

Sue Davidson

## Skinny Jeans

Ashley tested the shoulder straps of her small purse in preparation for her trip today across the border to see Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band. She didn't want to lose her wallet and ticket for The River tour in Buffalo. She was still living with her mom in Toronto and did her part to help. With a height of six feet, and long black hair, Ashley was a big-boned girl with arms that crushed laundry baskets to her hip carrying them down basement stairs. People said she had a pleasant enough face and personality.

About a year ago, while working as a personal trainer at a gym downtown, she had bumped into red-haired man sporting a goatee. He had taken a drink at the fountain and then said: "Love our chlorinated Toronto water!" He was twenty- seven; she was twenty- two. His name was Connor. They started dating and by the eighth month were going steady. Ashley liked the way he held up his beer and fixed his blue eyes on her as he got near the punchline of a joke. There had been a gradual progression in their affection for each other, and fuelled by the similar body types they worked on many bedroom activities in Connor's downtown apartment. The word love didn't really fit into the equation. She didn't stop to scrutinize what she felt about

him. It was overshadowed by up in her attainment of a boyfriend and an exploration into the delights of their physical world.

Ashley was going alone to see Springsteen because Connor was not into concerts. Of Bruce Springsteen, he said that Ashley was the more committed fan. She told him that she had been following the E Street Bands' tours since the spring of 2009, when she was thirteen and her father had taken her to the arena in downtown Toronto for the Working on A Dream tour. It had been Ashley's first concert. She had loved being with her father, sitting beside him in the stands, and was excited by the whole experience. Soon after, though, her parents went their separate ways. She wished her father hadn't met someone else soon after leaving. Her mother and father did not communicate after that. When Ashley heard The River tour was coming to Buffalo in 2016, she felt compelled to realize a dream she had formulated when she had seen Springsteen for the first time in 2009. She wanted to get into the pit, and see the band close-up. Her father had told her that seeing the band had made him feel so good. That was back in 1985, at the outdoor stadium at the Central National Exhibition in Toronto. It was Aug 26, 1985; the opening song was Born in the USA, and the last song was Bobby Jean – before the five- song encore. Ashley longed for the chance to see the band in Buffalo.

Once after a night out with the boys – Connor liked to have supper downtown and then watch professional basketball with his male friends – he asked Ashley “Why don't you try a spa? Tom said his girlfriend had the best time at one the other day.”

“Because I'm not high maintenance,” Ashley said. She prided herself on how little time it took to get dressed and out the door each day for her job at the gym. It seemed pointless to her to bother doing anything

more, like lots of makeup or fancying herself up; she didn't stop to dwell on why. Although she saw many women at the gym in tight clothes, she found the forgiveness of track pants and loose t-shirts more appealing.

“Oh, right, I forgot.” Connor made it sound like a short-coming she did not choose to address.

She bought her ticket for the concert without telling Connor. When he heard about it, he said he didn't like her staying overnight in a hotel after. “It's dangerous, and it's kind of unbecoming, don't you think? If you were with friends, that would be different.” Ashley winced at this last point, as she was definitely low-grade on the popularity scale. All through high school she had been body-conscious, and it seemed to have tied itself up to her basic shyness to make a complete package of insecurity and uncertainty. While the other girls talked at their lockers of first dates, Ashley was left to shut her own locker with a dull finality and trudge off to her next class.

Connor threatened to break up with her if she decided to go. “It's too late now,” she told him. “I've already bought my ticket. I want to see as many concerts as I can of this tour, and I am going to Buffalo.” He told her he was serious, but she didn't care. He wasn't going to stop her from fulfilling her dream of seeing the band. “You aren't being reasonable,” she said to him. “Are you worried I'll meet someone else?”. Connor sputtered out, “Of course not, but his goatee trembled as he said it.

In the next month Ashley decided she had to look her best for Bruce if she got lucky and landed close to him in the pit. She went out and bought some skinny jeans, and a lacy camisole top and a blue denim jacket with silver swirls of embroidery. Then she got her hair cut in layers. When Connor saw her, he said “All of this for strangers, but not for me. Nice. Thanks Ashley. Now we are definitely on the break-up trail.” She ignored

this, taking it as resistance. It was a trait that she had seen before; one that her mother identified in Ashley's father. She had called him obstinate or oppositional when he refused to let her mother have her way.

