

TIGHTY-WHITIES OR BOXERS?

By Avi

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IT WAS about eight o'clock on a Sunday evening when Ryan Bennett's mom, Halley, came into his small bedroom and said, "We need to have a serious discussion."

Ryan, eleven years old, was slouched in his soft chair, reading *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* for the ninth time. He lowered the book and said, "About what?"

"Mostly about me. Where do you want to talk?"

"Is it *that* serious?"

"It's *that* serious."

"Can you give me a hint?"

"Ryan, I'd just like to sit down somewhere so we can talk. It's really important."

He tried to read her thoughts. He couldn't.

"Okay," he said, marking the place in his book and pulling himself out of his chair.

Ryan followed his mom through their four-room apartment into what they called their living room. He sat on the couch. Halley sat in the chair with the frayed armrests across the way, by the lamp and bookcase. She, too, was a reader of novels, sometimes reading the books Ryan read so they could talk about them.

For a moment, they just sat there, she looking at him, he looking at her. She was thirty-four years old, a dental hygienist, and liked to bike to keep fit. Weeknights she worked out for half an hour on a stationary bike. On weekends, weather permitting, she and Ryan rode together along the Schuylkill River. He loved the long conversations they had about all kinds of things.

He could tell she was nervous from the way her top teeth—she had very white teeth—stuck out some and bit her lower lip.

"You going to tell me?" he coaxed.

She stopped biting her lip, but passed her right-hand fingertips over an eye, as if brushing something away. Ryan realized that her eyes were glistening. Suspecting tears, he felt tense and waited anxiously. Ever since that time when his mother had informed

him that his father had leukemia—the cause of his dad’s death—he was edgy about surprises.

His mom sat up straighter. Smoothed her skirt. Those, Ryan knew, were very serious signs. She said, “It’s been three years since your father died.”

“I know.”

“It was hard, very hard, but I think you and I handled it very well. And we love each other a lot. Maybe more, right?”

“Okay.”

“We’re more than okay. That’s not a small thing. And we’ve moved on.”

“But we haven’t moved,” said Ryan. “We’ve stayed right here.”

Relaxing, she smiled. “You don’t always have to be a wise guy. You know what I mean.”

“Okay.”

“I loved your dad. He loved me. And you. We had a good marriage. A really good family, but it... changed. We mourned.” For an instant, her face saddened, momentarily reliving that time. Then she took a deep breath, gave her professional smile, and said, “About a year ago, I felt good enough to, you know, start to... see people. I guess I needed to get on with my own life.”

Ryan, noticing she was getting more uneasy, said, “You mean go out on dates. Right? All those babysitters...”

“Yes, and meet a few eligible men—”

“Who I never met.”

“I was just *seeing* people, Ryan. I didn’t think it was fair to you.” She became silent. Bit her lower lip.

“When you do that,” he said, “you get lipstick on your teeth. Makes you look like a vampire.”

She smiled.

Ryan waited. Then he leaned forward, out of the couch. “But now, I bet, you met someone you think is... pretty good.”

“How did you guess?”

“Mom, I know you.”

“Well, you’re right.”

“What’s his name?”

“Ian Kipling.”

“And?”

“He asked me to marry him.”

“And?”

“I told him I’d think about it.”

“Seriously?”

“Seriously.”

Ryan took a moment to consider. Then he said, “How did you meet him?”

“I was cleaning his teeth.”

“Must have been a great conversation.”

She laughed.

He said, “*Are* you thinking about it? *That* seriously?”

“Yes.”

“How long have you known him?”

“Seven months.”

Ryan thought for a moment. Then he said, “Do I have any say about it?”

“About what?”

“Your marrying him.”

“Well... I certainly hope you like him.”

“*Hope?*”

“Of course. I want you to meet him. I’d like you to get to know him.”

“Wait a minute. If you married this guy, he would be my father, right?”

“Stepfather.”

“I don’t want *step*. He’d be my father. Period. And you just *hope* I’ll like him? That’s not fair. He have kids?”

“No. He does have a niece and a nephew.”

“Ever married?”

“No.”

Ryan considered. “You once told me, ‘Being your mom is not just about loving you; it’s a job.’”

“Did I say that?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Well, true.”

“So being a dad is sort of like a job, too, right? When you got your new job with Dr. Von what’s-his-name, you applied for it. ‘Employment opportunity available: Dental Hygienist.’ Right? You filled out an application. I was sitting right next to you when you did. You even had to get references, right? And an interview. You once told me that when you married Dad, he went to Grandpa and asked him for permission. So, I think if this... what’s his name?”

