Puppy Love

by Jerry Ratch

That was the summer that Christine Nelson owned me.

It felt like catching the flu. I had it bad. I was about to turn seven, and it was my first time, and it was bad. A love like that, I don't know, it's not a love supreme. It wasn't completely crushing or smothering like the love from your mother. It was more like the love a puppy can develop for something as ordinary as a slipper, an orange ball, a hard green tomato.

My pal Andy lived across the street from my house, and a few doors over. Our town, Villa Park, was a working-class suburb twenty miles west of Chicago, with moderately tall elm trees that were just saplings tied to stakes with pieces of white cloth when my parents, Bessie and Otto, first moved out there in the heart of the Great Depression. They decided to move out of the Bohemian ghetto on the South side of Chicago near the stockyards (in part, no doubt, to escape the acrimonious odor of penned-up cows,) to start a family in the suburbs out near fresh cornfields under the vast Midwestern sky, with no money and no despair, with nothing but hope in their souls — to give their children a chance at a better life. They met a young, unstoppable real estate agent called Harris Grigsby, (they named their first born child Harris after him — an omen if there ever was one) who put them into a snug little two bedroom bungalow on Illinois Street with a sun porch attached, which would become my room, for no money down and huge payments on a three-year “bullet loan.” That meant they had three years to pay the whole thing off, or down they went with the loan and the bank would take it all back. They hadn't yet invented the 30-year amortized loan at the time.

You should understand there were no real villas in Villa Park. They left that sort of thing to the imagination. About our town's only

real claim to fame was that it was home to that tasty beverage, Ovaltine. As tasty as that beverage was, the unfortunate thing about living downwind of the manufacturing plant, was that every afternoon they would let out the odors from cooking off the malt. I can only describe those odors as being about as close to a gigantic blast of vomit as you can get. And there it is. One is raised to be direct in the great Midwest, at the risk of being uncouth, even brutal. My apologies to the makers of Ovaltine, not to mention its drinkers. But maybe that's what helped make us into such ornery bad boys around there. I used to think that everybody loved a bad boy. Imagine!

Right next door to my pal Andy, one day a moving van pulled up and unloaded the possessions of the Nelson family, which included a willowy, lovely creature named Christine, along with her younger sister, Missy. And that was when I heard my first love song, ever, come bursting into my brain. It was one of those sweet little nothing songs that's so catchy it has to be surgically removed from your cerebral cortex, or might just as well be taken out with a hammer. It was called — I remember it so well, parts of it anyway — *"Sugar Bush."* When my eyes first landed on Christine's pure, scrubbed, glowing bright skin, her shoulders exposed and soft, her bare arms in the summer air — somewhere on a radio, in Andy's brother's car probably, parked in their driveway next door to the home of the Nelson family — I heard that song, and my heart fluttered like a bird suddenly filled with bird shot. In other words, I felt sick, like from the flu.

Andy's much older brother was off somewhere in Korea, fighting a war none of us understood anything about whatsoever, except that if it weren't for him, we'd been told in no uncertain terms, hordes of Red Communists would come marching right down our street in the heart of Villa Park (thirsting, no doubt, after our smelly Ovaltine) and we'd be taking potshots at them from behind bushes with our BB guns and .22 caliber squirrel rifles, maybe even our older brothers' rabbit-hunting, single-shot, bolt-action, 16-gauge blunderbuss shotguns. Now you can talk about accuracy all you

want, but that‘s what we had, and that‘s what we would have used, if push had come to shove.

The world had become a dangerous place, with Atomic Bombs and all sorts of mayhem. It was out of control. I think all of us in that era obtained an innate darker sense of humor about things because of the long shadow that Bomb cast over our souls. We learned early on to stay limber — to be able at a moment's notice to bend over, grab our ankles, and kiss our ass good-bye, in the event of a bright, ungodly flash. All bets were off, if it weren't for people like Andy's older brother, that was all we needed to know. And thank God he'd left his car behind too, so that we could listen to the latest popular tunes like *“Sugar Bush,”* until we wore down his battery and nothing came out of the weakened radio anymore but a low buzz, a burble and high hiss, certainly not “This Old House,” or my favorite: “They Call Me the Moonlight Gambler.”

This was some time before Elvis Presley hit the air waves with “You Ain't Nothing But a Hound Dog,” which would eventually spin our heads around at least one full turn, maybe two. And of course, need I mention Bill Haley and his Comets? Talk about change! When that kind of music put its spell on us — real Rock-and-Roll — we would shoot right out of the clutches of our older brothers' dance-band and big-band era music like ripened blue grapes squeezed from the foreskin of the vine.

