

There's Someone's Penis On My Shoulder So I Can't Salute The Flag

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I

The first thing I noticed about Garcia was his dick. When I was shown into what was to be my bedroom at the Gray Wolf Military Academy he was standing next to the window inspecting it. Fat and brown it lay like an uncircumcised sausage in his hand. For a second I thought it was a sausage, that is until I saw that it was attached to Garcia. Before I could make any sense of what I was seeing, Lieutenant Brewster, the cadet officer who was accompanying me, shouted at the occupied, preoccupied Garcia.

'Cadet! Unhandle that, right now! Drop it, Mister!'

Garcia looked up, startled. He let go of his dick. Unsupported, it flopped down dead against his leg. Hurriedly he stuffed it into his pants. He gave the officer a weak smile and shrugged. Brewster, who must have been all of sixteen, maybe seventeen, went red in the face, his eyes widened, his mouth twitched. He began to yell again.

'You are a stupid Spick jack-off, Garcia!'

He paused. Garcia looked at him blankly, trying to figure out what was happening, his thoughts lingering on the business recently in hand.

'What are you?'

'I am...'

'Stand to attention Cadet! Eyes front!'

For a moment Garcia's eyes flashed at Brewster, then the spark dimmed and he stood, straightening his narrow shoulders.

'What are you Garcia?' he asked again, this time in a quieter, more menacing voice.

'A stupid Spick jack-off,' answered Garcia, low and tight.

'A stupid Spick jack-off, SIR!,' insisted Brewster, who was now looming over the ramrod Garcia, breathing into his face.

'A stupid Spick jack-off, Sir!'

'What did you say, Garcia? I couldn't hear you. Did you hear that Mr. Cohen?'

'I...'

'No? I didn't think so. Mr. Cohen didn't hear you either Garcia. Louder!'

'A STUPID SPICK JACK-OFF, SIR!!,' screamed Garcia, the veins standing out on his neck.

'That's better. Much better.'

He walked around Garcia, looking him up and down, as if he were a piece of furniture. Garcia didn't move. Frozen to the floor, barefoot, tee shirt half stuffed into his blue uniform trousers, thin arms stiff at his side.

'Stand at ease.'

Garcia sagged from the knees. His eyes shifted sideways, giving me a quick inspecting glance.

'This is your new roommate Garcia. Cohen, Simon R.. Right? You see to it he gets settled in, learns the ropes. There won't be any problems, will there Mr. Garcia?'

Mr. Garcia. Mr. Cohen. Two thirteen year old kids. I had never been called 'Mr.' before.

Military uniforms, boarding school. I was going to be sort of a soldier. My dad said so. I would get a rifle, march up and down. It was going to be great fun, an adventure.

'Of course, Mr. Cohen, Simon will be very happy here. All our boys are happy,' he had said in a clipped, word-counting voice. 'We see to that. Now, don't you worry about a thing.'

Colonel Dallas D. Dennis. A short round man with a large wart above his sharply trimmed gray moustache. Gold oak leaves on the collar of his khaki uniform. A full colonel. But, Colonel Dallas D. Dennis didn't look happy. He didn't look like he was in the business of making anyone else happy. How could he make me happy? Before we came my father had assured me I would be.

'You understand, don't you Simon? Your mother and I are going to live apart for a while.'

'Yes, Dad, but...'

'It will be the best for all of us in the long run. It's just that right now it is difficult and we thought you would be better off, Ah... happier here. It's a very good school, lots of things to do. I'll come see you on the weekends. We'll go out, have a good time. OK my boy?'

He patted me on the back, gave me a quick hard kiss on the cheek. His lips felt cool, dry - not like my mother's at all.

'What about Mom?'

'Ah, well she's gone up north to visit your Aunt Esther. I'm sure she'll write, come visit you when she gets back.'

We got out of the car. He unlocked the trunk and took out my big red suitcase. All my stuff was in there, including the new uniforms. We walked up stone stairs through big white pillars and into a large old fashioned building. The Colonel's office was in a room with a view of the parade ground. I looked out the window but there was nothing much to see. A field of hard packed dirt and a high wire fence. I tried to imagine it full of boys in uniform, marching behind a band.

When the interview was over my father shook my hand like I was a proper grown-up and left me with Colonel Dennis. I felt like a proper grown-up. For about two minutes, I did. Then the feeling passed and I wanted to go home.

