

The Boy  
Can't Sleep

*Ann Dowsett Johnston*

The boy can't sleep. He can't sleep because he didn't get the girl. Or rather, he got the girl, but he lost her. And now he can't sleep. Nor can you because he wants to talk.

You try to take it seriously. You try to remember what this felt like. You know you went through this very same thing, at the very same age. But that was so long ago. The summer of 1969, to be exact. The same summer that man first walked on the moon—an event you barely noticed, an event eclipsed by a boy with blond hair and an acoustic guitar and your first trip to Paris.

You try not to say what you're thinking, which is, Thank goodness. You're too young to find "the right girl." You'll find someone better. Smarter. Less selfish. More nuanced. Take your time. This you want to say, but you can't.

So instead you make popcorn. Standing by the stove together in the middle of the night, his tall frame looming close beside yours. Waiting for the first kernel to hiss and sizzle and pop. And as the two of you stand, waiting for the

action to start, he bumps into you—a seemingly nonchalant little hip check.

Which is a good sign. This, you've come to understand, is what boys do after they stop hugging and kissing their mothers. A hip check, a knock on the shoulder, a little flick on the wrist. You've learned to decipher these casual little moves, along with the adolescent grunts—the code of a breezy male teenager.

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And this you've also learned: the last thing a breezy male teenager wants is to be grilled by his mother. Yes, you would love to know the details of the evening, how it all unfolded, how it led to this middle-of-the-night session in the kitchen. But you resist. You zip your lip and wait for him to talk. Because, as we all know, mothers of sixteen-year-old boys know nothing. Especially about dating. Unless they're asked.

Which isn't to say that the boy has lost faith in you. On the contrary. That's why the two of you are up in the middle of the night making popcorn. He has faith that you will listen. But it's a dance, and this time he's leading.

For years, you led and he followed. As far as he was concerned, adults could fix anything. For starters, they had the power to negotiate with the Easter bunny, a creature he believed had no business being in his bedroom. He trusted you to arrange a front-door drop-off for chocolate. And when, as a toddler, he watched Joe Theismann's leg snap like a matchstick on the football field, he sat in front of the TV, unfazed in his fuzzy yellow sleepers. "Don't worry," he said, as the doctor raced to Theismann's side. "That man will kiss him better."

But over time, his faith in adult magic began to wane. Once, on a vacation by the sea, you stayed up into the night spray-painting seashells with gold paint. You soaked paper in tea and burned the corners with matches, making secret treasure maps that would lead to the loot that you had buried on the beach before breakfast. For years, that "pirate's gold"

from Prince Edward Island was lugged to school for show and tell. Years later, when he discovered the true story, he was embarrassed. Unwittingly, you had made him look like a fool.

So tonight, as you stand over the ever-expanding pot of popcorn, you listen as he begins to tell the story of the girl and what happened. You listen carefully, your antennae keen for details. Most of all, you listen for evidence that she might have played him for the fool.

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And all the while, you keep your eyes trained on the pot in front of you. If you look him in the eyes, you know the story will stop. Teenage boys retreat easily: you can't approach them head-on.

Of course, this is the same boy who once had a habit of dancing you around the kitchen as you cooked dinner—a boisterous little tango that left you flushed and laughing. This is the same boy who used to stall his bedtime with a series of questions, questions designed to lasso you and keep you close. Do monkeys get periods? What would hurt more: having a baby or porcupine quills up the nose?

But that was before. Now, most nights, the bedroom door is closed, and you are beginning to wonder what it will feel like when he moves away, when he marries. For the past several months, you've carried a poem in your pocket, a dog-eared clipping of "Mother of the Groom" by Seamus Heaney. Which, of course, is silly because he doesn't even have a driver's licence. But when it comes to this boy, you don't like surprises.

Once, you thought that this boy was an egg on a spoon, an egg you could not afford to drop. But now it's clear that he's no egg at all. In fact, he's more than half hatched, and you're no longer holding the spoon. Perhaps you never were.

Still, tonight, as he stands lean and fresh-faced beside you, you'd like to know that his world will unfold as it should. You're tempted to give fate a helping hand, to make sure that no woman ever knocks him sideways—as if you

could stop it. Standing in your nightgown, you're tempted to tell him the whole truth about the mating dance of men and women, to spill the beans about all you've learned since that summer in Paris.

But where would you begin? Certainly not by warning him against marrying young. This you've already done, over and over. And besides, it made not one whit of difference when you were told the same thing, when you married his father.

No, you'd start by letting him in on a few secrets. Perhaps you'd begin with the ones women share over long lunches, or late at night, long distance, when others have gone to bed: that the men they love best are not the tallest or the richest or the most suave. The men they love are the ones who make them laugh. The ones who dance them around the kitchen and kiss them on the back of the neck. Most of all, the men they love are the ones who ask questions and then listen to the answers. All this, you're certain, he'll be good at.

And marrying? You'd like to tell him that the right person will *smell* right. His father smelled like April, when the pale green shoots of the trees reach upward, shimmering and electric. But no, that would throw him off. You'd keep it simple: never marry until you're amazed at your own luck, you'd say, paraphrasing Iris Murdoch.

Oh, and that's just the beginning. After the wedding, you must make your own luck. Learn to parse each other's silences; understand the arc of an argument, that it will begin and it will end. Talk to each other in the middle of the night; canoe together. Don't founder on the tiny pebbles of daily life, the ones that trip us all.

No, this you definitely can't say. Not yet; perhaps never. This boy won't know that you too have skinny-dipped under a harvest moon. That you too have tried to fall asleep listening to Neil Young, just as he has tonight. And yes, you too have been played for the fool. Certainly he'll never know just

why you learned the hard way how to parse men's silences, to hear what they weren't saying.

No. Instead, you pour the popcorn into the bowl, and he adds the butter—too much for your liking, but you say nothing because right at that moment he has begun to tell you that, actually, there is another girl. One he thinks he likes even better. And she likes him, too. And he wants to know, do you think he should ask her for coffee or a movie on the first date? For the first time, you allow yourself to look him in the eyes and smile.

Tomorrow, once again, you will be invisible: the mother standing at the door, telling him not to forget his sunscreen, to remember to call if he's going to be late. And he will rush down the walk, nodding, not hearing a word you have said. But tonight, the two of you are standing in the kitchen, eating popcorn after midnight because he can't sleep. And nor can you because, right now, he wants to talk.