

Michael Ryan

When Mate arrives at the Allens', she pauses at the end of their driveway to sneak a cigarette. The brisk October wind swallows four matches before she gets it lit. Once she does, she cups her fingers around the glowing tip to hide it. She's got to be careful. Mrs. Allen smokes like a stack but doesn't want her girls to; she certainly won't put up with the habit in their friends.

As she smokes, Mate tries to imagine the Allens' Cape Cod is hers—that she's just stepped out for a moment to gaze at the frosty stars. The neighborhood is nice enough, even though it's tacky. It's brand-spanking new, begun in the spring of 1953 and finished just eighteen months later. All the trees are seedlings, the houses sprung from fields of mostly mud still crossed here and there by bulldozer tracks—ugly, but fresh. No shadowy embarrassments hide in the Allen home—no cracking plaster or loose tiles or rusting pipes like in her own. No secrets: what you see is what you get.

Balancing carefully on her right foot, she grinds her cigarette out on the sole of her left shoe, then carefully wraps the butt in tissue and puts it in her purse. When she looks up, she sees May Allen silhouetted in her sister April's top-floor window. The four Allen girls are named April, May, June, and Julie. "She did it on purpose," May explained when they met. "*She* thinks it's cute." *She* is Mrs. Allen, Bunny to her friends—"*Bun-nee*, for God's sake!" May will yell, as if that says it all. She claims to hate her mother. Mate tries to avoid that conversation. Her own mother is dead.

May peers into the darkness—looking for her, Mate knows. She slides behind Mr. Allen's right-off-the-showroom-floor Oldsmobile Rocket 88, which gleams in the moonlight like a pearl. After a moment, May disappears, and April takes her place. She's brushing her hair—getting ready to go out. All the girls are probably in there, listening to records and watching her. She likes to preen to an

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audience. From the street, her willowy figure is small, a little doll; Mate imagines she could pry the front off the house and move her from room to room like a toy.

Mate should go in, but she doesn't. She has a secret—a story to tell them—and as much as she wants to tell it, she also wants to savor this moment, when it still belongs to her alone.

The wind picks up, whistling in her ears, rolling brown leaves down the street. Sometimes the wind at this time of year seems to knock something loose inside her. She can feel it rattling around, dangerously out of place—a scary but strangely exciting feeling. The flesh of her face is stiff with cold, but her lips curve into a smile. Her clumsy fingers work the buttons of her coat and she throws it open, spreading her arms so the wind balloons its sides like wings. She stays like that until a door down the street opens and a woman's voice starts calling, "Pumpkin! Pumpkin-kittee!" Then she furtively closes her coat, grabs her overnight bag, and rushes up the path to the door.

When she rings the bell, Pouf, the Allens' miniature poodle, bursts into staccato yapping. Julie answers. She's wearing a silver tutu from last year's dance recital and sucking on a Popsicle. Her lips are bright blue. She wipes them on the back of her hand and kicks the dog out of the way. "May just said you must've fallen into a washing machine and drowned."

"You just wait till I tell you why I'm late." Mate shakes off her coat. "You'll never guess."

"Gimme a hint."

"No."

"C'mon!"

"You'll have to wait."

"Well, let's *go* then!" She's pulling Mate's arm from her socket, dragging her toward the stairs. She takes them in three leaps, her skinny legs working under the fluff of the tutu's stiff skirt.

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In April's room, May's lying on the bed and June's on the rug. April's so engrossed in her mascara, she doesn't even turn around. Julie's cute, but April got the real looks in the family—dark, liquid eyes, coal-black hair, and porcelain skin. May and June are paler, duller copies—May's hair medium brown, and June's a light, mousy shade May calls "dishwater." They watch April primp with envy. April hasn't stayed home on a weekend night since she was thirteen.

"Mate says she has a story," Julie announces.

"Well, she better hurry up and tell it, because Billy's going to be here in half an hour." April pauses to rub the brush in the cake of mascara and then leans into the mirror again. "So start talking."

Mate puts her overnight bag on the floor and sits down on the bed next to May. "Can I catch my breath a second?"

May moves over to make room. "She's just in a bad mood 'cause she was *supposed* to go out with Ken tonight, and he called to cancel." Even though she says she'd rather die than be like April and the other social butterflies on the pom-pom squad, May follows their romances with ardent interest. She offers Mate a piece of C. Howard scented violet chewing gum, which she swears has kept Bunny from discovering she smokes. Mate shakes her head.

