

My Darling Pills

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THE FIRST TIME I MET PILLS SHE SPAT in my face. It was the first day of second grade and she had just given me what she considered to be an appropriate answer to an inappropriate question.

Quite innocently, I had asked this new kid, “Why do you stink so bad, boy?” She made it clear that she didn’t appreciate my reference to her odor. It wasn’t until I was older that I understood she was even more insulted by my failure to recognize she was a lady.

As I stood on the playground, startled, with her spit running down my cheek, the only thing I could think to do was apologize. Then she was startled. Pills knew how to respond to insults, but apologies seemed to perplex her. She simply punched me in the chest and ran into the school building without saying a word.

I still carry a picture of Pills Carrix in my wallet. I never knew why she had such an unusual name. Her parents were obnoxious, illiterate, and unshaven, so I assumed they were just plain weird too.

Most of my peers thought Pills was also weird. I have to admit that when I was younger, I joined them in their bigotry. We picked on her, giving her nicknames like “A Face Worse Than Death” in elementary school. The difference was that somewhere along the way, I saw the light. Intolerance yielded to tolerance, and eventually, to simple acceptance.

My classmates, it seemed, didn’t go through any similar evolution. Their contempt continued into high school. Even though we were over by then, it hurt whenever Pills would put the boys to shame by topping their claims of sexual prowess and inviting them for a shot.

Actions like this just seemed to give the guys ammunition to use against her. There were always rumors about such-and-such boy having “close” relationships with his farm animals. Pills

was the only girl I ever remember being the subject of those tales.

All these rumors, though, couldn’t change the way I felt deep inside. To me, Pills was an angel; she was just a misunderstood angel who often resorted to demonic stunts in reaction to the cruelties of her world. She was a poor girl destined to go through life being on the outside and looking in.

Pills actually experienced a short period of popularity at the end of the sixth-grade year. It was spring and most of us who had spent our scholastic careers voluntarily segregated by gender were somehow suddenly aware of the opposite sex. Girls, having been of no previous significance, were now interesting. We suspended our study of snakes and frogs to investigate this newly discovered species.

Suddenly, we noticed that some of these girls had pleasing faces. Each of us fell into puppy love with one or more of those faces at random and stayed in love for a few weeks, an eternity. This was the sweet and innocent side of us. Then there was an animalistic being within who knew there was more to having a woman than looking at a cute face.

We were only boys, but most of us had grown up on farms and witnessed the act many times in our short lives. We had been seeing it for years and until recently, had been disinterested. Now we watched mesmerized as bulls and stallions and males of other species performed their act of manliness. Our blood bubbled as carnal desire smoldered somewhere deep within our twelve-year-old bodies, volcanoes ready to erupt. This was the being to which Pills appealed.

She wasn’t one of the pleasing faces and never would be. But in the winter of our sixth-grade year, Pills began to blossom. By the time spring came and warmed earth and hearts

with its sunshine, making everybody, young and old, feel as if they were exactly seventeen, Pills had visible development. They weren't much, just two chicken eggs hidden within her shirt, but they were enough that spring to throw all the twelve-year-old boys into deep lust.

Pills was developing physically, but her face was still the same. If anything, she may have gotten uglier as she entered her gawky stage a little before the other girls. It was fine with us, though. If we wanted a pretty face to look at, we could turn to Elizabeth Helfert and her primping friends.

That entire spring, we never looked at Pills's face once. Even if we had wanted to—which we didn't—we couldn't have, because her breasts were magnets, pulling at our eyes with an inescapable force. Besides, any "turn-off" associated with her face was more than offset

by her speech. She made volcanoes surge with the crude language she used.

We were all new at this mating game and weren't very suave or discreet when playing. All the girls could tell when we were in love or in lust, and Pills was no exception. Most of the girls either reveled in the attention or dismissed it as childish nonsense. Pills didn't know what to make of it or how to react.

For the first and only time in her life she was popular, but it came and went so quickly she didn't have time to revel or dismiss. Soon, sixth grade was completed, followed by summer vacation. Seventh-grade boys came back to a school full of seventh-grade girls who were tanned and a little more developed than a few months before. Pills's brief reign of popularity was over. Once again she was just white trash.

I noticed Pills seemed both hurt and relieved she was no longer cast in this role—hurt that her popularity was gone, but relieved that what she knew wouldn't last was finally over. She was relieved that she could get back into a more familiar role. It seemed I alone could see these feelings while everybody else was oblivious.

