

My Bad Boy Summer
by Ann Herrick

1959

If I had to pinpoint exactly when I started denying reality, I'd say it was the night I went to The Exit.

"Turn off the engine, and let's go in," Caprice said.

"I just want to hear the end of 'That'll be the day.'" I did like the song. But what I really wanted was a few more seconds to gather myself. The dingy building with the dim light struggling to shine through the grimy windows was not exactly in New Haven's new Urban Renewal. "Are you sure it's okay for us to be here?" A mist of cold sweat formed on my brow as I watched people filing in. "Everyone looks ... *older*. What if they throw us out?"

"Vija Skalbe, would you cool it just for once? It's a coffeehouse, not a bar. No one here is over twenty. Trust me." Caprice snorted her snide, stifled laugh. "You'll be glad I dragged you here."

I doubted that.

Caprice lit a cigarette the second she stepped out of the car. "Just this one," she said. "I'm trying to quit."

I'd told her Karl had warned me not to let anyone smoke in his car. I took a deep breath as we went inside and ordered coffee from a rough-looking guy with a Frankenstein forehead. Caprice pulled me toward a mushroom-sized table near the low platform that served as a stage. I sat down and wrapped my hands around the mug of acrid liquid. Caprice drank hers black. I had enough cream in mine to turn it white, but still could hardly stand to swallow the bitter taste. My folks loved the dark brew, but my coffee-appreciation gene must have been recessive.

Blue smoke hung in the air from all the people puffing on cigarettes. One girl with long black hair touched a black cigarette holder to her lips, and blew a thin stream of smoke that swirled in the hazy light. Her over-sized black sweater hit mid-thigh on her black-tights-clad legs.

I slid my feet under my chair, pushed myself close to the table, and tried to hide. As usual, I didn't quite fit in. Ever since my family finally decided to emigrate from Latvia to Connecticut when I was eleven in order to get away from the ravages of World War Two, I had one foot in each country. I wanted both feet planted firmly on American soil. But my parents constantly reminded me that our roots were in Latvia.

I'd asked Caprice what I should wear, and all she'd said was, "Something somber." My black pleated skirt and mustard-colored sweater with matching cardigan turned out to be as out-of-place as I felt. I should've guessed, since Caprice had been wearing mostly tight-fitting black for the past two years. Her white lipstick, however, was new. Not a look out of Seventeen. Not that I was either. I tried to follow the latest fashions, but seemed to latch on to them just as they were ending. I was not what you'd call hip.

During most of the week The Exit held readings. "Beat" poetry, radical writers such as Jack Kerouac, that kind of stuff. I'd read in *On the Road*. I lost track of how many times the characters drove back and forth across the country on the open roads. I wasn't sure there was any purpose to it, but I envied them their freedom, if not their dreariness. My parents viewed American coffeehouses with profound suspicion. They would be appalled if they knew I was here.

On Fridays, instead of readings music was featured. I liked music, and that was one reason why Caprice was finally able to strong-arm me into going.

Caprice and I had become friends in the middle of sixth grade, soon after I moved to the small shoreline town of Chatfield. I was extremely shy. Caprice lived just a block away then. We found ourselves walking to and from school together, and something clicked. She helped me with my English, and radiated confidence. I admired people with confidence. Caprice enjoyed coming to my house where there was a father and a brother. She had neither. She liked bugging my brother, Karl, and he liked to tease her. Caprice and I became best friends. For a long time she was my only friend, and even now I was not what you'd call popular.

Caprice and I even had a ceremony to make ourselves Spit Sisters. We were both too chicken to actually cut ourselves in order to become Blood Sisters. So, instead, we spit into each others hands, rubbing them together to "absorb" the saliva. We figured one bodily fluid was as good as another. We cut a lock of each other's hair and clipped the tip of each other's pinkie fingernail. We dug a hole and buried the hair and nails. Then we marked the spot with a pile of round rocks we'd collected from our back yards.

We started to drift apart in junior high. When we started high school, Caprice announced that she'd dug up our hair and fingernails and scattered them. She didn't want to be Spit Sisters any more.

This spring I turned seventeen and my brother joined the Navy rather than wait to be drafted. He left his old Chevy in my care. That's when Caprice started getting friendly again. Maybe it was our history together—as well as the car—that renewed her interest in me. We certainly weren't in the same circle. Of course, my circle was much smaller than Caprice's, so I was more willing to adapt. I struggled to find my place in the world.

"Well, Vija" Caprice lifted an eyebrow. "What do you think?"

"What do I think about what?"

Caprice let out a loud sigh. "What do you think about *The Exit*? Is this a cool place or what?"

What could I tell her? That *The Exit* felt like a journey to an alien world to me? That my parents, instead of asking me the usual twenty questions, would've grilled me with thirty questions if I'd told them my plans to drive into New Haven at night. It was only a few miles, but to my parents it was another galaxy. I told them I was going over to Caprice's. Since she'd moved across town a couple years ago, it made sense that I'd drive. I just didn't mention that we were not *staying* at Caprice's. "Yeah ... it's ... cool."