"I'll take some," June says, cramming three pieces in her mouth. "Well? What's your story?"

The pink-shaded lamp on April's bedside table bathes June's upturned face in a rosy glow that combines with the spooky howl of the wind under the eaves of the house to give Mate a sudden, grateful sense of safety and well-being. Odd as her evening has been, she hopes it will gain a shape she can recognize when she spins it out to the Allen girls, who understand such things in a way that she doesn't. She can feel the goofy smile returning to her face, along with a flush of pride. "Before I came here tonight," she says slowly, "I went on a date." She tries to swallow the smile. "I think."

"You *think*?" April rolls her eyes and uncaps her lipstick. "If you went out on a date, sweetie, you would *know* it."

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“Well, it wasn’t *exactly* like a date—it was more spur of the moment—but still, it was *sort* of like one.”

“If a boy doesn’t call you up on the phone or come up to you in school and *arrange* it, it isn’t a date,” Julie says.

“How would *you* know, pipsqueak? You probably read that in a *Young Miss* column.” May scratches her leg, so carefully engrossed she seems about to flay the skin off. “So what mystery man swept you away?”

Mate chews her fingernail, enjoying the hush. This part’s the payoff. “Michael Ryan.”

The reaction’s every bit of what she’s been expecting—the room erupts. April drops her lipstick, staining her white carpet with a pink smear. May spills her gum all over the comforter. June keeps punching the sole of Mate’s shoe and shrieking, “Michael *RYAN?*” until Julie takes it up as well, holding her left foot and hopping across the floor as she belts, “MY-kal RYE-un! MY-kal RYE-un!”

When the furor dies down, April says, “Isn’t that living rather dangerously?” She retrieves her lipstick from the floor and starts to pick carpet fibers from its waxy tip. “I mean, do nice girls go out with Michael Ryan?”

A fair enough question, but May comes to her defense. “Oh, for God’s sake, April, even *you* would go out with Michael Ryan if he asked you—he is to DIE for and you know it.” She turns to Mate, a bewildered look in her eyes. “But what *happened*,” she whispers, a tremor in her voice.

Mate kicks off her shoes and curls up on April’s pillow. “Well, I was at the laundromat,” she says, “doing the laundry like I do every Friday night. The place was packed, so as soon as I had the wash in the machine, I went outside to get some air and have a cigarette.” She’d wandered out from under the neon sign over the door and around the corner, into the alleyway. She lit her cigarette and leaned back, letting the wings of her shoulder blades prop her against the side of the building. The sun was already long gone, but there was a

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bright band still laying over the horizon, and the evening star had just appeared. Looking at it, she'd thought, *God, I wish something interesting would happen to me for once*. Not much hope of that here, of course. She'd sucked on her cigarette and flicked an ash away.

That's when she'd heard the engine.

It was the kind of engine meant to be heard. A bent eight—that's what the hot rodders called them. The car was idling around the corner—probably in front of the drugstore—revving like an agitated bumble bee. A handful of boys at school drove those things. They slapped on custom paint jobs and tinkered with the insides every weekend. Her brother John liked to say those cars were held together with Scotch tape and spit, but he was just jealous. Even Mate was jealous. Sometimes on a quiet night you could hear them racing, gunning up the road over Dunderburg Mountain, motors screaming—a sound that would make your insides seize up as you imagined driving one of those things, the wind in your hair, the sheer cliff and the river far below, the boats like bathtub toys. “Somebody oughtta call the cops,” her father would say, and someone invariably would. Then the next day a story about degenerated youth would be splashed all over the front page of the local paper.

Mate finished her cigarette but didn't want to go back in, so she lit another. She wanted a glimpse of the car. She could hear when it started to move—the change in the pitch of the engine—then suddenly it tore around the corner and streaked by her. Red. It was red, like a lipstick, or a wild cherry Life Saver. The back end was jacked up a little, and the exhaust pipe was chrome-plated. She wouldn't have seen the exhaust pipe, except that the car screeched to a halt about ten feet down the alleyway, then shot back toward her in reverse.