But for now, this soft and lovely, bare-armed Christine Nelson creature was staring at us while we sat on the hood of Andy's brother's car with the radio jacked up, our hearts beating wild as sparrows in our tee-shirts, thinking our pure, sweet thoughts, empty but for innocence, our short-sleeves rolled up revealing our bony, sun-tanned shoulders. And for now there was be this goofy little love song I kept trying to memorize for Christine's sake, *“Sugar Bush.”* And trying to understand why I felt nauseous most of the time.

I remember running home across the street, pestering my mother time and time again, “Mom, Mom! What were the words to that song again? You know the one. What were they? Can you tell me one more time? One more time, c'mon!”

I stood there in our kitchen, breathless, tasting a tiny trickle of salt above my fuzzy lip. I kept rubbing my skinny belly, where the world wouldn't stop spinning. She could tell something was up with her younger son, her baby who was on the verge of growing up all of a sudden.

“Is this about that new little Missy girl across the street?” she inquired.

“Mom! No, not her, for Chrissake!”

My mother stamped her foot, scaring me. “You quit your swearing, young man! What did I tell you about that?” Mom had these large deep brown eyes that stared at you like an owl.

“What?” I whined.

“You're not going to impress a young lady, cussing that way. You stop that now, you hear, or I'm going to tell your Dad when he gets home! Where did you ever pick up language like that? I don't know.”

“From Dad, I guess. Or Harris.”

She put down her dish rag and waved a bar of soap in my face. “Do I have to wash out your mouth, Mr. Robinson? You!”

“Okay, okay! Just tell me the words, one more time. C’mon! Please?”

“Well, if it's not for little Missy, who is it then?”

“It's Christine,” I said quietly, looking down.

I heard my mother take in her breath.

“Oh, Robbie. Isn't she too old for you, son? She must be half again your age. Why, even your brother Harris was just gawking at her oddly the other day. How about that nice little Missy girl for you? That Christine Nelson … I don't know.”

Maybe Christine was two years older than me, if that. Maybe three, big deal! I knew I could impress her, and already had her attention. If I could only learn the lyrics to that song and keep my sleeves rolled up tight — my muscles showing and my shoulders bare, looking cool (I'd heard her talking about my shoulders to Missy) — I knew I'd have her heart in my grasp. I just knew it! Hadn't I learned these matters from the greatest teacher of them all,

my own brother Harris, whom I'd begun watching intensely the day I stumbled upon him with this girl named Olga, next door to our house, in some bushes with her shirt off? I realized right then what treasures were in store for us. That was the first time that I'd seen real breasts hanging out. Well, of course, maybe not the *very first time.* But who among us can even think about, let alone remember, that other possibility? Woe, I say, woe unto him who can recall those coming at you at birth.

My mother raised the blinds in our living room and peered out the window across the street. “That Christine Nelson, she's a little hussy! I bet that girl's sniffing around after our Harris. Why, she's just using you, son.”

“Mom, no! Will you just tell me the damn words to that song? I mean, the darn words to that damn song — darn song, darn song, for Pete sake! One more time. C'mon! There they are! They're both out there right now! Oh, there they are, Mom!”

At that moment Pete, our pet parakeet, flew down from the top of the curtains and landed on my right shoulder like a B-52 bomber. (A little exaggeration can go a long way.) Pete understood his name perfectly. He scared the crap out of me when he pulled that maneuver, because his wings sounded like a small, blue-colored, exotic pheasant.

Little did my mother know that my buddy Andy and I were already well on our way to full-throttle adulthood, puffing away on cigarettes up on our garage roof, where we hid packs of Lucky Strikes along with hordes of matches. Lucky Strikes when we could afford them at 25 cents a pack, and cigar boxes full of dried-out corn silk to roll up in old newspaper when we couldn't — manufacturing what we called Stoggies for when we ran out of real cigarettes to mimic our older brothers. El Stoggies actually, and that other quasi-Cuban brand, El Ropoes — since what they tasted like was something akin to hemp when you lit them on fire and had to shake the flames out to get a good raspy, throat-wrenching drag. In reality, they would burst into smoldering flames with nearly every puff.

Honestly, these things would set your hair on fire, if you weren't careful.

We had a hard time figuring out how to be as cool as our older brothers, though. They seemed to have something we couldn't quite put our finger on, although I suspect in the long run it was maybe really just their cars. But of course, that was huge, because cars meant girls — it was like a mathematical equation around there. Nevertheless, acting tough, cool and carefree, trying to imitate our brothers, in the evenings we would creep out into gardens in the neighborhood, where we'd plop ourselves right down on the soil for hours and haul out our own salt shaker, our full box of Morton salt with that dark blue label and its little girl in her short yellow dress spilling salt behind her as she went. We'd sit on our asses in people's gardens and eat plump ripe tomatoes pinched directly from the vine with that fresh raw, earthen tomato smell surrounding us in the left-over summer heat, while a full moon rose, slightly oranged, above the waters of Lake Michigan, asking its silent questions of man: *Who are you, little ones? Where do you go tonight? Is there love in this land? Awake and come with me, my little thugs, my hoodlums in the making, my pool-shooting sharks of the Future. Be mine tonight!*

And our hearts would rise with that moon, also.

