

Blueberries

by Andrew Bowen

Cold water shocked Ernest's face. The evening with Gracie had his nerves hot and popping. She was his fifth date and the closest to his memory of Sadie in college so far.

He looked up at himself in the bathroom mirror with his mouth agape. Redness flooded his cheeks.

But she wasn't close enough.

His stomach gurgled. *Why didn't you order the tenders?*

Ernest lurched forward. Chunks of Chicken Florentine poured from his mouth and splashed against the marble sink basin. Pale vomit dribbled from the corners of his lips.

A toilet flushed behind him.

Ernest rubbed tears from his eyes and dabbed a paper towel against his mouth. The ranch dressing from his salad burned his throat.

Footsteps echoed behind him through the bathroom until they stopped beside him. Water rushed from the sink to his right.

The young man rubbed his hands in the stream. "You okay, man?"

Ernest opened his blood-shot eyes and looked toward the voice. Steam rose from the sink of the young man.

He leaned toward Ernest's sink and winced. "Whoa, looks like the chicken's bad." The young man snatched two paper towels from the wall dispenser, rubbed his hands dry and then took a shot at the trash can in the corner.

"Yeah! Three points." He saluted Ernest and grabbed the door handle. "Take it easy, dude."

Ernest cringed as the door closed. "Use a paper towel to open the door. Disgusting."

A pop echoed through the bathroom and brought Ernest's attention to the floor. Vomit dripped from the sink and splattered in white blots against his black dress shoes. He sighed and turned the

knob on the faucet. Water loosened the chunky paste from the sink and pulled it down the drain in a clockwise swirl.

Another drop landed on his shoe.

Ernest tore another paper towel from the dispenser and wiped the blots from his shoe in counterclockwise circles. The last wipe revealed a black sheen.

He stood up and looked at himself in the mirror. Water spots littered the front of his blue button-up.

Ernest lowered his head, squeezed his eyes shut and whispered, "If only she'd ordered the chicken tenders." He opened his eyes. The strain of his closed eyes had blurred his vision. "Sadie loved chicken tenders."

He slowly shook his head. A daydream emerged as his rippling focus became still. Honey mustard dripped from a golden chicken tender pinched between Sadie's fingers on their first date. The sauce sweetened the taste of his and Sadie's first kiss later that night.

He licked his lips. The nausea settled.

Ernest twisted the sink knob and washed his hands. Steam rolled against his cheeks like a warm kiss.

He smiled. *Maybe I'll just go home.*

The bathroom door closed behind him.

Gracie watched a football game at their table by the bar. The Steelers scored. She looked over her shoulder and nibbled on her bottom lip. Ernest turned away and scratched his ear. After a moment he peeked back at the bar. Gracie took a sip of unsweetened iced tea while watching the television.

Ernest's lips curled. "Sadie likes sweet tea."

A waiter carrying a tray above his head passed the bathrooms and turned the corner leading down a row of booths. Ernest glanced toward Gracie. She stirred her tea absently with a straw. He folded in his lips and lunged toward the waiter.

The waiter took another right turn toward the door. Ernest hunched behind him, patrons watching him as he passed.

A little girl with French fries stuffed in her mouth pointed at Ernest. "Mommy, what's he doing?"

The woman beside her smacked the girl's hand. "We don't point, young lady."

Ernest glanced at the girl and tried to match the waiter's pace.

His thighs burned. A few more steps and he'd be at the door. His stomach tingled.

He bumped against the waiter's leg.

The waiter stopped and looked down. "What the hell?"

Ernest looked around him as more patrons leaned out of their seats to watch. The attention spread like falling dominos until Gracie noticed others looking toward the front door. She turned and met Ernest's eyes.

She stood. "Ernest?"

He slipped on a wet spot on the hardwood floor.

"Jesus, dude what's wrong with you?" The waiter lowered his tray and knelt in front of him. Ernest groaned and rubbed his hip. Gracie walked toward him. His heart was racing. Each breath became shorter.

He scurried out of the door.

The cold night air hit his face. He shivered and grunted with each step away from the door. White puffs of frosty breath exploded from his mouth.

