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Wayward

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Wayward

Abstract

It's hard to imagine, now, how it was that I took up with that boy in South Carolina, but facts are facts. William Buchanan Redmond was lawless and drawling, full of sideways glances and outrageous proposals. He went by Cannon.

One night on Hilton Head Island, where I was staying with a friend's family (thanks to private school I had friends with houses on Nantucket, etcetera, though I lived in a modest house with my mother and sister that we were renovating to resell), he approached me at an outdoor concert. A guitarist was playing a sing-along rendition of "Take Me Home, Country Road" in the piazza down by the harbor, hired by the resort to entertain visitors while they strolled and ate ice cream. Cannon sat down next to me on a brick wall. I thought he was cute. I'd say something more intelligent, except my teenage diaries reveal a definite simplicity of thought: he was cute. He was cool. He was dealing drugs out of a purple van in the parking lot. [*excerpt*]

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Disciplines

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KATHRYN RHETT

Wayward

IT'S HARD TO IMAGINE, now, how it was that I took up with that boy in South Carolina, but facts are facts. William Buchanan Redmond was lawless and drawling, full of sideways glances and outrageous proposals. He went by Cannon.

One night on Hilton Head Island, where I was staying with a friend's family (thanks to private school I had friends with houses on Nantucket, etcetera, though I lived in a modest house with my mother and sister that we were renovating to resell), he approached me at an outdoor concert. A guitarist was playing a sing-along rendition of "Take Me Home, Country Road" in the piazza down by the harbor, hired by the resort to entertain visitors while they strolled and ate ice cream. Cannon sat down next to me on a brick wall. I thought he was cute. I'd say something more intelligent, except my teenage diaries reveal a definite simplicity of thought: he was cute. He was cool. He was dealing drugs out of a purple van in the parking lot.

When he sat down next to me he said, "Hey?" I said, "Hey?" back. Then we smoked some cigarettes. I was smoking two packs of Newports a day, fat white cigarettes in a green box: menthol. Supposedly tiny particles

of fiberglass were embedding themselves in my lungs with every inhale, but I didn't care.

At night Cannon liked to sneak onto people's sailboats and trespass on the famous golf course. He liked to drink liquor straight from the bottle and smoke joints. He smoked joints during the day, too, in the bathrooms of fancy resort hotels. Then he'd sit by their swimming pools as if he were a guest. But he wasn't. He lived with his parents and a bunch of little siblings outside of the "Plantation" of Hilton Head, the Plantation being the corporately owned and moneyed part of the island where tourists stayed. The landscaping changed as soon as you left the gates to the Plantation, from a manicured lushness to scorched crabgrass. I was taken aback when I saw Cannon's house, the sagging porch and brown yard set directly on the highway. But I was deep into it by then. "Wanna do it," he'd say in the drawl with a crooked smile. We speak of "giving the bride away." I was giving myself away.

One night when we were lying down together on a deserted beach, he told me about a murder. A woman had been killed a few towns away, raped and strangled, her body left in the bathtub. She wasn't killed on the Plantation, but in a coastal town I didn't know. Cannon knew where it was, he told me how to get to her house, a two-story white house he said, and she lived on the second floor. I pictured the single white porch light shining down on the wooden stairs to her apartment. "Her name was Sheila," he whispered. "You think I coulda done that murder?" I laughed. "I know stuff that wasn't in the papers," he said, low and sinister. "I wasn't with you that night." He clasped his hands around my throat. "You think I coulda done that murder?"

It was just possible.

Cannon's first visit to me at home in New Jersey fell through because he stole a car. His father called to tell me Cannon was grounded. When he finally arrived, he debarked from the plane wearing mirrored sunglasses. He carried a zippered nylon bag, in which he had packed a

few essentials: T-shirts, a Confederate flag, a lava lamp, and an ax. (Remembering these items, I can't help but ponder the changes in airport security.)

In the guest room, he draped the Confederate flag over the back of the sofa bed. He plugged in the lamp and watched, satisfied, as the blue globs started ovulating up and down. He put the ax under his mattress. Made him feel safer, he said. Finished with settling in, he turned for the kitchen. I followed him. I wondered if he had ever traveled anywhere before. He asked my mother for eggs—raw. He broke three into a glass and drank them. My mother and I stared at him. He hadn't even stirred in the yolks. They had stacked up 1-2-3 in the glass, like the lava lamp.