Everybody knew *of* the Ryans, but almost nobody knew them, even though they'd lived out on Bulsontown Road for three

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generations; so Mate had only a vague notion of who she was looking at. Michael was the youngest—she knew that. He hadn't yet accumulated the kind of bad reputation his older brothers, Tommy and Danny, had, but he was working on it. He'd been left back last year, so he was a junior, like Mate, and there was a rumor going around that he'd been arrested last summer for drag racing. And yes, looking at him up close, she could attest that, as May would put it later, he was indeed to DIE for, with bright blue eyes and dark hair and rosy cheeks that softened his leather-jacket-and-D.A. stereotype a little, as if he were a cross between a hood and a Hummel figurine.

“So what did he *say*?” June explodes. “He didn't just sit there and look at you, did he?”

He had, though—at first, that was all he did. But he didn't just look at her, he looked her up and down, examining each part of her like there might be a test on her later. While he was doing this, Mate had an odd feeling of dissociation—she was floating above the scene, omniscient, watching him watch her. She examined herself the way she seldom did in a mirror, taking in the too-short sleeves of her open coat, a dull brown castoff left behind in the restaurant; the way the clingy material of her sweater set accentuated how she'd outgrown her bra; the way the sophisticated look of her new pencil skirt was ruined by the heavy opaque tights she wore under it; and how the wind was pulling her hair from its plastic comb one crazy strand at a time, making it dance around her head like Pigpen's in the “Peanuts” comic strip. No wonder he was staring.

Finally, he said, “Hey. I've seen you around. We're in the same homeroom, right?”

She tried to will herself back into her body, to open her mouth instead of standing there like a dunce—nothing. Instead, after a long pause, she raised her cigarette to her lips to puff. It had gone out. She dropped it on the ground and stepped on it like she had all the time in the world.

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He raised his eyebrows. “You a mute?”

She licked her lips and found her voice at last. “No.”

His face broke open into a smile then, sudden and childish and disarming. She didn’t really mean to smile back but couldn’t help it—he tugged it out of her like he was pulling strings at the corners of her mouth. When he smiled: that was when she lost the feeling of being above this, that it was happening to someone else. *He’s smiling at ME*, she thought stupidly. *Something’s happening. Something’s happening!*

“You wanna get something to eat?”

“I’m doing laundry.”

“The machine still works if you’re not standing there.”

“I ate already.”

“Have dessert.”

She switched her purse to her other arm, trying to breathe. “I have to put the wash in the dryers first.”

“Hurry up.”

“Wait a second—let me get this straight,” May says. “You *left* him there so you could go put the *wash* in the *dryers*?”

“What was I supposed to do? I couldn’t just leave it sitting wet in the washer!”

“You’re *crazy*. I would’ve jumped in that car and never looked back.”

“Well, that right there is why nobody ever asks you out, May.” April’s forgotten her makeup and the fact that her bangs are still in a rubber curler. “You always act too desperate. Mate did exactly the right thing, going back into the laundromat. Make him wait, play hard to get—boys just love that. It makes them think you’re worth more.” She twirls her hairbrush like a baton. “What happened next?”

“Well—I put the wash in the dryers.”

“*After* that!”

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Mate had been almost positive there would be no “after that.” As soon as she’d locked eyes with a toddler perched on a pile of clothes in a laundry cart with his finger jammed halfway up his nose, she’d become convinced the whole thing had been a dream. Like Michael Ryan would be cruising by the laundromat on a Friday night! She was insane.

Once she’d found three dryers and started them all, she’d strolled slowly toward the front window, trying to stay out of sight. No car would be there. There was no point in walking out the door and looking doubly stupid. Michael Ryan went out with girls who wore bullet bras and too much makeup. He was probably laughing with his friends right now about how this dumb girl was standing in the cold in front of the laundromat waiting for him to whisk her away.

The car was there. The cherry-red fender reflected the neon sign over the laundromat door like a mirror.

As she stepped outside, he leaned across the front seat and pushed open the passenger door for her. The seat was covered in mohair. A pack of Lucky Strikes lay on the dashboard. She could hear the DeCastro Sisters singing on the radio: “Since this is the perfect spot to learn, teach me tonight...” *Are you crazy? Are you just going to get into this car with this boy you don’t even know? And go God knows where?*

“Where are we going?”

He spread his hands—nothing to hide. “Just across the street.” He pointed. She could see Annie’s Snack Shack like a mirage on the horizon. She looked back at the laundromat. Her brother Elliott’s red-striped T-shirt whirled in a dryer. Her father would go through the roof if he knew she got in a car with a hot rodder. A boy from Bulsontown Road. Michael *Ryan*, for God’s sake. “Hey,” he said, bringing her back to the moment. “I’ll bring you back before your laundry’s done. I swear.”

