

## **The Promise**

“Promise on your life that you won’t tell.”

Richie gave me that look he reserved for his rare moments of seriousness.

“I promise,” I said.

“Raise your hand, like in court.”

I raised my right hand.

“Do you solemnly swear not to tell Mom and Dad?”

“I do,” I said, trying not to laugh.

“Okay, then,” Richie said, “but you stay in the car and don’t say a word to anyone.”

We got into our mom’s VW Rabbit and he backed out of the driveway at about ninety miles per hour. Our parents were out at a party. Richie had assured them he’d be home all night, but no sooner had they left than he announced he needed to “run an errand.” I was pretty sure I knew what that errand was and thus had power over him.

“Take me with you,” I’d said.

“No fucking way.”

“You’re supposed to be watching me.”

“You’re thirteen years old.”

“Twelve,” I said.

“Whatever.”

“You promised Mom and Dad.”

He thought about it a minute, and that’s when he swore me to secrecy.

For one thing, he wasn’t supposed to drive after dusk. For another, he wasn’t allowed to drive at all without an adult in the car—he only had his learner’s permit. If our parents found out, they’d murder him.

As we pulled away from the house, the sun was sinking behind the trees. Richie turned on WMMS, and Pink Floyd came blaring out of the speakers. Richie sang along—“Money, it’s a hit”—and tried, and failed, to tap along to the tune’s weird time signature on the steering wheel.

This was the first time he’d ever driven me, and it felt weird seeing him behind the wheel, resting his left arm on the open window frame just like Dad. He barely stopped at stop signs and seemed personally offended by red lights as we headed across town.

“C’mon c’mon c’mon,” he muttered, his eyes trained on the side of the traffic light to see when the green turned to yellow. Our impatient father had taught him that trick.

“Where we going?” I asked.

“None of your business.”

He eased up on the brake and, just as our light turned green, jammed his foot down on the gas pedal. We passed the cracked-up tennis courts and Fred’s Custard Stand and the old Greek church. The trees had started to bloom, and I’d seen two robins in our yard that day, which Mom told me was a sign of spring.

The town park was narrow and ran alongside a creek beside the railroad tracks. When we were little, Mom would bring us here to feed the ducks in the creek. We’d tear off shards of stale

bread and toss them into the murky water, where the fluffy, cloud-white ducks fought over the food.

Richie pulled into a narrow lot and parked among a row of other cars. A group of teenagers leaned against their cars or wandered onto the grass smoking and drinking from beer cans. I didn't recognize any of them as Richie's school friends.

He turned off the engine. Music came from one of the other cars: "We're an American Band."

"Remember," Richie said, "stay right here."

"Okay." I tried to sound annoyed, but mostly I felt anxious. In the next car, a guy was making out with a girl, and it looked like he was trying to chew her face off. Meanwhile, two boys wrestled in the near dark by the creek. Beyond them, I could make out a few ducks floating at a safe distance. Once, Dad told us to "bring home a duck so that we can have mashed potatoes for dinner," and I thought that meant that mashed potatoes were made from the white duck feathers, and Richie teased me for days.

He climbed from the car and walked toward some boys gathered a couple of spaces over. They seemed to know him and shook hands the way basketball players do after a game. They talked for a while, and I began to regret making Richie bring me here when I could have been home watching TV or masturbating.

One of the wrestlers charged at the other and brought him down, and a small crowd cheered. Next door, the girl had climbed onto the boy's lap, and they continued to make out in a way that excited and frightened me at the same time.

Richie was taking forever. I saw him inhale on a joint and take a swig of beer.

“Hey,” a girl said from the open driver’s side window. She had long, straight brown hair and a face dotted with pimples.

“Hi,” I said.

She stared at me with red-rimmed eyes. “What’s your name?”

For a second I considered giving her a fake name—Stanley, say, or Jeffrey—but decided against it. Though she was clearly high and older than me, she had a kind face. “Carl,” I said.

“What’s up, Carlo?”

I liked how she called me Carlo. “Not much,” I said.

She giggled, as if I’d said something funny. “How old’re you, Carlo?” she asked.

“Thirteen,” I said, though my birthday was more than a month away.

She asked if I wanted to get high.

“No, thank you,” I answered.

She giggled again and said, “Well, aren’t you polite.”

Throughout this I kept glancing over at Richie talking to his friends, silently urging him to hurry up.

“Are you Rich’s little brother?” the girl asked.

Rich? No one ever called him Rich.

“Yes,” I said, “but don’t hold it against me.”

I thought she’d giggle at that, but she looked serious. “Rich is a nice guy,” she said. “He just needs . . .” She thought a bit. “. . . direction.”

I didn’t know what to say to that, but Richie was finally headed back anyway, slipping a small baggie into his shirt pocket as he walked.

“Hey, Charlotte,” he said to the girl.

“So this is your little brother?” she said.

“Nah,” he said. “This is the family dog.”

She smiled. “Well, your dog is very polite.” As Richie climbed into the car, she leaned down and said, “See ya, Carlo.”

Richie started the car and backed out. “What was that all about?” he asked.

“I dunno.”

“I told you not to talk to anyone.”

“*She* started it.”

