

“Best if used by . . .”

One month away from my senior year at Hathaway High, I saw on my friend Mark’s computer that a male reaches his sexual peak at age 17. In less than eight months, I’d be past my use-by date. I’d had wet dreams, so I was convinced the real thing must be like crossing the finish line at Splash Mountain.

No one ever said I looked like a movie star, but I’m clean and neat, and I take care of myself. I could even grow a beard, but that’s not my style. My skin is clear. I guess my best feature would be my eyes. According to an expert—my mom,— when I smile, my eyes sparkle.

I never smile at 7-Eleven. If I’m the only customer, I pay and get out fast. The clerk looks at me like I’m a 16-ounce steak she could take in one bite. She’s real old, like, at least 25. That said, the girl I was looking for didn’t have to be Homecoming Queen.

As a kid, I liked my paper route because I rarely had to talk to a customer. In Scouts, I got a lot of badges by choosing projects I could do mostly alone. I analyzed my goal and laid it out, step by step. I figured I could approach getting laid the same way, with steps and everything, the first step being to find a girl.

When school opened, I zeroed in on my 11:00 o’clock English class. If I saw a likely candidate, we could get acquainted at lunch. I finally narrowed the list to three. Ariana, a blond who really filled out a sweater; Natasha, pretty, especially her dark hair. She dressed nicely and always looked good even after all the morning classes.

The third girl on my list, Emily, had auburn hair with soft curls surrounding her face like a frame. She looked like she was very much in charge of herself, independent and sure. I got the impression she could handle herself in any situation. The more I watched her, the more I thought that, with her cooperation, my project might move as smoothly as an ocean liner in the night.

And when she read her essay to the class, she held our attention as if she were announcing school was dismissed for the rest of the day. That’s when the idea hit me. I was having trouble with my essay. If I could get her to help me with my writing, I could kill two birds with one stone. She ate lunch in the cafeteria, but sometimes she brought a sack lunch to a table on the quad. I started bringing my lunch every day, ready to engage at the first opportunity.

How should I begin? *“Emily, I’m Jason. Would you be willing to have sex with me?”* Hardly. *“Emily, let’s get better acquainted so I can get you to do it with me.”* See how messed up I was? I had no place to go for help. Certainly not Mark. He was as bad off as I was.

The aroma of cinnamon hit me as soon as I opened the front door. In the kitchen, I got a tall glass of milk, took a stool, and helped myself to a warm Snickerdoodle cookie. I tried to sound casual, like it was no big deal. “Mom, there’s a girl in my English class I want to meet. I don’t know what to say.”

“This is news.” She continued rolling the cookies in cinnamon and sugar. “What’s her name?”

“Emily.”

“Tell me about her.” She put the pan in the oven and set the timer.

“She read her essay to the class. It was good. I’m thinking she might help me with mine. Plus, I think she’s cool.” No way would I tell Mom what I had in mind.

I know you shouldn’t describe a “knowing” smile, but that’s the look I saw on Mom’s face. “How about being upfront, the direct approach. Ask her if she has time to help you. If she doesn’t have time or doesn’t want to, she can say no without seeming rude. And if she says yes, I guess you’d need to have a place in mind—perhaps the library.” *That would totally work.*

On Tuesday, Emily collected her books slowly while the classroom emptied and took a paper bag from her backpack. Lunch in hand, I followed her out to the quad, but I held back till she was seated at a table. Prepared for any response, I walked over and forced myself to speak. “Hey, Emily.” She looked up and squinted. She didn’t smile, and she didn’t frown—more of a questioning look.

“I’m Jason. We have English together. Mind if I share your table?”

“Okay,” she said. I got the feeling she was surprised, maybe pleased. She unwrapped plastic utensils and unfolded a napkin without looking at me, spread dressing on her chicken salad, with croutons no less, and put a straw in her juice. I got out my egg salad sandwich, a carton of milk, and a large Snickers bar.

“Emily,” I said, “the essay you read in class, I’ve tried to write like that, but I don’t even come close. I wonder if you’ve got time to help me?” It had to be a line she hadn’t heard before.

