

RIEL NASON

The Prom

I HEAR THE RUMOUR THAT Keri-Lynn Thompson is showing up to the prom in the basket of a cherry picker borrowed from NB Power when I'm sent to Greer's Save-A-Lot for milk, and the cashier, Lucy, who is on the flower and balloon committee, mentions it after saying she alternately prays that the lupines will bloom in time and the lilacs won't fade too fast. I don't confirm or deny, because really it is generous to say I'm indifferent, but I am in grade twelve, so I put my change away real slow and act polite about the flowers at least. Like I'm eighty or something, I mumble, "God willing." Then I go out and get in my parents' green mini-van. I take the longest way home possible in our town—eleven streets. It's to practise my driving. The prom is in a week.



You see, last year Keri-Lynn and her grade-twelve date showed up in the bucket of a front-end loader. It was like a practice run, I guess. They do this whole red carpet arrival deal, but I mean seriously, Clearville, New Brunswick is a hell of a long way from Hollywood and over the years the whole thing has gone horribly wrong. Naming-your-kid-"Myrtle"-type wrong. And now Mom and Dad have to spend the big bucks so their daughter can be treated like pink frilly dirt, scooped up by a giant yellow Tonka toy driven by a man in a borrowed suit. It was quite a sight. But of course the local cop didn't seem to have any safety concerns, moving-violation-variety issues with this, because guess who was driving next in line with Keri-Lynn's best friend Kelly Crouse, and her date up on the roof straddling the red-and-blue lights? Exactly. Plus the mayor was taking pictures. The prom is the all-out-smack-down high-light of the year in town. It's honestly bigger than both the Demolition Derby and the Canada Day parade. Everyone gets involved, not just the

students and parents, and the whole town lines up in the parking lot for the show. Lucy, the cashier, on the flower committee, well she may have a great-niece of a cousin graduating or something, but she's near seventy so she's sure not graduating herself. Though it doesn't matter—that's what I mean, it's huge. That's how I know about all the little details. In the past, even I've been known to go.



In fact in the past, I've always been real nice about going to things: church, family reunions, the dentist. And tonight I'm even going to Keri-Lynn's graduation party. Everyone's invited, of course. But the reason I'm going is because Keri-Lynn's my next-door neighbour. Always has been. We've been friends since we were born. Or at least according to our mothers. Really, we were best friends until about grade two, good friends until grade four, reasonably good friends until grade five, passably good friends until grade six. Then, the summer before grade seven, my parents got this brilliant idea to send me to a special science camp for the gifted for two whole months.

Meanwhile, back in town: Keri-Lynn got a new backyard inground swimming pool, secretly started charging two cigarettes for admission, watched a porno, started wearing pink frosty lipstick, grew out her bangs, learned pig Latin, taught it to Kelly Crouse who she decided was the second prettiest girl in town, and developed breasts.

But it was probably destined to be that way sooner or later anyway, camp or no camp. It's just the town. It's just geography, population, economics, psychology, fluke. You see, Keri-Lynn's father owns the town's only gas station and the Tim Horton's out by the highway. He lets the high school sports teams and even the Pentecostal church youth group have car washes there, and most of the time a free box of doughnuts—good ones too, no Dutchies—shows up at the town council meetings. Keri-Lynn's mom is the head of the Lionettes and the Curling Club. She has bleached blonde hair but you never ever see any roots. Last year the whole Thompson family went to Mexico for March break. And ever since grade four, Keri-Lynn has worn a new outfit to school every day for the first three weeks back after Christmas.

My father works for the government, half-an-hour away in Fredericton, for the Department of Natural Resources. People around here think he just plants trees and picks flowers for a living. He ran for town council once about six or seven years ago. Five people ran, of which you could pick

any four. The guy who came in fourth wanted one thing—for the town to build the world's largest hammer to attract tourists. The man who came in last wanted to start a composting facility and institute a town-wide pesticide ban. Both my parents are at least fifteen years older than Keri-Lynn's. Mom was forty-two and already almost completely grey-haired when she had me. She used to be the junior high school librarian, but now she's retired. She works at the Thompson's Tim Horton's part time to keep herself busy though. When people bother to talk to me it's usually to tell me they saw her there—wiping tables and smiling.

