

Sugar River · Cori Jones

WHEN I WAS FOURTEEN and still a virgin I went to Sugar River. It was late June, heat building slow and wet in the late afternoon, me and Rita getting bored downtown. We were sick of walking through the clothes racks at Ames', smells of disinfectant and starch, all the big pink dresses. We were sick of all the fuzzipted boys in the park, most of them shorter than us, with all their whistling and carrying on. We'd been out of school maybe ten days and there was nothing left to do. One day we were hanging around the laundromat. We were reading magazines people left and Rita nudged me with her elbow. She looked at me hard. Let's go to Sugar River, she said. They got a couple bars there where nobody checks to see how old you are. Let's go and the hell with everyone, the hell with Tibbetts Corner. Let's get drunk.

I wasn't sure. Sugar River wasn't far from Tibbetts Corner, maybe ten miles down a few back roads. But my mother'd been talking about the place for years. Mill burned down and the whole town got crazy, the entire town of Sugar River. That's what she told me. When the social worker asked me why I'd never thought of going there before Rita came up with it, I told her I didn't want to go to a town full of crazy people. It's the truth. Besides, I'd heard about the trouble, which is what this is all about. Just a couple days before we went there I was watching my mother iron, her back to me as it usually was, little threads of steam floating up over her shoulders. She put the iron up and turned around. Lots of trouble last night over in Sugar River, she said. I knew she was wanting me to look at her, so I did. Bunch of men took a girl for a ride. They did things to her, beat her up, said my mother. Left her off all bloody down in the old mill lot. You ever go over there, you watch yourself, she told me that afternoon. I told the social worker my mother probably figured I'd already been there, her knowing as she did what people said about me because I hung around with Rita. All the social worker did was look at me.

Anyway I was there in the laundromat with Rita and some woman in front of us was folding dark clothes and Rita kept looking at me, eyes all glinty and narrow. Yeah, she said. She reached in her purse and pulled something out. Look, she told me. I saw twenty dollar bills, two of them. From my father, she whispered, I borrowed it. I figured she was lying,

but I didn't say anything. Last summer she was almost seventeen and twice that spring she'd got kicked out of school. And she wasn't afraid of anything, not Rita. So when she said we could hitch over to Sugar River and have some drinks and maybe meet some men, I figured I was safe with her. She said we should dress up, get ourselves pretty. That way everything would be easy.

So each of us went home to change, and we met later down at the west end of the park. Rita had on her shortest shorts, fat from her hips puffing out underneath. She had on her red blouse with no sleeves, fake gold buttons all the way down the front. Her hair was brushed so the roots didn't show and she'd put dark liner around her eyes, shiny brown liquid. I could see dots like brown bugs on her lower lashes. I had on my white dress, pale blue flowers all over it. Saint Flat-Chest, Rita said to me. I remember I felt little and thin next to her, but I knew my skin was tanned against the white. I knew my eyes were clear and dark and whenever I brushed my hair I'd think it was the nicest odd color, not brown and not red. We walked all the way out Tibbetts Street to the edge of town and we waited.

The wind was blowing in from the west and I remember how it whipped Rita's hair from her face as she put her thumb out, how her skin was pale in the light. There were little wrinkles around her eyes. When the old red station wagon stopped, the man let me get in first. When he asked where we were going, it was me who told him Sugar River. He stared at me and swallowed. I saw his forehead high and smooth, little lines across it. I thought he was maybe forty, maybe older. Rough town, he said. Then he laughed, all quiet and sad like he was telling a joke but there wasn't anyone but himself listening. But the river's nice, he told me. His eyes were brown, dark as mine. Next to me Rita slammed the door and he shifted into first. Around the gearshift his hand was large and tanned. He kept tapping the fingers of his left hand against the wheel. But he leaned himself warm against me as he drove and I knew he liked me. Though Rita was there with us, looking down in her lap and checking her pink nails, I knew he'd stopped for me.

Even now no one believes me.

