

## NORMAL EARL

by

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Grandpa started losing his mind the summer the cicadas drove everyone crazy in Carroll County. I was ten. It was the same year Dad killed Joe Pesci, our rooster. Joe Pesci was spotted black and white and had blue tail feathers and a wattle than hung almost to his stomach. Dad loved all those Italian mobster movies, and he said Joe Pesci was the meanest dude. He was a meaner rooster. One time, Joe Pesci pecked the head off one of our hens, one of the pretty, all-white ones. He got on top of that hen and started pecking at it like he was drunk or crazy. The hen cackled *cluckaaaw/k cluckaaaw/k*, and we tried to scare Joe Pesci away, but it was too late.

6 “Son,” Grandpa said. He called everybody he cared about son. “That rooster is meaner than hell.” Grandpa got worked up about Joe Pesci, red mustangs, and his homemade wine.

Dad killed Joe Pesci a few weeks after the hen. We were all on the back porch. It was barely dusk, and everything was warm. The lightning bugs were out, and the cicadas were so loud I thought the earth might explode. All of a sudden Joe Pesci ran through the back yard like he was up to something.

Grandpa said, “Look at that that goddamn rooster go,” and laughed.

We all laughed, too, and then Dad finished the last swallow from his Coca-Cola bottle and hurled it high and fast. The bottle bopped Joe Pesci on the head, and Joe Pesci fell over dead right there in the yard. I asked if we’d eat him, but Grandpa said, “Son, it’d take at least two settings to chew through that devil rooster’s thigh meat.”

Whenever I tell Dr. Judy stories about Grandpa, she always says the same thing: “That’s lovely, Earl, and what do your memories about your grandfather mean to you today?”

I always sigh like I’m a dying squirrel and say the same thing, too, which is, “I don’t know, I guess.”

Her office is painted puke green. Last week, as I was leaning back on her leather psychiatrist's chair, I was getting nauseous looking at all that green, and I asked her why she chose that color.

She looked around the room confused. "I was thinking it was more like pea green."

I'm a nurse. Or was. "I know puke when I see it," I said. "I guess you like it and that's what counts."

She asked if I thought it was going to snow.

There's one window in Judy's office on the second floor. I have to turn my head to see it. Outside, the sun was breathless, stuck behind streaks of grey clouds layering the sky. "I don't know," I said.

"Crazy to think we'll get snow in late March in Raleigh, isn't it?"

"I don't know." I turned my head away from the window then. We'd all moved to Raleigh the summer I turned a teenager right after Grandpa died and Dad didn't want anything to do with the farm.

"What do you want to talk about today, Earl?"

I shrugged.

"Who were you in high school?"

"Do what?"

"What kind of kid were you? Sports? Classes? Foreign language?"

Judy does this a lot. Picks and pokes. Sometimes I wish she'd just jump on me with a scalpel and rib shears. Go on and get it over with already.

"I took Latin," I said.

"Latin?" She scribbled on her notepad. "Why Latin?"

"I thought it'd be cool to speak a language no one spoke any more. Plus, I wanted to be a doctor."

"Do you remember your teachers?"

Jesus, I thought. High school was twenty years ago. There was fat Mr. Garner. He taught Physics. I played baseball. Listened to Nirvana and Wu-Tang Clan. "This girl Nicole and I used to write notes back and forth in History class."

"What kind of notes?"

“All sex notes,” I said. It was true. “About how she wanted it and how she let her boyfriend, who was much older than her and not in high school or college, tie her up in different ways. She started it.”

“And what did you write to her?”

“I can’t remember. I just remember that was way more interesting than History.”

It was quiet for a minute. She was spinning her pen in between her fingers, waiting for more. Judy does this too, sometimes. Just lets everything linger. I said: “My English teacher told us a story about how her dogs were stolen. She said she had one dog—I can’t remember what type—and that dog was stolen right from her yard. She went and got another dog and then that dog was stolen too. We all laughed at her.”

“Why would your English teacher tell you this in class?”

“I have no idea. I think we were reading *Gatsby*. I used to smoke pot before class in the back seat of Jeff Limbo’s Jeep Wrangler. I think that’s why her dog story was so funny.”

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“That is a funny story.”

“I think her name was Ms. Baker,” I said, looking up at the ceiling at the memory. “She was this short, black lady who always wore wool. Her favorite thing to say to us was, ‘the only thing you have to do is pay taxes and die.’”

“She sounds like a character. I imagine she was saying that in response to a student asking, *Do we have to?*”

I paused. Dr. Judy always tries to know everything.

