

The Locker Room

by Con Chapman

Ben liked it when he had his father all to himself, when his big brother Jeff had something else to do on Saturdays and they could be alone together. He got to talk to his dad more than—Jeff did all the talking when it was the three of them, and he cut him off if he tried to talk to his dad. His dad was usually too busy driving or doing something else to make Jeff be fair, so Ben came away from those days feeling cheated. Today would be different because Jeff had something at the high school that his mother was in charge of, so it was just Ben and his dad going to swim.

It was always an adventure to go swimming at his dad's club, because it was both fun and a little tense; the locker room was filled with old men who acted like they owned the place, talking and laughing real loud, and it was clear that kids were out of place there. He would look around him all the time when he was getting dressed and undressed because it was like he was in a different world; a world where there were no mothers or sisters, just men, in a little room where their voices bounced off the tile walls and floor.

Today wasn't so bad when they were getting into their suits, but when they got out of the pool there were several men sitting in the little circle of chairs in the corner by the door talking in that way that made it seem like they were showing off. Ben would look at them out of the corner of his eye, curious but careful, because he didn't want them to see him sneaking a peak at them. He didn't know what they could do to him—maybe get tough like Jeff and his friends did--but he was glad his dad was around.

They got dressed and went home. His mother and Jeff had already returned and the house smelled of alphabet soup. He didn't like it much but he knew there would probably be a sandwich with it.

He turned on the TV to watch for a little while but his mother called him to come, so he switched it off and made his way to the kitchen. His mom and dad and Jeff were already sitting down, talking about Jeff's day at the school, something about going to college. He started eating his soup but it was too hot, so he picked up his grilled cheese sandwich and took a few bites first.

"Mr. Carlson says Jeff should have one really good 'reach' school and maybe five or six strong schools where he has a good chance to get in, and one 'safety' school," his mother said.

"Um-hmm," his dad murmured, his mouth full of soup. "His math is solid but he needs to bring up his verbal scores and his English grades," his mother continued.

"Ms. Haygood has a hair across her ass about me," Jeff said like he was making an excuse.

"Don't talk that way at the table," his dad said.

"It's true," Jeff said.

"I think maybe you and some of your friends cut-up too much in her class," his mother said.

"That's not true. She picks on me. I hate her."

"You'll learn as you go through life that you're going to have a lot of people in a position of authority over you who you don't like much," his dad said. "You just have to get used to it." As usual, the whole conversation was about Jeff.

"If I have a job and I don't like my boss I'm going to quit," Jeff said.

"You may not be able to," his dad said. "You may have two hungry boys to feed."

Jeff shut up after that. Their dad always knew how to put him in his place, Ben thought; he wished he would do it more often.

"Still—she has it out for me," Jeff piped up again.

"I think she's a lesbian."

"Jeff! That's none of your business."

"And I doubt it has anything to do with the B minus she gave you," his dad said.

"Yes it does," Jeff said. "She's a man-hater."

Ben had grown restless as he sat in silence, and he joined the conversation in an outburst. "No, she probably just doesn't want jerks like you acting up in her class."

"Buzz off," Jeff said. "You don't even know what a lesbian is."

Ben was silent for a moment, and felt his cheeks burn. He took a breath before speaking again. "Yes I do," he said. "Lesbians give the best blow jobs."

His brother burst out laughing but his parents were silent, and his mother dropped her spoon on her plate with a clinking sound.

"Wherever did you learn that?" she said after she had collected herself a bit.

Ben sat in silence, feeling both proud that he had bested his brother in conversation for once, and embarrassed that he had said something he didn't understand that upset his mom.

"Ben—your mother asked you a question," his father said sternly. He said nothing.

"Benjamin—I want to know," his father said.

He looked up at his dad, tears forming in his eyes.

"Those men . . ." he said, choking back a lump in his throat. "What men?" his mother said.

"Those men at the pool," Ben said, bursting into tears as he ran around the table to be comforted by his mother.

"What a crybaby!" his older brother said, and began to eat again.

"What men at the pool, sweetie?" his mother asked.

"The ones who were sitting there in their underwear."

"Do you know what he's talking about?" his mother asked his dad.

His father put his spoon down and nodded his head. "It's just locker room talk," he said. "On Saturdays it's mostly a bunch of old guys, running off at the mouth. I was in the shower when Ben was

getting dressed. I didn't hear anything like that, but I don't doubt that it happened."

His mother kissed him on the head and said "Why don't you go up to your room and get ready for bed, sweetie. I'll bring your soup up and you can eat it while you watch TV in our bedroom."

"Okay," he said, and sniffled a little before heading up the back stairs. He heard his brother make a snorting sound when he was halfway up.

He went to the window in his room and looked out at the sidewalk, bathed in purple by the streetlight. He hoped his brother would go off to college soon.

