

Peoria

The boys in Peoria County had a thing for young girls. And this thing was reciprocated with short denim skirts, red lipstick and dark black mascara. Along with hair so teased and sprayed that moonlight reflected in its plastic sheen. On summer nights, groups of girls would be seen under the neon-lit awning of the Grab-n-Go burger stand, sucking down strawberry milkshakes and fries. When a car pulled up, top down, music blaring, the girls surrounded it like sirens, offering refreshments to lost sailors at sea. The seamen would order burgers and trade tales of their time spent “cruising.” But by midnight, when the neon constellations shut off, crews would scatter and disperse, back to the safety and reality of their beds and curfews.

Nancy Breeze sat on one of the wooden picnic tables next to the walk-up window with her high-heels resting on the bench. The tables under the patio, not the nicer ones under the trees where the sophomores hung out. Nancy sat next to her friend Joanne, the two surrounded by various other freshmen out for the night. Well, not really freshmen anymore, thank god, but not quite sophomores, either. The rotation of spot location wouldn't happen until fall when the seniors went on to whatever it was their lives turned out to be, and the juniors inherited the parking area closest to the jukebox. Nancy listened absently while the girls around her chatted gossip and the boys exchanged sports stories while eyeing the girls for signs of approval. She found it juvenile. She gazed across the parking lot to a group of seniors gathered around a gleaming, red mustang. Her eyes landed on the boy in the driver seat, Matthew Spencer. He had short brown hair and matching brown eyes, which seemed to be looking back at her. He smiled. Nancy turned towards Joanne.

“Let's go over there,” she whispered to her friend as she pointed surreptitiously towards the mustang.

“Are you crazy?” Joanne said. “Those are seniors.”

Nancy shrugged. “Not anymore, remember? They just graduated.”

“Your feet are too big for your shoes, Nancy,” Joanne told her.

Nancy felt bored. At the very least, she needed another diet coke so she took her change purse out to see how much cash she had left. She still had thirty cents remaining from the money she'd allotted herself to spend for the night, but she felt thriftier than normal because her curls were coming loose. She needed to save up for more hairspray. The discussion around her turned the usual course to complaints about school, and since Nancy quite liked school, she found the topic annoying. The night air, still cool from a long winter, felt nice now that the biting spring winds had stopped. Nancy enjoyed the feel of it as she walked away from the table. She did not notice at first that she was heading across the parking lot, but when she realized her indiscretion, it seemed all the more natural and planned out. She walked right up the polished car and regardless of whether it was shock or admiration, the grinning boys and scowling girls parted for Nancy as if she held a staff.

“I'm thirsty,” she said to Matt, who sat in the driver's seat, still (Nancy was sure this time) smiling at her. But he didn't say anything. He just sat there, grinning. *Mannish Boy* played on the radio. Nancy cocked her head slightly to the left, but kept her eyes level with his. Thankful that fear didn't smell, or if it did, that she wore perfume. The song ended.

“That was my favorite song,” Matt explained. “Diet, regular or a shake?”

Nancy changed her mind about the soda. “I'll take a strawberry malt.”

Matt waved his arm, and the waitress came to take their order. He ordered one strawberry malt, nothing else. When the waitress brought it to him, he handed it to Nancy, who turned on her heels and tried to will his eyes upon her back watching her go.

Nancy sat back down on the table next to Joanne, who rubbed her palms into her head in circular motions, causing her ponytail to come loose.

“You’re gonna get us kicked out of here,” Joanne said.

“What are you talking about? We’re paying customers.”

“*You* didn’t pay for that.”

Nancy shrugged and slurped her drink. “You worry too much, Joanne.”

Joanne snatched the shake from Nancy and started eating it with the spoon. “I just don’t want to have to cover all your shifts at the diner when they find your body, cat scratched to death, in the dumpster out back.”

“Oh but Joanne, I’ve already written my will and my whole wardrobe is being left to you.”

