

LEE GOODMAN

*A Girl Like Summer*

This is what he said. He said, "Would you do me the honor of dinner on Saturday." Those very words. Except maybe he had said, "having dinner." Or, "joining me for dinner," instead of just dinner. And he might have actually said the word, date.

Yes he had. He had said the word, date. Summer Raney remembered this because as she and the boy had stood there by the soccer field, and she could see the long-legged girls in the distance zooming around the oval, their pony-tails swinging, Summer had tried to understand what this boy was asking in a way that made sense. But there was that word right in the middle of it. Date. And so there was no sensible way to understand it. He had asked her out.

"Wait till I tell my dad," she thought. She tried remembering what she had said back to the boy: "Sure," or, "Okay," or, "I'd like that." She tried it now. "I'd like that," she said, looking around first to make sure nobody could hear. The words sounded unfamiliar, and in fact her voice sounded unfamiliar, and so she was sure that that wasn't what she had said. Maybe she had just nodded. Anyway, he'd gotten the answer because then he had said, "Great, I'll look forward to it," and she had been left standing on the sidewalk, watching through the cyclone fence, as his muscley calves sprinted him back to his team.

Summer grabbed the chain-links of the fence, both hands raised above her head, and she kind of slouched there, watching them practice. Other girls did this every day. They'd dangle against the fence laughing and calling out to their boyfriends: "great legs," or "look at the buns on that one." Summer didn't call out though. She just watched while they kicked the ball up and down the field. She tried to keep an eye on her boy, but her eyesight wasn't very good, and they all looked similar in their uniforms. They all looked like her boy.

"Nice legs," she said once, but not loud enough for anyone to hear.

That night, when she told her dad, he said, "What's his name?"

Summer said she didn't know.

"How do you know him?" her father asked.

“Math class,” Summer said, but then she remembered it was homeroom, because boys like this boy aren’t in math classes with Summer. But Summer could see her father liked it that she knew him from math class, so she didn’t correct herself.

In homeroom the next day he wasn’t there, but another boy was, and Summer realized she had her boy mixed up with this other.

Later, at her locker, a voice said, “I’ll need your address.” She turned, and there he was. She tried to get a good look at him this time so she could pick him out better on the soccer field, and so she could describe him to her parents. He had sandy hair, and it was curly, and it looked like he was shaving already—his cheeks had that look. He wasn’t big or small, or fat or thin. But he looked strong. His arms looked just like the calves she’d seen on the soccer field. That big.

“Your address,” he said again.

“Fifteen-oh-five Spenser Street.” She said this looking at his left ear. The hair wasn’t shaved at the side of his head like a lot of boys have. It was just a normal haircut. Kind of short, but a little mussy. She liked it. She liked that it wasn’t shaved, and she liked that it was ragged a little bit.

“You’re Summer Raney, right?”

Hearing her name in his deep, boy’s voice surprised her. She liked the way he talked. His words kind of rolled into each other, all smoothed out with no angles or corners or lonely open spaces between. “Summer,” in his voice, was round. It was like a soccer ball he might tap up the field in a careless loping gait, quick without seeming hurried. She looked at the mouth the words had come from. He had a moustache she hadn’t noticed before. It was trimmed instead of bushy, but it certainly didn’t have that wispy look like boys who just hadn’t shaved for the first time yet. His lips were parted a little, and she could see one of the front teeth was broken. A little triangle was missing where it should have met up flat against the next one. Summer liked that. She wondered if there was some way to get him to say her name again, but couldn’t think of anything. There was a movie she saw once where the man and woman were in bed. The woman was Russian, and she kept telling the man, “Say eet agaain,” and he’d say her name, and she’d laugh and hug him and kiss him each time. “I laave to hear you say eet.” Summer caught herself thinking this, and she giggled.

“I’ll pick you up around six,” the boy said.

“How do I know you?” Summer asked. It came out louder than if she had planned to say it. In fact, if she had planned to say it, she wouldn’t have. But sometimes words just came without her thinking about them. She put a hand over her mouth and giggled, then she chanced a look at him, and for an awful millionth of a second, their eyes met, and he was smiling, and she giggled harder until she needed to put her head into the open locker pretending to look for something. “Found it,” she said, reaching in and pulling a book from the jumble.

“I’ve just seen you around,” the boy said.

