

THE CEDAR CLOSET
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As you walked down the stairs to the basement you entered a long hallway. Halfway down the hall you encountered two side rooms facing each other. Continuing to the end of the hall you opened a thick, heavy door and entered the new cedar closet. That is where party's prelude took place.

The cedar closet was awesome. If you have ever smelled a new red cedar box you can imagine the delicious fragrance of a new cedar closet as large as a bedroom.

Here were the party rules. Girls occupied the room on the left and the boys, the room on the right. Each girl had one turn. She entered the pitch-black hall, knocked on the closed door of the boys' room to alert them, entered the pitch-black cedar closet, and closed the door behind her. One at a time, three lucky boys won the privilege of kissing the unknown girl in the cedar closet.

In silence in the dark each boy felt his way to the girl, held her and kissed her and left. After the third boy left the closet, he knocked on the door of the girl's room and returned to the boy's room. Everything repeated with a new girl and a new trio of boys. There were 15 boys and 15 girls at the party, so the game took about an hour.

Aviva arrived just in time to be included, moments after the boys had entered their side room in the basement and just as the girls were filing down the stairs. Aviva had never been kissed in anything other than a platonic, family manner. Such kisses tend to be neutral. They don't feel good. Neither do they feel bad unless they are wet or the person has bad breath or BO or wears smelly perfume or hasn't shaved.

This was Aviva's first kissing party and she was all anticipation. She was nervous, a bit scared, and hopeful. Her turn came early. When she entered the closet, the fragrance enchanted her. She was there less than a minute when the first boy entered. She could hear his slow, tentative footsteps. When he reached her he hardly touched her. She turned to face him but he missed her lips and only pecked her on the cheek. It was comical and neutral. She was relieved but disappointed.

The second boy was brusque and forceful. He squeezed her too hard and tried to force his tongue into her closed mouth. And if he hadn't let go of her so quickly, almost dropping her in the process, she would have tried to pry him away from her.

What a turnoff! For a moment, Aviva thought of Goldie Locks. One bed was too soft, one bed was too hard, but the third was just right. Maybe, just maybe!

The third boy entered, closed the door behind him and then there was silence. It seemed to last an eternity. Then she heard his footsteps, and his breathing even more. He walked directly to her – he must have heard her breathing or her heart beating. His hands moved slowly on her until they

found her hands. He put her arms around his neck, found her waist, which he encircled. He lifted her slowly until their faces met. She felt his breathing. Then he kissed her, slowly in a way she had never been kissed before. She opened her mouth involuntarily and they breathed for a few precious seconds as if they had a single pair of lungs.

Then his motions went into reverse. He put her down as gently as he had picked her up. He took her hands in his and removed them from his neck. When his fingers slid away from her hands, she felt a thrill she had never envisioned could exist. A few more breaths, this time deeper, a few steps, the closet door opened and closed and he was gone.

Who was he? She had to find out.

Midway through the game, the father of the house announced his arrival with a loud voice and turned the hall light on. The kids were sure that he would break up the game, but after about a minute he announced he was leaving. The hall light was turned back off, and the game resumed.

After everyone had their turns in the cedar closet, the lights were turned on, everyone filed upstairs, and the rest of the party began. Aviva was burning with curiosity. Who was he – the boy who romanced and kissed her so passionately? She searched their faces, their shapes, and their body movements for a hint. She thought she should be able to tell who it was just from his appearance, and narrowed it down to four possibles. For the rest of the party she focused on those four boys.

“Surely”, thought Aviva, “I will know who it is if I dance with him and can get him to kiss me”. She managed to dance with three of the four and enticed each to kiss her. Each failed her Prince Charming test. That left only Jim, the most handsome boy at the party. It had to be Jim. But Jim focused his exclusive attention on Betty for the entire party. “Why would Jim kiss me so hot and then ignore me? He must have kissed Betty too and liked her kiss better.” It would be easy for anyone to identify Betty. She wore a perfume you could smell a mile away.

Aviva regretted that she wasn’t in any of Jim’s classes. What could she expect? She was only a Freshman; he was a Junior. Aviva did pass Jim in the hall each day after third period. She made the most of it.

On Monday, Aviva smiled at Jim when she passed him and said, “Hi, Jim!” Jim didn’t have time to answer.

