



The reader is invited to take a stroll through a life: from the comforts and questions of childhood; through the audacity, heartbreak and yearnings of young adulthood and middle age; to the awakening of acceptance and, perhaps, some insight in later life.

OLD WIVES' TALES

BEDTIME STORIES GRANDMA NEVER TOLD YOU

by Gehla S. Knight

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Old Wives' Tales

Bedtime Stories Grandma Never Told You



A Novel by Gehla S. Knight

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1

MARSHA

71, Philadelphia, Pa.

Well, I'm going to be a grandmother again in a few weeks, so I have a long trail behind me. Mostly innocent, pretty tame relationships. Are you going to record everything we say?

It's all for my thesis. But I won't use your real name if you don't want me to. It can all be totally anonymous if that makes you more comfortable discussing intimate, personal stories with me.

Like pseudonyms?

Correct. If you want to avoid my using your first name. No last names will ever be used though. In fact, I'm only referencing those in my addenda for research verification.

Uh huh.

But we can use whatever makes you comfortable. A pseudonym or your actual first name.

Oh, I don't mind. Use my real name. There must be millions of Marshas. Who would care at this point in my life? None of my acquaintances even read these days. And I suppose anyone who would give a rip is dead by now. Will you put all this in a book?

Well, in a thesis for my PhD in sociology. Maybe it'll be a book someday.

Oh, I hope so. I'd like to buy a copy.

Well, you'll get a copy for sure if it works out that way.

Good.

Well, just go ahead and tell me what you see at night when you close your eyes and think about what your life was like when you were young. Don't censor anything. I really want to hear whatever you want to say.

It's mostly sad, really, what I realize I missed out on. You know, social restrictions and taboos can put a damper on youth, enjoying what God gave you. Lord knows there's little enough true pleasure and joy in life, why miss out on so much of it because of religious or generational moral rules?

I can relate to your question, Charlotte. What do I dream about? My husband is still with me, of course, but once the cat's put outside, and the lights go off, my imagination swings into overdrive. And you are the first human on the planet to ask me about it, to give a damn, I guess. Good for you.

Well, I'm interested. Very much so. I just wish I could have had this conversation with my grandmother, but I missed out. By the time I had the maturity to ask her about it, she was gone.

If only we were smart enough to know what to ask our grandparents when we're young. But that doesn't seem to happen. It's later, after they're gone that we regret not having those conversations.

That's so true. So, I guess, in some way, this is my attempt to make up for that missed opportunity on my part.

Let me tell you my fantasy then. The first time I got excited about a man was when Archie Rivens got in my drawers. Well, not actually got in, more like poked in sideways. We were sitting in his father's Chrysler Imperial after the Prom, just fooling around. He started to pant like our pug Boomer, and his eyes glazed over. The next thing I felt was this tree limb trying to bust out of his trousers. Then his hand was under my skirt, and his fingers were making me wet.

I had never seen a man's penis before. At least not one in industrial-strength full bloom. And I had three brothers which makes that fact all the more ridiculous. But you didn't know the resourcefulness of my mother. I had the exclusive use of the upstairs bathroom, which my father explained was originally built for the

maid. Only this was the fifties, and we had never had a maid. My brothers were all much older, so I was spared the trauma of wiping shitty pea soup off their bums and inspecting their little weenies for heat rash.

Archie was a good friend long before he showed me his prick. I never thought of him as anyone other than a classmate, a buddy and a brain in math class who would let me copy off his homework. Kissing him was not all that big a deal either because I could feel the little bristly hairs of his wannabe manhood scratching my lip. A major ick factor. Plus he smelled like grape soda. When he graduated to French kissing, that didn't do much for me either. I just didn't feel the thrill factor he was so hot about.

But when Archie put his hand under my skirt, slid his fingers under the leg band of my panties and felt me up, I began to wonder what I had been missing by masturbating alone in my little bathroom, massaging myself without a clue as to what it took to make the darn thing, whatever it was, go off and leave me shivering in a senseless cocoon of pleasure.

The memory that sticks with me about that night fifty-odd years ago in Archie's car is how his penis felt when he rubbed against my clit and then came all over my dress. It was harder than a major league bat, a rifle barrel or a croquet mallet. His cock thrust its helmeted head at my pussy, homing in like a guided missile. In all the decades since, I have never felt a steely rodgering tool bruise me like that. Archie was seventeen then, and my guess is that his heroic prick wilted just like my husband's did by the time he was sixty. But remembering that initiation, stirring my juices, baptizing me in the waters of lust led me through many, many singular orgasmic episodes throughout the years.

Archie was always number one in my list of lovers. It was based on a technicality, of course, because he never did get to home plate. His outstanding missile launch never made it to my virginal vault, but I think my mother would agree with me that we had sexual intercourse all the same. Ask Hillary Clinton, and I'm pretty sure she'd agree.

