

## Wordlessly

By Rachel Lloyd

Before she understood the power of a wrong word, Jane betrayed someone she loved deeply but vaguely and in a way she was wholly unable to understand. Years before her first orgasm, but only months after she had discovered the warm fleshly place between her legs, she betrayed a friend who was more than a friend but whom she didn't have the words to describe.

Jane made this discovery on a Thursday afternoon. She was sitting in a bath that she had been in too long, a bath that had gone sour and cold, a bath that needed new warmth, new life. She called out to her mother, who came in, unplugged the drain, and turned on the hot water. It choked out at first in a lurching halting way, then came rushing out suddenly and harshly.

"Tell me when it's the right temperature," her mother said. So Jane scooted along the sticky plastic mat to sit in front of the faucet. She put out her hands to feel the long rough ropes of warm water gush between her fingers and press down on her palms. The water poured down into the tub, and then rushed around and between her legs. There was still a certain pressure to it when it hit the water, and this intensity started to stir a strange sort of heat in her hip bones. It hummed like deep relaxation, as well as an ache of excitement, and it was new and warm and friendly. A welcome stranger, again with no name.

She wanted to tell her mom about it, wanted to describe it, but there were no words she knew for how it felt, so she said, still staring almost amazed at the faucet, "Mommy, I feel funny."

"What do you mean? What's wrong?" and with that last word she knew that funny, this particular sort of funny, was *wrong*. *Wrong* was the word to describe her feeling. *Wrong* was the

mask this pleasure wore and suddenly the water felt too hot among her fingers and between her legs, almost to the point of burning.

“Mommy, I want to get out.”

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Weeks later, her curiosity over took her shame and she sought out the fleshy place between her legs. She was in bed, again alone, and listened wide-eyed and carefully to all the sounds of a house asleep. She thought every groan of wood was footsteps, every creak was the opening of her door, and it almost stopped her. But even just thinking about the feeling from the bath brought up that strangeness, that stirring. She thought briefly about the word *wrong*, and turned her stuffed elephant, Snout, away. And then, in that sleepy house of perpetual sound and pervasive silence, she reached down to touch the fleshy place between her legs.

It was soft and warm, and in its way felt kind and soulfully open, like how she remembered warm hands felt after she had been playing in the snow, and to touch it was self-soothing in way she wasn't expecting. To touch it, to cup it in her hand, to rub it smoothly, was somehow to cradle her whole body at once in just those same two hands. It was also somehow to hold and treasure something deeper than her stomach and lower than her feet, to love something in her that was most vulnerable and most afraid. She touched it cautiously and felt her body settle into its own physical space in a way it had never done before, and for those moments her body felt bigger, as if it were finally full, as if her skin was finally pressed up against the edges of space, her space. She stayed like that, the whole time with a persistent dull ache of comfort and care and certain clarity, and fell asleep that night with her hands laid gently against the fleshy place between her legs.

Each night in the following weeks she would press her hand between her legs and feel that same small sweetness of selfhood, and suddenly it was a joy to be alone. When her mom would leave a room, she would push up her skirt or slip her hand down her pants, just to let it rest against that puffy warmth. She would lightly drum the pads of her fingers against it, or simply guard it with the curved palm of her hand, her body would settle down into that hand, and she felt that it was wonderful. But then her mom would return and she would hastily undo herself and hide her hand behind her or in her pockets or under her thigh. Although she wasn't sure why, she was somehow always convinced that the hand that if her mother saw the hand, she would instantly know what had happened, what Jane had done. So she would hide her hand and smile too widely and wonder without words how something that felt so much like love could also feel so much like fear.

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Her friends at school were like many young girls, both sweet and cruel in their way. She had three close friends who were all very similar, all loud and wild and desperate for attention. They liked Jane because she was the opposite. She never spoke and always listened. They assumed it was because they were so interesting, so they kept her around to fuel their self-importance. "Watch me!" they would shout and she would be torn between her three friends who all acted far more like enemies, girls who were always competing. One day they were on the swings competing over who knew the dirtiest word.

"I know, I know!" Isabelle said. "Screw is a bad word."

"No way! Shit is so much worse," Tammy said.

"What about Ass!" Leila suggested.

They all turned to Jane, the silent, group-appointed judge, but she didn't know. They all seemed dirty, like words that would make her mom scowl and her dad chuckle, but she wasn't sure of any metric with which to measure them. She wasn't even sure what any of them meant. She swung in a lazy circle and tried to think, kicking around the dirt, hoping somehow that would reveal an answer. She felt a tight anger, because somehow she knew that what she did alone each night was dirtier than any of these words. It was secret and special in a way her friends didn't know, but she didn't know the word for it.

“Well, what do they mean?” She asked.

The girls went quiet for a moment and fell back into their minds for an answer, but having none that seemed complete or correct, they started saying:

“How do you not know?”

“I'm not going to explain it to a baby like you.”

“You should know these by now.”