“I’ve seen you, too,” Summer said, but maybe she hadn’t seen him. It felt like a good thing to say though—I’ve seen you, too—and Summer was pleased with it.

“Saturday,” he said, “six o’clock.”

On her way home that afternoon, Summer hung on the fence alongside the soccer field. She spotted her boy. He was sweaty and red-faced. “Lookit those legs,” she said quietly, and she looked around in case anyone had heard.

“Did you ask his name?” her father asked, and Summer admitted she hadn’t.

“Why not?”

Summer just shrugged.

“Well for Christ’s sake,” he said. He had the newspaper open on the coffee table. There was a full-page ad announcing the grand opening of the new store, Sports Authority.

“Daddy,” Summer said, “don’t snap at me.” She dropped beside him onto the couch and put her head against his shoulder. “I forgot. I didn’t know how.”

Raney worked his arm out from under her and put it across her shoulder. He considered telling her he hadn’t meant to snap, he was just upset about the ad. It would have been mostly true. He hadn’t meant to snap, and he was upset about the ad, but it would have felt like a lie, because he was also upset about the date. He said, “But you know him from math class.”

It wasn’t a question, so Summer didn’t have to admit she really didn’t know him at all. “I’m so nervous,” she said, “what will we talk about?” She turned and lounged with her back against her father

who had to brace his feet against the sofa arm not to be pushed over. She seemed to have no sense of her size. She still flounced onto the furniture, or into his lap, with her little-girl giggles. “Rub my feet,” she’d say, dropping them in his lap, and once her heel had caught him where it counts, and he had buckled forward, trapping her feet while he waited out the warm ache that clawed up from his groin into the kidneys. “Sorry, Daddy,” she had giggled, and puffy white feet with pink toenails wiggled in his lap.

He was concerned about this date. “What does he look like?” Raney asked, this being as close as he could get to what he really wanted to know. What he wanted to know was why this boy would ask her out. Either he was up to something, or he had some issues of his own. (Issues: that was the word now. Summer didn’t have problems, she had issues. Weight issues, issues of learning ability, cognitive ability, social interaction.)

“He has a moustache,” Summer said, “and sandy hair.”

“And is his moustache tidy or messy,” Raney asked, hoping Summer would say it was messy. A messy moustache and stringy hair with dandruff, and a white shirt with a few buttons missing where it stretched over his big soft belly.

“Tidy,” Summer said, “and he’s on the soccer team.”

“Intramural?”

Summer rolled her eyes. “Daddy,” she said, “Intramural isn’t a team. I mean a real team. With uniforms.”

This was bad news because soccer players had to be fit. And usually intelligent. This guy was up to something.

On Thursday, Raney drove over to Sports Authority. It was a typical big-box retailer that wouldn’t hesitate to sell at a loss to get you into the store and obliterate the competition. Raney walked around fingering price tags on sleeping bags and tents. They made the prices at Mountain Country, Raney’s store, seem exorbitant.

At three o’clock Raney drove to the high school. He parked across the street and watched the students scattering out the doors. Summer was there. She left the building with the crowd and stood for a minute talking with a girl who was slender and tall. Raney assumed this was the tutor she had been working with. Summer laughed. She made a terrible face when she laughed. Her nostrils wrinkled back and she squinted, mouth gaping with her tongue

arched up inside, while she looked all around herself. It looked like she was gagging. Raney had wondered a thousand times how to mention this to her, but he'd never done it. How do you tell someone they laugh wrong? Summer especially, because for all her problems, had been born with a bubbly disposition. You can't take someone's laugh away.

Summer and the tutor parted, and Summer walked away with her usual slouching posture. She wore a daypack Raney had let her select from the store, and it looked strangely small against the expanse of her back. "Stand up straight," he wanted to say. He had said it: "Stand up straight, don't stare at the sidewalk. Interact with your surroundings." And Summer would straighten up, look ahead, and step forward like she was crossing a minefield. She wasn't a good walker.

