

Say What You Mean

If I hadn't stayed home from school that day—and I almost didn't because Mom couldn't see how a fourteen-year-old's cramps could be *that* bad—if I hadn't stayed home, then Mrs. Pfefferberg might have moved out without anybody knowing why. Mom told me I should take three Advil and quit complaining, that after I'd had two kids and passed the age of forty, then I'd *really* know what cramps were. But I think she felt kind of bad about it, too. It was only the third time I'd had my period at all, and I was still kind of freaked out about the whole thing, so she said I could stay home if I wanted to, and she'd call me over her lunch hour. Dad had already left for work, which was probably a good thing because female talk like that made him uncomfortable, and my brother Barry was away at college or he'd have been teasing me about it.

So I stayed home, curled up on the sofa in the living room with a heating pad pressed against my stomach and my knees pulled up to curl around it. I was flipping between a soap opera and a talk show, not one of those real sleazy ones, either. They were doing make-overs, which I thought was kind of cool since the girls were about my age, only they all started out dressed like hookers and ended up looking like models. There was a wedding going on on the soap, so I was flipping back and forth during commercials so I wouldn't miss too much of either.

I think it must have been about ten-thirty when I noticed that something was going on next door at the Pfefferbergs'. Right next to the TV we've got one of those big sliding glass doors that leads out

onto our deck, and if you go down the deck steps and across the yard, you end up over at the Pfefferbergs. So I had a pretty good view of their driveway and their garage and a little bit of the front porch. Anyway, it was probably about ten-thirty because the soap opera was having this really long commercial when I saw a Jeep Cherokee pull up at the Pfefferbergs', and some lady I'd never seen before got out. The Jeep was red, and this lady was wearing red, too—a sweatshirt, I think. I saw her get out of the Jeep and go around to the porch. She knocked on the door and went inside, but I didn't see anybody let her in.

Now I probably should have realized something was up then because the Pfefferbergs don't usually have people over at all, let alone in the morning. Mr. Pfefferberg works at this place in the city that makes air conditioners, and he usually leaves about seven forty-five. I know because I'm usually waiting for the bus when he pulls out of his driveway, and he never waves or honks or anything, just turns out of the driveway without using his turn signal.

Mrs. Pfefferberg works up at the flower shop on Pinto Street, and she's a tramp. Not a real one, that's just what I heard Mom call her once when she didn't think I could hear. "Carmen Pfefferberg's a tramp," she said, her hands sunk into the soap bubbles as she washed the dishes. Dad asked how she could tell, and Mom told him not to be stupid. "Look at how she dresses and the cheap way she dyes her hair. I know for a fact that Gary met her in some bar, and they only knew each other three weeks before they got married."

It's true that Mrs. Pfefferberg does have really blond hair with these dark roots that kind of make her look like a skunk only in reverse. She's got big boobs, and she's skinny, but she dresses cool, not slutty or anything. Not like those girls on TV. One of them was wearing thigh-high patent leather boots and a see-through top with a black bra underneath and blue fingernail polish, and I've never seen Mrs. Pfefferberg dressed like that. I think Mom doesn't like her because she goes into work after noon and gets home by five, and she and Mr. Pfefferberg go out a lot at night. Plus she sunbathes in their backyard, and I don't think Mom likes that very much either.

Maybe ten minutes went by, and then I noticed that the lady in the red sweatshirt had come back outside with a big box and was putting it in the back of her Jeep. Mrs. Pfefferberg came outside then too, and she was wearing jeans and a silky shirt with stars and moons all over it. She had her hair pulled back in one of those gold clips that don't work in my hair because it's too short. She was carrying a box, too, and she handed it to the first lady who heaved it into the Jeep.

The boxes were taped shut so I couldn't tell what was inside. Maybe it was the girls on TV that made me think this, but I thought maybe Mrs. Pfefferberg was getting rid of some old clothes, donating them to the Salvation Army or something. I thought that if she was doing that, I'd like to have some because, like I said, her clothes are cool. They probably wouldn't have fit me anyway, but I bet I could have grown into them.