The Taurus was parked in front. *Must go faster, must—oh!* He rubbed his hip. His lungs burned as he sucked in more cold air.

"Ernest, are you okay? Hey wait up!"

He glanced over his shoulder. Gracie looked like she was tiptoeing over hot coals as she hurried toward him. The click of her heels pounded in his head. He winced and pushed himself closer to the Taurus.

A thin layer of frost covered the windshield.

His hands shivered and jumbled the keys in his pocket. "Come on, come on!"

The keys spilled out of his pocket and crashed on the dark, wet pavement. Hot pain shot through his side as he bent over after them. He gritted his teeth.

The spike of her heel snapped as the momentum carried her forward. "Ah, damn."

Ernest felt her hand on his back. He closed his eyes. His fingertips rubbed against the gritty blacktop as they scooped up the cold keys.

"What is going on? You've got the whole place looking out here at you."

A hint of ranch dressing bubbled in his stomach.

Gracie lowered her hand. He glanced at her pink fingernails and inhaled slowly. Her hand smelled like au jus sauce. His throat flooded and burned.

"Come on. Let's get you on your feet."

Vomit clawed out of Ernest's throat and splashed against Gracie's gray blouse. She stumbled backward and lifted her arms. The crowd outside of the restaurant released a collective "Ooo."

Steam rose from Gracie's blouse. Ernest wiped his mouth with his forearm and looked up. Tears flooded her widened eyes.

"My blouse is ruined!" Her hands shivered beside her face.

"I'm so sorry."

"What the hell?"

Ernest lifted his hand in front of his eyes and stumbled backward. "I can't do this. I'm sorry."

He stabbed at the keyhole with his keys.

"Are you serious?"

The key slid in. "So sorry, Gracie."

Ernest opened the door and sat inside.

"I can't believe you're—hey I'm talking to you!"

Ernest pulled the door shut and started the car. "Sadie never yelled. Sadie never yelled," he chanted.

Gracie took off her broken heel and threw it at the Taurus as Ernest pulled out. The red heel struck the back window. Ernest flinched as he turned the steering wheel and pressed the gas.

“Asshole!” Gracie turned and limped toward the restaurant on one heel. The patrons separated and let her between them.

Ernest stood within the yellow glow of the outside light by the front door of his house. His hands shivered. Every breath trembled from his lungs. The door seemed so heavy, so big.

Sadie always leaves the light on.

The hot aluminum of the Taurus' engine block clinked as it cooled.

Ernest swallowed hard. The taste of vomit had left his mouth and was replaced by a subtle tinge of blueberry. He closed his eyes and released an easy sigh. Adrenaline dissipated from his veins.

The door opened.

“Ernie?”

Ernest opened his eyes and looked up. Sadie stood before him and took up most of the doorway.

“Baby, what are you doing? Get in here before you catch pneumonia, ya goofball.”

His feet felt heavy. A memory of Sadie cheerleading in college fought for clarity in his mind but the cold night and Sadie's presence distracted him. He felt her hand clasping his.

“Come on. It's cold as balls out here.”

She tugged his arm and drew him inside. The warmth swept against his face like her hands used to when she felt for the closeness of his freshly shaven cheeks. He shivered.

Sadie closed the door behind him.

“Whew! So what were you doing standing out there like that?”

Ernest peeled his shoes from his feet and unzipped his coat. His eyes fixed on a green box on the counter.

She touched his arm. “You there?”

“Sorry. Just daydreaming.”

She took his coat off his shoulders and then reached around his waist. Sadie cupped his groin and squeezed gently. Her moist, sweet breath rolled over his left ear. “About me?”

He smelled blueberries.

Each of his toes curled like a wave. The image of her in college—thin, sweaty, young—focused into clarity in his mind. His eyelids fluttered.

He opened his eyes. Sadie stood in front of him, smiling. Ernest shuddered and grabbed her meandering hand.

The smile melted from her lips. "What's wrong?"

He slowly took her hand away from his crotch.

"I need a shower." He sighed. "Just tired." Ernest released her hand and stepped around her.

The green box lay open on the counter. He peeked inside. Crumbs from a missing blueberry muffin littered the side of the box.