Summer stopped at the soccer field and reached up with both hands to hold onto the cyclone fence. She sort of swung there, anchored at the feet and hands, with the rest of her bouncing from side to side. The soccer team ran up and down the field. Raney considered going over to watch with her. He could put his arm around her and they'd stand watching the team, and maybe this date of hers would come over to get introduced. It was a nice thing to imagine. Summer and the boy would smile shyly at him, and at each other. There'd be introductions and a comical attempt at hand-shaking: the boy would stick a few fingers through the wire mesh, and Raney would just brush his own fingers against them, and it would feel intimate compared to the full-handed grapple if there were no fence. And from that little intimacy Raney would know he was a nice boy. He was the sort you could clap on the shoulder on a Saturday night and say, "You kids have fun tonight."

The boy didn't come to the fence though, and Summer, after hanging there a couple of minutes, resumed her cumbersome walk home. Raney crossed the street and watched through the fence. There was no equipment manager that he could see, no chubby benchwarmers or pear shaped fullbacks or slump-shouldered mascots even. Just bright-eyed, athletic boys who, at seventeen and eighteen, owned the world. He watched them prancing the field, sweating and pounding, and Raney knew again what he had known from the start. One of them was up to something. Never mind that he and Deb had always told Summer how someday there'd be a nice boy who could

see her good heart. These were cocky, intelligent boys, like Raney had been, and he knew for a fact that if they looked at her twice, it was only to gawk.

Two of the soccer players hurtled towards the ball from opposite sides. They ran like stallions: sweat and power and mindless fury, and Raney anticipated, for just the thrilling fraction of a second, their debilitating collision. He saw, in that fraction, teammates bunched around them, and screaming ambulances, and wheelchairs controlled with trembling fingers on a black knob. But one boy slid down, tapping the ball away with up-turned cleats, and the other lifted his legs in an airborne squat, and they sailed past one another while the coach yelled something Raney couldn't hear, but assumed was, "Good hustle."

Erin, Raney's full-time clerk, said, "So is Mountain Country going to be a sacrifice on the altar of that new temple to the consumer frenzy?" Erin liked to talk that way. She was just out of college and fit and wore flannel shirts that were always opened one button lower than a man would wear them.

Raney said that Mountain Country was in fine shape, and that they didn't have much to worry about from Sports Authority which was, more than anything, a seller of tacky athletic wear with a few golf clubs and tennis rackets thrown in. He told her that, but he didn't believe it. He'd already given up a huge share of business to the catalogue companies, and he couldn't afford to lose much more. "Well, here's wishing them a short and fruitless existence," Erin said, and she went into the back room to open some cartons.

Raney would miss it when he closed. On the wall behind the counter he had taped up hundreds of photos customers had sent in from their expeditions: summits, class-5 rivers, Asian jungles. He'd miss the gear, and the topo maps, and the customers with their blistered cheeks. And he'd miss his clerks who, like Erin, worked there for the discounts and the connections, and were always leaving for two or four months to do a climb or a trek or a crossing. He'd been like that once. He used to work construction, then he'd quit and go on a wilderness trip somewhere, then he'd fit in a semester of school, then construction again. One year, before fall semester started, he and his girlfriend, Deb, hitched to Washington and crossed the Cascades, east to west. They hiked topless in the high crystal air

that rattled with cicadas, and they camped and made love and conceived alongside a glacial lake in which they could see a reverse image of all the stars in the sparkling mountain sky.

They waited until after the birth to get married, lest anyone think they were doing it for appearances. They named the baby Summer, because she was born in summer, and she would be their summer. Their free spirit. At the wedding, which was outdoors, Deb and baby Summer each wore a crown of daisies.

Raney still tried to fit in a weekend hike sometimes, but it was hard with Summer. Bringing her along was always a disaster, but leaving her was worse because Summer had an accusing way of using all of her considerable size to sulk.

Erin came from the back hugging half a dozen water bottles against her abdomen, her small breasts resting above in their breezy flannel tent. "Shall I display these?" she asked, and Raney, looking at the breasts, thought that yes, he would like that very much.

"With the others," he said, and Erin went to set the bottles up on the shelf. Raney had seen the same ones at Sports Authority for half the price. Raney wondered what he would do when Mountain Country closed. He didn't need the money because Deb had finished college and medical school while he, sometimes with Summer in day-care, but often with her in his backpack or crawling around underfoot, started Mountain Country. She worked there on Saturdays now. He had started paying her once she was in her teens. The regulars knew Summer and accepted her slow-motion service and her mistakes. But Raney always wondered about newcomers. What must they think walking into a store like Mountain Country, and seeing a girl like Summer instead of the lithe, bright-eyed ones like Erin?

