Afraid To Ask

As a freshman in high school, I was thankful for Echo since she had a hard time talking like me. She stuttered so badly that no one could understand her, but she understood the social complications of being a teenager, while I didn't have a clue since I have high-functioning autism and I couldn't speak except to sing whatever I tried to communicate. We wrote notes to each other then quickly crumpled and tore them. Everyone wanted to know what was in them but heck if we could talk well enough to say it said something about liking your hair today.

Soon, a boy walked up to me and said, "You're so dumb, you could throw yourself on the ground and miss."

I stood there with a blank look on my face, thinking, *What's wrong with you?* Then I thought, *What's wrong with me?*

I called my brother and sang, "The boys bully me to make me flee; what can I do? I'm embarrassed about me too."

Buck said that I was so beautiful that the boys in high school were mad because I wouldn't go out with them, but it still hurt. I have very deep pathological feelings. I was tragic but interesting – on certain days.

To make me feel better and gain some insights into this sexual stuff that mostly weirded me out, he gave me the best-selling book, *Everything You Ever Wanted To Know About Sex But Were Afraid To Ask*.

I was afraid to read it.

Alone.

One time, I spent half the day in the girls' restroom, crying and hiding from the boys, feeling like someone had stabbed me in my failing heart.

Echo came in and talked me through it. "B..Banjoy, d..don't l..l..let t..t..them…" She got so frustrated, she stopped speaking, but I knew what she meant. We wrapped our arms around each other and bravely went to the next class.

The teachers liked us since we were quiet and earned straight A's, but it made the other kids envious so they tormented us more. Some boys answered a teacher's question while pretending to stutter. Others sang their answers in rhymes to mimic me. It happened in every class until the Principal called half a dozen of the boys into his office and threatened to suspend them if he heard of another bullying incident.

That ended the in class harassment, but out in the hall was another story. One walked up and whispered, "Echo, you're so skinny that if you stood sideways and stuck out your tongue, you'd look like a zipper." His buddy said to me, "You're spread out like a cold supper so ain't no way I'd eat you."

It didn't make sense. I was just as skinny as Echo. And heck, I didn't want to get eaten, especially by a boy. Yuck!

We stayed close to each other for protection and signed up for choir, home economics, and typing together. Echo sang like a bird with a full, resonating alto voice while I was first soprano. When we sang together, the volume expanded into a big, red, hot air balloon and our voices filled the room with resonating harmonies, spinning out into the school, vibrating the town, and resonating the whole planet. I wouldn't go so far as to say the universe, but you get the picture. One day, the choir teacher had tears in

her eyes. “You two should go to New York City and you’d become famous in the Broadway musicals.”

I almost wet my lacy pink underwear (without any tags).

Echo felt likewise. New York was a big city and we were country girls. No way! My older brother said for sure some agent or producer would take advantage of us, so we never gave it another thought. Well, honesty, I had a few fantasies of being world famous like Echo did. When we wore that out, we decided to read *Everything You Ever Wanted To Know About Sex But Were Afraid To Ask*.

The first chapters made us afraid to look any further.

Buck liked Echo as much as I did and treated her like me. When he was home from college, he’d take us out for dinner and a movie, happily sitting between us, holding our hands and feeding us popcorn. “Love you Banjoy, love you Echo,” as he popped a popcorn into our mouths. We licked our lips and begged for more.

Echo leaned over, “Someday I’m going to marry your brother.”

Made me happy. Only in our dreams. He was so much older and simply too handsome. I knew some girl would trap him with her sex charms, he’d get her pregnant, the cows would come home, and the barn door would be locked tight. But still, Echo dreamed. “I’ll never marry anyone who isn’t like your brother.”

“Me too.” I got to wondering about Earl, my brother’s best friend. Naw. He had deserted from the Army and was way too old for me. But he flirted with Echo and she was beside herself. “Let me look at that afraid to ask book.”

Sadly, she was scared to read it by herself, and certainly, I wasn’t ready. I figured I’d never have a boyfriend because I was too weird. Make that too dysfunctional. If one

of them talked to me, I'd jerk my head away, and Lordy, if one touched me, I'd scream in reaction.

The summer before our sophomore year, Echo turned fourteen like me. She started getting involved with Earl because he was like my brother, but instead of college, he was running an ice machine route. He had PTSD from the Vietnam War and smoked and drank excessively. Buck talked to him, trying to help him adjust.

I sang to Echo, "He's a twenty-two-year-old man back from Vietnam. He'll get you pregnant and put your life in a trashcan."

