

## C.D. Mitchell

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### EXEMPT

Back in 1979, on a beautiful April day, Kelly Patrick, my steady girlfriend, approached me in the hallway at school. I played baseball that spring, and the district tournament was six weeks away. I'd received letters from two different colleges. Scouts from several universities always attended the district baseball tournaments looking for future scholarship players. Kelly and I hadn't seen as much of each other that spring. Baseball took all of my spare time. But I discovered that girlfriends weren't like a shotgun. You couldn't oil them up and store them in a closet when one season ended and a new one began.

We constantly argued over sex. I wanted more, but she'd lost all interest in the subject. Kelly didn't even want to be seen in my van anymore. She accused me of using her for sex.

"We never go out anymore. I meet you after a ballgame and we go parking."

"We haven't been parking in two weeks. I'm sorry. I guess I'm just not spending enough money on you."

"You don't have to spend money on me. I'm lonely...I want to be with someone."

"Oh, I get it now. So who else are you fucking?"

She said I loved baseball more than her. I said she didn't want the Honor Society to know she'd seen the back end of my van. We attacked each other over the pettiest things.

Noisy students in the crowded hall banged on the vending machines, trying to get change and Cokes. I smelled sulphur from the experiment we'd just completed in Mrs. McAllister's class. The hall stunk. Kelly leaned against the lockers as I turned the numbers on the face of my padlock.

"What's that smell?" she asked.

"Chemistry lab," I said. I thought she was trying to change the subject.

"My period is late," she said.

I still remember the combination of that padlock, 18-28-18. But I forgot it that day. I fumbled some more with the lock, then gave up and pulled out my wallet to retrieve the numbers written on the back of Kelly's picture. Kelly thought I was trying to ignore her, I guess. But I

didn't understand what she had tried to tell me.

"We didn't have to miss sex this weekend, did we?" I asked, not wanting to let the argument end.

"What did you say?" She looked at me with a blank expression and shook her head.

An inconvenience that meant we skipped sex for a few days each month, her period caused us many problems—even more when it stopped. But I didn't know what skipping a period meant. All I knew about reproduction I learned in Mr. Hill's Livestock Production class.

"I missed my period," she said.

She toyed with the ring on her finger—my senior ring—as she said the words. She had melted wax and pressed it inside the band so it would fit. Every time I see a gum-chewing clerk in a grocery store wearing a boy's senior ring, I think of Kelly standing next to my locker that day.

"Then we missed having sex this weekend for nothing," I said, avoiding her eyes. I had a more simplistic view of our relationship.

"You really don't know, do you?"

I didn't enjoy her mocking me.

"You miss your period when you're pregnant, you idiot." She turned and walked away.

I finally managed to open my locker. After finding my books, I darted down the hall to my next class. Maybe I was naïve, but I wasn't an idiot. I finally heard what she tried to say.

She had missed her period.

I remember when Sally Pope got pregnant. Brian Simpson fathered her child. An honor student before he quit school, Brian worked nights at the Emerson factory so Sally could graduate. Then he passed his G.E.D. They married just before she had the baby.

"No one will ever call my son a bastard," Brian had said.

Eight months pregnant at commencement, Sally pranced through the graduation ceremonies. She held her head high that night; her stomach protruding under her maternity robe, her fiancé working at the Emerson plant because he lacked enough seniority to get the night off. And I heard the whispers of those around me at the graduation. But as a teenager, I saw the mistakes others made and never realized the same

could happen to me.

Lisa Bishop hadn't made it to graduation. She dropped out of school before she began to show. Kendall Johnson denied any responsibility. At that time, DNA testing was unheard of. A blood test could preclude paternity, but could not prove anything. If a man didn't want to accept responsibility, he didn't have to. All of the girls at school talked about Lisa, what a slut she was for having sex before she got married, and I remember thinking what hypocrites they all were—half of them having seen the inside of my van on more than one occasion. I never spoke in Lisa's defense, but I know how she must have felt. I wonder if she thought like I did, that it couldn't happen to me.

In high school, I drove a hippie conversion-van with a couch around the back that made into a huge bed. A shag carpet with green, brown, and yellow hues covered the floor, walls, and ceiling. Rumors about the sex and drug orgies that went on every weekend in that van were vicious lies. I never allowed anyone to do drugs in my Dodge. But two other high schools in the county had banned me from their homecoming dances if I drove my van. That never made sense to me. Bruce Wayne was still Batman, whether he drove the Bat Mobile or not.

