

Stop for Them

Towards the end of the summer the woman and the man went to the beach and brought a watermelon and a cantaloupe with them. They also brought a triple-cream cheese and two beers. They ate both the melons and floated in the cold water. They sat on their towels and kissed slowly and talked about how the days were getting shorter. When they left, they packed up the untouched beers and the cheese. When they got to the car they decided they wanted to drink the beers. They poured them into thermoses so they could drink them on the drive home. On the way back they saw two girls in very short shorts and bikini tops walking on the side of the road. Both of the girls had their thumbs out and wore perky, expectant smiles. The woman touched the man's arm, "Stop for them" she said.

The man pulled over to the side of the road, onto the gravel edge and the girls skipped up to the car. They opened the backseat and breathlessly expressed their thanks.

"Where are you heading?" the woman asked, turning her head slightly to face them.

"Just into town would be great," one of them said excitedly.

The woman noticed the girls could not gracefully contain their burgeoning sexuality yet, which was reflected in the guilt and giddiness of their movements. She saw the man glance at the girls in his rear-view mirror and wondered if he too was uncomfortable with their looks. One of the girls had strawberry blonde hair that was long and looked straightened. She wore a hot pink bathing suit top. Her newly grown breasts, which were squashed together so that they looked like one great mound, protruded from her chest. The other girl had lighter blonde hair that was pulled back into a bun. She had on an equally revealing bathing suit top but much smaller breasts. The woman noted that her belly button was pierced and that she was chewing gum.

The woman tried to remember what being that age felt like. She remembered thinking she looked much older than she was. She remembered thinking about sex, a lot, and remembered when her best friend had sex for the first time, when they were sixteen. The woman had cried when her friend told her. She had felt left out, betrayed even. She wondered if these girls were still virgins. The woman got a little pink in the face thinking about this and quickly decided reliving her teenage years was not a productive train of thought. “You can’t dwell on the negative so much, the world is already fucked enough,” she imagined the man saying to her, as he had said so many times. “Existential crises are so American” was another one of his favorite comments to make when she spun out particularly far. This comment bothered and embarrassed her. How could he, standing within American culture, as an American, objectively observe “American” tendencies in her? It embarrassed her because he was right—they were so American, and so self-absorbed.

The light blonde girl popped her gum loudly. The woman looked at her through her side mirror. She noticed she had braces, which made her lips puff out into an unnatural pout.

“So, were you two at the beach today?” the woman asked.

She hoped her tone implied that she was both older than them and thus deserved respect, but also still cool and relatable. The woman was really not much older than the girls in the backseat, probably only about seven years. This age difference made the woman uncomfortable because she did not feel old enough to really be viewed as an adult. That being said, she was also, definitely, and thankfully, not young enough to be their peers. She looked over at the man. He had one hand on the steering wheel and the other rested over the middle console. She saw, through her side-view mirror, the pouty lipped girl staring at him. The woman placed her left hand over the man’s hand on the console.

“No, we weren’t,” one of the girls giggled. “We were at a friend’s.”

“How did you get out here?” the woman asked.

“We got a ride,” the strawberry blonde girl responded.

“With a stranger?” the woman pressed. The girls looked at each other and the pouty one leaned her head against her hand and looked out the window.

“Sort of,” she said wistfully.

The man laughed and said, “What does that mean?”

The woman was startled by the sound of his voice because he had not spoken since they had picked up the girls. The strawberry blonde girl seemed to perk up at the sound of his laugh. She tried to pull down her shorts a little and adjust her top subtly but the woman noticed and knew that the girl was practicing something, some performance that women, later in life, learn to perfect and accomplish without anyone noticing.

“My brother’s friend drove us,” the strawberry blonde responded as she adjusted her top. “But we don’t know him that well.” She looked pointedly at the man as she asked, “were you guys at the beach today?”

The man nodded and took a sip from his beer. Both of the girls watched as he drank from the cup.

“What’s that?” the light blonde, pouty girl asked.

He raised his eyebrows slightly as he sipped. He took a moment to respond. The moment of silence was just long enough for the woman to notice the girls leaning forward in their seats.

“It’s beer,” the man responded.

The woman almost shot back that it was soda, not beer, but before she could retort the man smiled playfully at the girls through his rear-view mirror and asked, “do you want some?”

“No,” the woman responded sharply before the girls could respond.

She didn't want these young girls to know they were drinking and driving. And she definitely didn't want the man offering alcohol to young girls. But the woman worried that her tone sounded unnecessarily serious and so she tried to adjust it.

“I mean, you girls definitely aren't of age,” she said with a smile that she hoped read as fun and at ease.

“It's fine,” the girls responded almost in unison.

“We drink *all* the time,” the light blonde hair girl added.

The man shrugged, and, without taking his eyes off of the road, passed his cup back to the girls.

“Go for it.”

