

Princess

"Pang, pang, pang." A leaky tap drips onto dirty dishes stacked in the sink and beats time with the country music that blares from Maggie's radio. She sprawls in her chair, feet on the kitchen table, but ignores her cluttered kitchen.

She watches the morning flirt with fall, the clouds glued to the mountaintops like dirty candy floss, and the weeping sky lamenting summer's end. She drains her can and the beer bubbles around her broken teeth before seeping into her veins. She gets up and rescues the last can from her fridge.

"Damn, I need more." She smiles with relief when she discovers a crumpled twenty in her jeans. "I'll drink this then get groceries and a half sac." She lights another cigarette and snaps open the can that answers with a soft squirt of promise.

Champ's sudden bark splits the morning, drowns her music and shatters Maggie's fragile brain. He saw Ian and Jan get in their car across the street.

"Goddam you Champ. Lie down and shut up for chrissakes!" Maggie's shriek is heard in the street.

Champ woofs once more then looks at Maggie with sad eyes. He lowers his ears, pulls his tail between his legs and retreats to his corner.

Maggie had hoped the couple across the street would become good neighbors. She and Jan shared coffee a few times, but she did not meet Ian until

Jackie, her daughter, got sick. She had a temperature, threw up and had the running shits. Maggie needed a doctor. It was not yet ten when she walked across the street and rang their bell. No one answered, so she waited and rang again.

She thought they were unlocking a bank as their chains and bolts clanked before Ian opened the door in a dressing gown.

"Sorry about this, Ian, Jackie's sick and I need to use your phone."

"At this time of night? I'm on early shift and you've got me up. It's time you got your own damn phone."

He slammed the door and Maggie stood in stunned silence listening to the bolts locking her out of their life.

She wrapped her children in blankets and drove an hour to hospital. Jackie had food poisoning and they kept her in overnight while she and Kyle spent the night on plastic chairs in Emergency.

Maggie did not give up on her neighbors. One hot summer afternoon, she walked over and found Jan home.

"Come on over and share some cold ones."

"Thanks Maggie, but I need to vacuum and dust and still have to make supper before Ian gets home." Maggie noticed that Jan's house was, as usual, magazine clean.

She did not offer again. She felt inadequate in Jan's pin perfect home; she felt the same rebuke in her mother's house. Her mother kept it too clean, as though her

family did not live there.

Maggie wanted a neat house but her efforts always unraveled. "Kids, put your stuff away," she yelled at them. Jackie tried, but Kyle treated his home like his den, the same way his father had done. She refused to sergeant major her children and lacked stamina to impose a clean regime.

She did not want to think about Ben, but thoughts of him kept turning up. She would be on a different road if she had not ridden away with him but Ben had been the ride of her life.

She smelled him before she saw him, back when she was a bank teller. He exuded the same comforting essence of heavy machinery that her Dad always wore. The fragrance grew stronger as he reached the front of the line, and as his twinkling blue eyes smiled across her teller's wicket, the smell almost overpowered her. She changed his check into a healthy wad of notes.

"End of the week, eh?"

"Yeah," he said. "I've got the weekend to cruise."

As he left, she noted the crash hat on his arm, the biker boots, his tight tush and cocky walk. He obviously rode the world.

She was serving her next customer when the bank's windows rattled and a big twin's rumble resonated inside her.

Every Friday at 4.30 pm she sniffed his odor. Her mind, primed with heavy hydraulics, steel hard strength, and male mastery of mechanical beast, blipped her

throttle. She looked around until she saw him and then purred like a tuned twin.

One Friday, he did not arrive until almost closing time and she had given up on him. He surprised her at her wicket; he wore a laundry fresh shirt and clean jeans.

"I didn't think I'd see you this week. We close in a minute."

"I know," he replied. "Wanna ride home?"

He handed her his check. His powerful hands were like her father's. His muscled shoulders filled his jacket and his clean hair gleamed. His blue eyes pressed for an answer. She shyly looked into her drawer as she sorted his money.

"On your bike?" she asked. "I live on the other side of town."

She counted out his cash.

"No problem. I'll wait outside." He smiled as he left and his eyes enticed her anew.

She was eager to get to know him, plus she had always loved bikes. A friend of her Dad's, a biker, often visited. As a child she saw her face in the bike's chrome, looked in awe at the shining parts, and heard guns go off when it started. When she was older, the friend took her riding on an upholstered motorbike but with a whisper-quiet engine.

Cashing up, she felt she might float out of her shoes. They were dressy for a bike, but at least they weren't heels. She was too tall for heels.

Her suede jacket would do. She tied back her hair and touched up her makeup and worried about her tight skirt. While she wished she wore jeans, she

knew her bare legs would spark his interest.

He waited astride his bike in the car park.

"Hi, I'm Ben."

"I'm Maggie."

"Where do you live Maggie?"

"Just off Bay Road."

"Okay." He handed her a tiny lid. "Here's a crash hat. Give us your purse and I'll put it in the saddlebag."

She squished her long curly hair beneath the helmet.

"Hop on and hang onto me."