She paused. “I don’t know. I’ve got a full load, and I have work to do at home.” She scanned me like airport security, looking directly at me, not blinking.

“I want to get into a good college, and I know this will help my admissions packet.” I added my special smile, hoping my eyes did their thing.

“I’ll think about it,” she said, and lunch was over.

During the next few days, I felt like she was checking me out. So, if the teacher asked a question and I thought of anything to say, I made myself speak up. I wanted her to know I wasn’t an idiot.

I got to bed late Thursday night, so on Friday, I had trouble staying awake in fourth period. The bell startled me. I looked up from my desk, and there she stood. “Jason,” she said, “Let’s have lunch.” At lunch, we agreed to meet in the school library.

Waiting just inside the library with one eye on the door, I foraged around in my brain for something to say, but I had no good ideas. To me, small talk is the noise people make when their brain is idling. But I wanted to close the gap between “help me with my essay” and getting laid, still there was no rush. I had six months to go.

When she came in, the library seemed to brighten. I gave her good eye contact and kept up my smile as we wove our way to a small table near the computer lab. When we sat down, I moved my chair closer. She gave no sign she noticed. We dropped our backpacks on two empty chairs and took out notebooks. “How can I be more persuasive?” I asked.

She said, “It helped me to get the basic framework in mind before I did any writing.”

“So what framework are we talking about?”

“The outline we learned in debate club last year: State your idea, think of three arguments in favor of your idea, and explain why you think they’re good reasons. Next, list three things people might say who object to your idea. Explain why their arguments are weak or flawed, then wrap it up.” Her explanation was a lot clearer to me than what our textbook said, perhaps because it was shorter and more to the point. *She could teach the class with no problem*, I thought.

“Do you have something you want to write about?” she asked. Premarital sex crossed my mind, but I said, “Anything except politics and religion.”

She said, “I wrote about immigration because my doctor was a professor at a teaching hospital in India. But because of our laws, he can only practice general medicine. Instead of teaching other doctors, he’s giving flu shots.”

While Emily continued to talk about the Sikhs and immigration, I tried to think of three good arguments that would persuade Emily to do it. First, I said to myself, it’s a natural behavior.

“It’s a natural behavior, isn’t it?” I heard Emily say.

Natural behavior! “What?” I choked. I must have looked like a deer caught in the headlights. I took a big gulp.

Emily said, “It’s natural, isn’t it—to resist what we don’t understand, to feel threatened by it?”

I took a deep breath. “Oh, yes . . . natural.” I was having trouble keeping ‘natural behavior’ in the cranial part of my body.

I made notes on the outline she gave me to let her know I was paying attention, then it was time to leave.

“I won’t be able to work with you again till next Friday,” she said. “I’ve got schoolwork and chores at home. Write up something. We can look at it then.”

I walked her to the bus stop. Her mother drove up in a new Lexus, and Emily got in. As the car merged into traffic, the thought occurred to me. We would need a place, and a house is a place. I could offer to help her with chores and scout out the situation.

At lunch Monday I said, “Emily, since you’re helping me, could I help you? Need a strong back for any of your jobs at home?”

“I’ll check with Mother and let you know.”

I waited with Emily every afternoon for her mother to arrive. On Thursday, we were at the bus stop for about 45 minutes and her mother didn’t show. When Emily tried to call her mother, her battery was low. I gave her my phone. It turned out her mother was working late and had tried to call her. Her mother said to take the bus.

“I always have a bus pass,” she said, “for emergencies.”

“Then if it’s okay, I’ll go with you.”

The bus was full, so we held our backpacks on our laps. After a few miles, the crowd thinned out, and we put our books in seats on either side of us. I laid my hand at my side. Emily placed her hand lightly on mine. Suddenly, I felt like I had been connected to a 220-volt line. I placed my hand on top of hers, and the electricity continued. I glanced at Emily, looking straight ahead, her face serene, untroubled.

Emily's house was about a block from the bus stop. Her mother wasn't home, and she hadn't mentioned a dad. If the house was empty, it was an open invitation. When I passed her backpack to her, I gave her a little peck on the cheek, and that set off the electricity again. I left without going in, but I remembered the smell of her hair. I smiled all the way home. I couldn't help it. People on the bus probably thought I was high on something.

