Like Birthday Balloons on Lockers

Liz Clift

The Halloween I was in eighth grade, Mom passed out condoms. Mom and Dad have never passed out candy like normal people. They passed out things like erasers and pillboxes, journal books and toothpaste. This began when people still believed sugar caused ADHD. Now Dad says passing out non-candies helps stem the childhood obesity epidemic.

Mom thought passing out condoms—she bought three economy variety boxes a week before Halloween—would get people talking about birth control. She even passed them out to the little kids. I'm sure their parents were mortified when they inspected their kids' candy for razors and rat poison.

"Don't you want to pass them out?" she asked the afternoon she brought home the boxes, along with enough toilet paper to supply the entire county for a week and a couple of four-pound bags of dried fruit. I sat at the table, drinking mulled cider and working on a social studies essay about women in the Revolutionary War.

"No." I stared at the sentence I'd just written, willing her to go away.

She held up one of the boxes and studied it. "Some of these are *flavored.* Chocolate and strawberry and banana. And some glow in the dark."

"No."

"You're getting old for trick-or-treat. Besides, don't you think it'll be great to see the faces of the parents who notice what their kids are getting?"

"I'm sure it'll be a riot," I replied.

Mom pouted in the way that said she honestly didn't understand why I acted like I did, then went out to smoke pot. She probably told me she was going to weed the garden, or something—she had a list of excuses she cycled through. Dad was the same way, as though they didn't think I could tell when they were stoned. They were hippies. Ex-hippies. Something along those lines, except Dad was a banker and Mom sold engagement rings at the mall. I grew up trying their various diets: raw foods, vegan, macrobiotic. They shopped organic before every grocery store had an organic section.

I'm sure they thought the idea of passing out condoms would appeal, maybe because the word embarrasses so many people. Mom and Dad tried for weeks to talk me out of trick-or-treating, pointing out it was a holiday for

kids created by candy companies, that most of the chocolates people passed out were harvested by child slaves, that it'd lost the charms of All-Hallows Eve and the celebration of fall. I countered by talking about bonfires and celebrating, for one night, our monsters, our dreams.

As a last resort, they pointed out how bad all those extra calories would be for my figure. I wasn't vainer about the way I looked than most eighth grade girls. I played softball and joined swim team at the community pool each summer. I dressed in clothes that showed off my curves, at least as much as any girl did when acid-washed jeans were in. I didn't spend hours inspecting my face for pimples or piling on gunk to make it prettier. Mom provided me no shortage of articles about how make-up was full of cancer-causing things.

When Mom and Dad pointed out what extra calories could do (indiscreetly at grocery stores, nudging me and pointing at some corpulent person with a cart full of junk food), they almost had me. I didn't want to end up fat, with saggy arms. But, by their reasoning, things would only get worse. I told myself I could always up my afterschool run to three miles. It wouldn't be such a big leap and a couple of my friends ran a lot to burn calories.

"Suit yourself," Mom said. She set one of the boxes of condoms on the table in front of me and glanced at my paper. "You know, during the time of the Revolutionary War, they used animal bladders for condoms." Mom paused. "But mostly they relied on female contraceptives. You should include that in your paper."

On Halloween, when I left the house dressed as a Dallas Cowboys cheerleader—including makeup—a navy-colored pillow case in one hand and a blue and silver pompom in the other, the Christmastime nut bowl we use for Halloween goodies was nearly full; when I came back it was empty, save three lonely little packages. I'm surprised Mom didn't just give the last trick-or-treaters extra and turn off the porch light. She and Dad liked trick-or-treating to be done by eight so they could watch horror flick marathons. I tried not to let myself think about my parents having plans for the extra condoms. It didn't work.

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The next morning, I woke early and went into the living room to practice yoga with Mom. I didn't usually do that, hadn't since I started junior high, but I needed to feel centered. We didn't say a word, until time for me to leave.

"Have a good day," she said, like always, as she handed me lunch. "Remember your pranayama."

"Love you."

At school there were condoms, inflated and tied off, attached to my

locker, like balloons the popular girls put on each others' lockers for birthdays. I almost turned around and walked back out the door, but couldn't think of what I'd do for the next six hours. It was a seven mile walk home—across two highways. There was *nothing* around the junior high where students could hang out if they skipped—just law offices and bail bond places, a strip mall with a bunch of closed shops, a tailor, and Kentucky Fried Chicken and another one with a baby supply store and a *mercado.* I walked toward my locker, feeling my cheeks heating up. I tried to focus on my breathing.