It occurred to me, at this time, that Pills had never been human before. She had always been an object. Most of the time she was an object of disdain. Briefly she was an

object of desire. But she was always an object.

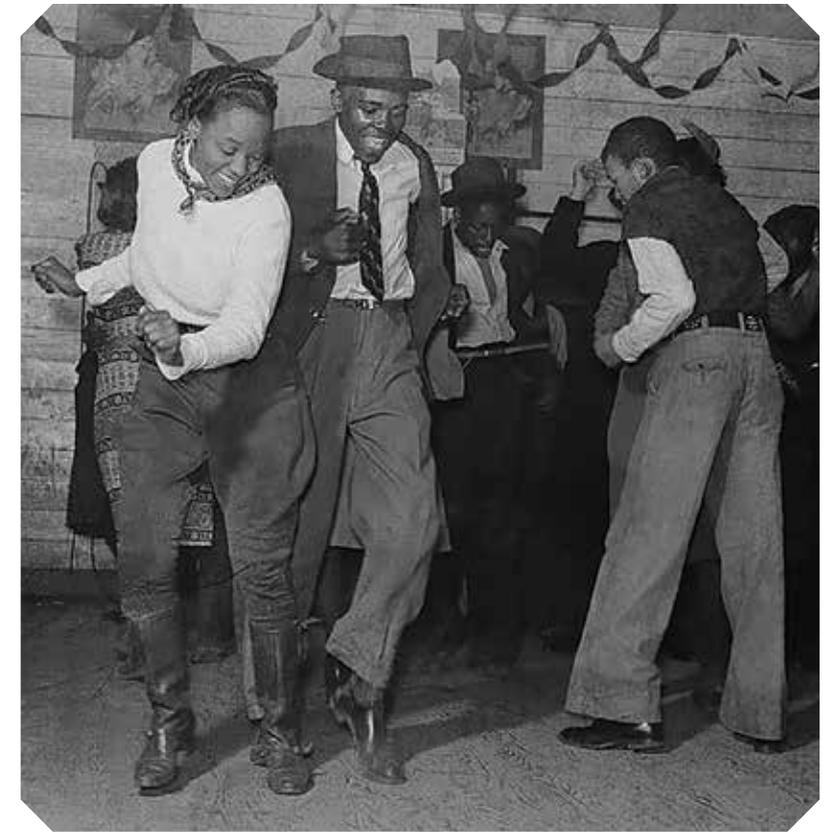
Understanding this made me feel shame for myself and disgust for the others who didn't understand it themselves. From then on, I no longer saw an object. I saw Pills.

By eighth grade, I found myself gradually becoming sociable and even nice to Pills whenever I would see her. Everybody, especially Pills, was surprised someone would finally defend her against the cruel comments launched in volleys whenever she passed through the halls.

Although a friendly relationship with Pills was developing, I fought to suppress the stronger feelings growing inside. By February, though, the right mixture of emotion and event was present. I could contain myself no longer.

Our school had a traditional affair that took place around Valentine's Day of the students' eighth-grade year. Essentially, it was just a dance, but it was significant because it was our first dance. It was a coming-of-age event, a massive rural bar mitzvah of sorts.

The idea was outdated. It had originated several generations earlier as a device by which our forefathers promoted propagation. Supposedly, the fourteen-year-old you took to the Sweethearts' Dance was to end up as your spouse within a couple of years. Of course, things didn't happen that way anymore, but it was our first adult-sanctioned romantic encounter



with the opposite sex and was thus very important to us all.

Much excitement preceded the dance, but there was even more apprehension. For the first time in our lives we had to worry about getting dates.

Fourteen-year-old boys may brag about their fabricated sexual experiences, but when it comes down to asking a girl out, their technique often tends to flounder. It is at about this age that many would-be playboys learn that their classic lines work much better on their mirrors than on real live women. The rest of us discover that it is excruciatingly painful to ask a girl out for the first time. We find ourselves walking away from her locker grimacing after having a friendly chat about No. 2 pencils, the weather, or Mr. Archer's comber.

I should have been with the latter group



trying to get up enough guts to ask my favorite girl out. Instead I was trying to get up enough guts not to. I was planning to skip the biggest social event of the entire junior-high years, when I accidentally asked Pills to go with me.