No one believes me when I say he drove us straight there, when I tell how he pointed once to the fields and asked us if we noticed the land getting greener. That meant we were getting nearer the river, he said. He

said something about a flood plain and when I saw his eyes again I held on around she looked over at me. Her eyes were narrower than before. The try I'd never seen before. He let us off halfway down the hill just outside town. They look at me funny when I tell them we climbed out of the car and he looked at us and told us to take care of ourselves. Nothing about coming back later. He just turned around and drove back into the sun towards Tibbetts Corner. They don't believe we weren't scared. But it's true, I wasn't scared that day and Rita never is. Me and Rita watched his car get smaller, then she looked at me. He's all right, she said, but he's old. We looked down the hill at the green fields and the gray road that ran between them and the buildings on each side of it that weren't any color at all. That's Sugar River, Rita said. Those buildings. I saw how it all looked so still and sad, but off to the right, I saw the river, how it was the same color as the flowers on my dress. It must've been getting toward evening, the light in the west was pale. When we started walking I kept remembering what my mother had said about the girl, how some men had beat her up and left her off in that old lot. I kept looking at Rita with her blond curls and her brownlined eyes and this little secret smile that almost wasn't a smile at all. So I walked with her down the hill, on toward the neon sign at the bottom. It flashed a green martini glass, a pink olive in it. Underneath the glass pink and green letters flashed out *Sugar River Inn*. I've heard about this place, said Rita. Drinks are easy.

So we went in, her pushing me in front of her after she opened the door. I smelled stale beer, air moist and cool and dark. As my eyes made the place get lighter I saw empty booths, a bald man mopping the bar. In the back of the room was a jukebox. In the dark its lines glowed purple and red. Three men were standing in front of it, tall shadows in violet light.

It was Rita who bought the first drinks. She made me sit down at the booth next to the door. When she walked over to the bar I saw the men at the jukebox turn and look. When she walked back her hips were lazy and slow. She had a tall glass in each hand, foamy and sweet-looking. She sat down and handed me one. Sloe gin fizz, she told me. She raised her glass. To Sugar River, she said. When the glasses clinked I felt cool sticky liquid on my hand. I took one sip, then another, kept tasting cough syrup and ice. The men moved away from the jukebox, sat down in the back booth. They kept laughing. Rita drank hers down fast. I wasn't going to tell her how I'd never had anything but beer. Warm nights late my father forgets

how much he's had and I take a bottle. Not even the social worker knows I've done it since I was maybe twelve, how it's always calmed me, especially now since all the trouble. Rita was drinking fast and something buzzy and warm kept flowing through my ears and fingers and toes, but in my belly there was something cold.

What happened next isn't how Rita told it. She said I was drunk, not knowing what was happening, and that's why he took me off with him. But that's not it. I had maybe one more drink and the buzzy feeling was louder, but I wasn't drunk like Rita who had four empty glasses lined up in front of her in no time. She kept tapping her fingers on the table and looking over beyond the men. She kept smiling this crazy lopsided smile at the wall. I turned around and looked at the jukebox. White dots kept running down red and purple lines. When I shut my eyes they wouldn't go away. Rita said to me she figured there wasn't much sense to anything if we didn't get ourselves some men. She said come on kid, let's do a little dancing. She got up and I watched her. When she moved out onto the middle of the floor the men in the back booth got quiet. She kicked off her sandals and twirled around on her toes, circled up and down the row of booths. When one of the men put money in the jukebox the cold thing in my belly spread down. When he punched in a song I heard my father's rifle, the way he cocked it. He walked over to Rita and whispered something to her. She laughed. He put his arms around her waist and his hands moved down. His thumbs made little lines on her hips and the other men were walking toward them and the jukebox was moaning oooh baby baby. One of them touched Rita's hair, her blouse. When he twirled her around she looked over at me. Her eyes were narrower than before. The other one was standing still, holding a bottle, looking at my dress. My fingers were cold and the taste in my mouth was too sweet and then something threw a line of light across the floor. Oooohhh baby baby. I looked at the doorway, the man standing in it, asphalt and neon and moon behind him. It was the man who'd driven us here, he'd come back.

