

## **Becoming a Man**

by Emerald Ayres

She had the most beautiful brown hair Ant had ever seen. It was shiny. Very shiny. He stood in a lineup of students waiting to go down the slide on their first lunchtime of second grade, and her hair was all Ant could see in front of him. He wanted to touch the shiny.

So he did.

“Ow!” The girl slapped his hand away. “Don’t pull.”

His fingers came away with a few long strands. Staring after her as she took her turn on the slide, Ant watched her find a seat on a swing across the playground. After his turn on the slide, Ant hefted his lunchbox and sat on the swing next to hers.

“I’m Ant.”

She squinted at him. “Like the bug?”

“Like Anthony. What’s your name?”

She continued to squint at him. Ant picked at his shirt self-consciously, noticing a jam stain from breakfast. The fabric was faded. An orange cat shooting lasers from its eyes sat on a grey background.

“I’m Lilly,” she finally said. “I like your shirt.”

Ant beamed. “It’s my favorite! I love cats.”

“Me too!” Lilly slung a Hello Kitty purse off her arm to show Ant. “Y’know my cousin’s cat is gonna have babies soon.”

“Cool.” Ant fiddled with the latch on his lunch box, clicking it open, then closed, then open again. “Would you like to be my girlfriend?”

“What will you give me?”

“What do you want?”

“I’d like a gumball.”

Ant leapt off the swing. “And then you’ll be my girlfriend?”

“Yes,” Lilly said. “But don’t pull my hair again.”

Ant ran into the school. He headed for the secretary’s office, where he knew the little gumball machine sat under close watch. A thought stopped him. Frantically searching the pockets of his shorts, Ant’s heart fell.

He didn’t have a quarter.

Nearby a boy exited the hallway bathroom. Ant recognized him.

“Jacob!”

The boy turned, yanking up his fly. “Hey Ant! Got any Doritos today? My mom keeps giving me apple slices.”

“I need a quarter,” Ant said.

“I don’t have a quarter.” Jacob adjusted his fly again. “Try Oscar in the gym closet.”

Ant paled. “Oscar?”

“He’s always willing to trade.”

Ant ran for the gym.

A lightbulb in desperate need of changing flickered overhead as he entered the closet. It smelled awful. Like sweat and old socks and baseball gloves. Ant plugged his nose. Shelves and racks of P.E. equipment closed in around him as he followed the sound of voices to the back. Seated atop a tall stack of orange plastic chairs was the largest boy Ant had ever seen. Oscar stared down at Ant. Ant stopped as two boys standing on the ground stepped forward to meet him.

These were sixth graders.

Ant cleared his throat. “I need a quarter.”

“What will you give me?” Oscar asked.

Ant held up his lunchbox.

“What else?”

“I don’t have anything else.”

The older boys laughed. The stack of chairs Oscar sat on swayed.

Desperation built in Ant’s chest and he whipped off his shirt, holding it out. “It’s my favorite. I need a quarter. Please.”

Oscar eyed him. For a moment there was silence. Then the large boy nodded to his friends and they took Ant’s lunchbox and shirt. Oscar flicked down a quarter. Ant caught it.

Shirtless, Ant returned to Lilly and presented a blue gumball.

“Where’s your shirt?” Lilly asked.

“I traded it.”

“Why?”

“To get your gumball.”

Lilly nodded and popped it into her mouth. There was a loud crack. She spat out half of the gumball into her palm and offered it to Ant. Ant took it.

As the first week of school passed, Ant decided he was in love. He just wasn’t sure what to do about it. With lunchtimes now strictly reserved for sitting with Lilly, Ant sought Jacob for advice during recess.

“What should I do?” Staring up at Jacob’s dangling legs, Ant watched his friend climb the monkey bars.

“Well,” Jacob hopped down with a grunt, “my brother says that boyfriends and girlfriends have sex when they’re in love.”

“How do I do that?”

“First, you buy Ring Pops and get married. Then,” Jacob leaned in conspiratorially, “you walk around the school three times while holding hands. Then you’ll get pregnant and become a man.”

“I’ll get pregnant?”

“No! Lilly will.”

Ant scrutinized him. “Have you had sex before?”

“Oh yeah.” Jacob shrugged nonchalantly. “Loads of times.”

“No you haven’t.”

“Sure I have! Look.” Jacob grabbed Ant by the shoulders. “You do wanna marry her, don’t you?”

“Well yeah,” Ant said. “She has pretty hair and she likes cats.”

After school Ant stopped at the corner store by his house. Hurrying to a rack of chips near the back, Ant pushed it over. While the owner was distracted Ant snagged two Ring Pops and darted back outside.

The next day at school Ant proposed. Lilly accepted, on one condition—that they could have a family. Ant agreed, and Jacob officiated their wedding.

The trio stood under a rusty geodome in the playground during lunch, and when Jacob was done talking, Lilly and Ant donned their Ring Pops. Then the two of them joined hands and went off to walk their three laps around the school. Ant didn’t particularly enjoy the way Lilly’s hand got all sweaty and sticky, but he supposed it was a fair price to pay to become a man.

