

# Boys From My Hometown

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Their mamas had them young, and were busy with their own lives now, dating and divorcing. Their daddies were mechanics or factory workers or janitors, who made sure their sons grew up lean and tough. By age twelve, the boys clamped cigarettes between their lips, and they started growing their hair long and drinking beer, too, soon after. Dinner table conversations at the boys' homes might include talk of buying a new Mustang, complaints about the Whalers, or those bastards at the bank. Most of the time, though, the boys in my hometown, when they reached a certain age, didn't have dinner table conversations. They were out racing their cars on Rte 5, past the boarded-up gas station, the adult bookstore and the aircraft factory, or they were out in the woods with me and my friends.

My name's Daisy, but the boys called me Diz, short for Dizzy. In '91, my own dad had been gone for two years, and I was a high school senior, the leader of the girls in my hometown. I'm not talking about the girls who wore button-down shirts and sweater vests, and volunteered for everything. None of the girls I hung with belonged to band or Junior Achievement, or helped plan the prom. Instead, we raided our parents' liquor cabinets, stared down cashiers' dirty looks when we bought condoms and cigarettes, and shoplifted so often we joked we should get P.E. credit for it.

We thought we had everything figured out. We'd already taken part-time jobs as cashiers and waitresses and drive-thru window girls, and the only mysteries we hadn't exhausted or dismissed as boring were the boys. The boys, with their skinny bodies and garage-band glamour, were going to save us from the banality of our hometown. We discussed them at length over the phone, and when we met to smoke in the bathroom during fifth period study hall.

Me, Danielle, Missy and Janice were crammed into the giant handicapped stall, sharing a cigarette, the day Danielle told me Mark was leaving.

"Did you see his hair?" she asked, passing me the cigarette. Danielle wore dark lipstick that left a waxy, plum-colored print on the filter.

"You nigged it," I said.

Janice took the cigarette from me, "Nigga please!" and put it to her own frosted pink lips.

We talked that way only among ourselves, of course. We were badass but not stupid, and went out of our way not to offend the black girls—especially the ones bussed in from Hartford—who always seemed to be larger and louder than us, and funnier, too.

“What about Mark’s hair?” I asked.

“He cut it—he thinks he’s going to college.”

“How do you know?”

“Tim told me,” Danielle said. She paused to reapply her lipstick. When she finished, she smacked her lips, then puckered.

“How ‘bout a kiss, Diz?” She nudged me with her shoulder.

I pushed Danielle away. “Lesbo!”

We all laughed then, and I was glad to turn the subject away from Mark. We’d hooked up, but I wasn’t sentimental about it.

“Nothing wrong with girls lovin’ girls,” Missy said. She blew a thin line of smoke at Janice, who laughed and waved it away from her triple-pierced ear.

I rolled my eyes—that crap might fool the boys, but not me. My girls weren’t as experienced as they liked everyone to think. Oh, they put on a big show, with their mini-skirts and slutty stiletto heels. But Missy had only done it once, and was too drunk to remember, and Janice hadn’t done it at all. Me, I was horny all the time. Serious shit had gone down in my life, but with my body all revved up, my skin tingling, I forgot everything but feeling good.

“Is Mark coming to the woods tonight?” Danielle asked. It was almost cute, the way her voice got all hopeful.

“Yeah, he’s going.” I smiled, generous now. There were still a few things I knew about him that she didn’t.

I sat next to my friend Peter during sixth period supportive history. After a year of skipping classes and purposely failing tests, I’d finally gotten my guidance counselor to drop me down with the rest of my friends. Peter started out in college track classes, too, but unlike me he was seriously smart. If anyone should have been applying to college it was him. Instead, he was growing his blond hair long in the back, and collecting silver biker rings that made his thin fingers look like weapons.

I dropped my history book loudly on my desk and threw myself into my seat with my legs spread as wide as my jean skirt allowed.

Peter continued drawing band logos on the front of his notebook.

I sighed, pushed my skirt up and scratched my thigh. I folded my arms. Finally I leaned over—class hadn’t begun yet—and said, “What’s up with Mark?”

“You mean his hair?” Peter didn’t look up.

“I haven’t seen it yet,” I admitted. “How short is it?”