He gritted his teeth. "I thought we agreed to limit the sweets."

Tension grappled his neck. He looked back up at Sadie.

She blinked, folded in her lips and glanced toward the staircase. "Moment of weakness, I guess."

Ernest slouched. "You'll never get to your college weight eating like this."

Sadie walked up to Ernest and embraced him in the first position of a tango. She looked into his eyes and jutted her chin toward his.

"Fine. Let's work off those calories. Ready? Wait, I'll get a rose petal for your mouth."

Ernest closed his eyes and turned his face away. "Sadie..."

"What? You used to love to dance before the kids went off to school."

He looked back into her blue eyes. They were so soft, so welcoming, like a lazy day on a private beach. And her full pink lips...saliva pooled around his tongue. His mouth parted.

Ernest squirmed away from her embrace. "We can't. Remember your cholesterol? You're at risk now. The doctor said limited strenuous activity."

Sadie's arms dropped to her sides. She rolled in her lips to a frowning smile. "Always the worry wart, eh Ernie?"

"Don't take it that way."

"I know." She took his hand and kissed his smooth knuckles. "You mean the best. How was the book store?"

Ernest shrugged and rubbed his ear. "Okay."

"That's good." She touched his shoulder and let her hand slide down his arm. "Well go on and take your shower. I'll be reading on the couch."

Sadie's shoulder brushed his arm as she walked by. He slouched as the warmth of her embrace slipped away from his skin. The tingles and pings of her presence in his stomach faded into the gurgling of hunger.

Ernest glanced at the box of blueberry muffins. Sweet air swelled in his lungs. He closed his eyes.

He sighed. *Sadie keeps me warm.*

Steam from the shower tumbled above Ernest. He stood naked in front of the tub, lulled by the hundreds of taps of water drops against the fiberglass shower floor.

The air grew thick and moist. Beads of water pooled on his skin. A mushroom cloud of steam rose from behind the cream shower curtain. Ernest breathed deeply.

Three shampoo bottles lined the shelf in the shower. He took the blue one, the one Sadie always thought was a new bottle. Ernest unscrewed the cap. A corner of clear plastic sprang to a point out of the bottle.

His cock was hard and throbbing. The hot water trickled down his body like Sadie's fingers used to. He shivered as he reached for the tip of plastic.

Ernest pulled the plastic out of the bottle. Water dripped off his brow and into his eyes. He unfolded the plastic like a scroll as he wrapped his fingers around himself and stroked. His eyes fixed on Sadie's college cheerleader photo within the plastic baggie. She held two blue and white pom-poms above her head and stood tall in a blue and white cheer uniform like a Y.

Tears mixed with the water and dripped to Ernest's mouth. The mixture slid between his lips and wet his tongue. He closed his eyes. He could taste Sadie's skin.

Ernest winced and lifted his face toward the ceiling as the pressure and buzz built in his groin. Sadie's thin, sun-kissed body slipped into his fantasy and straddled him. Beads of sweat collected on her forehead.

Her eyebrows spiked. "You ready, baby?"

Ernest groaned toward the ceiling, trying to stay quiet. "Yes."

He turned his face into the shower's stream. His lips parted and he gritted his teeth. Sadie rode him harder.

"Sadie does it," he moaned, "just right."

He grunted and then became lightheaded. Stars flashed before his eyes and his knees weakened. His muscles relaxed as if he were slipping from his skin.

"I don't want to get into your personal life Ernest but..." Mr. Perkins rubbed his bald head. "You know we have strict internet use policies."

Gracie slipped into Ernest's mind. She had long brown hair like Sadie.

If only she had liked chicken tenders.

Honey mustard. Sadie's glistening, sweet lips...

Mr. Perkins dovetailed his fingers and leaned forward. "Ernest?"

Ernest shuddered. "Yes. Strict use policy." He nodded. "I understand."

Mr. Perkins leaned back in his chair. His back rubbed against the leather seat and rumbled.

"Okay well, moving forward, let's keep a rein on our personal interests here at work. Sound good?"

Ernest stood and smoothed out nonexistent wrinkles in his khakis. "Sounds good, Mr. Perkins."

Two weeks had passed since the date with Gracie.