Three weeks into the semester, the biology labs were overflowing with too many students for the stations available. A noontime lab was opening. I asked Emily to be my partner. She agreed, and we arranged our schedules to do a lab during lunch and eat later.

Luck was on my side. Shortly after the lab opened, we were dissecting frogs. Soon the sex organs would come into view. When we got to them, I looked at Emily and shrugged slightly. "It looks like everybody does it," I said. "Instinctive, isn't it?"

"You're right," she said, "with one exception."

"Yeah?"

"Humans. We're exceptions. We have instincts, but we also can make choices, choose a person, a time, and a place."

I liked the sound of that.

Then she added, "We can also say no."

"Clean up time," the teacher announced.

"Can we talk about this later?" I asked.

"If you like." She was quite casual about it. If she was interested at all, she hid it well.

The next step had to be a date. But how to ask, where to go, how to act, transportation. A movie? I thought of one that's R-rated and one that's PG, to give her a choice.

Back to the drawing board. “Mom, I want to ask Emily out on a date. Can you help me?”

I saw just the hint of a smile. Mom wasn’t laughing at me. She was pleased. “Your first date’s a big deal. You can’t know exactly what to do or say. I bet Emily wants pretty much what girls have wanted for a long time. Respect. Kindness. Thoughtfulness.”

“I can’t put on a show for her.”

“You don’t have to. You’re thoughtful and respectful. In your own way, you’re kind. If you keep Emily’s feelings in mind, you’ll be okay.”

That was nice of Mom to say those things, but not much help.

I went for it. The worst that could happen to me would be to crash and burn—while still a virgin. “Emily, how about a movie, you know, a date?” I held my breath, braced for a knockdown. If she said, “No” or “Let’s just be friends,” I would be disappointed, but anything above that would be a win.

She said in a calm voice, “Cool.”

That was all the good news I could take for one day. I never dreamed someone could make me feel so good and confused at the same time. Here was a person, not someone in a crowd, a real individual who was letting me in, opening up to me. Was it possible I could open up with her?

Then came my next surprise. “You get the tickets,” she said. “I’ll pay for the snacks.”

What was I supposed to say? I said thanks.

“I’ll talk to Mother. She’ll give us a ride—if that’s okay with you.”

“Great.” Transportation solved. If she drops us off, we can be alone in the theater.

I don’t usually give much thought to what I wear except for my funeral clothes. I call them that. Whether it’s my funeral or someone else’s, those are the clothes I’m wearing. All my clothes are school clothes. However, I wanted to look nice. Mom bought me a new T-shirt with the logo of my favorite team, the Denver Broncos. That’s all the dressing up I could tolerate.

I honestly can’t tell you the name of the movie we saw. Not that it wasn’t good. I had other things on my mind, beginning with Mrs. Bradshaw picking me up. I didn’t

know whether to sit in the front, with Emily in the back, or sit in the back, with Emily upfront, or both of us in the back, like her mother was a taxi driver. Turns out, I didn't need to worry. Emily was in the back, and she opened the backdoor for me.

"I'm glad to meet you, Mrs. Bradshaw. I'm Jason," I said as I got in. "Thanks for giving us a ride." She nodded. She might not be so accommodating if she knew my ultimate goal. Mrs. Bradshaw dropped us off and drove away.

The theater filled up quickly, but we got there in time to get good seats in the center, near the back, but not all the way back. Emily put her sweater in my seat to save it for me and slipped some cash into my hand. The line at the snack bar was long.

Believing I could carry two sodas without a drink holder, I left the snack bar juggling 20-ounce sodas and a bucket of buttered popcorn. When I got back to the theater, the trailers had begun, and the lights were dim. I finally found the right row and started across. The movie began as I maneuvered around knees and avoiding feet.

About two seats away from Emily, I stepped on a woman's toe. She screamed, jumped up, and elbowed me into a freefall. I tossed the popcorn to free my hands to stop my fall. The guy in front of me jumped up and grabbed the sodas, saving several people from getting Pepsi-d. Everyone nearby got "corned." One guy tossed a kernel in his mouth and said, "Thanks! More butter next time!" I fell into my seat, and Emily was laughing. The man handed us our sodas, and nobody got mad.

