

[Snap Judgment intro]

Glynn: Hey, Snappers. We know you enjoy your storytelling in the bright light of day, but if you also like your storytelling crafted in the dark of night, this is for you. Because right now, we're hiring two freelance story scouts for our incredible sister show, Spooked. In our efforts to bring you more supernatural stories from around the globe, Spooked is searching for someone who has lived in or has deep cultural knowledge of the Caribbean or the indigenous peoples of the Americas, the American South, Southeast Asia, or West Africa. This amazing story scout will find and pitch original first-person stories, and work closely with the Spooked team and work closely with me. Is this person you? Do you know someone who might be interested? For more information, go to snapjudgment.org/careers.

[music]

Glynn: Have you ever had that one friend that you share everything with? The one you always go to when you mess up, and you know that they're going to help you out, no judgment? Today on Snap Judgment, Ray Christian-Dickens finds out that they are that friend, when a coworker reaches out with a very sensitive question. Sensitive listener should know this story does contain sexual situations and references to homophobia. This is a podcast exclusive. It will not be on Snap Public Radio Broadcast. It will not be heard on NPR stations. It's just for you. Ray first told this story on the podcast, RISK!. Ray, take it away.

[music]

Ray: I am 21. And I am walking home from my local watering hole. It's about 10:30 at night, and I get a text from one of my coworkers, we'll call her M. M is just a little bit younger than me. We're not like friends. We're friendly coworkers. I open the text and M has asked me, "Have you ever used a DivaCup?"

A DivaCup is a silicone bulb that you insert into your vagina during menstruation and it catches the blood. I text her back, "I haven't used one myself, but I've heard really good things. What's up? Is something wrong?" And a moment later, M texts me back. "I got a DivaCup stuck inside of me. Will you help me get it out?"

Now, I'm no stranger to doing favors for people, but this one in particular made me step back and pause, "Why me?"

[music]

Ray: I've always really been drawn to the myth of Little Red Riding Hood. My favorite interpretation of the Little Red Riding Hood myth is the sexual awakening myth. A young woman goes out into the world and is led astray by a masculine figure and has to fight for her innocence. I realized that if Little Red Riding Hood is supposed to be representative of absolute pure femininity, as a black woman, I have

never had the opportunity to be that. There's no space for me. And if I couldn't be Little Red Riding Hood, well, I guess that makes me the wolf.

I've never really felt at home in womanhood. It's always felt like I was putting on this performance that I had to maintain. Because if I dropped the performance, if I was myself, I'd be found out. I can't wrap my head around the fact that she trusts me so much. It feels something has to be wrong. She has to be missing something. She can't possibly be knowingly trusting me in this way.

As I keep thinking about it, though, I realize I don't have much of a choice, but to help her because I can see the other scenario so clear in my head. I see this poor 20-year-old girl waddling into the ER because all the urgent cares were closed and having to put her legs up in the stirrups, surrounded by doctors and nurses. The only thing worse than being in a real crisis is when it's only a crisis to you. I think that's the most quintessential woman thing there is. I take a deep breath and I text her back, "Meet me at my apartment in 45 minutes. Bring gloves."

I rush back home, and I start to prepare my bedroom to be the most comfortable and accommodating place for the procedure. I think personally that I construct a really good 10-minute gynecology office.

I lay out towels on my bed, I set up some pillows for back support, and I grab some lanterns because the lighting in my bedroom is really bad. I also grab a roller ball of Stress Away essential oil. It's just anxious nesting. It's this weird panic of like, "Okay, where do normal people put their shoes? How do normal people put the blankets on their bed?" As I'm preparing the space, while I know what my intentions are, I know I'm genuinely trying to help someone, there's always this part of me that's saying, "You're just tricking people into feeling safe with you, but no one should actually feel safe with you. It's a trick." And by curating my living space, it feels like a trick. It feels like the wolf putting on the grandma clothes.

About 10 minutes after, I finally gotten everything ready. I hear a knock at my door.