Ernest sat down at his cubicle and pulled at his collar to loosen his tie. His tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth. He grabbed his bottled water and took a gulp. Ernest swished for a moment and then swallowed.

He returned the bottle to its place beside his laptop.

The screen had turned black in his absence. He wiggled the mouse. A blurry email site emerged into clarity. He leaned forward.

Ernest had mail.

TrueLove.com was the best of the best—even had a money back guarantee if someone couldn't find a soul mate in six months. Ernest was creeping up on five months.

After Gracie, Ernest had enhanced his requirements in TrueLove.com's compatibility fields. He made sure there was interest in chicken.

Ernest opened the email.

Dear Ernest,

You seem like a man who knows what he wants. I like that. Wanna chat? I'm free tomorrow night if you're interested.

Janet

The phone rang.

Ernest's hand bumped into his supply rotunda and spilled pens across his desk. A black pen rolled to the edge of his desk as he grabbed at the others.

A hand with pink fingernails reached beside him and scooped up the pen. "Gotcha."

He looked up at the woman. She took the pen and slid it into a slot in the rotunda.

Ernest's lips parted and he blinked. "Th-thanks."

The woman winked and pushed her long, chestnut hair behind her shoulders. "Don't mention it."

Ernest watched her as she walked behind him and continued down the cubical aisle. A red turtleneck sweater hugged her round breasts and flowed along her slender waist as if it had been painted onto her skin. Light beige silk from her skirt swooshed with each step. He shifted in his seat as his groin and face became warm.

She turned left out of the aisle and peeked back at him before disappearing behind the wall.

The phone rang again.

Startled, he dropped the water bottle between his legs. Cold water spilled over his crotch and sent shivers rippling through his body. The bulge between his legs shrunk.

"...book club meeting." Ernest left a voicemail on Sadie's cell phone on the way to the steakhouse the next evening.

Static and pops came through as he listened to the void. He pulled the phone away from his ear.

Ernest walked into the steakhouse and waited for the hostess. She scribbled on a sheet of Plexiglas covering seat schematics with a red wax pen. Patrons bumped his shoulder as they walked out of the building. Steak settled on their breath. Ernest shifted his stance.

"How many, sir?"

He looked up at the hostess. "I'm meeting someone."

She smiled with her eyebrows perked and looked down at a clipboard. "Name?"

"Uh, Janet."

Her fingers scrolled down a list of names. "Janet. Got it. Wanna follow me?"

"Oh, sure."

Their heads cut through ribbons of smoke as Ernest followed her. Steady chatting buzzed the air. He pushed his sweaty palms against his thighs. The khakis were still damp but the wet spot between his legs had disappeared.

Then he saw her.

The woman who had saved his pen from falling waved at him as if tickling the air with her fingers. She crossed her legs behind the dimly lit booth and grinned.

His heartbeats tripped over one another. He swallowed hard. Pulsing heat rolled along his skin. Every step became lighter.

Ernest smiled and whispered, "I found you, Sadie."

A heavy-set woman struggled out of the booth in front of Ernest. He stopped and watched her wriggle away from her seat.

Her date smiled across from her and pulled the table closer to his chest. "Got it?"

The woman chuckled. Ripples rolled through the chestnut hair draped over her shoulders and back. "Maybe I shouldn't have had the cheesecake."

Ernest's breaths became short. Weakness softened his legs.

Sadie turned. When she smiled, her cheeks flushed as if holding back laughter.

Their gazes locked on to each other. Her blue eyes trembled. Ernest rubbed his ear and tried to look away.

"Sir?"

He glanced at the hostess. "I can't."

Janet slowly rose from her seat. "Ernest, what's going on?"

Buzz turned to silence. Smoke and the tinge of skilletts, heavy with onions and peppers, slipped into his nostrils and burned. He found more eyes everywhere he turned. They wouldn't let him go.

Finally, he looked back at Sadie.

Janet's thin face sat off-center to Sadie's like a before and after photo of an exercise regimen. He glanced back and forth between them. The last 23 years of their marriage blurred between the two faces. Sadie gained weight when he looked at her and it melted away in Janet's face.