As President of the Honor Society, Kelly Patrick did not attract the kind of attention I seemed to thrive on. Her organization had refused to accept me, even though my grade point average floated above most of their members. When asked why he denied my application after the students voted to accept me, Mr. Alderson, their faculty sponsor, said he did not have to justify a decision to maintain the integrity of the organization. I guess I spent too much time in Mr. Johnson's office, the Assistant Principal in charge of discipline. I found out years after Kelly and I were married that she, too, had voted against my application.

Kelly wore glasses with large frames that hid most of her freckled complexion. Her dark red hair, always neat and shiny, framed her green eyes and saucer face. Jimmie Birmingham, her first boyfriend, said her hair was the color of a Hereford cow. There is nothing like a country boy to put things in their proper perspective. Not a gregarious girl, like some of the members of the cheerleading team, Kelly didn't hang with the groups that I mixed with on a social basis. She lived an ordinary life in every way. When I finally noticed Kelly, I saw someone more un-like

me than anyone I had ever met.

A quiet girl, Kelly had never been inside of Mr. Johnson's office for disciplinary reasons, although as a student council officer, she'd witnessed more than one of my paddlings. She sat on the front seat of her bus and in the front row of all her classes. Although she never volunteered in class, her teachers knew to call on her when they needed the right answer. The high school band had three seats for snare drummers. One of those seats belonged to Kelly. She had attended every one of my football games the past year, though I never knew she was there.

On the weekend before Christmas of 1978, my junior year of high school, Kelly and I had our first date. I drove Mom's four-door, baby blue Buick—I didn't want to scare Kelly's parents when I pulled into their driveway in my conversion van. Mrs. McAllister said one day in Advanced Chemistry that her daughter would never leave the house with a boy in a van. I needed a good grade in that class, so I didn't tell her that Martha had seen the inside of my van on more than one occasion, although we never met on any thing as formal as a date.

I pulled into Kelly's driveway that evening, and she didn't recognize me in the blue Buick. Her father had underpinned their home, a small frame building, with the same tin that roofed the tractor shed out back. White Masonite siding covered the exterior walls. Her father raised cotton on five hundred acres of land he leased from Soapy Thompson, the man who owned the Neighbor's Corner Coop and Cotton Gin out on the county line. The turn-rows of the cotton fields marched nearly to the back of their house. I could smell the hickory burning in their woodstove, and I saw the smoke as it floated straight up from the chimney into the cold, moon-less sky.

As I stepped up on the porch, Kelly opened the front door of the house. She had parted her hair on the side, instead of down the middle like she did for school everyday. Under the jacket I saw a silk blouse with the top two buttons undone. I could see enough white flesh to make me drool. She looked elegant, and I felt like a bum. Dressed in my letter-jacket and jeans, along with my cowboy boots made from cottonmouth skins I tanned in crafts class, I even looked like a bum. She wasn't wearing her glasses, and she wore a rabbit fur jacket.

"Don't I need to meet your dad before we leave?"

“Where’s your van?” She fidgeted at her hair and raised her hand to push her glasses up on her nose, a gesture I have made many times without realizing I wasn’t wearing them at the time. I kissed her on the cheek and took her hand.

“I didn’t wanna scare them on the first date.”

“I ran them off earlier. They don’t even know I have a date,” she said. “I wanted to see that van.”

“You will.”

“Let me get my purse.

I stepped inside the door and saw her in front of the mirror in the bathroom checking her lipstick and releasing the third button on her blouse.

We went to see Clint Eastwood and the orangutan Clyde in the movie *Every Which Way But Loose*. Then we ate at Bonanza. She had to be home by eleven, and it took thirty minutes to drive to her house, so we called it a night shortly after leaving the restaurant. Like a good old-fashioned Southern gentleman, I walked her to the door and kissed her goodnight.

Kelly Patrick never looked ordinary again after that night.

When you took a girl out, you set a time, picked the girl up, saw a movie, ate at McDonalds and took them home by curfew. My better-looking and richer classmates all had girlfriends. But I played baseball and football, and when the games ended, I chased every varmint that had a legal hunting season. I began 1979, however, with a new girlfriend. No one could believe I asked Kelly Patrick to go steady with me.

On New Year’s Eve, we had sex for the first time. The worn shag carpet that lined the walls of my van seemed as elegant as the finest suite in New York City that night. She said “I love you,” and so did I. I guess we were in love. No love is ever like the first. Kelly and I began the year as the odd couple, the honor society band student and the trouble-making athlete.

