

Sports Radio

I put on two long-sleeved tees and Dad's old Princeton sweatshirt before I was willing to face the day. Four a.m. had a certain kind of cold that cut through everything but my lucky sweater. Daybreak was a distant wish, and fog as thick as cotton greeted me when I stepped out the back door.

Dad's black Explorer was parked beside my blue one on the cracked blacktop. They were the same type of car, but his was ten years younger: father and daughter cars. I should have snatched his keys last night and spared myself a battle with the unpredictable heat in my car.

I had to blow in the keyhole before it would let me stick the key in. The door stuck with frost and the inside of my car was as cold as outside. I turned up the heat and defrost, although the latter didn't work. Old habits. I punched the button for the radio. It cranked out some static and screeching before settling into the one station it would play—sports radio. Dad was amazed by my football knowledge. I didn't educate him on my weapon. The announcer on the radio was talking about the three best defensive plays of the last game. After the break, we'd hear from some listeners.

The roads were icy, but I'd been driving in this weather long enough to know how to handle it. All I had to do was watch out for the dupes who didn't know how to drive. I flipped on my high beams as I turned onto the narrow road that would take me deeper into the country. The spill of light was lopsided. Damn. One of my lights was out. I'd get Dad to deal with it when I got home. I would have had enough of the cold by then. I was going to Baker to get Dad's horse trailer from his friend Sam. I didn't like Sam, hence the early hour to avoid him. He wouldn't roll out of bed until at least ten on a weekday, much later on a Saturday. He was almost forty but thought he was young enough to hit on me. I told Dad I wouldn't step foot on Sam's farm unless he let me take the shotgun, and he said, "Fine,

Ranger, whatever makes you happy.” And then, under his breath: “Should have had a son.”

On the radio, Dan—that was the morning talk show guy—laughed at a girl who was sharing her opinion on uniform colors and color psychology. She said she went to Princeton. I wished Dan would shut up so I could hear her. If Dad had been in the car he would’ve made me turn the radio off. Princeton was getting to be a touchy subject. He didn’t want me going off to his alma mater this fall. We’d been arguing back and forth for months, but I was going to win this one. Sometimes I didn’t know if Dad and I were too different or too alike.

Road kill loomed ahead of me. I didn’t bother avoiding it. There was enough dead possum, raccoon, and skunk on these tires to keep a starving family in meat for a month. The mass of fur, blood, and bones squelched beneath the tires. Deer was about the only thing I’d avoid. I didn’t need that messing up my undercarriage.

The road forked. Dan hung up on the girl and started talking to a guy who knew the yardage of every current NFL player. I was impressed.

How do you remember all those numbers, Dan asked.

I just remember things.

The heat rattled. I slammed the flat of my palm against one of the vents. The whole car shuddered, and then the heat died. Figured. I turned the dials to the off position and turned the radio up louder.

We’ll hear from a few more callers, Dan said.

The next caller was an old guy from Maine. He wanted to talk about the Chiefs. Dan and I laughed together.

The road forked again. I hung a left, and the radio lost signal. White noise boomed out of the speakers, and one of the back ones died with a cough. I kept going, listening to the radio scream. Didn’t turn the volume down. In another mile or so, Dan would be back, regular as clockwork.

This road was made of red clay and packed dirt, lined with paper birch trees on both sides. The trees were naked now. I could see down to the lake on my left. Dad had a dock about a mile farther. I looked at it every time I went past, although we didn’t use it for anything. Four years ago we built it together—made the platform from two-

by-fours and mounted it on airtight plastic containers to make it float. Now the mess of warped boards was an insult to nature.

The road curved by the dock. I had to slow down to make it, and on automatic I swung my gaze to Dad's lonely dock. Only it wasn't lonely today. Somebody was sitting there, staring out across the water.

I braked. Yup, definitely a person out there. The fog was still thick, so I couldn't tell who it was. We had a neighbor—much as you could have neighbors out here—named Clementine who swam off the edge of the dock in the summer. Clementine was a little strange, but even she wasn't stupid enough to try swimming in this weather.

My engine gasped and puffed out smoke from the tailpipe. I hoped it would make the trip back with the trailer. The windows fogged up from my breath and the faltering defrost system. My lucky sweatshirt was failing me. The cold slipped up under the folds of cloth and kissed my spine, making me shiver. Who would be out here in this weather? Well, like Dad said, if you got a question, get off your ass and get an answer.

I pulled over and parked. The car wheezed in relief, and I gave the steering wheel a pat. I tugged my sweatshirt sleeves down over my hands and got out of the car. The walk down to the dock was steep and slick. The mud banks had frozen into a sheet, and fallen twigs and exposed roots reached up arms like crying children. I picked my way down, planting each steel-toed boot firmly before setting my weight on it. The fog was thickest on the lake. The water lapped against the air-tight plastic containers keeping the dock afloat, and the whole thing tilted forward to accommodate the weight of the girl sitting on the edge.

