

My Hairy Thumbnail

by Mike Handley

I was a gangly 11 years old, a year before the Watergate hearings pre-empted the afternoon cartoons on television, when I discovered an uncle's girly magazine during routine reconnaissance of my grandmother's hall closet. A scavenger of the first order, I was always looking for pocket change and anything else that might rest in a place not easily seen by a kid. Neenaw's house wasn't exactly a treasure trove, but it was mostly virgin hunting ground.

Nothing could deter me, not even my father's cold stare when he caught me throwing what I thought were the world's best water balloons off the back porch.

"Those rubbers cost good money," he growled. "Don't you go through my damn drawers again!"

Unlike the tame "Playboy" my father stashed on the uppermost shelf of our laundry room closet, which featured a centerfold named Fran who very much resembled my mother, my uncle's magazine didn't stop with full breasts and the curve of an ass above a bear skin rug.

His was the real deal.

There it was, the hairy notch, which could only be the "pussy" referred to in hushed tones by the older, pimple-faced boy down the street. I was mesmerized by the dark shadow between the centerfold's long legs, only to snap out of my daze moments later, sure that I'd be discovered.

It's like walking in a grocery store and spying a \$20 bill on the floor. Though impractical, you look around to see if there's a camera recording your reaction before snatching it.

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I carefully tore the page out of the magazine, intending to hide it somewhere so that I could gaze at the pussy in my leisure. But I couldn't quite figure out where I could keep a whole page. After considerable thought, I very gingerly tore the paper in such a way that I wound up with a tiny piece the size of an adult fingernail.

Only the hairy v-shaped spot was left, hardly recognizable to anyone offered the chance to see it out of context. But whenever I looked at the ink smudge, I knew it was the forbidden fruit. So I tucked it into my little child-sized wallet.

At school the next day, the pussy wouldn't leave me alone. It wanted out of my pocket. It wanted to be seen and appreciated.

Mrs. Jennings might have been waxing stoically about the German mercenaries who fought during the American Revolution, but I was daydreaming about the treasure in my pocket. It promised to help elevate my status in the eyes of the other boys. And like the sucker for attention and acceptance that I was, I couldn't keep it in my pants.

Carefully pulling it from the secret flap of my billfold, I whispered to Dale Hooper, one of my burlier classmates, "You can't tell any one. You have to promise, okay?"

"I won't tell nobody. What is it?" he asked.

I plucked up the dime-sized piece of paper and placed it in his hand as if it were a blood diamond.

"I want it back," I said.

"But what is it?" he pressed, turning the paper over and staring at the other side filled with words.

"No, not THAT side," I told him. "The other side. It's a pussy."

"A what?"

"A pussy ... You know, what women have ... down there," I glanced down at my lap.

That was my first brush with school authorities. Dale ratted me out, eager, it seems, to prove his devotion to Mrs. Dolly Phillips, the elementary school's barrel-chested assistant principal. He couldn't give it to her fast enough.

"What is this?" she wanted to know, eyes flashing beneath her arched eyebrow.

"Um, I ... I don't know," I stuttered. "It's just something I saw in a magazine."

"You don't know what this is?" she persisted.

"No ma'am," I lied, meeting her gaze squarely.

"Where did it come from?" she continued.

"I found it on the floor."

"On the floor?"

"Yes ma'am. On my uncle's floor."

"What do you think your mother would say about this?" the interrogation continued.

"I don't know. I don't even know what it is," I said, envisioning myself dancing around while trying to avoid the sting of a freshly cut "switch."

"Well, I tell you what, young man ... I'm going to keep this, and I won't tell your mother, though I should. But only if you promise that you'll never do this again, okay?"

"Yes ma'am," I said sheepishly. "I won't."

A year later, I found myself in that same office, trying to look innocent and confused as to why I'd been called to visit Mrs. Phillips.

"What is this?" she demanded, holding a limp white pad in her hand.

"It's a Kotex," I said.

"And what is a Kotex used for," she asked.

"I have no idea, Miz Phillips. All I know is that my mother has a closet full of them," I offered cheerfully.

That was a half-truth, so I had no problem feigning naivety. I knew that a Kotex touched a pussy, but I was clueless about menstruation. A period was part of a sentence. Period.

I was a member of the "safety patrol" at my school, which meant that I got to wear a fetching orange belt and shoulder strap, a shiny badge and carry a flag. Before and after school, the safety patrol manned the crosswalks, stopping traffic and allowing kids to cross the street.

There were ranks. A smart girl with long blond hair, Kim, was the captain.

Her badge said as much. It said, in red, "captain."

I resented her. I coveted that badge.

Which is why one afternoon, while Kim and I were in the school's storeroom, donning our belts and pulling the flags out of the closet, I happened to point to the box of Kotexes on the top shelf of the broom closet and announce, "I know what those are ... Oh yes, I know."

The girl blanched and ran out of the room.

Miz Phillips arrived soon afterward.

"Follow me to the office, young man," she sighed.

I'm not sure how I got out of that one. There was no phone call to my mother. All I had to do was apologize to Capt. Kim.

"I'm sorry I pointed to the Kotexes," I told her. "I don't really know what they're for, but my mother does."