He struggled to breathe as he pulled at his collar. "What are you doing with him?"

Sadie reached for his hand. Warmth flowed through her fingertips and seeped into Ernest's skin. He trembled and closed his eyes.

Sadie's voice quivered. "Are you meeting someone, too?"

Her blueberry breath settled upon his face. He inhaled deeply and opened his eyes. Gossip hummed in the background.

Janet stepped away from the booth. Her lips moved around words but he couldn't hear them. The man across from Sadie stood. His lips moved too as he pushed up his sleeves and walked toward Ernest. Sadie stepped between them but the man pushed her aside. Ernest watched Sadie stumble back and then looked back at the man.

His deep voice rumbled into clarity as he jabbed his finger at Ernest's chest. "You that deadbeat husband she's told me about?"

Ernest glanced at Janet and then Sadie. A tear shivered loose from Sadie's eye and slid down her cheek. Her lips parted and she took a breath to speak. Ernest looked back at the man.

"Yes, I am."

The words whipped out of his throat like fire. He blinked and looked down, unable to believe his own voice. The man took his finger away. Pressure lifted from Ernest's chest.

Ernest looked at Sadie and smiled as he offered his hand to her. "Wanna get out of here?"

Sadie wiped her tears and nodded as she reached for him. Murmurs from the patrons faded into the silence of a snowy day. There was only Sadie. He could see her on their wedding day, draped in long ivory silk. The minister asked them to face one another. Sadie's hands slid over the top of Ernest's. Her warmth flowed through his body and melted the strength in his knees. Sadie grabbed his shoulder as he became lightheaded. She smiled and said, "Gotcha, Ernie."

Her fingertips brushed against his palm and Ernest's fingers curled to hold her hand.

The man Sadie was with pushed Ernest's arm away. "I don't think so, pal. She's with—"

Ernest's fist crashed against the man's jaw. Blood and saliva sprayed from his mouth as he turned and fell to the floor. All in the restaurant gasped. Ernest did not realize what had happened until the pain in his hand turned hot and throbbed. He leaned over and cradled it against his stomach.

Sadie grabbed his other hand. "Come on. Let's go!"

"I can't believe..." he cringed and tried to move his fingers. "I can't believe I hit him."

Everyone parted as Sadie led Ernest away.

"Well, you did, Ernie." She turned and looked into his eyes. "And you just wait till I get you home."

Ernest smiled as excitement pinged through him. She winked and turned.

"What the—hey, get back here you son of a bitch!"

Sadie tightened her grip on Ernest's good hand. "Robbie's up. Come on!"

They burst through the restaurant doors. Cold air tingled in his lungs. He tripped over a landscape timber and fell to his knees. Pain clawed at the skin of his cuts. He cried out into the November night. White breath spewed from his mouth like smoke from an erupting volcano.

Sadie knelt beside him and inspected his knee. "You okay?"

He nodded and turned. Patrons filtered out of the restaurant as Sadie's date pushed through the crowd.

Sadie pulled on his hand. "Gotta move, baby."

He pushed himself off the cold, wet pavement and limped toward the car.

Robbie burst from the restaurant doors. "Stop!"

Her steps tapped in front of him. She heaved after every third step.

"No running," he panted, "Sadie."

"We don't," she heaved, grabbing her chest with her free hand, "have time."

Ernest dug in his pocket for the keys. Sadie let go of Ernest's hand and stumbled toward the passenger side. She opened the door, "Hurry!" and sat inside.

Ernest looked back.

Robbie held his mouth with one hand and pointed at Ernest with the other. "I'm gonna beat your ass."

The keys fell out of Ernest's hand. He bent over after them. The moment his fingers touched the keys he could feel Robbie's steps rumble through the pavement.

He took up the keys and sat in the car.

Sadie pressed her hand against her chest and took short breaths. She looked into the rearview mirror. "Start her up and let's go."

Ernest cranked the Taurus and slipped it into gear.

Robbie hammered the bottom of his fist against the window. "Nice cheap shot in there. How 'bout we finish this."

Sadie reached across Ernest and flipped Robbie off. "Get a life," she heaved and took a deep breath. She grabbed Ernest's arm and sat back in her seat.