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Christine Nelson wrote copious love notes (probably on her way to pumping out bodice-busting romance novels) about being captured and tied up, about being forced to kiss “a real man,” (this made my virtual tail wag,) and she left them in obvious places where they could be found by me or my pal Andy, who was on a constant lookout, snooping under rocks around the playhouse in their backyard (which was where they said in enormously loud whispers that they might be found.) And I would hide her notes when we found them, which were carefully folded up, in a secret cache up on my garage roof, underneath the stash in our cigar boxes filled with that raw damp earth-smelling corn silk that was soft and brown and

felt smooth in my fingers like a young girl's ponytail. I didn't know which was more important, Christine's love notes written out in curly, perfectly-written longhand, patiently, thoughtfully on lined paper like school-room exercises — or that soft brown corn silk. Soon the love notes began crowding out the horde of corn silk, and in fact gained more importance. We started puffing away even harder, to get rid of that stuff. Both kinds of contraband could lead to unknown dangers, should they be discovered, because Christine's notes were getting more and more daring (on their way possibly to the birth of porno.)

Andy and I made plans. We drew up messages of our own. I shot off notes about how and when and where exactly this “real man” would be kissing Christine Nelson, giving the private missives to my trusted lieutenant, Andy, who would promptly see to it that our notes were intercepted by little Missy. (Honestly, I think he was just handing them to her.) At the bottom I'd apply the signature: *“A. Real Man.”*

And this activity would surely, surely as men seek women and women men, lead to my first stolen kiss.

Christine and little Missy cast their eyes on our bare shoulders and soon enough came over to ask us if we wanted to play house in their little playhouse underneath the big elm trees behind their home. “Did we want to play house?”

“Hell, yes!”

Andy's eyes rolled when I said yes. Andy was a year younger than me, and Missy was as bony as they come, a perfect “10” twig, and I was certain she had her eye on him. It would take years to fill out that frame, if ever. Whereas Christine, on the other hand, had impending womanhood fulfilling itself already in her features. Already there was movement to her chest when she ran, then abruptly she stopped running. Her cheeks glowed with a fresh redness and her straight brown hair fell over her shoulders in a soft fall, and she exuded something, I don't know what, or didn't understand it yet, but there was some animal nature in the way she carried herself — where exactly do girls learn to walk that way? —

that sent me running back time and again across the street to my mother, bothering her over those damn lyrics to that catchy song, *“Sugar Bush.”*

What were those damned words anyway? See? I have completely and utterly forgotten them now.

Then to my dismay, the following year they moved away to a big house in Elmhurst, the next town east of ours, and she took my stricken little heart with her. We never even got to steal our first kiss! I couldn't believe it when they left. She was gone like that, and I would sometimes pester my dad, when we went out on our Sunday drives, to drive past Christine's palatial new home on this expensive, tree-lined street in Elmhurst. The elm trees there were absolutely towering, they were so old. And I spied her one time, one time only, standing out in front beside her father's brown Cadillac, with that signature long brown ponytail hanging straight down her back, almost touching her little ass.

Now she seemed — how should I say it? — older somehow, untouchable, beyond me. She even dressed differently than she did back in our little town of Villa Park. Less comfortably, it seemed. She wasn't wearing those tight blue jeans anymore, my favorite. And she walked straighter, with her back stiffened. It looked less natural. My brother sat up and took a good long look at her. I saw his head nod, but thank God, he didn't say a word. But then again neither did he punch me in the arm as usual. That was something out of the ordinary, right there.

“Do you want to stop and say hello, Robbie?” my father asked. He looked over at my mother, who looked back over her shoulder, smiling.

I shrank down in the back seat, horrified.

“No!” I said. “No way!”

He honked the horn and waved at Christine as we swept on by in our Buick. I have no idea whether she even turned her head. They never told me whether or not she did. My guess is she did not, but you never know with my dad. He could be a real prankster.

I never asked him to drive past Christine's house again. We began taking our Sunday drives heading out the other way, further west, where there were more cornfields, more a promise of the future and what it might hold, with new subdivisions popping up in developments at the edge of fields in Lombard, where I would come to discover some years later my first real experience in full-blown adult love, the kind that wrenches your heart free of your chest, if you have one left inside you by that time, and tosses it aside carelessly, willfully, in a man-made lake at the edge of town when you're not looking — when your guard is down, and you are still open to everything under the sun, or the moon.