The backs of the seats were too high for me to put my arm around Emily, but reaching around a cup holder was no problem. Her hand was soft and warm. She laced her fingers through mine and squeezed. It was hot wire time again. I felt like I was blushing all over.

As we came out of the theater, Emily's mother drove up almost instantly, as if she had been parked somewhere watching for us. Remembering the vibes from Emily in the theater, I would like to have kissed her goodnight when I got out. But I didn't feel like trying it with her mom around.

The next day at school, I asked Emily if I could help with chores around her house. She said, "Not really. I'm not sure my Mom likes you."

"Where did that come from?"

"In her mind, if you need help with what she thinks is a simple assignment, that's strike one. Plus, she wants my friends to be people who know the college they're going to and are sure of getting in. She was glad I paid for the refreshments at the movie. That way, she said I don't owe you."

I didn't know how to respond. "Does your mom choose your friends?" I had heard of helicopter moms.

"I never thought about it. Yeah, I think she does." She was silent for a moment. "I can't totally ignore her opinion."

"What about your dad?"

"We don't see much of him. He's stationed in Germany. He'd back Mother. He respects the chain of command."

"So, what's next?" I asked.

"How about we hang out at the game Friday night?"

"Cool," I said. I wouldn't diss Mrs. B, but I was glad she wasn't my mom.

The game was the annual rivalry between Hathaway and McClendon High. There was a lot of yelling. A small fight broke out near the entrance, but security handled it. Bands from both schools took turns blasting out quick-step marches, and the Pep and Cheer teams were like they were all on a controlled meth trip. Our side of the stadium looked like it had been bathed in green Jell-O, and the McClendon side had lots of yellow.

Before the teams came out on the field, Emily came through the gate with a group of her friends. Seeing me, she peeled off like a fighter pilot breaking formation.

I greeted her with, "You can have any snack you want, but you'd better pay for your own, otherwise, you'll owe me." I laughed to make sure she knew I was teasing.

We climbed to the top row of the bleachers. I put my arm around Emily without any trouble. She seemed to like that, so I took her hand in mine and held it. In addition to being smart and pretty, she was breaking loose a bit, defying her mother, even secretly. She leaned into me, and I suddenly felt protective. I had a strange urge to take care of her and see that she wasn't bullied by her mother. At half-time, she left to check with her friends. When she returned, she said, "Mom called. I feel like I'm being monitored."

I didn't sing out, "My mom is better than your mom," but I thought it. I'd been taught to respect my elders, but it goes both ways. It doesn't hurt for elders to return a little respect and some trust. Yet maybe her mother's suspicions were right on. Anyway, I wasn't going to back off. I liked being with Emily.

"Jason, I like you—a lot."

At that moment, I liked her a lot, too, all over, if you know what I mean. We were at the top of the bleachers. Nobody was watching, and I wouldn't have cared if they were. I kissed her, full on. I felt her hand on my neck pulling me to her. A feeling wrapped itself around me—and Emily felt it, too. I wanted it to last forever. People around us jumped up and yelled. Maybe they felt it, too. Wrong. Our team had just made the winning touchdown. Hathaway was taking home the Golden Pumpkin. I was dizzy, but it had nothing to do with the game.

“I've got to go. Mom will be waiting. I'll see you Monday.”

“I understand—I think.” I shook my head. “Do what you gotta do.” Her friends were waiting for her at the bottom of the bleachers. They looked up at me and giggled.

Saturday morning, I lay in bed imagining Emily beside me, her hand on my neck. I had thought before about a moment like this, but without a face. Now, Emily was all I could think of. I couldn't let it go.

Mom knocked, then stuck her head in the door. “Jason! You're getting up this morning, aren't you? When the smell of pancakes and bacon doesn't bring you running into the kitchen, something's wrong. What's going on?”

“Does something have to be happening, just because a guy sleeps in?”

“Not for everyone, but for you, yes. Sleeping in on a Saturday morning is not you. You wanna tell me about it, or are you keeping it to yourself?”