The day of the concert she felt a sudden stab of shame; like she was planning on attending a street-walking convention as she added her underwear, pajamas and then the new concert jacket to her bag but decided Connor's words were all bluster and a warning not to be listened to. After checking in at the hotel and having lunch, she went to the arena for the five o'clock pit lottery and traded her ticket for a numbered bracelet. Her bracelet was 289; number 200 was picked so everyone lined up in order after that person. It looked like she was going to get her wish to be very close to Bruce Springsteen, and she wanted to tell someone about it. She tried calling Connor, but all she got was his voicemail, and it seemed silly to leave a message about being in the pit. She looked around her and recognized a radiant, generously endowed blonde-haired woman from an online fan group which she followed but never posted in. The woman, Cindy, also had skinny jeans on, with chunky boots to boost her petite height. She was with a male friend and her Springsteen sisters. Ashley coveted their ease with each other and wished she could be part of their happy go-lucky group.

When the arena doors to the pit opened, they headed for Bruce's microphone. Ashley grabbed a spot just behind them. A lanky blonde-haired man about her age holding a drink in a plastic cup came by and said his name was Daniel. "I'll hold your spot for you, go get one too," he offered. Ashley went to get some bottled water. As she made her way back into the crowd, she noticed that the arena seemed to pulse with the electricity of a high school dance. Connor as a boyfriend to her receded into the background as the excitement grew in the arena. What had she seen in him? The thought travelled through her mind before the burden of having to prove some sort of worthiness to him rode away on a wave of self-confidence. She was here, at the

concert, and it was all going to be better than it ever had been, for her. Was she with Connor or not? She didn't care, because right now it felt so good.

Ashley felt her stomach jump with anticipation near eight o'clock and she told Daniel she had to leave for a break. In the washroom she saw texts from Connor. "Ashley," the first one began, "You haven't considered me in any of this." A second text said: "I am not going to sit around any longer. You can choose Bruce, or you can choose me. If you don't get back to me before midnight, I'm ending our relationship." Before she could reply, the house lights started blinking and she had to turn her cell phone off. Then, she couldn't find Daniel in the pit crowd. Cindy's blonde hair was a marker, though, and Ashley manoeuvred towards her. She felt a touch on her arm and there was Daniel beside her, smiling. He tapped Cindy's male friend on the back; it turned out he knew him from other concerts. Daniel assured her that it was normal to be nervous your first time in the pit; it would all subside when the lights went down.

Ashley soaked in the fullness of the experience; the people in the stands, the band members coming out one by one. Promises of hope and joy suffused the air with optimism, and she felt thrilled to be in this moment. She leaned briefly against Daniel's shoulder, sharing her newly found generosity of spirit with him. He put his arm around her and she forgot with finality Connor and his ultimatum. *I choose you, Daniel*, she said to herself. Then Bruce Springsteen himself came out on-stage, speaking to her and everyone. "Good evening, Buffalo!"

Exhausted but exhilarated after, she found herself outside the arena with Daniel, making plans to have a night cap with him and Cindy's friends. She turned on her phone and saw all the missed calls from Connor. Ashley telephoned him, concert jacket in one hand while Daniel, Cindy and the group waited ahead.

She felt resigned to listening to his words. Connor said, “You have three minutes to tell me what you’re doing, Ashley. Is it me? or Springsteen? Do you agree – no more concerts?”

“No, I do not agree to no more concerts. I just met a group of people and one particularly sweet person in particular. His name is Daniel. And they all like me for who I am right now. Not who I could be if I tried harder.”

“But you made yourself over to get into their clique,” Connor said. “Got yourself out of your work-out pants and everything.”

“That’s right, Connor,” Ashley said. “It’s called putting your best foot forward. I took it up a notch, but it’s me all the way through.”

Connor told her to have a nice life and then hung up. Daniel came over and sent a gorgeous smile her way. “Ready?” he asked. She nodded.

They caught up to Cindy and her group.

Ashley’s words tumbled out. “The concert really affected me. It was like a leap of faith - into a state of elation.” She couldn’t explain the feeling. except that it was a combination of hope for the future and the remembrance of that first concert with her dad. She had been accepted then, sitting beside him. Now her experience had rebuilt that base her parent’s separation had torn away.

Cindy came over and hugged Ashley.

“Welcome to E-Street Nation.” she said.