I stared for a minute, trying to figure out if what I was seeing was real. The girl was starkers. No socks or shoes. No underwear. Not even a ponytail in her hair, and she had a lot of it, a dull, thin black mane down to her waist.

"What are you doing out here?" she said without turning around. She had a voice like plates shattering on concrete, sharp and staccato.

"What am *I* doing out here? You're going to freeze," I said. "Put some clothes on."

“I don’t have any.” Plates dropping. *Crack. Crack. Crack.*

She must have been crazy. I stepped onto the dock. The water gurgled as the dock tilted my way. The girl wasn’t heavy enough to balance me. Her shoulders were tiny and the shoulder blades jutted out. Her skin was blue as a film of ice over a dark river and hung on her bones like a t-shirt two sizes too big.

“Not even a shirt?” I took another step forward. The dock tilted again as I crossed the center-line onto her half, and water gushed up over the edge where the girl sat. It spilled over her thighs, thighs not much thicker than my calves. I could see all her veins and arteries—femorals, deep and superficial; popliteal; great saphenous. “Isn’t that cold?”

She shook her head. “I can’t feel anything when I’m in the water.”

“You want to scoot back from the edge?”

Again, a slow shake. She put one hand on the dock beside her. She had a French manicure that looked ugly on her wrinkled fingers. I could see the veins in her arm, too, all the way up to her torso. I could play the xylophone on her ribs, but her belly was distended, resting in her lap.

“What’s your name?” I sat down, crossed my legs Indian-style. My voice shook from the cold, and I started to shiver.

“Summer,” she said.

“That’s pretty.”

“Thanks.”

“Summer, you know it’s really cold, right?” I waited for a reaction, but she wouldn’t give one. “I can let you wear my sweater.”

She turned her head and looked at me. Her eyes were blue like the morning glories that grew on the trellis beneath my bedroom window in the summer time. She had a hint of epicanthic fold. Maybe she had some Asian in her. Her eyes were swollen and looked dry like marbles. Her nose had a bent to it; she’d broken it at least once before. A tattoo of a kite sat beneath the hollow in her neck, and beneath it was the word *soar*.

“How deep is the lake?”

I didn’t like the sound of that. “Why do you ask?”

“I want to know how far I’ll sink.”

She didn't have any eyelashes, I realized. It took me a minute to process what she'd said. "When you sink? Why would you get in the water? Can you swim?"

Summer crossed her legs like mine. Her toenails matched her fingernails. The toes themselves were purple. Where were her parents? She looked young enough to still live with her parents. Fourteen. Maybe a mature thirteen or youthful sixteen. "I lied," she said. "My name's not Summer." We stared at each other.

"Good," I said. "It doesn't suit you. What's your real name?"

"Ariel."

"Like the mermaid in the movie?"

Her gums were white when she smiled. "That's me."

"Did your parents name you after her?"

She laughed. I thought of icicles breaking. "No. I *am* her. Ariel. They made movies and books about me. I'm on a lunchbox too."

I waited for her to laugh at her joke. She didn't. This girl was ten and a half kinds of crazy. "You know you're not really Ariel, don't you?"

"I dyed my hair," she said, like she was ashamed to admit it. "Eric liked the red. I had to change it. I had to."

My head hurt from trying to make sense of her. "Honey, you're not Ariel. She's a made up girl from a movie."

The girl, whatever her name was, pursed her lips together so they made a flat white line. "I wouldn't expect you to understand. None of you do."

"Hey." I reached for her hand.

She jerked back, and the dock shuddered. "I made a deal," she said, clutching her hands to herself. "And I got to be with Eric. But . . . but . . ." Her voice dropped. She put her face in her hands. Her shoulders shivered as she sobbed.

I could count the vertebrae in her spine. There was a conch tattoo at the base in blue ink. It was harsh to look at on her pallid skin. "Do you have any family, Ariel?"

She pointed at the lake. I edged toward her, close enough to reach out and pull her hands away from her face. She could have been an ice sculpture, she was so cold. I could even feel the chill in my teeth.

Blotches of red darkened her face. Her tears froze on her cheeks like low quality diamonds. She didn't look crazy, just scared. And sick.

"Where's your family?" I asked again.

"Down there," she said in a hoarse voice. "Daddy and my sisters. I've got to get back to them. I can't stay here anymore."

"How come?" I tried to sound patient, but I wanted to get her back up the bank. She whispered something into her lap. Her fingers refused to warm, and they were as lifeless as clumps of clay in my hands. I thought about blowing on them like I'd blown on my car lock. "Ariel?"

"It hurts to walk."