I said nothing.

“Then it has to be Emily. That must've been some ball game.” At this, she smiled and gave me a look that meant “It's okay. Enjoy the moment,” and she said, “Later on, we can talk about it if you feel like it. For now, get up and eat.”

I topped off breakfast with a tall glass of OJ, grabbed my Broncos hat and my gloves, and headed for the garage. Saturday morning was my time to mow and edge the lawn and clean out the flower beds. My mind was not on lawn care. It's a wonder I didn't cut off a foot with the edger. As I followed the mower, I imagined Emily in the clutches of a domineering witch, unable to free herself, doomed to a life of servitude. A bit over-dramatic, but she might need a little help.

Mom and I had talks about growing up, being more independent, making more decisions for myself. I wished she could talk to Emily the same way, and even more to Mrs. Bradshaw. I thought Mrs. B had some growing up to do.

After school on Monday, while we waited for her mother to pick her up, Emily raised the subject. “I never really thought about it before. I can hardly make a move

Mom's not a part of. I'd like to have a little room to breathe. I'm not sure she trusts me—or my judgment.”

Mrs. Bradshaw stopped at the curb. She didn't look my way. Emily got in like a little puppy on an invisible leash, and they drove off. Maybe Mrs. B's problem was that she had a daughter. Don't mothers worry more about girls than boys? I knew a guy who got a girl pregnant when they were 18. It messed her up, and they both dropped out. I didn't want that. I would have a family someday, but not now. I had protection, and I knew how to use it. We'd gotten the banana-condom demo in every sex-ed class I ever took. However, feeling like I did about Emily, I could see how a guy could go a little crazy and lose control.

After we got settled at “our” table in the library, I put my hand on hers. I would have liked to do more, but not there. “I'm having a lot of trouble choosing a topic.” And I was going to keep on having trouble so long as it gave me an excuse to keep seeing Emily.

“You've already had some extensions. Monday is the last day you can turn it in before first-quarter grades come out, so you'd better get a move on,” Emily said.

I finally decided to write about free higher education. I thought of several reasons why that would be a benefit to everyone. Like someone said, spreading education was like adding a cup of water to the ocean. It lifted every boat in the world a little. Once I settled on the topic, the rest fell into place quickly. Emily took my paper home and returned it the next day. She liked it. Our English teacher read it and acted like I had changed from a worm to a butterfly.

I heard a knock on my bedroom door. Mom stuck her head in. “Jason, it's almost midnight. You never stay up this late on a school night. What's up?”

“Her mother doesn't think I'm good enough for her.”

“Really? Well, some relationships work out, some don't. You learn to accept it and move on.”

I didn't know how to tell her how strong my feelings were, or that I wasn't sure I was still in control of them. “How old were you when you started dating dad?”

“I've told you before. I was sixteen. He was nineteen. Our families knew each other. Our first date was with two whole families. We went to a movie and took up most of a row in the theater.”

“So how did you ever get together?”

“The first time was after a school bus trip to an away game. After we got back to Hathaway, your dad walked me home. On the way, we stopped in the darkness beneath a tree, and he kissed me. He said, ‘I love you. I’ll never do anything to hurt you.’”

At the library, Emily phoned her mother and told her she was taking the bus home. Her mother said that was fine because she would be home late. When we got on the bus, we had to sit in seats facing each other. I couldn’t keep my eyes off Emily. As soon as I could, I changed to sit beside her. My shoulder touched hers. That simple act aroused me. I laid my hand on hers and both our hands rested on her thigh. She jumped just a little.

The bus stopped. We grabbed our backpacks, got off, and stood there on the sidewalk, staring into each other’s eyes. She made a slow turn and started toward her house, stopped, came back, and took my hand.

We sat on the lounge on her front porch. I had never been high or drunk, but I was pretty sure the feeling must be similar. I felt like the prow of a pirate ship headed into a storm, loving every moment of it. Was it worth it to get her in bed just to be doing it? I was having a hard time keeping my goal of getting laid in mind. I had this urge to be sure she was ready. I was losing focus. In that moment, I knew I loved Emily.

She took my hands, drew me to my feet, and smiled.