“Ian Kipling.”

“If Ian Kipling wants the job of being my father, he has to apply. To me. To get my permission.”

Ryan could not tell if his mother was going to laugh or cry. “Really?” she said.

“Really,” said Ryan. “If I don’t like him, would you still marry him?”

His mother said, “I’d have to think about that.”

“So you have to admit, it’s important that I like him, too, right?”

“Right.”

“If you married him, would you change your last name?”

“I haven’t thought about that, either.”

“There’s a lot you haven’t thought of.”

She smiled. “I gather.”

Ryan stood up. “Tell Ian Kipling to submit his application. To me. I’ll go write a job description.”

“A what?”

“A description of the job he wants.”

“Ryan...”

“Mean it.”

An hour later Ryan handed his mother a sheet of paper. “Here’s the job description. I printed it in Arial Black font, so it would look good.”

Employment opportunity available: Dad. Must not be too old. Has to like my mom a lot. Be nice to her. Know stuff. Athletic. In good health. Funny. Know sports. Know Harry Potter books. Have interesting job. Being smart necessary.

Does not believe in harsh punishments. Does not expect clean bedroom. Must like kids, but previous experience unnecessary. Knowledge of computers not needed. Overall, needs to be cool. Two written references must be provided, one from kid. People applying should call Ryan Bennett.

His mother read it and said, "Come on, Ryan. What do you expect me to do with this?"

"Give it to Ian Kipling. If he's interested in applying for the position, tell him to call me. And tell him to make it soon. Maybe you'll get another offer."

Halley studied the words again, looked at Ryan, and then said, "Okay."

Two days later, in the evening, Ryan received a call on his cell phone.

"Hello. Is this Ryan Bennett?"

"That's me."

"Oh, hi! My name is Ian Kipling."

"Oh."

Silence.

"I guess I'm applying for the position you have available. You know, being your... dad. I read the job description. I think I'm an excellent candidate and would like to make an appointment."

"A lot of people have already applied."

Another moment of silence.

"Is that true?"

"Maybe."

"Ah. *Can* I make an appointment? Soon?"

"I first need to see two letters of reference."

"Oh, right. One from a kid. And the other...?"

"Have any friends?"

"Sure."

"You can use one of them. Just send the letters to me. Not to my mother."

"I'll see what I can do."

Four days later a letter came:

Dear Ryan Bennett,

I am telling my mom what to write. Ian Kipling is my uncle. He's a pretty nice guy. When he visits my mom, who is his sister, they laugh a lot. My father likes him but they argue about politics. He took me to a baseball game, twice. He said football games are too expensive. His birthday presents are okay. He thinks my sister is great but trust me, really she is only okay. Look out—he likes spicy food. But I think he would be a good father. Good luck.

Randy (I am 7 years old.)

Two days later, Ryan's mom asked him, "Did you get any letters of reference?"

"One. From a kid."

"Who was it?"

"Ian Kipling's nephew."

"May I see it?"

"Reference letters are confidential."

"Who told you that?"

"I asked Mrs. Gillman."

"Your English teacher?"

"We had these class lessons about writing memos and letters. So I asked her. That's what she said."

"I'd never argue with an English teacher."

The second letter came four days later.

Dear Ryan Bennett,

My name is Chuck Schusterman, and I am pleased to recommend Ian Kipling for the position of Dad—your dad.

Ian is an old college friend. About nine years ago, he was my roommate at the University of Wisconsin (Madison) and we have stayed friends, so I think I know him pretty well.

Ian's good points: He's a very nice guy. In fact, I think of him as my best friend. He's smart, and a hard worker. As you probably know, he works for an insurance company, uncovering crooks and cheats. Like a private detective. So he tells lots of cool stories. Pretty generous. Can be very funny. Likes to go to unusual restaurants. Good listener. Dresses neatly. He was an all-state baseball player (pitcher) in high school. Nowadays, he works out in a gym

twice a week, so he's healthy. I have a daughter (three years old) and when he comes over, he enjoys reading to Sally. She calls him Uncle Ian. My wife likes him, too.

I have met his parents, and they are very nice.

