

Don't Worry — We'll Fix It.

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“**T**ake that off!”

I thought I'd yelled loud enough to knock the dress right off him, but Brady was lost somewhere in “ballerina land” and ignored me. He was wearing my new strapless blue sundress with matching pumps and doing the dance of the wood nymphs, or whatever it was, in front of the full length mirrors attached to my closet doors. I moved in a little closer and cleared my throat.

“Take that off — NOW!”

“Aw c'mon Sheila! I'm not hurting anything.”

“Sure. Nothing but my ego . . . ”

I stomped over to the bed and flopped down on it. I mean honestly! It's bad enough having a brother who wears my clothes all the time — does he have to look better in them than I do too?

“Look kid, if you want to wear dresses so badly, why don't you buy your own?”

“Oh sure! And what would Mom say, huh?”

“Why don't you ask her and find out for yourself!”

Brady was doing his best to look tough but it's hard to feel threatened by a skinny guy in a blue dress. Besides, we've been having this same argument for the last two years, ever since Brady got interested in wearing women's clothes. At first I thought it was just another phase, but when he started wearing my bras to school under his sweat shirts, I knew this was serious business. Last year he told me he was gay. Mom doesn't know any of this, and I think Brady should tell her.

“I can't tell Mom, Sheila!” he moaned. “She'll get weird and do something awful.”

“How do you know?”

“Women's intuition.”

“Just take off the damn dress!” I yelled, “and get out of my room!”

“Fine!”

Brady unzipped the dress and let it fall into a puddle around his ankles. He stood, with his hands on his hips, at the foot of my bed.

“Happy now?”

When I sat up to bash him over the head with a pillow and saw what he was wearing, I buried my face in the blankets and started to laugh. Upon the slim, alabaster, and otherwise naked body of my baby brother, was a pair of the skimpiest black satin panties I'd ever seen.

"And just what's so funny?"

"Where in the world did you get those things?"

"Oh these!" he said smiling. "Don't you just love 'em?"

"God no! They're ridiculous."

"You're just jealous."

"No I'm not! They're—"

"They're Mom's."

If I hadn't heard the front door open, I think I would've wet my pants — I was laughing so hard — but Mom was home and I had to control myself. Brady turned into a blithering idiot. He stood waving his arms around like a drowning man for a few panicked seconds before diving head first under the bed.

"Sheila? Brady?"

"In my room, Mom!"

By the time Mom poked her head inside my door, I had composed myself again. The bags under her eyes looked more like suitcases today. Her face was pinched and tired.

"Isn't Brady in here too? I thought I heard him laughing."

"Nope," I said, jumping up to give her a kiss and steer her back out into the hall so Brady could make his escape. "He's not home yet. You want me to get you a cup of tea or something, Mom?"

"No thanks honey. I've got to change my clothes. We're meeting your father for dinner tonight, remember?"

I nodded my head a couple of times and dropped my mother off at her door like a taxi or something. I hate covering up for Brady all the time. It makes me feel bad hiding things from Mom.

"Oh and Sheila," Mom yelled from inside her room as I started down the hall to give Brady a piece of my mind, "wear a bra tonight, okay?"

"Sure Mom."

I'd love to wear a bra every once in a while, but Brady has them all! I stomped into his room and shut the door behind me.

"Phew!" he whispered, "that was a close one."

"No kidding! And I'm getting pretty tired of covering for you all the time. You'd better tell Mom the truth or—"

"She's got enough problems without a fairy queen for a son."

"What do you mean 'without' one? She's got one. You're making excuses."

"What Mom doesn't know isn't going to hurt me."

Finally, I gave up and went to change my clothes.

After twenty-two years of marriage, my parents, Jake and Ester Epstein, decided to separate for a while. My father moved into the back room of the delicatessen the two of them own. He says he likes it there because it's so quiet all the time. My mother thinks he's boring. My father thinks my mother's pushy. Four days a week Mom helps out at the deli, and a couple nights a week the whole family eats dinner there.

"Here Brady, have some more potato salad," Mom said for the third time in ten minutes.

"No thanks, Ma. I'm full."

"Did you hear that Jake? He says he's full — Ha!"

"I heard."

"Eat something baby. You're too skinny." Mom glared at Pop while she tried to scoop some salad onto Brady's plate. Pop stared out the window and I stared at him.

"Really Ma! I'm stuffed," Brady said and pulled his plate away.

"Stuffed? You're a scarecrow! No wonder you don't have any girlfriends."

"I don't think that's why . . ." Pop mumbled.

"What did you say, Jake?"

"I said leave him alone."

"That's not what you said. Sheila, what did your father say?"

"I don't know, I wasn't—"

"Yes you were. Pass your brother the potato salad."

"Mother please! I'm not hungry."

"What's the matter with you?"

"Nothing."

"Then eat!"

"No."

"Then go home." Mom took Brady's plate away and glared at my father. I knew they were going to have a fight so I decided to go home too. As soon as we got outside, I started my own fight.

"Pop knows doesn't he Brady?"

"Knows what?" Brady said, widening the space between us by taking bigger steps.

It was a beautiful night. Warm. The street lights were just starting to flood the sidewalk with yellow. Brady peeked inside his shirt. I couldn't really see but I bet he was wearing my pink lace bra with the tiny rose in the center.

"Knows that you're a—"

"A what!"

"You know what you are."

"That's right. And I know what you are too. You're a bitch!"

"Fag!"

"Bitch!"

"If you could tell Pop why can't you tell Mom?"

"Just leave me alone!"