On Tuesday, he did when she greeted him but never broke stride with a “Hi, Aviva!”

On each of those brief encounters Jim was walking with his best friend, Ron. Right after Tuesday’s encounter, Ron spoke up. “Jim, that girl has a crush on you. She’s got stars in her eyes. You gotta ask her out. How does she know you?”

“She was at the party Saturday night.”

“She was?”

“That’s right, you couldn’t have known. Yeah, she was there and she kept on staring at me.”

“So, ask her out!”

“She’s cute but she’s just a kid – a freshman.”

Ron said, “I wish that kid stared at me like that. She has such eyes for you she didn’t even see me. And she’s not just cute, she’s gorgeous.”

“Well, then, *you* ask her out, Ron.”

“*Sure*, when all she can think of is, ‘Hi, Jim – Oooh, oooh, oooh!’”

“Change her mind. That should be easy. She made a real display of herself at the party. She’s just a shallow flirt, making eyes at a bunch of the guys, getting them to dance with her and kiss her, and then throwing each of them back in the water like a cold fish after a single dance. She even broke away from two of the guys right after they kissed her. You should have a real fun date with her. She’ll probably leave the second she finishes her ice cream float.”

Each day, for the rest of the week and on into the next week Aviva greeted Jim as they passed in the hall. She took his first response as a positive sign, but after several days of ever more perfunctory responses from Jim she began to get the message. By the following Friday she made a display of ignoring him that was almost comic.

Ron watched Aviva carefully and it struck him that Jim may have kissed her at the party. “Hey Jim, do you think she likes you because you kissed her at the party?”

“I definitely didn’t kiss her.”

“How do you know?”

“By the process of elimination. Anyone could tell Betty from her perfume. And the two other girls – well, one was much taller than Aviva and the other was fat. I could hardly get my arms around her. And her whole body was hot, I don’t mean passionate hot, I mean fat hot.”

Ron was dead silent.

The next Monday, when they passed in the hall and Aviva made her show of ignoring Jim, Ron turned a 180 and walked beside Aviva. “Well, now that you don’t love Jim any more, why don’t you go out with me on Saturday.”

“Who are you?”

“Are you serious? I’m Ron – Jim’s friend. I’ve been right beside him for the past two weeks when you were greeting him.”

“Sorry, I didn’t see you.”

“Thank you. But will you go out with me on Saturday?”

“I’ve got to go to class now.”

Ron tried several more times but Aviva rebuffed him each time with an obvious display of indifference. The last time made him so angry he said something he regretted. “Jim’s right. All you are is a shallow flirt.” And he didn’t ask her again.

That made it Aviva’s turn to be hurt. If the hall passings became uncomfortable for Ron, they became twice as humiliating for Aviva. Only Jim seemed unfazed.

For a month Aviva managed to avert her eyes from Jim during the daily school passings but then her attention was forced back to him by *Scaramouche*, the school play that spring. Truth and fiction seemed to merge. Jim played the lead role of the dashing André Moreau with perfume Betty as his true love, Aline de Gavrilac, and the inseparable Ron as the demonic Marquis de Maynes. And Aviva – well Aviva, the unaware, the naïve, who loved acting but hadn’t even known the dramatics club existed, was out in the cold. When she tried to join, she was told she was much too late and to try out next school year.

Aviva watched every performance with strengthening emotions. How well suited the players were in their respective roles! Oh, how she loved the swashbuckling Jim. But always there was Betty. What a thorn that girl was. It was near hopeless.

Summer came and passed with Aviva deserted but with a speck of hope. Jim was a counselor in some summer camp up in New England, with the inevitable Ron, but without Betty, who remained in town. Aviva waited for September. Then, she would join the dramatics club.

And she did. She was a real pest, but a helpful and useful pest. And it didn’t take long for everyone to recognize that she had an innate sense of the dramatic. The decision about what play to put on had to be made relatively early in the school year. Aviva didn’t like any of the choices and had a brainstorm. “All the plays have more men than women. But if we take scenes from several plays that include women it would even the count.”

Her suggestion was in tune with the times and all the girls backed it. And so, a medley of romantic scenes was decided on, including the balcony and final death scenes in both *Romeo and Juliet* and *Cyrano de Bergerac*.