She started obsessively reading *Everything You Ever Wanted To Know About Sex But Were Afraid To Ask*. When she finished it, she wanted to try everything.

With me.

I said, "Maybe when we're sixteen."

Her eyes were dilated. "You promise?"

"Sure." I meant it. The two of us were ahead of the times.

Yeah, right.

All the girls loved Mr. Axelrod since he looked like Burt Reynolds. On hot days, he'd take his shirt off when he coached football, revealing chiseled muscles and a V of black hair running down his chest into his tight coaching shorts where there was an interesting bulge. We really wanted to know what it looked like down there since *Afraid To Ask* had only a few illustrations and *no* photos.

Echo and I, along with a dozen girls, watched the practices. Most were there for their boyfriends, but we were there for Coach Axelrod. We panted instead of cheering. I told Echo what my brother had mentioned about sex and we regarded Mr. Axelrod's

rod. We made up little stories and giggled. It was hard for Echo to talk without stuttering and I sang when I tried to communicate so we passed our spiral notebook back and forth.

This imp of a boy stole it from us and we chased him. I was fast and tackled Jimmy in the middle of the football practice field.

Echo ripped the notebook from his hands right as Coach walked over. “What’s the problem?” He chewed tobacco and swallowed it, then made a funny sound in the back of his throat, clearing it, “Uah, uah.”

Boys mimicked him, “Uah, uah.”

Echo sputtered, “J..J..Jimmy s..stole…” She held up the notebook.

Coach took it, opened it, and read.

I sang, “That’s not yours, it’s ours, it’s full of blurs, you’ll put us on Mars.”

As he flipped through the pages his face turned red, no, scratch that. It was a livid crimson with big purple veins on his forehead. He slapped it closed and handed it back to Echo. “You girls better burn this.” He turned around and blew his whistle, “All right, huddle up for the next play.”

We were so badly embarrassed, we wet ourselves. I felt the lace in my favorite pink panties sticking to my thighs. Gross!

I turned to Jimmy and kicked his leg.

“Ouch! What’d you do that for?”

What a dumb question.

Echo kicked his other leg.

“Ouch, what’d you do that for?”

I sang, “You’re a brat and a rat and when you do that, you get the bat!” I kicked him again, this time where it really hurt.

“Ouch!” He grabbed himself and puked.

During the next play, the defensive back slipped in it and the receiver scored a touchdown. His girlfriend ran over to me. “Hey thanks, Banjoy!”

Suddenly, I knew how to make a friend. Just kick some kid in the balls and make him puke.

Echo said, “No Banjoy, don’t try that again. You were just lucky this time.”

I sang, “Okay, okay my friend, I’m on the mend, I don’t need another friend.”

In Mr. Axelrod’s history class, he kept catching our eyes like he had a question. We imagined he was attracted to us and batted our eyelashes. We were surprised when he sent us to the high school counselor.

Mr. Watson was fat and funny and very nice. “So,” he gave a slight smile. “It looks like you girls have a crush on Mr. Axelrod.”

We twittered like songbirds.

His round face turned serious. “Listen, you’re making him very uncomfortable, sitting and staring at him while batting your eyes. He’s a married man with two little children. You’re giving him an ulcer. Haven’t you noticed how he often clears his throat?” Watson went, ““Uah, uah,” and frowned. “It’s acid reflux. His stomach is upset because, not only you two, but nearly all the other girls flirt with him.”

Our mouths dropped open.

Echo stuttered, “W..we d..didn’t..” She couldn’t finish.

I sang, “We’re sorry, so sorry, it won’t happen tomorry, tell Mr. Axelrod we won’t think of his–”

Echo hit my leg.

“Ouch!”

Mr. Watson chuckled, but with a serious expression, said, “I want you to tell *all* the girls they are being very inappropriate. If you do that, I won’t call your parents and you won’t be suspended.”

We promised by writing a note. We also wrote a letter of apology to Mr. Axelrod and tried to convey his concern to the other girls. Coach seemed to feel better. He stopped clearing his throat and his football team started winning games. He quit chewing tobacco. Probably made his wife happy-ier since he was so darned handsome she’d ignored his tobacco breath.

It was because of me and Echo. We had saved his job! Maybe his career! Maybe his whole, movie-star-handsome, life! The thing was, well, I shouldn’t tell you, but when Echo and I had overnights, we still thought of him while intensely studying, *Everything You Ever Wanted To Know About Sex But Were Afraid To Ask*.