"Maybe we'll meet some guys."

"Me? Meet a guy? Yeah, right." I crossed and re-crossed my ankles. What if I *did* meet a guy? Then what! Caprice talked about trying to meet "men from Yale." *Yale!* Guys from our own school made me nervous enough. But of course I couldn't tell Caprice any of that. When she'd been convincing me to drive into New Haven and spend the first Friday night of summer vacation at *The Exit*, she made me think I'd be a failure for life if I didn't.

Caprice just shook her head. With her naturally flirtatious manner, she couldn't possibly understand what it was like to be drab in every conceivable way. Besides, I wasn't interested in just any guy. I wanted to wait for someone special. Of course, back in junior high when I told Caprice that she laughed and said I was afraid of life. Maybe she was right.

"Cast an eyeball on him." Caprice gestured toward a lanky, dark-haired guy in a far corner. "He's a cool cat."

"Um. Yeah." He looked kind of gloomy to me.

The lights blinked and the room's discordant chatter turned to a soft murmur.

"Here comes Nolan Shar." Caprice nodded toward the stage. "I've heard he even plays gigs in Hartford."

"Yeah, I know. You've told me." A hundred times. As if Hartford was the center of the music world. Of course, what did I know? Caprice said this guy was a folk singer. I loved rock n' roll, especially Buddy Holly's music. He was killed in that awful plane crash a few months ago, and I still mourned him.

Nolan Shar stepped out of the shadows, up onto the platform, carrying a guitar. It was rumored that he'd attended Yale for a while, then dropped out of school to sing. He was the kind of guy Caprice would set her sights on. I saw him only from the back, and took in the sandals, striped shirt, and chinos. A Kingston Trio look. As the lights dimmed, except for one casting its gentle, muted light on him, he turned. He looked out toward the audience—and smiled directly at me.

A swath of dark curls fell casually on his forehead. His stubbly five-o'clock shadow gave his face a slightly dangerous look. He moved with nonchalant grace as he placed himself on the tall wooden stool in the center of the stage. His hands gently cradled the guitar. He spoke two words. "Aura Lee." Then his long, slender fingers caressed the strings, and he started to sing in a quiet, yet almost gravely voice. "As the blackbird in the spring"

The music, I realized, had been used for Elvis's "Love Me Tender." But these original lyrics had a haunting quality, and filled me with a sense of peace and satisfaction.

Every word pulled at me. Or maybe it was Nolan's voice.

I applauded, too enthusiastically apparently for Caprice, as her mouth was tight with displeasure. I realized then that steady, rhythmic clapping was the approved method of The Exit crowd. Still, in the dim, smoky atmosphere, I allowed myself an intense smile.

Through his set Nolan sprinkled in a couple of lively songs with high humor. But the general tone of the music was soft and yearning. After his last song, he simply acknowledged the final applause with a nod, and put his guitar in its case. As the lights came back on, he stepped down from the stage.

My throat closed as he started toward the door.

"Nolan, wait." Caprice's voice shot across the table. She arched an eyebrow. "Join us?"

Nolan stopped. He looked at Caprice, then me, then at Caprice again. He shrugged, grabbed a chair from another table, and sat down.

I stared into his peacock-blue eyes. I felt as if they just pierced my soul. I could not open my mouth. Fortunately, Caprice never had that problem. She launched into a monologue about Chatfield, folk music, and, of course, herself. Word after word tumbled off her lips, effortlessly, like rain off a roof.

Nolan sat, apparently fascinated, staring at Caprice, nodding occasionally, tossing out an "mmm-hmm," now and then. Finally, the flow of words stopped. Caprice reached out and placed her hand over Nolan's in a possessive gesture. "Can I get you a coffee?"

Nolan shook his head. "Sorry. Gotta split." He pulled out a pen, tore off a corner of my paper napkin, scribbled a phone number on it, and shoved the piece of paper at me. "In case you'd like to talk some time."

Then he left.

For a second Caprice gawked in stunned silence. Then she sat bolt upright. "I can't believe he asked *you* out!"

"He ... he didn't ask me out."

Caprice rolled her eyes. "He gave you his number. Same thing."

"Yeah, right. As if I'd ever call him. Girls don't call guys."

"Maybe prissy little girls don't. But *some* of us do. Especially a gorgeous bad-boy like Nolan."

Bad-boy? What made Caprice say that? Was she just jealous because he gave *me* his phone number? I looked down at the piece of paper and traced my finger over the number. I folded the paper in half, and in half again, then tucked it in my pocket.

From the moment Nolan strummed the guitar I knew he was someone special. I suddenly realized what I'd been waiting for. I'd always wanted to fall in love with a folk singer.

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