

Jeffrey Loeb

The Eye You See It With

JIM HAREN SHUSHED US WITH A FINGER TO HIS LIPS and turned back to the wall pantry. He nudged some cans over then flashed a big over-the-shoulder grin. Clustered next to the refrigerator, five of us boys gawked at the rough tunnel he'd plowed through the peas and beans. He reached deeper into the cavern and pulled out what looked like a strip of masking tape; a pencil-size stream of light poured between the cans. We jostled each other, craning to spot the wonder he'd promised. The running water on the other side stopped. The silencing finger shot back up. Jim stuck his head further into the gap and peered through the exposed hole. After a good ten seconds, he backed out, eyes rolling comically to heaven, a triumphant grin on his face. He motioned us to line up for our own peeks.

I don't remember where the Harens came *from* exactly. Maybe western Washington since they were always telling goofy stories about their sad-sack Spokane cousins. Another clue is, that's where they moved *to* a short time after the events I'm telling you about here. Anyway, at the point their family took occupancy of the empty house down the street things were changing for me. For one, I was needing some new friends—ones who weren't acquainted with my lying, sneaking ways—and three boys roughly my age seemed a welcome diversion from my problems. Most of these came from being trapped in a civil war brought on first, by my parents' embarrassing refusal to cease procreating and second, their desperate social climbing.

Until I was five, we'd lived in a neighborhood of cheap, barracks-like fourplexes slapped together just as the war was wrapping up. This whole development was rife with kids and babies, and I remember it as a kind of non-stop recess of tricycles, sandboxes, and fights. In short, it was fun. Then, when I was already in kindergarten, for obscure reasons—my parents insisted we'd outgrown the apartment—we moved into a new house in a "better" part of town. This was sizable, no question, with a big backyard and extra rooms to stow my two baby brothers. But I'd also had to switch schools, making me feel as welcome as a space alien in one of the creepy movies my father would drag me to. He'd been a scientist at Los Alamos and was rabid over the spate of post-WWII sci-fi films then rolling out.

Only a few kids lived in this new neighborhood, and since I wasn't allowed to range beyond our block, finding them was hard work. Mike, I met in my new kindergarten. His house, a small, older two-bedroom, was just across the street, and its size meant his family was somewhat suspect socially. Plus his father "only" ran a radiator-repair shop, and worse, his mother worked too—at an office job on Fort Riley. The final strike against them was, they rented their basement to two WACs, whom my father called "dikes," a puzzling word I never knew had a "y" option until several years later.

Once we got to about eight or nine, Mike's older brother, Murray (who by then had supplanted the downstairs boarders), for some reason seemed eager to explain the anatomy of girls, even though generally he had no

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use for us. He introduced these mysteries via a secret stash of magazines illegally obtained at Junction City's crummy bus depot. Normally, this was a hangout for sad-sack draftees—whom we disparagingly called “doggies”—but at fourteen, Murray was already adult-sized and told us he went there mainly to play the wall-to-wall pinball machines. Be that as it may, in the mid-fifties, the legal limit for publishing photos of naked women stopped at bare breasts, so these primers he brought home had to suffice for our lessons. Mike also told me privately that Sondra, a wild red-head from up the street, snuck through Murray's window at night so they could “do” it. Whatever it was.

My summertime universe also came to include Harry from across the alley. He was Mike's friend, but a year younger and a baseball nut—in fact, a great pitcher when he grew older—perfect for outdoor activities. His family owned a jewelry store downtown, an enterprise theoretically acceptable to my parents. When my mother got wind that they didn't attend church though, she came to suspect them of being Jews—already a vexed subject in our house. Ironically, our own name, Loeb, an established one in the area, had brought money into her life (as she'd no doubt planned), but also subjected her to unexpected frowns from some of the country club's more well-rooted members. My own biggest problem in those days wasn't Judaism, which I knew of mainly from catechism class, but the fact that her strident Catholicism had led to such a humiliating horde of younger siblings, four and counting at that point.

Harry, by contrast, was an only child. His parents had just added onto their house, including a new bedroom and bathroom just for him. With my home's riotous fights and Mike's cramped spaces, Saturday-night sleepovers at his place became a welcome ritual for the three of us. We'd stay up late and watch TV, then arise at a civilized hour to his mother cooking eggs and bacon (which, had my mother opened her ears, might have been some kind of tipoff). This ritual underwent a pronounced change when Harry's older Kansas City cousin came to visit for a week. He was much more sophisticated, and delivered up to us the miracle of masturbation, which of course became a sort of hobby.