But then they went back into the house and came out with armloads of clothes, and I began to think that the boxes must have

had something else in them instead. There were a lot of clothes, and I wondered if Mrs. Pfefferberg was getting rid of her whole wardrobe, like maybe she's had a make-over like the girls on the talk show and was getting a whole new look.

Then another truck pulled into the Pfefferberg's driveway, a pick-up truck this time. A man was driving this one. He was a big guy with a gut and these really round arms, and he was wearing khaki pants that looked like they were about to fall off. Mrs. Pfefferberg came out of the house with a grocery bag overflowing with shoes, and when she saw the man, she put the bag down and gave him a big hug. She didn't kiss him or anything, which was good because that probably would have grossed me out, but she just kind of hung onto him like she was a little kid and he was a teddy bear. The big guy stood there and patted her back like maybe he felt kind of awkward, and the other lady came out of the house carrying a suitcase and stood waiting on the porch.

I guess I realized that Mrs. Pfefferberg was moving out then. The first lady's Jeep was pretty full by then, so the three of them started loading things in the guy's truck, bigger stuff like chairs and more boxes and even a microwave. I'd moved to sit in front of the window so I could get a better look at what they were doing. It was more interesting than the soap opera, and all the girls had had their make-overs already. I think I figured that both of the Pfefferbergs were moving. It didn't occur to me that it was weird for them to be moving out while Mr. Pfefferberg was at work or that there wasn't a moving van, just a Jeep and a pick-up truck.

It took them about half an hour, which was pretty good considering the amount of stuff they loaded up. A lot of it didn't seem to be



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packed real good, like the shoes falling out of the bag and the clothes just kind of tossed in. I wondered if the stuff in the boxes was packed any better or if things were just sort of thrown in there, too.

And then all of a sudden Mrs. Pfefferberg was coming across the yard toward our house, watching carefully where she stepped because the grass was wet and she was wearing white Keds. I quick got back up on the couch and put the heating pad back on my lap, so I don't think she saw I was watching. I pretended like the show on TV was really great, like I was really into it so when she came up on the deck and tapped at the door, I acted all surprised.

"I didn't expect anybody to be home," she said, and she kind of laughed. She was wearing little gold earrings shaped like dolphins and a lot of rings like she always did. "You sick?"

"Yeah. I mean, sort of." She looked past me, like to see if there was anybody else home, and she saw the heating pad and the bottle of Advil on the coffee table.

"Oh." She sighed and folded her arms. "It sucks, doesn't it?"

I knew she was talking about the cramps, so I nodded. "Yeah. It sucks." Mom thinks "sucks" is a crude word and doesn't like me to use it. But she's also always telling me that I don't talk clear enough, not like I mumble but like she doesn't get what I'm trying to say. Like when I say that school is OK or my teachers are all right. "That doesn't tell me anything," she says. "Say what you mean. I'm not a mind reader."

So when I said that having cramps sucks, that's what I meant. I don't think you can say it any more clearly, and if sucks is crude,

then so are cramps. And I think Mrs. Pfefferberg understood that.

“When I was in school,” Mrs. Pfefferberg said, rubbing one hand along the sleeve of her shiny shirt, “they taught us that having your period meant you were a woman. Like it was some big prize or something. Some kind of trophy. ‘Congratulations, you’re all grown up now. Here you go.’ They still do that?”

I told her they gave us pamphlets now, pamphlets with titles like, “Today a Girl, Tomorrow a Woman” and “Growing Up Me,” and she thought that was pretty funny. She even laughed, which I think is what made me feel like it was OK to ask her if she and Mr. Pfefferberg were moving out.

She stopped laughing then, but she didn’t look mad or sad, just kind of calm. “Nope. Just me.”

“How much you want to bet she’ll end up walking out on him?” Mom told Dad that same night over the soapy dishes. “She’ll leave him for some other man. You watch.”

