



Living Lovington, VA
by Stephe Seton

Spring 1960, and with spring, a boy awakens from his winter doldrums.¹ Jessica and I were fourteen and classmates at a school best suited for demolition. Within the past month we began to spend more time together, and in my thoughts, a lot of time together. Living in a town so small, like Lovingston I could stand in the center of town and spit in any direction to see that phlegm leave town. Jessica had an effect on me. I can say, it was a powerful effect, taking my body prisoner and all my senses. In a primitive Darwinian sort of way, I wanted to love her. Every inch of her. I luxuriated in her when she came fresh from her Saturday bath with a heading to church smell and her before the bath Saturday morning smell that reminded me of a summer's sweat and labor, of grass and farms, and smells attached to girls I knew, of talcum powder and Ivory soap.

If Jessica thought this way about me, I am uncertain. She would nestle in my arms, run a hand across my chest and tug at my long hair. One time with a loud whooshing noise, she inhaled me when she came across me laying in the yard of my parent's place. I suspect she was joshing me, but the vacuum noise she made startled me. I looked to her curiously. "You're teasing me." She smiled and leaned to kiss me on the forehead. The first time.

I adored her after a fashion. She wanted to hear my blandishments as often as she spent any time with me. It was easy enough, but my mind, to say my body, I anticipated well past my saying anything. If words existed to center my purpose, I said them. She might agree or not. This all depended on what my mother called "nature's disposition".

Let it be said, my parents never schooled me on puberty or the ways of women. I knew as much as boys could know by chattering with each other and practicing, as we called it, with discretion in our rooms at night. One of the older boys in our circle encountered opportunities and would bluster to brag, telling us younger boys enough to know we had no idea what he was talking about until we cross-referenced with farm animals. Such talk about cows and pigs always earned a chortle from my friends, and if time allowed, we biked the Stagecoach road to near farms to see if we could catch the bovine mischief, or to laugh at a porker's massive genitals as to compare the boar with absolutely none to our witness beyond their bragging about such things. We all knew better, and this bravado ended when laughter dried.

Now at fourteen, Jessica knew, and I knew what we both thought should happen between us. As my sense tells me, girls are instructed differently from boys, we

¹ In 1960 the population of Lovingston was 6467 ($w = 4642$; $n = 1825$).

sadly did not agree. Our pleasant lawyer fussing might as well have been staged, scripted. Boys are all talk. The too obvious truth was she could plainly see my physical frustration, and she would point this out as if I was complimenting her. Whatever physical shifts she endured over her panting, Jessica kept hidden from my general observation.

I give you all that precedes to remind you of fourteen, and to get my state of mind out of the way. My mind seemed locked to the age of unrequited possibilities.

A late June Saturday, I sat astride my Schwinn Stingray in front of the Loving general mercantile. I saw Jessica drawing near on her Schwinn Fair Lady with the framing bent down to allow a dress to flow, although I thought girls just bruised more easily. Jessica laughed at the thought before clearing my mind. She taught me a lot as I think back. I was naïve despite the plain speaking of the Blue Ridge Mountain folk who settled this part of the world. They kept to their old-world habits. Many still lived in cabins dotting the mountain landscape.

Jessica pulled up next to me. "What you got going, Seton?" She tugged my arm.

"Want a soda?" I pointed to the Loving general store. "I have a dime."

She smiled. "Rich man. Lot of money for an unemployed kid."

I corrected her. "I make some money harvesting ginger." Digging ginger roots satisfied many locals for seasonal money.

We dismounted the turf. I took her hand in mine, and we walked our bikes to the store. Two Negroes sat outside. "They acknowledged me with a slight rise. The older of the two spoke. "Afternoon Master Seton. Miss Apperson." I waved them down.

"Hot day, Ben," I nodded his way.

"Is that, Sir. Yes, Sir." He laughed. I don't recall ever seeing teeth as beautiful. I didn't know the younger man sitting next to him. Ben took note. "This is my cousin Samuel out of Atlanta. He's spellin' with us 'fore headin' to DC. Kinfolk there. Right, Sam?"

Sam glared. "You say."

