

Sit Like a Lady

The brown dog, fast asleep, blended in with the pale dirt in the middle of the town square. The square never had grass this time of year, or for most of the year. A few bright green blades tentatively poked out at the beginning of spring. But the square was a direct line of access to any point in the town from any other point, and new grass was quickly trod to dust.

Marina spit a peanut into a bed of closed-up morning glories at the side of the steps. She ate from a bowl of M&Ms on her lap, and had accidentally put a peanut M&M in her mouth. She swore silently at her mother for mixing the two kinds together, the plain ones she liked and the peanut ones the rest of her family preferred. "I'm twelve years old," she said aloud, "old enough for my own bag of M&Ms." Twelve . . . and old enough to start Junior High in three more weeks, a thought that scared Marina, and thrilled her at the same time.

Searching through the candies, she picked out five yellow M&Ms. She stared at the dog while holding them in her hands, biding her time to see if she could make the candy melt in her palms.

The dog yawned and so did Marina. Janie had piano lessons and her mother would not allow her to play with Marina on Wednesday afternoons because of those lessons. Marina was bored and annoyed at the prospect of a long, hot afternoon without her best friend.

She ate the yellow M&Ms and picked up green ones, squeezing her fingers around them. Junior High. She saw the Junior High girls every morning, as she walked past to her elementary school. They were tall and pretty, they dressed like grown-ups, wore stockings and shoes with little, feminine heels. Marina wondered if, sometime in the next three weeks, she was going to look grown-up, too.

Marina squinted at the dog and saw that, with the right amount of tears in her eyes, the dog took on the shape of a tiny hump of dirt. If she walked toward him, keeping her eyes like this, she would trip over him, wake him up. Then she could say, "Oh sorry, dog. I thought you were a pile of dirt." She thought this sounded funny, like Alice in Wonderland. She wanted to be Alice. Last summer she spent her days searching the fields, looking for a good size rabbit hole to jump into. This summer she knew better, but liked to imagine the boring life in town as if she had gone through a looking glass and what was normal and everyday was odd, unusual. . . . queer, as Alice would say. Marina liked to say "queer" a lot last summer, until her brother Bobby laughed at her and told her it meant being a fag. Marina had only a vague idea of what a fag was, but she knew that Alice meant it differently.

The M&Ms had melted to a gloppy green and chocolate mess on her palm. Marina licked it off and wiped her wet hand on her knee.

The front door behind her opened, slamming against the wicker chair, and Bobby ran out, followed by Hank and B.J. They leap-frogged over her, and took off after the dog. It quickly ran to the safety of a nearby porch. Marina stuck her tongue out at her brother's back. And at B.J., but not Hank. Hank was the cutest guy in Junior High, and she had secret wishes that when she was there, looking all grown-up, he would notice her, ask her to dance with him at the Friday noon dances, maybe even walk her to school.

The boys fled the square. Marina put the bowl on the cement step and went over to the spot where the dog had been. She walked around it once and then sat down in the slightly indented dirt. Trailing her hand through the dirt in spirals, she drew wiggly lines all about her. Like a moat, she thought, or a witch's secret circle. Pretending that the tiny ruts offered her a protective shield that made her invisible, she laid down, curling up in the same position as the dog. She closed her eyes and tried to think of what the dog could have been dreaming. With her eyes closed, she felt the sun

heating the left side of her face, and the right side was warmed by the hot dirt. By laying so still, she could hear the sounds of kids playing in the field behind her house. She could hear the rumble of the big freezer at the side of Hanson's grocery store, and she thought of the fudgcicles and sidewalk sundaes waiting for her inside, behind the frosted, freezing glass door in what Mr. Hanson called his frozen foods department. She thought of the neopolitan sandwiches he had there, the little, three-flavored, ice cream sandwiches. She would eat one and imagine she was a romantic Italian girl, riding in a gondola in the moonlight.

She heard voices coming from the Weston house, and then the light, hesitant sound of a piano. That was Janie, practicing, for her mother, to be the world's greatest pianist.