She steadied on his shoulder, hiked her skirt and swung astride, and immediately felt the engine's throb through the saddle. Ben turned to check she was ready when her thighs splashed in his eyes.

"Better keep my eyes on the road, eh?"

He cranked the throttle and they moved off. Maggie smiled at her curious colleagues. Ben took fistfuls of throttle, catapulting them into the traffic. Her smile grew wider and she tingled as though electrically charged, weaving through the cherry-blossomed streets to her home. She held him tightly or she would have slid off the back. When they pulled up, she was sorry the ride ended so soon.

She swung off and shimmied her skirt down.

"I'm riding tomorrow. Want to come?"

"Sure," she said. "Where are you going?"

"Thinking about Nanaimo."

"Sounds like fun. What time?"

"I'll pick you up at ten. You got jeans? You've great legs, but Nanaimo's a long ride and you'd get cold."

She laughed. "See you tomorrow."

He carved a tight turn and disappeared down the hill.

She had seen her mother peering from behind the drapes.

"You did not ride home on that bike, did you, Margaret?"

She thought it a silly question, as she knew her mother had watched.

"Yes, Ben gave me a ride. He's taking me riding tomorrow, too."

"You should be careful Margaret. You hardly know the man and motorbikes are dangerous."

"Yes, mother."

She retreated to the smallest bedroom. It was not her exclusive refuge as her mother invaded twice a week with a vacuum and duster to religiously enforce domestic order. Once she even took Maggie's posters down. That caused a shouting match, until Maggie had compromised. Now she opened her closets, displaying her Harley posters, and switched on her radio, sending country music keening through the house. Only then did it feel like her room.

At supper she kissed and hugged her Dad.

"Hi Princess, you have a good day?"

"Yes, Dad, real good. You?"

"Oh, the usual, 'cept I helped with a back axle." His eyes chuckled." Our mechanic hadn't done one before."

He was a trucking maintenance manager. He did not always manage from his office, because he loved getting his fingers dirty.

"Mum said you had a ride home." He asked with interest, so different from her mother's disapproval.

"Yes, I met a young man in the bank. He's taking me riding tomorrow."

"Who is he?"

"His name's Ben and he works for Provincial Logging.

"Provincial Logging's a good company. Where's he taking you, Princess?"

"Nanaimo."

"Just be careful. I don't want my Princess hurt."

She had always been `his Princess'. She would always recall her tiny hand disappearing inside his great paw on their walks and him pointing out the changes in trees and flowers and the blossoms blowing in the street. He had shown her the liquid sun shimmering on the blue ocean, logs like bleached bones on the beaches, flies exploding from stewing seaweed and tiny waves caressing the shore. They also watched winter storms when walls of water jumped sea walls and seagulls screamed and cavorted on the wind like drunken entertainers.

He took her to the misty blue Camass slopes where gnarled Garry Oaks bent like old men. They collected acorns, chestnuts, cones and nuts, and she loved flying the tiny windmill seeds she gathered off the ground. He pointed out the untidy platforms of herons raising their young and the ragged clusters of twigs as crows swayed in treetops. He took her to feed ducks in ponds but named the Mallards, Widgeons, Shovel Ducks, Pintails and Teals.

He took her to car and bike rallies, and often took all day and drove to Nanaimo. But around bikes she heard his frustrated longings. "I'd love one like that," he said admiring a Triumph. "I used to have a bike, a Matchless. Then I met your mother. It's best I don't think too hard about getting another one. Your mother doesn't approve of bikes and she'd never ride with me." When he took her to car rallies, he lifted her up so she could see inside and it was then she became aware of the grease and oil engrained into him. Grease and diesel were his primal deodorant and she grew up secure around his smell.

Her mother had named her after Princess Margaret and often reminded her she should be proud. She dressed Maggie in frilly dresses and formal skirts. When Maggie was in high school she looked like a storybook character. She fought a cold war with her mother over jeans and T-shirts but Maggie only escaped her mother's dress sense by earning her own money. Her mother still greeted jeans with snide disapproval. "I don't think you look ladylike wearing those," she often said. So Maggie loved her Dad calling her Maggie, not Margaret.

She had loved her first day with Ben. The road had rushed beneath their wheels, winding through the cool dank Goldstream Canyon and up the slopes of the sunny Malahat. She stopped gulping whenever Ben pulled out to overtake and did not cling so desperately and even enjoyed the speed, the wind and the freedom of the bike. Ben turned off the highway before they reached the upper slopes, and swooped down a curling road into a tunnel of trees. The sun splattered through the branches and puddled light on the empty road. Quickly a lake sparkled through the trees and reflected into her streaming eyes. Ben pulled up at a coffee shop in Shawnigan Lake. She got off and took a handkerchief from her jeans to dab at her ravaged makeup. Ben grinned at her, took her face between his hands and kissed her hard before handing her sunglasses.

“Wear these in future; you're gorgeous even with spoiled makeup. You've obviously ridden bikes before.” Maggie did not admit her childhood love affair with bikes.

In Nanaimo Ben bought her a leather jacket. She knew it was a symbol, almost like a guy giving a ring, and she could not believe she was becoming his girl. She hugged and tried to kiss him but he brushed her aside.

