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STORIES, BOOK PICKS, AND BLESSINGS

The Boy in the VW Bug

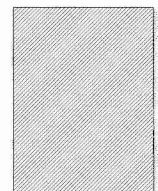
He was my older brother's college friend,
and he could have broken my heart.
Instead, he protected it **By Ann Hood**

The boy in the white VW Bug drove into my life on a summer night in 1970. Nine months earlier, my brother, Skip, had left for college wearing raspberry Bermuda shorts and a matching polo shirt. He returned that summer a new person in cut-off blue jeans and an Army-green T-shirt, with his dirty-blond hair hanging in waves to his collarbone. But more than the way he looked had changed about my brother. During his year at college, he had turned from a slightly nerdy, slightly overweight, slide-ruler-toting kid into a 6' 3" handsome man. It was as if a stranger lived in the bedroom next to mine that summer. He smelled mysterious. He kept his door closed. He had secrets. His new girlfriend, Linda, would sometimes appear in moccasins and ripped jeans, →



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Photograph by Thayer Allyson Gowdy





and the two of them carried a frightening air of sexuality about them.

For \$1,600, Skip bought a lime-green VW Bug with his earnings from last summer's job at a discount store called Zayre. He was working there again this year, and that was where he was when the boy in the white Bug pulled up in front of our house.

At 13, I was bored and weepy, trapped at home in a neighborhood next to exactly nothing. Some Saturdays, I walked the mile to the new shopping mall, where the movie theater played foreign and R-rated films. Looking back now, I realize how odd it was for a mall in Warwick, RI, to have such a thing. But it was part of my peculiar landscape that summer.

I would walk to the mall, spend hours in the record shop and bookstore, then watch *Women in Love*. A restaurant across from the movie theater had baskets of peanuts on every table, and the idea was to eat the peanuts and throw the shells on the floor, a decadent pleasure that I

“So,” he said, making sure my parents were out of earshot, “you want to go to the movies?”

loved. There was also a Newport Creamery—a local ice cream-shop chain—on the second floor, where college girls wore green-and-white-striped uniforms and scooped ice cream with a surliness that I envied. On that long walk to and from the mall, I worried over the sad state of my life: too young to date or drive, yet keenly aware of something bigger out there waiting for me.

My yearning for this something was enough to keep me up at night or send me into fits of agony and sobs. I would sit in my room and play the 45 rpm of “Candles in the Rain” by Melanie as loud as I could, until my



father would shout up the stairs: “Put me and that woman out of our misery, please!” At which point I would switch from Melanie to Simon and Garfunkel’s album *Parsley, Sage, Rosemary and Thyme* and cry over “The Dangling Conversation.” When they sang, “And you read your Emily Dickinson, and I my Robert Frost...,” my entire being ached for a boy who read poetry, a boy who would love me.

I spent many late afternoons perched at the top of the stairs, gazing out the window. I grew up in an Italian-American family. We—my parents, my brother, and I—lived

VW Bug turn the corner onto our street and park behind my parents’ green Chevy Caprice. The door opened. Out stepped a boy with long, pale-blond hair and as skinny as could be, dressed in that summer’s uniform of torn jeans and pocket T-shirt. He disappeared up the front walk that led to our kitchen door. I held my breath. Then a deep voice asked: “Skip home yet?” Next came my parents’ muffled voices, the creaky sound of the screen door opening and then swinging shut—and the boy was in our house.

I ran to my room and brushed my waist-length blond hair, sniffed under my arms for any traces of BO, then walked downstairs, trying to look cool and casual. When I entered the kitchen, where they all sat—the boy and my father holding bottles of Michelob—he stood the way

gentlemen in movies stood when a lady came in. My heart was doing strange and wonderful things: flutters and leaps and banging about. He said his name, which was so beautifully ordinary I almost wept at the sound of it. He sat back down. I sat across from him at our table, a tablecloth decorated with tulips and topped with plastic stretching between us. →

with my grandmother Mama Rose in the house she had moved into when she was 2 years old. She’d given birth to 10 children in the bedroom where she still slept, and six of those children still lived within walking distance. From that window, I could see the rooftops of three of their houses. I used to play a game: *Someday I will go beyond those houses, beyond the mall, beyond those distant trees. Someday I will go farther than anything I can see at this moment...*

This was what I was doing when, outside the window, I watched a white



Photographs, from top: Ian Lishman/Justin Images/Corbis; istockphoto.