I still don't know exactly what happened. I had been trying to avoid her because I feared I might slip. She surprised me, however, by approaching me at my locker. After a little small talk, she asked, "Are you going to the Sweethearts' Dance?"

"No," I replied.

"Neither am I," she said.

"Do you want to go with me?" I asked.

I faltered in a moment of weakness and sealed my fate. I'm still convinced she tricked me.

That night was the first time I had ever seen her house. I pulled up in my dad's truck—everyone began driving on the gravel roads as soon as their feet could reach the pedals—and was dumbfounded by what I saw. Someone had opened Fibber McGee's closet and its contents had spilled onto the piece of earth that was now the Carkix estate.

My first thought was that her yard looked like a dump, then I realized they literally used it as one. Junk was everywhere. Tin cans lay piled outside a window, probably the kitchen's, in an unintentional monument to Carkix meals of the past. Tires of all shapes and sizes littered the ground. An eight cylinder engine hung by a rusty wench from a thick branch of their lone tree.

The house itself was a little wooden crate, bandaged up in places with odd pieces of lumber and sitting on concrete blocks. Underneath it and the adjoining porch were six or seven dogs, some chickens, and a pig.

Mr. Carkix, wearing grungy overalls and sweating excessively, was out back working

on a very strange-looking contraption. I had never seen one before, but this thing bore an uncanny resemblance to the still "Snuffy Smith" used to produce his moonshine.

I was dreading having the traditional "touch-my-daughter-and-I'll-castrate-you" talk with this hillbilly when a noise inside the shack distracted me. Mrs. Carkix was screaming. I could only make out a few cuss words and the phrase "that damned, stupid dance!"

As I sat behind the steering wheel, I began pondering whether I should walk to the door and ask for Pills. She saved me the trouble by storming out of the shack and into the pickup.

She was wearing her everyday clothes: an old brown dress and footwear my classmates swore were army issue. Since this was a semiformal affair, though, she had washed her face and tied her shoestrings neatly. I, dressed in a plaid suit that was getting too small for me, handed her a pink corsage intending to let her pin it on herself while I drove. Instead, she took the long pin out of the stem, poked a few holes in my dad's vinyl seat, poked one in my right leg, and threw it at a kid on the side of the road in an attempt to impale his heart or any other major organ.

It was already becoming clear to me that this night might not be very enjoyable. I entertained thoughts of taking her back and forgetting the whole thing. Instead, I just pulled to the side of the road and affixed the flower to her dress with some black electrical tape kept for such emergencies in a toolbox behind the truck seat. As I was doing this, Pills retrieved a plug of tobacco from her pocket and bit off a liberal amount. She offered me a chew, but I declined.

Once we arrived at the gym, we had to wait in a line stretching out along the sidewalk. While we stood, I tried to start a conversation by asking if she had finished her math homework.

She responded by belching. It wasn't the belch of a lady in which her mouth puffed slightly and then she excused herself. No, this was a manly burp, low and guttural, that cast all eyes upon my date and tobacco juice upon the white dress in front of us.

We made it into the gym with no further incident. I immediately sat her down and went to get some punch. As I was dipping the ladle in the pink liquid trying to get a few little chunks of ice at the same time, I began to make plans for the rest of the evening. It was obvious this date could very easily be disastrous. I felt, though, that if I could take control, things would be okay.

I saw myself taking punch back to my date. We would sip it while sitting in the bleachers, having light conversation, and listening to the music. Once we had consumed our punch and grown accustomed to our strange roles, I would take Pills by the hand and lead her to the dance floor.

We would begin with a couple of fast dances to loosen us up a little more. Then the lights would dim and the deejay would say something like "This one is for all you lovebirds out there." The opening notes to "My Girl" would reverberate throughout the gym. Pills would lay her head on my shoulder and whisper, "This is the most wonderful time I—"

A loud commotion interrupted my daydream. I looked toward the clamor and saw that Pills had hold of another girl's hair and was banging her head into the wooden bleachers. As I slowly



moved forward with my mouth gaping open, I noticed the victim was the class beauty and Sweethearts' Dance Queen, Elizabeth Helfert.

It was apparent that Elizabeth had discovered the tobacco juice on her royal dress and decided to start a girl-fight with Pills. It was also apparent that Elizabeth didn't realize Pills didn't fight like a girl.

Unfortunately, our principal, Mr. Archer, got to Pills before I did. I stayed back a little to see what would happen. Elizabeth stood up, her hair in a mess and her crown crumpled and hanging to one side, and explained hysterically what had happened as she rubbed her aching head.

