

Vera Sheets

By

Rita Juster

I heard my father's footsteps cross the small carpeted area outside my bedroom.

"You sure you're ready for this?" he said at the doorway. Diffused streetlight limped through the shutters. His naked body glowed white in the almost dark. He'd just taken a shower.

"I guess so," I said. I concentrated on the sheets covering my twin size bed. They were Vera-brand seconds. With dabs of white amid black swervy lines on shades of purple, they brought to mind the waves he'd thrown me into to teach me to swim on Cape Cod when I was five. "I can do it!" I'd said, gulping the Atlantic Ocean while my mother sat on the beach reading our town's Milford Daily News. Now I was twenty.

Old-fashioned white bedsheets like the ones I'd grown up with would have seemed pasty on this night, a wimpy stage for my grand eve of self-discovery. The word Vera in its branded script peeped at me from a corner. Same name as my godmother, Aunt Vera. I tried not to look at her name. She wouldn't like what was happening.

My father sat himself down on the edge of my bed then lit the candle on the wooden crate night table, the one he'd found in some company's trash heap while he waited for me to move in. In those waiting weeks, my first as a college dropout, I lived with my mother in Milford, fifteen hundred miles away. The day she realized my silver ring was formed by two naked embracing lovers, she said, "Nothing but two nudies kissing. Rape bait," and rammed it into her housecoat

pocket before stomping out of the room. It was then that I decided to move in with my father. He sent me a plane ticket, and I started a job working nights at a US post office close to his rented duplex in Hialeah, Florida.

My father blew out the match and dropped it into the ashtray. It fell into a sea of cigarette butts with a half-smoked joint on top. Years of slacks rubbing against his legs along with the pumice stone he showed me, had removed most of his leg hair. "Try it on yours," he'd said, offering me the stone. "Beats shaving." His calves were as smooth as a model's. The scent of Jean Nate, his favorite aftershave because of its lemony notes, was sold as a female fragrance. It wafted over to me from his recent dousing. The bed shifted from his weight. I inched over to make room for him.

"Do you even know how lucky you are?" he said. In the candlelight, his brown eyes pierced mine like the drills he stored in the hall by the kitchen. "You have a one-in-a-million chance to learn about your body the way God intended. A father teaching his daughter. Nothing more sacred than that." His lips, barely the thickness of copper wire, stayed horizontal, keeping his expression serious. Solemn.

I did want to feel lucky. Sheets cooled my bare skin. 100% percale. The best, according to my mother. No muslin scratch. Some would call them hippy sheets. The design brought to mind bongs and waterbeds, a belief in dreams. A paying attention to material formerly ignored or considered boring by previous generations of unenlightened squares. I rubbed my heels on the crisp fabric.

"Well, OK, Dad. I'm willing to try it once." "It" didn't seem like such a big deal, really. What was one time? I could do anything one time. I would eventually jump from a plane, relying on a

static line to pull my chute. I dropped acid in college with my boyfriend Chris. Now my ex. I left my small town of Milford and equally small state of Massachusetts to attend college alone in Queens, New York where my mother was too scared to drive by herself, so my Aunt Vera came along for freshman orientation. I landed the lead in a college play, participated in statewide high school solo speech competitions, ran for and won high school class offices, tried out for high school cheerleading, making it two years, but not the third. I hitchhiked by myself. Picked up hitchhikers while driving alone. I'd gone into stores and stolen food and clothes. I camped out around Nova Scotia with Chris. Got him out of jail when the US border guards busted him for the few grams of hash we forgot to smoke and he'd hid under the floorboard, the first place the guards looked. I was an underaged passenger. I streaked with friends on my residential Florida street when they came to visit. I organized class-wide school-skipplings in high school. I snuck into movie theaters whenever possible to save on admission. I raided our college president's office with my student theatre group. I laughed when turning down an old hairy dentist who offered to be my sugar daddy in the middle of pulling out my wisdom teeth.

After all that, what was one more crazy-ass thing like making my father happy by agreeing to let him teach me about sex?

"How about we try a little mary?" my father said, and reached around into the ashtray. "This will do nicely." He smiled and lit the joint. From the first plane ticket he'd sent me to visit him in Florida when I was a college freshman in New York, we smoked pot together. Usually his. He was a hip dad who knew famous jazz musicians and invented gadgets. We were finally getting to know each other after he left my family when I was nine.

We alternated hits. The windows opened to screens, but no breezes entered. The ballet bar

he'd installed so I could practice, took up a corner of the room. He'd bought the lumber, sanded it, applied the stain and varnish. In the closet sat a tool he'd designed so I could fashion rings from sterling silver spoons and forks and sell them. He introduced me to flea markets where we bought the pieces cheap. He gave me a giant fish hook and spool of fiberglass thread and showed me how to make area rugs by sewing rug pieces together. Scraps we pulled out of a carpet factory's dumpster formed a pile next to the back door ready to be transformed into nifty area rugs I gave away as gifts.

Soon everything melted together the way it did when I was stoned. My father's penis looked like the neck of a clam. It hadn't been circumcised. He began to touch it. I asked him about the time he babysat and made me play with his penis. Had I been three? Four? "So it wasn't my imagination?" I said.

"Hell no. Your mother got so pissed," he laughed. "You should have seen her."

Look what I was able to find out. Things that had haunted me for years. Things I could never ask my mother as an adult. When I told her the next day when I was a child, she said I'd been dreaming. "Mom told me it didn't happen," I said. "All these years I thought I was crazy."

My father shook his head in that "what can you do?" manner. "No way I was going to let you end up a prude like your mother."