Sex during those years was not the death sentence that it can be now. AIDS had not been discovered yet. Teddy Joe White—my best

friend—said rinsing your penis with isopropyl alcohol after sex prevented venereal disease. It burned like hell, but it must have worked. None of my friends were ever infected, and I kept a bottle in the van at all times and used it religiously.

But at seventeen, I believed I was immune to the disasters that happened to others. I thought a little rubbing alcohol could fix any problem and had no reason to think otherwise. Cancer had never happened to anyone I knew. My father was young and would never die. Only dopeheads went to prison.

And getting your girlfriend pregnant always happened to someone else.

We didn't practice safe sex; we didn't know what safe sex was. We knew when people had intercourse, they sometimes got pregnant. I thought if I pulled out soon enough, it couldn't happen to us.

It is real easy, sometimes, to overstay your welcome.

The janitors painted the walls and the ceiling of our cafeteria a light blue that year. We had three serving lines. One lunch line served a different hot meal every day; one served only hamburgers and French fries, and one wasn't actually a line, but a salad bar. Before Kelly had missed her period, we always took lunch with our friends. We spent lunch alone after she skipped; it was the only time we could see each other for more than the few minutes between classes. I caught a lot of ribbing over all the time I spent with Kelly, but her friends thought I was sweet.

One day she made it to the cafeteria before me and found us a corner off by ourselves. We spoke in hushed tones with our faces turned down, afraid someone might read our lips and learn of our problem. But the noise and the crowd provided as much anonymity as we needed.

We sat in the back row of tables. Kelly ate the fruit off the salad bar—anything else gave her heartburn. She had left some pineapple on her plate, and I finished it for her. Her hair lacked the luster it used to have. I dropped my fork and touched a strand that seemed to be out of place. After tucking it behind her ear, I brushed her chin softly. I asked her if she'd been late before.

“Of course I have. Every girl has a late period at one time or another. You have three sisters. You should know that.”

“Yuck, sisters do that too?” I had never thought about my sisters having periods. That meant they could get pregnant, too.

“I wasn’t having sex at the time,” she said.

“But you’ve still had late periods. Is there something else that causes that? Like...constipation?”

She smiled and shook her head. “Maybe you’re right,” she said. “It’s just too early to tell.” She leaned back, pulled her shirt out of her jeans, and unsnapped her pants. Then she pulled her shirt back down so no one would notice. “Momma dried my jeans too long last night, and they’re about to cut me in half.”

“There has got to be some other signs you’re pregnant. When would you start getting a belly on you?”

“I’m already gaining weight, if you haven’t noticed. Some women have morning sickness. Some have heartburn. They say bad heartburn means the baby will have a lot of hair.”

“You needed some weight,” I said. “How long before you begin to show?”

“Around three or four months, I guess. Five or six before it’s really bad.” She looked at the café walls. “Blue is for baby boys.”

“Then we got plenty of time for your period to start,” I said.

Two weeks later, Kelly threw up on the driver while riding the bus to school. Her jeans didn’t fit her, no matter how long her mother dried them. Kelly used a pair of wire pliers to zip her Levis. Her breasts swelled and overflowed her bras. She wore her shirts un-tucked every day to hide her belly and her unsnapped pants.

And we kept waiting for her period to start.

Eight weeks passed. On the Saturday night of our prom, we went parking. We made love for the first time in weeks, and as I went to withdraw, her fingers touched the small of my back, applying a slight pressure as she gently pulled me back down on top of her.

“No,” she said. I agreed.

After we finished making love that night, we talked, and cried, and prayed, and agreed to try a home pregnancy test. Hyde pharmacy was close to my church, and open on Sunday. I used to go there to look at the *Playboy* magazines that I couldn’t buy because I wasn’t eighteen. I would go Sunday night after church and buy the test. The store would be empty at that time of night.

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Tall and bold, I walked through the doors of the pharmacy. As I headed straight for the magazine rack, I wondered if you had to be eighteen to buy a pregnancy test. If the girl at the register asked for my license, I'd pull my wallet out and show it to her, just like I did when I bought beer. The clerks never checked the birth date.

As I left the magazines, I searched the signs hung from the ceilings for the aisle with the pregnancy tests. The sterile smell of the pharmacy reminded me of the school nurse's office. I found aisles of back rubs, candy, Father's Day cards, hemorrhoid ointment, vaginal creams, and fiber. I couldn't ask the clerk for help. There are some things you just cannot ask for.

