and water colors and painted a picture entitled “Mesopotamia.”

Basically, it was just a lot of brown huts next to one another and a purple dragon flying overhead.

“Why ‘Mesopotamia'?” Albert asked the following day when I showed it to him.

“You don't know anything about Mesopotamia, do you?” I asked. “Jesus!”

He shrugged and then walked off.

It was recess again, but we didn't make vaginas. Instead, he played soccer with some of the other guys, and a pack of loud, snarling girls clapped and cheered and told all of them how great they were.

Jessica Meyers, the loudest of all, could whistle really loud by slipping two fat fingers into her mouth and kind of jerking her neck like she was choking. She was the girl who always raised her hand in class to point out something like, “Um…Mr. Kenner, did you know that 90% of the world is covered with water?” to which he would reply, “No, Jessica, it's actually closer to 70%.”

Like putting glasses on a pig.

Probably, I would have given in and played soccer too if it wasn't for “Mesopotamia.” I wanted to keep it safe and there was no way I could trust one of those spectator girls to hold on to it for me while I scored all the goals. Probably, their hand sweat would ruin the paper and smear the dragon too.

So I rolled it up and watched the others play as I wandered by the sidewalk. The entire time, I pretended to be interested in the ants crawling back and forth from the grass to a little dirt mound by the baseball field. I wondered what they'd look like under a magnifying glass, but I didn't want to risk it in case I fried them.

But mainly, I just watched the soccer game because I didn't care about those stupid ants anyway. Instead, I watched those idiot boys trip over the ball and roll ankles and limp around like they'd just taken a bullet from some Nazi. I made it a point never to play with boys like that—the kind who didn't know anything. They always made the worst soldiers. Albert was bigger than the others, and after he scored a goal— after all those dumb girls stood up and

cheered for him like he was the coolest thing since the electricity we were learning about in science class—I said goodbye to the ants, waved, then left them there to crawl and die and go about their business.

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Mom's leg did not grow back. This was a misconception I had about the entire process many years ago. For some reason, I was under the impression that maybe legs could grow back the way skin grew back. Just give it enough time and sure enough, inch by inch…

Dad straightened me out pretty quickly. I remember him crying when Mom was still in the hospital, and when I told him not to worry, that surely it'd grow back, he kissed me and said it was a beautiful thought, but it was wrong to believe in miracles.

“But Miracle-Gro!” I cried. He said that was just for plants.

I never did understand the prosthetic completely. She didn't sleep with it, and some nights, I'd peer in their darkened bedroom just to see its shadow loom against the wall as if waiting for something.

Once, on TBS, they were playing The Christmas Story, and when they showed that leg lamp, I turned to Mom, tapped it, and said, “Hey, probably, it'd make a pretty good lamp, huh?” She and Dad had both thought this was very cute at the time. Only it became less cute when, on Christmas morning, I put a shade over the top and placed it in the living room under the tree. Dad had to carry her in. I was the only one laughing.

When Albert and I returned to our fort a few days later, I told him that, to me, he was kind of like a prosthetic. “You're good to have around,” I said, “but it's not like I would die without you.”

“Okaaaaaaaay,” he said, drawing the word out for an entire breath. I looked over, then told him he'd have to stack the wood tighter; that if we wanted to stretch ripped trash bags over the top for a roof, then we'd need to be serious with the walls.

I put “Mesopotamia” in a safe place by a stump.

“So what's with you playing soccer lately?” I asked casually, my

tongue dangling from my mouth as I returned to digging the booby trap hole just beyond the entrance. “I thought you and me could hang out in that bush some more. Keep practicing until you get it right.” He restacked the sticks and pressed them tight like I told him, then wound some old kite string around them to hold them.

“Soccer's more fun,” he explained. “Especially scoring goals. All that vagina stuff was getting kind of boring.”

What would the guys in the back of the bus think if I told them that? If I said, “Hey guys, this kid here thinks vaginas are boring.” Probably, we'd all have a good laugh and then maybe we'd shove Albert's head into his crotch until he promised that he'd made a mistake, that they were the farthest thing from boring.

The woods were quiet then, and peaceful, and I dug that hole until it was about three feet deep, and then I picked some thorns. I filled the hole with a layer of thorns, and I covered it with leaves. I'd been pricked a few times, but it felt good to know exactly what trespassers had coming to them.

“Now don't forget to step to the side,” I warned, dabbing a foot gently on the leaf-covered trap. “And don't go telling anyone about this or else it's useless. Loose lips…” I started, but then he wedged a finger between some of the heavier logs and shouted the S-word so I knew he was serious.

Since he was from Alaska, I doubted Albert was the crying type. Probably, he'd killed polar bears after school when nothing good was on television. Probably, he carved totem poles before bed. So when I saw him curled up on the forest floor rocking like a baby, I put the shovel down and leaned over him.

“I'm a doctor, let me see,” I ordered, shoving one hand away from the other. I knelt on the ground beside him, my knees in the dirt, and I spread his fingers apart to examine each one individually. I held my grip on the ring finger.

“It's this one, isn't it?” I guessed, touching the crooked one. He nodded, winced, peered out over the tree limbs to avoid looking at it. “Yup, just like I thought,” I said.

I bent the finger gently and a humming sound came from his

throat, kind of like the radiator in the hallway.

“Okay, let me get the shovel,” I offered, wiping the dirt from my palms. “We can cut it off and still save the hand.”

