

The Underpants



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The most unlikely of presents at age 6

I'm turning six, soon graduating from kindergarten. There's this boy from my kindergarten class who has a crush on me. We often nap side-by-side on our woven-rag floor mats. During playtime, Johnny insists that we play "house," that he be my husband. He won't allow any other kids to enter the playhouse in the corner of the classroom. Just Johnny and me ... and baby doll makes three.

At first when we set up housekeeping, Johnny Hardman tries bossing me around, for about two minutes before discovering that I'm untamable. At my real home, they call me "Little Mayhem," and other apt names. But Johnny lives two blocks from me, and except for school, his mother doesn't allow him to come on our block. So on Day One of kindergarten, he's had no explicit warning about my innate mutineer when he judges me for my looks alone. How could he not read the stubborn conviction in my flashing green eyes when he orders me to do the dishes?

Furthermore, I am a five-year-old shiksa, and a Catholic. Who can fault Mrs. Hardman for kvetching at her son to avoid me, for steering his innocent blue eyes toward a pretty, four- or five-year-old Jewish girl? We live in this exclusive neighborhood of mostly Catholics and Jews. In those days, anyone who wished to purchase a home on Magnolia Bluff had to sign an agreement explicitly promising to not resell their property to "persons of color." Neither Johnny nor I knew of this adult covenant, and I only discovered it after my parents were deceased. I don't know if Johnny ever knew about that aspect of our neighborhood. As for the adults, I don't pass judgment on the whole adult population of Magnolia Bluff. Back in those times many real estate companies controlled their territories with their personal redlining tactics. Most adults probably didn't even

read the entire sales agreements; the "persons of color" clause appeared in small print amidst such tedious clauses as sewer line inspections, noise ordinances and lawn maintenance. That said, abundant though they were on Magnolia Bluff, I don't recall any Jewish girls in our kindergarten class.

Briarcliff is the only kindergarten on the Bluff, walking distance from home. Had a Catholic kindergarten existed in our neighborhood, you can bet that's where they'd put me. It's a public school, but confined to the parameters of Magnolia Bluff. Protestants also live on the Bluff, and my best friend,

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Annie Templeton, is one. Norwegian Lutheran, I believe. Annie's in kindergarten class with Johnny and me. She lives two doors down, and we play cowboys and Indians along with Tina Galer, who lives in the biggest house and is olive-skinned, and therefore always plays the Indian. Johnny Hardman doesn't participate in afterschool games because his mom has him studying the Torah. That's about all we know of Johnny's afterschool activities. He's two blocks distant, after all, and between the Hardmans and us live about 16 kids, so why bother to visit Johnny? Anyway, he can never come out to play. We encounter Johnny only in kindergarten class, where Annie's smart enough to avoid the playhouse

corner where Johnny traps me in the domestic scene, demanding I cook him dinner and change the baby's diapers. I soon rebel and desert Johnny and the baby doll, but because I like him and feel sorry about destroying our domestic scene, I continue napping at his side on our mats on the floor.

Kindergarten is the last class I'll share with Johnny Hardman and Annie Templeton. Next fall Annie enters first grade at Briarcliff. Johnny ... I don't recall if he joins Annie at Briarcliff or gets sent off to a private school. I go with my sister and brother across town to the nearest Catholic school, where the nuns of the era try to convince us that kids like Johnny and Annie will end up in perpetual Limbo. Me, I've got a shot at Heaven or Hell, most likely the latter. I don't buy the claptrap, and then later the Church goes, "Oops. We erred." Why did Annie and Johnny and I know that all along?

The April before graduating kindergarten, my family organized a party for my sixth birthday. My mother sent out invitations to all the neighborhood kids, including, of course, Annie Templeton. She also sent an invitation to Johnny Hardman.

It's a spring afternoon, the cherry blossoms suspended like pink clouds over the parking strip, the tulips budding, and hyacinths scenting the air. The guests arrive, wearing little suits and party dresses, each bearing a birthday gift. After the cake and ice cream, in the living room, I open my gifts. I'm guessing it was Mrs. Hardman — not Johnny — who put so much thought into selecting the gift Johnny presents to me. I honestly don't believe — especially after I destroyed our domestic bliss — that Johnny feels like giving me a set of seven multi-colored, frilly, nylon underpants, each with a day of the week embroidered on the seat. Does he know I've moved on and have a crush on his older brother Buzz? ♦