“Yeah, well, stay away from her.”

“Why?”

“She’s a skank.” He turned on the radio, and “Layla” came on.

I didn’t know what a skank was, but I didn’t want him to know that I didn’t know, so I didn’t say anything. The night had come on, and I watched the lit-up houses float by like space ships.

Halfway home, Richie rolled through a stop sign just as a car came from our left and smacked into the front left corner of the Rabbit. Richie saw the car at the last second and shouted, “Whoa, Bessie!” but it was too late. The Rabbit twisted to the right and came to a stop. I was tossed forward on impact and my head hit the edge of the dashboard above the radio. Richie’s head banged off the door frame.

The radio kept playing the instrumental coda to “Layla”; the only other sound was the ticking of the car’s engine.

Someone appeared at my door and opened it. “Are you okay?” It was a man in jogging shorts and a sweatshirt that said “Kent State.”

“We’re fine,” Richie shouted, trying to sound nonchalant.

The jogger helped me from the car. I kept touching my forehead, enjoying the weird pleasure of feeling the bump growing there. At least there was no blood.

The other driver was already out of her car and yelling at Richie for running the stop sign. Richie yelled back that *she* had run a stop sign too, but then she pointed out that there *was* no stop sign coming from her direction.

Richie, quiet now, climbed out the passenger side—the driver’s side door couldn’t open all the way because the other car was up against it—but first he calmly turned off the radio. People had started coming out of their houses by now. One shouted that he’d called the police, and I wanted to tell Richie to run, get out of there, not because the cops would get him but because our dad would kill him for this.

A large woman from the neighborhood asked if we wanted to sit down, so I sat on the lawn while Richie paced. He didn’t seem at all affected by hitting his head. From far off we heard a siren start up, and Richie’s movements got more and more frantic as the sound slowly got louder.

The police cruiser arrived, red lights flashing, the siren impossibly loud before it wound down to a groan and died. The other driver ran up to the car and spoke to the two officers, pointing in our direction.

One cop, looking bored and a little disappointed that the accident wasn’t worse, came over and asked us if we needed an ambulance. “Nah,” Richie said, though by now I had a good-sized egg on my forehead.

“What about *you*?” the cop asked.

I shook my head. “I’m okay,” I said, pretty sure that, if I went to the hospital, I would die.

The cop asked for Richie's license, and when he showed it to him, the cop said, "You know this is a learner's permit, right?"

Richie didn't answer. He looked like he might rip off his skin just to let his insides escape. I was worried the officer would smell marijuana on Richie, but he just filled out forms while the second cop questioned the other driver, who loudly declared that my brother was a juvenile delinquent and should be put in jail. She got so worked up that the police decided to give her a breathalyzer test, which she resisted until they threatened to take her in. Richie, still jittery but less so now that the spotlight had shifted, stood close to me as we watched the lady breathe into the machine.

"Can you believe this shit?" he muttered.

"This is bullshit!" the lady shouted when the second cop escorted her to the cruiser. By now, two tow trucks had arrived and the drivers were discussing their strategies for removing the cars. One of them inspected the damage to the Rabbit and declared that it was drivable. He yanked a bit on the bent wheel well until it was a safe distance from the tire. In all this commotion, we had almost been forgotten. All of a sudden I felt cold.

The first cop came over as the lady's car was being hoisted up by the tow truck. "The station called your house, but no one's home," he said. "You're going to have to leave the car here, have your parents come get it. Unless you want it towed." He pointed to where the tow truck driver had parked the Rabbit at the curb. "We'd drop you off, but we need to take the other driver down to the station." He shook his head and added, "Lady's drunk as a skunk."

"We'll walk," Richie said.

"How far is it?" the officer asked.

"It's close. Not even a mile."

“You sure?” He looked from Richie’s face to mine. I nodded. “Watch that bump,” he said to me.

“Yes, sir,” I said. I guess I *was* a polite kid.

On the way home, as we walked slowly past houses with rooms lit up by TV screens, I remembered that Richie had marijuana in his shirt pocket.

“Did you hide that stuff?” I asked. “The cops could’ve found it.”

“Nah. They weren’t gonna search me. That’s against the law.”

“You better not let Dad find it.”

“You better not tell.”

He was acting tough, but I could tell he’d been rattled. The cop had given him a paper that said the accident was his fault, even though the lady was drunk. I knew Richie would blame her anyway, and he’d probably convince our parents of that, but he’d still be in trouble for driving in the first place.

And that’s exactly how it played out. He lost his learner’s permit for one year, and couldn’t drive on his own for another year beyond that. He broke that rule several times, and got into two more accidents.

As for our parents, Dad steamed around the house for several days, grumbling about the cost of fixing the Rabbit. Mom put on her sad face, which was even worse. It showed a combination of sadness, fear, and profound disappointment. And she directed it not just at my brother, but at me too, I guess for taking a ride with Richie and thus being an accomplice.

The bump on my head slowly went down, leaving no external mark, but, inside, I always carried around the vivid image not of the accident—the oncoming car, the shouting lady, the



flashing police car lights—but the face of that girl, Charlotte, blank with beer and weed, and covered with pimples, as she told me my brother needed direction.