This was 1991, after all, when the ultimate bad boys—the rock stars whose band logos we wore on our jean jackets—all had long hair. The boys I liked were the hometown version, with their tight jeans, unruly hair, mouths tasting of cigarettes and beer. Even if they were only high school rock stars, it was still something. It took balls to grow your hair long in a town where the word “fag” was thrown around by men—those daddies again—who spent their lives working with heavy machinery.

“He had to cut it,” Peter said. “He’s going to college in California.”

Before I had time to respond, Mr. McCann turned from the blackboard and began clapping chalk from his hands. “All right guys, let’s get started.”



Mr. McCann had grown up in our hometown, and still had a kind of swagger, even though his hair was receding and he wore the same plaid button-down shirts every week. Sometimes he'd reach for a nonexistent pack of cigarettes in his breast pocket, although he'd quit smoking fifteen years earlier. "That's the scary thing about addiction," he told us. "It never really goes away."

"Peter," I hissed, when Mr. McCann turned back to the blackboard, "let's get out of here."

I raised my hand, and spoke without waiting for permission. "I'm going to the bathroom."

"Five minutes, Daisy," Mr. McCann said.

I put my hands on my hips, and considered telling him I had womanly things to take care of. But Mr. McCann raised his eyebrows, and gave me that no-bullshit look he'd been giving me a lot lately, ever since I accidentally aced one of his tests.

"And I'd like to see you after class."

"Fine." I drew out the word to let him know I was the one doing him the favor.

I walked out to the parking lot anyway, and wouldn't you know it, ran into the boys. Not Peter, he was still being a dork in history class. But there was Mark, with his newly shorn head, walking with Dan and Tim across the parking lot towards Tim's car. Tim had an old Chevy Nova, painted red with shining silver hubcaps and black detailing, courtesy of his dad's auto body shop.

My first impulse was to yell for them to wait up, but I held back, walking close enough to hear their conversation.

"Dude, peanut butter, I'm telling you," Dan was saying. He was a skinny boy with pale skin and a bouncing walk that made him seem like he was on the verge of skipping. The other boys picked on him a lot.

Mark laughed so hard he coughed.

"I don't believe you," Tim said. He reached for a pack of cigarettes from the back pocket of his ripped jeans. He had to tug a little to get them out.

"Ok, here's what you do, next time you and Missy are hooking up and she says no way, you pull the peanut butter out of the glove compartment..."

"I can't believe you put peanut butter on your dick," Mark said. "Isn't it, like, *sticky*?"

Dan pushed Mark, hard enough to knock him off balance, "What do you know about it? You get all the slutty chicks, so you don't have to try..."

"Yeah, but not anymore," Tim said, "not with that haircut."

The hair was pretty dramatic. I had expected some kind of feathered wave, the haircut favored by our class president, but Mark had gone all the way. His head was buzzed, the hair so short you could see the pale scalp beneath. His ears stuck out, and were tinged pink, as if embarrassed.

If I waited too long to say something, they'd turn around and catch me listening. Eavesdropping and gossiping weren't my thing, that's what the girls in my old college-track classes did. I heard what they said—how they called me and my friends sluts, and made fun of our big hair and tight jeans. I didn't care. They were just pissed because all their boyfriends wanted us.

"Peanut butter, huh?" I said. The boys turned around.

"Diz, you cutting class again?" Mark asked.

Now that he faced me I could see the full impact of the cut. He looked like he could throw that cigarette down and go chase a football. I'd thought I was special, hooking up with a rebel like Mark, and there he went, turning himself into an ordinary boy.

"Where you guys going?" I asked.

"The woods," Mark said.

"You're not going to last period?"

"Fuck last period," said Tim.

I looked back at the school, up the hill from the parking lot. It looked like the aircraft factory, a great square building filled with dull-eyed workers shifting from one room to the next at the sound of a bell. I imagined going back to history class and sitting down next to Peter, who would only continue to ignore me because, in spite of his long hair and biker rings, he was just another goody-goody in disguise.

"I'm going with you," I said.

I sat in the back seat of Tim's Nova, next to Mark. "So who said you have to cut your hair to go to college?" I asked. "Doesn't everyone have long hair in California?"

Mark shrugged and passed me the joint. "I'm not going right to college. I have to raise the money first."

I took a deep drag, held it in until he told me.