"Marina! Get up!" Her mother stood over her, casting a shadow on her hot cheek, "What in heaven's name are you doing? Look at you, you're filthy. Come with me!"

She yanked Marina by the wrist and pulled her toward the house. Marina tried to keep up with her mother's long strides but was pulled along, her heels dragging in the dirt. She was dragged up the porch steps, through the entryway, up the staircase and into the bathroom. Marina stood limply as her mother undressed her and ran water in the bathtub.

"Oh my!" gasped her mother, looking at Marina, now standing naked in front of her. Marina's indifference vanished and she looked down at her body.

"What's wrong?" she asked, searching for some terrible mark, something that signified cancer or some other killer disease.

"It's your breasts. They've started to grow. Take a bath and then we are going right over to Aunt Clara's store and buy you a brassiere. I can't have you walking around with those showing!" Her mother slammed the door behind her and yelled back, "Don't take all day!"

Marina got in the tub and looked at her chest. She'd been waiting for breasts, but what her mother noticed were two little bumps. Nothing she thought of as different. They

weren't in the way or anything. And she wasn't sure she wanted a bra. She'd seen Bobby at school, running up behind a girl and snapping her bra strap on her back. "Nancy's got tits!" he would yell and Nancy, or whatever girl was his victim, would blush and look frantically for a place to hide. No telling what Bobby would do to her, once he knew she was wearing a bra. Maybe she would let her mother buy one, then never wear it. Obviously, Mom never noticed she needed one until she saw her naked.

Marina sank down in the water, until her eyes were half in and half out. She imagined that this was how a dolphin saw things — the clear, real world on the top half of hereyes, the little sloshing waves as a dividing point and the murky, grey-blue underwater world. She put the bar of soap in the water, and maneuvered it like it was a ship. She compared the bright white top with the mysterious looking hull that bobbed under the surface.

"Marina!"

"I'm almost done," she yelled back, and quickly soaped and scrubbed herself, got out and poked her head out the bathroom door.

"Mo-om. I need something to wear."

A hand reached in and offered a clean t-shirt and shorts. Marina dressed. She didn't want to wear a bra, but she was anxious to have one and see what she looked like in it. She imagined that she would buy a pretty lace-covered one, and that she would put it on and stand in the little green dressing room at Aunt Clara's store and look at herself in the mirror. In her daydream, her mother and Aunt Clara would discreetly wait outside while she admired her now-sexy body. Her breasts would miraculously fill the bra, and her waist would be slim and curved like the high school girls at the town plunge, where they sunbathed in their bikinis. Forgetting the possible torment of her brother and his friends, she thought of lazily strolling through the school playground and having all the cool boys drop at her feet. She saw the envy in the eyes of other girls. She was a woman and they

were still children. Marina preened in front of the fogged-up bathroom mirror, pulling her t-shirt tight across her chest, trying to picture the barely discernable bumps as large and voluptuous. Objects of desire, she thought. That's what she wanted to be, an object of desire. It sounded so foreign, so French.

She heard her mother pacing in the hallway, so she combed her hair and left the bathroom.

The limp cotton bra was no match for the lacy one of her dreams, and to make matters worse, Aunt Clara kept calling it a training bra. Marina tried to figure out what it was supposed to train. Would her breasts grow only if she wore this itchy, elastic thing? Did it train breasts to be bigger? There wasn't even a chance to admire the bumps of white cotton, because Mom and Aunt Clara stood on either side of her, pulling and tugging on the straps and the elastic that went around her chest.

"I think it's too tight, Clara," said her mother, indicating the red welt already appearing on Marina's back.

"Nonsense. We'll just loosen the hook one notch. If we go bigger, the cups will bag on her."

Marina grimaced at the word cups. What an ugly way to describe a bra. She remembered the phrase from Sunday School... cup runneth over. And wondered if they were talking about a woman with big boobs, the kind she saw in the magazines that Bobby hid under his mattress.

Aunt Clara told her to put her t-shirt on.