Aviva then began an incessant lobbying campaign to be Roxanne and for Jim to be Christian de Neuville, with his constant friend, Ron as Cyrano. That way, whether or not Jim liked it he would have to kiss her. It took some doing, but she was very convincing and won out by her frank, undiplomatic though not necessarily accurate assessments. “Jim is handsome but shallow and his good friend, Ron, who would help Jim in any situation, is profound but would be real

ugly with a little false nose. Besides, everyone knows I had a crush on Jim and Ron still has a crush on me.”

For the first few months rehearsals were done with no props, no costumes, and no kissing. This frustrated Aviva, which only added to the passion of her performance in the balcony scene. But while Ron showed great feeling in the death scene Aviva’s performance remained hollow. She just couldn’t get it.

One afternoon, after repeating the death scene five times, Ron got so exasperated he blurted out, “What’s wrong with you? You just don’t get it.”

“What do you want from me? You’re the one who is wooden. And you want me to fail in this scene.”

The dramatics coach interrupted the argument. “Aviva, Ron is playing the scene with great feeling. And the way you play the balcony scene is magnificent. But Ron is right that you are missing something critical in the final scene, and everyone sees it. Much as I don’t want to, I may have to scrap that final scene.”

Then Ron surprised Aviva by supporting her. “Don’t take that scene out. We need it. I am sure that Aviva will turn out even greater than in the balcony scene.” Then he turned to Aviva. “You are supposed to act. Don’t think about your feelings for Jim and for me, think about how bereft Roxanne felt about losing her love twice.”

“I can’t. Roxanne’s supposed to be bright and sensitive, but she’s just stupid. Anyone in love would recognize that the voice in the balcony scene was not her love’s. How could she be so stupid as to be oblivious that Cyrano was in love with her? And how can anyone, presumably so sensitive and cultural fall for someone like crass, mute Christian, and stay in love with him for years after he was dead just because of a single kiss?”

Ron countered. “Roxanne wasn’t stupid, she was blind. Love made her blind. You should know that! Roxanne’s love blinded her to the change of voice. And her contacts with Christian were so brief she never got a chance to know him. All she had to cling to was a stream of love letters she could have no idea came from Cyrano. But once she had the facts – she saw the truth. That is the pathos – that is her great tragedy. And Cyrano - Cyrano was even blinder than Roxanne. He was so consumed with his ugliness that he couldn’t see into Roxanne’s heart. He was convinced he was a loser. And his pride, which got him killed in the end made him even more afraid of being humiliated by confessing his love and being rejected by Roxanne. Blindness and pride – that is why Cyrano is a tragedy.”

Have you ever noticed that at truly great performances the audience is so stunned that there is a pause before the applause begins? So too, a few long seconds of stunned silence followed Ron’s incisive, passionate words.

Aviva got the message. Her acting in the scene metamorphosed. The dramatics coach kept the scene.

About two weeks before the show, the costumes and sets were finally ready, so the dress rehearsals began. Aviva licked her lips.

The lights were dimmed for the balcony scene. Ron, as Cyrano, rhapsodized her from below while Jim waited to climb. When, at last Roxanne gave Christian permission to climb to the balcony for his kiss Aviva was breathless. She closed her eyes and her lips parted involuntarily. She paid no mind to the rude giggling she heard from some of the other members of the cast. “Alright, let them poke fun at me for loving Jim.” Eyes still closed, she awaited her impending moment in glory. Two strong arms circled her waist.

“Oh joy, oh joy, at last, at last!” The boy who was kissing her so magnificently was the boy who had kissed her so wonderfully at the party. She felt dizzy. But, how could he kiss me so yet never have shown any feelings for me? How could he have hurt me so yet kiss me so? It’s not possible for anyone to be so mean.”

As the sweet kiss ended, she let out a sigh and, still in his arms, opened her glistening eyes. Everyone saw her instantaneous shock and confusion and heard her involuntary gasp.

Jim and Ron had pulled a switch.

Just in case you didn’t grasp what happened, neither did Aviva. It was only on the way home, holding hands with Aviva, that Ron explained, “I was the one at the party who kissed you, but I had to leave early because of a family emergency.”