“Never mind, Earl,” she finally said. “I’m getting us off track. Those are all memories you have, but I want to hear you talk more about you.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well,” she said, flipping pages of her notepad. “You’ve talked about your family, and I can picture moments from your life as you’ve described them, but why do you think you’ve become the person you are today. What do you think has brought you here, to this point in your life?”

I wanted to say, “You mean for me to want to jerk off in public?” but I didn’t. I was caught masturbating at the Two-Dollar Cinema on Blue Ridge

Road about a month ago. I was by myself. It was 1:30 in the afternoon on a Tuesday. Who goes to the movie theater at 1:30 on a Tuesday afternoon? It was a romantic comedy with Reese Witherspoon. I have a thing for Reese Witherspoon. I didn't know indecent exposure carried a felony charge, and I didn't know there was a teenage girl with her mom in the theater that day either. Why wasn't she in school, huh, mom, I wanted to say when I watched them fade away in the distance as the police car left the parking lot. I'm not a pedophile, but no one but Judy listens about that anymore. I lost my job and was mandated by the court to see a shrink three times a week. It was my first offense.

"I was a really good student," I told Judy. I was lying. "I played soccer and baseball."

"Let's project into that a bit, Earl. How were you good? What made you a good student? Why did you play soccer?"

"Sorry, Dr. Judy, but I'm not sure I understand what you mean." I called her Dr. Judy when I thought she was talking gobble-dee-goop. "All that was a long time ago. Why does anybody do anything anyway? How about: I liked to feel my lungs fill with air when I ran. I liked to learn and to read." That last part was true. I did read a lot. "Isn't that normal?"

"Everything's normal and not normal," she said. "It depends on how the individual defines it. What are the boundaries, what are the rules, what's non-negotiable, and what's not."

It started to sound a lot like the *mindfulness* crap Dr. Judy had been trying to sell me at our last session. Mindfulness had been everywhere at work lately, too. At the hospital. "Hmmm," I said. "I guess, Dr. Judy, then, what I am isn't normal."

It's a small office. You can feel everything inside there. I could feel her shaking her head no, trying to save me. "We're all *not* normal, Earl."

All gobble-dee-goop. "Even you?" I said.

"Even me." She was lying. "Did you have any girl friends in high school or in college?"

We'd been over my recent love life already, which was bare. "I did." I said. "We dated for two years in high school. She was a year older."

"What was that like?"

"It was high school. Aren't all high school relationships the same?"

"How so?"

"All awkward and angst-y."

"I married my high school sweetheart."

Judy hadn't really revealed much of herself to me. "Of course you did," I wanted to say, but instead, I said, "Is that normal?"

She laughed at this. "Probably not," she said. "So—what was her name?"

"Jennifer."

"What is the story of Earl and Jennifer in high school?"

I laughed at this. I told her about how we met, which was at a football game. We'd been eyeing each other for several weeks. It was all negotiations back then. You talk to your friend to talk to one of her friends to set up an activity or something that usually involved the mall. The whole group is there, at the mall, or wherever, until it dissipates and it's just you and her. That's how it was at the football game. It was everyone and then me and Jennifer at the snack bar. I don't know what all we said to each other. You just sort of slide into dating and then you're there. I told Judy all of this.

"That's adorable," she said. "Why'd you break up?"

"You're not going to ask if she was my first?"

"Okay," she said. "Was she your first?"

"No," I said, firm and hard. She didn't ask who was.

"I care more about how your relationships begin and end," she said.

I hadn't heard Judy reveal her game plan like that to me before. She was up to something.

"Oh," I said, "well, I should tell you something then."

She didn't say anything. She was waiting.

"Whenever Jennifer got real drunk and passed out, I'd take pictures of her."

"Pictures? What kind of pictures?"

"The kind of pictures Nicole drew in History class."

“Really?”

“Yes.”

“Did you ever—”

“No,” I said. I knew Judy was going to ask if I played with Jennifer when she was passed out drunk. I’m not like that. “Never. She knew actually.”

“You told her?”

“She caught me one night.”

“She caught you?”

Judy does this all the time. Repeats what I say, like I’m talking to a mirror. “Yes, she caught me.”

“What did she say?”

“She didn’t care. She just said I better not do anything with them.”

“And did you?”

“No,” I said. I was telling the truth. Sort of.

“Never?”

“No. They were just for me.” The truth was, I’d look at them at home in bed or in the blue bathroom and masturbate.