“No,” he cried. “Let's not.” But I was already back on my feet, walking toward the shovel. “Don't worry,” I assured him, reaching for it. “One of our dads can get you a really good deal on a prosthetic.”

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Turned out, a band-aid was enough. And some rubbing alcohol. And a squirt of Cortizone-10.

“See?” I told you we could save the hand.” He thanked me, and he said I was a pretty good guy, especially since I didn't chop it off.

“Does that mean we can be friends at school tomorrow?” He said okay, if that's what I wanted. I nodded solemnly.

So we were friends again. Allies. And for the whole next day, we walked around the playground together, and I showed him all the ants, and he dabbed at them with his swollen finger

“Sometimes I like to…kill'em,” I lied, then surprise attacked a herd of them and just mashed down hard with my shoe. I wanted to show him I was serious, and that I'd do pretty much anything.

“Geez, man,” he said, pulling his finger back, “you didn't have to do that.”

“It was nothing,” I assured, wiping my shoe on the grass.

Then stupid Jessica and some of her friends came over, and they all said hi. Every single one of them said hi. Like ten different people all saying hi. Like a machine gun.

“Hi, hi, hi, hi, hi,” I said, and Albert gave a small wave.

“Uh…can we help you with something?” I asked in a deep voice, flexing like a weightlifter. Jessica turned to Albert and handed him a note. Then, in a spray of fluttering ponytails the girls were gone, and I ran after them, clicking my tongue like how cowboys do to cattle.

“Man, you never have a crossbow when you need one,” I sighed,

then turned to Albert. “Sorry about them.” He uncrumpled the note.

“What is it?” I asked. “She want to be your girlfriend or something?”

He said yes, that's what it was. I rotated a finger near my head. Jessica was crazy.

“Trust me,” I explained, leaning close. “A guy like you, he can do better.”

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That night, Mom and I were watching television when I realized that I'd forgotten all about “Mesopotamia.” I'd left it in the woods the day Albert nearly lost his finger. Had it rained recently? Was it ruined?

There are a lot of things about that painting that other people probably wouldn't understand. Like why I drew a purple dragon over the city. It's simple, really: because there were no purple dragons there, but there were great warriors, so I figured why not give them a dragon to deal with? People usually think I'm pretty dumb until I stop and explain things to them. Then, they usually think I'm pretty smart. And also, people never know a masterpiece when they see one—I overheard Dad say this once as he stroked Mom's leg in the dark.

I stood up, slipped my shoes on, then hummed a patriotic song I did not know and began marching toward the woods.

Already, it was late fall and the leaves formed a nice cushion on the ground. Probably, I didn't have to wear shoes at all. Everything was brown and burned-smelling, and crackled as I walked.

There, in the woods, I saw the last person I expected to see. Actually, I hadn't expected to see anyone at all because the booby trap hadn't been tripped, but there she was, dumb as ever, Jessica Meyers. She was just leaning against the wall that we'd constructed from sticks. I froze.

Where were our weapons? Where were our goddamn weapons?

I'd spent so long carving spears just for this occasion.

I hid behind a few trees, and I watched the top half of her body squirm as she peered down at the ground, eyes-wide and mouth open. I couldn't see the rest of her—just that floating t-shirt—and then, a moment later, there was Albert, rising like a prince, growing from the ground.

"You!" I said, revealing myself. "You!" Jessica bent down, pulled up her shorts, then returned to standing.

"Jackson?" he whispered. He was scared of me. Real scared. I stomped my feet to try to frighten them off.

"Git! Git outta here!"

"Jackson, now just wait…"

"You're…you're putting glasses on a pig, Albert!" I stuttered, pointing to her. Jessica covered her face with her hands and shook no, no.

"Let's see your glasses, pig," I said, clawing at her hands. "Go ahead, show us!" She ran behind Albert like he'd protect her—her heroic, fake Eskimo.

"And you," I said, pointing a finger at him like a curse. Snot ran down my face, and I tried to suck it in. "Mr…Mr. 'I-think-vaginas-are-boring.' If they're so boring, then what were you two doing back here? Huh? Huh?" I stamped again. I snapped, growled.
I waited for him to say something, but he didn't. My chest throbbed, and I really wanted to kick things and break things and throw spears.

Where were all the goddamn spears?

We waited there, the three of us, and I glanced over and saw "Mesopotamia" crinkled on the ground beside the stump like any other leaf. The dragon had shrunk, and you could only see part of the head. I buckled, caught myself against a tree branch, then kept waiting for Albert to explain himself.

He didn't.

Eventually, Jessica ran away like a deer, so I was the only one left waiting.

"Well?"

He didn't answer. All those Alaskans are the same, dumb as rocks.

Far off, the rumble of a car going someplace else. The sound of my sniffling.

Maybe, I considered as we stood there, we could just wait here forever. Until we grew beards and got arthritis and all our limbs just peeled away from us. Maybe, this fort could be like our new home, and those ants from school, they could move in too, and the dragon. I wanted to tell him all of these things, about how good we could have it if we wanted.

“Albert,” I whispered, stepping closer “I think you have the loosest lips of anyone.”

He nodded, said he understood, that he wouldn't return to the fort any longer.

Then he walked away and I walked away. And probably, it was a good thing.

And also, it was a good thing that I couldn't find those spears.

At such close range, I could've pierced his heart in an instant.