"I'm joining the Army. Basic training starts in July."

I released the hit with a long, slow sigh. It was late April then, two months to graduation. "That's fucked up." Everything I knew about the army was from watching Desert Storm on CNN. All those army guys looked the same to me—meaty and violent, yet submissive, like guard dogs.

I passed the joint to Mark, and turned my attention to Dan, who leered at Mark and I from the front seat. At seventeen his pale forehead was already furrowed with worry, his lips pressed together in a thin, straight line. His special talents included rolling joints and blowing smoke rings. He also owned a motorcycle.

"Looks like in July we'll finally get to be together," I said. "Mark's gonna be far away."

Mark shrugged and passed the joint back to the front, "You can get together now."

I knew he was just trying to be tough, trying to play like he didn't care. But he had to know I didn't really want Dan. My eyes rested next on Tim, his grease-stained hand tugging at the gearshift.

I was getting all revved up then, wondering what Mark would think if I made it with all three of them, when suddenly there was Mr. McCann, just like that, in my mind's eye. His high forehead reflected the fluorescent light he always seemed to be standing under, winking at me as if we shared some private joke. He was the only teacher who didn't let me blend in with the rest of the supportive kids. He made it a point to call on me every class—even though I never raised my hand—and wrote "I know you can do better," on my homework assignments.

"Don't forget the So-Co, dude," Tim said to Dan, who produced the shiny pint from inside his jacket.

I banished Mr. McCann from my mind, and looked out the window, at the world beyond the smoke-filled car. There was the diner where Ma used to work, the aircraft factory that had employed my father until the layoffs in the late '80's. Time got hazy then, stretched thin like my blood with the booze and pot. It seemed like we'd never get to the woods, the



Main Street gas stations and diners and factories would keep repeating in an endless blur till we either crashed or grew too old to care.

I don't know how long Mark's hand was on my thigh before I felt it, but as soon I did I took it in mine. The world seemed more solid then, though I wouldn't turn and look him in the eyes, wouldn't let him know I'd doubted it for a second.

When we got to our clearing, I hooked a finger through one of Mark's belt loops and pulled him to me. "So, you're moving away from me, huh?"

"I have to, Diz," he began, but I was already biting his lip.

He opened his mouth wider—pulling his lip away from my teeth—and I tasted the sweet liquor on his tongue.

"Hey no fair," said Tim. Him and Dan leaned against a maple tree, passing the bottle between them. "Where's *our* bitches?"

"Who you calling a bitch?" I said. Then, to Mark, "Do you see what you're leaving me with?"

"Those guys aren't so bad."

I looked back at the two of them—Tim, with his long brown hair and ripped jeans, Dan with his dusty work boots and furrowed brow. The afternoon light streamed through the trees, glinting off the zippers on their leather jackets, making their pale faces glow.

I'd made out with all three of them before, even Dan. That's the way it went with our group. We'd hang out in the woods after school until dusk, smoking, drinking, bullshitting. Sooner or later, we'd separate into pairs. Our respective couples would last for a few months or so, but sooner or later there was always a breakdown. There would be transgressions at parties, or at the bowling alley, and then we'd be back in the woods with anyone up for grabs.

But for the past month, I'd been drawn to Mark alone. He had that kind of effortless cool you couldn't fake, whereas I had to try constantly, harder than anyone. I had to drink more, smoke more, skip class till I got threatened with suspension, shoplift until I got arrested. Even after all that, once the thrill wore off, I still had that dull ache inside, the same one I felt when I thought of Mark moving away.

I took the bottle from Tim, had a swig and then set it down, propped up against one of the maple's giant roots. Then I pressed him against the tree, hard enough to feel him stiffen beneath his jeans. His tongue was smoky, his kiss lazier than Mark's.

"That's messed up," I heard Dan say.

When I pulled back from Tim, Mark was sitting cross-legged on the ground, watching us calmly.

I sat down next to him. "See what you make me do?"

I searched his face for signs of hurt, but Mark only looked sad. "I need to get out of here, Diz. Don't you realize we can't do this shit for the rest of our lives?"

"We can't?" I asked. "What am I going to do? Join the army, too?"

He paused, lit a cigarette. "Don't you want to get away from your Ma? Doesn't she give you shit?"

