

Toast

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It was a Tuesday afternoon around four o'clock when a little girl screamed and a torrent of children came rushing down from the red playhouse on the jungle gym. The air was thick with the smell of urine and the little boy who had been the cause of the scream and subsequent torrent held his head up with pride as he squeezed his exposed penis and continued to piss on the small table in the red playhouse. He didn't watch as the other children ran away screaming, however he did look down when he noticed that one little girl had remained behind. She stood there staring up at him, and when she didn't jump or flinch when he jerked his penis at her.

"What are you looking at?" he said, but the girl didn't respond. She simply kept staring up at him, and what a sight he was.

His hair was greasy and it was impossible to tell if he had freckles or a thousand little dirt smudges covering his face. She also noted that his hands were filthy even as he still held onto himself. She made a face.

"What are you making that face at me for?" he said without letting go of himself.

"When was the last time you had a bath?" she said as she took a step back. "It looks like it's been a while since your last one."

"What's it to you?" he said. "You're not my mom."

"Well, if I was, I sure would make you stand in the yard and hose you off. It can't be very sanitary for you touch things or other people the way you look now. Not even you," she said and her gaze drifted back to where he was still very tightly gripping himself.

The boy was quick to take notice of this and turned up one corner of his mouth. "Hey. Want to touch it?" he said as he walked closer to the edge of the table.

"Eww! No. Your hands are already so nasty looking, so who knows where your thing's been at."

His eyes narrowed at this, then he spat at her. "What do you know? You're just a dumb little cunt." The little girl stared at him in response. "What's the matter? Too dumb to think of anything to say back?" Still she said nothing. She just continued to stand there staring at him. The little boy took a few more steps forward waving his penis around while taunting her. "She's nothing more than a scared stupid little baby. What's the matter baby? Are you gonna cry? Here. I've got something for the little baby to put in her mouth."

At that moment, the little girl rushed forward and shoved the boy from the table and watched as he let go of himself and flailed his arms every which way as he fell. He landed on his elbow and immediately burst into tears.

"Who's the baby now?" she said as he rolled over clutching his elbow. "Maybe **you'll** feel better if you put your thing in your mouth and that'll shut you up." The boy only cried harder at this, so the little girl turned and climbed down the jungle gym as some of the other children from before began to creep back to see what all the commotion was about.

"Boys are so stupid," she said as she stepped down from the jungle gym ladder and made her way across the playground.

The day hadn't been going well so far.

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First, she missed the school bus forcing her mother to take her resulting in a clipped lecture the whole way there, then once she had gotten to school she realized that she had forgotten her popsicle sticks, so she had to sit at the circle table and work on math sheets while everyone else got to make deer and antelope during art class.

She had also gotten a bad mark on her spelling test, and Austin Martin spilled his chocolate milk on her pants during lunch. She thought things would be better once she got home and got to go and play on the new jungle gym at the community playground, but then that nasty little red-haired boy had jumped on the table, whipped out his thing, and peed all over the table and chairs in the playhouse.

She didn't understand boys. They were always doing stupid things, and they were always taking out their things and playing with them. She remembered the first time that she'd seen one of those things. It was at the beginning of the school year when her class was waiting in line outside the gymnasium doors while the fifth graders were ending their class. They were separated into boy/girl lines and the boys were being especially dumb that day. They were making fun of Kelsey Meyers because she was the first girl in the class to get her boobs. It was upsetting her a great deal, but no matter how much she and the other girls told the boys to stop, they kept going harder. Then, for whatever reason, Michael Finney decided to pull down his pants and underwear and show all the girls his thing.

It was weird and really ugly. It made most of the girls scream, and poor Kelsey cried until she could barely breathe. One of the P.E. teachers came running out of the gym, and when he saw Michael Finney whipping his thing every which way, he very quickly snatched him up by the arm, yanked up his pants, and toted him away to Principal Miller's office.

Ever since then, it seemed like every boy couldn't wait to get his thing out to show to the world. She wanted to get boys and their things out of her head at this moment though. As she walked across the playground, she took notice of other children playing on various things. There was a girl hanging upside down from the monkey bars, a boy ripping up and eating the grass next to it, three girls laughing as another one spun them around on the merry-go-round, and a boy attempting to swing over the bar on the swing set.