Things not so good about Ian: When we were roommates, he was pretty messy, but I believe he has gotten better. Did not make varsity baseball in college. Sulked for weeks. Doesn't care much about football. Loves spicy food. Does not like snow sports, and since he is from Wisconsin, that is odd. Knows more about cows than you need to know. He listens to bluegrass music, which is okay, but only if you like that kind of music. I don't. The worst thing I can say about him is that when we were college roommates we used to arm wrestle and he ALWAYS beat me. I would advise you not to do that.

Feel free to ask me questions if you have further concerns. I know he would like to be your father so I hope you will give him the position.

Sincerely yours,

Chuck Schusterman

The day after Ryan received the second letter, he was eating dinner with his mom when he said, "I got the second letter of reference."

"Who was it from?"

"Guy named Chuck Schusterman. He says he's Ian Kipling's best friend. Have you met him?"

"Yes."

"Is he a best friend?"

"Uh-huh. Did the letters say nice things?"

"Mostly."

"Just mostly?"

"Mrs. Gillman told us that when you write a letter of recommendation, you have to say some things that are not so good or else no one will believe you about the good things."

"Well?"

"I told you. Letters of recommendation are private. But don't ask him about cows or arm wrestle with him."

"Okay. What's the next step?"

"I interview him."

"Interview? Ryan—"

"When you were watching the *Nightly Business Report*, remember, they had a thing about job interviews. Really important. They can get you or lose you a job."

"But this is about—"

"According to the guy on that show, most people don't even *get* answers to applications. Lucky to even have a job interview. Ian Kipling is lucky."

"Okay. What do you expect him to do?"

"Tell him to call me and make an appointment."

"Can I be there?"

"No way. I'll find a place."

"Ryan, what happens if you don't like him?"

"I told him lots of other people applied."

"You didn't!"

"You said you started to see people. And they all wanted to marry you, right?"

"That's very sweet of you, but... no, not really."

"Just tell him to call me," Ryan said as he gathered up the dirty dinner plates and carried them to the sink. "Can't get a job without an interview."

Two days later, Ryan's cell phone rang.

"Hello," said Ryan.

"Hi. This is Ian Kipling. Is this Ryan?"

"Yes."

"I guess I have to ask for an appointment to meet you."

"It's an interview."

"Right, interview. Do you want me to come to your house?"

"I don't think that's a good idea."

"Fine. How about an after-school snack or something?"

"Bribery won't help. Besides, I don't like spicy food."

"Then maybe you can suggest someplace."

"There's a public library a few blocks from our place. I go there a lot."

"Okay with me. Can you tell me where it is?"

“Corner of Ohio and University. Friday afternoon. Four o’clock. They have a section for newspapers and magazines off to one side. With nice chairs.”

“Will Halley be there?”

“Absolutely not.”

“Okay, then, I’ll see you Friday at four. I look forward to it.”

Ryan said, “Good luck.”

Then he began to compile a list of questions. By the time he was done, he had filled four pages.

Friday afternoon at three forty-five, Ryan was sitting in a library chair reviewing the questions he had written when a man approached him.

“Ryan Bennett? I’m Ian Kipling.” He held out a hairy hand.

Ryan looked up at a rather thin man wearing a dark suit, with a button-down blue shirt and striped tie. His hair had receded; his eyes seemed unusually blue, and bright, while his nose seemed somewhat large. He was smooth-shaven. The hand he extended had rather long fingers.

Ryan shook the hand. The grip was strong.

Ian Kipling sat down across from Ryan. The two looked at each other. Ryan decided that Ian was nervous because he kept clasping and unclasping his hands.

“I appreciate your seeing me,” said Ian Kipling.

“No problem.” Ryan took out a ballpoint pen and held up his pages of questions. “I’ll be writing down your answers so I can review them. Okay?”

“Okay.”

Ryan checked the first page. “Question one. Can you tell me why you want the position?”

“Being your dad?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Well, I really love your mom, crazy about her, and if you’re anything like her, I’m sure I’d love you a lot, too. I mean, I like kids.”

Ryan wrote some of that on his paper.

“What’s your experience with kids?”

“I was one, once.”

“Anything more recent?”

"I have a nephew and niece. We get along really well. I think you got a letter from my nephew."

"Did you read it?"

"No, but my sister said it was okay."

"What does my mom like to do when she wants to have a good time?"

"Go to a restaurant. Bike."

"What's your favorite sport?"

"Baseball."

"Who do you root for?"

"Cubs."

"They *never* win."

"Gotta be loyal, right?"

"Favorite ice cream?"

"Triple-Death Chocolate. At the Barkley Ice Cream Parlor down on Oakson. They make it there."

