

Do You Have a Girlfriend?

Driving down a narrow state route in western Oregon, somewhere between the Interstate Five straight in the Willamette Valley and the Pacific Ocean, meant that he was in the car with his grandparents. This usually means that they are going to a place far away from their home in Salem with him, which equates to long trips in the Honda SUV without stop and an included hour of obligated familial conversation. He was visiting them for the weekend. It is nice to see family every once in a while, even though the strings of inevitable drama or tension are usually attached. He sat in the back seat on the driver's side of the vehicle, looking out the window, watching the dashed yellow line of the poorly maintained state route come in and out of view as they traveled at high speeds through the window. The car had been quiet for several moments--just a few moments too long. Questions that can be adequately described as small talk are bound to pop up to break the awkward silence.

A few more moments passed.

"How's your life going?" his grandfather asked from the driver's seat of the car, likely with the intention to break the awkward silence that had consumed us all.

"Fine," he replied adding "I guess," to the end of the statement.

His grandfather gave a slight chuckle to his response. He had raised two kids of his own, so he was used to the all too typical and ubiquitous, yet mysterious teenager responses that could make anyone doubt their validity. He saw a slight grin appear between his grandfather's lips through the rear-view mirror. "What about your studies--school? You're starting as a freshman in high school next year. That has to be exciting." His grandmother's interested had been peaked,

re-positioning herself in her seat up front to be more engaged in the seemingly uninteresting dialogue.

"Not really," he answered, "I am pretty nervous about starting."

"Why?" his grandmother followed up on.

"Why wouldn't I be?"

"What is there to be nervous about?"

"New school, new people, new everything, lots of change..." he rattled off. He had been recently been diagnosed with social anxiety disorder, so all of the things he listed were potential triggers for the debilitating sense of panic associated with the illness.

"It's not that bad," his grandmother said in hopes of making him feel better, ignorant of his social anxiety. "You get a lot more freedom in high school compared to middle school, and I mean a lot."

He shrugged.

The question his grandfather had asked about being excited for the upcoming school year had been somewhat rhetorical. His grandfather knew that no 14-year-old wants to go to school. It is a state-mandated six hours in a building that resemble a prison. One where the busy work is plentiful and the plethora of social cliques roam untamed.

All of these questions were not unfamiliar to him. He had been asked variations of these mandatory grandparent questions many times over. He knew what to expect, however, he was never expecting them. He knew deep inside that one question, in particular, was bound to come up. It had come up reliably in every situation like this leading up to this late summer day in 2012. He never seemed to prepare for it though. It was like he fell victim to denial every time this

"deja-vu" conversation came up. He hoped it would never show up in the conversation, but it did so without fail every time. How could have he been not expecting it?

The conversation continued. More and more tension built up inside of him as more and more of the typical questions were used because the probability of *the question* coming up as a form of small talk increased. However, he did nothing to derail the conversation away from the small talk. He sat there passively in the backseat of the car with the false hope that *the question* would not come up. However, the questions became more and more personal as the car trekked down the narrow state highway. He tried not to think about it.

"How are your friends?" his grandmother asked with solely pure intentions. This spiked his anxiety even further. An old receipt he had found in the side compartment of the door found its way into his hands. He frayed the edges by tearing it in short increments along the sides, a nervous tic he had grown into while coming of age.

"Fine," keeping the answer short and sweet, doing nothing to turn the conversation around from its inevitable fate.

"Staying out of trouble, I hope?" his grandfather added.

"Yes," it seemed like the conversation was going the other way. But he continued to fray the old receipt. It slowly lost its paper-like integrity. *The question* was coming, but he sat there compliantly.

"Try not to get in with a bad crowd when you go back to school next year." His grandfather did not care to elaborate. His grandmother nodded in simultaneous agreement.

"Do you have a girlfriend?" The question came out of his grandfather's mouth just like that. The receipt in his hands tore just as quickly as the elephant in the room appeared, making

the once spacious SUV felt cramped and claustrophobic. There was no room to breathe and he started to perspire. His heart palpitated, even skipping a beat as heard the line. What does he say to that question--how does he respond? His mind drew a blank. The blink of an eye felt like an eternity as time stood still in the moment. He came back to reality as his mind slipped and fell for just a few milliseconds. He had to think quick. He looked over the door handle. It was locked. There was no chance he could jump out. The car was traveling too fast, as well. That was not a practical solution to the problem at hand. He could lie and say that he has a girlfriend, but he wouldn't even believe the lie himself. How could he expect his unsuspecting grandparents to believe it, too? It also felt like an oxymoron to him, foreign, somewhat dichotomous. It felt unnatural. He could tell the truth; he could take a risk. It would be a real risk, too. He replayed all of the possible scenarios in his head of what could go wrong. The shock of the truth could send the car off of the road. That was always a risk. He would not know how his grandparents would react if he told the truth. Would they accept the truth? Would they reject him if he confided his truth that he had been carrying for all these years? There was a lot on the line. His relationship with his grandparents could be damaged, his personal safety could be in jeopardy if he told his truth. He tore the two halves of the mutilated receipt out of the surge of cortisol that came from the question being posed, breaking it into uneven fourths.

It had been a couple of seconds since his grandfather posed the question. He had made his decision on the response he would give: "No." It was short but not sweet. It was safe but not sound. He had betrayed himself again. He had not told his truth. He had decided to hold onto it, to carry it with him as extra weight.

Skipping forward to the present day, he has yet to tell his truth to his grandparents. He has yet to tell his truth to his other, maternal grandparents as well. He has yet to tell his truth to his bible thumping aunt, or any of his extended family for that matter. How could he share his truth that he has carried for all of these years to his family? He had no idea what to expect from them, how they would react. Safety was a concern for him if decided to tell his truth: that he could never love a woman the way he could love a man.