When Nancy returned home, she noticed that the light in the front room was on. Nancy lived with her mother in a three-room shotgun house. The living area slash kitchen at the front, Mrs. Breeze’s bedroom in the middle, and the back room belonged to Nancy. She took off her clothes in the yard and returned them to the wardrobe she had just bequeathed to Joanne, a duffel bag hidden behind an overgrown hedge on the side of the house. Standing in just her underwear, she dropped to the ground and rolled a couple of times in the patchy grass to rub off any scent of perfume or cigarette smoke. She put back on the poodle skirt and blouse that her mother had laid out for her earlier that morning, then brushed her hair straight and pulled it back into a ponytail before she went inside.

Mrs. Breeze sat in the faded green recliner in the center of the room watching reruns of *Ozzie and Harriet* on the black and white television. The empty bookshelf to her right piled with

a stack of dirty dishes. Next to that, their kitchen, which consisted of a small sink, one stovetop and a mini-fridge.

“Where have you been?” Mrs. Breeze asked, standing up from her chair. Nancy noticed that she still wore her work uniform.

“It’s only nine-o-clock, Ma. Do you have another night shift? You just got off at noon.”

“Proper girls are home by seven-thirty, Nancy,” Mrs. Breeze said, taking a packed lunch out from the fridge. “I’ll be late because of you.”

Nancy rolled her eyes and headed to her room. Typical, blaming Nancy for all her problems. But that didn’t change the fact that Mrs. Breeze would be at work till half way through the next day, trying to keep up with the house payments, other bills that stacked up faster than garbage, and two mouths to feed on one salary. Nancy wanted to help out with money issues, but she had to lie to her mother about having a job. Mrs. Breeze would never have allowed it. Proper girls did not have jobs. Nancy felt lucky that her mother stayed as naïve as she was strict. She seemed to truly believe that her daughter went to the library to study every day after school. Mrs. Breeze believed just about any lie, so long as it was a pretty one.

“Your life will be perfect as long as you remain on course,” Nancy heard her mother call to her, then she heard the door shut and lock, leaving only the welcome silence.

“Don’t worry,” Nancy replied to the absence of her mother. “I won’t make the same mistake as you.”

One busy day at work, as Nancy cleaned the sticky remnants of malts from the black and white countertop she heard the bell on the front door ring, but did not look up from her task. Nancy was not a receptionist; she worked the counter. But she felt, after a moment, that somebody was watching her. The hairs on the back of her neck stood to attention, and her heart

seemed to pick up a beat even before she raised her eyes. Matt leaned against the wall right in front of her, waiting patiently. His brown hair neatly parted. His jean-jacketed arms crossed. His winning smile crooked and his brown eyes cocky.

“Take a seat anywhere,” she said and quickly retreated to the kitchen to redo her ponytail, which had become messy during her shift. When she returned, Matt had taken one of the stools.

“What would you like?” she asked him.

“How about a date tonight?”

Nancy blushed. “Is that really what you want?” she asked.

“Yeah, what d’ya say?”

“Why, Matthew Spencer, I doubt you even know my name.”

“Nancy, right?” Matt said eyeing her nametag. “Okay, how ‘bout we start with a strawberry malt.”

“I’m going out, Ma.” Nancy stood next to the green recliner, where her mother sat watching one of her favorite shows, *Leave it to Beaver*. Mrs. Breeze waved her arm at her daughter in annoyance.

Nancy waited for a commercial. “I’m going out, Ma,” she said again.

“Salisbury steak in a box!” Her mother slapped her knee with great enthusiasm and began to laugh.

“That’s great, Ma. Are you listening to me?”

“You’re not listening to me!” Mrs. Breeze took her eyes off the television and turned towards her daughter with a haughty look of disapproval and awe.

“I’m sorry. Salisbury steak in a box?”

Mrs. Breeze continued to stare at her daughter. She extended one of her large arms towards the television. Nancy followed it to the screen, which showed a rosy-faced kid with peanut butter all over his face.