"This is Skip's sister, Ann," my father said.

My father went on to ask him about studying chemistry in college and his summer job at a nearby lab, and the entire time the boy snuck blue-eyed glances at me and gave me close-mouthed smiles. Too soon, my brother came home from work, and the two of them left in the white Bug. I raced upstairs and watched them go, the eggbeater sound of that engine growing faint in the summer night as they disappeared from my sight.

Skip worked at Zayre until nine o'clock most nights. But the boy came for him at eight, or even earlier, and sat at our kitchen table across from me, drinking a beer with my father and eating my grandmother's meatball sandwiches. "What does that boy

which she sometimes did. We'd go to Dunkin' Donuts and sit in the pink seats, and she'd tell me her own teenage love stories.

One night, on his way out the door, the boy paused. He handed me a worn paperback—*Siddhartha* by Hermann Hesse.

"I thought you might like this," he said, with his bashful smile.

I took it, still warm from his pocket, and nodded like an idiot.

"So," he said, making sure my parents were out of earshot, "do you want to go to the movies tomorrow night?"

My ears started to ring so loudly I wasn't sure I'd heard him right. "Sure," I managed through my dry mouth.

Then he was gone, down the sidewalk to where my brother waited for him.

I'd never done anything yet that required permission; I went nowhere, except the mall

think?" Mama Rose said one night, a week or so into this ritual. "We dumb or something? He come here to see Ann, not Skip."

My father's own blue eyes bulged. "She's 13," he said. "I'll kill him."

But I knew in my heart it was true. This college boy liked me. *Me!* Over those nights, I'd learned that his father had just died, a fact that made my crush on him grow even bigger. Here was a boy who knew tragedy and poetry, who knew history and philosophy. It was as if he had stepped out of my imagination and into my kitchen.

Suddenly, my dull life had become thrilling. After my brother would come home and the two of them would leave, I could barely sit still. I hopped and danced and talked fast. I went outside to stare at the moon. I begged my mother to take me for a drive,

It didn't occur me to even ask my parents if I could go to the movies with him. I was young enough that I'd never done anything yet that required permission. I basically went nowhere, except the mall, and did nothing without them. So when he showed up earlier than usual the next night, I simply came down the stairs and said, "We're going to the movies." Mama Rose jumped up, and my father looked bewildered, but I just walked out the door and into that white Bug.

It smelled so masculine in there, I thought I might faint. Smoky and musky and leathery. I inhaled deeply, clutched the edge of my seat, and concentrated on the way the veins in his hand looked as he shifted. The movie was *Claire's Knee*, a French film at the mall. I tried to follow it, to read the subtitles as they appeared across →

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the screen, but there was too much going on in my head and my heart. I wished someone were there to see me at a French film with a college boy. But none of my friends would ever be here now.

The movie was about a guy trying to touch Claire's knee. At least, that was all I could manage to take from it. Mostly the movie, for me, was about the few times the boy's arm brushed against mine when he shifted in his seat, and the smell of his own particular scent.

"Have you ever had the strawberry pie at Cello's?" he asked me when we got back in the car.

I shook my head. I'd never even heard of Cello's. But soon enough we were there, and he was ordering two pieces of strawberry pie and two coffees. The pie was delicious, a huge

I nodded again.

He handed me a copy of *The Tin Drum* by Gunter Grass, and I somehow managed to open the car door and walk up the sidewalk and into my house.