I laughed. That would be the day when Ma—who holed up in her room with her pills and her wine, taking the phone off the hook when the bill collectors called—took enough notice to give me shit about anything. She signed my suspension notices without even reading them, probably wouldn't have cared if I was kicked out of school for good.

"I don't take any shit from my Ma," I said.

“But don’t you think about what you want to do? I mean, after?” He waved his hand as if the answers were all there, at the edge of the clearing.

What did I want? I wanted to get the hell out of here too, but how? What were my special talents? Dumbing down? I was surprised to feel a sudden burning in the corners of my eyes, and looked at my hands so Mark wouldn’t see. I noted the way my black nail polish was beginning to chip, and then stood up and began taking off my clothes. I slid my nylons off first, then pulled my sweater up over my head. “This is what I think about,” I said, cupping my breasts through my black lace bra.

Tim whistled and clapped. Dan’s eyes widened with disbelief. Mark grinned and stubbed his cigarette out on the bottom of his shoe.

“C’mon you guys,” I said, wriggling out of my skirt. “Stop acting like old men.” Goosebumps rose on the back of my neck, and my body felt cool and light. I ran around the boys, laughing and kicking up leaves, so giddy I barely felt it when I stubbed my toe against an old beer bottle half-covered with dirt.

Dan was out of his clothes first, although his pants caught around his ankles and he nearly fell over trying to get them off. Tim undressed stoically, somehow managing to keep a lit cigarette in his mouth the whole time. Mark removed his clothes slowly, as if on the verge of changing his mind.

But once all our clothes were piled on the ground, no one hesitated. The boys pretended to chase me, and I pretended to run away, dodging their grasping hands until Dan caught my long hair and wouldn’t let go. He dropped to the ground and pulled me down with him.

The leaves crunched beneath us, and the dirt was hard with tiny sticks, pebbles and bottle caps, but Dan’s slight body was surprisingly soft. I lay on top of him, enjoying the feel of his skin against mine. The lines etched into his forehead seemed to smooth over when I kissed him, but when he tried for more, I rolled off.

I was on my back now, the three boys standing over me. I was a wild girl, leaves in my hair, fingers in the dirt. When Tim stepped forward I spread my legs wide—I could still do those splits from my old dance classes at the Y—then snapped them back together.

“Cock tease,” Tim said, stepping back.

“Fuck you.” I sat up.

Mark knelt in front of me, and handed me the bottle. His eyes searched mine. I took a swig, then pushed him down.

“Don’t go.” I was on top of him, my hands gripping his shoulders.

“I’m not going,” he said, thinking I meant, don’t come.

“No, I mean it. Stay.”

“I’ll come back, Daisy—really.” Whatever else he meant to say was lost when I kissed him, hard. At least I knew I was getting the truth that way. Better an honest kiss than a mouthful of lies.

I was breathing heavy now, almost too loud to hear the leaves crunch when Tim came up behind me. My body had taken over, would have let him do whatever he wanted, but he was surprisingly gentle. He ran a hand down my back, and pressed his lips to the nape of my neck. Looking up, I saw Dan, six feet away from us, working himself with his hand.

I held onto Mark, pushed back against Tim, and felt every stroke of Dan’s hand although he only touched himself. My body was a livewire, sparking with electricity and I screamed when that electricity exploded, and I saw sparks on the backs of my eyelids, felt them from the top of my head to the soles of my feet. If only for that day, that hour, no one



was going anywhere, no one could leave me behind. There was no long, dull future to contemplate, no consequences at all, because we were still young, and all the boys were mine.

Mr. McCann was not amused. Stupidly, I'd left my purse in the classroom and had to go back. It was well after the end of last period, but he was still there.

"Sit." He pointed to a chair in front of his desk.

I sat down gingerly. My back and legs burned where I'd been scratched by twigs, and my nylons were torn and dirty. The longer Mr. McCann stared at me, the more my body retreated into that burn. My exploits in the woods suddenly seemed ridiculous, embarrassing.

"I've seen your file." He sat down in front of me on his desk, crossing his legs so his pant legs rose, revealing pale, hairy shins. "I know you're too smart for this class. You're not fooling me."

"I'm just here for my purse," I said. "I don't need a lecture."

