

# The Chastity Gum

*Lael Littke*

IT WASN'T LIKE SISTER FARLEY to chew gum. She took her stewardship over her little swarm of Beehive girls seriously, and normally she was the very soul of decorum, showing us by her dress and manner what true daughters of Zion should aspire to become.

When she came to class one Tuesday night with jaws moving around a cud of gum in exaggerated chomps, we suspected she was about to make a point, especially since she seemed nervous and apprehensive as well.

After the class preliminaries, Sister Farley cleared her throat and cast a desperate glance at the classroom door as if she was about to bolt. Instead she suddenly whipped the gum out of her mouth and held it toward us, a wad of wet, gray matter with teeth marks plainly showing. The scent of spearmint filled the small room.

"All right, girls," she said. "Which one of you would like to chew this for a while?"

It wasn't that we weren't tempted. We were in the midst of World War II, and gum was hard to come by. You cherished each piece, chewing it for days, saving it on the windowsill at night, hoarding it until it disintegrated.

But gum somebody else had chewed?

One by one we shook our heads.

Sister Farley cleared her throat again and her face reddened, but she went gamely on, saying the words as if she'd rehearsed them a lot.

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"A girl who lets a boy get too familiar is like this gum. No good man wants to marry a girl who's been passed around."

Heat rose from us. Passed around? Was she talking about *It*? Were the mysteries about to be unfolded? Information about *It* was not readily available in those days. Schools didn't mention *It*. Movies stopped with a kiss and a mere glimpse of a bed. Pubescent girls thrilled to Rhett Butler carrying Scarlett up that long flight of stairs, but what happened once they got there?

Sister Farley went on to talk about necking and petting, skating all over the map without saying anything specific.

Quietly we listened. This had to do with boys. We were around boys each day at home, at school, at church. Those deacons whose wrists hung out of too-short sleeves, who piously passed the sacrament each Sunday, were they secretly plotting to fall on us if they had the chance? Did my friend Norman know about these things? Had his teacher brought a wad of gum that night, too?

It was heady stuff. We didn't talk much about it after class. But that night I thought about Merlie Linford, a sixteen-year-old girl who sometimes came to help Mama. You'd have to be blind not to notice Merlie was about to have a baby. I'd always thought you had to be married to have a baby, and Merlie wasn't. Did that have something to do with the gum?

Who was there to ask? The last time I'd asked Mama where babies came from, she'd said, "You'll find out when it's time."

It was time.

The next day I lay in wait until Mama was ironing so she wouldn't have to look at me if she didn't want to.

"Mama," I said. "Merlie Linford is going to have a baby, but she doesn't have a husband. How come?"

Mama bent low over the ironing board to press a ruffle on one of her kitchen curtains, all washed and blued and starched to rigid attention. She cleared her throat the way Sister Farley had done. "Well, you see," she said, "Merlie went up in the hayloft with a boy."

I shouldn't have asked. How many times had I climbed up into the hayloft with Norman to hunt swallows' nests or jump down on dusty piles of hay?

I took a deep breath. "Do girls always get babies if they go up in the hayloft with a boy?"

Mama twitched the iron back and forth over a ruffle that was already smooth. "Sit down," she said.

I sat. This was it. My heart beat fast. Mama continued to iron. I concentrated on examining a long scab on my shin bone. I'd scraped my leg on a rock the last time Norman and I had gone looking for

nests of baby birds whose progress we liked to chart. Norman had put mud on it and had been interested in how it was getting along. He planned to be a doctor.

"Pay attention," Mama said.

She told me the great secrets of life, facts and figures and details that made me glad she didn't look at me. I was a farm child. I'd seen what happened when the bull was brought to the cows. But people?

Mama covered the subject thoroughly. I'm sure she didn't want a repeat performance any more than I did.

"Remember about haylofts," Mama said. "And parked cars," she added as an afterthought.

The world was full of hazards.

Mama went back to her ironing, and I escaped outside to the protecting branches of the weeping willow tree. When I heard Norman calling me, I hid behind its trunk.

"Hey," he yelled. "Where are you?"

Last week, yesterday, I would have scrambled to my feet with a raucous, "Over here, Norman."