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Judy was scribbling things on her notepad, judging me. After a while, she said, “so, why did you two break up?”

“Ha!” I said. “This is the best high school break-up story ever.”

“I’ll be the judge of that.”

I laughed at this. Judy is pretty funny when I think about it. Jennifer is still in Raleigh. I’ve found her on Facebook. She has kids and a dorky-looking husband. They sell real estate together, which is perfect. Just perfect.

“My high school had these epic pep rallies. Everyone got really into it. Jennifer was a cheer leader and on the night before the big Senior-Sophomore/Junior-Freshman pep rally, after Jennifer and all her senior girlfriends finished decorating the halls with posters and signs, my buddy and I broke into the school and tore it all down.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean we ripped the posters and streamers from the walls. All the things that said the seniors were the best and all that. We tore it down.”

It took Judy so long to respond I thought she was writing an essay about me. She finally said: “That doesn’t seem like a nice thing to do.”

“I know. It was awful.”

“You got caught again, didn’t you?”

“That’s my M.O., isn’t it? Getting caught red-handed.”

There was a pause again, and I wanted more than anything for Dr. Judy to say, *Or with your pants down*, because that would have been funny and I’d stop hating myself for a second or two in that puke green room. But she was scribbling shit on her notepad again.

“Well,” she finally said, “what did Jennifer say?”

“She said she’d been cheating on me anyway with this kid who had a really bad stutter, but everyone was still afraid for some reason. I think he was a model or something for Abercrombie.”

It was getting darker outside. Judy stood then and turned on the lamp right by the window. After she sat back down, she said, “Let’s take this a bit further, Earl.”

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I shrugged.

“I want to ask you about your father.”

“My father?”

“Yes, your father.”

I nodded.

“Did he ever touch you?”

“Dad?”

She said that most sex addicts, not all but most, had some traumatic or sexual abuse experiences as a child that could have caused an inability later in life to control sexual urges and impulses.

“No,” I said.

“You don’t recall ever in your childhood—maybe back on the farm—something happening that...didn’t feel right?”

Why does everything have to have an explanation. There are worse things in the world than being like me. How about, *This is what God gave me, Dr. Judy?*

How about that? “No,” I said. “Dad, Mama, Grandpa. Nothing. It’s only good memories.”

She seemed satisfied with that and scribbled some more. “Tell me about one of your recent moments.”

“You want me to tell you about Reese Witherspoon again?”

“No, no, not that. I’m sure, Earl, there have been other moments. Other moments that led you to the movie theater.”

She was trying to get at how long I’d been doing what I’d been doing. How long I’d been starving for flesh. I haven’t told my parents about any of it. They’re old and already moved back to Carroll County, back to the country. They’d just worry, and nobody wants their parents to worry.

“I paid for sex once when I was in college,” I said. “I drove to the Mustang Ranch in Zebulon and asked one of the strippers how much it’d cost for her to do more than a lap dance.” Judy was scribbling, and I knew then that wouldn’t be enough. I’m not sure if there’s an exact moment when it all crosses over. Are we all just hovering at some invisible threshold? Does it grow and evolve until it consumes you? I didn’t say all that though. “Porn only went so far,” I told Judy. I’d subscribed to the most erotic online sites, but the videos didn’t feel real. I paid for and joined live-streaming chat rooms. Each girl was almost always dressed and posturing in the same way: wearing bra and panties, lying on her bed with the keyboard at her fingertips, grinning into the computer screen. The slight video delay aroused me even more, elongating the anticipation of it all. I’d type what I wanted to see her do—whoever she was—and she’d penetrate herself with whatever toy she had or maybe it was just her hand, and I did the same, pleasuring myself. I was on several sites at a time. Click, click, click. I had a few aliases. *NurseIsThor*. *CallmeEarl*. *LiptonService*. I’d spend hours reading personal ads on Backpage.com: Women Seeking Men and Men Seeking Women, sometimes Men Seeking Men. Just to see all the flesh, but it was never enough.

I kept jerking off to this one young, black girl from Durham named Lottice who’d written in her Women Seeking Men Ad on Backpage that she was looking for a white man who would “cum to her every want and need.” Her

phone number was there with the ad, and one night I decided to text her. She texted back with an address. I drove to Durham, to a Motel 6, and went to room 203, as her text message directed. I knocked. She opened the door. I could see the rug and the cheap bed that had been the subtle backdrop to the teasing pictures she'd uploaded online.

I told Judy that Lottice looked a lot younger in person, but I skipped telling about all the sex we had in her motel room. That's not what she really wanted to hear about anyway.

