

The Hole of Sharon

Girls had holes. Boys had pencils and pens.

No, the boys didn't stick their pencils and pens in the girls' holes. You're having a nightmare. Wake up.

The wall in the boys' north bathroom had a hole, smaller than the palm of a boy's hand and bigger than a man's thumb. This hole became a girl's hole when a boy—Jeff heard it was Kevin Clark, the boy who drew the best and liked musicals—drew a girl around it. Some other boy—the handwriting looked like Chuck Deacon's—named this girl Sharon, who was a girl everyone knew and was neither pretty nor ugly and would die of cervical cancer before age thirty.

Twice a day, mid-morning and early afternoon, the boys were sent to the bathroom in a complicated arrangement involving specific maximum numbers of boys allowed to be in the bathroom at any one time for specific lengths of time each. It was an arrangement inviting interpretation and proved flexible enough for there to be a rolling penny-pitching game underway during the bathroom breaks. Daniel Davis, a tall and loping boy who would become a locally notable drug dealer, spend a few years in prison, find Jesus, and die of a heart attack before he reached fifty, was the master of ceremonies and a master of the game.

Okay, dudes, line 'em up, line 'em up, who's in? Who wants to try to take a piece of the action? Who has the guts to pitch against Dan the Man?

The rule was the pitched pennies had to hit the wall first. The wall was the one with the Hole of Sharon. She was higher up the wall and the pennies were to be pitched well below where her feet would have been had Kevin Clark been able to draw feet.

Jeff was no penny pitcher. He could barely scrape up the money to buy the occasional gum machine ring or Minute Market slingshot. He watched the other boys play.

Then things happened. It was as if the boys came down with a virus, not one that gave them runny noses or wet congested coughs or even a fever that could be measured with the glass mercury thermometer the school nurse used, but one that nonetheless spread quickly and infected most of them in similar ways. The ones who were not too taken by it took their pens and pencils and wrote such words as Damn and Hell and Shit and even a Fuck or two on the bathroom walls. Jeff was one of these. The others, who had it worse, raised their aim and no longer strove to win each other's pennies. Someone (Kevin? Chuck? Daniel? Not Jeff!) wrote Pussy next to the Hole of Sharon. They took their pennies and threw them, hard, at the hole. It was a new game, with new rules.

Hard! You have to throw it hard!

Get it in there!

Don't be a pussy, Kevin! Throw it! Hard!

The wall around the hole was soon patterned with small dents. The boys played the new game with enthusiasm and raised the racket boys will raise. The bathroom door swung open and Principal Williams and Mr. Irons, the science teacher, walked in.

Jeff didn't get in as much trouble as he thought he would, or even as much as he thought he should. His mom didn't beat him or scream or call him names. She was calm, driving down the street after school with Jeff in the front seat beside her.

You shouldn't do things like that, Jeff.

She seemed distracted. She was a grown-up, and you never could tell what was going on with them. As for Jeff's dad, he didn't say anything. He was in a bunker in Vietnam, being shot at.