

I Hear You & Other Stories

by Jack Swenson

I Hear You

My mother is driving me nuts. She won't use her hearing aid. "They're not perfected yet," she says, but she won't look at me when she says it.

I flew back last summer to see her. The first day I got there, I had to adjust the settings on her TV. The picture was green. I fiddled around and got the color back to where it was supposed to be. "Ma," I said. "Why don't you get a new television?" She cupped her ear with her hand. "What?" she asked. I repeated my question. "A new TV?" she asked. I nodded. "Why?" she asked. "I just got that one." Her TV is twenty-five years old.

"I don't watch TV much," my mother said. "I'd rather listen to the radio."

The next day, I stopped by to see her after breakfast, and the first thing out of her mouth was that somebody had called and wanted to talk to me. "Who was it?" I asked. "What?" she asked. She had her head in the oven; she was poking around, looking for something. The oven was crammed with cereal boxes.

"Who was it that called?" I asked. "She wants you to call her back," she replied. "Who is 'she'?" I yelled. "Oh, you know her," she said.

I made a writing motion with my hand. "Did she leave a number?" I shouted. My mother pointed to a scribbled note on the kitchen counter. I snatched it up. On it were the words "bread" and "ice cream."

I later found the note with the name and number of my caller. Mom was using it to mark her place in her Bible.

Missing Parts

One day our cat snags a blue jay. The bird is almost as big as the cat. I yell at her, and she drops the bird, which flies to the top of a nearby tree and cusses us out.

My wife and I split up, and we put our townhouse on the market. The wife of our real estate agent tells me that during an open house a potential buyer asked if the dead gopher in the dining room was a joke. I told her it wasn't my fault. When I catch a gopher, I said, I eat it on the spot. I don't bring it into the house.

I inherit the cat and dog. My ex-wife travels light. My realtor's wife finds me a house on the other side of town. Behind the house is an expanse of open land that belongs to the city. It would be a perfect place to exercise my dog, the realtor's wife says. She has a dog and knows about such things.

The realtor's wife introduces me to one of her girlfriends. Jenny tells me about the people I buy the house from. "Didn't you read about it in the newspaper?" she asks. I shake my head. The husband is a school teacher, and he is diddling one of his students. She blabs, and the man loses his job.

"You teach school, don't you?" Jenny asks me. I nod. We are sitting on a small couch in front of the fireplace in my new/old house. It is a brisk winter day. Jenny has come over to give me a present. It is a Christmas tree ornament: a glass angel.

We have a brief fling. I get scared when I find out her husband is a cop. Jenny has some quirks, too. For one thing, she won't let me see her naked. She always wears undies to bed. They are nice undies, but I want to see her body. She has an okay body, as far as I can tell. No missing parts.

At the Races

My friend picked me up at LAX, and we drove to his place. He had a swell little house in the hills above Western Ave. The next morning we sat around his kitchen table reading the *Racing Form*. Doc was in his skivvies. He looked awful. Both of us had hangovers.

I asked Doc if he had found anything, and he said there was a favorite in the third that looked like a lock and something promising in the ninth. A long shot. I looked at the last race to see if I saw what he saw, and I didn't. "Speed horse drawn inside, and look who's up," he said. Pincay. The horse had only had a few races, and each time he had folded early. I shook my head. "You never know," I said.

Doc had a date, so we picked up the girl on our way to Santa Anita. She was one of the girls in what he called his "stable," young women who worked where he did. Doc was cheap, and a date to him was a nooner in the back seat of his car with one of the secretaries and a six-pack.

The girl and I got along famously. She was good-humored and smart. She had a big laugh, and she looked you in the eye. She knew nothing about horses. She insisted on making her own bets, and she lost every race. She shared in the excitement, however, when the horse that Doc and I liked won the third race, and by some miracle, our long shot in the eighth eked out a victory at odds of eight to one.

A celebration was in order, Doc declared. We had a dinner at a restaurant in the Hollywood Hills with a view of more lights than I had ever seen before in my life. Then we went back to Doc's house and did some serious drinking. We ended up taking off all our clothes and marching around the house to German band music.

We had planned to play golf the next day, but we decided against that. Doc and I went out for breakfast. Doc had some peculiar eating habits. He always ate one thing at a time, one item after the other, including the parts of the egg that were white and yellow. Watching his performance made me sick to my stomach.

I told Doc that I liked Cass. She was good company, I said. She knew what was what, Doc said. She had been around the track a few times. "She was the girlfriend of a famous baseball player once," Doc said. She told him that ball player liked her to suck his toes.

Secrets

All the attractive women in the building had secrets. He wanted to know their secrets, but they wouldn't say.

The Crier lived next door. Everybody called her The Crier because from time to time they would hear her crying. The sound

carried. Once he knocked on her door and asked her if she were all right. "I'm fine," she said and closed the door in his face.

He had a brief fling with a nurse who lived in an upstairs apartment in another wing. Her secret was that she had very small breasts. Black hairs grew out of one of her nipples.

A very pretty girl with long dark hair lived down the hall from him. One day he helped her hang a picture in her apartment. He took her to a basketball game. She seemed to like basketball players, especially if they were black. He wasn't black, and he didn't play basketball, and when she kissed him goodnight, she did not put a lot to zing into it.

For a time he dated a redheaded girl named Annie. She wasn't very pretty, but she was nice. It surprised him that her pubic hair was blonde, not red. He thought for a time that that might be her secret, but it wasn't.

The girl with one boob was a home-wrecker. He spent one night with her. By coincidence, he also knew the woman whose husband left her for the woman with one boob, but she wouldn't go to bed with him, so he never did find out how many boobs she had.

The ballroom dancers lived on the other side of the quad. They may or may not have been married. The girl was pretty and graceful but coarse. She referred to her partner as "him"; she did not seem to think highly of the poor fellow. He was a little guy with red hair and a red face. Maybe her secret was that she was going to leave him.

The one he liked best was a middle aged woman who didn't wear underwear. She had a terrific figure. He got to know her a little because he would see her in the laundry room when he was washing and drying his clothes. He talked her into coming back to his apartment with him one night, but after a few kisses she panicked and left. She called him later and apologized. Her husband drove a truck. She was afraid that he would come back and raise hell if she weren't home. She didn't say what would happen if that occurred, but he had a pretty good idea.

The Office Assistant

She told me her secret in an off-hand way, as if we were discussing the weather. We were in my office. The girl was doing some filing. She glanced at me and smiled. Her parents knew what was going on, she said, but they didn't say anything because they didn't want to lose the man's friendship.

She was from Ohio, and she looked it. She looked like a farm girl, but she wasn't. She told me her family lived in town. Her father worked for a bank. She was a pretty girl, a bosomy blonde with freckles.

One day after work I noticed that she was sitting in a chair by my desk in my tiny office at the college just looking at me. I looked up and smiled. I asked her why she was doing that. "Because I like to look at you," she said.

Another day she came to work with bruises on her wrists and face. I asked her what happened. Her boyfriend, she said. Sometimes he got violent.

Right before Christmas break she came in one day and closed the door behind her. She sat down on the chair next to my desk. She wanted to ask me a question, she said. I leaned back in my chair. I made a steeple with my fingers. "Shoot," I said.

What she wanted to know was if I thought it would be okay if she called her boyfriend and asked him to come over for Christmas dinner. She said she hadn't seen him since the day of their fight. Then she started to cry. She was lonely, she said.