The woman stared at him, but the man refused to take his eyes off the road, as if he was unaware that she was staring at him.

The woman remembered the first time they had met, a year and a half ago, and how she had drunkenly asked if she could have one of his beers. “Go for it” he had responded, smiling and then turning away from her to return to his conversation with a woman in a sparkly top that hung loose off her shoulders.

The woman watched as the girls drank the beer and self-consciously played with their hair. The woman remembered being in the U.S. Virgin Islands at their age with her family and meeting a man who worked at the hotel they were staying at. He had been blonde and tan and twenty-one and had smiled at her whenever she would come to the hotel restaurant to eat with her family. One afternoon she decided to go to the hotel restaurant alone, when her parents were on a hike and her older brother was reading by the pool. She went and sat alone at a table and

asked for a glass of ice water. The boy came up to her, grinning, and asked her where her family was.

“Asleep,” she lied, not quite understanding why. He grinned.

“What are you doing tonight?” he asked her.

“Nothing,” she responded quickly.

“Do you want to go to the beach?” he asked, placing his hand on her table.

“Yes,” she responded and he seemed to smile even bigger.

“Okay, I’ll see you then,” he said, walking away.

The girl wondered when “then” was but decided to go down to the beach as soon as everyone had gone to sleep that night. She left the hotel room she was sharing with her big brother around 11 p.m. and walked down to the beach. The boy was not there. Had he already left? Had he ever arrived? And then he was behind her, grinning, his footsteps muffled by the sand.

“Hi,” he said. He sat down and pulled out a plastic bottle of dark liquid. “Do you want some?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said and took a long sip from the water bottle. The taste of the alcohol made her want to grimace but she forced herself not to. Instead her eyes watered. The man laughed.

“How long are you here for?” he asked.

“One more day.”

“Such a short trip. How old are you?” he asked.

The girl hesitated slightly.

“Fifteen,” she said, though her birthday wasn’t for another seven months. The man exhaled, somewhere between a whistle and a deep breath.

“Damn.”

“What?”

He laughed and pushed back his hair.

“You’re really young,” he said as he leaned back onto his elbows, sinking into the sand.

The girl tried to laugh. “Not really.”

“Yeah really.”

“How old are you?” she asked.

“Twenty-one” he said, looking her directly in the eyes.

The girl shrugged. “So?” she said.

“Come here,” he said, pulling her down into the sand. His tongue was big and rough and his breath smelled of alcohol and tobacco. His hands were hot as they moved to her breasts and then to her shorts. He did not look her in the eyes, the girl noted, but instead kept them firmly shut as his tongue prodded her mouth.

The woman turned to face the girls and made direct eye contact with the strawberry blonde as she sipped on the man’s beer. The other girl giggled as she watched her friend drink. The man looked at them in the rear-view mirror.

“Now don’t tell your parents,” he said sarcastically, wagging his finger at them. This comment sent both girls into a fit of giggles. The woman wanted to turn around and knock the cup of beer from the girl’s hand. Instead she picked up her own plastic cup of beer and drank.

The day after the woman had met the boy at the beach she went to the restaurant alone again and asked for a glass of ice water. The boy was working at the bar but did not look up to meet her gaze. He did not look at her for almost an hour. She grew impatient. He must have not seen her. She walked, swaying her hips purposefully as she approached him at the bar.

“Hey,” she said in a tone she hoped was nonchalant and sexy. The boy barely glanced up and continued to cut limes into small wedges.

“Hi, can I help you?”

The girl turned bright red. She flipped her hair behind her shoulders.

“Uh, no,” she responded. He looked at her and gave her a distracted half smile. The girl waited a moment before she realized he was not going to say anything else and so she turned around and walked back to her hotel room. On the way back to her room, she wondered if people could tell that her dress was slightly see-through.

“Where do you want to be dropped off?” the man asked.

“Just at the 7-11 up ahead is fine,” the pouty girl with braces responded.

“Are you sure? We can take you home,” the man said.

“No, this is fine.”

The woman wanted desperately for the girls to put t-shirts and long pants on before they exited the car but she knew they had no other clothing with them.

“Thanks so much!” both of the girls chirped as they slid across the backseat of the car.

“Sure!” the man replied, raising his right hand in farewell.

The girls shut the car door a little too forcefully and the woman winced at the sound of the door slamming shut. The man shook his head slightly and chuckled. “Well they were something else, huh?”

The woman slouched low in her seat and put her bare feet onto the dashboard.

“They were children,” she snapped. “They were little kids and you shouldn’t have given them alcohol.”

“Oh come on, you know we were drinking at that age too,” the man said dismissively.

The woman slammed her feet into the dashboard as hard as she could and her back arched against her seat.

“You shouldn’t have given them alcohol, you shouldn’t have even picked them up in the first place.”

The man turned to her, his mouth agape.

“You told me to pull over, you told me to stop for them.”