His particular embodiment of the South didn't play well up north. I took Cannon to a party and left him with the guys drinking beer in the yard. One of them came and found me. "I'm really sorry," he said, "but we had to beat up your boyfriend." The next day Cannon thought he'd frighten me for fun, by putting pantyhose over his head and threatening me with a wooden hairbrush. My mother happened to see him coming out of the bathroom in this getup. She gave him fifteen minutes to pack his things. "I'll come back for you baby," he assured me. "Someday you'll see some dude pull up to your house in a black Beamer with tinted windows and it'll be me. You'll hear a motor gunning in the driveway, you'll run to the window, and it'll be old Cannon. Come to take you away." My mother took him to the airport. His father sent him away to military school. I haven't heard a word since about William Buchanan Redmond, my love of the South.

I loved the South, with its Edenic overgrowth, its excesses and extremes. The landscape expressed my feelings of wildness at the time. At home I chose oblivion and wandering. My friend Howie once carried me on his shoulder the whole quarter-mile of driveway up to my dad's apartment

on a cattle farm. I was too drunk to walk. “Here she is, Mr. Rhett,” he said cheerfully, dumping me on the couch. My dad laughed.

My dad was in a stage. He had a waterbed with brown satin sheets. My sister and I would lie on it to watch TV. Periodically when the mattress became too gurgly, we were allowed to take off the sheets and remove air bubbles by coaxing them along toward the release valve with a yardstick. Then we’d remake the bed and watch more television. We ignored the stack of *Oui* magazines in the television cabinet. *Oui* was pornography for gentlemen; the title was French, so it must be in good taste. My dad had a girlfriend with bleached blond hair and bright blue eyes, who drove a sexy red Mazda sports car. My dad loved Mazdas. He had a friend who raced Mazdas, and he took us to see him race in the “600” at Watkins Glen, in which cars roared around a track for hours. Even to my untrained eye, I thought my dad’s girlfriend was too obvious—her bathing suit was a crocheted string bikini. She gave me hand-me-downs: a pair of thigh-high blue suede boots. Her hair would have looked better brown.

My dad drove a green Porsche convertible, a 911t. (The “t” stood for “targa.” I liked knowing this, being in the know, holding onto the secret words like stones.) My dad gave rides to my friends, driving eighty miles an hour. He came to weekend soccer games at my school and stood with me on the sidelines. “He is a hurtin’ puppy today,” he once observed about a hungover boyfriend who was struggling to run the length of the field. He yelled, “Give it some legs!” My mom was away once and he came by the house unannounced to check on me. Looking over my shoulder, he saw a crowd in the kitchen, a beer ball on the counter. The stereo was blasting The Doobie Brothers and I was flushed, wearing dangly earrings and my favorite purple shirt. “Hey, Ace,” he said mildly. “Looks like you’ve got it all under control. Call me if you need anything, will ya?”

I don’t know how my sister put up with me. It was that night, I believe, that I cut the hair off all of her Barbie dolls.

My mom was in a stage, too. When I had arrived home from South Carolina, there was no one at home. My sister was at camp. I had wandered through the empty house. Everything looked orderly—even the row of men’s shoes lined up neatly on one side of my mother’s bed. I paused at that. I poured a glass of lemonade and sat in the backyard to think about it. My mom pulled up in her pink BMW. I loved that car, the BMW 2002, in deep rose. She’d bought it used, of course, like all of our family cars. She buzzed back and forth from our little townhouse in Princeton to her new job as counsel to the Governor in Trenton. Her public defender’s job had become frightening when clients threatened her, and us. She visited them in the Trenton prison and the Vroom Building for the Criminally Insane, where she’d once gotten locked in by mistake. She felt safer in her new job, designing the legalization of casino gambling, among other things; working with the Mafia was safer than defending the violent poor. I heard the emergency brake cranked up, and then she hopped out of the car, in tennis whites. “Honey!” she exclaimed, coming over to hug me. “You’re home early!”

“A few hours,” I said grudgingly, watching a man get out of the car in tennis clothes. He looked young, with wavy brown hair and brown eyes. He was sort of pigeon-toed. Cute.

“This is Bruce,” my mom said. He came over to shake my hand.

“Hi,” I said. “Are you living here?”

They both looked embarrassed for a second, and then they didn’t. He was a lawyer, too, younger than my mom. He was living with us. He bought a book about disco dancing and taught us the steps. It was the year after *Saturday Night Fever*. When my dad took me and my sister to France the next month, we saw *La Fièvre de Samedi Soir* playing in theaters. The fever of Saturday night in America had struck all of us.

*

I was perfect, and I was trouble. I did my chores at home and rode my bike to the drugstore, supermarket, and dry cleaner's. I could steer with one hand and hold my mother's clean blouses and suits with the other, the plastic bagging streaming out behind like a banner. I cooked and cleaned and painted the porch. I babysat in the neighborhood for money. A good student, I spent hours on the weekend writing essays for English class, memorizing chapters of history. I dressed neatly and didn't break the rules. And I was a jerk, hanging out my bedroom window blowing cigarette smoke into the backyard, hiding bottles of vodka in the closet. I talked for hours on the telephone at night to my friends. Once my friend Cammie and I both fell asleep while on the phone with each other, the receivers cradled on our pillows. We were both grounded for that one—there could have been an emergency and no one would have been able to call. I was always either grounded or not grounded.