He told me his name was Daniel. He'd been thinking about me, he said. He told me this when we were still in the bar, him sitting across from me in the booth. As he stared at me my belly got warmer. I kept thinking about his eyes, the darkness of them, how they burned and soothed me at the same time. I wondered about my own eyes, if they looked as big and

dark as I usually thought they did. He didn't say anything about them, didn't even say I was pretty. He just told me I looked like I needed some air. Before we went outside I looked back at Rita. She was sitting on the lap of the first man who danced with her. One of the other two was holding her head back, feeding her beer. Her mouth was tight around the bottle. The muscles in her throat moved as she drank. I reached over on the seat and found her purse. I figured I'd keep it for her, better me than one of those men. When I started sliding out of the booth I saw the third one. He had ugly stick-out ears. He looked at us and for a second Daniel's face got tight, his lips and jaw. He kept grinning at Daniel and I kept seeing his ears and when he made a circle with his thumb and finger the cold thing in me came back. He stood very still, held his hand high in the dark air.

When Daniel took me outside I looked around for his car. Under the light everything was pink and black and green. I kept thinking about Rita, about the man with his hands on her hips. I told Daniel I couldn't go very far away. He said he knew. He said he just wanted to walk a little ways. I seemed like a nice kid and he felt like talking, he told me. All I could see up ahead was the road he'd driven us down. Just before it started to wind up the hill I saw a little path off to the left. Under the moon I could see pale sand, specks of pebbles. This goes down to the river, Daniel told me. Then he said the thing that no one believes: we don't have to go anywhere you don't want. I remembered what my mother had said about the girl and for just a second I wanted to go back to the bar and get Rita and go home. But I liked the warmth of him next to me as we walked, and I saw Rita's lazy hips and heard her telling me there wasn't much sense to anything if you didn't have a man. Above us were a round moon and darkness. I smelled the grass and the river beyond it. I'll go with you, I said.

When we got to the river he sat us down on a rock. Not even the social worker believes he just started talking about it, just like that, but I swear it's true. And I swear that most of the time I wasn't afraid of him, though he told me right off it was him who beat that girl up, him and those three men back there in the bar with Rita. That was the only time I got scared. I felt the rock, my curled fingers trying to sink into it. When I tried to move away from him he put his arms around me and pulled me close. Please, he said. I didn't bring you here to hurt you. But I was breathing fast and then both his arms were around me tight. The water rushed and

gurgled and under me the rock was cold and he was saying something about Rita. No one'll hurt your friend either, he said. She can take care of herself. The river sprayed drops and mist against my leg and I was crying a little. When I remembered her throat and hips I stopped. I leaned into his arms, the hard muscles of them. I took slow breaths so my voice wouldn't shake. And then I asked him why they did it to her.

For a while I thought he wasn't going to tell me any more. Finally he said something about his wife, that was all. My wife, he mumbled. She was sick. Then he was quiet again and I kept trying to see her, this woman married to him. I thought of a woman I saw once in the laundromat. She had a big wine-colored jacket on, ripped white lettering across the back. TIBBETTS CORNER CHIEFS, it said. Her hair was black, long wild curls, and she had a cigarette dangling from the corner of her mouth. What I remember even now is her eyes, how slanted they were. And they were lighter than the smoke that kept floating up in front of her face. She looked strong and mean and sick all at once.

She's been sick for years, Daniel went on. Not forty yet and she got no strength left. She gets sort of crazy sometimes and there's something wrong with her circulation, her veins. They're all purple and swollen and she walks like an old woman. When he told me this he started stroking my hair. With his fingers he made loose little curls, then he let them fall back on my shoulders. He told me she'd been crazy all week long, even the pills the doctor gave her couldn't keep her from yelling at him and the two boys, couldn't keep her from walking all through the house at night, sobbing to the walls. She knows there's nothing I can do for her, she's known it for years! When Daniel said this his voice shook more than mine. He let go of me and stood up. Sometimes when she does this I go off by myself and that's all right, he said. For years I've been coming here to the river, down to this rock. As he watched the water I watched the slope of his shoulders. Sometimes I sit here all night, he told me. But then some nights I get restless. Do you understand this? He turned to me. Do you? Under the moon he was tall and sad. I got up and stood next to him. He said he drove down to the Inn and the three of them were there. They're younger than me, he said. They can drink and run around all night. He made a sound like a laugh, short and harsh. I walked over to him, touched his arm. He didn't touch me back.