I imagined a teacher or the principal walking by while I stood at my locker—I felt sure some already had. It wouldn't matter I hadn't put the condoms on my locker. I could hear the conversation I'd get sucked into, in the principal's office about the appropriateness of displaying condoms on school property and how abstinence was a better choice than sex at my age. Like my principal wasn't a teenager in the late 60s.

I pulled the condoms off my locker, and it felt like my whole body was burning. It didn't help that I've got fair skin and so whenever I blush even a little *everyone* can tell. I didn't have any place better to put the condoms, so I stuffed them in my book bag.

"You know, they're not going to work anymore," Tom Ramos said from behind me, in his deep sing-songy voice. He always sounded like he was faking a deep voice because he wasn't even 5'5", but he wasn't. "You're not supposed to keep them after they've been tied off," he continued. "You're supposed to flush them or something." Tom died at the end of our senior year of high school. Wrapped his black '87 Camaro around an oak tree two weeks before graduation.

"Aw, leave her alone," Chris Kepler said. He was Tom's best friend, a wrestler with gray eyes and a weak chin. "At least we know *she'll* be well prepared." He spoke louder, "If you're looking for a quickie…" Everyone nearby started to laugh.

The bell rang. I knew I'd be late to class, but I waited for the hall to clear—Chris was last to leave. I couldn't help but notice he glanced back at me once more before he walked into his language arts class. I'd never been late to class before. I knew the teacher would want an explanation. I wished for a hole to open in the ground. I'd step into it willingly.

"You okay?"

I didn't need to open my eyes to know it was Quinton Armstrong. We'd been in classes together since 4th grade, when my family moved to town. Usually he acted like a jerk. Mom used to say this meant he liked me.

I nodded and opened my eyes. "You're late to class," I pointed out.

He shrugged. "So are you. You feel like going?"

I shook my head.

"Don't let 'em get to you." He smiled and I wanted to believe him. He

could always make people laugh in class. I wanted him to be a jerk now, or make me laugh. I didn't know how to handle nice Quinton Armstrong.

"Come on," he said, after a moment, "Let's go sit on the football field."

"Won't someone notice?"

"You'd be surprised by the things no one notices."

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"What were your parents thinking? And why weren't you in science this morning?" Roberta asked as she slid into the seat across from me.

I shrugged, refusing to answer both questions, and passed her my lunch tote, then dropped a couple of napkins onto the pizza I'd bought with babysitting money and blotted the grease.

"Just so you know, the other girls are talking about it. A few are calling you a slut."

"Which girls? Bitchifer and the others?" Bitchifer—Jennifer—Wallace was the leader of a group of snobby girls who wore name brand clothes and dated athletes. We said we hated them. They also called Caitlin Snodgrass a slut. And even though she was my friend, I agreed that sometimes she was a slut. Not that I'd have told her that.

"Who else?"

I crossed my arms. My pizza didn't look so good. I watched Roberta dig a carrot stick into black bean hummus and I wished I'd stayed out on the football field with Quinton. We hadn't talked about much, sat on the bleachers, mostly watching traffic.

"Oh come on," Roberta said. "What do you expect them to say? They need fresh gossip. Caitlin going all the way with that boy she met at camp is old news now."

I knew. Everyone knew Caitlin was easy before that summer. She was the first of us to let a boy stick his tongue in her mouth and in fifth grade, the year my parents passed out pocket protectors and travel shampoo, she'd dressed like a street-walker for Halloween. Like *Pretty Woman.* Plus, she'd dated nearly half the boys in our grade—though she said she'd only had a few *real* boyfriends—she said a real boyfriend happened after at least three dates. She talked about how uncomfortable she made boys when she initiated the first kiss or encouraged the boy to lie about where they'd been. I didn't think all her stories were true.

Caitlin *was* exceptionally pretty, even without make-up. I was jealous because boys asked her out. The summer before eighth grade, I'd gone on a couple of movie dates, group things, with a boy who wore thick glasses and had sweaty palms. In my mind, because Caitlin was asked out by so many of the boys, she could choose the ones that didn't have sweaty palms or garlic

breath. She said all boys had sweaty palms or garlic breath or worse. I didn't ask what was worse.

