

# Chapter 20

*I* had thought Miles was at Desmond's house, that it was like any other night and that the boys were just hanging out playing video games. After dinner Miles had told me he was going to Desmond's to check out the new Spider-Man release on PlayStation. Sometimes on a Saturday night the boys had to work – Desmond at his job at the mall, Miles at the cinema where he sold popcorn and candy – but if they weren't working their jobs the boys were spending time together at Desmond's house or our apartment. I'd told Miles as he'd grabbed his jacket and backpack not to stay out too late, and he'd given me a nod and a smile – an actual genuine smile – before heading out the door. I'd assumed it was just two best friends hanging out together, nothing to be worried about.

Miles had pretty much stopped spending time with his other friends. After Desmond moved to the neighborhood Miles still saw Hunter, Josh, Carson, and the rest of them once in a while, if they found themselves together at the basketball courts after school, or online in games of Fortnite or Apex Legends, but in the last year even those interactions had occurred less and less often, and when I would ask Miles about one of his old friends he'd just shrug and tell me they did other things now. They didn't have jobs, like Desmond and Miles, they joined clubs, like chess

and yearbook. Yearbook was quite popular, in fact – I heard from one of the other mother’s that nearly everyone wanted to be on the yearbook committee, so they could get as many of their own pictures in the yearbook as possible. When I asked Miles about it, however, he insisted that he didn’t want to join. He said he *didn’t* want his face plastered throughout the school yearbook, that he hated seeing even his single standard class picture in there.

“Why?” I asked, surprised, knowing that he liked posting Tik Tok videos and seeing himself captured in other ways.

“You’re the handsomest kid in the class,” I added.

Miles sighed. “I don’t want to be the diversity poster child for the school.” And then he’d admitted to me that he actually ducked and hid every time he saw a yearbook person in a classroom with a camera.

“I get it,” I said, not trying to talk him out of avoiding the camera.

I was pretty certain it had just been Miles and Desmond hanging out together the night before, and no one else, but I didn’t know exactly what they’d been doing. “They were at Desmond’s,” I told Bob, “I’m sure of that. Probably playing video games.”

“How might they have ended up at that party?” the lawyer pressed me.

I thought about it. Neither of the boys had a driver’s license, but Desmond did have a learner’s permit and I knew that he had snuck out in his grandfather’s car in the past. I’d seen him backing out of the driveway before, when Cierra was working an overnight shift at the hospital and his grandparents were presumably already asleep in bed. I never said anything. I didn’t want to be the one to get Desmond into trouble. I supposed the boys could have taken the car and driven by this party, hoping to catch a glimpse of things, maybe even see Sarah or some other girl. I guess I could see them doing that, driving by the party if Miles or Desmond had been interested in someone who they knew was going to be there. It had taken awhile, longer than I’d expected frankly, but my son had at last become preoccupied with girls.

It had started, in some sense, in fifth grade when the school sent an announcement home that there would be a three-week health class on the topic of puberty, and boys' and girls' anatomy. We were advised as parents to prepare our kids for the lesson and talk to them about sex and their changing bodies.

After getting the announcement I'd tried doing that, making Miles' favorite meal for dinner and asking him if he had any questions about girls or boys bodies, or how babies were made. But at the time all he'd done was shake his head and push some food around on his plate.

I kept at it, however, wanting to keep the lines of communication open, trying to make sure Miles was comfortable coming to me with any questions he had about sex and the human body. Throughout middle school I asked Miles if he liked any of the girls in his classes, or any of the boys for that matter, but for years he gave me a disgusted look while shaking his head. Sometimes he admitted to me who Josh liked, or who Hunter had tried to kiss at recess, *other* kids who were indeed talking about penises and holes and finding squirreled away moments to show each other things. But Miles himself, through sixth and even seventh grade, insisted it was all gross.

But by eighth grade Miles had finally started bringing up the topic himself, albeit indirectly, through jokes he'd heard or confusing videos he'd seen on YouTube.

"Why do you have to drag a girl by the hair, and not by the feet?" he asked me one day, looking up from his tablet.

"Um, you don't have to drag a girl at all, I don't think."

"Just answer the question, mom."

"Seriously though, that's a terrible question. Never drag a girl anywhere."

"*Ok*, but if you did, why by the hair?"

I sighed. "I don't know. Why?"

"Because if you drag her by the feet, her hole will fill up with dirt."