We were driving up Euclid Road, he told me, and she was hitching.

She was older than you, probably, but she had your eyes. And mine. He looked at me and I think we both smiled. I was breathing fast again and trying not to think of her under him, crying, her face bloody, maybe from his fists. But when he said that, about our eyes, it was better than having him or anyone else tell me I was pretty. Then he sat down on the edge of the rock. With his hands he cupped some water, poured it back. He said they all got her a little drunk but the whole thing was Jimmy Crary's idea. He was the one who had your friend on his lap, said Daniel. I remembered then that Rita and the neon and the beer and the men were maybe half a mile away, no more. I sat down and gripped my knees hard with my hands. We drove into the lot by the old mill, Daniel said. He said he heard her and Jimmy in the back seat, their breathing all jagged and quick. He said he heard her breathe out the word *no* maybe four or five times. And he heard Jimmy laughing, asking what's a girl got to grow up to but this. Then someone threw open the door and her and Jimmy were rolling around in the gravel. He said he watched all this, Daniel did. He watched Jimmy punch her hard while someone held her legs for him. He watched her white knees make little helpless jerks in the dark, watched someone else kneeling over her face, grunting. When he told me this he brought up more water with his hands, poured it over his face, his neck. He said he sat there gripping the wheel and in the night his wife got closer and closer to him. In the girl's white knees he saw her legs, sick and swollen. He heard her crazy yells, Daniel said, and he remembered how it was different with her when the boys were little, when he still worked steady shifts at the mill. He remembered this and the way she used to hold him, both of them sleeping through the night, and as he saw himself there, his hands against the wheel, he didn't know if he could keep up with his own breathing and then he was out of the car, pushing the others out of the way. He said when he did it to the girl he pulled at her sticky hair and there was blood all over his fingers. He said there were sobs from her and from him, laughter and puking somewhere around them.

I didn't say anything, didn't move. The moon made a line of light across the water and I kept looking at the waves moving through it. After a few minutes he told me they left her there. The men all stumbled back into his car and he drove them close to a mile before he started shaking. He said he stopped the car, told them he had a gun. He told them he'd blow their heads off if they didn't get out and walk. For maybe half the night he

drove alone up and down the back roads. He said he kept smelling his own sweat, the blood on his fingers, and after a while he had to turn around. When he went back to the mill lot to look for her there wasn't anyone there, just broken bottles, crushed tin.

Then he touched me again. He ran his fingers down my arm, and I got that strange feeling, cold and warm. He reached for me and put his arms around me, tighter than before. This time I let my face fall against his neck, and my breath made sighing sounds against his skin. When I finally got home, Daniel said, I held my wife for a long time. I held her with my head against her leg, and I kept running my fingers over the veins. I felt water dripping from his chin onto my hair. I wanted to be sure, he went on, that the blood was running through them, that's all.