When Elizabeth finished her testimony, Mr.



Archer turned toward Pills and began to scold her shamelessly. I could not make out what he was saying, but I could hear his shouts occasionally bleed through the loud music. His reproaching seemed to go on forever, a steady stream of bad breath, spittle, and degradation raining down upon Pills.

Finally, the yelling and finger-waving stopped. Mr. Archer stood red-faced, catching his breath and waiting for an answer to some question

he had asked Pills. She was ignoring him, her eyes scanning the floor around their feet, looking for something or pretending to be looking for something. Mr. Archer, his patience expended, yelled one more thing to this dissenter and pointed a long skinny index finger toward the door.

In a final act of rebellion, Pills gave Mr. Archer the most intense go-to-hell look I have ever seen and held it for a couple of seconds. For a moment, Mr. Archer lost his nerve and began to buckle. But realizing a crowd had assembled to witness the event, he checked himself. He jerked his drooping finger back into position so swiftly it quivered in the air like a diving board having just launched a swimmer.

Pills gave in and turned to the door, trying to save any remaining dignity by stomping fiercely as she walked. Just as the

spectators began to disperse, however, Pills suddenly flung around and stomped back toward Mr. Archer. The audience, surprised by the promise of an encore performance, froze in their tracks.

Mr. Archer's confidence was visibly waning. We were all certain he was about to be the recipient of a knee to the groin or some other retribution. As Pills approached him, he appeared to be whining, begging her just to

leave. Pills ignored him, once again searching the floor. Within a few seconds, she found what she was looking for, picked it up, turned, and ran out of the gym.

I didn't know what I should do. At first I considered just standing there with two cups of punch pretending I didn't see a thing and letting her find her own way home. Feelings of responsibility and pity convinced me to leave the dance and search in the darkness for my darling Pills.

She wasn't hard to find, sitting on my father's truck hood, chipping the paint off with a stone. I held a cup of punch out as an offering. She threw the stone to the ground so that she might accept, her other hand busy tightly clutching whatever she had lost and then found on the gymnasium floor. I pulled myself up and sat next to her, kicking my heels against the bumper. I wondered what she held in her left hand but was not insensitive enough to ask.

Neither of us spoke for several minutes, although it felt like somebody should. We just sat quietly and drank our punch. I sipped mine indifferently. Pills, who had worked up quite a thirst in the gym, gulped hers down, crumpled up the empty paper cup, threw it on the gravel parking lot, and wiped her hand on the hem of her dress. Finally, the silence became too uncomfortable and I simply asked, "Why did you do that?"

"She said I was a slob," Pills replied on the verge of tears.

There was my pitiful Pills, sitting on a truck hood slumped over with her legs spread apart, pushing out her tobacco-coated bottom lip. Maybe she appeared to be a slob on the surface, but could they not see how she was raised?

Could they not see that the only thing that separated her from the rest of us was her family's lack of money and finishing? Could

these fine Christians who were so accustomed to reciting the Golden Rule and things like "There, but for the grace of God, go I" not see that just below the crude and coarse surface beat a heart that had never really known love or happiness and was not immune to misery? No, all they saw was a slob.

As she sat there trying not to cry but not quite succeeding, I felt her pain. And I also felt pity for all who knew her and knew her only as a slob. They were robbing themselves of a chance to know her as a caring human being. They were doing their part to insure that the rest of the world would never know Pills for what she could be. How could they be so blind?

I held her all the way home. For a brief moment, she was my beautiful, fragile dove, and I was her protector. As we arrived at her shack hours earlier than we had originally anticipated, she simply kissed me on the cheek and ran into the house without saying a word.

It was a bittersweet moment. I felt guilty for having asked her to the dance in the first place, for having put her into a setting so unlike any she had ever known, for not having the foresight to see that disaster was imminent, that something was bound to go wrong. What hurt the most, yet in some strange way made the whole night worthwhile, was that as I drove away from Pills, I had no doubt she wouldn't have traded that night for the world. Despite everything, it was the most wonderful time she had ever had.

The next morning, I cleaned my father's pickup as payment for its use. When I looked into the cab now illuminated by the bright sunlight, I was surprised to find pink petals lying in the seat, remnants of a corsage that had been squeezed more than it could stand. I smiled, knowing her corsage would be kept in some fourteen-year-old's special place. And so would these petals. ❖