They decided to name their first child Anthony Junior.

When Ant got home after school he proudly approached his mother, who stood washing dishes at the kitchen sink. “I had sex today.”

The clanking of dishes stopped. “What?”

Ant showed her the remaining plastic of his now-eaten ring pop and explained. His mother made him sit down. Ant waited for his father to come home from work, and when he finally did, they had the “Talk.” Ant was horribly confused. His father kept going on and on about always wearing raincoats, when, clearly, it was still sunny outside.

Nevertheless, Ant returned to school the next day wearing his favorite green raincoat. Just in case he and Lilly had sex again.

During lunch, Lilly presented Ant with their son, a brown stuffed bear.

As Ant held Anthony Junior, a thought crossed his mind.

“How many kids do you want?” he asked.

“I’d like at least seven.”

Ant blinked in alarm. “But I only have two hands.”

“So?”

“How am I gonna hold them all?”

Lilly thought for a moment. “How about four? We can each hold two.”

“Okay.” He stared at Anthony Junior as Lilly continued talking. Their new son had Lilly’s hair, and this made Ant very happy.

“Do you promise?”

Ant found Lilly staring at him. “Huh?”

Lilly frowned. “Were you listening?”

Sheepishly, Ant shook his head.

“My parents are married,” she repeated, “and they always yell at each other. I don’t like it. Will you promise not to yell at me?”

“I promise.”

“Good. Now I think Anthony Junior needs a sister,” Lilly paused, then added, “because I’d like a girl next. Can you bring one of your stuffed animals tomorrow?”

Ant nodded. “I think we should name her Lillian Junior.”

“I like that.” Lilly blushed. She tucked a piece of shiny hair behind one ear and Ant was pleased to see the Ring Pop plastic still on her finger.

Near the end of lunch, they joined hands and walked three more times around the school.

The next day, Ant arrived at school with a green stuffed snake, having carefully selected Lillian Junior from his pile of stuffed animals. When he went outside to find Lilly during lunch, a familiar brown bear caught his eye instead.

Anthony Junior lay on the ground under a swing.

Running to the bear, Ant scooped him off the ground and hurried to wipe the dirt from his fur. He looked around in concern. Where was Lilly?

He spotted her across the playground.

Sitting with another boy. An older boy.

Leaning in closely, Lilly stared engrossed at the phone the boy held. They laughed. Lilly grabbed the boy’s arm to pull his phone closer. The smile that stretched across her face was bigger than Ant had ever seen.

Ant’s stomach dropped. Something hot built inside of his chest. Teetering on the balls of his feet, Ant opened his mouth to let it out.

Then clamped it shut.

He remembered his promise to Lilly.

Ant turned and ran.

The hot feeling in Ant's chest became cold and heavy as the day passed. He avoided Lilly. Seeing the Ring Pop plastic on his finger made his stomach hurt. His raincoat became uncomfortable. In an attempt to make the feelings go away, when Ant got home he threw his ring in the garbage and tossed all of his raincoats into the yard. The neighbor's dog found the raincoats and tore them apart. His mother was not happy about that.

Lying in bed that evening, Ant decided he and Lilly needed to have a conversation. One where neither of them yelled.

Lilly found him first the next day, her face full of concern. "Have you seen Anthony Junior?"

Ant took their children out of his bag. Lilly looked relieved.

"Is that Lillian Junior?" she asked. "Can I hold her?"

"I found Anthony Junior on the ground by the swings yesterday."

"Oh."

"Why did you leave him there?" Ant's voice grew quieter. "Why were you sitting with another boy?"

"My cousin's cat finally had kittens," Lilly said. "He asked if I wanted to see pictures so I ran over."

"Why didn't you invite me too? We could have looked at pictures as a family."

Lilly looked away. "I got so excited I forgot."

Ant said nothing.

"Are we still together?"

Something in Ant's stomach hurt again. "Dunno."

"I'm sorry, Ant."

"What will you give me?"

Lily looked at him. Their eyes met. After a long moment, Lilly ran away.

Ant tried desperately not to cry. He wished the hot feeling in his chest would come back so he could forget how much his stomach hurt. He wished he hadn't had sex. He wished he hadn't thrown away his ring. He wished too many different things all at once and the force of it made him sit down. Holding his children close, Ant pulled his knees to his chest and pressed his face against Anthony Junior's fur. He squeezed his eyes shut. Tears slipped out to wet the soft fur.

Footsteps approached. Ant opened his eyes.

Lilly stood in front of him, arm outstretched. Seated in her palm was a blue gumball. Her Hello Kitty purse was missing from her arm. "Would you like to visit the kittens with me after school?" She looked at Ant, then at their children. "As a family."

Wiping his eyes, Ant looked at the gumball. Then at Lilly. In the sunlight, her brown hair was no longer shiny. It glowed.

Ant stared in awe. The pain in his stomach melted into warmth.

Taking the gumball, he popped it into his mouth. There was a loud crack. Ant spat out half and offered it to Lilly. "Yes."