I get mixed up on what happened next, and I'll never tell anyone all of it. He wouldn't let go of me. We weren't either of us moving, there was just our breathing and the flowing water and a faint breeze up from the south. Then somehow he was running his hands slow down my back and I was rubbing his shoulders. And he lifted my face up and kissed me. I didn't think about anything, not Jimmy Crary or the girl or the veins in Daniel's wife's legs. I just felt smooth rock, felt the water close to us as he pulled me across his lap. He whispered something I couldn't hear too well, something about never hurting me, and when he started rubbing my leg slow just above my knee I held onto his neck with my mouth. His hand went higher and everything was warm and all around us was water. He made circles with his fingers and though my eyes were shut I kept seeing flecks of moon. Higher he went and his fingers brought me into a circle of light that grew bigger till it flashed and flashed and I was falling somewhere dark and he was holding me. After that I wanted to curl my legs up and go to sleep against him but I just lay there. After a while he said we should probably be getting back. I was tired, I didn't want to go, but I remembered Rita's purse, I knew she'd be needing it. I held it in my hand and Daniel picked me up, carried me all the way over the path back to the road. My head was against his chest and he said *baby* but I couldn't keep my eyes shut. In the air I kept seeing neon and something else that hadn't been there before, loud red swirls that wouldn't go away. After we got closer to the Inn I saw the red bubbles, the two police cars they belonged to. I saw Rita, I saw the bartender, I saw Jimmy Crary and the other one and the third one, Ugly-Ears. They were standing with two policemen, right in front of the door. They looked like they were all waiting for us.

Later I found out about the police. While I was with Daniel down by the river, Rita went to look for her purse. When she saw it was gone she started screaming. She couldn't stop, her being so drunk. I don't know if the bartender called the police to get her purse back for her or just to get her out of there, but when the police got there one of them recognized Ugly-Ears because the girl they all did it to had gone and made a statement that afternoon. What happened after, there's not much to tell. All four of them, Daniel and the others, got put on trial over in Euclid. Each of them got five years. I read in the paper that the girl said that the older man, the one with the dark eyes, had tried to pull out her hair. She didn't say anything about Daniel driving around half the night, him going looking for her. But I guess she couldn't know that, since he didn't tell anyone but me and no one asked me to testify. The only thing I had to do was sign a statement saying I was fourteen years old and I got served liquor at the Sugar River Inn. Later they closed the place down.

All of this happened close to a year ago, and though no one ought to care, they talk anyway. I still have to go over to Euclid once a week and visit the social worker at the County Health Center. She asks a lot of questions, like did I think I was trying to punish myself or how does drinking make me feel or how did I feel when Rita showed me the money. I don't know. I never did see Rita much after that night. She got married this spring to Gary Charbonneau who drives a produce truck and is away a lot. Once, on a warm day in the park, I saw her sitting by herself, knitting. She's grown her hair out brown and she doesn't wear red any more, just pale loose dresses that don't hide her pregnancy. Once from a distance I saw her stand up, raise herself off the grass. After she did it she reached down and brushed at her leg like she needed to get something off. She brushed it for a long time, slow circular movements with both hands. I wanted to go over to her, tell her something, but she still doesn't believe I didn't steal her money so I just moved on.

This spring I started going with Gary Charbonneau's cousin Rick. I liked the slow hard way he kissed and I was sick of being a virgin so I let him do it to me. The first time it didn't hurt like everyone told me it would, it just felt dry and tight. A few nights ago when I was with him I didn't want to do it and he got mad, told me I was crazy and the whole town knew it. His fingers made bruises on my arms. He said he knew he wasn't the first one and I was an idiot to think some pussychasing rapist was better than

him. That night I made him give me a beer, then I left him. I walked all warm and buzzy down by myself to the laundromat. I like to sit in the old wobbly chairs, hear the gurgle of the machines, the hum they make when they're almost done. The place was empty, then one woman came in. I saw wisps of gray in her dark hair, folds of skin under her eyes. Though it was practically summer she had on dark stockings and I couldn't see her legs. I watched her pour in soap and bleach, dump in white towels, white sheets, lots of panties and slippers. She pushed the coin slot in hard and I heard the jukebox. I shut my eyes, tasted beer in my mouth. And he was with me again, Daniel was, drops of the river easing down his face. I felt the water and the light and I still feel them. If he ever comes back here he'll take me away with him. He'll drive back in his old red car and the lines on his face will be smooth and no one will ever know he did time. When it isn't quite dawn yet we'll leave here and go over toward the west. The hills will keep the sun from us and we'll find some deep field. He'll see my eyes and I'll open for him and our knees will be damp in the grass. Yeah I'll be his baby, my hips light as water, stars racing purple and red behind the dark.