

Let Me Embarrass Myself

By Anna Wostenberg

I can't recall what had upset five or six-year-old me in this particular scenario, but my oldest brother Eric and his best friend Matt had done something to really make me angry, as usual. They taunted me constantly, torturing the little sister who didn't know any better than to react to their goading, or at least that's my perception. It's very likely that I was, in fact, the instigator and they were just responding to my annoying little sisterly behavior, but that's not how I recall most of the events of my youth.

So the three of us are gathered in the kitchen, Eric and Matt sitting at the table and I'm standing just in front of them, my mom cooking something like Kraft Macaroni and Cheese on the stove. She was watching us as we argued about something that clearly was infuriating me.

"You're just a little girl!" I think Eric said to me, smirking triumphantly.

So I quipped back with, "Oh yeah?" And then, without hesitation, I turned around to face the old, crooked cabinets, grabbed the waistband of my pink velour leggings, and dropped them to my ankles, bending over at the waist and knees and exposing Eric and Matt to everything I had to offer.

"Anna!" my mom shrieked, dropping the wooden spoon into the pot and running over to where I stood. "Stop that! What are you doing?"

"I'm not done!" I yelled, but she'd already picked me up by my waist and was carrying me out of the kitchen as quickly as she could while I screamed in protest.

"I'm not done with them! Put me down!"

My mom finally plopped me down in the computer room and yanked my pants back up, giving me a brutal wedgie in the process, which I dramatically pulled out as she spoke. "What the hell were you thinking?"

"They made me mad!" I cried. "Eric moons me ALL the time!"

"Well, yeah, but you can't moon him when there are other people around!"

"But why not?"

"It's just not appropriate. It's not okay! You just exposed the moon AND the stars to Matt Nugent!"

"So? I don't care! They deserved it!" I insisted.

That's the point where my memory fades, but my family brings up this event at every possible opportunity.

"Hey, Anna, remember the time you mooned Matt?" they'll say casually every time I bring a new boyfriend home.

One time recently, 12 or so years after the event, I was in Los Angeles visiting Eric and Matt, who now live together. Eric was in the shower and Matt was playing the piano while I sat on the couch and listened quietly and complacently, eyes closed and my skin tickled by the snug summery breeze being delicately carried in through the open screen door. Matt suddenly stopped playing in the middle of a beautiful piece he'd composed, something that resembled "Für Elise" and, without looking up,

said, "Hey, Anna? Remember that time when you mooned me in your kitchen?" He giggled as my face burned.

I sighed and uttered a quiet, "Yeah," trying to play it off as a funny memory, but I was very aware that I would never live this story down.

But in my defense, my family had always been a family with few boundaries; we'd never really had much privacy, what with Eric and I sharing a room after he'd moved out of Dane's room. So it wasn't rare for me to be in the master bathroom brushing my teeth or something while one of my brothers showered behind the protection of the frosted glass doors. We'd mess with each other, slinging insults back and forth and laughing the whole time, not concerned about how much water we wasted, and when we'd pissed each other off, our form of saying "eff you" was to moon each other, so it had been completely normal and acceptable up until The Event, when I learned that this wasn't actually an acceptable way to show one's frustration. But at least it still makes my family laugh.

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My family lived in a house whose backyard opened up to a hill and valley. We'd always been exposed to the wildlife that this open space had to offer and I usually loved it. As a little girl, I loved watching rats scamper across our back fence and deer graze on the dead grass on the rare occasion that they'd meander close enough to our yard. But with these cute creatures also came the scary ones, like spiders.

So on one evening, my older brothers had discovered a big, hairy wolf spider by our back door.

"Let's kill it!" Dane suggested, and went to grab something hard.

"Wait!" Eric insisted. "Let's use some tape. So we can look at it after." Dane's eyes lit up at this twisted idea. So he retrieved the roll of packing tape and Eric quietly sneaked up on the disgusting spider and squished it with a piece of the tape.