Brewster went out of the room. Just me and Garcia.

He threw himself down on his bed, not looking at me.

'Son of a bitch!' he spat, slamming his fist into the pillow with each new word. 'Bastard! Shithead! Asshole! Fucker! Dick! Cunt! Son of a bitch!'

It was very impressive. The first time I had ever heard such a variety of swear words, a couple of which I had never heard, from someone my own age. It was exciting. It was scary. I didn't know

what to say. He wasn't really talking to me anyway, so I waited to see what would happen next.

'What you looking at, huh Cohen? Jesus and Mary, me and TWO Jew-boys! Two! What do those fuckers want from me? Huh Cohen? What do they want? Bastards!'

Jew-boy? First the magical incantation of FUCK and now Jew-boy. JEW-BOY. I hadn't really thought much about that. My parents didn't go to temple, I hadn't even had a barmitsva. Nothing. No contact with real Jews or real anti-Semites. And here was this Mexican kid calling me a Jew-boy. I thought I had better ignore it. I did have to live with him, didn't I?

I picked up my suitcase and looked for somewhere to put my clothes.

'OK, that's your bed, man,' he said pointing to the far side of the room. 'The other one belongs to Goldstein. Put your stuff there in that chest.'

'Thanks.'

'Yeah, no sweat. Hey, my name's Angel,' he said, sticking out his hand.

I put out mine and then remembered what he had recently been holding. I hesitated, hand half-way up. Garcia didn't notice. Maybe he thought I had short arms. He took a step closer grabbed my hand and squeezed. I squeezed back. He stared into my eyes, smiled with lots of Mexican teeth and squeezed harder. I had made my first mistake. The kid was skinny but much stronger than me.

'OK, I give, I give,' I yelped, before he could completely fuse my fingers.

He let go and then picked up the conversation as if nothing had happened.

'It's really *Ang-hell*, but everyone calls me Angel. Anglos can't get around it.'

'Anglos?'

'Yeah, you know white people, like you.'

'Oh, I see.'

I didn't.

'So what you in for then, Cohen.'

'In for?'

'Yeah, man, like what did you do to get your ass thrown in here.'

I didn't understand. I told him I hadn't done anything.

'You sure, man? Come on,' he said putting his arm over my shoulder and putting his face close next to mine. His breath smelt like stale cigarettes and ham.

'You can tell Angel. Everyone's in here for something.'

'No, really I haven't done anything,' I protested.

'Like with me it was stealing stuff. Nothing big, right? Just little bitty shit. Candy, comics, maybe some cigarettes - that kind a shit. If my old man hadn't had the bread to send me here I'da been in a fucking reform school wouldn't I? Yeah,' he said squeezing my shoulder, 'what we got here is a reform school for rich kids. Shit yes we do.'

At that moment an enormously fat boy eating a Hershey bar ambled into the room. He was almost six feet tall and put together like slabs of random meat. I didn't want to think what he had done to get sent to Gray Wolf. Probably ate somebody. He stopped when he saw us. His eyes looked swollen, floating behind the bottle thick lenses of his glasses.

'Got a new girl friend, Garcia? Ha. Ha. Ha.'

'Up yours Goldstein! You dumb kike!'

'Wetback faggot!' shot back Goldstein.

This was my other roommate, my fellow Jew-boy.

Angel laughed.

'This,' he said with a wicked cackle, patting me on the back, 'is Cohen, our new roommate. Say hello to one of your own guys, Howie Goldstein.'

'Shit! Another bedwetter,' said Goldstein, licking the last of the chocolate from his thick fingers.

If I hadn't been so frightened I would have broken down and cried. I knew there was no way I was going to survive these two guys. Absolutely no way.

'You know what else Goldstein?'

Goldstein didn't reply. He didn't look particularly interested in the 'what else'.

'He didn't do nothing to get sent here. You believe that? Nothing. Nada. Zip. Shee-it!'

'Is that a fact,' said Goldstein, yawning hugely.

Bits of chocolate clung to his teeth, to the edges of his wet lips. From his shirt pocket Goldstein pulled out a giant sized Tootsie Roll and unwrapped it. After inspecting it closely and assuring himself that it was in fact a Tootsie Roll, he stuffed it into his mouth.