That night with Archie in the Chrysler was in May of 1970. That's fifty-four years ago now and a lot of miles in the rear view mirror. But even today, I can smell that grapey breath when he pushed his tongue in my mouth and feel the wet jism running down my leg. And there has never been a male member anywhere near my vagina as hard, as determined or as alive as Archie's. His cock seemed to have a persona all its own like an armored warrior on a mission to inseminate the world. It was wonderful to feel so hunted, so fertile, so *female*.

Last April, I was in Pennsylvania visiting my granddaughter Denise. She took me to lunch at a chain restaurant, and our server was a twenty-something with an earring, blue eyes and a tight butt. I inventoried every inch of him where my prurient glance landed although I would never dream of letting my granddaughter know I pursued such fantasies in my dotage. But I always look. My sexual desire lies hidden deep under all the trivial trash of my life like the old quilts in the attic trunk, but it peeks out from under the covers and delivers a flashback at the slightest hint of a rutting man. So I always look.

I know my Gramma did. And I'm positive my Mom does every chance she gets.

Well, you see then? We're all not so different, are we?

So to go on. . . . Denise had to get back to work and left me with the check. I paid the bill and walked out to the parking lot. I stood there like a moron for a few minutes trying to remember what my rental car looked like, and then I saw him. He was walking right for me. Not the sexy waiter, but a bald, middle-aged man with a tummy bulge, watery blue eyes and a tuft of white hair poking out from his open shirt collar.

I studied him as he stepped onto the sidewalk, raising his left leg as if he had stuck a broom handle in his trousers. His arms were browned with sunspots, and his knuckles were gnarly. And then the damndest thing happened. He looked right at me and had the same expression on his face that I did.

"Marsha?"

"Archie?"

“My god! Is it really you!” We both gushed.

It seemed a little awkward for a few seconds, and then assured that we weren't making total asses out of ourselves in full view of the lunch crowd firing up their SUVs, we hugged. It felt so strange. I was thinking of all those sensations I remembered from the last time Archie and I had embraced—the urgency, the barely restrained plumbing parts about to blow out all the joints in a full-blown explosion. This Archie was somebody else. He felt like a lumpy sofa pillow when we scrunched together for a brief moment. Not a single steely-honed blade left in his sheath.

“Well, my god, Marsha, what are you doing here?”

“My granddaughter lives here. What are *you* doing here? Aren't you still in Reading? I saw something in the paper when I was here several years ago—said you were running for something.”

“State treasurer. Luckily I lost. There was a big scandal about bribery that came out after the election. Dodged a bullet there.”

“Really. So you've been living in Reading?”

“Thirty years now. But I'm here to see my son. They just had their first grandchild, a boy, eight pounds. Named him Archer Glendon after his grandpa,” he beamed.

“Oh, that's nice.”

“I have a grandson in Colorado who just had a baby girl.”

“A great grandfather. That's something.”

“Well, he and Cindy married young, right out of high school, and the tradition is still going, I guess. My granddaughter married at seventeen. They don't have children. Maybe someday.”

“Well, congratulations, Archie.”

“Makes you think, doesn't it? Being a great. Don't feel that old. Most days anyway. You look great, Marsha.”

“You, too.”

“Guess we both survived this long, huh?”

“So it would seem.”

“So you have family here?”

“Close by. Wilkes Barre.” I smiled with genuine pride. “We have two girls. Lucy is my oldest. She teaches at the nursing school there.”

“Oh, really.”

“She had twins. Boy and a girl. My granddaughter Denise is a pediatric LPN at UPMC.”

“Well, that’s something, isn’t it?”

“My younger daughter never had children. She and her husband live in Wyoming on a sheep ranch.”

“No one turned out to be a ballerina then.”

“No.”

“Well, I always thought you were going to pursue your dancing. Maybe join the Bolshoi. You were always such a great dancer, Marsha.”

“Well, you know. I gave up dancing when I got married. Had to help put Kenneth through dental school and then with the girls . . .”

“Oh, yeah. The children kept us busy.”

“Did you join your family business after college? I haven’t been by the store in years, not since we moved away.”

“Oh, no. I went to law school after Caroline and I married. We divorced, you know.”

“No, I didn’t know.”

“You knew her, didn’t you? She lived on Squirrel Hill. Her dad owned the TV repair shop.”

“No. I’m afraid not.”

“Oh . . . well, I thought maybe . . .”

“So you met your wife in college?”

“Law school, and then she interned at the same firm, and so I left and went out on my own after we separated. I’ve been practicing in Reading ever since.”

“Married again then?”

“Oh, yes. For almost thirty years. Gracie’s a retired loan officer for Mellon Bank. What about your husband? He’s a dentist?”