We walked the next few blocks in silence. The moon looked like a big toenail clipping in the sky, a sliver of white on the blue-black carpet of night. I watched Brady prancing along in front of me for a while and tried to think of something else to talk about but, I'm a lot like Mom. I'm stubborn.

"You should tell her Brady. She—"

"She'll never understand, Sheila. She'll get all crazy and then—"

"It'll be worse if she catches you wearing her underwear."

"Leave me alone!"

Brady took off running. I trudged home feeling terrible inside. I wish I could fix everything for him and make everything all right.

An hour or so after Brady and I had barricaded ourselves in our respective rooms, the uncomfortable silence was blasted to pieces when Mom came bursting into the house, slamming the door so hard that it flew back open again.

"Brady!" she screamed, slamming the door again, "get in here!"

I heard Brady creeping down the hall, staying close to the wall. His knees must've felt like jello.

"I want a straight answer . . ." she warned him and then took a deep breath. She let it out slowly. "Are you . . . are you gay?"

I snuck out into the hall to get a better look. Brady was kicking at the carpet, wishing he could crawl under it.

"You mean like happy?" he said.

"You know what I mean!"

"Okay! Yes. I'm gay."

And then there was silence. Once the truth was out, Brady seemed to grow taller. Mom was shrinking. She shook her head.

"Oh baby . . . why couldn't you have told me sooner? We could've fixed it by now. Your father says it can't be fixed but I know better, I know—"

"You can't fix it, Ma! I am what I am and what I am is—"

"Confused! You're just confused. We'll fix it."

Mom patted Brady on the head like a good little puppy or something. She looked like she was going to cry.

"Go to bed now baby . . .," she whispered. "Everything will be just fine. You'll see."

Brady turned away from her and ran down the hall, almost knocking me down on the way to his room. Mom stood alone in the middle of the living room staring at something I couldn't see. Brady slammed his door. I heard him pacing around in there for a long time.

When I came into the kitchen the next morning, Mom was chuckling into her oatmeal, looking very pleased with herself. I sat down at the table and started buttering a piece of toast. Brady shuffled in a few minutes later.

"I fixed it!" Mom announced.

"That's nice Ma . . ." Brady said, plunking into his chair and laying his head down sleepily on the table. He yawned a circle of fog onto the cool formica. Mom patted him on the head.

"Brady baby, you have a date tonight."

"A what!" Brady was awake now.

"A date with Phyllis Walston's beautiful daughter, Tina."

"Why?"

"Because she's beautiful that's why!" Mom was yelling now too. "And I know in my heart that a date with a beautiful girl with somewhat loose morals . . ."

"Mother, a date with the Happy Hooker and all of her friends wouldn't change me! I'm as gay as a day in May and I'm—"

"NO! You're just confused. It's perfectly normal for a young man your age to be confused. Trust me baby, I know what I'm doing."

Brady scanned Mom's face for a way out, a weak spot, but it was set firmly in the cement of righteousness.

After Mom had left for the deli, Brady came swishing into my room in a blaze of purple. He was decked out in Mom's floor length crepe kaftan, a streak of bright pink lipstick completing the ensemble.

"You look nice," I said.

"Well, I feel like shit."

"I'm sorry Brady." I didn't know what else to say.

"I told you she'd get weird. Now I have a date with some girl."

The way he said the word "girl" reminded me of someone eating soap.

"So what are you going to do?"

"What can I do? Once Mom makes up her mind—"

"I know. She won't change it."

"She's not going to change me either."

"I know that too," I said patting him on the knee.

Poor Brady. He didn't even cheer up when I told him he could keep my pink bra with the tiny rose in the center.

Later on, when he left for his date, with Mom bouncing behind him like the proud mother of the bride, chatting and laughing and patting him on the head, Brady gave me a look that said, "I have not yet begun to fight." He stood like a soldier on his way to the front lines. I felt sorry for Phyllis Walston's beautiful daughter, Tina.

We followed him to the car and waved him on to victory. Each of us with a different kind of victory in mind. Then we went back inside the house to wait for his return.

Brady got home around midnight and Mom was waiting up for him in the front room. I was up too, but I was peeking from my room.

"How'd it go, baby?"

"We had a nice time I guess," Brady said, kicking at the carpet.

"Do you like her?"

"She's okay."

"Did you ask her out again?" Mom asked, sounding like an attorney questioning a witness.

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because I didn't want to."

"And why didn't you want to?"

"Because I'm gay!"

Mom, who had been pulling at a loose thread on the couch cover, wrapped the thread around her index finger so tightly that the finger turned red and then blue. She waited until her finger turned to white before speaking.

"You mean like happy?" she said softly.

"You know what I mean Mom."

Brady bent down and gave Mom a kiss on the top of her down-turned head. He left her alone to think and walked down the hall to my room to tell me all about the date.

"Well?" I said.

"Well," he said peeking down the front of his shirt and smiling, "it wasn't so bad. It was kind of pleasant really."

"Did you kiss her?"

"Yup."

"Did you like it?"

"Yup."

"You mean you've . . . you mean Mom was right. You were just confused."

"When Tina and I kissed—"

"Yes?"

"When we pressed our lips together something truly beautiful happened to me."

"Yes?"

"Some of her lipstick rubbed off on me and I found out that 'Egyptian pink' is definitely my color!"

Brady handed me a tube of pink lipstick and walked over to my closet. He took out my black bolero jacket with the fake pearl buttons and slipped it on over his shirt.

"Take that off!" I yelled, throwing the lipstick at him.
"Aw c'mon Sheila!" he said, "I'm not hurting anything."