Ryan checked his paper. "When do you think kids should go to bed?"

"Depends. There are school days. Holidays. Weekends. Special days. I think there should be some flexibility."

"Should kids have to do jobs around the house?"

"If the parents work, kids should do their fair share."

"What about allowances?"

"I don't believe kids should get too much. There are jobs they can get. Babysitting. Dog walking. That kind of stuff."

"Yeah, but how much?"

Ian thought for a moment, then said, "Negotiable."

"What do you eat for breakfast?"

"I'm not big on breakfast. Just coffee. Black."

"What's your job?"

"I work for United American Health. Investigate false claims, fraud, and corruption. Basically, catching crooks."

"Is that dangerous?"

Ian Kipling shook his head. "People do make honest mistakes. But some people try to cheat. Doctors, too. So I study accounts, go over forms, records. Going through computers. Lots of data recovery. What we call computer forensics. Lots of details."

"You catch any crooks?"

"It's happened."

"They go to jail?"

"A couple."

Ryan wrote that down. Then he asked, "Are you rich?"

"Nope. But I have decent pay."

"Have any diseases?"

Ian shook his head.

"What if my mother got sick?"

"I'd take really good care of her. Oh, yeah, I can include her—and you—in my health benefits."

"My mom and I both like to read. What about you?"

"Reading's okay. When I read, it's mostly history."

"What are your feelings about restrictions on TV watching?"

"Willing to negotiate that, too."

"Favorite band."

"Grateful Dead."

Ryan checked his list and looked up. "Tighty-whities or boxers?"

"Ah... tighty-whities."

Ryan said, "What's your idea of a good time?"

"Hanging out. Playing sports. Cooking. Love movies."

"What's your favorite movie?"

"Oh, wow, so many..."

"Pick one."

"Let's see... *Casablanca*."

"Never heard of it."

"You should see it."

"What do you like to cook?"

"Indian food."

Ryan made a face. "Spicy?"

"Can be."

"I don't like spicy."

"I'm flexible."

"Where do you go on vacations?"

"When I do go, it's to my parents' dairy farm out in Wisconsin. I get to drive a tractor. I could teach you."

Ryan reviewed his paper. "What's the best thing about my mom?"

"She's full of life. Great sense of humor. I love being with her. Terrific."

"If you became my dad, could I keep having a picture of my real dad in my room?"

"I hope so."

"Are you aware that if you two marry, and people send you both an e-mail, and start off the way they usually do, you won't know who it's for?"

"I don't get that."

"Your initials, *H* and *I*. Because, you know, how people write: HI."

"I hadn't thought of that."

Ryan took another look at his paper. "Okay. What's the most important thing you can do for your son?"

Ian Kipling became thoughtful. "I can think of two things."

"What?"

"The first thing is to love him. Second thing is, convince him that you *do* love him."

Ryan took a while to write that down. "Got three more pages, but they're mostly about the same subject."

"Shoot."

"In *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, who's the teacher that Harry thinks is working with Voldemort?"

Ian Kipling said, "I'm sorry to admit it, but I haven't read the book."

Ryan frowned and folded up his papers. "Well, that's not negotiable. So I guess I don't have any more questions."

That night Ryan went into his mom's bedroom. She was sitting up in bed, reading some dentistry manual.

“Okay,” said Ryan. “Ian Kipling. His letters of reference are okay. Interview, okay. I don’t think he reads as much as we do. He likes spicy food. And, guess what? He never read Harry Potter.”

Halley said, “Do you think he can handle the job?”

“Yeah, I think so.”

The wedding was held in the city municipal building with Judge Hemens officiating. Halley and Ian were there, of course. So was Ryan. Ian’s sister, her husband, and their kids were there. So were Chuck Schusterman and his family.

When they got to the judge’s chambers, Ryan said, “I have to speak to the judge in private.”

“Whatever for?” said Halley.

“Something important.”

She looked at Ian, who just smiled and lifted a shoulder.

Ryan went up to the judge. “I’m my mom’s son. She’s the one getting married. Can I speak to you in private for a moment?”

“Are you going to object to the marriage?”

“Just want to ask you to do something.”

“Step over here.”

Whispering, the two conferred in private.

After the brief conference, the judge came forward. “Let us begin,” he said to the wedding party.

The words were spoken, the rings exchanged, and as the ceremony was completed, the judge said, “And by the authority vested in me by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, and Ryan Bennett, I proclaim you Mom and Dad.”

Ryan grinned.