On Saturday night the boy blew his horn in the driveway.

"Don't move," Raney said. Summer was wearing a high-waist dress with a ribbon under her breasts. Raney had wanted her to wear her cable-knit sweater. It was big and loose and it looked natural on a big girl, but Summer ignored him and had dressed herself to look like a decorated egg.

"What if he leaves?" Summer said.

"Don't move."

They heard the car door, then the doorbell. Raney answered it. "I'm Raney, Summer's father." The boy was average looking and strong. He had that nicely trimmed moustache. Raney grabbed the boy's hand and squeezed, but the boy didn't squeeze back, and his eyes avoided Raney's. But he wasn't shy and he wasn't slow—Raney could tell this in the way the boy surveyed him, apparently surprised that Summer's father wasn't fat and bald and dismissible.

"My wife is at the hospital," Raney said, curious if the boy would express concern, but he just nodded, and Raney understood that whatever he was up to, this boy needed Summer as anonymous as possible. "She's a doctor," Raney said. He steered the boy into the living room, and into the Scandinavian recliner that was Raney's favorite.

"Sandy," the boy said when Raney asked his name.

"Do you have a last name?"

"Fletcher. Do you have a first name?"

This could have been said with a smile, a joke by a confident boy, but it wasn't, and Raney thought of telling this Sandy Fletcher to get the hell out. He wanted to. He wanted to grab him by the shirt collar and haul him out of the recliner. But there was Summer on the couch, large and baffled, seeing only an evening of enchantment. Raney knew that someday, in the merciful future, this phase would be over. Summer would have no muscley calved soccer players. What she would have instead was a small house near her parents where they could help with bills and repairs, and there would be her job at Mountain Country, if Raney could keep it open. She would be invited to her parents' parties, she would have her collection of stuffed animals and her daily routines: her latté that took forty-five minutes to make, her television shows, her movies, her movie posters that she had negotiated for with the theater manager. She would have a quiet little life that would fill up with these things, and Raney believed she would be happy in that life. But first she had to get past this Sandy Fletcher and all the false hope he represented. So Raney didn't throw the boy out on the sidewalk, much as he wanted to. He ignored the question about his first name though, and he said the boy's name aloud, slowly: "Sandy Fletcher," so the boy could understand it would be written down on a notepad the moment they were out the door. "Sandy Fletcher," as he would say it on the phone to a police dispatcher.

Summer didn't say anything all the time Sandy was there. She sat smoothing her dress and jiggling one leg. Raney could see excitement in her half smile. She thought this was romance. She was Juliet. She was Scarlet O'Hara.

"We should go," Sandy said.

"Well," Raney said. "Be good to our Summer."

"Okay," Sandy said, but Raney could tell he hadn't heard it, so he tried again because there was something he wanted Sandy to hear. He wasn't talking about Summer now. He was talking about Deb and himself. He grabbed Sandy's arm and turned him around as they stepped outside. "No, listen," Raney said, his eyes suddenly watery, "she's special to us."

Sandy Fletcher looked at Raney this time. Their eyes met, and Sandy seemed to consider for a moment before saying, without the arrogance, "She'll be home by ten-thirty."

"This is a nice car," Summer said.

"Thank you. It's my own. My folks helped a little, but I have to pay them back."

Summer was glad her dad had asked Sandy's name because she still hadn't seen him since two days earlier at her locker. Sandy. Like Orphan Annie's dog. Easy to remember. "Well it's very nice," Summer said, meaning the car, or his name, she wasn't sure which. Sandy seemed pleased. He patted the dashboard.

"My dad thinks you're in my math class," Summer said.

"Oh, god."

Summer giggled. "And I thought you were in my homeroom because I had you mixed up with someone else."

"I see."

There was a sweet smell in the car. And lime. "What's that?" Summer said.

"What's what?"

"After-shave! Is it after-shave?"

"I guess," Sandy said, and Summer said she liked after-shave, even though her dad didn't wear it, but she wished he would, except with his beard he didn't shave anyway. And she giggled. Then she giggled again because she was nervous, so she decided she wouldn't say anything more, she'd just let him talk. But he didn't. He just drove, and then they were parked outside the steak house, but Sandy still did-

n't say anything, and didn't even get out of the car. He just stared out the windshield, fiddling with the car keys.