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The wind picked up. A torn paper bag tumbled across the parking lot and she felt it—that crazy feeling of something coming loose inside her, somersaulting at the same velocity as the bag. What’s the difference? What the hell!

Okay.

She got in and shut the door.

“Geez, what was it like? Was it anything like a regular car?”

“Don’t be such a nosebleed, June. It’s just a souped-up old Ford—it doesn’t have wings or anything! And anyway, she only rode across the street to Annie’s, right?”

“Right.”

“Did you ask to drive?”

“Jules, if you ask another question that dumb, we’re going to have to ask you to leave.”

“It’s not a dumb question! I would’ve asked.”

“Like you can drive! Listen, Mate, what did you *say* to him?”

Mate hadn’t said anything—not at first. She was too taken with the car. It *was* different from a regular car. For one thing, it smelled overwhelmingly, almost cloyingly, like a *boy*—smoke, sweat, leather, and Brylcreem. And something else she couldn’t quite identify—some strange tangy base that set her on edge. Or maybe it was the engine setting her on edge. When he stepped on the gas, she could feel it as well as hear it, vibrating up through the floorboards, tickling her legs and settling heavily in her stomach like a pack of iron-winged butterflies. She wished they were going somewhere besides across the street. She wished he would floor it. “I like your car,” she finally said.

“This car’s a hottie. It can blow off any car in this town and everyone knows it. You know anything about cars?”

“Not really.”

“This is a deuce. They make the best rods. I got a ’36 flathead in it. When I punch it, it’s unreal.” He turned into the parking lot of

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Annie's and pulled into a spot next to the window. "Whaddya have?"

"Huh? Oh. Just a Pepsi, thanks."

"That's it?"

"Yeah. I mean, I ate already." The idea of eating was horrible to her—food in her teeth, her stomach roiling—what if the Pepsi made her burp?

"Suit yourself." He got out and walked up to the window, leaving the car running, the keys dangling from the ignition. Mate began to busily rearrange her hair, pulling the comb out and sliding it back in more securely, tucking stray strands behind her ears, all the while keeping her eye on him. She felt marginally safer with him outside the car. He wasn't a huge, hulking guy, but he was solidly built—the kind of boy other boys shied away from starting a fight with. The motorcycle jacket he wore made his shoulders look wider than she suspected they actually were. He couldn't seem to stand still. After ordering, he paced by the window for a minute, then abruptly turned back to his car. He opened the driver's side door and felt around on the dash for the pack of Lucky Strikes, ignoring Mate. He slammed the door without speaking to her, and that was fine. She dreaded his return, wracking her brains for something to say to him.

When he came back balancing paper cups and a greasy paper basket filled with fries and a gloppy cheeseburger, Mate leaned across the seat to open the door for him, the way he had for her. He got in without saying thank you. Mate decided good manners were likely not his strong point.

"Here." He handed her a cup.

"Thanks."

He took a big bite of cheeseburger. "You wanna fry?" He chewed with his mouth open.

"No, thanks."

"You gonna say anything but thanks and no thanks?"

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Mate sucked a tiny sip of Pepsi up through her straw. “That depends.”

“On what?”

Mate swallowed hard. “On what you ask me.” All of a sudden she felt like someone was feeding her lines.

“Well, how about I ask you this: what’s your name, sweetheart?”

*Did he just call me sweetheart?* “Mary,” she said carefully.

“Mary what? Quite contrary?”

“Mary Theresa Donegal.”

“Your pop owns that restaurant up the road, right?”

“Yes.”

“Yeah.” He smiled and took another wolfish bite of cheeseburger. “I think I used to beat up your brother.”

“Probably.”

“You remember that?”

“Vaguely.”

He crammed what remained of the burger into his mouth whole. “You’re not much of a talker, huh?”

Mate put her Pepsi down on the dashboard next to his, then wrung her hands, clammy with condensation from the cup, in her lap. “I guess not.”

“That’s good. A quiet girl. I can’t stand chatty girls, they drive me nuts.” He licked grease off his fingers. “But there’s quiet, and there’s too quiet, you know what I mean?” Mate saw that his nails were bitten down below the cuticle. “You wanna ask me anything?”