"Much better," said Mom, and Clara nodded. Marina saw no difference in the look of her breasts, but was dismayed to see the obvious tell-tale line that went across her back.

"Marina, you're a young lady now," said Aunt Clara. "No more rough games with children."

"And you must learn to sit like a lady," added her mother, "with your ankles crossed."

"Heavens, yes! Be very careful not to expose your under-pants! You must never sit with your legs up."

"I don't think you should spend your time in the fields looking for rabbit holes, either. A proper young lady doesn't play in the fields. And certainly isn't found curled up in the dirt, right in the middle of town!"

"Oh my, has she done that?" asked Aunt Clara, a hand clutching the lace collar at her bosom.

"Today! Would you believe I found her that way just this afternoon? Thank God I'm the one who found her. You can imagine the gossip around here if someone else saw her like that."

Marina left the dressing room, not wanting to hear about her potential for disgracing the family, which she thought was already thoroughly disgraced by Bobby. She wandered through the store, picking up delicate perfume bottles that she wasn't allowed to touch when Aunt Clara was watching. She sprayed herself with a mist of something called Evening in Paris. The smell tickled her nose and almost made her sneeze. She didn't like the heavy odor, but she imagined tall, elegant people strolling down the Champs Elysee, with the Arch of Triumph and the Eiffel Tower in the background. She held out her hand to an invisible suitor and sashayed through the store aisles, nodding to the dresses on display as though they were acquaintances standing at sidewalk cafes. In her fantasy, she and her handsome gentleman friend would take a seat at a cafe and order croissants. She said the word aloud, trying her best to make it sound like "kwasahn," as it did in the commercials.

The perfume became too much and she decided she needed fresh air.

"Mom! I'm going outside!"

"Don't get dirty," came a voice from the back of the store.

Marina walked out of the cluttered store and into the square. She felt the sun as she stepped from the shade of the blue awning. Imagining that it highlighted her golden blonde hair, she chicly tossed her head sideways, to make her ponytail bounce and sway against her back. Miraculously, her thin, limp ponytail became full and luxurious. Marina

stood straighter, and thought that maybe, with this bra, her chest was growing, just a little bit already. She felt that her long and gawky legs were now long and lean, that she was now worthy of being in Junior High. She would wear a hint of blush across her cheeks, a bit of pale coral lipstick on her womanly lips. She continued her grown-up, sashay walk through the square.

Bobby, Hank, and B.J. came running from the shade of Mr. Hanson's store.

"Outta the way, bozo, we're in a hurry." Bobby yelled, pushing past her.

B. J. slowed down long enough to say, "Pee-uu, you smell funny!" and raced after Bobby.

Hank skimmed by, setting Marina's heart thumping. Her heart beat faster when he stopped and turned and looked her over. He looked at her slow, from head to foot, then smiled, and said, "Are you getting uglier, or did I just forget how ugly you are?"

Then he cackled and ran away.

Marina yelled after him, "You're too ugly to know anything!"

"Shoot," she said to herself, "boys are so stupid." She reached her front steps, tired, hot and uncomfortable. Standing in the shade of the porch, she realized that the constricting feeling around her chest was her bra. But it wasn't just a weird feeling she'd have to get used to. With nothing to keep it in place, the bra had slid up, until it was digging into her underarms. She wriggled her arms inside the sleeves of her t-shirt, found the hook on the back of the bra, wriggled out of it, slipped it out the sleeve of her shirt and threw the thing over to the white rattan chair. It fell behind the chair, and landed in the pot where her mother sprouted avocado pits.

Marina sat down on the steps and reached for the bowl of M&Ms, dug out some orange ones and threw them all in her mouth. The brown dog came back to the square and lay down in the same spot he was in before.

“Object of desire,” Marina thought, scornfully, “lace bras, acting like a lady. Heck with that. I’d rather look for rabbit holes.”

The dog rolled over on its back and scratched itself by rolling in the dust. Marina wiggled, imitating the dog, sighed, and accidentally tossed a peanut M&M in her mouth.