"Oh, this looks lovely," Summer said, just to say something.

"Look, this might be a bad idea," Sandy said, "maybe I'll just take you home."

"No," Summer said, and she wiggled her shoulders, settling back into the comfy seat of his nice car. "I'm having a lovely time." And she was. But who could blame poor Sandy for thinking she hated him when she had hardly said a word for the whole drive. She had almost ruined the date. But it wasn't too late: "Here we are," she said, feeling happy in her beautiful dress, with the sweet smell of lime filling his car like moonlight, or cigarette smoke, or the sound of waves, filling up a romantic scene in some movie. "Let's go in," she said, "you can open my door."

Inside the restaurant Sandy knew people. Other boys came to the table and Sandy introduced them, and they all shook hands with her. A few of them were on the soccer team. It was the kind of restaurant with big tv screens, and everyone Sandy knew was in one section with a fence—a split rail fence like on a ranch—right there in the restaurant around their section. Sandy excused himself and went around to the other tables, shaking hands with the dates of all his friends. Summer peeked over as these girls were introduced. She hoped they'd peek at her too, exchanging a shy grin, all of them swept together into this romantic evening. Maybe there'd be a chance later for all the girls to be together, whispering about their dates, giggling. Summer wouldn't say anything of course, but she'd like to stand and giggle with them when they giggled.

But most of the girls, when they got introduced, didn't look around at all. A few of them barely even looked at Sandy. This was rude, and Summer would have liked to tell them so. Then one girl did look around. Her eyes met Summer's for just an instant, but she wasn't grinning or giggling, or even smiling. Instead, her eyes were watery and her big cheeks were splotched with red, and on her top lip there were little drops of perspiration that sparkled on the feathery darkening of her faint moustache. "Smile," Summer wanted to tell her. It's what her dad would say to this girl: "When you smile, people don't see a big girl, they see a happy girl."

On their way home, Sandy still didn't say anything. Summer didn't say anything for a long time either, but then without meaning to,

she said, “You know what my nickname was when I was little? At school? Rainy Summer. Instead of Summer Raney. I think that’s funny, don’t you?”

When Raney sat in his Scandinavian recliner he could smell the aftershave. He tried washing the leather, but it was still there, perfumey and sweet, getting onto his hair and his shirt, and deep up into his nose. Raney washed his hair in the morning, but even at work the smell was there with him, stronger than the ski waxes and the leather of the new telemark boots.

Summer had come in and gone to bed. “Yes,” she had said when Raney had asked if she had a good time. But that was all. Deb had gone upstairs, and with a gentle, plaintive voice that came drifting down to Raney like a warm mist, she talked her way into Summer’s room.

When Deb came down again, after midnight, she stood in front of him, distantly sympathetic he thought, like the physician addressing the family. He knew pretty well what she’d say. A contest of some sort. Fattest, or ugliest, it was unclear. Watching his wife speaking, confirming these things, Raney smiled at the similarity between mother and daughter. They had mannerisms in common: they both looked up to the left when they paused to think, they both rolled their lips in. In Deb’s narrow face you could see origins of some features of Summer’s. Deb’s cute upturned nose: Summer had it too, but on Summer it was large and porcine. Just a quirk of genetics. A bad sperm or something, but nothing with a name. No syndrome or disease. Nobody had ever said, disability. Or deformity. She was just a slow learner with a weight problem.

Deb sat down on the piano bench and pushed tears away with the heels of her hands. “Come snuggle,” Raney said, patting the couch cushion, and Deb moved over to curl against him.

“I knew it was something like this,” Raney said.

“I wanted to believe it,” Deb said.

Raney laughed a short humorless laugh. He had wanted to believe it too, but he had known. Not that knowing had done him any good. He could have forbidden her going, but what reason would he have given her: We lied; no normal boy will want you? So instead Raney had let her go, let her believe that strong, handsome soccer players might want to hold her hands and give her kisses.

