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Tarzan and the Rabbit

My two brothers and I just didn't understand the kids who got all bent out of shape about their parents' divorces. By the time I was twelve, and my mom kicked my dad out, the three of us had been lobbying for his exile for at least three years. If you'd asked me back then what I thought of my father, I would have said, "That guy? Total dick."

I'd had enough of his ridiculous rages; he'd scream at me for a full 20 minutes if a bath towel was not folded properly or respond to the F on my older brother Tom's ninth-grade report card by pushing him up against the wall and berating him, drill sergeant-style. Shortly after my family moved to our new house in the Phoenix suburbs, we sent my dad back to live in our old house in the city. My parents legally separated.

It was the summer of 1982, and our new house had a private bedroom for each of us, and a pool. My mom went back to work as a nurse and bought us the microwave and the VCR my dad would never spring for. She went out on Fridays with her nurse friends and got looped on strawberry daiquiris.

For the first few weeks it was refreshing to see my 36-year-old mom having so much innocent fun with this pack of lightweight Happy Hour gigglers. When one of the "girls" held a "Tupperware" party and Mom left for the party dressed in her standard Cherokee stretch-waistband-jeans and puffy-aerobics-shoes-and-koala-bear-sweatshirt outfit, I imagined them all gathered in some gal's living room, drinking pink wine out of plastic cups and pawing through piles of juice pitchers and cereal bowls. I had no idea what they were really up to.

"I ordered the big one. Do you think I should have gotten a smaller one? What type of batteries does it take?" I heard Mom ask a friend on the phone after the party. She giggled and, when she saw me watching her, she stretched the phone cord around the doorway into her room and then giggled more from behind the door. Her laughter took on this familiar and disturbing lilt as I realized this was the same type of high-pitched hooting she'd made a few months prior when she'd paged through her gag birthday gift, *Buns*, a photography book full of close-up shots of male models' asses. A few days after the phone call, the "Tupperware" my mom ordered arrived on our doorstep, a long narrow box like one that might hold a pair of drumsticks, and I knew it was not a salad spinner or a melon-baller. I didn't want to know what it was.

Usually after my mom left for work at 2 PM, my 11-year-old brother Jake would hop on the handlebars of my bike and we'd ride out to my friend Anna's apartment in the desert foothills on the edge of town. Anna was a tough 13-year-old I'd met on the junior-high basketball team. She had dark, straight, shoulder-length hair and cracked her knuckles a lot, an act which always made me notice that her hands were huge and nearly as strong as a man's. Anna's mom was always on some mysterious trip to Reno, leaving behind a pair of pony-tailed

and paunchy bikers to look out for Anna—harmless men in leather vests and bandanas who slouched on the couch while we picked the seeds out of their marijuana for them.

After smoking the pinch of weed the bikers gave us as payment for the seed-picking chore, Anna, Jake, and I would blast AC/DC and Judas Priest from the living room stereo. “Breaking the law, breaking the law,” Rob Halford shrieked on the cassette tape while we wrestled and turned somersaults on the shag carpet, happily stoned and nostalgic for our elementary school days, a time before we walked the halls at Royal Palm Junior High dressed in black concert T-shirts, pretending not to hear the rich kids who called us “Rocker losers.” “Your mom shops at K-Mart,” they’d taunt. “Your dad works at McDonald’s.”

Jake and I were high and filling up the bong in Anna’s bathroom sink one time when we noticed a long, narrow box—like one that might hold a pair of drumsticks—sitting on the back of the toilet tank. The label read “Tarzan.”

I picked up the box and tried to peer through its tiny cellophane windows, but Jake grabbed it away from me before I could see anything. He held the box at arm’s length and then gingerly pried open one end, letting Tarzan fall onto the bathroom floor with a soft thud and a slight bounce. Contrasted against the vinyl of the yellow floor, the object looked all the more shocking: a black shaft of solid rubber about twelve inches long, a realistic-looking penile head on one end, and at the other end...another head. “Dude!” Jake called out to Anna. “Dude, your mom has a double-dildo! It’s got two ends. We all know what *that* means.”