There was always an edge to conversations with the black residents, but most days did not provoke conversation at all unless at a construction site or a field, then just business. I am ashamed to say I was unschooled in matters of race. Our schools were not integrated and while I knew black children went to school some place, I don't recall ever seeing it. That would not change until the mid-70s. The white school was a monstrous frame building and, toward the end became a part of the consolidated school system in Nelson County.

Rebecca tugged at my hand to direct me into the store. The room smelled of

vinegar and spoiled beef, motor oil, sold in refillable jars from a large barrel, and tobacco. Two old men sat in rockers near the counter. I recognized them both from the Baptist church we attended out of social necessity, and I attended with fantasies of Rebecca and me going into the curtained baptismal tub. Mr. Chester puffed on his pipe, heaving, and coughing a lung of Irish Wolfhound smoke, pungent. Unpleasant. His companion fiddled with his pipe, scraping the briar with a pen knife, cleaning the stem to reload it with Prince Albert.

I handed the dime to Mr. Loving. "Two colas please."

He asked, "Those darkies trouble you? I can run them off."

Rebecca scowled. "I know Mr. Ben. He's a good man. Very kind and respectful."

One of the old men laughed. "Fear has that effect on 'em."

I hear her leading in with a phrase, but I took her at the waist and turned her aside before words congealed. Over her shoulder she spat, "See you mind your words."

Chester snorted, then, as if to rise, fell back. "Your paw will see to you."

We reached our bikes to walk them to the courthouse. Once there, we sat at the base of the concrete soldier from the great war. When the conversation neared percolating, she turned to me, put her hand behind my head, into my long mane. She turned my face toward hers. It headed that way as it was. Then she kissed me kind of gently, a kind of evaluating a taste or smell. Not so much surprised, my boy's state of appreciation reacted.

"What's this statue all about?" She tapped the pedestal.

I looked up at the lanky soldier's austere face. Mr. Reynolds told us that after Reconstruction ended, these wives and daughters of Confederate soldiers raised money to put these statues up in front of court houses all across the south. He said it was to remember them. "Some people think it's to put a balm to the bitterness of losing the war."

Rebecca looked up, then to me. "Some folks around here don't even believe that. All these states' rights people. And the way Negros are treated."

"What do you mean? Are they treated badly?" I regretted saying that.

She sighed, collected her thoughts as she nursed the RC Cola. I studied her lips, absorbed the tight pink dolphin shorts, the matching snug top. I thought about her, the burst of femininity she exuded. *Mindful. Be mindful.*

She stared into my eyes as her head bobbed disapprovingly. "Hard for me to exactly phrase what I mean. You get used to things; I mean things as you have always known them."

"I guess." I scraped my vocabulary for a response.

"This town is pretty small. Where do you go for fun?"

"We go to Lynchburg. Maybe a movie or roller skating." As I said this I realized how petty this seemed. She was a lot more cultured. Probably spent her time in the library. I never asked. I was so focused on her presence.

"You have much family around here?"

I pictured my mother and father. "Just my folks. My dad's a photographer. Does school photographs, football games. Mom takes care of the house."

"A housewife?" The word spilled with acrimony.

"Pretty much what there is. No factory work. Is that what you mean?"

She laughed. Her smile brightened even the concrete soldier. "No silly. I mean like working for a cause, having a purpose. Women's rights. Racial balance."

"Truth to tell, those topics don't gain much traction around here. Honestly." I paused to assess her reaction. "I suppose we seem dumb. Your mother?"

"She's a lawyer. Charlottesville. My father teaches there. At the university."

I was losing my edge. I just wanted to make out with her. "I guess I don't know much about you." My apology.

She leaned into me. Her warmth, her breath on my cheek, her lingering fragrance of soap and life at fourteen. She kissed my cheek near my lips. I wanted to check to see if I was drooling. Her face stayed to within an inch. Kissing me again. I turned to reciprocate, but she eased back, soda to mouth, peering into the cluster of cheerful cumulus clouds. "We live here now."

I stiffened. "Prison?"

Shifting her weight, she asked, "How did this town come into existence?"

