

THAT LUCKY OLD SUN

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She knew the bell was about to ring. One minute to go. The others shifted noisily at their desks stacking books in their arms, ready to escape. Five, four, three, two, one. At last the bell! She filtered into the herd, moved along by shoving hands and nudging shoulders, into the hall of grey lockers. She clung to the wall, supporting heavy books in her arms, waiting for him to come out.

He was the last one out, balancing his one book on his head. The books were damp in her hands. Bobby Burke, she sighed inside her tight sweater. Heart-throb of the month, her desperate substitute for the real thing, which of course was Ricky Nelson. She followed him through the maze of bodies, fighting to keep up. Locker doors opened dramatically, the crowd parted for her. Bobby, she called silently, watching the black cotton jacket fade into the others. The name "Annette Funicello" was stenciled in bright yellow across his back. She hurried faster.

"Bobby," she called, finally gathering courage to say The Name. He turned, looked at her casually. They were nearing the double doors, the crowd dispersing. He was tossing his book in the air, making it spin with admirable agility. He waited for her, impatiently, to catch up.

"What do you want, creep?" he wanted to know.

Panic. She had prepared no opening line. Her books were weighted like lead. His book spun in the air. He stared at her, bored as Ricky Nelson. She couldn't bear the sight of the sensuous lips, the half-closed eyes; she looked away.

She saw him coming toward her then, her younger brother. He was only twelve years old, an insignificant junior high student and, she thought, a stupid little punk. She thrust her foam rubber breasts out threateningly; he must remember she had reached the sacred age of sixteen and was no longer approachable. But still he came toward her, white teeth flashing in a silly smile.

"Hey, Wendy," he called and quickened his pace.

"I don't know him," she told Bobby nervously, alternating between half-crazed glares at her brother and batting innocent eyes at Bobby.

"Ain't he your brother?"

"Are you kidding? That little creep?"

She looked down at her saddle shoes with the plaid shoelaces, hoping they would reassure her that she had a touch of class in spite of her brother. "Yeah," she nodded.

The punk had joined them, smiling from her to Bobby and back again. "Hey, Wendy, this the guy? The one you sing to when you play your records and cry?" In the midst of Bobby's laughter, she reached out and shoved her brother.

"Get lost, icky!"

"What else does she do?" Bobby wondered.

"Swoons over Presley."

"That's a lie! If you don't get lost, Jimmy, I'm gonna tell mom!"

"I'll tell her you put rubber in your shirt."

She felt her face color with red heat. It was impossible to even look

at Bobby's face; she knew the smirk would be there. Just as the smirk covered Jimmy's face, beneath the fringe of straw-colored hair. When she reached out, her books dropped to the linoleum, but she wrenched the boy's shirt in her hands, tore it in one quick jerk. The three of them stood, all eyes on the ripped shirt sleeve.

"My favorite shirt," Jimmy said incredulously. "The one you gave me for Christmas."

The satisfaction she felt mingled with regret. She glanced around the hallway to be sure a crowd hadn't gathered to watch this domestic fight. There were kids going by, more or less interested; but not nearly as interested as she imagined. The books rested on her saddle shoes, she couldn't see them anymore; her confidence was gone, what little she had possessed. Jimmy was crying.

"You ruined my shirt, my favorite shirt!"

"Shut up!"

"I'm telling mommy!"

"Shut up, shut up!"

Bobby bent down and picked up her books, balancing his on his head again. When he got up and gave them to her, she took them but did not meet his eyes.

"I hate you!" Jimmy shouted and punched her in the arm.

Jimmy turned and ran toward the double doors; she hesitated only a moment before she ran after him. Down the walk they ran, the armload of books holding her back, Jimmy dashing in front of a cat. A screech of tires on pavement. She followed him across, dodging parked cars, onto a green lawn.

