

Sweet Story

by Laura McCollough Moss

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I always knew if I had any chance of meeting a boy, it would happen in winter. Not to be conceited, but I look prettier when it's cold out. During the summer, you know, the sweat, the greasy hair, the shiny face. In the winter, my skin dries out and looks really nice. My hair is bouncy and fresh, and I can wear sweaters and boots and hats, which makes anyone cute.

I remember it was January ninth and I skipped school. Fredericks was having some kind of Chemistry encounter, and it was too soon after winter break to get into anything that elaborate as far as I was concerned. I texted Lexi to see if she wanted to hang out, but she was on academic probation for missing too many days first semester. She was doomed to suffer through acid/ base titration hell.

I left the house at seven-thirty because my Mom was running late, again, so I had to play it like a normal day. Then of course she had to bitch about what I was wearing and send me back upstairs to change. I mean, what's so obscene about a miniskirt if you wear tights under it? I came back down in skinny jeans with holes in them and the tights still on. Little purple kneecaps. She shook her head but let it go, standing there in her poop-colored Worthington suit. At least she was having a decent hair day was all I could say. I let her give me lunch money before I took off.

Seriously, does anybody shovel their freaking sidewalks anymore? Walking on the side of the street slushed up my new UGGs, my jeans were splattered by the cars going by, and I was feeling totally annoyed.

I heard someone say "Watch it!" and this guy pushing a snow blower practically ran me over. He was a kid, maybe eighteen. He had on a rad trapper hat, and his cheeks were red. His nose was running a little, but Mr. Toro was babe-alicious, and he was checking me out

"Sorry about that," he said.

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I read his name on the Ridgeway Panthers letter jacket.

"Hi Luke," I smiled; glad I'd taken a few extra minutes with the flatiron.

"How did you know my... Ohhh," he laughed. "You're pretty smart!"

I put my hands in my pockets so I wouldn't twist my hair.

"Oh, yeah, I'm a genius!" Lame!

Luke wiped his nose on his glove. "What's your name?"

"Iris."

"Like the part of the eye?"

"Like the flower. I know, right? My parents thought it was cool; 'Retro'". I made quotation marks with my fingers.

He kicked the snow blower, knocking the snow off his boots. "I think it's nice."

Ohmigod was he kidding me? "Thanks."

We stood there staring at each other.

Luke looked at my backpack. "You go to South?"

"Yeah, not today though. I was on my way to Perks."

"Skipping school?" he said, like he couldn't believe it. "I'm a freshman at RCC. We're still on break for another week-and-a-half. I just came over to clear out my grandpa's driveway."

"That sucks. Did your parents make you do it?"

"What? No... He can't drive anymore and he lets me use his car. I like to help him out." Was he blushing?

"Man, I don't know anyone as nice as you! I rag about doing dishes for my mom."

"My mom has MS, so I do dishes, laundry, grocery shopping, lots of stuff."

Yeah, I felt like a total ass. He turned around and started pushing the snow blower to the garage.

"Hey!" I hollered, "Want to go to Perks?"

He held up his finger for me to wait while he ran inside the house. Ten minutes later he was back. The first thing I noticed was that he had taken off the snow pants, and he looked slammin' in his jeans.

The second thing came along behind a walker. Luke stopped and waited while a really old man tottered down the sidewalk.

"Iris, this is my grandpa, Sid Sherman. Grandpa, this is Iris. She asked us to go for coffee."

Did I? What would I say to him? "Hi," I gave him a little smile.

"Good morning, young lady,"

Sid let go of his walker and bowed. Then he took my hand and kissed it. I know it sounds pervy but it was kind of cute. He had his hair all slicked back and he smelled good; like aftershave.

"I hope you don't mind my tagging along."

He pulled a sweet fedora out of the walker bag and put it on, running his fingers around the rim, and held his arm out to me.

"Shall we? Luke can pull the car out for us."

Luke pulled on the heavy garage door and there was this huge light blue Caddy inside. You know the ones with the big hood ornament and the fins? He got in and drove it out and the thing looked, seriously, like, half-a-football field long. Sid opened the front passenger door and I tried to get in.

"Sorry Iris," he said, "but the Old Guy has to ride shotgun. I can't bend my legs enough to sit in back."

This was not going the way I wanted it to! Luke made a 'sorry' face at me, and I helped Sid get in the front seat. He told me how to fold up his walker, and I put it in the back and got in.

When we got to Perks, Luke pulled the car in front of the door, and Sid and I got out and waited. There was no lot, so he had to parallel park across the street. Between the size of the Caddy and the snow, it was a nightmare. Sid stood on the sidewalk yelling directions.

"Cut it left, Lukie! That's it, now straighten it out. HOLD IT, you're gonna hit that rice burner!"

After Luke parked perfectly, we went inside. He pulled Sid's coat off and hung it on the rack; then he grabbed another hanger and held his hand out for mine. Such manners! I was impressed.

That's when he pulled off the trapper hat and I saw his hair.

"It's weird, I know," he kind of rubbed his hand over it. "My mom cuts it, and she can't do it like she used to, but I hate to say anything."

"She also doesn't realize you're not four years old. Dude, sometimes you have to be honest even if it hurts. You look like that kid on the paint can!"

"You tell him, Iris," Sid laughed. "He won't listen to me. I offer all the time to take him to my barber."

I looked him over. "Not sure that's the answer Sid, with all due respect."

"I ain't had any complaints," he winked at me. Yes, he did.

We sat down with our coffees; black for Sid, cream and sugar for Luke, and skinny mocha latte for me.

"That's not coffee you know," Sid blew on his before taking a sip.

"Leave her alone, Grandpa." Luke smiled and looked through his choppy bangs at me.