"The history of Lovingston. I didn't know much. It was started as a place with a name in the early 1800s. A farmer named Loving donated a chunk of land for the town and courthouse in Nelson County, which was new. I guess farmers lived around here, but probably not that many. A dirt road passed through from Lynchburg. I think the road just provided a route for crops and stuff they made."

She ran her hands through his long brown hair. "How's such your hair is so long?"

I took her hand and held it as I likewise combed through her shoulder-length blond. It felt light and silky. "A summer thing. My best friend lives up in the mountains, near my grandmother. I spend part of my summer with him and chopping wood for my grandmother. Been that way for years to recollect. His hair's the color of yours. It reaches his waist. I don't reckon to say he has never cut it. You'll meet him. Joel Tinker. Lives with his two sisters and parents." I stalled for her reaction. None appeared over

her, casting a curious glance, more to attend my hair. I continued. "About twenty people up there. My grandfather died last year. I helped bury him."

"Helped? How did you do that?"

"I dug the hole."

An eyebrow raised. She nodded. "Oh, so just your grandmother."

"There, yes. My mother's people live near here, in Crozet."

Not that I asked as I should have. Rebecca picked up the thread. "My mother works out of the Lynchburg office now and my father transferred to a college there. We moved here for some reason. Land prices maybe. My father always had this notion of raising chickens. Or goats. He hasn't settled on that. My parents bought twenty acres with an old farmhouse. I think it dates from the Civil War. Folks around here call it the Civil War or the War of Rebellion, right?"

I don't know much about the war over what some of the old timers recollect of their grandfathers, and it festers in a lot of them. I answered, "War for Southern Independence. Some bitterness lingers."

She finished the cola. "They want slavery back?"

I shook my head. "Never heard that. Closer to the call is returning to a kind of serfdom. Like it pretty much is. I don't think about it much. There are some colored folk around here."

Her thoughts became audible. "Colored? That's an odd way of saying it. Why do they stay here?"

"Where would they go? Most of them have small places out of town. Shacks really. They labor the apple orchids."

She turned to her side, propping her head with her left arm against the ground. "I should think someplace where the work paid better. Detroit, or New York. Only apples there are in grocery stores. Most of them couldn't even pick an apple tree out of the apple orchid."

Smiling, I said, "That's funny. So you have them migrating. That costs money. Wouldn't you suppose the thought occurred to them, but something held them back?" She did not respond immediately. He closed, "I don't know."

I leaned in to kiss her. Seemed like a logical next step. At first, she seemed interested, but turned her head. She winked, rose to her feet, and brushed off her shorts. "Let's go. I need to get home before you get too persuasive."

Persuasive? Sounded like a place from which to proceed.



My father answered the door. I was in my room attempting homework assigned by my ninth grade English teacher. It was the unintelligible *Hamlet* holding the skull of Yorick. I got that Yorick was not himself. How it came to a skull sitting around escaped my reasoning.

“Good evening Mr. Seton.”

“Good evening deputy. What brings you calling at this hour?”

The conversation sounded promising. I strode quickly to my father’s side. My mother was paces ahead of me.

“Nothing serious I suppose. I really want to speak to your boy.”

“Concerning?”

The tall, thin deputy shuffled uneasily. A man no older than twenty-five cleared his throat, removed his hat. “Mind if I set inside?”

My father cleared a narrow passage. Closing the door, the deputy came in. He said to me, “You and Miss Jessica were at the store earlier?”

My mother shot me a glance. I couldn’t read it. I responded, “Yes. We got a soda.”

“Did you speak to Ben, the colored man?”

“Yes, Sir. Not speak really. Greeted him.”

“And he was with another colored, a stranger to these parts?”

“Yes, but we didn’t speak.”

“Here is what I need to know, did this other fellow say anything to you or Miss Jessica? Anything that might be taken as, ah... .” He fidgeted. “Not appropriate?”

My mother interrupted him. “Inappropriate? Like what?”

The deputy turned to face her. “Something on the line of how she was dressed or what she might be up to with your boy?”

Mother continued, “You seem cautious with your words deputy.”

The deputy slunk a little. “One of the men in the store heard some comments to the effect that the children might be planning some personal mischief.”

I stepped between my mother and the policeman. “You referring to that old buzzard Chester? He don’t mince words. Nothing was said that I would take any way other than seeing those old men killing their retirement smoking and stinking up the store.”