“I’m not following you,” Nancy said. Mrs. Breeze looked back to the screen, which now showed the weather.

“You missed it. Never mind. Now, what were you saying, dear?”

“I’m going out.”

“What? You just got home from the library.”

“Joanne and I are going to the movies.”

“What movie?”

Nancy thought for a moment about something playing that Mrs. Breeze might consider acceptable entertainment. “Gigi,” she said.

Mrs. Breeze, still keeping steady eye contact with Nancy, tilted her head slowly to the right.

“Fine,” Mrs. Breeze said. The show came back on. She returned her attention to the television. “You may take fifty cents from my purse.”

“Thanks, Ma.” Nancy turned to leave.

“Remember dear,” her mother called after her. “You’re the captain of your own ship. Don’t let anybody else steer for you!”

“What movie are *you* seeing tonight?” Joanne asked Nancy when she arrived at the Grab-n-Go.

“The back of Matthew Spencer’s car,” Nancy replied with a wink. A grin spread across her face as she eyed Joanne’s dropped jaw. Matt was a catch. And he was on time. He pulled up in his mustang, got out and went to open the passenger-side door.

“Wait,” Joanne grabbed Nancy’s hand and pulled her around to the backside of the building where they could talk in private. “What the hell are you doing?” she demanded.

“Going to a movie,” Nancy said.

“I’m not your mother,” Joanne replied.

“You sure can act like one.”

“What did you say?”

“Nothing. Jeez, Joanne, I never knew you were the jealous type.”

Joanne furrowed her thick eyebrows for a moment then began rubbing the side of her head. “Just go. I hope you know what you’re doing.”

“I’m bagging myself a rich one.” Nancy smiled. “Did you know he plans on going to Yale in the fall?”

Joanne just shook her head, defeated. She let Nancy go.

Matt drove them past the city limits. Nancy marveled at the wide expanses of open land. She had never been out of Peoria. Nancy felt free from the confines of her county. The feeling of freedom inexplicable, entirely new and unordinary. She rolled down the passenger side window, extending her arm outside, she moved her hand against the wind to the rhythm of Muddy Waters playing on the radio. The night became darker and the stars brighter than Nancy had ever seen them before. She held her head out the window to stare at the endless eyes looking down on her. The landscape first became spotted with trees, then they hung in the landscape as

vastly as the stars carpeted the sky. Nancy checked her watch. They had only been driving for twenty-five minutes. Amazing one could get so far so fast.

“Where are we going?” Nancy asked.

“To a special spot,” Matt replied, taking his eyes off the road for a moment to look at her. “You’ll love it.”

“Somewhere you take all the girls?” Nancy tried to sound confident. She didn’t want to let Matt know how much the answer meant to her.

“You’re the only person I’d ever take here.”

“Is that so?” Nancy kept her eyes on Matt, who kept his eyes on the road. They looked the lightest shade of brown, like wet sand on a beach. Beautiful. But that’s not what mattered. Nor was the answer what mattered, even though it had been the right one. What mattered was whether or not Nancy had the ability to make it the truth.

The highway became narrow and windy. Matt drove with ease as the road turned and ascended a wooded mountain. At the top, he parked at the tip of the cliff, where the view of the serene forest seemed endless. He cut the engine and turned again towards Nancy, giving her his full attention.

“Do you know why I asked you out?”

Nancy shook her head.

“You’re in charge,” he said. “You know what you want and you get it.”

Nancy raised an eyebrow. “What else have you noticed?”

Matt broke eye contact for a second to look down. “Okay, you’re beautiful, but that’s not all I’m after.”

“Uh-huh.”

Matt sighed and moved in closer. “Alright,” he said. “I’m going to let you in on a little secret.”

“Now we’re getting somewhere.”

Matt sucked in his breath before announcing, “I’m going to be president someday.”

“That’s not a secret,” Nancy said. “That’s a pipe dream.” But Nancy knew that Matt had retained student body president all four years of high school. He had walked around the school’s campus shaking hands with kids from every grade and handing out sticks of gum with his name written on the wrapper. If people know you, they’ll vote for you, was his motto.