As a townie in Princeton, I liked breaking into university parties. Their version of fraternities and sororities were eating clubs, housed in former mansions along Prospect Street. If my friends and I couldn't get past the front doorkeeper, we would climb in a side or basement window, some window always being open for air in the rooms where people jammed together dancing, shouting, and drinking beer out of plastic cups. So many sweating, shining faces. We sneaked into Princeton reunions, too, a standard townie civic duty. If we were lucky, we'd have extra badges from a genuine alum, and if not we'd find byzantine routes through dormitories in which a window or door would let out into a tented area.

I was trained in subterfuge by my dad, the only member of his generation I knew of who faked his way into reunions. Probably my sister and I were good cover—who would try to bust into a reunion with his kids? He preferred the front door method, sliding in with a crowd of entrants, or pretending he'd lost his badge, and he looked the part in his polo shirt, khakis, and boat mocs. He actually owned a boat in

those days, a Bristol twenty-nine-foot sailboat. (“A Bristol Twenty-nine,” I would say airily, and I knew, too, how to raise and fold the mainsail and jib.) We were seldom turned away at the gate, and a memorable triumph was a free roast beef dinner from the Class of 1955.

One night I wandered off home from reunions by myself. We lived in town, I had a curfew, so there I went. On the way I got sidetracked by a new building on a street near campus. Funny I hadn’t noticed it before, a white building with many windows, manufacturers’ tape still on the glass. Could I see inside it? I pushed on the nearest door and it opened. I glided along the shiny floor. When a staircase appeared, I climbed it to the top. A large classroom opened up, a laboratory outfitted with pristine work stations, Bunsen burners never used, countertops never spilled on. Plastic wrapping still covered the faucets at sinks along the wall. I walked from station to station, imagining how the classroom would be in daylight, full of students and beakers and blue flames. I touched the plastic faucet wrappings. I was here first. Arriving at one end of the room, I looked out of a large window. The street seemed far down. It occurred to me that I was in an empty four-story building in the middle of the night. Hurrying downstairs, I felt shivers up my back.

Pushing open the door as quietly as I could, I peered around. The thought of Stanley the Bum came to me as I walked quickly away from the building toward home. I had taken Stanley the Bum to court, in the brick courthouse at the end of Nassau Street, for harassment. My friends called him Stanley the Bum because he did appear to be a bum, poorly dressed and hanging around the streets. He’d been following me around for months, which I didn’t want to believe when my friends pointed it out, but when I did errands in town he was often in the same store, staring at me, black eyes in a dumb soft face. He seemed slow and strange, his pants belted up too high. He often stood still staring, while people bustled around him. One day he stood

behind me in the grocery store line with a basket of things, and when I'd finished paying he set down his basket and followed me out. He stood next to me while I unlocked my bike and put groceries in the basket, and then I rode away fast without looking back.

He found me on a summer morning in the park at the end of my block, where I was babysitting my usual group of preschoolers. When I pushed one on a swing, he got on a swing. When I rocked a little boy on a hobbyhorse, he got on the next one and bobbed crazily back and forth, his bulk testing the metal coil. I ignored him. When we all got in the sandbox to play, he climbed in, too, sitting on the opposite edge with his shoes in the sand. Black lace-up shoes. He looked at me, he'd never stopped looking at me. "I've got something for you," he said.

"Get away from me," I said.

He held up a box. "It's a pearl ring."

"I don't want it." I smoothed the sand for a play highway. The kids shoveled and patted.

"It's a real pearl. I got it just for you."

Now I looked at him. "Where would you get a real pearl?"

He threw the box across the sand. "La Vake," the name of the good jeweler in town, was stamped on it in silver script. My friends and I coveted jewelry from La Vake, distinguishing ourselves from one another by favoring different silver bracelets, or St. Christopher's medals, which supposedly protected travelers, in red, blue, aqua, or green. The La Vake box was at my feet in the sand. "I don't want it."

He looked at me harder. "Open it. I got it for you."

"Take it back," I said, "and get out of here."

At this Stanley lunged full-body across the sand, grabbed the little box, and came up on his knees. I was on my feet pulling one of the kids out of the sandbox when he took a handful of sand and threw it in the children's faces. Right at their eyes. "Get out of here!" I yelled, "you asshole!"