'You're all gut, Goldstein,' said Garcia, 'all fucking gut. You ever stop eating, man?'

Goldstein gave Garcia a disdainful look, yanked a Batman comic from his back pocket and collapsed on his bed. The wire bed frame bulged and screamed, scraping the floor. He held the comic close to his face. He moved his lips as he read.

I unpacked my things and hoped that somehow it would get better. That it would all be ok.

It didn't and it wasn't.

II

'I hear we got us some new meat here.'

'Hey Swede, go easy now.'

'You say what, greaseball?'

'Nothing, man. I say nothing.'

The Swede filled the doorway. He was all squares. Square head, square shoulders, square fists. Squares. Big ones. Except for his eyes. They were steel blue points encased in folds of unsympathetic pinkness. He aimed them at me.

After a minute or two he lumbered over to my bed. My mouth went cotton-dry. Undoubtedly, at the very least a mass murderer. He probably did it with a blunt axe. The whole family, father, mother, sister. Little blood covered pieces all over the house. Whatever crime he the had been sent here for, the guy was definitely trouble. An earthquake, a tidal wave, a hurricane. There was no defense, especially for an undersized shit-scared thirteen year old.

He looked me over, then caught sight of the large framed photo of my parents which I had put next to the bed. The picture had been taken when I was about five or six. The three of us, all together outside the house on the lawn, suspended forever in a blissful family moment. It was my lifeline. The Swede picked it up, turned it around in his big hand.

'This your mommy and daddy then?' he said, taunting me.

'Please,' I whined, 'can I have it back?'

'You want it? Yeah? Sure you want it. Why don't you come get it?'

He turned away and stood once again in the doorway, holding the photo at arms length.

'Come on Swede,' said Garcia, 'give the kid back his picture.'

'You wanna make somethin' of it Mex?'

Garcia didn't.

The Swede laughed and threw the heavy frame across the room in my general direction. It sailed through the air as if in slow motion. I tried to catch it, but it floated between my outstretched arms and smashed against the wall. I knelt down to pick it up. The glass had shattered, but I could still make out the faces in the photograph.

'Well now, I'm real sorry about that. That is too bad. You got a name punk?'

'Simon Cohen, sir,' I answered, voice and knees quivering, vision blurred with self-pitying tears.

'You don't have to call him sir,' said Garcia, 'he's a dumb fuck private, just like you and me.'

'Shut it, Mex 'less you want a fat lip.'

Garcia shut it.

'Cohen, huh?' continued the Swede. 'Jesus H. Christ, another fucking kike! Yeah, shit! This fucking place is becoming a regular kike camp. Ain't that right, Goldstein?'

Goldstein didn't look up from his comic. Instead he lifted one mammoth wobbly thigh and farted. Loud, damp, blubbery, it shook the room, bounced off the windows, and smelled like nothing imaginable. Garcia collapsed in a fit of laughter. I couldn't think what to do. I looked at the Swede. He looked at Goldstein. Goldstein, apparently unconcerned, continued to read Batman, lips moving slowly over each word.

'Funny man. Very funny, I don't think,' said the Swede, who didn't look like he could in any case.

I waited for him to do something. But what can you do, even if you're built like the Swede, when someone as large and inert as Goldstein farts at you? That problem was apparently too much for the Swede's limited imagination. He shook his head, muttered something about 'fucking kikes' and disappeared. The doorway seemed much wider after he had gone.

I had been at the Gray Wolf Military Academy for about an hour and a half. It wasn't getting any easier.

III

'Hey kid,' said Goldstein, putting down his comic, 'you got any money?'

'A bit,' I replied cautiously.

My father had given me \$5 in new one dollar bills. It was a fortune at a time when my weekly allowance was 40 cents and it cost 25 cents to get into the Saturday matinee. I didn't think about it at the time, but I suppose it was conscience money. I was being paid off.

'You know how to play rummy?'

'Rummy?'

'Yeah, gin rummy. It's a card game. You want me to teach you? I don't mind doing that,' he said with a magnanimous wave of his fat hand.

'Careful kid,' said Garcia. 'The guy's a fucking shark. He don't care that you're a Jew.'

I was young, I was inexperienced, but I didn't need Garcia's advice on that one. I knew instinctively that Goldstein was not doing me a favor. He was the kind of person who only did favors for Goldstein. But, I was desperate to make contact, to establish myself with my roommates. I agreed.