She stopped and looked over to where the giant yellow teeter totter was and frowned when she saw that a bunch of older boys all sat on one side while some girls sat crying at the top of the other.

She decided to keep walking.

As she came to the far, less populated corner of the playground, she noticed the old playhouse that had been run down since the construction of the newer one. It was a sad sight to behold with its uneven wood boards covering the outside and caved in roof, but there was something else about it that managed to catch her eye. There was a large new sandbox that had been built in front of it. Its dark wood perimeter almost shined in the sunlight, and the sand was a pale and iridescent shade. Suddenly, she felt the overwhelming urge to build a sand castle. She ran over to the sandbox, but quickly stopped when she saw another little girl come from behind the old wooden playhouse. She held a blue bucket in one hand and a yellow plastic shovel in the other. As she came from behind the playhouse, she only looked at the other girl for

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a brief moment before she climbed into the sandbox and began shoveling sand into her bucket. The girl got excited since it looked as if this girl was also going to build a sand castle, so she decided to offer some help. She smiled as she walked up to the edge of the sandbox.

“Hi,” she said to the girl in the sandbox. “Are you building something?” The sandbox girl only looked up, but didn't say anything in response. Her smile wavered slightly.

She tried again. “My name's Rita,” she said. “What's yours?”

“Sarah,” said the sandbox girl without looking up from her shoveling.

“Nice to meet you Sarah. Can I play in the sandbox with you? I was thinking of building a castle. We can make a really big one together if you want.”

“I don't want your help,” Sarah said without missing a shovel. “I'm already here, plus, there's no place for both of us in the sandbox.”

Rita looked at the girl, then at all the space left inside the sandbox.

“But you're the only person in it. There's more than enough room for both of us even if you don't want me to make a castle with you.”

The girl finally stopped shoveling and looked up at Rita. “Well, like I said, I'm already here, and you don't belong anyway.”

Rita tilted her head to the side. “What's that supposed to mean? What do you mean by „I don't belong“?”

“Why don't you look in the mirror and figure it out for yourself, or did you not know that some people prefer their toast not to be burnt?”

Rita stood there for nearly a full minute staring at Sarah before the gravity of the girl's words actually sank in. “Excuse me,” she said stepping into the sandbox.

Sandbox girl didn't budge. “I said that some people prefer their toast not to be burnt. I don't know about you, but I like my toast best when it's buttered.” Her expression never once changed, and Rita felt herself begin to become agitated.

“Are you calling me burnt toast?” Sandbox girl smiled.

“Wow. You're burnt and deaf, but a mirror would help you out if you're really that stupid.”

Rita stood there clinching her fists and started to shake slightly. Something had suddenly shifted in her surroundings and it was then that she actually saw the girl. Blonde hair, blue eyes, and very fair skin. Rita held up her own hands and took in the darkness of them. She felt her ponytail and noted the coarseness of her hair's texture. This girl's hair was full and fell in waves around her shoulders framing her face. Her own was stiff and had begun to stick up around the edges.

Sandbox girl's smile disappeared as Rita stood there clutching her ponytail. “What's wrong with you? Did you get struck stupid or did you finally think?”

Rita looked down at Sarah and really took her in. She had such a powerful meanness in her eyes, and Rita felt herself being pulled down into that place.

That's when it happened.

She didn't remember grasping the handful of sand, but in the next moment, she was on top of Sarah rubbing the sand into her face with one hand, and yanking at her hair with the other. She was completely unaware of Sarah clawing and biting at her, or of her screams. She

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was only aware of that meanness in her eyes, and so she yanked and rubbed harder.

She really was shocked when she felt her own hair harshly yanked and her head cracked against the corner of the sandbox.

She heard herself groan and felt a wetness sliding down her forehead, then she finally heard the other voices.

Sarah was beside herself and writhing around in the sand while an older boy was on his knees trying to hold her still as he emptied a bottle of water over her face. Rita was still unsure of what had just happened.