Mike and Harry both went to public school, so I naturally saw less of them as time went on; our friendship got reduced to weekends at best. My St. X friends didn't seem to have the same allure, probably because none of them lived all that close. My real social downfall came in fourth-grade summer. Instead of going swimming at the public pool, we Loebes started getting whisked off to the newly-built one at the country club, which was segregated, of course. Hardly any kids I knew, from either school or the neighborhood, went there. We were odd ducks at best—three stairstep boys who looked alike, tanned easily (and darkly—some lifted eyebrows there!), and had a pregnant mother still lugging toddlers. Maybe two or three other Catholic families were members, but their kids weren't my age, plus golf turned out to be a weak substitute for sandlot baseball and football. Back in school that fall, word of my class betrayal shoved me even further to the margins. Then, like a miracle, the Harens moved in.

The summer I'm talking about, the one right after seventh grade, I took to heading for the Harens' house as soon as I could break loose. Their parents both worked, and the five kids were left to fend for themselves.

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By then, to my relief, my own had finally seemed to stop procreating. My mother, of course, was still a stay-at-home mom, chasing embarrassingly after my toddling brothers and sisters—not an ideal place for a thirteen-year-old to spend his long, lazy days. For one thing, I'd continued working on my interest in sex; all of us had, of course, constantly telling made-up stories or repeating frothy jokes we only half understood. Unlike the situation at my house, though, with both parents blatantly announcing the repulsive reality that they still did it, the Harens had had their kids at a decent age, giving themselves some respite and me a perfect place to hang out.

John and Michelle, the older two, were pretty much gone from the house all day. John was going into senior year at St. Xavier (the fact that the Harens were Catholic was the only reason my parents would allow me to “associate with” them) and would pick up his girlfriend to cruise town until well after dark, their heads plastered together in his flat-black '50 Ford. We'd spot them when we got bored enough to wander downtown. I can recall John's greased pompadour more than anything else about him, that and his customized hot rod. I can't actually remember ever talking to him, or even what his voice sounded like. Maybe it's because he and Terri got married right after graduation. I do know he became a barber, and she worked for years in a Junction City office-supply store.

Michelle, an upcoming freshman, wasn't as ambitious. She'd ooze out of the rack about ten or so and lounge around in her skimpy nightgown until it was time to face the day, which in summers usually meant laying out at the public pool with her equally languid gal-pals. She regarded our little gang as something like insect life, rarely speaking except to curse her younger brothers' laziness. In my nascent teenager's eyes, Michelle was prime booty, as her randy brother Jim would say. In school, she wore the shortest skirts allowed (and then rolled these under at the waist when she was out of the nuns' sight), and was remarkably stacked for her age. She'd wasted no time becoming tight friends with my disreputable cousin Sheila, both of them flouncing up and down the stairways, poking at their high, teased hair-dos and giggling at come-ons from panting seniors. And Michelle really was fabulous—bold, vivacious, with no prisoners taken once some poor hormonal specimen had fallen under her gaze. Except for maybe Sheila, she was the first girl I ever knew who'd “done it.” Every boy in school had a giant bone for her.

Charley, the oldest of the three younger Harens, had been born the same month and year as me. Maybe that's why he seemed the most interesting. That and we were both nearsighted, badly needing glasses neither of us yet had. He was also the calmest, which to me at that point also meant smartest. Jim was a year younger but big for his age, claiming to be tougher than everybody. He wore his collar up, lied constantly, and was totally sex-crazed. A grade behind him was Gary, who was gawky but close enough in age to hang out with us. He also suffered from a speech problem, pronouncing vegetables as “vashables.”

Their mother, Ann, was the one parent I knew for sure did it—and what *it* likely consisted of—because of the loud, embarrassing sounds emanating from her bedroom on nights when their father, Martin, was out of town. Ann was brash and boozy, a somewhat older and more dissipated

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version of her daughter, though even then you could see the handwriting for Michelle. Ann spoke to her kids in loud commands and wasn't above getting after even me on Saturday mornings when she'd emerge to find us watching TV: "Are *you* still here? Don't you have a home?" Things like that.

Martin was more mysterious, mainly because he wasn't around much, or for that matter very long. I remember him as tall, dark-haired, and quiet—natural enough since Ann always held court. He drove a new blue-and-white Ranchero, which because of their relative rarity in Junction City we thought was ultra-cool. He always carried a sharpshooter spade in the bed, though I never saw it used for anything. Car and shovel alike were commandeered by Ann after Martin suddenly disappeared, plus she upped the frequency of her male guests to nearly nightly. Whenever Martin's name would come up, the boys seemed to grow quiet.