An hour later my five dollars was gone. I was devastated. I had never had so much money all at one time and now it had gone. I felt sick to my stomach. I was alone. Helpless. And now broke. If my father ever found out he would kill me.

'You gotta pay to learn, kid,' said Goldstein with a rippling shrug.

The lesson was over. No free rides with Goldstein.

Somewhere down the hall a bell sounded. Goldstein was up from his bed and out the door before the echo died away. He dressed as he ran.

'Dinner,' explained Garcia. 'It's the only time Old Lard Ass ever makes a quick move. Come on, I'll take you down.'

At least someone was being nice to me.

Angel straightened my tie and then stepped back to check everything was OK. The wool itched and the new shoes pinched, but it was great to be in uniform. It made me feel grown up, important. Neither feeling lasted very long.

'Not bad, Cadet. Not bad. Right, let's do it.'

Outside the room the high ceilinged green linoleum corridor was full of boys, running and punching each other, laughing and shouting. A stampede of blue uniforms. Their heavy shoes pounded on the floor. The noise was deafening, disorienting. Angel took my arm and gently shepherded me through the confusion to the dining hall.

It was a lot calmer in the dining hall. Wooden floors, dark wood paneled walls. All highly polished. The footfalls and the voices were muffled, church-hushed. The boys stood quietly at the long tables, heads bowed. An older boy, a cadet officer, was at the front of the large room, waiting for everyone to settle in their places.

'We thank you Lord for all your bounties. We know that...'

'Fucking chipped beef and cabbage!,' Goldstein complained under his breath.

'We pray for all those less fortunate...'

'Goldstein!' hissed the cadet officer at the head of our table, 'you shut your fat mouth or you'll be on report.'

'... for the many blessings that...'

Goldstein snorted disdainfully in reply.

'Fart food,' giggled Garcia.

'Right, Cadet you are on report!'

'Shee-it, man! Wad I do?'

'Ah-men.'

'AH-MEN,' replied a hundred solemn voices.

Goldstein had been right. The food looked terrible. Slivers of red meat floating uncertainly in a thin white sauce. The

cabbage was overcooked mush. It could have been almost anything - anything greenish.

I missed my mom's cooking. I missed my mom.

Before I could pick up my fork I was yanked to my feet by two older kids.

'New boy!,' they shouted in unison.

'NEW BOY!,' shouted back everyone else in the room.

I could feel my face reddening, my stomach heaving.

'Up on your chair, New Boy.'

I climbed up. It was dead quiet. A hundred boys looked up at me. Waiting for something. There was nowhere to go.

A rhythmic thumping began. First it was only a few of the boys, but soon they all joined in, slamming their feet in unison up and down on the hard floor. Plates, glasses and silverware jumped and rattled. Two hundred marching feet. Up and down. Up and down. My legs went rubbery.

'Name, New Boy?!,' yelled the two holding me.

My throat was dry, constricted. I tried to speak. Nothing happened. It didn't matter. I couldn't remember my name! I had lost it somewhere in that sea of silent jeering faces, somewhere in that wave of hostile regimented noise. If only I could have fainted.

'Simon Cohen, sir,' I finally managed to squeeze out between shaky lips.

'We can't hear you New Boy. Louder!'

'Simon Cohen, sir!'

'SIMON COHEN, SIR,' screamed the room.

It was only then that the two boys let me sit down and eat my chipped beef and cabbage.

IV

After the ordeal in the dining hall my room felt safe. Even with Goldstein and Garcia.

I picked the broken glass out of the frame the Swede had busted. The photograph was cut in a few places but it would be OK. I put it back next to my bed.

It was 8:30. My first day at Gray Fox was almost over.

An hour later a bell rang.

'We got ten minutes before lights out,' explained Garcia.

He showed me where the bathroom was. The white tiled room was full of boys, some in pajamas others in their underwear, shouting, pushing, snapping towels at each other. I didn't see the Swede. That was something to be thankful for.

'Come on Cohen,' said Garcia, elbowing a smaller kid out of the way.

I stood next to him at one of a long line of sinks and brushed my teeth. He smiled at me out of a foam filled mouth. He wasn't such a bad guy, Garcia. I smiled back.