“I’m going to bed,” Raney said, and he kissed Deb on the top of her head. When he stood up, Deb tipped over on the couch, and she lay there with knees pulled up and her hair everywhere and she looked tiny and fragile to him. That was the odd thing, because she was anything but tiny and fragile in her character. She was strong and sure, the all around opposite of Summer. Raney always envied Deb’s certainty about things. She knew what she knew, and she knew it with a doctor’s intellectual arrogance. She was hell to argue with, but lying on the couch in her crumpled-up position, and the mussed hair, and her eyes red and puffy—at least that’s how he imagined them because they were hidden to him—she looked small and fragile. He went and got the afghan to spread over her, thinking that later he’d come back and carry her sleeping to bed.

“Mmm,” she said, but then she sat up and said, “No, I don’t want to get too comfortable.” She folded the afghan. “I have rounds in the morning.”

Raney imagined a scene from Summer’s date: all the boys are scurrying from table to table, consulting, passing slips of paper, and Summer gets up from her table trying, in that desperate moment, to look like a normal girl. Her free hand pressed against her stomach to still the jiggle as she walks, and with eyes locked ahead she pauses a moment to organize legs and arms and eyes for a dignified trip to the rest room.

Raney tinkered with this picture. He added details that he collected from Summer: he watched her face at home, then added the little sideways twist of her lips when she was thinking. He hadn’t realized before that she brought her feet down flat when she walked instead of heel-first like most people. He added that.

In free moments at his store, or in his car, or after Deb was in bed, Raney would give up to it. He would sigh heavily, expelling from deep inside himself the jittery tension that came from trying to fend off this image. The scene would form, everything still in its place, and he would get a strangely peaceful feeling before setting to work tinkering with it, trying to change something in the scene, trying to get it right. Raney entered the scene himself; he would wait by the door of the rest room while Summer walked her clumsy walk toward him, but there it ended. He never knew what to do when she reached him.

They had had her in to see specialists when she was little, but they never got any answers: “Just a big girl,” the doctors said. “Her unique physiology.”

“But what can we do?” Raney would ask, and the doctors shrugged and said, “not a thing.”

“Idiots,” Raney called them, but not to their faces.

And when she started bringing notes from school, when he and Deb got called to a meeting at which, just sitting in, was so-and-so from the special-ed staff, Raney lost his temper because, he told them, he didn’t know it was a crime now if you start your little girl in first grade without having taught her to read. Idiots.

“Raney,” Erin said. She stood leaning against the door jam of Raney’s office. She was the kind of girl he had gone for at that age. Like Deb. Trim and smart and physical, and a little cynical with natural, unintentional, sensuousness. She held a box of energy bars and her flannel shirt was open, as usual, to show the tanned vee of her neck and chest. She had ideas. She could run the store if she had to. Could probably do a better job than Raney himself. She had a trip coming up. Central America, if he remembered right, where she would hike in a halter-top and camp in the rain-forest, and sleep with the boys she met on the way, and come home with native weavings of the quetzal that she’d want to hang on the rough wooden walls of the store. “Should I display these?” she asked, and Raney thought that with so much going for her, with jobs and travels and schools waiting for her, and with all those anonymous boys stacked up in her future like cans in a pop machine—boys to take her on dates and give her kisses and sleep with her in the muggy night of the Costa Rican rain forest—she could at least decide for herself what to do with the god-damn energy bars. And he told her so.

“Fine,” she said. “Be an asshole. See if I care.”

Raney drove over to the soccer field. He watched as they drilled and scrimmaged. He watched Sandy, who clearly wasn’t a star, running and sweating and doubling over occasionally to catch his breath. Sometimes Sandy was in the right place and the ball came to him, sometimes not. Raney left, and the next day he came later and watched the end of practice, then he watched the parking lot, and noted the car Sandy drove. He came another day and got the license

number. He found out where Sandy lived. Raney carried a schedule of the soccer games.

Raney never actually planned to do anything to the boy. He was just researching him. Becoming an expert, the way a climber studies the peak from all angles, and a kayaker walks the bank alongside the rapids. But one day, rearranging the snorkeling section, he took a spear gun out to keep in his car, the way a climber who isn't thinking of getting lost or injured keeps a signal flare in the zipper pocket of his pack.

Raney sold his recliner. It was padded leather with a seat and headrest formed of contoured wood. The footstool was separate. He sold that, too.

"But you loved your chair," Deb said.

"It stunk," Raney said.

