

Eleanor Levine

Mrs. Leeds' Son

Ricky Thorpe was the first boy I ever kissed. He was perky, scraggly with brown hair and drove a purple moped.

We lived in Lakewood and he was from Jackson—our streets bordered the towns. The kids on my block were not fond of him. That he asked me out was not a problem; if I wanted to date a “dirt bomb” from Jackson, NJ, this was cool because the Lakewood boys, which included my brothers and neighborhood guys, did not consider me a girl.

“You’re a 2-by-4, Agatha,” my brother Harold said. He slammed the door when he saw me experimenting with makeup.

It was the first time I wore blue eye shadow and cherry lipstick and went near the road and Ricky came over on his moped.

“How ya doing?” he asked, glancing at my mascara. The other kids played baseball cards across the street.

“Good and you?” I was skinny back then—5 feet 6 inches and weighed less than 100 pounds. My mother (and some elderly aunts with sour breath in the Bronx who wore bargain-basement lipstick) fawned over my beauty. Their compliments were irrelevant on the tar Jersey streets where I played kickball.

“You look pretty,” Ricky said on his moped. “Want a ride?”

I looked at my family—some in the house and others playing baseball cards with neighbors. I muttered incoherently.

“Sorry, didn’t hear you—” he persisted.

“Okay,” I whispered.

“Well c’mon then,” he said, motioning toward me. I looked pensively at Ricky’s miniature leather jacket and slowly got on his bike, putting my hands around his waist.

Ricky smelled of cigarettes. His leather jacket felt smooth as we drove around the block. The kids playing baseball cards stopped momentarily.

“Look—there goes Agatha and Ricky!” They ogled as we rode along Poplar Street near the golf course.

I was petrified when Ricky took me on Ocean County Line Road, which was a major highway.

“How you doin’?” he asked.

“Fine,” I remarked, perhaps a little unenthusiastically. It was the closest I had ever been near a boy, not including my brothers.

Ricky returned me to our Cape Cod house, which was located at the top of the street.

A few days later Ricky came by to invite me for spaghetti. My mother was downstairs in the laundry room—a dim, concrete area where I rarely went by myself because you had to waddle in the shadows to find the

light. I was afraid people would come through the curtain and strangle me.

Ricky accompanied me as my mother put detergent into the washing machine.

“Mom,” I said nervously as she stared at the boy next to me. He was wearing his “Jackson Jaguars” jacket.

“What Agatha?” Mother asked, shutting the machine.

“Ricky wants to know if I can have spaghetti at his house.”

Ricky looked awkwardly at her.

“When Agatha, when are you going to have spaghetti?”

“Tomorrow night?” Ricky said, putting his hands in his jacket.

“No, absolutely not, we have Shabbat dinner on Friday night.”

“Awwww c’mon Mom—we don’t eat till six or seven,” I moaned.

“So, you want two meals—you’ll eat his spaghetti and won’t touch my food. The answer is no.” Once she gave an opinion, it was like slamming a door in a bank vault without knowing the combination.

“Mom, I promise I’ll clean the dishes if you let me go—please?” I whined, which she abhorred.

“Agatha—the answer is no. If you persist, you’ll be grounded for the week. I’ve got work to do.”

My mother folded clothes and I went with Ricky upstairs, where our German Shepherd Felicia barked at him.

“She won’t bite,” I told him.

“Why do you call your dog ‘Felicia’?” Ricky asked. You could smell his cigarette breath.

“Cause my mom likes the character Felicia on *General Hospital*.”

He went toward the door. “See ya, Agatha.”

Bye Ricky, I thought, and before I could say it, he was gone.

The next time I saw Ricky he took me to an abandoned seminary behind the golf course.

“This is where they taught young men how to become priests in the 1800s,” Ricky announced. It was, he explained, eerie and people rarely went there.

“Closed at the turn of the century—” Ricky pointed. It seemed like he walked around there by himself.

“It *don’t* scare me none, ‘cause what’s a dead priest gonna do?” he said, laughing to himself.

Ricky had a deep voice, which deepened as we got further into the woods and near the seminary. We walked among pine trees and nailed-up buildings and a darkening blue sky.

We stopped for a moment, while, what appeared to be a bird, made sucking noises.

“*Shit*—did you hear that Agatha—” he motioned to me. I heard a hissing screech and saw a lizard-like creature ascend.

I flew into Ricky.

“Shhhhhhhhhhhhhhh,” he motioned, “get down here....so he can’t see us...over here....”

I was shivering but did not know to whom or what Ricky referred.

“Who—what—who is it?” I murmured, clinging to his coat. We sat near a bush and heard what sounded like a needle scratching a record player.

“Shhhhhh—that’s the Jersey Devil,” he explained while there was yelping in the air. The creature—more interested in the trees than me or Ricky—was moving less apprehensively than we were.

I was about to cry until Ricky put his arm around me. Through the trees, we could see it flying back and forth like a vulture, chasing itself and squawking and whistling.

“*What’s the Jersey Devil?*” I mumbled, quite taken by the deafening sounds. I wished he brought his purple moped, but of course, his bike was so loud our escape might have been foiled. The wind, in the meantime, was blowing rapidly through the trees like a larger version of the thing above us. The branches, we saw, were shuffling.

