

BLOODSTAIN

by Colin D. Smith

Ben loved his 2005 Ford Focus with a passion that bordered on obsessive. He bathed it and tended to its every need, whether oil, spark plugs, or a wax and polish. It was used when his parents gave it to him for his sixteenth birthday, but the previous owner had taken care of it. The body was in immaculate condition, and the white upholstery was without stain or blemish. And Ben resolved to keep it that way.

After a year, Ben and his car were inseparable. His friends joked about it being his replacement girlfriend, and would ask the car's name. He told them straight-faced, "Ashley." It was true that Ben felt a special connection with the car. Gripping its faux leather steering wheel was like holding its hand. Every drive was like an intimate conversation. On the occasion when someone rode with him, they weren't always sure if Ben was speaking to them, or the car.

One Friday morning in April, Ben drove his car to school. It was unseasonably warm that day. He rolled the window down and let his elbow hang out as he guided the vehicle along the familiar route. The car responded to his most gentle touch. A slight nudge on the accelerator, and there was a smooth increase in speed. A gentle pull on the steering wheel, and the car turned. A single tap on the brake, and the car slowed. That's all it took: a slight nudge, a gentle pull, a loving tap.

Ben parked in the designated student parking. His heart ached a little as he got out of his car. He locked the car then glided his hand over its roof: his fond farewell for the day.

He planned to take the car for a long drive on Saturday, and this occupied his mind as he walked up the stone steps to the front entrance of the school. While retrieving books from his locker, he thought of trees, the lake, and the sound of the engine changing pitch as he shifted gears. He could almost feel the

gentle vibrations in his arms and legs as the speed increased over sixty miles per hour. Ben walked down the corridor to his first lesson, smiling. He closed his eyes, and hit something solid.

“I’m sorry!” said the girl, bending down to pick up her books.

“No, no, my fault,” said Ben reaching down to help. He handed a particularly large chemistry book to the girl. Ben swallowed hard. She had large brown eyes, long fluttery eyelashes, and a smile that melted his heart. Defying his momentary paralysis, Ben pushed the edges of his mouth up.

“Lisa Munro,” the girl said as they stood. She reached out a hand from under the books in her arms. Ben recovered enough to take it.

“Ben Bradley,” he said, finding it amazingly easy to maintain eye contact. She didn’t look away.

“I’m surprised we’ve never met,” said Lisa, “at least formally.”

“It’s a big school,” said Ben.

“I need to get to class, but did you want to meet later—less formally?”

Ben felt the veins in his neck pulse. His heart was racing, probably in excess of sixty miles an hour since he could feel his hands shaking slightly.

“I would like that,” he said.

“Let’s meet here after school,” said Lisa. “You have a car?”

Ben thought for a moment. Then he remembered.

“Yes, I do. That would be great.” They gave each other parting smiles and went on their way.

All the way to Math, Ben’s mind was on Lisa’s long wavy brown hair, the curve of her face, the poise of her step. Somehow even the scent of her perfume lingered around him. The rest of the day, Ben found himself looking for opportunities to see Lisa. He watched for her friends, hoping she was with them. In the cafeteria, he sat at a table close to where she sat, too nervous to sit with her, but bold enough to let her see him watching her. Every time their eyes met, she would look coy and approving.

At the end of the school day, he joined the throng of students making their way to the long corridor that led to the front doors, nervous about his appointment—no, date, with Lisa. Where would they go? What should he say to her? Could he even speak without sounding like a complete dork?

“Hi, Ben,” said Lisa as he approached her. “Shall we go?”

“Sure,” said Ben. “Did you have somewhere in mind?”

“Do you know Bentley’s, the coffee shop?”

“Yes,” said Ben. He had been there a couple of times in his pre-Ashley days. Ashley had pretty much consumed his social life until now.

Ben led Lisa to the student car park and pulled out his keys. He pushed the button on the key fob that unlocked the doors. There was a light click, not the usual thunk of the locking system.

“That’s odd,” said Ben. “I’m sure I locked the car this morning.” He shrugged his shoulders and opened the passenger door. Lisa slid into the seat and Ben closed the door after her. He then walked around the car and got into the driver’s seat.

“Nice car,” said Lisa as Ben pulled the door closed and fastened his seat belt.

“It was a gift from my parents,” he said. “It’s old, but it’s in fairly good shape. Gets me around.”

Ben slid the key into the ignition and turned.

Click.

He tried again.

Click.

“Something wrong?” said Lisa.

“I don’t understand.” Turn. Click. Turn. Turn. Click. Click.

“It sounds like the battery’s dead or something.”

“It was fine this morning. This doesn’t make sense.”

“We can walk,” said Lisa. “It’s a nice day, and it’s not far.” Ben looked across at her. He couldn’t believe how beautiful she was.

“Yes,” he said. “Let’s walk. I can call my mom to pick me up after, and we can have someone tow the car.”

Lisa opened her door and got out. As Ben tried to get out of his seat, he felt something pulling on his jacket. He leaned forward and there was a ripping sound as his jacket separated from the back of the chair, like bare skin from leather on a hot day. Outside the car, Ben looked at the back of the seat.

“What the—?”

There was a huge bloodstain.