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Becoming a Man

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It was wedged between my Social Studies notebook and my god-forsaken Math homework. The permission slip, a transit paper to adulthood, had to be handled responsibly. It was our burden to bear. We carried plastic sharpeners, flimsy rubber rulers, bags of innumerable colored pencils. We carried pride and glory and authority. And on that cold Monday in November, the fifth grade students of Kent Elementary carried permission slips.

My focus was shot as soon as they were passed out that morning and it didn't help when Jordan told me about this preview for a movie he saw that you could watch on the Internet. I didn't have Internet at my house, so he said he would show us after school. The excitement helped me through the unbearable normalcy of Monday. I balanced my fake checkbook, read some more of Ender's Game in reading class, played wall ball at recess and ate Mexican jambalaya that smelt suspiciously like the chili pie offered every Friday, but nothing interested me so much as that permission slip. When the bell rang at 3:05, I hurriedly grabbed my bag and made my way to the front of the school to meet my little brother.

He wore a patch then, something wrong with his eyes. The doctor said he had to wear it to make his other eye stronger, kind of like how Daredevil has heightened hearing and stuff because he's blind. It was this huge pervasive blue patch over his left eye. On the outside of the patch was a picture of a train coming over a hill, presumably to make it look less like a patch and ... more like a work of art covering his left eye. I never understood why that train was there.

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It's not like Zach was admiring it. He couldn't even see it. It wasn't to scare people away because it was a Little Engine That Could-looking train and it had a big stupid smile on its face. I just didn't get it. It would be okay, too, if he was the patch type, but he just couldn't pull off a patch. I didn't know anyone who could pull off a patch.

Anyways, we pushed the front doors open and squinted at the momentary explosion of sunlight. It took me longer to recover than Zach. That patch was good for something, I guess. Safety patrol whistles were firing left and right, kids wrapped head to toe in orange tape and extending "Walk" signs out like strange appendages. The hike home was a long, abnormally pensive one. I traced my left hand over cherry bricks, today worn pink with age, that formed the wall guiding our path down Rosemeade. The street was quiet. My hands felt every crack, every gap in the hastily assembled partition. My brother pined at me to let him see it, the permission slip, just like we nagged our mother for a present every Christmas Eve. I shrugged him off and resumed my contemplation: how was I going to swing this? They'd never sign the thing. My parents were, like all good Christians, sexless and I had a golden ticket to a chocolate factory of debauchery. I could forge it, I thought almost aloud.

We went to my friend's house that afternoon. My mom was at home in bed. She had been for a week or so. I didn't have a hell of a clue what a sisterectomy was at the time, so I just thought having a daughter took more out of a mom than having a boy did. My friend Kent had just moved back from Scotland and lived the next street over from me, on Peter's Colony. When we got to his place, we all sat down at the table and grabbed something to eat and drink. Kent's

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mom, Mrs. Willis, was one of those moms that insisted that people take their shoes off in their house and eat at the table and all that. My mom wasn't like that. I didn't realize how much so until years later.

Billy Herzog lived down the street, a bigger kid with a hopelessly obnoxious laugh that sputtered like an old engine turning over. We walked by his house every day on the way to and from school. Every kid had a friend like Billy: wouldn't shut his mouth about anything, always going on about how much of a badass he was. He started talking about the usual crap: how awesome "Stone Cold" Steve Austin was, how he beat the water temple in *Zelda* without the blue tunic, how he put a sick hit on some guy in football three weeks ago. Everyone had that friend, the "sick hit three weeks ago" friend. I fished the permission slip out of my backpack and let him drone on. I don't really remember what it said exactly, so I'll paraphrase. In professional-looking type, it read something like this...

Dear Parent or Guardian, Your fifth grade student will be participating in a unique learning experience this Friday. He/she will be given the opportunity to watch *Sex: The Final Frontier* under faculty supervision. Male and female students will be separated and discussion involving the film's content, according to gender, will be available for them after viewing. Please check the appropriate box below, sign the form and return it with your student before Friday. Thank you.