“There's no need for that, you need a decent jacket on the bike.”

On Sunday they drove beyond Sooke, and hiked to a pool among the trees. Wordless, he stripped and dove. The flash of his naked flesh lodged in her mind. She had not skinny-dipped before, and the warm breath of wind on her bare breasts

and the river's intimate caress surprised her. They frolicked like children in the water.

She asked, "Do you have towels? I didn't know we'd swim."

He laughed as though sharing a joke with the trees. "Don't worry Maggie; you'll dry in the sun."

Ben lay spread-eagled to dry, while she modestly cradled herself in the shade until her shivering forced her into the sunlight. She closed her eyes as she stretched out, pretending, like a child, that she was not there. She wanted to be with Ben and watch him, but she was shy.

She heard him move and thought he was dressing, but suddenly the warmth of the sun disappeared. When she opened her eyes he stood over her like a pillar.

"You make me hot, Maggie," he announced, and bent down and kissed her. His lips, like his biceps, were supple and strong. Then he dropped to the sand, spread her legs and mounted her. She was willing, but had hoped he would entice and not abruptly possess her. However she adjusted her fantasy and the earth still moved.

He rolled off. "You're the woman I've always imagined, Maggie."

Her summer days flew by as the miles sped beneath Ben's wheels. Her Dad asked, "Princess, how's your summer? We never see you. Are you having a good time?" But her mother fretted, "He's so different. Are you sure you're doing the right thing? You should find someone else." Maggie did not say she had stopped looking, but simply said, "I love him, Mum."

She married Ben that winter. He was her biker and as familiar as her Dad. She hated the constant rows with her Mum. In her mother's house she would never be a woman, always a little girl. She had to leave.

A few days before the wedding her Dad gave her five thousand dollars.

"This is my wedding gift, Princess—and there's no need to tell your Mum."

Her mother dueled over the wedding. Maggie partially surrendered by dressing in white and agreeing to a church, but Ben chose the hall and his friends played music and ran the bar. The party went loud, long and late, and her mother took her Dad home early.

She and Ben bought a trailer home by the ocean, and a Harley for her. The pacific breeze wafted through their home and Ben added the tang of pine, a scent of diesel and honest sweat from the forest. They spiced their lives with ferocious coupling, wild parties and whirling convoys of biker friends whom her mother claimed lived on the wrong side of the middle class curtain. But Maggie loved their honesty, not in their talk because they lied like thieves, but in the way they inflated their triumphs, boasted about exploits and swept through life at full throttle, taking advantage of every bend.

Her Dad joked, "You've got your own little castle on the seashore." He loved to visit, to relax in their lair and drink beer while her mother wondered aloud if Margaret would ever have a proper home and serve wine, not bottled beer. Maggie knew she would never meet her mother's expectations.

Her Dad died of a heart attack just before her first child, Kyle, was born. They visited her mother after that, but she went quickly too.

She and Ben loved exploring their rocky beach. She would exclaim over exquisite anemones in the pools, delight when barnacles sang in the surge, and name the creatures of the empty shells and singers of lonely birdsongs. Ben admired her knowledge and saw it as her strength. After she had birthed two children and lovingly taught them the foreshore, though, her schooling threatened Ben.

Kyle asked, "What shell is this?" Ben gruffly replied, "Ask your Mum, she went to a g-o-o-d school," and blamed her for knowing more than he would ever see.

Then Ben failed to meet Maggie's horny eye

"Naw, I've been working too hard and I'm tired," She did not understand his rejection. When she discovered who did meet his eyes, she became a broken hearted lioness, and roared the adulterous truth to the world.

"You double-dealing bastard. We're leaving." She rented a house in the next valley, took her young cubs and left.

Maggie had scoured her new valley for another Ben. Village talk said she tried out some, village gossip claimed she tried too many, but she never found a replacement.

Now she sucked back her beer and burped, the sound echoed around her untidy kitchen.

She wondered if she would ever be middle class again. She had once been

her Dad's princess. Friends from the past rarely visited now. Ben did not have steady work and was liable to lay-offs, so she and her children barely survived. She refused to get a job. She was a full-time mother, nurturing her youngsters on the edge of the forest, sharing the somber mists, playing among the trees and swimming in jeweled lakes in the forest valley.

Her knee peeked through threadbare jeans as she swung her feet down. She took the last swill of beer and butted her smoke in the brimming ashtray. She did not want to walk to the village, she wanted to sit and dream of who she could have been.

"Dammit." she exploded. "Halloween ain't here yet, but I'm going to dress up. I've got time; I'm not helping at school today."

She had no fairy godmother to wave a magic wand but found clothes in the back of her closet, tights in the back of a drawer and remnants of makeup in the bathroom cupboard.

In the grocery store, the locals looked twice. They had never seen her in skirt, blouse, and pearls, and wearing makeup.

The clerk in the beer store did not recognize her until she said, "Don't you say hi anymore, John?"

"Dammit, Maggie, is that you? You should dress up more often. You look like a princess."

She floated home, feeling higher than the clouds surrounding her valley.