“I know what they mean,” said a voice they rarely heard. They all leaned back in their swings to look upside down at Annie, the class weirdo. There were many rumors and theories about the deep red mark that seemed to stretch and drip from her right cheek down past the lining of her shirt and then presumably down her torso and finally ended just above her right knee. It was hard to imagine the stain under her clothes, but everyone thought that her whole body under her pink t-shirts and white shorts must be that same dark red. Kids said it was because her parents' skin was different colors and her skin didn't know what color to be, or that it was a permanent bruise after her father hit her, or that it was a contagious disease, or that as she grew it got bigger and eventually her whole body would be that color. Jane didn't know what to think

about any of it. She had no way of knowing one way or another, and it had never occurred to her to ask.

The girls all straightened and turned to Annie.

“I bet you don’t!” Tammy said.

“Yeah! Prove it!” Leila said.

“Screw is like something you use to build houses, Shit just means poop, and Ass means butt, but it also means donkey.” Annie stood in front of them with the same relaxed face she always had, one that seemed distant, like the world around her hardly mattered. “I know an even dirtier word,” Annie said, and when she was sure she had all the girls’ attention she straightened and said “Masturbation.” It certainly sounded dirty, like something you had to whisper. It was so long and grown-up, and somehow grotesquely round and heavy in its vowels. It seemed lurid and self-indulgent, and Jane felt suddenly that she had to know this word. It seemed to have the proper weight and significance and seriousness of the exact word she was searching for, the word for what she did all alone at night.

“What does it mean?” Jane asked, and her friends turned to her, surprised she spoke at all.

“It’s a secret,” Annie said as she turned to walk away.

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In the following days, Jane became obsessed with the knowledge Annie had, but Jane was too afraid of her friends to approach Annie during the normal day. So during class she would sit and stare at the sunset red stain on Annie’s cheek, with its sharp uneven edges, and she came

to believe that for each thing Annie knew, the stain grew by just one cell. For Jane, that stain became a physical manifestation of Annie's genius, and Jane wanted desperately to know just how big it was beneath her clothes. But after school, when Jane and Annie were both in extended-day together waiting for their parents, Jane would pursue Annie and ask her questions about the universe, and life, and language. After about a week of this, Annie and Jane had become in a sense secret friends, friends that talked about realer things, things that felt big and important, and between them there seemed to be care and affection in a way Jane didn't have with her other friends.

One day Annie said "My house is full of books on a bunch of stuff. You could come over sometime to look at them," and with that they were planning a sleepover, and a date was set for the following Saturday.

Jane went over to Annie's house. She met Annie's parents and her dog and her older sister, but what she was really interested in was all the books. There were shelves of books in every room, and in Annie's room especially. Annie and Jane spent most of the evening reading and talking. Annie showed Jane all her favorite books and helped Jane understand words she had never heard before. After Annie's parents went to bed, they got out the naughty books which Annie's parents thought they had hidden. They were mostly strange romance novels and one human anatomy book.

"I've already read all these books," Annie said

"So you must know like everything," Jane said.

"I guess, but what's the point of knowing if I've never done any of it."

"What?"

“Like I know what the ocean is, but I’ve never swam in it.”

“Well then let’s stop reading and do stuff,” Jane said, although it was not what she wanted. They decided to play Truth or Dare, but they also decided that they would only do dares, so they called it Dare or Dare. The two of them would trade off telling each other things to try. It began with dares like Annie putting ice on the bottom of her feet or Jane prank calling the pizza place down the street, but as they laughed together and dared each other, they got bolder and more willing to ask for what they wanted.

They were sitting cross-legged facing one another on the bed when Annie said, “I dare you to tell me your biggest secret,” and Jane remembered the secret fleshy place between her legs and the way it felt to be alone and in love with herself.

“That’s too much like truth,” Jane said.

“Fine,” said Annie. “Then I dare you to dare me to kiss you.” It was sudden but not surprising, and Jane felt warm and light at the word kiss.

“Ok. I dare you to kiss me.” Jane paused and thought of how to explain what she wanted. “On my mouth.”

Annie skewed up her face in mock discomfort, but through it all, smiled. She popped up to sit on her knees, and moved in quickly, as if nervous that Jane would change her mind. She pecked Jane on the lips, almost too fast and small for Jane to notice, but all her attention was on her lips, on the feeling, so Jane still caught every sensation. Although it was quick, it was sweet and gentle, and now that they had tried it, Jane was sure she didn’t want to go back to reading books or doing dares about prank calls or drinking weird stuff from the fridge.

“Ok, your turn,” Annie said.

“I dare you to show me all of that mark,” Jane pointed to Annie’s right cheek and the dark red that sprawled up towards her nose. At this Annie actually looked nervous.

“Ok, but only because you dared me. You have to promise you won’t make fun of me.” Jane nodded, knowing that however it looked she would find it lovely. “You have to close your eyes until I say so,” Annie said, and Jane instantly pressed her palms against the deep sockets of her eyes. She felt the bed quiver as Annie scooted off, and heard the soft rustling of fabric being pulled and rubbed until there was suddenly silence.