[knocking on door]

I go to open it, and M is standing there, red faced, puffing. She's obviously been crying. She hugs me, and the first thing she says is, "I'm sorry if I smell. I've been stress sweating." We go into my bedroom. She takes off her pants and gets on the bed while I'm putting on the gloves she got me, ready for grip.

I grew up in Boone, North Carolina, in very conservative purity culture. And one thing nobody talks about growing up in purity culture is the majority of people come out of it with some form of sexual dysfunction. And if you have a vagina, it's generally vaginismus where the muscles in your vagina will not relax to allow any form of penetration. What had happened was, M had lost her virginity the night before after a long struggle with vaginismus that we had been talking about. She thought she was grown now, and so she's thinking she was grown, was like, "I'm going to use a DivaCup," and it got stuck.

M lays down on the bed, and she's got her knees together, and I kneel down in front of her. I put my hands on her knees, and as confidently and as comfortably as I can muster, I ask, "Are you ready?" Which is ridiculous, because, of course not. M breaks down in this half-sobbing, half-laughing, hiccupping noise. She's having a full breakdown.

When something goes wrong with any other part of your body, it feels like this a thing that happens. When there is something that feels like an existential threat, when something goes wrong with your vagina. It is this mixture of shame and the world ending. It takes a lot of effort for M to finally spread her legs, and I am kneeling there in front of the labia majora of my coworker. All I can think is, is this how it happens? Is this how I touch another person's vagina for the first time?

I think I was 15 or 16, and it was a girl in my dance class, specifically a Christian dance troupe that I was in, and she was this gorgeous curvy, pale blonde. I remember we were just messing around after dance class and she was lying on the ground and I was standing over her. I remember looking at her and being just so overcome with the feelings I felt towards her. Immediately, it was like there was no joy in that attraction. It felt just a ton of bricks had been dropped on me, just like, "Oh, this is it. This is who I am. I'm a queer person."

When you're a teenager in a conservative area, you hear a lot of people talking about like, "I don't want the queers on my dance team. I don't want the queers in my football team because I don't want them watching me in the locker room." I remember years of getting dressed in ballet green rooms, and feeling I was doing something wrong by just being there amongst naked women. I don't want to hurt people, and it felt like, "As long as I'm attracted to women, I'm always hurting them by being around them in any capacity, because I am engaging in some nonconsensual sex act." I myself just felt so much like this hypersexual predator.

This girl is pantsless, laying on her back, shaking and crying on my bed. For some reason, she trusts me. Having gone my whole life thinking I'm this aggressive sexual predator, it feels like I'm a wolf in sheep's clothing.

[music]

Glynn: Snappers, it is not over. When we return, Ray goes in. Stay tuned.

[music]

Glynn: Welcome back to Snap Judgment. You're listening to the Bring Gloves episode. My name is Glynn Washington. And sensitive listeners should note this story does contain sexual situations and references to homophobia. When last we heard from Ray, the gloves are on, the towel is laid, but can Ray go through the task? Snap Judgment.

Ray: I take a deep breath, I still myself and I dive in. I thought that DivaCups had a little tail at the end that poked out. But pull back the lips, and there's no tail. And this is when I realized I then have to

actually put my finger inside of her. But I'm losing my mind. Every problem, every insecurity I've ever had in my life is just bubbling up to the surface, and I have to take care of this girl. I put my finger inside of her. There's this moment of pause, like I hold my breath. And then, nothing happens. I am not suddenly overcome by violent destructive urges. I am not transforming into a monster or a predator. It didn't feel like my sexuality in that moment was an obstacle to be overcome. It didn't feel like it was something that was in the way or even relevant. It was no longer an issue.