“Go ahead, laugh,” Matt said. “But it won’t be so funny when you’re first lady. It’s a lot of work y’know.”

“You’re a gas, Matt.”

“Hey, now, I’m a politician.”

Matt’s future seemed as bright as the stars above, and open-ended like the landscape that spread out before them. He might not make it all the way to the white house, but he was a sure bet to get out of Peoria.

Mrs. Breeze had Sunday’s off and used the free time to spend with her daughter. Nancy went to the store in the afternoon and bought two Swanson Salisbury Steak dinners, stopping by Joanne’s on her way home to heat the meals in an oven.

“How’s Matt?” Joanne asked as Nancy freed two aluminum trays from their cardboard cages.

“Now Joanne, don’t be bitter,” Nancy said. She turned the oven to 425 degrees and placed the trays inside.

“How’s Matt!” Joanne gave Nancy her biggest smile then pointed to the oven. “You know, you’re supposed to preheat that.”

“He’s doing very well, thank you.” Nancy took the egg timer off the counter and set it for twenty-five minutes. “And, my cooking is just fine, too.”

Joanne filled Nancy in on all the gossip that she had been missing out on. Not too much to report, which meant that everybody was most likely saying nasty things about Nancy that Joanne didn’t care to repeat. Mary had dumped Lou Thomas, which surprised everybody because he was a football player. Rosa accepted Bobby’s pin, didn’t see *that* one coming, Joanne rolled her eyes. Lou Davis got caught making out with his cousin, pretty funny. But for the most part everyone was driving Joanne up the wall, as usual. Also, John had asked Joanne out on a date, but Joanne held no feelings for him, and couldn’t decide how to answer. She wanted Nancy’s opinion. The timer rang. Nancy removed the two dinners from the oven, wrapped them in foil and picked them up off the counter.

“John’s a cutie,” she said. “It’s a no brainer.” She gave Joanne a hug with her free arm and turned to leave. “Thanks, hon.”

Mrs. Breeze sat in her usual spot when Nancy returned home, *Lassie* had just started and poor Timmy was in trouble again.

“Here, Ma,” she said handing over the lukewarm metal tray and taking a seat on the floor next to the recliner. “Salisbury steak in a box. Pretty nifty, huh.”

“Shush,” Mrs. Breeze replied and ate her dinner. When the commercials came on, Mrs. Breeze turned to Nancy with tears in her eyes. “You really do listen.”

“Sure.”

“To everything?” Mrs. Breeze turned off the television. Nancy was shocked. Timmy hadn’t been rescued yet. The black and white characters on the screen had not returned to their model lives. The room was completely dark without them.

“Of course, Ma.”

“You’re still captain of your ship?”

Nancy nodded. “Nobody’s steering for me.”

“They’d better not. Not yet, anyway. You know, your father took the wheel of my ship before he made me first mate.”

“I know,” Nancy said.

“I trust you know the end of that voyage, as well.”

She did. What a ridiculous thing to ask. The end was the beginning of Nancy’s life. As her eyes adjusted to the new lighting, or lack of it, she picked at her lumpy mashed potatoes. They didn’t seem any more progressive than this tired conversation, the one that always led to the question that plagued Nancy. Feeling superior to her supper and clear-headed without the distraction of collies, Nancy decided to try and take a step forward.

“Do you regret it?” she asked. “Do you regret me?”

“No,” her mother replied. “But you can have a child without all,” Mrs. Breeze waved her hand around, “this.” She turned the television back on. Timmy had been saved, and the happy family celebrated. “I simply demand something better for you, you understand?”

Nancy understood, but Matt didn’t. They were at their usual spot, doing their usual thing when Matt decided to take his own step forward. He slid his hand down Nancy’s skirt, undoing the buttons with his thumb. Nancy pushed him off.

“Maybe we should go home now,” she said.