“Ok,” Annie said, “you can look.” She was standing with her arms curled around her chest, and Jane was right. It was completely lovely. It looked more like blood this way, more like life, like one drop of blood diffusing in water, spreading and shaping and then suddenly frozen in a unique fluid shape that ran the length of Annie’s right side from her cheek to the place above her knee. It looked like blood, like Annie’s blood, like her insides were reaching out of her body, like they were forcing self-expression, like her knowledge and kindness and beauty was too much for her physical body, so much so that it all pushed its way onto her skin. Jane saw the red move down Annie’s hip and past her underwear, and she wondered how far it went, if it reached the fleshy place between her legs. Jane watched the mark quietly for a while, sure that even in stillness it rippled and swirled and moved with life, until Annie said “I know it’s ugly.”

“No,” Jane said. “No its not.”

Annie smiled and began putting her clothes back on. “Is it my turn?” Annie asked as she climbed back onto the bed, and Jane nodded, excited that she would be asked to do something,

hoping vaguely that she would be dared to touch Annie somehow, that this dare would bring them closer.

“I dare you to kiss me.”

“Can I kiss you anywhere?” was Jane’s instant answer.

“Sure.”

Jane leaned across her own legs and in close to Annie’s face. Jane moved her head at the last moment, and kissed the red stain on Annie’s right cheek. And from there, they needed no dares and no words as they leaned into one another. They pressed their hips gently together and moved in ways that felt like water, warm water, like a bath when you first step in, and their faces slowly began to flush. Annie’s face grew red, red like the mark on her body, red like the blood that was certainly in the both of them. The red suited her, Jane thought, and she reached out to touch the stain on Annie’s right cheek.

For Jane, being with Annie like this felt good in a way that was bigger than any past pleasure, good in a way that felt infinitely deeper than the deepest possible place in her, a depth that sunk beyond her. She wanted to tell Annie. She want to say something like *Annie I like you and I like this. It is new and I'm afraid but I can't possibly imagine the end of something that feels as quietly beautiful as this.* If that could be a feeling, it was what sat in her soul, but she could not find it among all that was new, much less look upon its kind and earnest face and know it well enough to tell Annie its name in such a way. So she stayed silent and held it in and knew her face was red as well.

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The next week, as the class walked out to the playground, Annie walked past Jane and squeezed her hand softly to get Jane's attention. All she said after was "Hi, Jane," but Jane's friends started asking her questions.

"Are you and Annie friends?" Tammy said.

"I had a sleepover at her house," Jane said, but quickly added "My mom set it up." It wasn't true but it felt right to say.

"No way," Tammy said. "So you guys are friends!"

"Not really. The sleepover was weird."

"What happened?" asked Leila.

"Yeah tell us," said Isabelle.

All her friends stared at her and they seemed genuinely interested in what she had to say. She felt power swell in her mind, but she didn't know what to tell them. She remembered the word *wrong*, and the truth seemed like it would be horrible to say aloud, like admitting to a crime. It felt too secret and pure in that form to possibly be given life outside the mind, the heart. So she grasped at words that felt big and serious and just different enough from truth to give her some space and distance in this tight circle of pressing eyes.

"She raped me," was all Jane could think to say. She had heard her mother use it once on the phone and had asked what it meant. Her mother had explained that it was a bad thing, an evil thing, that it was cruel and the opposite of love. She wasn't sure what it meant completely, but she vaguely understood that it had to do with touching and pressing and all the things she and

Annie had done. She also knew it was far from the truth, and once she said it she knew it was wrong, more wrong than even the truth seemed.

She hoped briefly that her friends, like her didn't really know this word, that they would misunderstand her and see instead the truth. But her friends all gasped and started hugging her and comforting her, but none of their hands or arms felt right. They felt too light on her, like they were afraid to touch her, like they were elsewhere.

“We are going to get her,” said Leila, and the three of them left Jane alone and walked off towards Annie with the stride of soldiers, of righteous men. Jane was sure they saw themselves that way, but watching them descend on Annie, they looked awkward in a way that didn't suit them, like they were wearing their mom's clothes and trying to act older than they were, rushing off with long steps and swinging arms to make themselves look bigger. Once they reached her, they started pointing and Jane could tell they were yelling, with the way their whole bodies moved with emphasis and the way their lips opened and closed in wide dramatic circles, opened and closed, but she could not hear them. Annie didn't speak, but Jane watched her fists get tight and her whole body constrict. Annie pushed past the girls, who turned but did not follow her, and ran towards Jane.

“Did you tell them I raped you?” Her voice was stern and louder than usual, but Jane could hear that there was softness in it, still a chance for forgiveness, but Jane didn't speak. She had no words for this kind of apology, this kind of guilt, this kind of love.

“Do you even know what that means!?” Annie yelled, her face sour and red with anger, red like it had been when their hips were pressed together.

“Yeah,” Jane said in a quiet mumble, looking anywhere but Annie’s face. “I wouldn’t have said it if I didn’t know.”