[] – I give permission for my student to watch *Sex: The Final Frontier*.
[] – I respectfully request that my student be given another assignment, humiliated by his/her peers, and left ignorant of his/her sexuality. Additionally, I respectfully request he/she remain so ignorant until he/she finds out on his/her own time the bizarre function of his/her downstairs equipment. Signature: _____

It was heinous. They would never sign it. I showed it to

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my brother, who congratulated me on my becoming a man, and then tucked it back into place in my bag. A few minutes passed and Mrs. Willis left to pick up her daughter, Kaylie. We ran upstairs on all fours, like a herd of cattle. It always seemed to get us up there faster that way. Jordan gathered us around Kent's brother's gleaming Mac screen and we watched a trailer for *The Matrix*, unaware then of the power of the Internet unchecked. It happened then, right as Keanu Reeves was dodging bullets on the roof. A colorful pop-up advertisement filled the screen and showed me and five of my best friends what it looked like when two women had sex. In a word, it was... confusing. I was revolted by it. Over the shoulders of my friends, I grimaced, shook my head and walked back downstairs. I don't remember much else about that day except that I pushed the screen door open not five minutes later and went home and did my homework and watched hockey with my dad and went to bed. I woke up the next morning to find the permission slip signed on my nightstand. It was a miracle.

School became an exciting place. The week we waited to watch "The Video" came to be abbreviated as "The Week." It held buzzing excitement and stories of insurmountable interest. The fifth graders who had older siblings had been told a myriad of different tales about "The Video." Some of the more tantalizing tales spoke of a film rated R. Sixth grade siblings prophesied around crowded after-school snack tables that there would be a quiz on the overhead afterwards which would force us to label the parts of our corresponding genitalia, that the film was almost four hours long. I had no older siblings and little respect for those of my friends, so I was left to my own contemplation, which turned out to be quite useless that Friday when we walked into Mr. Phillips'

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classroom.

The air was electric at school that day, but there were plenty of surprises in store. What the permission slip failed to convey was that “participating in a unique learning experience” meant there would be a goody bag distributed to the girls (and a different, much less exciting one to the boys) chock to the brim with what were essentially prepubescent party favors. I should have come home that fateful day with a brown bag of red Old Spice deodorant and a brochure on the dangers of sexually transmitted diseases, but instead I swapped bags with a girl who picked on me named Lindsey Johnston and came home with a pink bag containing a tampon, some pink Old Spice deodorant and a small fold-out pamphlet about my ovulation cycle that could be hung on the wall like a poster.

Something was noticeably different about the music hall when we marched into it that day. The music stands had been replaced with extra chairs, those short blue ones with the three oval holes in the back that were uncomfortable even for fifth graders, and there was a string of stern faculty members and teachers that guarded the perimeter of the room, arms crossed and ready to converge on any lowly fifth grader who decided they would be a hero. They were spaced about eight feet apart from each other and one was standing right in front of the door that led directly outside to bike rack and potential freedom. The box of recorders we had to learn to play last year was nowhere to be seen and the lines of music that usually cluttered the dusty chalkboard had vanished, likely as frightened of this R-rated exercise in bad taste as we were. I was trapped. We all were trapped. It was finished.

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They walked us in arranged in two columns of single-file lines, like dodo birds to the edge of a high cliff. We said goodbye to the girls as they broke up and went to the gym. Some cried. They were pulled out of line. I never knew what happened to them. We all took our seats and looked around confused and frightened. Someone said something, a hush came over the crowd and “The Video” started.

I remember absolutely nothing about it. It could have been as short as three minutes and as long as three hours for all I knew. When it was finished, the someone who said something turned the TV off and asked if anyone had any questions knowing full well no one did. There wasn’t a young man ballsy enough in that crowd to ask what ballsy meant, so they passed out the bags, the faculty parted in front of the door like the high walls of the Red Sea and we were released. That was it.

Nothing felt different. In a week, I had discovered the oddity that was lesbianism and the mystery of reproduction, yet had all the while retained my sanity. In a sense, nothing had changed. I was the same, I thought. Both “The Video” and the pop-up lesbians appeared ineffective.

But so did The Ring, huh?