At soccer scrimmage one day, Sandy scored a goal. He tilted his head back and shouted, "All right," and put his arms up in conquest. This, Raney thought, was probably the boy's reaction when the winners were announced at the restaurant: face turned to heaven as if receiving glory from above, because that's what those people believe—Sandy and the other boys. Teeth white, noses straight, and all of them showing in their excitement a certainty about their lives, a certainty that they would win games, go to good schools, and screw pretty girls. And to the parents and girlfriends who may disapprove of the dog show, they say, "No harm done, everyone has fun. The girl gets a nice dinner." And since the parents and girlfriends don't know how to imagine being a girl like Summer, or a father like Raney, they'll say, "well, it sounds mean to me," but then they'll laugh with that same certainty. Raney kept the image of the boy, face and hands turned to heaven, receiving grace and giving thanks. They, with their muscley calves and good minds and winning smiles, are sanctified in the blood sport of their dog-show date night. And the girl gets a good dinner out of it.

Erin was waiting on a customer, which meant listening to him brag. It was a man in his sixties, a fringe of white hair. He was a regular. In his speech there was a "vee" sound where there should have been a "W". "Dee" where there should have been a "th": "So ve're caught on dis ledge for huf de day." German or Austrian. Raney got a lot of both in the store, and a lot of Scandinavians, too. Outdoor people.

This man got more excited in his storytelling, and as Raney watched, he put his head back and his arms up, hands out, talking about finding the route, or the weather clearing, or some equally meaningless event.

They were all like that, his customers, and he was sick of their shallow, egotistical physicality. They were obsessed with doing things and going places Summer couldn't do or go to. Like they had an entitlement to their abilities and good health. And like he, Raney, had some obligation to keep providing them with equipment. "Well, that will end," Raney said out loud. Erin and the customer both looked at him, but Raney smiled and said, "just thinking."

Raney went to bed earlier now that he had sold the recliner. He just couldn't get comfortable on the couch. It took him awhile to fall asleep though. He lay there thinking about the date and the musky soccer player, and he thought about his customers too, the man with the white fringe. All the same breed, all of them acting entitled.

At the store, Erin stood with her back to him. She was bent over, using the little atomizer to spray the mossy rocks in the window display. Her waist was tiny and her dark hair fell smoothly down her head like water falling over a stone. "I'm closing the store," he said.

She turned toward him. There was the vee at her neck revealing, if she moved just right, the smooth contour of a breast, and her skin was tanned and freckled like Deb's had been that first summer, and all those early summers until she swapped it for the chlorotic skin of the hospital life. He missed that. He missed Deb's brown, sun-smelling skin and the unintended sexiness of how she used to dress.

"When?" Erin asked.

"Saturday."

They stared at each other a few seconds, then Erin stepped forward and hugged him, and said gently, the way you'd say it to someone whose dog was killed, "I'm so sorry."

"I'm sorry, too. Not much warning for you."

Erin brushed his apology away with a flip of her hand that said, you have problems of your own.

"Leave early on your trip," he said.

"No trip," she said.

"No trip? What do you mean no trip?"

She wouldn't tell him. He guessed though that it was about money problems. "I could loan—," he said, but he stopped, and Erin had to pretend she hadn't heard. He knew Erin would be okay. If she didn't go on her trip, she'd do something like run for Congress, or write a novel, or go to medical school.

In the restaurant scene, Raney's customers are there with the soccer players and their friends. They all watch as Summer makes her laborious journey to the bathroom. Raney, waiting by the bathroom door, steps to the side as Summer approaches him, and sends a spear through the boy's chest. Then he walks away into the sudden crystalline silence.

On Friday night Raney stood at the bottom of his stairs and called up to Summer. Erin was gone already; she had cried a little, and she had asked if there'd be discounts and could she get a few items, and Raney had said, helplessly, that he'd already signed something with the liquidator: no sales, no give-aways. No bargains. Business as usual until closing. Actually Raney hadn't even talked to a liquidator yet. This lie came out unintended, though, and he wondered why he hadn't just said, "sure, take whatever you need."

Summer came down the stairs. She had on a nightshirt she liked wearing to bed. It was short, and whenever she sat down and brought her legs up on the couch or propped them on the coffee table, there she was. He had tried telling her, "have some modesty," but she had just laughed and the laugh, to Raney, was repulsive, being so much like the laugh of a pretty girl who has discovered her power over boys. Raney had bought her pajamas, and he asked Deb to speak to her about modesty, but Summer still liked the nightshirt.