But in the half acre that is our two yards, Keri-Lynn and I are pretty good at playing the part. And even though our mothers probably almost know the difference, they both go along with it. We were best friends once, after all. I wave if I'm outside and Keri-Lynn pulls in her driveway in her new shiny silver Honda Civic. She usually reciprocates. A smile just seems neighbourly. Plus I think it makes Keri-Lynn's mother happy because it confirms her belief that Keri-Lynn is liked by everybody.

My mother's just happy I'm liked by somebody.



Now about the rest of the town. I think the whole prom, something for everyone eight to eighty, says a lot, but if that doesn't tell you enough there's always the giant hammer. Yes, it became a reality. It's made from what looks like cut-up pieces of aluminum row boats welded together and it has a telephone pole for a handle. Everyone takes their summer visitors down to see it. Like everyone, I can tell the visitors from the locals, because not only do they look unimpressed and curious as to why the big monstrosity isn't covered in graffiti—"Hammer this!"—but because I know everyone in town. I can tell you what family lives in every house on every street. I can tell you what their cars look like, and Lucy at the grocery store will let you know what the inside of their refrigerators look like. And they all know who I am whether they acknowledge me or not. They're always out walking, watering their lawns, shovelling their driveways, or at the gas station, the post office, the grocery store, recognizing me, knowing who my old parents are, knowing my dad picks flowers for a living, knowing my mom will wipe their spilled coffee, knowing the colour of the shutters on the house where I live, knowing the teachers think I'm weirdly smart, knowing I had mono in grade ten, knowing I live next door to, but am not really friends with, Keri-Lynn.

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I leave for the party at about seven-thirty. I've been watching Keri-Lynn's backyard out my bedroom window to make sure at least some people are there before I go, but I can't stay home too long without my mother wondering how it will look. I walk downstairs and out the side door, weave between my parents' green mini-van and Keri-Lynn's silver Honda; ring the Thompsons' doorbell. Keri-Lynn's mother lets me in. She looks happy to see me, says "Oh, Keri-Lynn will be so glad you came, Myrtle." I just smile. She leads me to the newly renovated kitchen at the back of the house. I take a maple-dip doughnut from the big box on the marble counter. I try to eat it really slowly so it seems clear all the while why I'm not talking to anyone, but soon enough Keri-Lynn's mother is back, probably thinking she's rescuing me. "So do you have your prom dress yet?" she asks. "Yes," is all I say. "I bet it's lovely," she says. "We got Keri-Lynn's dress up in Montreal. I don't want to spoil anything by saying what it looks like, but the designer was born in Paris." I nod. "It's one of a kind." I nod again. Then, thankfully, the doorbell rings and when she answers it, I go outside.

There are about twenty people on the back deck, hovering near more boxes of doughnuts and bowls of chips, but most are now in the pool with Kelly Crouse and Keri-Lynn. The two of them have on matching bikinis—or not exactly matching, but Keri-Lynn has on a yellow top and blue bottoms; Kelly is wearing the reverse. I'm sure they've just traded tops, maybe even in some cutesy underwater manoeuvre with the whole hockey team cheering. Yellow and blue are the school colours.

I stay well back near the side fence and watch them, splashing and flipping their hair around. I've picked up another doughnut and I make it last as long as I can. I try to look at ease, maybe like I'm just waiting for someone who went in to the washroom. I stretch. I lean against the fence. Only once do I turn around to glance over at my house, and sure enough, I can see my mother behind a sheer curtain watching. So I turn my attention back to Kelly and Keri-Lynn. Now they are sitting on the diving board like queens on a throne. Kelly stands up and before she jumps in I can tell she glances over and notices me. But I don't wave, and neither does she.