The pregnancy tests hung on a rack with the Trojan Condoms and K-Y lubricating jelly. Four different brands claimed to give the most dependable results, and they all cost twenty bucks. I had no idea which one to buy, and since they all cost the same, I couldn't just get the cheapest. I reached for one marked \$18.99 and heard the door of the pharmacy open. The pastor from my church, Brother Styles, walked in. A big man, he towered over the aisles, and could probably see me from four rows away, no matter how low I crouched. Still in his gray suit with the pink pinstripes, he walked past the checkout stand. I scurried from the rack and ducked down the next aisle. I tried to peek through the merchandise to spot him, when I heard his voice.

"Hello Christopher. I see you got stuck with the same task I did." He reached up to the rack of merchandise in front of me and brought down a box of tampons.

I grabbed a box of the same brand and said, "Preachers too, huh?" I didn't give him a chance to reply. "See you Wednesday night," I said, as I took my tampons and disappeared towards the back of the store.

I waited for him to pay for his tampons and leave before I walked back to the rack, selected the Merck Home Pregnancy Test, and as an afterthought, grabbed a package of condoms. The only person in the store when I finally got the nerve to pay, the cashier eyed my strange assortment. She wore the same aqua colored scrubs that doctors wear, and her huge breasts made me wonder if she were pregnant, too.

"Did you find everything you needed?" she asked as she rang my condoms, tampons, and pregnancy test.

I couldn't think of anything else, unless she had a book of baby names.

I went home and set the alarm early so I could get Kelly the next morning. She lived over twenty miles from the school, but I had picked her up every morning since the day she got sick on the bus. Kelly thought the long bus ride and the diesel fumes had made her sick, and I believed her. She only threw up twice after I started picking her up.

I pulled into her driveway, no longer worried about making a good impression. Just behind the driver's seat of my van sat a countertop, with a built-in cabinet and a camper-style icebox. At the end of the cabinet, a cushioned bench circled the back of the van, and the cushions lay down on a lip around the bench to fill in the middle and make a king-sized bed. I put the sack holding the test in the icebox.

Unlike the ones that now give instant results anytime of day, this test required her first urine of the morning and needed to set for two hours. In a positive test, an unbroken ring formed at the bottom of the test tube.

We didn't talk much on the way to school that morning. The van had two bucket seats in the front, and we kept a metal folding chair to set between the two seats so she could be next to me. She had gained twenty pounds, and her mother had recently bought her some new clothes that didn't fit her now. She sat and squeezed my hand on the way to town that day.

"I don't know if I can tell my parents about this," she said.

"We can't keep it a secret any longer."

"Mom knows I'm late. She's been asking questions."

We pulled into the parking lot of the school fifteen minutes before the first bell rang. Kelly pulled a small, Adam's Imitation Vanilla bottle from her purse.

"How did you manage to pee in that?"

"Don't ask," she replied. She screwed the small, round cap off the bottle as I opened the box. She poured the contents into the test tube. We set our experiment in the icebox. I told her I'd come down after chemistry lab to check the results.

"Then I'll come find you."

“You know if you get caught in the parking lot, you’ll be suspended,” she said.

“We’ll have bigger problems if there’s a ring in that tube.”

“I just don’t want you to miss the district tournament. You know the scouts will be there to see you.”

We got out of the van. I put my arm around her, and we climbed the hill to the school.

I watched the second hand trek around the enormous dial of the clock that morning. My mind wasn’t on baseball or chemistry. I counted my options. I could marry Kelly, or deny the child was mine.

I thought of Brian Simpson and Sally Pope. I thought of Kendall Johnson and Lisa Bishop. Why did Brian marry and Kendall run? Kendall was the father of Lisa’s baby. Drunk one night, he admitted it to us as he bragged about what a great lay she had been. The University of Arkansas accepted Kendall and he walked on to the baseball team. He hadn’t played, but got to make a trip to the College World Series. My dream was to play college baseball. But the University of Arkansas, at that time, did not make scholarship offers to married students.

I guess I loved Kelly. I couldn’t consider letting her face this on her own. Brian Simpson had quit school to allow Sally to finish. They held off getting married so Medicaid would pay for the baby.

We could no longer deny we were about to become parents. So desperate to believe we hadn’t made this mistake, we’d grasped at every false hope, every way to explain away the signs of pregnancy. I knew before I went to my van that morning that I would find a ring in that tube. Somehow, accepting the problem made thinking my way through it a bit easier. Telling our parents would be difficult. Facing our classmates, knowing they would talk about Kelly, all of it somehow seemed bearable when I thought of holding my new child.