"Sit," he said, "I need to tell you something."

She sat, feet on the floor, hands on her knees.

"I'm closing the store."

Summer asked if he meant for good. He said, yes, he meant for good because it wasn't making any money, and he was sick of it. Summer didn't say anything, so he said, "What do you think of that?"

"Okay," she said.

Summer thought it seemed like he was bragging. He was all jolly. She didn't know what to think. She couldn't really see how it would

affect her one way or the other, except that she couldn't work there anymore. And she liked working there. People were nice. And she was good at it. She knew that. She had been there since she was a baby, and she could answer almost everybody's questions, and she was good at using the cash register. And she liked making displays. The rocks in the window, they were her idea. "I guess I can get a job someplace else," she said, and her dad said of course she could. She pulled her legs up on the couch. Her dad had told her not to do that, and sometimes she tried not to. But now she did it on purpose because she suddenly felt angry at him. He stood up and went into the kitchen.

"Tea?" he yelled.

"No," she said and she went upstairs to finish watching her movie. But she kept thinking about the store. She liked the smell of ski wax, and of the leather boots, and she liked all the posters, and the photos people sent. Some said, Dear Raney, or Dear Raney and Erin, but a lot said, Dear Raney and Erin and Summer, and they told about where they were and what they were doing. Summer had thought she was just going to keep working there when she graduated, except now she couldn't. She thought about the boy, Sandy. He had asked what she planned to do after high school. "Work at my dad's store," she had said, then she had told him all about the store, and he said he'd come in some Saturday and buy something. She still hoped he would, but now he couldn't because there wouldn't be a store. She'd miss it. Her dad always let her pick the music on Saturday, and whenever one of the customers said anything about it, her dad rolled his eyes and said, "You'll have to talk to Summer about it." That always made her laugh.

He had apologized. Sandy had. He had found her at her locker and said what a stupid thing it was for him to do, and he had walked to her next class with her, and that's when they'd talked about the store. Now he talked to her sometimes at school. But now if someone asked what she was going to do after high school, she'd have to say she didn't know. It made her angry because she couldn't think what else she'd do. She had thought once about being a nurse. "I could work with you," she'd said to her mother, but then her dad had said how nurses need to take science, and there's lots of math in science, and so she'd better work hard on math.

So she wanted to work at the store. Summer started crying and she didn't like crying, so this made her even more angry. And then, without planning to, she ran downstairs and she shouted into the kitchen where Raney was, "You're so selfish."

On Monday morning Mountain Country opened for business as usual. Except Erin wasn't there. Raney planned to call her, but kept forgetting. He thought about it again as he unlocked the door and stepped into the woody, waxy, leathery smell of the building. He had been so upset about that soccer player lately that he kept forgetting things. But now, Raney thought, he had wasted enough time thinking about that son-of-a-bitch with his prissy moustache. The problem with pond scum like the soccer player was that you're powerless against them unless you get right down on their level, and Raney wasn't going to do that. And he knew the best thing he could do for Summer was to give her a place to belong—the store—and set an example of self-confidence and dignity. She needed to just put the soccer player behind her.

Raney walked around the store getting things in order. He sprayed the moss and tidied the displays, and called to check on some merchandise he had ordered. These were things Erin usually did. She was good at it all, and it had annoyed him sometimes that she assumed so much responsibility there even though she wasn't staying long. That was the thing with the ones like Erin. Like the soccer player. Everything was too easy for them. They have no idea what it is to be a girl like Summer. Having to work so hard to find a place in the world. Erin was nice enough to Summer in the store, but it was a patronizing kind of nice. It was the kind of nice that, you could just tell, she'd go home and feel good about herself for being supportive and patient. That was it: she was using Summer to feel good about herself. Like the soccer player.

Raney sat at his desk and swiveled around a few times. He wasn't actually losing money yet, but with Sports Authority open, it wouldn't be long. He'd stay open though. Deb's salary would support the store. She wouldn't mind, and in fact she probably wouldn't even know. She had her hospital. He and Summer would have the store. Erin would come around sooner or later, all hurt feelings and indignant that he hadn't called. But by then too much time would have passed. The job would already be filled.