Stanley gave me a sideways smile, delicately plucked up the box, and strolled over to straddle a hobbyhorse. There were other people in the park. “Someone call the police,” I asked. My kids were crying. I sat them on the edge of the sandbox and wiped their faces, started putting on their shoes. The police came and took Stanley away, in handcuffs. He didn’t resist, just shot me a taunting look over his shoulder.

I had to go to court that afternoon and describe the incident. My mom came home from work. I had a court-appointed lawyer. Stanley represented himself. This was the most frightening part, to find that Stanley had two personalities, for there he sat behind a table, utterly articulate and sharp. After I told my story, he questioned me, without a shade of the weird sidling lust he’d shown before.

“Did you, or did you not, use foul and scatological language in reference to me?” he asked, tapping a pen on the table.

I must have turned pink. I was under oath. Not sure what scatological meant, I knew the meaning of foul. The judge looked at me—he was a friend of my mother’s. My mother looked at me from the front row of seats, and the collection of individuals there in the courtroom with matters on the afternoon docket—they looked at me, too.

“I did not,” I said. Everyone except Stanley looked satisfied. He gave me one dismissive flicking glance and went back to his paperwork.

Stanley the Bum was thereafter banished from the township of Princeton, and forbidden to have any contact with me. The judge was grateful, because though Stanley had been stalking young women in town for years, he had never touched anyone, and so they could accuse him only of being creepy. Once he had thrown sand in the children’s faces, he became criminal. Banishable from the castle of Princeton.

Stanley knew where I lived, my lawyer had said. As counsel, he had my full name and address. So when I realized, in the brand-new university science building, that I was stupidly alone at one a.m., I shivered with the thought of Stanley. Stanley who seemed slow but threw

himself across the sandbox so fast, who wanted me to have a ring, who knew I lied in court. I thought, too, of the recent “bicycle rapist,” as yet uncaught, who pushed girls off their bicycles to attack them. Funny how safe I always felt on my bike, as if I could fly right past trouble. I practically ran the ten blocks home, staying in the street where the light was.

I made it home, I always did, and I didn’t stop straying. In those days the university library, the formidable Firestone Library with vast underground floors, was open to town residents. I would go to do homework and wander through open stacks on the dimly lit lower floors. In some areas, you pushed a button for a light, which would stay on briefly. I would walk through the light, and feel it extinguish behind me. I would see no one down there, as I passed thousands of books. Abandoned card catalogs lined an obscure corridor. Vanilla cards still filled the drawers. Study carrels were tucked into corners, where oversized books leaned and crumbled. Then I’d come upon a lone reader at a table, in an isolated bubble of light. I would pass quietly, both of us silent as fish. In the surrounding gloom I would pull out a book and pause to leaf through, then put it back. Someday I would be a university student, but not yet. I felt invisible, anonymous, an unseen wanderer.

One night in a town parking lot I tried to break into cars. Just the unlocked ones. I wanted to sit inside and pretend to drive them. My boyfriend at the time, a nice wholesome boy named Billy, was beside himself, his blue eyes earnest and panicked. What was I doing? We’d been drinking of course. All my friends did. We would drink so much of certain liquors that we could never drink them again in our lives: sloe gin, Southern Comfort. We drank vodka and beer and a jug wine called “Mountain Chablis.” We would drink on the Revolutionary War battlefield, or in someone’s house whose parents were away on a cruise, or in a car as we glided up and down the hills of rural roads listening

to soulful music. That night I tried to break into cars, and sometimes I hitchhiked home from school; I was a tramp and yet an innocent, with a fake name at the ready. Barbara was my fake name, I don't know why, except it sounded superficial and elusive, like a wave.

It seemed possible to leave your life and not come back. Stanley the Bum must have once been a different person. The university students had all been someone else before they sat in their islands of light, studying, transforming themselves. "When I get my own apartment, that's what I'll have," I would say importantly to my mother, pointing at a magazine picture or dishes in a department store display, imagining a future self.

I could slip away and not get caught.

Cannon's seduction line, as we lay on the swaying bunk of a stranger's sailboat cabin in the Harbortown harbor, was "Wanna fuck?" The Anglo-Saxon word is of the body, physical and direct. I consented, half unconscious. Boys wanted my body. Their lust wasn't personal. And what was my body to me? I was tired of fighting over it. My mind was separate—my mind that says: "fuck" came into the language in its current spelling circa 1495, the time of Columbus. In the sailboat, peripheral light sliding up and down the small windows as the boat rocked, I was sixteen. The South Carolina coast held the bright green and silica glitter of early summer. Facts are facts, you can't escape them. Do I feel shame, call myself a tramp, renounce my wicked ways? Maybe I'm just grateful—now, as a married worker bee—that I lived, following my craven impulses to the edge of ruin, letting my body have its wanton way.