"Damn it Sarah. I know it hurts, but you have to hold still if you want me to get all the sand out of your eyes." "It burns. It burns." Her screaming lessened into short bursts of shouting. By the time Rita rolled onto her own knees, she felt herself be shoved face first right back onto the corner of the sandbox.

"What the fuck you little bitch. You think you're gonna get away with jumping on my little sister? Let's see how you like it," he said as he scooped up a handful of sand and began to violently rub it in her hair. She could feel the wood splintering into her cheek and heard her own wails as the boy increased the pressure.

Almost as soon as the whole episode began, it was over and Rita felt herself being pulled up and out of the sandbox and pushed behind a person. When she looked up, she saw that she was behind her brother Alex.

"Motherfucker," Alex said. "What the hell is wrong with you? You think it's cool to beat up on little girls?" The other boy had a bloody lip, but quickly stood up and took a step forward.

"And you think it's okay for that darkie bitch to pound on my little sister? She needed to be put in her place," he said shifting his gaze back to Rita.

Rita felt herself getting angry again despite the pounding in her head. "She started it," she shouted from behind her brother. "She called me burnt toast and said I couldn't play in the sandbox because she's better than me."

"I did not," Sarah screeched back. "She got mad at me when I told her I didn't need any help moving the sand, then she started calling me names and just jumped on me for no reason at all."

"Liar," Rita said. "You are such a liar. You started the whole thing. You said that you were buttered toast and that I was burnt toast you liar."

"Shit toast is more like it," said the other boy.

"Hey. Eyes on me asshole. I'm here now, and I don't care who started it because I'm finishing it." He turned to his sister. "Come on Rita," he said as he took her hand. "Let's go home. These people are trash, and I don't feel like kicking anyone's ass today." He squeezed her hand, turned, and led her away from the sandbox toward the playground's exit.

"Fucking darkies," the boy yelled as they walked away.

Rita hesitated. She looked back at the boy and his sister, but Alex was firm in his determination to keep walking and squeezed her hand more tightly. She wanted to tell him to stop and that they should go back, but when she looked up at him she could see the resolve in his eyes. After a few more steps, she stopped resisting and let him lead her home.

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As they passed the swing set, merry-go-round, monkey bars, and the giant yellow teeter totter, she thought back to the other children she had seen playing before. For some reason, she hadn't noticed that the girl hanging upside down on the monkey bars was Asian, or that the boy eating the grass was Hispanic. She'd been completely oblivious to the fact that those had been black boys terrorizing that group of little white girls on the teeter totter, and that the girls laughing on the merry-go-round were Indian. The boy trying to swing himself over the bar on the swing set was dark too, but not so much as she was. She hadn't noticed any of these details before, but now she recalled them very vividly. Now, she couldn't figure out why she didn't think of these things then but was able to recall them so acutely now.

The white boys yelling at the black girls in line at the gymnasium doors stood out now in her mind and as she and her brother passed the jungle gym, Rita thought again of the red-haired white boy shaking his thing at her.

"Am I really burnt toast?" she said quietly to her brother.

"Why would you ask me something crazy like that?"

She thought about it for a second. "I don't know. That girl and her brother really thought so."

"That girl and her brother are nothing but ignorant trash. You shouldn't ever listen to people like them. They're the burnt toast."

"But they're white. How can they be the burnt ones?"

"Well, think about it," he said "When you bite into a piece of burnt toast, it's really terrible, nasty, and bitter. Even the smell alone is enough to get you to turn away from it. It's completely unappealing in every way. Inside and out."

"Bad inside and out?"

"That's right," he said.

As they exited the playground and came into view of their house, she thought about telling him about the greasy haired boy and his thing, but when he stopped and looked at her, she changed her mind.

"My head hurts," she said.

"I'll bet. That moron cracked it pretty good against that wood," he said as he bent down and gingerly ran his fingers across her forehead.

"What are we going to tell mommy and daddy?"

"We'll just say that you fell off the jungle gym. We can leave out the toast part, but I'm not sure how to explain all the sand in your hair."

Rita thought for a minute, and then said, "I'll just say the weird boy who eats grass did it. They won't even think twice about it."

With that decided, Alex once again took Rita's hand, and the two walked the rest of the way to their back door.