“It’s only seven-o’clock,” Matt replied.

“Proper ladies are home by seven-thirty.”

“Then, since when are you a proper lady?”

Nancy punched Matt lightly on the arm.

“I’m kidding. I’m kidding,” he said, kissing her again.

Nancy pulled away. “I’m not.”

“What’s wrong, babe?”

“I’m not ready yet,” Nancy lied.

“You don’t love me?”

“I do. You know I do. I’m just scared.”

“Of what?”

“The consequences.”

“Don’t be.” Matt’s voice was soft and reassuring. “I’ll take care of everything and anything.” He ran his hands through her hair and gently kissed her forehead, eyelids and nose. “I’ll hold you tight and love you forever. I promise.”

Nancy had made a promise to her mother. There were two unspoken agreements that Nancy learned long ago. One: Never mention Mr. Breeze. He had “gone out to sea” one day, which really meant that he had left them for good. Who could blame him? Their wedding used the same adjective as the house they had to take out a mortgage on, shotgun. Two: Nancy’s life must display perfection. This might make up for the life Mrs. Breeze had lost. But to do this Nancy needed Matt. The best route in Peoria for her to navigate, the only route she saw to get

out. Nancy had seen the whole county and nothing on television even remotely resembled it. To live *that* life, whichever one it turned out to be, she needed to get out.

Summer passed. Nancy had too much fun being in love to notice anything else that happened, or did not happen, outside of her relationship. Relating nothing, she left it to the Beaver to notice the SOS atop the sinking ship in the social waters that followed sitcom fantasy. It wasn't until fall when Matt went off to Brown that she noticed, first the changes in the leaves, then the changes in her body.

She went to Joanne first.

“You need to call him.”

Nancy didn't want to say it. It seemed to her that until she let the words out, it wasn't true. “I have.”

“What does he say?” Joanne asked.

“He's out.” Nancy replied.

“What?”

“That's what his roommate says.”

“Every time?”

Nancy nodded.

“Well, I didn't want to have to say this,” Joanne said. “But I knew I would. I told you to stay away from him.”

“I thought you were jealous.”

“God, you're clueless!” Joanne shouted. She looked furious. Nancy couldn't understand why. “You dug your own grave, go lie in it.”

Nancy knew that she had only one option left. The thought of it made her vomit, but perhaps that was the morning sickness.

“Mom, may I please talk to you?” Nancy asked standing in the doorway between the bathroom and the living area.

“Shh!” was the response. Nancy gathered her courage as she awaited the fateful commercial.

“What is it, dear?” Mrs. Breeze asked as the television switched from *Father Knows Best* to advertisements for dish soap.

“Say, what if the captain gets tired?”

Mrs. Breeze shut off the television. She gave Nancy a grave look and said, “The ship sinks.”

“What if the captain demotes to first mate?”

Mrs. Breeze looked at Nancy’s hand. “I don’t see any life saver around.”

“But what if he promised-”

“I don’t want to hear about any lost voyages, Nancy. Is that clear?”

It wasn’t. But Nancy didn’t know what else to say. She didn’t know if her mother even understood what she tried to tell her. She didn’t know how to say, I haven’t had my period for two months and I’m throwing up every morning now, but make it sound nice. So she told her mother that she was going to the library, turned and walked out.

Freshmen year once seemed like the height of misery. Nancy now recalled it in fairy-tale hues. She would be a sophomore soon, but what kind of sophomore? Certainly not any of the ones her mother watched on television. No sweet-sixteen episode had ever starred a pregnant

protagonist. Nancy Breeze, the pilot that never aired. Another eternal resident of Peoria, where there were no white picket fences, no forts hidden in the leaves, hardly any trees in which to build them. And the dogs never saved anyone; they only snarled and barked, locked by their poles and chains. The few patches of grass that managed to grow from the hard, cracked dirt were yellow instead of green. That's when Nancy realized it. She didn't know if those other lawns were green. But Peoria stood full of breathtakingly painful color.