Tonight wasn't the first time I'd seen my father naked. He wore his boxers and undershirt around the house, but when I agreed to let him give me a lesson, he undressed. One lesson had been oral sex. Once. He did it to me. I didn't do it to him. I considered it the build-up lesson, the build-up to this. Other than the oral sex and this, he'd shown me his penis a few times. He explained how he hadn't been circumcised. The lessons were always up to me, but the way he

looked at me with eyes that squinted, the way he hesitated as if I were about to say something he didn't want to miss, it put pressure on me to make up my mind. Was I in or out, he seemed to be thinking all the time.

It's not that I was a virgin. I made sure he wouldn't be the first. That would be going too far, although really, wasn't it all too far? But who was there to ask? "No one's going to understand this, Rita," he'd tell me. "It's scientific. Most of the fathers in the world can't even ball their wives. A bunch of limp dicks. Do you think I want to see my precious daughter end up like that? You're a goddess. The world is your oyster." I wanted to be a goddess.

When my father climbed on me, or maybe we stayed on our sides facing each other, I held my breath. The smell of his Jean Nate practically burned my nostrils. His back felt oily even though he'd just taken a shower. South Florida humidity never let up. When I arrived in Miami, my dark brown hair reached the middle of my back. Within a couple of weeks I paid a corner salon to chop it off above my ears. But maybe it wasn't totally because of the hot, thick, wet air. My father looked at me like a tiger waiting to pounce. Short hair would be less enticing.

It was up to me, he made sure I understood from the beginning. From his first invitation to live with him rent-free so I could "stockpile tuition" and finish college. I'd had to leave after sophomore year when my savings ran out. One year of working nights at the post office, letting my dad teach me what he thought I should know, from him, was that too high a price to pay for a life not working in factories such as the Tupperware plant I worked one summer in Blackstone?

His hair puffed out on either side of his head aside a bald spot on top. His nose was a bit pointy with a bump on the middle of the bridge. His fingers were stubby. He'd clean out his fingernails with the end of his car key and wipe it on his pants as he talked. I tried not to think of

all these things. I just wanted the lesson, the last lesson, the ultimate one, to end, and for us to live together peacefully until I earned enough to finish college.

He tried to be gentle. It didn't hurt. I wasn't aroused. What was I supposed to be learning? When Chris and I made love, our entire worlds joined together. His wiry hair tickled my face; his young muscular body practically became mine. Not only was this guy my father, for God's sake, he was old. Forty-eight. But he was able to maintain a hard-on, he was proud to point out. Chris would get angry with himself for coming too fast. "I'm sorry, so sorry," he'd say. "Thank you for not getting mad." Why would I get mad? Could women complain about such things? His girlfriend before me, whose father owned an international men's clothing line, used to yell at him for coming too fast, he told me. They all hung out together. Rich kids from Long Island. They didn't go to St. John's where I had met Chris, but to colleges across the country. They'd meet up at Thanksgiving and Christmas. See each other over the summers. Once I asked one of the girls about her pink parka with the fur lined hood. She said "Oh I don't have it any more. It was last season's."

My father shuddered then pulled out. He asked if I'd liked it. Before I could answer, the phone on my night table rang. I didn't know I'd have that reaction to a phone call, but I thought "Oh, thank God." I felt rude answering it. My father looked at me partly as if he'd been hurt, which was probably a put on. He'd just gotten his way with his own daughter. The dumb bunny would believe any line of bull, just like her mother who steadfastly believed in a husband who'd eventually realize the mistake he'd made leaving his loving wife. He'd come back, she was sure. But I didn't let those thoughts linger.

"Oh hi, Chris," I said. "Nope nothing much." I winced when I glanced at my father, hoping he

wouldn't feel insulted, but then not caring if he were. The powder blue phone cord stretched between us. I covered the receiver with my hand and mouthed Chris's name. My father considered himself my advisor. He'd convinced me to lose my virginity in college. Chris played ice hockey for St. John's. He'd been an altar boy, his father was a lawyer and a judge, the perfect Catholic family. I pictured us married. But after eighteen months of dating, Chris became possessive, practically a stalker. When I'd broken up with him on the phone from my room in Milford, he was home on Long Island. Three hours later, he was knocking on my front door telling me he wouldn't let me go. I had no car, no money, a mother who wouldn't let anyone in our house, and a father offering me a place to stay a million miles away where Chris couldn't drive to every weekend if he wanted to graduate from St. John's that May.

My father resignedly left the room. The candle flickered as I concentrated on the weight of the receiver, something solid. My thoughts seemed to flicker, too. Was I actually talking to my ex-boyfriend after screwing my own father? But why stop and think about it? Just another crazy ass thing like my senior high school yearbook picture blown up to poster size hanging above my father's bed in the next room. He'd decorated it with the plastic streamers we'd ripped off in the middle of the night my first week there. The streamers went from the picture to the opposite corner of the room. Something a crazed schoolboy would do with a picture of his girlfriend. But nah, he wasn't really thinking I was his girlfriend. No way. He was just happy we were reconnecting after so many years apart. He'd taught me how to swim. My best friend Nancy would be visiting in a few weeks on her spring break, driving down from Salem State with her roommate. I would need no more sex lessons. Just work work work until college in September, eight months away.

"I'm sending you a bike," Chris said on the phone. "I promised you one. My break up present." Our mutual friend Bob would haul it on his VW bug when he visited.

When I pulled the top sheet up to cover myself, my body felt suspended between the waves, floating and drowning all at once.