But not now.

Norman knew where to find me. He loped across the lawn and poked his head through the drooping branches of the willow, grinning, showing teeth too big for his thin, freckled face.

"Hey," he said breathlessly, "I spotted some magpie nests in the ravine. Want to go see them?"

I stared at Norman's knees where the patches his mother had carefully applied were already worn through. I thought of that ravine, cool and secluded and dark.

"No," I said. "I don't want to go, Norman."

He flopped down beside me. "You tired or something?"

"I guess so." I shifted a few inches away from him.

"Well, let's do something closer then. Let's look for swallows' nests in your hayloft."

"No," I said so emphatically that Norman's blue eyes widened in surprise.

"Boy, are you a grouch today." He stretched out on his stomach, resting his chin on his crossed arms. "Boy," he repeated.

I looked at him lying there, lanky, familiar Norman. My best friend Norman. We'd been playmates practically since we were babies.

He was staring intently at my leg. Suddenly he grasped my bare ankle with one hand while he pushed up my blue jeans with the other.

Visions of Sister Farley's gum, gray and pitted, appeared in my head. "Norman, stop it." Yanking my leg away, I shrank back against the tree trunk. Tears welled in my eyes.

Norman sat up. "I was just looking at your scab. I wanted to see how it's coming along."

I stared at him.

He put a hand on my arm. "What's the matter? You sure are acting funny today."

I looked into his eyes, then down at his hand. "Take your paw off me," I said through gritted teeth.

Norman drew away. A slow flush crept upward from his shirt collar, spreading to his big ears, painting them a bright, painful red. The color ran across his cheekbones and up into his hairline.

"Good gosh," he said. "Good *gosh*."

Scrambling awkwardly to his feet, he ran back across the lawn.

I heard the kitchen screen door slam as Mama came out to throw potato peelings over the back fence and slam again as she went back in. Had she witnessed the scene?

I wanted to call out to Norman, to tell him to come back, to say I'd go with him to look for birds' nests.

But all I did was lean my hot face against the tree trunk and watch him go.

During the next week it seemed as if there were babies everywhere. Each one reminded me of my heavy new knowledge.

Norman and I didn't look at one another any more. If we happened to be in the same general area, which we tried to avoid, we looked at the trees, the ground, our toes — anywhere but at each other.

The weeks went by.

Then Merlie Linford brought her baby over to show to Mama.

"I can't believe her," Merlie said. "A real, live person. And I made her."

"She's beautiful," Mama said. "A miracle."

She looked quite ordinary to me. Bald. Red. A round, chinless face and a toothless mouth.

"Hold her," Mama said to me.

I backed away.

"Babies aren't contagious," Mama said softly.

I sat down and let her put Merlie's baby in my lap. She was warm and soft and a little damp. Her fingers curled around my thumb. She looked up at me with the blurred eyes of babyhood.

Once I'd been as she was now. Someday she'd be as I was then. I'd be older and maybe have a baby of my own. Then soon she'd be older and have a baby. My baby would grow up and have a baby, and this baby's baby would, too. That's the way the world went on.

A miracle.

“What’s her name?” I asked.

“Sunday,” Merlie said. “Like ‘Our Gal Sunday.’ It’s my favorite show on the radio.”

Merlie, who loved soap operas and Rhett Butler and Evening in Paris perfume, was Sunday’s mother. Merlie, who’d made a mistake.

But Sunday had a father somewhere, too, didn’t she?

“I’m going to keep her,” Merlie said.

Mama nodded. “It won’t be easy.”

“No,” Merlie said. “No, it won’t.”

She came and took Sunday from me. She held her close against her neck and cried.

Norman brought me a bouquet of Indian paintbrush one day. He handed it to me, smiling shyly.

Norman had never given me a bouquet before. He’d never been shy around me before.

It made me feel different.

I liked it. He was male, and I was female, and there was something that pulled us toward one another in spite of everything. I wasn’t sure what it was, but I suspected it would grow stronger as the years passed. It was age-old and mysterious and so powerful that I wondered if it could ever be held at bay by anything so insubstantial as Sister Farley’s gum.