It was still a brittle whisper, but I understood her this time. I looked down at her feet. The soles had been sliced apart. They weren't the wounds of walking barefoot for too long; they were surgical in precision. Some had scarred over. Some wept clear liquid. Mother of God. "How'd that happen?" I tried to keep my voice calm, but it didn't work. An edge crept into it, and Ariel shrank away from me.

"He said he didn't want me to run away."

Her words put a knot in my chest, colder even than her icicle fingers. I got that feeling right before I did what Dad told me not to do: act before I thought. "Does he know you're out here?" I said, fighting to keep my voice normal.

She shook her head, fast at first, then slower, and then she stopped altogether. "He knows I'm gone."

I put my hand on her cheek—her skin was as thin as paper—and made her look at me. "How do you feel about sports radio?"

She tried to look back at the lake, but I held her face still. "I don't know," she said, confused.

"Before you go back to your dad and your sisters, you should come listen to some," I said. "I know a really good show. But there're only a few more minutes. Come on." I stood up, spreading my legs to balance the dock, and put my hand down to help her up. Hesitantly, she put her hand in mine and stood. The dock floated right before it was stopped short by the anchors, and she stumbled into my arms. She was a foot shorter than me and didn't weigh a thing.

“How old are you?” I said, stepping toward the shore. She didn’t answer, and when I got to the end of the dock she refused to move. “Ariel, the show’s going to end soon,” I said, smiling. “We need to hurry.”

“Will you bring me back?”

“Of course.”

“Really?”

Dad said I wasn’t much of a liar. “Of course,” I said again, slower. “I wouldn’t lie to you.”

She bit down on her bottom lip. Her teeth looked yellow in contrast with her skin, and they left little red marks on her lip. “Okay.”

I got her off the dock. Had to help her up the bank. I didn’t want to touch her, not because she was buckass naked but because she was so damn cold. I had to fight to get my car door open, then I grabbed the keys from where I’d put them on the passenger seat and started the engine. The radio sputtered to life, and Dan’s voice spilled out. He was talking about fantasy football.

“That’s Dan,” I said. Ariel stared at me. “You should sit. Come on.” I took her hand. She let me lead her to the passenger side of the car. I yanked the rusty door open, and she slid into the seat. I had a horse blanket in the trunk, a ragged blue one that had belonged to Dad’s now dead pinto. I popped the trunk, wrestled out the massive blanket, and took it to Ariel. She let me arrange it over her, staring out the windshield like I wasn’t even there. I sat in the driver’s seat, blasted the heat, and turned up the radio. Everything was working. It was a miracle.

Dan went on a commercial break. Ariel looked at me from the corner of her morning glory eyes. “We don’t have radio where I come from.”

“That’s too bad.” I put my hands in the big center pocket of my sweatshirt, chafed the fingers together. “Ariel? Did he ever do anything to you besides cut your feet?”

She looked out her window. “Sometimes.”

I wished I could call Dad. My cell phone reception was crap out here, so much so that I didn’t carry the phone unless I was going to the city. Dad would know what to do with her. Dad was always prepared for everything. He tried to train me like that. I had chains in the trunk for when it snowed. The rifle on my back seat. A lighter

and a compass in the glove compartment. *You never know*, Dad said. He'd assumed since my birth I'd spend a lot of time in the woods. It was why he named me Ranger.

Dan came back on. One of the Dolphins' linebackers had gotten into some trouble last night and might be getting suspended.

"Would you like to meet my dad, Ariel?" I said.

"No." She snapped the word out, and I flinched. "I don't want to leave the lake."

"Are you sure—"

"No." She yelled it, then started fumbling with the door handle. I'd put the child lock on. She yanked at the handle again and again, and each time it made a hollow click. "Let me out!"

I took a deep breath and let it out. She stared at me with wild eyes. I knew that look, knew it from the faces of rats I'd cornered in the barn. In my peripheral, I saw movement. Ariel and I turned to look. A red Sierra was coming up the road, bumping over the ruts. Ariel trembled. I didn't have to ask, but I did. "Is that his truck?"

"Let me out," she said, and "out" stretched into an agonized wail. "I want to go home."

The truck got closer. Icy sweat broke out on my skin and trickled down my back. The truck windows were tinted too dark to see in. That made it worse. My hands shook. Ariel started crying silently. I could try driving away, but if the truck decided to give chase, it would run my Explorer down before I went ten feet. I didn't like this, being the adult, the one in charge. I tried to think of what Dad would do in my place.

A year ago, Dad had a red truck like that, an older one, but still bright and shiny. We drove it down to this dock a few times. I rode shotgun. Literal shotgun. From the passenger seat, I'd shoot at deer too stupid to run away. I didn't usually hit anything, mostly because I didn't want to. Dad taught me to shoot when I was a kid. I didn't miss much except on purpose.

One day, though, we took the drive at midnight. It was winter and the lake was frozen. We were going ice skating. I was thinking about putting the gun up when Dad said, "Give me the gun." He braked slow, and I handed him the gun.