And I was watching, watching Mrs. Pfefferberg loading a bunch of stuff into two trucks and listening to her tell me she was moving out. But to be with that big guy? With the lady in the red sweatshirt maybe? I’d seen another talk show once where that happened, where a man was all upset because his wife had left him for another woman.

I didn’t ask her why she was leaving. I really wanted to, but I got shy again all of a sudden, and I didn’t. Mrs. Pfefferberg held out an envelope to me and said how it had gotten delivered to their house by mistake two days ago, and she’d forgotten to bring it by. “I figure if I leave it here for Gary to bring, you’ll

never get it." She gave the envelope to me. It was from Visa, a bill maybe, maybe just an ad. "I don't know if it's important or not, but you make sure your mom gets it, OK?" I told her I would, and she smiled again. "I know you will."

The big guy called out, "Hey, Carmen," and Mrs. Pfefferberg turned. "You don't want these dishes to go in the truck, do you? They'll get broke for sure, bumpin' around back there."

"They're packed with newspaper," Mrs. Pfefferberg shouted back. "They'll be fine."

"They'll get broke," the man repeated. "Better put 'em in your car," and he set the box down on the ground.

Mrs. Pfefferberg turned back to me and shook her head. "You got an older brother, right?" I nodded. "Does he always nag you like that?"

"That's your brother?" I looked back across the yard to where the guy was climbing up into the back of the pick-up. His pants were slipping, and I could see his butt crack.

"Mmm hmm. My brother Jim." She pointed. "And that's my sister-in-law. Not Jim's wife, though. My other brother's. She drove down from Lansing to help." The lady in the red sweatshirt was slamming the back door of the Jeep and brushing her hands on her jeans.

Mrs. Pfefferberg reached up and brushed back a piece of her yellow hair. "Well, I'd better head on back. Gary said he'd give me till five, but I told him I could be out in three hours."

I felt like I ought to say something then, but I didn't know what. See ya? Have a good life? Hope the dishes don't break? It all sounded stupid.

Mrs. Pfefferberg put out her hand like she wanted to shake mine. Her rings pressed into my fingers, and the gold felt cool and smooth. I don't think I'd ever shook anybody's hand before, and it seemed weird, but it made me feel kind of grown-up, too.

Then she let go of my hand and said, "I'll tell you something they don't put in those pamphlets. There are five billion people in this world. Did you know that? Five billion. Now some people think that they can treat other people like crap because there are five billion more people out there to choose from. They're the kind thinks that one's as good as any other. You just remember that there's somebody out there who'll appreciate you the way they should. You just hang on and hang back. You know what I mean?" I didn't exactly, but I nodded anyway. "You can afford to be choosy."

I think, looking back on it, that she was talking about Mr. Pfefferberg. Later, I ran that whole conversation back through my head, after the Jeep and the pick-up had pulled away with Mrs. Pfefferberg in her white Camaro behind them. I don't know if Mr. Pfefferberg was cheating on her or if her was bad to her in another way, but I know that's why she left. Not because there was somebody else, but because the somebody she had was the wrong one.

Mrs. Pfefferberg only said one other thing. She was half-way down the deck steps, and I was just sliding the door shut, when she said, "Look, tell your mom I'm sorry I didn't bring the letter over yesterday. I would have, but it slipped my mind. Tell her," she said, "that I'm sorry we didn't get to know each other. I don't have a lot of cookie recipes to swap or anything, but, well, she

seems like a real nice lady.” She waved. “And try drinking some 7-Up for those cramps. It sometimes helps.”

Mom tried calling on her lunch hour like she promised to. “Didn’t you hear the phone?” she wanted to know when she got home. I told her I was in the bathroom.

I’d heard the phone, but I didn’t answer it. I didn’t want to talk to her then because I knew I’d end up telling her about Mrs. Pfefferberg moving out, and she’d say, “It just goes to show you,” or something like that. And it did show me something, but not the something it showed her. So when the phone rang, I turned up the TV real loud so I couldn’t hear it and only turned it down again when I was sure the ringing had stopped.

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