He leaned back and produced the purse from his desk drawer. "Don't think I don't know what you're doing, Daisy," he said.

"You don't know anything about me."

"I know that you're scared, and you think you're out of options," Mr. McCann said.

"But, Daisy, there are people you can talk to. People who can help—guidance counselors, social workers."

Just who did this guy think he was? My dad? Well, my dad was in Virginia, living with a woman closer to my age than my mom's. Did Mr. McCann know how that felt? Or how it felt to watch your mother get fired from one crappy waitress job after another because she couldn't go off the pills long enough to not spill someone's coffee? To hang out in the woods, pretending you were free, before coming home to an empty house or your shift at the grocery store that would be more than happy to employ you for the rest of your life? No, I decided. He didn't know shit. Guidance counselors? Social workers?

"I don't want those losers picking my brain," I said.

"Well then, what do you want?" Mr. McCann looked at me in that no-bullshit way again. "You're obviously not excited about my class. Okay. Not everyone loves history like I do. But what does get you excited? What do you want out of life?"

I stared at him, watched as he reached for his phantom cigarettes. What did I *want*? It occurred to me that Mr. McCann was a guy. An old bald guy, sure, but still a guy. And I was a young, hot girl with a torn skirt. I probably smelled like sex.

"What do *you* want?" I uncrossed my legs.

"I want to help you succeed, Daisy," he said (coily, I thought.) "I want to see you live up to your potential."

"Should I shut the door?"

He cocked his head and squinted, looking at me like I was an interesting passage in the history book. "What are you talking about?"

"What are *you* talking about?"

"I'm trying to figure out why a smart girl like you would get herself put into supportive classes, and why she would work so hard to fail." Mr. McCann leaned back on his hands and gave me what I thought was a smug, teacherly look.

"Oh." I leaned forward so my neckline fell open and he could see my black lace bra. "I thought you wanted to fuck me."

It was awesome. His face turned bright red, right up to his shiny crown.

Before he could say anything I got up and shut the door. I walk a little different when the boys are watching, and I walked that way for Mr. McCann too. His face was still red when I came back.

I sat down next to him on the desk, good and close. I could smell him now, Old Spice beneath something garlicky he'd had for lunch. My own body was humming, warm in the usual places. There, you dirty old fucker, I thought. Who needs the social worker now?

"Daisy," he said, his voice wavering. "You're misreading my intentions."

Like I couldn't tell, even with those loose khaki pants that he was getting a boner? Please.

I put my hand on his thigh. It was trembling, just a little. I thought of all those times he'd bawled me out in class, all those smarmy notes he'd written on my quizzes.

"Maybe you're the one who needs extra help," I said, my voice barely above a whisper. "Maybe I'm the one who can help you."

He shook his head. But he didn't make me move my hand.

I'd never really looked at Mr. McCann, beyond his bald head and glasses. But now I saw that he had soft-looking lips, almost like a girl's, and that his fingers were long and elegant, with meticulously trimmed nails. Was I really going to do it with him? I imagined telling my girls. Would they think it was badass or disgusting?

He put a hand on my back, and began rubbing it in wide circles. I knew I had him then. I waited for him to make his move.

But he slid off the desk after only a few moments. "I want you to think about what I said. We both know you don't belong in this class. We both know you can do better." His face wasn't flushed anymore, but his eyes were liquid, his mouth turned down. He was looking at me with *pity*, of all things.

When he was gone I realized I'd had this stupid grin on my face the whole time. I finally relaxed, and my jaw ached.

And then suddenly I was crying. It just happened. I was crying and shaking as if I'd just barely missed taking a bullet. I hadn't really cried in years. It was part of my plan, along with failing tests and dying my hair, to get in with the tough girls, to make myself as hard and rough as them. I thought I'd be shielded from disappointment, from grief, that way. But now I was lonelier and more tired than ever. I couldn't get that sad look on Mr. McCann's face out of my mind.

Later that week, I told my girls what happened and we had a good laugh. I didn't go back to Mr. McCann's class—I kept skipping it to see Mark in the woods until he left for boot camp. It wasn't until years later that I saw what had really happened in that room, how I hadn't been able to see beyond the only source of power I thought I had. That's the great lesson of history, isn't it? To not repeat the mistakes of the past? But first you have to see them for what they are.

