

Ronnie

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On the last afternoon of his life, he'd thought about her. She'd seemed to blossom that July, under the sun, her back tanned brown and her full face radiant, healthy. I've been getting plenty of sleep, she told him that night at the lake. I can stay out late. My folks don't mind. He'd watched her over at Brookville High. The previous fall she'd worn that gold silk jacket to school every morning, the one with the embroidered flowers all up the back and a buck with big antlers square in the center. He suspected she'd made it herself. He'd noticed her shoving books into her locker, and he'd watched the way hair hung in her face as she struggled to locate overdue copies of books with strange words in their titles; Heliotropes, Divination, Geomancy. He wondered about the designs she drew in the margins of her spiral-bound notebooks while listening to Miss Smith lecture on the nature of free fall. As winter moved in, the color drained from her face. She grew increasingly quiet and wore less colorful clothing. One morning Ronnie spotted the gold silk jacket balled up in her backpack, stained by the ink of an uncapped black marker. Her lips cracked and dried. Flakes and raw patches formed at the corners of her mouth and the half-moons under her eyes looked dark and blue, a dark navy blue like the dashboard of Ronnie's Monte Carlo. Sometimes he caught her dozing off during class, droplets of drool sneaking out from her mouth, smudging the designs she'd drawn in her notebooks. Sometimes her eyelids fluttered as if she was dreaming.

Like everyone else in the area, Ronnie had known her for years. Last names were familiar, the same names recycled, year after year, the same facial features and gaits and smiles wandered the halls of the high school, zoomed down the main drag, crowded into the bleachers for football games. Brothers and sisters of so-and-so. Daughters and sons of locals from way back. Cousins of folks who married nieces of others. But she was an only child from Burg, where she lived in the strange house with her parents. No one knew much about them. Just that they drove the station wagon. Just that they'd always lived there.

Ronnie had been drinking for a couple of years. It started one night when his father let him drink a

beer with him out in the garage. Ronnie liked how the booze made him feel more social, more like himself, and he liked how it made him laugh and feel wild. He enjoyed driving out to the lake past dark, parking the Monte in the lot near the swimming beach, counting the stars and guzzling a traveler of whiskey. I'm my own man now, on the brink of busting out of this place he often thought. He dreamed of playing football at Nebraska – the red jersey with THOMPSON stitched on the back and a trophy blonde co-ed riding shotgun in the Monte, her hair whipping wild from a breeze that blew in through the cracked window, her legs smooth and bare like river rocks. He wondered if he had what it took to reach that fine moment, to step into the picture his mind had drawn up for his future. Prolly just end up stuck here, he thought, cranking up the tunes on his radio, staring southwest at the dark spot where the Brookville High football lights would glow on nights when there was a home game.

He'd happened upon her at the Taste-E-Freeze that July. She sat alone at a picnic table, sucking a rhubarb shake through a straw, letting a ladybug crawl down the length of her forearm. He'd straddled the picnic bench opposite hers and scratched at his unshaven chin.

"Hi Ronnie," she said. "Sure hot out today."

"Wanna go for a drive with me?" he asked.

"Where to?" she said. "Now or later?"

Something about her sun-colored face seemed powerful, and Ronnie felt his heart pulse like it did when he ran for a touchdown, under the lights, riding the wave of the Brookville faithful chanting his name from their spots in the stands. He'd heard stories about her getting drunk by herself up in her bedroom, placing strange whispery phone calls to the chemistry teacher, showing her breasts to some of the other football players. He'd heard stories about her throwing up in the Brookville High bathroom. I think she's pregnant, somebody said. I think she's bulimic, suggested another. He'd heard she smelled like Peppermint Schnapps.

"Later," he said. "Round dark. Out to the lake. I'll bring some bug spray and something to drink."

He'd felt invincible after that night, when she'd drawn the design on his palm. She'd told him he'd live for a long time. Then he'd entered her body, broken her dam like a surge from the mighty Missouri, invaded her fjord like a sharp hard glacier, like an old Viking claiming his territory. At that moment

of impact he felt all of his senses spring into life as if freed from dormancy, the lilac scent of her skin filled his nose, the smooth hairless feel of her thighs reminded him of the just born rabbits he'd found under his backyard shed last spring. Her lips tasted like school lunch peach cobbler. He couldn't shake the sensation of the ballpoint pen rolling across the pad of his index finger. He found himself trying to re-imagine the way her face looked, nose up toward the stars, wide eyes staring at constellations. She knows 'em by name, he thought.

He started driving back to the spot late at night, after the good girls had gone home or down under the football bleachers to make out with their boyfriends. He liked to crank up the tunes, mix more of the whiskey into his bottle of cola, rod the Monte Carlo down the dirt road that led to the lake and turn a cookie in the parking lot by the swimming beach. He liked to watch the dust fly up like a halo of brown smoke

around him. That afternoon he'd dug in his mother's shoebox of lipsticks, hoping to find one that smelled like peach cobbler. He'd driven past the Taste-E-Freeze where the tables were empty. He'd gone to The Swarm with some buddies, and had sat in the back of the Brookville Cinema where they'd taken pulls from a flask. When they drifted out of the theater that night, the summer seemed to embrace Ronnie. He was just drunk enough to want to keep going, and after he'd dropped his friends off at their houses he'd run a red light on his way out of town. But there'd been no one to see him. He kept taking pulls from the flask down the highway and down the dirt road to the lake. He thought he was almost there when he saw the big bug destroyed on the windshield, bright juices and innards staining his view. Then he blacked out, licking his lips, singing along with the radio, under the stars.



Two Beats Tonight
Shaina Harris