

Boy

Marsha P. Cobb

Marshall and I were close in age. I think he always resented the fact that I was born first. Expecting their first child, my parents were overjoyed. They were fulfilling a life-altering dream; it was, after all, the responsibility of every man to father a son, - a male heir, a protector, a provider, a father, a man, someone to continue the race and carry on the proud family name and heritage. In one small package, God delivered to our family a baby. Surprise, I was not a boy.

My parents had prepared for the arrival of this special child with all the normal items needed to care for an infant: diapers (cloth of course), glass bottles, nipples, belly bands, flannel receiving blankets, and baby powder. A name was carefully chosen, Marshall Glenn. When I surprised them, they named me Marsha Lynne.

My brother arrived sixteen months later. As we grew out of the toddler stage, people upon hearing our names, would ask, "Are they twins?" But we didn't call Marshall by his name. We called him Boy; he was, after all, the only one we had. The word boy has been used by some to degrade and demean men in our society, but in our family, it was a name of distinction elevating him above all the girls. When Dad wanted someone to help in the yard, he would call out, "Boy." When Mother needed the kitchen trash taken out after supper, all she had to say was, "Boy, take out the trash." Neighborhood friends could be out playing in the yard, but we all knew who was being summoned when we heard someone shout, "Boy."

Our names never were an issue with us; we thought we were special. Terrorizing our younger sisters provided us many hours of sidesplitting laughter. Rolling around together in the grass, seeing who could win the wrestling match, occupied many lazy summer afternoon hours. Capturing lightning bugs in Mason Jars and playing hide and seek after dark with flashlights were just a few of the things we did together. One of my favorite memories was playing in the creek that ran through our property. Boy and I were pals. We shared everything.

Our home wasn't large. Our family was. The main floor of our cinderblock home was a square consisting of a living room, dining room, kitchen, two bedrooms and a bath. The bedrooms were occupied by our parents and two younger sisters. A flight of plywood stairs concealed behind a door in the dining room led to the unfinished second floor. This area was our bedroom. My older sister, Frances, and I shared a double bed. Boy had his own. Mother had nailed a cotton bedspread to a rafter creating a wall between our rooms. Privacy was provided, and we respected the boundary of cloth.

I don't remember the exact time we stopped being pals and became brother and sister, but I do remember the summer it happened. Summers were hot and dry where we lived; air conditioning was only available in the movie theaters. A window fan was the best we could hope for. It was on one of those hot summer nights that Boy no longer shared everything with me. My sister and I silently sweltered in our bed, not moving because we believed if we lay still we would be cooler. Even the air sucked into the room by the window fan offered little relief. The hot summer night air baked us. It was at this moment that I heard the sound.

“Boy” I whispered, “Did you hear that?”

“Hear what?” he whispered back.

“That sizzling sound. It sounded like the hiss of a snake,” I replied.

“You’re hearing things. Go to sleep and stop bothering me,” grumbled Boy.

As summer passed slowly, the same reoccurring sounds assaulted my ears during the nights. What was going on? What was the origin of this sound? When my curiosity could no longer stand it, I peaked around the curtain wall and found the source of the hissing snake. Boy had a bottle of Coke Cola. Carbonated bubbles were exploding into the night air as he slowly poured it over ice cubes. Not only did he have one bottle of Coke Cola, he had a whole carton.

We never bought pop. We didn’t have the money for that kind of thing. Where did Boy get the money? How did he get that carton of six clanking glass Coke Cola bottles into the house without anyone knowing? Why wasn’t he sharing with me? That was the real question; why wasn’t he sharing with me? I did the only thing I could do. I told Mother. “Mother, Boy has pop in his room” I complained. Her reply caught me off guard; she told me to mind my own business. What was going on? Was there a conspiracy between my mother and brother? Does Dad know about this?

His response was equally disturbing, “What were you doing in your brother’s room?”

That summer, Boy had entered a new phase in his life. He didn’t need me to walk with him to the little store two blocks away. He was growing taller every day and spending more time with his neighborhood chums than with me. Boy was earning money mowing lawns and making decisions without consulting with me. He no longer needed a sister for a pal. Boy had begun the journey to becoming a man. He was no longer a boy.