He blushed. “All the same, we need to look into it.”

“Get your ropes out of storage I suppose.” My father did not take kindly to the rebel cause although he had heard his share of the men with the war memories of their grandfathers still waiting on Lee to ride in on Traveler’s back to undo a hundred years of

back burner apples stewing.

“Nothing was said to either of us to stir a worry. Nothing. Did you talk to Jessica?”

The deputy ran his hand across his forehead, then through his black, slicked hair. “Yes we did Bert. She was not exactly interested in talking to us.”

I Cheshire grinned at him. “You mean her mother. The attorney.”

My father apparently was not aware of this. I mentioned Jessica often enough as children were obliged to tell their parents on the company we kept. “An attorney.” He spoke as if this was old news.

The deputy shifted weight. What he expected I do not know, but if he thought something else would settle matters, he was wrong. “Yes. And Jessica’s father. Damn Yankee liberals settling in around here.”

My mother stabbed her words, “I doubt they’ll be picking apples.”

My father read the situation. “I might suggest the police department find some actual crime over pestering our children with the rantings o old rebels. M boy told you. Why don’t you just leave Ben to be. He’s a good man and sticks to his own.”

The deputy stalled answering, considering. “We have to look into these things. You understand. Times are changing.”

My mother laughed. “Around here?”

My father closed, “Is that it? I hope Bert settled this for you.”

He put his hat back on. “Good night.” He bumped the door, then stepped back to open it.

To ourselves again, my mother asked, “You and Jessica hanging out at the store today?”

I shook my head. “No, we got an RC and rode our bikes to the courthouse. That’s all there was to it. I never gave those folks at the store another thought. No point to that. Those old men are always there.”

I saw Jessica the next day.



No plan to it. She was with her mother and walked past our house. My father put me to pushing the Craftsman manual lawn mower around the yard. Jessica called to me. I waved. The pair made their way to me. I released my grip on the Craftsman. Cutting our lot digested half my day.

I said hello to her mother. “Did you get a visit from the constable last night?”

Jessica pulled me aside to whisper in my ear, "Later."

Her mother said, "It was a short visit. You?"

"My parents did the talking. I was there. I told the deputy what happened. Which was nothing." I picked up a t-shirt from the porch and pulled it over my head. It crept uneasily over my sweat. Jessica eyed me curiously as if I performed for her benefit. To her mother, "How is the apple farm?"

She laughed unexpectedly. "Apples? We should wait ten years to plant a sapling for a fruit that falls like snow around here. Maybe pears would be wiser."

Pears grew in these parts of the valley. "Pigs and groundhogs like 'em."

We walked to the country store, no more than a half mile. As it came in view, no one sat on the old chairs. No Ben or distant relative. Had Sam taken leave for the city? Was Ben working a field? I envisioned old Ben toiling in the sun, barely able to lift one foot to the other. I had no idea what he did, if anything. The thoughts weighed my mind, tinged with guilt, perplexed by my naivete.

We went in. Just the clerk. Jessica picked up a loaf of bread. She looked around. A jar of local strawberry preserves earned her study.

Her mother spoke to the clerk. "Some trouble here lately." Matter of fact, like common knowledge on the weather.

He shifted. I could not think of his name. A Love relative? "Not my doing, any of it. I ran them off. I don't need trouble here."

She continued, "Trouble? Lies cause you trouble?"

He reddened. "Not so to concern me. Just can't tolerate folks hanging around. Not good for business as is said."

Jessica eased toward the counter, placing the two items on the counter.

"What's not good for your business is restraining a hand to quiet them. You have a couple old rebels staking words to the place, leading the local law—such as it is—calling on us. Those Negroes did no harm, not able to raise a hand. Words frightened them, my guess to the matter. We all know we live in dark days. Change is in the air. Even this place, set off the path, really no more than two roads converging. A place of apples and stories. Isn't that it? Apples and stories?"

He thought about this. "Comes to seventy-eight cents."



Jessica and I grew into romance before we grew apart. Might have been more for us. I gave my imagination full rein. Did she? We never spoke of it. Nor did we speak of Ben and Sam.