My anxiety calms down just enough for me to focus on the task at hand. It takes a while to get just one finger in and get to the DivaCup. It then takes another while to get my thumb in so I can actually grip the DivaCup. Now, I've never used a DivaCup before. And thus, I don't know that DivaCups work by forming a suction on the cervix. As soon as I get a hold of it, I just yank. M bolts off the bed and she screams at me, "Why didn't you break the seal?" I yell back, "I didn't know there was one!" I'm feeling so remorseful. I'm so upset that I hurt her. I messed this up. But after she catches her breath, she's not upset with me. She's still half-laughing, half-crying the way she has been the entire time. And she's still trusting me to do this, and that feels crazy to me. And it also feels that trust is the most important thing anybody's ever given me.

We take a break for her to recover from me trying to rip her cervix out of her body. We hydrate, we breathe, she lays back down, and we get back to it. After about 15 minutes of fishing around in this poor girl's vagina, I finally get a hold of the DivaCup, and this time, I do break the seal. I pull it out, and I hold it up, and M immediately bursts into tears. And she chokes out, "I'm just so happy."

The story of Little Red Riding Hood, like any myth has been told so many times, there's so many different versions of it, I think my favorite ending is the one where she is eaten, and she is saved by the woodsmen. The real ending of the story is her reflecting having in some ways failed this test of adulthood, but learned from it.

After talking about it the day after, we realized that the DivaCup wasn't actually stuck. She was having a panic attack. She was very freaked out by the inside of her own vagina. She could not get her fingers inside of herself without panicking, because in a lot of ways, we discount how much your body holds on to anxiety and trauma, even when consciously you're fighting to move past it.

I feel I came to terms with being the wolf, that being who I am, having the sexuality that I do, and being attracted to what I am, still doesn't make me a threat. At the end of the day, I am still in control of my choices, and I make the best choices I can in the moment, and I know that I don't seek to harm anybody.

I took all of my thoughts and hang-ups and emotions that I have about being a wolf in a world of Little Red Riding Hoods, and I put all of that into a solo play called Red with Irritation, that I wrote for the girl I met in my screenwriting class. It took so much hyping up for my friends to even text her. I think I sent her some Hozier memes. And that's what leads me to finally asking her to hang out.

She comes over, and we just hang out for two to three hours. We listen to music and we talk about nothing. And it's really casual and in the grand scheme of things, so small but it feels such a huge act of intimacy to be in this closed, intimate space with a woman that I like, and for that to be okay.

Inviting this girl over was so different from when I had M over. With M, I was so horrified that my sexuality might rear its head in some way during this encounter. Whereas with this girl from my screenwriting class, I was doing it because I was attracted to her. It wasn't something I had to fight. I sent her this play and I said, "I wrote this with you in mind. I think this is your story to perform." She sent me, I think, it came out to 10 minutes of her doing a full read through, she's a very good actress, and there were tears. It was scary to be seen that much and to share that much with another person. I've only watched that video once or twice, and I can't watch it again. It's just too intense.

[music]

Glynn: Ray Christian-Dickens first told this story for the podcast RISK! RISK! goes where others dare not tread. So much more amazing RISK!, wherever you get your podcast, the RISK! podcast. And Ray, thank you so much for sharing. You can find more of their work at rcdickens.com. We're going to have a link at snapjudgment.org. Original score is by Sudi Wachspres. It was produced by David Exumé.

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Glynn: This is but one episode of Snap Judgment. So much more, so much more awaits. And if you want to be the most interesting person you know, tell your friends about Snap Judgment. Even better, sport a Snap Judgment t-shirt and bring all the boys to the yard. Snap gear available right now at snapjudgment.org.

Snap is brought to you by the team that always stands ready to help a friend out of a tricky situation. Except, of course, for the uber producer, Mark Ristich, he'll advise you to call AAA. Anna Sussman, Nancy López, Pat Mesiti-Miller, Renzo Gorrio, Shaina Shealy, Teo Ducot, Flo Wiley, John Fecile, Marisa Dodge, Regina Bediako, David Exumé, Bo Walsh, and Annie Nguyen

And this is not the news. No way this is the news. In fact, you can ask your buddy to help you out of a jam, only to realize that they are the one that got you into a jam in the first place. And you would still, still not be as far away from the news as this is, but this is PRX.