"I wanna see!" I cried, trying to get a closer look, but the taller, thicker bodies of my big brothers blocked me.

"Okay!" In response, Dane pirouetted around and tried to shove the gut-splattered spider in my face.

"Dane, stop it!" my mom interjected. "Put it on the kitchen table for her to see." My mother wore her slightly frustrated, boys-will-be-boys grimace so Dane reluctantly obeyed and placed the spider sticky-side up on the clean white wood. I was just barely taller than the kitchen table with long blonde, hair that draped down my back to my butt. I eagerly pushed through the crowd of my brothers and mom to examine up close the anatomy of a wolf spider.

They're ugly. They're wide and flat and hairy and far larger than necessary. They're grotesque and should be removed from this planet. But maybe I'm biased.

Because as I leaned over the table, a few stray blonde hairs wiggled their way out of my tiny hand which was holding them back, and gravitated toward the taped up spider like a magnet. Before I realized what was happening, it was too late. The bloody spider tape had attached to my hair as I whipped it back, further entangling the mess.

I'm fairly certain my eyes actually leapt from my head as I screamed in terror and began running around my house, circling the island in the kitchen a few times and bulleting into the family room around the couches to escape the inescapable spider in my hair. All the meanwhile, my brothers were quite literally on the floor laughing at me, and my mother couldn't control her laughter either.

"Anna!" she yelled in between laughter sobs. "Anna! Stop!" But I had no intention of stopping and with every step I took, the spider became more and more irreversibly matted in my hair, inching closer and closer to my precious face. I ran back into the kitchen and circled the island once more when my mom jammed an arm out and caught me before I could dart out of the room again. The screaming continued.

"Shhh! Sit still!" she commanded. But I continued to sob, flailing and thrashing as she attempted to keep me still.

"Bill, I need scissors." My dad wordlessly brought over the scissors, a sympathetic smile mixed with an unnecessarily entertained grin on his face. My brothers calmed down enough to eagerly watch the surgical removal of the spider from my hair, stifling laughter behind their hands. I had calmed a bit, but was still shaking with terror and crying.

"Anna. The spider is dead," my dad tried to console me.

"You're overreacting," my mom piped in, still laughing. I hated being told that my behavior was inappropriate and I abhorred when my family laughed at my expense. It happened far too often, being the baby of the family. She delicately picked apart the section of my hair that the spider was adhered to and gently

snipped the hair, freeing me from the spider. I bolted to the couch and dove into the familiar leather cushions, hiding my shame in the pillows.

This story, unlike the one where I mooned Matt, is a memory I can laugh at with my family now, although it took a long time to get to that point. I wish I could say that these moments had some huge impact on who I've become today or that they define me as an individual, but they don't. Well, except maybe for the extreme phobia of spiders that I still have. But we sit at the kitchen table together on the rare occasion that all three of us are home under the same roof, pretending our parents never separated. Or Eric and I will go shopping for a Christmas gift for his girlfriend and he'll jokingly say, "Hey, you moon anyone lately?" and I'll still react just as immaturely as if I were still five or six years old but he still goads me on just like when we were kids. Or Dane and I will be draped like Dali's clocks on the couch watching *Family Guy* and argue over who should get up and make dinner. None of us act our age of 21, 25, and 28.

They're just things that have happened to me that have contributed in small ways to the woman I've turned into. They're the stories that I'm going to try my hardest to prevent my brothers from recounting at my wedding one day. But they're also the stories that can bring us together as a family and make us realize that we do have something we can all laugh at: me. And I'm okay with being that lightning rod of embarrassment for my family. So as much as I pretend that I'm humiliated and hate that once again the Anna-Mooned-Matt story or the Anna-Got-A-Spider-Stuck-In-Her-Hair story came up in conversation, I secretly enjoy it, because it means we're having a good moment and I treasure those rarities.