There was a crash behind us. I turned around to see Goldstein pushing himself nearsightedly out of a toilet stall.

'Hey Goldfart,' a boy called 'You fuck up the shitter again?'

'Yeah, couldn't see where to put his fat ass.'

Goldstein swung his head around slowly in the direction of the insult like some bewildered prehistoric animal sniffing the wind.

'Goldfart! Goldfart!,' they all began to chant.

He stood with his mouth open, squinting through his glasses, unable to find his tormentors among the tangle of boys. Powerless against the taunts he turned unhurriedly and floated out of the bathroom with an air of studied indifference.

I supposed I would get used to it all after a while. Learn how to survive like Goldstein had.

'You want some of this kid?'

A disembodied voice. A small red glow over Goldstein's bed in the darkened room.

'Sure, thanks.'

'No lipping,' he warned.

Lipping? I took a puff from the cigarette. It burned my throat. I coughed. The smoke rushed violently out my nose. I handed the butt back to Goldstein. My eyes stung. I was dizzy.

'A real pro, huh Ang-hell? ... And he fucking lipped it! Dumb asshole!'

'Yeah, a real pro.'

'You ever smoke before, Wet Lips?' asked Goldstein.

'Sure,' I lied, 'lots of times.'

'And,' said Garcia, 'I bet you seen pussy as well. Right? Plenty of hot pussy. Your momma's hot pussy?'

'Pussy?'

'Shit, even Goldstein's seen pussy.'

'Snatch, twat, poontang, beaver, cunt,' enumerated Goldstein.

'Oh, that,' I said still unclear as to exactly what they were talking about.

'He doesn't fucking know does he Garcia?'

I was getting increasingly panicky. What the hell was a hot pussy? Or, any of those other things? And, more importantly, what did they have to do with my mother?

'OK Cohen,' said Garcia, real comradely like. 'It's alright. No problem. I'll tell you what, you give me a blowjob and I'll tell you all about it. How's that?'

Blow job? I figured it couldn't be all that bad. Something to do with hair. So, I said yes.

'That's gross,' said Goldstein, 'even for a Spick.'

Garcia told me what a pussy was.

'OK,' he said, 'now that blowjob you promised. You goin' to come here or you want me over there?'

'I don't know. What do I have do?'

'Do?,' laughed Goldstein, his bed squeaking under his heaving bulk 'Do? Nothing but suck his cock. Ha. Ha. Ha. Yeah, suck his brown Spick cock! Ha. Ha. Ha.'

Shit! So that was a blow job.. And I had thought Garcia was my friend.

'Yech! I'm not going to do that! Never! You can't be serious!'

'Hey man, you agreed in front of witnesses. Ain't that right, Goldstein? In front of fucking witnesses.'

'Right. Witnesses.'

'I don't care. I'm not going to,' I insisted, choking back the sobs. 'You can't make me do it!'

'Listen, man,' said Garcia coaxingly, 'Don't cry. Come on now, I ain't goin' to hurt you.'

I knew then he wasn't kidding about the blow job.

I managed to get up from my bed before he crossed the room. I ran for the door. He tripped me. I fell. Then he was on top of me, his wiry arms around my waist. I fought as hard as I could but I couldn't get up, couldn't move him. He was sitting on my shoulders, pinning me face first to the floor.

'Get off me!' I shouted, unable to stop myself sobbing. 'Get off! Get off! Please get off!'

'You makin' a big fuss for nothin' man. Shee-it! Be cool will ya? We don't want no one in here do we?'

Then I felt it. Like a soft finger on my neck. A very soft finger. It seemed to be getting bigger. He began to move it around toward my left ear. He rubbed it lovingly against my cheek.

'You like that? Nice, huh?'

'NO! NO!,' I shrieked. 'Please Angel! Please get off me! Please get off!'

Just then the door was flung open. A flashlight shined in my eyes.

'OK boys,' said an adult voice. 'Enough of that roughhousing. Into bed with you. You know better than that Garcia. It's well after lights out.'

'Yes sir. Sorry sir.'

'You settling in alright Cohen?'

It was the Colonel. Colonel Dallas D. Dennis. The man who was going to see to it that I was happy at Gray Wolf. He was going to see to that. My father shouldn't worry, his little boy would be very happy.

'Yes sir. Settling in just fine, sir. Thank you, sir.'