Anna came into the bathroom and stared at her mother’s dildo on the floor. A good friend would have comforted her in her moment of painful vulnerability. But I was too disturbed and embarrassed to respond well, my head filled with images of Anna’s mom naked with another woman, Tarzan swinging between them. This was a time in my life when I didn’t want other kids to look at my own mom at all, even if she was wearing a koala bear sweatshirt.

Jake and I both freaked out and tried to distance ourselves from Anna’s embarrassment. And then we turned on her. Jake and I already teased Anna regularly about her mom’s trips to Reno. Since Anna’s mom always came back with big wads of cash, we decided this meant she was a prostitute. Now, as we stood there in the bathroom and Jake handed Anna the box with Tarzan in it, our friend’s mom was suddenly a lesbian prostitute. For weeks, we were merciless about it. “Can I have a sip of your Coke?” Anna would ask. We’d reply, “No, dude, your mom’s a gay hooker. No way.”

My mom, who couldn’t figure out why we were suddenly torturing Anna all the time, asked us, “Do you keep her around just to make fun of her? With all those jerks at school, you should at least be nice to your only friend.”

Anna tried to remain stoic and wait out our latest wave of teasing, but, unfortunately for her, Doublemint Gum commercials aired hourly on TV in those days, with these bikini-clad twins singing the jingle, “Double your pleasure, double your fun.” One Thursday afternoon when we were all sitting on our couch watching a Gilligan’s Island rerun, Anna finally cracked. The twins sang, Jake smirked, and Anna lunged at him. Jake leapt over the coffee table; Anna stepped on the couch and launched over the table to tackle him in the middle of the living room floor.

My mom came out of her room just as Anna caught Jake in a chokehold, his neck firmly clamped between the forearm and bicep of her right arm. Jake said, "Your mom's double-dicking it with another chick." Anna retaliated with, "So what? Your mom has one. She has The Rabbit."

Oh no. I knew right then that when I wasn't around, my brother and my friend had somehow found my mom's long, narrow package. The two of them knew what was in it—this mysterious "Rabbit"—and now my mom knew that they knew.

Mom had to think fast. She had to do something about us three kids who had been stomping all over the furniture and choking each other, the hooligans who had gone into her closet and raided her privacy. If my dad had been there, he would have screamed and kicked and broken something. He would have sent my friend home and assigned us kids time-consuming outdoor chores so he could have the TV and La-Z-Boy to himself. But now my mom had to handle us on her own. Her eyes narrowed and her chin jutted out in a posture of challenge and defiance. "Do you want to see it?" she asked. "I'll show you."

What happened next is the "most embarrassing moment" I could never cite when asked by an innocent date or a circle of co-workers in an icebreaker session. It was all too hard to explain. My mom as a sexual being. My mom as a sexual being in front of her kids.

The brand-new toy was out of its box, stripped of its plastic wrap, and in her hands before I could stop her. It whirred around and around, a seven-inch pink rubber shaft rotating clumsily. Affixed to the shaft like a low-slung saguaro branch was the cute little rabbit head, its ears vibrating in a mad amphetamine twitch. Around and around, it whirred, a new gadget like the microwave and the VCR. I winced, shut my eyes tight, but I could still see it in my head, rotating. It was as if The Rabbit were emitting life lessons from my mom. In my imaginings, the slowly rotating shaft conveyed its morals in a low, hesitant baritone like Forrest Gump: "Be nicer to your friends. Guard their vulnerability as if it were your own." The twitchy rabbit ears tapped out a frantic, high-pitched Morse code: "Respect-your-mother's-privacy!"

I would never, ever tell kids at school about Tarzan, and Anna would not tell them about The Rabbit. My mom's shock effect worked—it got my brother out of Anna's chokehold and made Anna feel better about her own home life. Around and around went The Rabbit, and soon all of us were laughing—Anna laughing at me, Jake and I laughing because we didn't know what else to do, Mom laughing more softly as the embarrassment started to kick in. Around and around went my mother's phallus, the disciplinary head of the household, a way better dick than my dad.