None of those things seemed as important to me as the decisions that Brian and Kendall had made. One accepted his child; one denied his child.

By the end of my second period biology class, my thoughts had focused. I thought of what my father had meant to me and how important a part of my life he was. I couldn’t imagine my world without him.

Kendall's child would grow up never knowing who his father was. Even if I abandoned Kelly and never saw her again, the child would still be mine. Somewhere, I would have a baby that would go to bed at night hating me for not being there to tuck him in.

Randy Haler poked me in the ribs during biology lab and said, "Pay attention or we'll have to do this over again. What's up with you, man?" The bell rang.

"You'll know soon enough," I said.

I raced down the hall, praying every step that all my worries would be gone when I saw the test. Kelly and I would take no more chances. We would not have sex again without using a condom.

"Please Lord; just give us a chance to correct this mistake."

I could not have noticed Mr. Johnson follow me out the school door. He stood behind me and watched me run down the hill. When I got to the van, I bowed my head and said another prayer. "Please Lord. Not me. Not us."

I slid the van door back and jumped in. I heard the airtight seal give as I swung the door of the icebox open, and the vacuum of air tipped the tube over. A part of the perfect circle that had formed at the bottom of the tube broke away, like a drawbridge waiting for a barge to pass.

After I closed the van door, I started walking up the hill. I could buy another test. We could do it over, but that circle would still be there. I watched my feet. After thinking about my options all morning, my mind was blank as I stumbled along. I still believed it couldn't happen to me. The test couldn't be right after I knocked it over. Maybe it was broken before I opened the door.

Mr. Johnson stood waiting for me. "Let me smell your breath," he said. "Tell me what you were drinking down there." His short hair was sprinkled with gray, most of which I could claim credit for. But he had never intimidated me before, and I knew I had no reason to fear him now.

It took me a second to realize I'd been caught.

"Follow me and I'll show you," I said.

We walked back down the hill to my van. I gave him my keys, and he unlocked and opened the door. The test sat on the countertop over the icebox. He leaned inside and picked it up. The perfect circle had reformed again at the bottom of the tube.

“The ring at the bottom of that tube means—”

“I know what it means.” He looked at me. “Kelly?”

“Yes sir.” My cheeks burned. Our secret was out.

“Let’s go back up to my office. Don’t let anyone know I caught you down here,” he said. He locked and shut the door and handed me the keys. Mr. Johnson and I walked back to the main building without saying a word. For the third time that morning, I climbed that hill. Only this time, I never saw my feet. I thought about Sally Pope and how she held her head high as she pranced through the graduation ceremonies, and Brian Simpson, winding the coils of the electric motors at the Emerson plant that night so Sally could graduate. I thought I knew why Sally held her head up, why Brian worked so hard. But I had a bigger problem than Mr. Johnson and that perfect ring.

Kelly and I had never discussed what we would do if she were pregnant. I had only been thinking of what *I* would do.

I wouldn’t have to quit school so Kelly could finish. She was a senior and would graduate. I hadn’t even thought about expenses, though. I had no idea how much it cost to have a baby. It broke me for the weekend just paying for the pregnancy test. Outside of the work I did for Dad building houses during the summer, I had never held a real job. Kelly would need to go to the hospital to have a baby, I guessed. I didn’t know if women still had babies at home or not.

We walked into Mr. Johnson’s office, and I stood at attention at the end of his desk, like I had done so many times before. He wrote out two passes excusing Kelly and me from school the rest of the day.

“You two have a lot to talk about, but have your butts back here tomorrow.”

I took the note and walked to the door.

“This is no excuse to quit school, Christopher. Don’t you even consider that option.”

I nodded and left his office.

I went to the vending machines to get a Coke. Out of quarters, I pulled my wallet from my hip pocket to get a dollar bill for the changer. Behind my license I saw one of the condoms I bought the night before. Pulling it out, I looked at the little round package. I could see the perfect ring that formed the rim of the prophylactic through the clear plastic on the backside of the package. I felt the rim of the base of the condom through the wrapper that sealed it inside. I went to toss it in the

trashcan next to the soda machine and stopped. I put it back in my wallet, then changed the dollar and bought a Coke.

Walking down the hall, I spotted Kelly coming towards me. Our eyes met. I didn't smile. The next week would be a difficult one, but the biggest problem we had faced was accepting that we had one. With that behind us, we had a lot to talk about.