Tess Ross-Callahan

Short Story #1

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Don’t Tell

I never told anyone that the first night my son came home with a boy, I didn’t speak to him for three weeks.

The second time, I threw him out of the house.

You have to understand, I wasn’t raised to talk about things. Talking, talk talk talk, it’s all over the news now as the trademark of good parenting: talk about it. *Talk to your son about his behavior. Have you talked to your son lately? Honey, someone’s got to talk to that boy.*

Talk.

The way I was raised, the surefire way to make a bad situation worse was to talk about it. Even asking my dad about his day could get you a licking. Whenever my mama insisted we eat dinner together, my dad would read *The Montgomery Advertiser* out loud between bites. Sometimes we’d discuss Kenny’s football game, but mostly we just listened to Daddy read about what ass-backwards decisions the liberals had just made in Congress. I never told anybody about my boyfriend Fred until he proposed. Even then, the only question my dad asked was how much Fred made, not all those questions you see on TV nowadays about what’s he like or does he treat you right and all that.

So I sure didn’t tell Fred when our son started talking about Prince Erik instead of Princess Ariel. I was never real sure about God, but Fred went to church every Sunday, and I didn’t want any trouble. So I tried, I really did. I gave Kyle all those books about God making the sunrise and I told him about the right way to fall in love and he was better at first, I swear. He even stopped drawing Prince Erik in art class. And I thought there was nothing else to worry about, that we’d sidestepped the crisis and that my boy was on the right track.

And then, fifteen years old, he came home with Richie Baker from algebra. No problem, I always feed my boy’s friends from school, I just buy beans instead of meat the next week. Fred might’ve complained, but Kyle had been so quiet, so isolated. I was glad to see him with a friend.

But when I went up to ask the boys to set the table for supper, they weren’t doing algebra at all. No, their backpacks were lying untouched on the rug like fat, dead birds, and they were lying on the bed together. I hadn’t seen so much of my boy since I’d been teaching him to wash his privates. And there they were, under my roof! Right under my nose!

They saw me and sprang apart like the little boys they were, and Kyle scrambled for the blankets. “Ma - ”

But I had nothing to hear from him. I told Richie he’d best leave this very minute, and I went downstairs and thought about burning the sausage, just so something would suffer for this sin. But in the end, I didn’t burn anything. I made that meal the best I’d ever made it, throwing my heart into my work, and it was so good that Fred commented on it when he got home. Kyle, though, didn’t eat a thing. He sat with his chin dipping towards his chest, his cheeks Alabama crimson.

And I didn’t say a word to him the whole meal.

From there, I just didn’t know how to stop. Kyle would come home from school and hover in corners, twisting his shirt between his fingers like he’d done as a little boy, and he’d say, “Ma, I think we ought to talk about this,” and “Ma, why aren’t you answering me?” But I never learned how to talk. So it stayed that way until he said, “Ma, are you going to tell Dad?”

“Tell him what?” It just came out.

Kyle dropped his head and pulled at the loose thread in his sweatshirt until it ripped. His mouth looked like it wanted to smile, but his eyes looked like the dark holes in the soil after I’d dug up my pansies — too empty to even be a grave. He walked out of my kitchen without a word, and just like that, we were on speaking terms again. I thought that was the end of it, but these things send out deep roots. Cutting off the head only slows them down.

When he came home for the first time from UC Berkeley, his father was out. When I opened the door, he was standing on the doorstep with another boy gripping his hand. Kyle’s face was not my son’s face. Older, without the small pouches of baby fat weighing down his cheeks, but it was more than that. The hem of his shirt wasn’t wrinkled or full of holes, and he held himself upright without needing to be reminded.

But I barely noticed these changes at the time, because I was looking their twisted-up hands hanging between them, and all I could think about was Faerie Daryl from my neighborhood, and what had happened to him, and how the blood stained the concrete for four whole months before the mayor finally ordered it painted over.

I didn’t close the door. I meant to, but I was stuck, staring, and now Kyle’s face looked the way it did when he was confronting the ref about a particularly bad call: scared and angry and determined, all at once. He wouldn’t leave, even when I told him to, and he kept trying to *talk* to me - talk talk talk - and finally I couldn’t stand it anymore, that word *talk* burning and pricking me like a bad fever, so I said it.

“You aren’t welcome here until you beat this sickness back for good.”

And something in my boy’s face closed, somehow. He turned pale and bitter as gin, and he turned, still with that goddamn stranger clutching his hand, and they got in his truck and drove away.

When I got the phone call after the Stonewall Riots, I didn’t cry. I made a sausage dinner. I made it perfect, absolutely perfect, and it was only much later that I found myself choking on my dinner and spitting it into the sink.

“What’s wrong, Elsie?”

I almost told him, but how do you tell your husband that his son was in the gay riots in California when your husband thinks his son is still in Alabama, maybe with a nice girl? How do you tell him that his son is paralyzed in a hospital and probably has a boy sitting at his bedside?

“I think I burned the sausage,” I told him, and put my napkin back in my lap.

Talking. I never did learn how to do it.

Words: 1127

LOVE THIS TESS. Really incredible. Glad to have it in the issue!