“Get down.”

I slid down in my seat until I wasn't blocking the window. Dad shot right over my head. He'd seen a deer in the brush. Knew I wouldn't shoot it. Instead of skating, we dressed the deer. Dad told me if I were a boy, I wouldn't be afraid to shoot things. Then he shook his head and gave me one of his rare smiles.

The strange red truck kept getting closer.

“Ariel,” I said. “Get down.”

She slid down to the floorboards, clutching the horse blanket around her. I climbed into the backseat and opened the oak gun box. The cartridge box spilled its contents when I opened it, and the bullets rolled over the scruffy blue carpeting.

The truck got close enough for me to hear the engine. Any other day I loved the sound of a diesel. Now it made my fingers shake harder. I imagined Dad scowling and telling me to focus when there was a gun in my hand. Pull the bolt. Insert the magazine. Push the bolt back. I climbed back into the front seat, cradling the gun like it was made of glass. Ariel whimpered. The gun pointed like an accusing finger at the passenger window. I took off the safety and placed my finger against the guard.

The truck drew even and shut off. The black windows stared at me. Ariel pressed both hands over her mouth and shut her eyes. Slowly, the truck's black window went down. The man inside was young, and he had Ariel's eyes, but his were clear and alert. He had the masculine form of her lips, and they parted at me in the toothy grin of a politician.

“Ariel, who is that?” I said, not taking my eyes off him. We stared each other down like two cobras, waiting.

“It's him.”

He wouldn't move. Sweat trickled down my back. A bead of it slid down over my top lip, and I tasted the salt of it on my tongue. “Who's *him*, Ariel?”

He motioned for me to put the window down. My windows weren't automatic, and that one was broken, anyway. My finger was slick on the trigger guard. It wanted to slide off. My underarms were wet. My nose was running and I needed to pee. “Ariel,” I said again. She shook her head, eyes shut tight, and wouldn't answer.

Dad would slap me for getting myself stuck like this. With one hand, I reached behind me for my door handle. The door stuck, and I had to kick it open, making the metal screech. I slid one leg out, got it settled, and then jumped out, keeping the gun trained on the man.

“Good morning,” he said. His voice was similar to Ariel’s but stronger, more put together. More sane.

“Can I help you?” I said.

“Can I get out of the truck?”

“No.”

His smile grew nervous. “I know you think you’re helping, but my sister is a little . . . uh . . . special.”

His sister. Made sense. I didn’t trust him, though. “Who’re you?” I said, readjusting my finger on the guard. Don’t put it on the trigger until you plan on shooting something, Dad always said.

“My name is Eric Haven.”

“Let’s see some ID.”

His smile disappeared altogether. “Look, I need to get my sister home.”

I looked down at Ariel. She was still shaking her head, her hair going every which way. She was special, no question, but she was also scared enough to piss herself. I looked back at Eric. “What happened to her feet?”

“What do you mean what happened to her feet?” He opened his door.

I put my finger on the trigger. “I think you better sit still for now.”

He froze. Everything but his mouth, anyway. “Look, my sister has a lot of problems. She has episodes and takes off to do God knows what. It took me hours to find her, and I need to get her home and warm and taken care of.”

Oh, hell. I wanted Dad.

“I *will* call the cops,” Eric said.

On the radio, Dan was talking about a new halfback who kept outrunning his blockers. *You don’t keep that kind of crazy cooped up. Let ‘em run!*

I liked that advice. It sounded like something Dad would say. Dad told me I’d be a halfback if I played football. I had the legs to run

like hell. My finger trembled on the trigger. I took a step back from the car. Eric was still frozen, but his eyes followed me. I took another step, a big one, this time to the right. "You're her brother, huh?" I said, licking my lips. They hurt from the cold.

"Yes, I—"

Ariel was a blur as she shot out my open door and took off for the lake. Eric cursed and jumped out of his truck. The door slammed on his arm, and he cursed again. By the time he got free, Ariel was down the slick bank and sprinting for the water. In spite of her feet, in spite of her frailty, she was fast. Eric went past me, not half as quick as her. I pointed my gun barrel at the ground and put the safety on, watching them go. Ariel reached the dock. Water sloshed and splattered as she ran the five feet of warped wood and jumped.

She made a perfect arc, so pretty it would put a real mermaid to shame. She slipped into the black water and became a slip of dead white, kicking hard for the bottom with both legs moving in tandem like a dolphin's tail.

Eric skidded to a stop at the edge of the dock, panting. Almost went into the water. Great clouds of frozen breath filled the air in front of his face. A second puff exploded as he screamed at the water. He called her awful names. The names made part of me angry, but it didn't matter. She couldn't hear him.

"Twenty feet or so," I said. That's how far she'd sink.