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Though Keri-Lynn and I sometimes pretend to be friends, Kelly Crouse really can't be bothered. I think she's hated me ever since that

summer I came back from science camp. At Keri-Lynn's start-of-school party when she and Keri-Lynn were bragging about watching the porno, I decided to chime in with a little tidbit I'd picked up at said camp. A girl from Rivière-du-Loup told me you could come up with your porn star name by using the name of your first pet as your first name and the name of your street as your last. This is when knowing everything about everyone in town came in handy. You see Kelly Crouse had a little white cat called Fluffy, and while Keri-Lynn and I live on Cedar Street, the name of Kelly's street is Hedge. I'm sure it would have been hilarious if I'd been Kelly and she'd been me. And it was still pretty good. But by then it was already too late. Like I said, it's the town. Within a limited population, everyone gets a designated role to play. It's that simple. I don't think she talked to me for a year after that. It kind of started a trend. But it was all right though, because just about that time, as if they somehow knew it was inevitably going to happen, my shy gene kind of kicked in anyway.



I survive the party for almost an hour and a half and then, because others are leaving, it seems safe to go too. Plus I've eaten six doughnuts. I step away from the fence and make it halfway up the side yard before Keri-Lynn's mother seems to come out of nowhere and wants to know if I got a chance to say "Hi" to Keri-Lynn yet. I think of lying, but decide against it and next thing you know I'm waiting by a rose bush as Keri-Lynn's mother brings Keri-Lynn and Kelly towards me. They don't exactly look thrilled. "So I hear you're arriving at prom in the power company's cherry picker," I say. "Yeah," Keri-Lynn nods and says I should hear what Kelly is arriving in too. But Kelly just says, "It's a surprise," and turns and glances back to the pool.

This has been about enough conversation for me, but then before I can say "great party" and bail, Keri-Lynn's mother perks up and asks me how I'm arriving at the prom. So I look across to my house next door and to my parents' green mini-van sitting in the driveway. I point. Kelly smiles. I really don't care. But all of a sudden Keri-Lynn's mother does and she starts shaking her head like there's a mosquito in her ear. "Now Myrtle, you're not serious." A pause. "Are you?"

I confirm the worst.

Which I soon learn is the wrong answer as she launches into the suggestions. She could get me a golf cart from the Club. A friend in Fredericton

owns a Bricklin. I tell her politely no, no, no as we stand there and that the van will do just fine. But then there are more suggestions—my God, this is the prom we're talking about here—and after an encouraging look from her mother even Keri-Lynn joins in, half-heartedly offering up her date's ATV. I say I plan to decorate the van with Kleenex flowers, which is a small fib that doesn't help anyway. I just want to flee.

"Let her do what she wants," Kelly says. "Maybe her dad will help with the flowers." But at least she's encouraged them to stop. "The mini-van will be fine," I say. Keri-Lynn's mother looks across the driveway and frowns. "Really." She's still frowning. "Really. I'm going to make it look nice." No reaction. "Really." And I swear she almost seems like she might give in, when she looks up her own driveway and I can just tell she gets a brainwave. She turns to Keri-Lynn and smiles. "How about you take Keri-Lynn's car?" She gestures towards it. "Keri-Lynn won't be using it." Keri-Lynn looks unsure. "And it's nice and shiny and new." I say thanks, but no thanks, but her mother is insistent. I must take it, it's only neighbourly. She'd be so pleased to see me in it. Keri-Lynn glances back to the pool and a boy from the hockey team waves at her. She turns back. "Go ahead," Keri-Lynn says, "it's fine." Kelly Crouse makes a face. And then maybe it is just the sugar from the six doughnuts kicking in and affecting my judgement, but I agree.



I go home. I take a peek out my upstairs bedroom window and see Keri-Lynn's car in the glow from the streetlight. It has a personalized license plate that says KER BEAR. It has a little spoiler on top of the trunk. The silver paint is polished to a high shine. Then I look to Keri-Lynn's backyard. There are tiny white Christmas lights in all the Thompsons' trees. Keri-Lynn and Kelly Crouse are back in the pool, each up on a hockey player's shoulders, throwing a ball back and forth. Now they are wearing matching CHS T-shirts over their bathing suits. They are laughing. There are still at least thirty-five to forty people in the pool and on the deck. Keri-Lynn's mother is carrying a box of doughnuts around trying to get rid of the last few. She smiles at everyone and everyone smiles back. I look to Keri-Lynn. Still laughing. They have already forgotten about me. This I know from experience. But it doesn't matter.