I didn't feel hungry. I picked up my tray. "I'll see you in geometry."

Roberta stood, ready to follow me. We'd been friends since third grade, but she sometimes just didn't get when to leave me alone.

I shook my head. "I need to study anyway." We had a test in geometry and I hated math. I had no intention of studying. Instead, I sat in the stacks and meditated, something I'd never have admitted to anyone. It was Mom's thing.

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By the time I got home, I was nearly in tears. If it had just been being called a slut or the way the boys looked at me—and tried to look down my shirt, or even the condoms on my locker, I don't think it would've been so bad. But these things, combined with a geometry test and the school counselor calling me in during social studies (right before I was supposed to talk about my essay on women of the Revolution) to have a "little chat" about the condoms on my locker and my relationship with my parents (Are things going okay at home? *Yes.* You sure, because you know this is a safe place to talk about anything that's causing you to act out. *I didn't put the condoms on my locker.* Is there a reason someone would have found this funny? *You're kidding, right?* Are you normally picked on? *Not really.*) was way too much.

I slammed the door on my way in and tossed my book bag on the floor. Mom stood at the kitchen counter, looking at ring catalogues and writing notes on index cards. Because she had to know all sorts of stats about the rings she sold, she made flash cards about them.

"Bad day?"

I didn't answer.

"John Keynes said, 'In the long run, we're all dead.'" Mom turned the page of the ring catalogue.

"John Keynes?" I asked.

"An economist."

"Great, well, once I'm dead, I won't worry about it. Or about economics."

She told me it couldn't possibly be that bad, and I told her what'd gone on in school, expect the part about skipping class. I didn't think she'd be okay with that, especially since I'd skipped class with a boy. A couple of times, I could see her force back a smile.

"People probably just don't know how to approach you," Mom said when I finished. "After all, they teach *abstinence.* The boys are probably embarrassed and you don't really like those girls who are calling you a slut anyway, do you? Bitch-any or something?"

I shrugged. "Bitchifer." The fact I didn't like those girls was beside the point and the boys certainly didn't act embarrassed.

"Plus your body language is closed off. Look at this," she said. She crossed her arms and scrunched her forehead. She hunched her shoulders and bit her lip. Mom was always on me about my posture, part of why she wanted me to practice yoga again. "Would you want to approach someone looking like that?"

I wouldn't, but couldn't let her know. "I hate you," I said.

"Of course you do," Mom said. "But that'll pass and in a few weeks you'll hate me again." She gave me a big smile. "It'll be just like that for the next seven or eight years."

Mom sounded like a parenting book a lot of the time. I knew it wasn't something that would "just pass." Even though I wouldn't be the main gossip forever, people weren't just going to *forget* either. Mom was clueless about school and my life and the real world. But what can you expect of someone who wore slippers to the grocery store in winter because slippers "keep my feet warmer?"

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I locked myself in my room after pushing dinner around my plate, eating just enough so Mom and Dad wouldn't protest when I asked to be excused. There, I sat on my bed clutching a purple plush monkey Dad won for me at the state fair when I was seven, plotting how skip school until Mom and Dad agreed to transfer me.

My first idea was fake-sick, but I was one of those unnaturally healthy types and when I got sick, I got really sick. I couldn't pull it off. Maybe some kids could just tell their parents why they wanted to skip school (after all, it was the parents' fault, something a reasonable human being couldn't fail to see) and those parents would consent. I, however, wasn't blessed with cool parents. *It's character building,* they'd say. Code for: Glad I'm not in your shoes. It kind of sucks. *You're probably just blowing the whole thing out of proportion.* Code for: This won't look so bad when the next worst thing comes along.

As an after-thought, Dad would come to me alone and say he'd talk to the principal about the boys if I wanted. *Don't bother,* I'd say, knowing he'd call in the morning anyway, and secretly I'd be pleased.

By the time I went to bed, I still hadn't come up with any ideas to prevent Mom and Dad from sending me to school in the morning. I couldn't just do what my parents suggested and ignore the comments and stares from the boys. I wasn't that type of girl. I still believed in nice boys. Nice boys. That's a joke we're all in on, if we're older than 15.