“C’mon Agatha,” Ricky led me further into the thicket.

“What’s the Jersey Devil?” I asked again.

“I probably shouldn’t talk about it now—he’s up there...ya know what I mean? Just stick close,” he touched me on my back.

We walked further.

“Shhhhhhhhhhh.....” Ricky said, taking my hand.

“Do you think he wants to eat us?”

“No, it *doesn’t* eat people—just chickens or puppies,” he reassured me. We were away from the trees, felt the breeze but didn’t hear the monstrous woofing.

“Think it’s gone,” he said, leading me to a bench. He put his hand on my knee. “Hey—maybe we should go a little further—make sure it’s gone,” he led me to a seminary building which, like the preceding ones, was nailed up. It was five stories high. The Victorian architecture looked misplaced, and Ricky was certain that “the ghosts won’t bother you, if you stay close to me.” The windows were covered with huge blocks of wood with graffiti: “Isabel Loves Steve” and “Shit on the Jackson Jaguars!” and “White People Suck.” It stretched for several hundred feet and smelled like burnt timber.

“What about the monster?”

“Think the fucker is gone,” Ricky grinned and motioned me to accompany him to a neighboring bench.

“Come here,” he said while he lit a cigarette. “You want one?” He pointed the pack in my direction.

“No thanks.”

“You know, you’re really hot, Agatha. I’ve liked you since you rode my moped,” he inhaled. I didn’t respond and he moved closer. I had only, until that point, made out with female dolls on my windowsill.

“You sure it’s not coming back?” I asked.

“Don’t worry—I’ll protect you,” Ricky assured me. I heard quiet verbs of bravery. He put his hand on my hair and caressed it.

“You have beautiful eyes,” he said, while I wondered about the Jersey Devil’s eyes, particularly if he were looking at us.

Ricky put his mouth near mine and inserted his tongue. He pressed his head closer. We were smooching but it felt like scratching.

I didn’t enjoy this, and Ricky thrust his tongue in my mouth. I could taste the nicotine in his breath, and he pressed further down.

“You never done that before?” he asked.

“No.”

“You like it?”

I heard wind coming from the old building. It was nearly 6 pm and starting to get gloomy.

“I have to go home, Ricky,” I withdrew from his embrace. He motioned in his direction, forcing his chapped lips against mine. Ricky moved his hands toward my bra.

I broke from his hold and he threw his arms up in the air. “What’s wrong with you, Agatha?” He lit a cigarette and walked away.

I chased after Ricky, but he moved faster along the muddy path.

A week later I had not heard from Ricky. I flirted with Cinderella and Barbie again and was relieved that I didn’t have to neck him, but also missed Ricky and his moped. I loved the breeze against us and his smell of cigarettes.

I was a little restless so Mother suggested I take Felicia on a walk “down the block.” It was gloomy and cloudy—like when Ricky led me to the seminary.

I went toward his house, which was on the street that bisected ours, where Lakewood becomes Jackson. I saw Ricky standing by the fence with his neighbor, Nessa, a handsome girl.

“Hey Ricky!” I yelled. He acted as if he didn’t see me, and I walked with Felicia toward his fence.

Felicia barked and Ricky remained silent but Nessa acknowledged us.

“Hi Agatha,” she shouted.

“Hey Nessa, hey Ricky.” I waved and dragged Felicia, who barked at them.

Ricky rolled his eyes, “Hey...”

“What’s up, Agatha?” Nessa asked, staring at Felicia, a little nonplussed in her company.

“Taking a stroll,” I said, trying to catch Ricky’s attention, but he smirked at Nessa.

“Isn’t this a little late for you, Agatha?” Ricky chimed in. He saw the sun going down. I was not wearing blue eye shadow or lipstick.

I smirked at Ricky and Nessa. They looked toward the trees.

“I’m not sure you’re aware, Agatha, but the Jersey Devil comes out soon...” I eyed him—he was serious.

“You mean that thing near the seminary?”

Our streets were located by a large wooded area, and I rarely, if ever, went in there, least of all by myself and not at night.

I held tightly onto Felicia who growled.

“It’s got steely red eyes and hunts soon,” he said lowly. Ricky told us that the creature had hooves, a horse’s head, bat wings and a forked tail and that it was born as a devil to some lady in the 1700s.

“Mrs. Leeds,” Nessa inserted the name. “Her son lives in this forest,” she pointed at the overgrown trees and bushes several feet away.

“It usually feeds on girls,” Ricky said, “but if there’s no girls, then it goes after boys.”

“You said it likes puppies and chickens the other night, Ricky,” I retorted, grabbing Felicia.

“And sometimes German Shepherds,” he rolled his eyes, giggling at Felicia who was unusually reticent.

I was afraid to visit my laundry room, and until my thirteenth year, slept with the bedroom light on.

“Sometimes it peeks through people’s windows,” Ricky added.

The sky was bleaker, and Felicia was eager to go home for dinner. I heard the mistral. There were insects flying and frogs croaking and it was chilly so I grabbed the leash and we ran up the block.