"How did you feel after your..."

"Sport fucking."

Judy cleared her throat then. "Is that what you call it?"

I shouldn't have said it like that. It's not Dr. Judy's fault.

I said, "Lottice fell asleep and I was lying on the bed naked and smeared with KY Jelly. I thought about cutting off my penis right there in the Motel 6. If I didn't have a penis, would I still be a nympho? Wouldn't it just all be easier?"

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The room was colder, and I could feel Judy trying to be quiet, letting it all linger. It was like she was cutting out my insides. "I almost fell asleep, but then I heard a baby crying in the bathroom."

"A baby?"

I nodded. "Lottice wasn't moving. I got up from the bed." I'd tried to put this part out of my mind. "It was just a plain, white Motel 6 bathroom, but Lottice had all her make-up and brushes and combs and girly products on the counter. I pulled the shower curtain, and there was a small, wooden crib rocking a baby."

I think I scared Dr. Judy. She wasn't expecting that.

"What did you do?" she said.

"At first, I thought it was a sign from God."

"A sign of what?"

"I don't know. Hope, maybe. I mean, Lottice, the slut, is a mother. I'm way worse than Lottice, but why can't I be a father too? I'm not all bad. Why can't I have a child one day and raise him so he won't be anything like me?"

Judy watched me. Looked at her notepad, waiting. Held her pen, waiting.

“I picked it up and held it until Lottice woke up. For a moment, we were there in the bathroom together, I was cuddling the baby and Lottice was by my side. Sort of like a mother and father. Sort of like a family.”

Judy had recommenced scribbling like she was having an orgasm. “What happened next?”

“Lottice gave me a look and took the baby from my arms. I got dressed and left.”

I was done. I couldn't see anything but the night through the window.

After a while, Judy lightened the mood. She went back to asking me about Grandpa. That's how it all starts and ends with Dr. Judy: Grandpa. I think that's her game plan with everybody.

“Time's almost up for today,” she finally said. “But, Earl, I need to know. Have you ever thought about—”

I sat up then and interrupted Judge Judy. “Suicide?” I said. I turned and looked at her. Judy's funny, but she's too nice. I bet she takes her work home with her. I guessed she'd probably tell her husband about Earl Lipton and his sex addiction. “It's never crossed my mind.” I was lying.

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Our session was over then. Outside, it was somewhere between sleeting and snowing. I drove around town until I found a Starbucks. Instead of going through the drive-through like I usually do, I parked and walked inside. There were people there, sipping lattes and mochas and talking. I bought a tall black coffee and went back to my truck.

If I did kill myself, I'd leave the truck engine running in the garage and sit naked and lubed more than a race car. I'd play “Song of the South” over and over, because Grandpa loved Alabama.

If I had a son, I'd name him Shelton or Earl Junior. I'd watch him catch lightning bugs with a Mason jar, like Dad and Grandpa did with me. He'd ask me about the men in the family who came before me and him. I'd keep it simple. He'd be ten. That's when boys want to know everything. I'd tell him the truth. That some things can be explained in the world and some things can't be.

I'd tell him that his granddaddy was a mechanic and could fix any car, but he smoked too many cigarettes.

"What's that mean?" he'd say.

"It means cigarettes clogged his insides and he coughed himself to death."

"Did it hurt him?"

"Hurt me worse, son."

"Oh."

Shelton would have hair like mine, dusty brown and shaggy. He'd have my elongated second toe and bowlegs too.

"What about your daddy's daddy?" Shelton would say next. "What happened to him?"

I'd want Grandpa's tone then. Tall and strong and stoic. "Your great grandfather," I'd say, "was a farmer."

"What'd he farm?"

"Cattle."

"Did you ever farm with him?"

"A little bit, I did."

"What happened to him?"

"Well, son," I'd say, taking my time, feeling the space between my son and me. "He had Alzheimer's."

He'd look around and then his eyes would wander back to mine and he'd say, "What's old-timers?"

I'd smile then and rub his hair. I'd kiss him on the forehead and tell him I love him. Forever and ever. After all the cicadas are dead and gone. No matter what in the world he wanted to do or be. "Sometimes, son," I would start, and then I'd lean in a little more, making sure he could touch me and I could hold him. That would be enough.

I sipped my tall black coffee, thinking about it all. The whole sky turned into snow then, and pattering snowflakes whited the windshield and then whited all the rest of the windows, and I felt, finally, like it was all becoming a cocoon of white and maybe new again.