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In the morning, I did feel kind of sick—achy and head-swollen. I considered complaining to Mom, but she'd just make peppermint tea and hand me a Vitamin C pill. Instead, I made sure I put a novel in my backpack.

Usually I left for the bus stop early enough that I could get in some good gossip with Caitlin and Roberta before the bus came, but that morning I waited until the last possible minute, stirring my congealing oatmeal with my spoon.

"You going to sculpt that oatmeal?" Mom asked.

I glared at her. "If I did, you'd probably figure out how to display it on the refrigerator and point it out to everyone who came over."

"Don't be silly. It's not like anyone would want to see your oatmeal unless it had the Virgin Mary's face in it."

I ignored her, what I should have done to begin with. "I've got to go."

"It *is* later than usual," Mom replied with her stellar grasp of the obvious.

"Bye, Mom." I tried hard to make my voice even. My parents would stalk me in the car if I left the house angry. *What would happen if we died?* they'd ask as they rolled along beside me. *How would you feel?*

"Do you want a ride?"

Mom almost never offered to drive. She biked most places. I hesitated, before telling her no. Only losers got dropped off at school, especially in a station wagon.

I don't remember what happened the rest of that year, at least related to condoms. There were other condom comments, but it blew over pretty quickly because Chase McDonald got arrested for arson two weeks after Halloween.

What I do remember is this: the next year was the year that ninth grade moved from the junior high to the high school and a middle school formed. On Halloween, someone left five packets of condoms taped to my locker. Chris Kepler pulled them off. We were dating, had been since the end of summer when we'd started bagging groceries together at Winn-Dixie, one of the few jobs we could get at 14. I'd wanted to work because Mom and Dad didn't want me to—especially Mom. "You'll have the rest of your life to work," Mom said. "Use the time to volunteer if you need something to do."

At 14, dating meant talking on the phone until my parents yelled at me to get off the line, and going to the movies, sometimes hanging out in the mall so we could be alone. Chris said he'd find out who put the condoms on my locker. I told him not to bother. The condoms were glow-in-the-dark, ribbed for extra pleasure. We broke up the summer before tenth grade, for no good reason, because that's what you do when you're 15, four years to the day before Mom died in a bike-car collision. He was the first person I called

after I learned the news.

Chris drove three hours from his parents' house, to my college, when I told him. *You shouldn't make that drive,* he said, *I'll come get you.* I was working as a summer tour guide and getting trained as a resident advisor. I protested halfheartedly. When he arrived at my dorm, I was sitting on my bed, clutching the purple plush monkey and staring out the window. Chris wrapped his arms around me.

"You packed?"

I shook my head and he went to my closet and started pulling clothes off hangers. "You remember the first—the only—time you had me over for dinner when we dated?" he asked as he packed my stuff into a duffel bag. "Your mom made raw lasagna and after dinner, we went on a walk to Bojangles and each ordered a 2-piece dinner, then ate on the elementary school playground."

I nodded. When I got home that evening, Mom told me what a nice boy she thought Chris was. I didn't tell her I'd let him feel my boobs, after we'd finished eating, while we sat on the merry-go-round and made out, that even though he'd wiped his fingers on the paper napkins in a way that seemed almost dainty, I could feel fried chicken grease under my bra.

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After the funeral, after I'd hugged people I'd never seen before who I'd never seen again, after Caitlin and Roberta left with their mothers, Mom's college roommate came up to me. I'd met the woman once, at Mom's 40th birthday, had heard Mom's stories and seen pictures. Pot. Business classes. A sit-in for equal rights for cafeteria workers. Summer of '69 road trip. The woman, if I remembered correctly, lived on the west coast somewhere. The woman's hair was red, streaked with grey.

"You look just like her," the woman said as she embraced me.

I didn't think much about it. I'd heard that all my life. I nodded when she told me she was sorry for my loss, because that was what I was supposed to do, because that's all I'd done all afternoon. I wondered what it was like to lose a friend you'd known for longer than I'd been alive.

That night, Dad and I smoked a bowl and drank rye and didn't talk about our feelings. We listened to The Beatles and The Doors. He set all of her shoes out on the back porch the next morning, and two days later, when the next summer storm came, they filled with ice marbles and rain. Chris drove me back to college the next day. I felt ready to smile at incoming freshmen, ready to forget the image of those lonely shoes.