Mate twisted her cold fingers in the fabric of her skirt. “I already know who you are.”

He snorted. “Yeah, I bet. You know where I live, too?”

She nodded.

“That bug you?”

She shook her head.

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“Good. ‘Cause there’s nothin’ worse than a snob, and this goddamn town is fulla them.” He crushed the paper basket into a tight little ball and stuffed it in his paper cup.

Mate cleared her throat. “I do want to ask you something.”

He belched. “Sorry,” he said when he saw the look on her face. “Shoot.”

She leaned forward, the close air between them tickling the insides of her nostrils. “Why do you like cars so much?”

He moved across the seat toward her. He was so close that she could see the dark rings around his irises and an angry red pimple half hidden in his hairline. “I’ll tell you why,” he said, his breath, warm and smelling of ketchup, fanning her face. “Because as soon as I got my own car, at any moment, day or night, I had the option of getting the fuck *out* of here. You see what I’m sayin’?”

She looked down at his hands on the seat—at the vein in his wrist that pulsed above the cuff of his jacket. She nodded. She saw exactly what he was saying.

She leaves this last part out when she tells the Allens. It seems somehow embarrassing, as if he’d said something obscene. Which she guessed he had, but it was more than just the one word. She’d felt like he’d said it because he’d seen what she tried most to hide; like he knew just what she wanted.

That was the moment she started to like him.

“And what happened *then*?”

“Um...nothing, really. He drove me back to the laundromat.”

“That’s *it*?”

“Well—he did ask me if I wanted to go to a party, but I said I couldn’t, I was spending the night at a friend’s house.”

“And what did he say to that?”

Mate drops her voice and tosses her head. “See ya around, baby.”

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Julie starts laughing. May takes her glasses off and polishes them on her sweater. “He didn’t ask for your phone number?”

“No,” Mate lies.

“Oh,” she says. She looks relieved.

Downstairs, the doorbell rings. April shrieks and tears the curler from her bangs, slathers her lipstick on, and throws it in her purse. She turns out the inside pocket. “Girls, can I bum a dime? Just in case?”

April’s number-one rule of dating is always have a dime in case you need to call someone, for a ride or help—just in case. *In case of what?* Mate sometimes wonders. April’s boyfriends are cream puffs. But there’s an unacknowledged assumption among them all that being alone with a boy is dangerous—you’ve got to be prepared. Mate thinks again of Michael Ryan’s face when he leaned close to her—the look in his eyes. Maybe April’s dime is not a bad idea. “Here,” she says, ferreting around in the bottom of her own purse.

Later on, after April’s home and Julie’s in bed and even June has fallen asleep listening to Alan Freed’s radio show on the rec room couch, her mouth hanging open so her braces catch the light, Mate and May take Pouf for a midnight walk. He trots down the sidewalk, his little legs working double-time to keep up with them, his leathery nose testing the air. The wind has died. They pause out of sight of the house to light cigarettes, then turn onto Hepplewhite Street.

“Do you wish you had gone to the party?” May asks. The moon shines in the lenses of her eyeglasses—two blind eyes.

“Not really,” Mate says, although she does.

“Well, I wish *I* could go to a party. Or on a date.” May throws her cigarette down and stomps on it. “What if we end up old maids in a single room, eating Campbell’s soup from a gas ring and sleeping on a foldout couch?” She pauses in front of the house on the corner. She wants one just like it. All the Allen girls do. They all plan on living in this neighborhood. Even Julie has picked out her

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living room drapes and china pattern. They debate the merits of Frigidaires and Hoovers and Sunbeam mixers.

“Michael Ryan doesn’t seem like the kind of guy to settle down in a nice house on Hepplewhite Street,” Mate points out.

“How do you know? What a boy is at seventeen isn’t necessarily what he is the rest of his life. Just because he’s a little wild now doesn’t mean he’ll always be. And at least—” She yanks Pouf’s leash to stop him from digging a hole in a bed of mums. “Well, at least he’s *someone*, you know? At least he’s a boy and he likes you. Someone to take you places.” She crosses the street to walk back. “I wish it had happened to me.”

Mate stays where she is, letting May walk ahead. *Someone to take you places*. She longs not for a house, but that car. To go fast, the wind in her hair, in her lungs, washing the sadness out of her. To not feel safe and not care. And never to have to go home.

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