Two girls in big skirts with poodles printed on them, walking close together on the sidewalk, Jimmy crashing into them, scattering their books. She tossed her own books onto the lawn and dove at him. He fell back on the grass, she on top of him, punching, until she noticed the poodles looking at her. Looked up and saw the girls looking at her. She knew them.

"Boy, you're nuts," one girl decided between smacks of gum.

"Sorry," Wendy whispered, still crouched over a laughing, sobbing Jimmy.

"Whatcha wanta beat up a kid for?"

They turned in disgust and continued their concentrated walk, hips swaying the poodles dizzily.

"Jimmy, cut it out!" she yelled at him. He brought his laughter to controlled sobbing and looked at her with a child's frightened wide eyes.

"I'm gonna tell," he promised her, flinching at the slap he expected. But she was frozen with thought, a mixed-up feeling of having done this before. Beside the Christmas tree, beside red and green gift-wrapped packages. Crouching over her little brother, pounding him, yelling at him.

"Tell me," she had cried.

"No!"

"Tell me what's in it or I'll break your arm!"

Through tears he had answered, "Lemme go, I'll tell, I'll tell."

She had released him and when he told her, she wept. Wept for what she had done. Wept for a ruined surprise. Wept for a Cinderella book and Mickey Mouse watch he bought for her at the dime store with his own money.

She sprawled over him now, remembering, feeling sick. "I'm sorry," she said, wondering what good it was to say it.

"My shirt," he wailed.

"I'll fix it, Jimmy, I'll sew it up myself. Really." She shook her head, rolled onto the grass. Miserable. "Why'd you do it, Jimmy? Why'd you tell Bobby those things?"

"I dunno." He lay there, looking tearfully at the sky, his hair mussed boishly.

"Oh, Jimmy," she sighed. The rubber cones stood out of the sweater by themselves, empty inside. She touched the sweater over them and wondered why she was so icky. Why was Jimmy such a creep. Life seemed a confusion of fear, humiliation, and pimples. Breasts that didn't grow, boys who didn't call, girls in poodle skirts wearing class rings on chains.

"Remember when we were gonna get rid of the dog?" Jimmy asked her.

She thought back to summer, when they were left alone with the obnoxious collie licking their bare feet. "We could tie him up," Jimmy had suggested, "and throw him into the street!"

"Yeah," she had agreed, inspired. "Then after a car hits him, we can untie him and tell the folks he was hit by a car."

"We should've done it," she said confidentially, blinking at the sunny sky.

"Yeah."

"Crazy dog bugs me."

"Me, too."

"Jimmy, I'll fix your shirt."

"Mom can do a better job."

"Jimmy, don't ever say anything about my bra again. I've never told mom about the dog. So don't you go telling things."

"That's bribery."

"So are all those slips of I.O.U.'s you made me sign. I'll be in debt to you til I die."

She got up slowly and watched the others coming home from school: some running, others strolling, a boy and girl holding hands. "Oh, Bobby," she thought sadly. "It's all over for us. I can never face you again." Supposing this was the plight of women, she gathered her books and her brother; they skipped along the sidewalk, avoiding the cracks.

"Step on a crack you'll break your mother's back," she called to him.

"Step on a space you'll slap your mother's face."

They saw a colony of red ants milling around a sandy crack. In a jubilant dance, they stomped on them all. An old Studebaker crept slowly along, a boy with long bangs and sideburns hanging out the window.

"Hey, baby, he called to her.

She tried not to look, averted her eyes and nose, walked along the street with Jimmy at her heels. From the corner of her eye, she watched the car moving with them. He looked like Fabian, she decided. I wanta growl, wow!

"I'll tell Bobby Burke," Jimmy yelled at the Studebaker.

"Shut up!" It was a warning, the hiss of a snake. Jimmy stiffened, goose-stepping behind her as they walked home. Later, she decided. I'll cry about Bobby later. The spring sunlight felt warm on her neck; the world was so old and new it overwhelmed her, but the sun was always the same.