The next day he picked me up at 10 o'clock in the morning. My parents were at work, but it still hadn't occurred to me that they might not allow me to go with him. We drove to a beach I had never been to before. It was called East Beach, and something in the way the beach faced the ocean made the waves there enormous and rough. We bodysurfed, getting tumbled and thrown onto the sand until we could hardly walk back to the scratchy Army blanket he'd brought. Panting, I dropped onto it beside him, trying not to stare at the V of hair that

He picked me up at 10 in the morning; we drove to a beach I'd never been to before

mound of sweetened whole strawberries topped with whipped cream. I had stayed up the entire night before reading *Siddhartha*, and we ate pie and talked about the book and about Hermann Hesse, Simon and Garfunkel's lyrics running through my mind the whole time. *And you read your Emily Dickinson, and I my Robert Frost....*

Sitting in front of my house a couple of hours later, he told me that he'd had a girlfriend named Kathy for a couple of years. She worked at the Newport Creamery. "But it's kind of on and off," he said sadly.

I nodded, trying to seem sympathetic and wise.

"So that's OK?" he asked.

"Uh, sure," I said, confused.

He smiled at me. "Good," he said. "How about we go to the beach tomorrow?"

started on his chest and trailed down to his belly and into his trunks.

He produced two warm cans of beer from his rucksack. I watched him pop the tops on both and then hand one to me.

"So where are you going to school in the fall?" he asked me.

I frowned. "The same place," I said.

"Really?" he said. "For some reason I thought next year was your first year."

I thought I understood then. "No, I'm not in high school yet. I'm going into ninth grade."

The boy put his beer down.

"What?" But before I could repeat what I'd said, he said, "You're not going to college in September?"

I laughed. "College? I'm only 13."

"Oh, my God," he said. "No →

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wonder Skip said he was going to beat the crap out of me.”

The boy in the VW Bug did not walk out of my life that day. He simply stopped trying to date me. Instead, he introduced me to the world that was waiting for me to grow up and enter it. He taught me to play Frisbee. He took me to see *Hair*. He drove me to Cambridge, MA, an hour away, to see experimental theater, to shop at Marimekko, to eat vegetarian food. Some afternoons he took me into Providence, a 15-minute drive from my own small town but a city with art stores and restaurants and theaters. He introduced me to a guy who made and sold fringed vests, and I had the man make me a purple one with beads in the fringes. He bought hamburgers stuffed into pita bread, and ice cream with M&M’s folded into it. We browsed the College Hill Bookstore together, and he bought me copies of poetry by Gregory Corso and Lawrence Ferlinghetti. He played FM radio in his car. He explained physics and existentialism to me.

For three summers, he drove up in his white Bug when he came home from college, and led me through the complicated and confusing world of adolescence.

And then came the summer that I was 16; over the school year I had acquired a boyfriend.

I was sitting in the backyard, waiting for that boyfriend to pick me up, when I heard the familiar eggbeater sound of a VW engine. The boy walked toward me, grinning. “Want to go to Boston?” he asked. “There’s a new show at the MFA.”

For the first time since I’d known him, I said, “No. I have a date.”

What was that look that came over

his face? Disappointment? Surprise? Maybe even hurt?

He studied me, 16 at last, and he nodded and said, “OK.”

As I watched him walk away, I realized my crush on him had ended, replaced now with a more mature affection and passion for the boy who would be appearing on my doorstep in a few minutes.

During my 20s, I worked as a flight attendant to help pay for graduate school, and wrote my first novel. It was my husband, Lorne, who finally wooed me back to Providence, where we bought a house and started a family. One might think the story would end there. But it didn’t. It hasn’t ended yet. The boy in the white Bug got married and had children and moved to Washington, DC. But every now and then, when he’s back visiting his family, my doorbell rings and he’s standing there.

“Want to grab a coffee?” he might ask. And I go off with him in his Volvo station wagon to talk about books and life. And in that moment he’s that boy again, and I’m the girl with the crush I thought would never end, tasting strawberries and ocean air. ■

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Author Buzz



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