Ernest pushed her hair from her face. "Look at me."

Her eyes moved back and forth between his. She winced and pressed her right hand against her chest. Robbie pounded against the window, shaking the car.

"Let's just go home."

He nodded. "Okay."

Ernest looked back as he pulled out in reverse. Janet stood in front of the crowd with her arms folded. Robbie walked backward toward the building, taunting Ernest with muted insults.

He put the Taurus in drive. The urge to look at Janet one last time squeezed his chest. Sadie grazed her fingertips along Ernest's forearm. A shiver rippled through him. He turned and met her eyes. The streetlights painted a soft hue upon her face. He smiled and pressed the gas.

A meteorite streaked white against the starry night sky and drew Ernest's eyes toward the rearview mirror. Headlights twinkled behind them along Interstate 81, mixing with Harrisonburg's glow. As they drove northward, the city lights condensed like common gravity collapsing a cluster of stars.

Ernest flipped on the turn signal and merged into the right lane.

Sadie placed her left hand on Ernest's leg and squeezed. Hot air from the vent dried Ernest's face. He shifted in his seat and turned back the heat. Hairs on his neck stood. He could feel her eyes on him.

"I want you to know that," she moaned with her right hand still against her heart, "I never intended to touch that man. I...we've just been so cold, so distant for a while." She leaned toward him, rested her cheek against his shoulder and sniffed. "Guess that's why you were out too eh, Ernie?"

Ernest's toes curled against the sole of his shoe. He wished there was more room for them to move. The friction of the struggle burned the skin of his toes.

Her voice cracked. "I'm so sorry. Can you forgive me?"

Pressure built within his chest. His stomach rumbled. Nausea pushed drops of vomit to his tongue. He rolled in his lips and winced as he swallowed. Images of Sadie in school collided with those of her in his present. Words and feelings fired off in his mind and shattered his focus. It was noise; indiscernible madness. His eyes flooded as he fought for a distinguishable image of Sadie.

Her grip loosened on his thigh. Sadie's face slid from his shoulder and crashed against his lap.

Ernest tilted his face back. "Sadie?"

Tears bled from his eyes and dripped off his face. His voice quivered. "Sadie?"

He glanced at the rearview mirror. Dots of distant yellow light littered the blackness. Ernest sniffed and rubbed his eyes. A pair of headlights, outlined by a rectangle of smaller orbs of yellow, approached from miles away in the southbound lane.

Ernest took his right hand from the steering wheel and stroked Sadie's hair. He blinked slowly. His fingers glided through each strand like a feather through a breeze.

The flicker of the distant headlights caught his eye.

He applied the brake and drifted onto a muddy driveway across the median marked, "Authorized Vehicles Only." Ernest parked and pulled Sadie's limp body from his lap and set her against her seat. Her blank face stared at her lap with her chin digging into the soft, pale folds of her neck. Ernest looked back at the road. The truck's headlights grew brighter.

Heaviness settled on his body. He sniffed back tears and changed gears. The Taurus lurched. His hand shivered on the nub of the gear shifter.

A deep breath rolled into his lungs. He could smell the salt of his tears.

Ernest floored the gas. Sadie's face jerked back. He threw his right arm against her chest and pushed her against the seat.

The tires threw mud against the passenger and driver-side windows. He could only see out of the front window. Ernest draped his forearm against her chest as he lined up the Taurus in the truck's trajectory.

She was so heavy. His arm burned as he pushed her against the seat. He set the cruise control.

One hundred yards separated the two vehicles. The truck driver released the burp of his horn.

Ernest's heart pounded against his chest. Breath slipped away from his lungs. He pressed his left knee against the steering wheel and aimed for the truck. The truck's tires screamed as they melted against the asphalt.

Fifty yards. Ernest held the gas to the floor. He turned to Sadie and took her loose face in his hands. Her cheeks were cool and pale. The truck's horn saturated the air and buzzed along Ernest's skin. He closed his eyes as tears wet his lips. Strength left his body and he leaned forward.

Roaring steel, fiberglass and glass wrapped around them. When Ernest's salty lips met Sadie's, he tasted blueberries.

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