I watch out the window for about another twenty minutes, then I go to bed early. And although you may think so, I don't question what I've done. I think about the night of the prom and me alone in Keri-Lynn's car. I don't have a date, but one good thing about the huge production is that a lot of people arrive alone in order to avoid disagreements about mode of

transport. Usually it takes until a week or so afterward for Lucy and the whole town to sort out who was with who. So I just lie there and think of little old me in my blue dress in the shiny silver car. I think of Keri-Lynn in the cherry picker and Kelly Crouse spinning on the back of a cement mixer—for lack of a better guess.

Then I think of driving around town first and looting the whole empty place with Keri-Lynn's car while everyone stands in the high school parking lot unaware. I think of drive-by egg throwing and graffiti and toilet paper in town hall trees. I think of driving to a payphone and calling in a downed power line so Keri-Lynn has to come rushing, pink chiffon billowing in the wind. I think of phoning in any and all possible cement-related emergencies. I think of making burnt rubber doughnuts in the Tim Horton's parking lot. I think of driving on the wrong side on each of the town's deserted eleven streets. I think of accidentally crashing into the giant hammer and the aluminum patchwork head smashing down on the perfect silver hood. I think of some combination of these things.

I think of just getting in the KER BEAR car and driving really far away. Really, really far away.

But then, when I fall asleep, I think of something else. I dream of me in Keri-Lynn's shiny car parading up before that line of people, six or seven deep, the whole town all recognizing me, knowing me, but all happy, taking pictures, looking at me, waving at me, and all the while cheering.



Over the next week the prom overtakes me just like it does everyone else. The posters go up, and the banners, and each night the Lions and the men from the Curling Club build and paint the giant entry arch for the parking lot. I tell my mother about Keri-Lynn's car and this immediately starts her search for an upgrade to Keri-Lynn's graduation gift. I buy shoes and a bracelet and a fancy hair barrette. The rumour goes around town that Kelly Crouse's surprise arrival vehicle is actually the rink's Zamboni. Keri-Lynn Thompson goes to a Fredericton tanning salon. The Lionettes prune the rose bushes and plant extra flowers down near the giant hammer where everyone gets their pictures done. The lupines bloom and the lilacs hold fast.

The night before the prom I watch Keri-Lynn's father wash and wax her car and the next morning she brings the keys over to me. She says, "Just be careful, okay," and though I'm sure there is potential for an after-school-special moment, I just say I will and thanks a lot. I go and move the car

the twenty or so feet from her driveway to mine. Her mother sees me and winks as she waves out the window.



I am nervous all day until after supper when I start to get ready. I use my minimal make-up and hairstyling skills to try to make myself look the best I can. I am sure I use too much hairspray but I think my lip gloss is about right. My parents take my picture then leave eventually in order to get a good vantage point at the parking lot. I watch the green mini-van drive away. I see Keri-Lynn come out of her house in a long, frilly, seafoam-green dress decorated with crystals or something that catch the sun. Her date pulls up as if on cue and they leave, off to meet up with the cherry picker. Her parents go too and I am alone on Cedar Street. I stay in the house for about ten more minutes. I stare for a long while in the hall mirror.

Then I go outside and start the car. I keep all the windows up and the air conditioning on. I check my face once more in the rear-view mirror. I remind myself it's all about how it looks. I drive the seven blocks to the school. I see the Zamboni and the cherry picker hanging well back so they'll be the last two to go. There are about twenty vehicles in line, and I fall in behind a new John Deere tractor. I wait. I wait.

I wait.

Finally I pull up to the giant entry arch and I see them all there. Everyone out on the one best night of the year. I feel a wave of panic wash over me, but I say to myself it will all be good. I power down all the windows. The sound of clapping and whistling overwhelms me. I can't help but smile. Maybe I am as bad as the rest of them, but I feel almost confident. My KER BEAR license plate is like Keri-Lynn Thompson's seal of approval. The town will have to love me. They will. I can feel it.

I touch the gas pedal.

So watch.

Here I go.