Summer days at the Haren house were slow and unfocused, especially after Michelle had flounced out of her room. They had central AC and, unlike the rest of our families, subscribed to the town's new cable television system. These amenities were enough by themselves to draw us outsiders in, but there was a big, empty lot next door too. This was decent-sized enough for baseball, plus we'd dig foxholes there, or build forts for rock fights, even though we were getting a bit long in the tooth for such things. The lure of afternoon TV usually won out once the sun got high. Most of us at St. X had known each other for years, but when the Haren boys moved in, a new, more lawless quality came with them. Part of this went with being unsupervised, but even when the parents were home, there was always a kind of tension in their family—arguments and criticism were more out in the open than they were for the rest of us.

Together, the Haren parents ran the Gay-Ann, one of the several private supper clubs in town. Even by the Sixties, such joints were the only places in dry Kansas where thirsty people could legally buy a drink. The ghost of Carrie Nation still haunted Enterprise, just a few miles up Highway 40, and Prohibition wasn't that long gone. Since parched throats seemed to plague the connected most, country club bars had been semi-legalized during the war, but soon after, the Gay-Ann and places like it started paying the high license fees too. I'd witnessed the Country Club imbibing scene myself by then, but before the Harens, I didn't even know supper clubs existed. I *did* know that downtown Junction City was awash with soldiers strolling arm-in-arm with short-skirted, poofy-haired women, from one neon-signed 3.2 beer tavern to the next.

Supper clubs were a bit more refined than these saloons, actually serving mixed drinks to their members, along with food that topped out at least slightly above the jars of Polish sausages and giant dill pickles floating in brine. They also featured actual booths and tables with cloths, catering to enlisted men of a slightly higher cut—meaning NCO's—while officers went to their own club on post or drove to posh, sophisticated Manhattan, a college town about fifteen miles away.

It was Charley's so-called job to clean up the Gay-Ann on Saturday and Sunday mornings. Not long after I started hanging with him, he invited me to go along. His parents paid him a dollar a shift, and he gladly split this with me for helping him clean glasses off the tables and mop the

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sticky floors. The place was so underlit, I remember, that we'd have to tie back the frilly window shades so the morning sun could help guide us. It wasn't a particularly pleasing job, and the urine-splattered bathrooms, and even occasional used rubbers in the booths, were a real fright; it was, however, good company and fun in an out-of-the-ordinary sort of way. Any coins we found on the floor were quickly dropped into one of the wall-mounted juke boxes, letting the Everly Brothers and such pour forth through the dimness. It was a world away for both of us, however fleeting.

On the day in question, as we boys huddled in the Harens' kitchen, it was Michelle herself drawing the bath on the other side of the wall. We'd been lounging in the living room pretending to be interested in TV until the exact right moment. When that happened—when we heard the padding of her bare feet in the hallway and the bathroom door slamming shut—we leapt up as one and bolted into the kitchen for showtime. Jim hadn't actually told us what his surprise was, only that it involved his sister, a fact that by itself had us slathering.

The idea for the lower-case glory hole had come to him about a week earlier when he was innocently lounging in the kitchen gnawing on some leftovers and heard these same sounds of Michelle preparing her bath. Like the rest of us, he'd been entertaining inflamed visions of his sister's naked body. At some point, two pictures must have come together in his fevered mind: nude Michelle, of course, but also the crank hand-drill hanging in their garage. Over the intervening few days, he'd carefully arranged some indoor time when the coast was clear, and then crafted the narrow window-on-paradise laying before us.

After lining us up in what he felt was the proper order—basically by age, which meant Charley first and Gary last—Jim once again showed us the correct method of viewing (taking another full ten seconds at the perch, of course) and handed over the reins. Charley stooped awkwardly, then took a knee and leaned in precipitously among the cans. Jim bent and hovered close in case his help was needed. The splashing seemed to grow louder. Then Charley suddenly leaned out of the cavern and straightened, his expression more one of confusion than awe. Jim made some motion with his tongue and waved me into the now-yawning gap. I wasn't really sure I was ready for whatever vision I'd find, but manfully knelt nevertheless.

I squeezed my shoulders into the fearful cave. The swishing got louder. A pale, indistinct image floated into view through the lighted hole. I felt my head bang hard against the shelf above and jerked back. Cans went rolling by my shoulders, each thumping as it hit the linoleum. I heard loud curses through the wall and slowly lifted my gaze.

An enormous blue eye was staring right back at me.