Sid chuckled. "I'm just a big tease. I don't mean any harm. Once you two drop me off, you can do whatever you like."

I liked the sound of that!

He picked his hat up from the seat beside him and put it on.

"I guess that means we're leaving," Luke followed him to the door and helped him into his coat. He looked back at me.

"Are you coming?"

I crawled out of the booth and caught up with them.

We dropped Sid off at Off-Track Betting in the plaza. Luke got the walker out and took him inside.

When he got back in the Caddy, he fastened his seatbelt.

"I don't have to pick him back up until four. Do you want to do something?"

I had to ask. "Sid gambles? No way!"

"Yes way," Luke said. "He actually won this car on a bet."

"Honestly? You're kidding, right?"

"Nope, I wish I was. He's lost a lot more than he's won, but he'll never stop. It used to drive my Grandma crazy. She died a couple years ago." He looked sad and uncomfortable talking about it, so I

didn't ask any more questions. He revved up the engine. "Anyway, do you know where you want to go?"

I didn't even have to think about it.

"Pine Hills."

"The mall? What're we gonna do there?"

I gave him my mysterious look.

"You'll see..."

Fifteen minutes later I was spinning around in an empty barber chair while Luke got his hair cut. He looked at me in the mirror as a girl named Wanda transformed him into a certified hottie.

Wanda stood back and admired her work. Luke leaned toward the mirror and frowned.

"I look like that kid singer."

"Exactly!" I said, feeling very happy with the result.

"All the young guys are getting that cut," Wanda reassured him.

"It looks good on you."

Our compliments were working. Luke kept looking at himself, and I could tell he liked it.

He reached in his back pocket for his wallet at the register.

Wanda rang it up. "That's twenty-four for today, Hon."

Luke paid her and we went out into the mall.

"You should have tipped her."

"Are you kidding? I'm a poor student! I'm lucky I could pay at all. That was an unexpected expense."

"Well, it was a good investment!" I ran my hand through his hair and he blushed, again.

"Stop it!" he laughed. "How'm I gonna face my mom?"

"Is she home? Let's go show her," I dared him.

He shrugged and I dragged him toward the car, trying not to get peeved by all the girls making eyes at him. Get your own Dutch-boy and make him over, I wanted to say.

Luke lived across town in the not-so-good section. He turned into the driveway of a sad little house and we parked under a carport full of leaves and litter. The Caddy looked totally out of place in the neighborhood. I got out and closed my door before I noticed that

Luke was still sitting in the driver's seat. I went over to his side and he rolled down his window.

"Iris, I'm not sure this is such a good idea. My mom is... well... not like other people."

"Whose is?" I wondered what could be so weird about his mom; I mean, weren't they all a little whacko?

"C'mon, it's no big deal."

Luke unlocked the back door and a little dog came at us yapping his brains out.

"This is Chico," he said, picking up the chubby brown Chihuahua. He let the dog lick his face and put him down.

The place was kind of dark and stuffy and cold. There was a drainer full of clean dishes next to the kitchen sink.

"You really do the dishes, don't you?"

"Every night," Luke said, looking nervously around. "Mom! You home?"

"I'm in the sunroom, Lucas," a woman's voice said.

I followed Luke through the messy living room to a doorway that had one of those bead curtains. He pulled it apart and I saw a small woman with light brown hair down to her waist, sitting on a pillow in the middle of the floor with her eyes closed. The smell was different in there. I'd gone to enough concerts in City Park to know why; she was smoking weed! The joint burned away in an ashtray in front of her. Luke tapped her on the shoulder.

"Mom, I brought someone home to meet you."

She opened her eyes and waved away the smoke so she could see me.

"Hi, Sweetheart!" She tried not to act completely blitzed, which she was. "What's your name?"

"This is Iris, Mom," Luke answered for me. "We met this morning over at Grandpa's. Iris, this is my mother, Dawn."

Dawn spread her arms out wide. "Iris! What a fabulous name and you're so pretty! Please don't get the wrong impression of me, Darling. I suffer from Multiple Sclerosis and use medical marijuana. It really helps me."

Luke picked up a medicine bottle and opened it.

"There's only four left. We just picked these up yesterday, Mom."

Dawn rubbed the sides of her forehead. "It's been a bad day, Lucas. Don't get on my case please." She pointed at me and almost fell over. "We don't need to talk about this in front of your friend."

Luke left the room and I followed him back to the kitchen. He opened the fridge and pushed stuff around, and then he closed it again.

"I don't have much to offer you, sorry."

I was starving, but I could tell he felt embarrassed, so I said "that's okay".

"Well I'm really hungry," he opened a cupboard door and looked inside. He started pulling things down.

"Tuna noodle it is!"

I sat at the vintage red kitchen table and watched him while he cooked. He was shaking a bag of noodles into boiling water when Dawn walked in.

"Honey, I would have made you something," she tried to hug Luke and he gently shook her off.

"That's okay. I've got it under control." He was stirring tuna, mushroom soup and peas together in another pan. The guy clearly knew what he was doing.

Dawn grabbed a box of crackers.

"Leave some of those here," Luke said. "I need to crunch them up on top."

She handed him a handful and one fell on the floor. Chico scarfed it up, and Dawn gave him another one.

"That's a good boy!" She scratched him between the ears and went to watch TV.

Chico stuck around hoping for more dropped food.

Luke brought me a bowl of tuna noodle, and sat down with his across from me.

"Looks good!" I lied. It looked like throw-up, but it actually tasted okay. "Thanks."

“You're welcome. It turns out better with potato chips on top, but you have to use what you've got, right?”

Dawn stood in the doorway, looking shocked.

“Lucas, your hair! You got it cut?!”

We cracked up!

He was even cuter when he laughed.

