

## **T.M.I.**

**By Nevin Martell**

“I just love watching the sparrows flying over the meadow in the evening light,” my mother said, without a hint of sarcasm.

“They’re feeding on the fireflies,” my sister matter-of-factly replied, using that tone of voice that broached no argument that she knew every last thing about the animal kingdom.

“Hey, why aren’t you out there trying to save those poor little fireflies,” I shot back at her, hoping she’d rise to the bait.

I could feel her glaring at me, but I refused to look up from the article on some rock star overdosing on sleeping pills I had been reading.

“Stop being such a jackass. Just because I’m a vegetarian, doesn’t mean I can’t morally rationalize the physical needs of other organisms.”

“But if you could, you’d have them eating a soy gluten firefly alternative right?”

“Fuck you.”

“Look at their grace,” my mother marveled.

This exchange was typical of the family vacations I took in my mid-twenties. Every June my mother, sister, and I all met up for a week on Cushing Island, a verdant blip in Portland, Maine’s Casco Bay. Dad hadn’t been invited along since the divorce and, to be quite honest, I think he had been relieved to be released from an annual event he had never really cared about. For my sister and me, these getaways were a relaxing break from our vaguely loathsome jobs, our failing relationships and overdue credit card bills. However, our vacation this particular year had been fraught with difficulty. My sister and I were constantly bickering. We couldn’t get through a meal without one of us pointing out some character flaw the other had managed to demonstrate while passing the salad or lighting the candles.

There was no one reason why we were more combative than usual; maybe it was because I had been unable to replenish my weed supply before coming or because my sister had recently lost her longtime feline companion to an errant neighborhood driver. No matter the impetus for this acrimony, the non-stop arguing disappointed our mom and she tried to alleviate the tension. Her tactics had ranged from proposing we do a puzzle together, to organizing group walks after dinner to cheerily carrying on one-sided conversations.

It was late one afternoon about four days into our doomed holiday and we were all out on the veranda of the New England house we'd been renting. The sun was just beginning its slow plunge into the ocean and we all had buried ourselves in the kind of flimsy paperbacks of dubious literary distinction that suddenly become necessary reading on vacation. However, this year Danielle Steel, Amy Tan and, in my case, Clive Cussler, weren't just diversions, they were our bodyguards. Indeed, it was their considerable duty to keep my sister and me from verbally beating the shit out of each other.

The day had started out poorly when I accidentally put real milk instead of soy into my sister's morning coffee and things hadn't improved in the following hours when I discovered my sister using my razor to shave her legs and God knows what else. However, our time reading together had always represented an unspoken cease-fire. I had even convinced my mother and sister to have the radio on in the background. It had started off well. A block of Beatles songs had been greeted by a few mmm-hmmms of appreciation from all three bookworms, but our momentary truce was torn asunder when the Doors' "Light My Fire" chortled out of the speakers.

As I began humming the melody under my breath, the artificial solace we had conceived out of pop tunes and cheap novels was shattered when my mother announced, "I lost my virginity to this song." She said it so matter-of-factly, she could have been commenting on that day's weather.

I don't think my mother had ever talked to us about her sex life -- it had taken her years to own up to her college drug experimentation -- so this random declaration was by far the most information she had ever offered up on the subject, not that we had ever asked. Instantly I wished that she had stuck to prosaic one-liners about the cold front that seemed to be developing. She continued talking, expanding on her fond reminiscence, but I had already clamped my hands to my ears and shut my eyes, like a little kid during the scary parts of a slasher film. But even in that dark silence, I could still hear my mother's voice echoing those seven words like a sordid mantra.

After a moment, I deemed it okay to open my eyes again and uncover my ears. The first thing I saw was my sister pulling the stereo cord from the wall with a feral intensity; she would have probably heaved the offending set off the porch if the pre-Depression Era monster had been less cumbersome. Both she and I refused to make eye contact with our

mother, who had returned to her gold covered romance novel blithely pronouncing “Well, I guess you weren’t mature enough for that.”

“I’ll never be mature enough to hear that,” I sputtered. My sister joined in with the tone of a reprimanding matron, “And I hope we don’t hear anything else like *that* ever again, Mother.” Then, without premeditated choreography, the two of us simultaneously gathered up our books and retired to the ratty living room couch inside, demonstrating the kind of solidarity my mother had only dreamed about our entire trip.

It wasn’t that I had ever been a huge fan of the Doors, but this revelatory proclamation certainly did not endear them to me any further. The few records of theirs I did own were immediately heaved into the garbage when I returned home and my copy of *No Way Out* made its way to the recycling bin soon after. Still, every so often, one of their songs will crop up, sending me frantically searching for my therapist’s cell phone number. The last time I heard “Love Me Two Times” on a barroom jukebox, my body reacted with a twitchy spasm, spilling my drink on my pants and leaving me freshly embarrassed.

If there was ever something I didn’t need to know about my mom, “Light My Fire” was it. My children will never be privy to the song that accompanied me my freshman year at college. After all, there’s no reason why they shouldn’t enjoy Nirvana’s “Smells Like Teen Spirit.”