“Orthodontist.”

“Oh, my. Well, that’s a good profession to be in.”

“Yes, I suppose we were lucky.”

“Well, what a coincidence, huh? Running into each other here in Monroeville?”

“Yes, it is, isn’t it?”

“Well, I’ve thought of you over the years, Marsha, wondered what you did after graduation. I knew you left for school at Penn State, but I guess we lost track of each other.”

“Do you keep in touch with anybody from our class?”

“Oh, god, no. Haven’t seen anybody in years. Missed the reunions. Busy, you know.”

“Me neither.”

“Don’t see anybody from those days now.”

“How’s your brother, Archie? Randy?”

“Vietnam. Sixty-nine.”

“Oh, I am sorry.”

“Well, you know, Marsha, it was awfully hard on my folks. They’re gone now, of course.”

“What ever happened to that Chrysler Imperial they had? The one you took me to the prom in. That was such a beautiful car.”

“My prompt didn’t even light a flicker. “Oh, you know I don’t recall. Dad bought so many cars in those days. Every two years, a trade-in.”

“Oh, yes.”

“Well, we should get together sometime.”

“That’d be nice.”

“We could talk about the good old days.”

“Let’s do that.”

“Well, I’m in the book, as they say. But you can Google me. I’m listed under the firm name Rivens and Sternbaum.”

“I’ll do that.”

“Well, nice seeing you, Marsha. You look great.”

“Nice seeing you, too, Archie. Take care then.”

“You, too. And when you visit Reading next time, give me a shout, and we can do lunch and talk over old school days.”

“Sure.”

“Say, I saw Bob Newberger at the airport last month. You knew Bob, didn’t you? The brain in algebra class?”

“No. I’m afraid not. I was in Miss Haver’s class.”

“Oh, right. The one with the fright wig. She was a terror. Glad I didn’t have her for math. My worst subject.”

“Well, we did learn a lot from her.”

“Oh, well then. So you were in Haver’s class. So you knew Tim Boronski. He and Sally got married, and she died a few years back. The damndest thing. She was allergic to bee stings. They had a big Polish family. Nine kids. He and I used to go fishing every couple of years.”

“I didn’t hang around with Sally and Tim much.”

“Sure. Long time ago, right?”

“Right.”

“So I guess I’ll see you next time.”

“Great seeing you again, Archie.”

“Same here.”

Then there was absolutely nothing more to say. While we stood there trying to find a comfortable way to separate, I wondered if his Mr. Dick was folded up like Long John’s spyglass in those polyester pants. I wondered if it remembered me, rued all the years that had shriveled its taut girth and transformed its Kielbasa pride into a Vienna fingerling.

Archie and I fumbled with another awkward hug and parted ways, promising to stay in touch but knowing we never would. Archie wasn’t Archie in the Chrysler Imperial, and I was a long way from the highschooler with a quivering clit and a wet spot on her prom dress.

I never saw Archie or heard from him again.

But when I got home and curled up in bed beside my husband, I was back in that Chrysler, feeling Archie and all those sensations still fertile in my mind. After all, number ones aren’t ever really forgotten. Good or bad, they’re mile markers we come back to no matter how high the subsequent numbers get.

My numbers never grew higher than a slug could jump over. After prom night with Archie, I lost my virginity to my husband in our senior year at Penn State. I married him for a lot of good reasons but sexual attraction and lust weren’t on the list. So as meager as it was for a Number One, Archie provided my fantasy flights through the years. I’d check out waiters, garage mechanics, construction workers and the pediatrician who I know I could have started

something with. But I didn't. Chickened out. Afraid I might really get into it with a stud who could play out my fantasies. And then what would I do? Torture myself with the knowledge of what I had doomed myself to be without and could never have? Imagine a life without my husband's pasty body and average penis? Too risky. So I never encouraged the doctor's subtle entrees and congratulated myself on my fidelity. It's so sad that I never considered just what I was passing up and how it would all be out of reach someday.

So here I am skidding down the slippery slope, an aging matron with only one actual consummation on my list. But don't even ask me about that. Kenneth was drunk on his ass the night he took my cherry and instead of the Archie projectile I was expecting, he pulled out a floppy spatula that barely got through the front door. Once he collapsed on top of me, I thought about Archie. Because we had left the act undone, there remained a wonderful empty stage to act out whatever my mind could invent happening in the front seat of that Imperial. Over the years, Archie became quite the proficient, unbeatable lover in my imagination.

If my granddaughter were to ask me today if she should remain faithful to her boyfriend and look the other way whenever a lustful urge struck her fancy, I'd tell her to go for the gold. Grab at life whenever she had the chance, hold on with both hands and enjoy the ride. It doesn't last long.



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