

# Everyone Else's Business

*by* Jennifer Donnell

Where I grew up, everyone knew everyone else's business. We all knew that the thirty-eight year old mother, with the house on the hill, was having an affair with Darren, a fifteen year old boy, but no one did anything about it. When he was sixteen the parents found out and were furious, but the police were never called. Living in the mountains, we followed the rules of the valley which prioritized freedom away from society. Inside our homes, civilization felt far away. After the discovery, Darren cut his long blonde hair, as if it would erase the wound, and was told to stay away from the woman. He didn't and snuck to her house whenever his parents weren't home.

Besides acres containing about sixty-three homes and just as many barns, we were surrounded by National Forest. The acreage each family owned should have allotted more privacy, but the valley was so quiet and you could hear everything within a mile radius.

When I was twelve going on thirteen, the woman Darren was having the affair with hired me to babysit. She had three sons- the youngest was sweet, the middle child a charming trouble maker, and the older boy acted strange, probably from an undiagnosed ailment. I rarely saw the mother, as she left first thing in the morning and barely spoke once arriving home. She was blonde and a few pounds overweight, her face hardened from smoking. Her home was that of a hoarder, floors so messy you could hardly walk, unwashed dishes crusted with food. There was only one room, the television room, where you could stand and move around in relative comfort. Whenever possible, I took the youngest child to my house and we played board games.

The middle son was ten but had a friend who was eleven going on twelve, named Max. Max would come over and harass me.

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"See this plastic knife?" Max told me one day, an evil smile forming on his face, "I'm going to use it to cut your pants off and put it.... *somewhere.*"

It chilled me. I knew he was practicing flirting, even if he sounded like a psychopath, but it felt awful. The plastic knife was small, probably belonging to a toy soldier buried in the mess that was the toy room. It wasn't a real threat, but his smirk made me feel gross. Betrayed by my own embarrassment, I turned bright red. His smirk grew wider.

Twelve year old boys were disgusting, I re-confirmed the next day, when he asked if I wore a bra yet and said he would hold me down and snap it until I screamed.

Though I can think of a lot of comebacks now, I'm not sure what witty retort I came up with then, other than, "Stop." or probably telling him he was dumb. I was glad when he tried to torture the cat and wasn't allowed over anymore. The cat cuddled on my lap, after her injury, bandaged tail whisking back and forth. In the distance, I heard Darren's motorcycle roaring up the hill to meet the children's mother, arriving home from work. I knew to leave then, because they would be busy doing whatever people having affairs did. Maybe they watched rated -R- movies and ate ice cream without brushing their teeth afterwards... bad stuff like that.