It was such a terrible joke I didn't know what to say at first. But then it dawned on me that, despite what some of his

friends might be doing, Miles had clearly still not seen an actual vagina, and that he had no clue how they worked. “The vagina isn’t a gaping hole,” I’d finally responded. It won’t just fill up with dirt. It’s got lips. Is your mouth always hanging wide open?”

But then Miles’ mouth did hang open. “A girl’s hole has *lips?*”

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By high school, Miles’ interest in girls was full blown, blotting out nearly everything else – 2K, Nike Airs, basketball even – nothing consumed him as much as his interest in, and confusion about, girls and what they did.

I found Miles watching the Kardashians on his tablet one afternoon. It didn’t seem like the kind of show a teenage boy would watch. I leaned over his shoulder to see what was going on, but he moved to block the screen from my view.

“Is that *Keeping up with the Kardashians?*” I asked.

Miles just glared at me in a way that said *Leave me alone, Mom*. When I remained standing where I was he took the tablet to his bedroom, and closed the door. A few days later I saw him watching *Save the Last Dance*, and then *Candy Jar*, movies that all featured interracial couples.

I considered Sarah. She was white, and beautiful, like a lot of the girls in the shows Miles had been watching. Had Miles and Desmond cruised by that party hoping to catch a glimpse of her? But Miles had been friends with Sarah for as long as I could remember, she wasn’t a mystery to him. In fourth grade, Sarah was the neighborhood girl who collected Pokémon cards, wore superhero t-shirts, and knew the names of all the Lego Ninja minifigures. All the boys thought she was cool and by middle school they were all comfortable enough around her to let her join their games of pick-up basketball; the only girl who ever did.

Sarah wasn’t just a tomboy, however. Over the years she’d grown lanky and tall, with brown hair that swung in waves

down the middle of her back. She had big brown eyes and a disarming smile and, frankly, she was gorgeous. When freshman year of high school started I was overjoyed when Miles worked up the gumption to ask her to the homecoming dance. I was as let down as he was when she said no. Despite my prodding, Miles refused to ask anyone else to the dance that year, and instead he stayed home.

Desmond didn't end up going either, having been turned down by both the girls he asked.

"White girls," I overheard Desmond saying to Miles one evening as they sat in Miles' bedroom, "they think they so much better than us. They think they can like our music, like our clothes, flirt with us and tease us, but never actually go out with us. It's bullshit."

I was so surprised by the anger in Desmond's voice I'd nearly tripped. Had Desmond sounded more innocent, more hurt, I would have entered the bedroom and spoken to them about girls and relationships. Instead, I'd backed away down the hall, hoping they hadn't heard me, stalling for time to think.

I contemplated whether I should talk to the boys about dating myself, or have someone who wasn't white do it. I thought of Cedric, but knew that he was busy because Tiffany was out of town again on another international business trip. Her career had really taken off, and she was rarely in the country anymore. I was happy for her, but sad for myself. These were the perils of relying so much on a single close friend. I wished, again, that Cierra and I were better friends. But we weren't.

Unable to sleep one night I'd turned to Facebook. I'd opened my computer and in the blue glow of light typed, "answers to ignorant white questions about inter-racial dating," but no relevant page turned up. I tried, "I have a Black son with a crush on a white girl. What now??" A few edited searches later I came across an inter-racial adoption support group open to new members that had some recent relevant activity. When I read through the threads, however, I noticed one white person after another being hounded for, and made to feel embarrassed by, their basic questions. It was not a welcoming atmosphere. I sighed and closed the computer.

I thought about my mom, something I'd been doing a lot lately as my relationship with Miles entered the rocky teenage years, and I wondered what she would say. She had stressed to me when I started dating to be careful – to keep my guard up in any interaction, even if I already knew the boy. It had been sound advice for me, but it wasn't relevant to my son.

I decided that I just needed to be there, that I needed to make it clear to both Miles, and Desmond, that I was available, no matter the situation. I decided that if I kept the communication lines open, both boys would eventually talk to me. So I baked chocolate chip cookies, I walked noisily down the hall, and I waited, while Miles and Desmond huddled behind Miles' now always closed bedroom door, playing loud music and saying things I could no longer hear.

Thinking about it in the police station, I realized that waiting might not have been the best decision. Miles had not come to me with a question, or even a joke, in months and I suddenly realized that I no longer knew what he was thinking, or, apparently, what he was doing.

“He was with Desmond last night,” I said to Bob, holding up my hands. “That's all I know. I thought they were just hanging out playing video games. I honestly don't know anything else.”