



Printer's Devil Review

Melissa Reddish. *Last Days of Summer*.
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Last Days of Summer

IN THE BEGINNING OF AUGUST, the last month of those long, hot summer days before the inevitable trudge back to high school, before I started the tenth grade and no longer had homeroom with Tina and Aimee, who had given me the brush-off for no good reason after seven years of friendship, in this month I got a call from Stacy Lynn telling me that we needed to hit the beach. We had spent most of the summer hanging out behind Royal Farms, meeting up with friends she knew or catching a movie and then throwing rocks in the river. One time we snagged some weed from Stacy's brother and smoked it next to the tree carved with our initials in Pemberton Park. We spent hours pulling up blades of grass, pinching them between our fingers, and blowing a sharp, high note that sounded like a rabbit dying in the woods. All this, and we'd only made it to the beach a few times. We would park at Happy Jack Pancake House on Twenty-Fifth Street, one of the few places that wouldn't tow your car, and then lie sprawled on the just-warm sand for hours before trolling the boardwalk for Fisher's popcorn (always caramel with peanuts) or a cup of Thrasher's fries, oil-slicked with the sweet tang of vinegar, throwing the leftovers onto the boardwalk for the seagulls to fight over. Every once in a while, we would drop a few coins in a game of skee ball, but we were careful to put on our bored and ironic faces in case someone we knew walked by, and we never, ever actually spent the tickets on a cheesy keychain or stuffed bear.

When Stacy Lynn called, I was watching a rerun of *The Price is Right* and feeling increasingly gloomy at the old white-haired women, who could barely stand, attempt to spin that giant wheel, pinning all their hopes and dreams on making it to the final round and winning that living room set. Both of my parents were at work, and my only dinner option was a Stouffer's lasagna crusted with freezer burn, so I was pretty thankful when Stacy said she would pick me up at seven and then drive us to the Wawa on Route 13 so we could load up on soda and snacks for the drive up to the beach. Stacy and I were in the same grade, but she had been left behind in kindergarten, so she already had her license. Around six-thirty, I left my parents a note and jumped into my bathing suit. I covered it with a tank top and jean shorts that I had cut myself from an old pair of pants to give it that authentic look.

At Wawa, Stacy led the way. She grabbed candy bars and pastry snacks and five bottles of soda, not even bothering to get a handcart, just loading the snacks into my arms.

"We gotta get ready, Lace," she said and threw some Slim Jims onto the pile. "This night is going to be epic." We never called ourselves Lacy and Stacy or any other dorky combination. Instead, she was Stacy, Kat, GiGi, or the Carnivorous Wombat. The last was a name she earned when she ate an entire Grand Slam breakfast in five minutes flat. Her voracious appetite was just beginning to catch up to her in a slight pudge of stomach and increasing roundness to her cheeks. And I was Lace, LaLa, or Monkey Tits. In ninth grade, I had stuffed my bra with Kleenex for the Homecoming dance (being so flat-chested I was almost an innie). I was doing my bend-over move with Scott Birch and a wad of tissues began to fall out. Stacy, noticing before anyone else, screamed, "Monkey Tits!" – drawing everyone's attention away so I could shove the wad of tissues back inside my dress. I asked her if she was trying to warn me, and she laughed so hard she spit. Since then, I've been "Monkey Tits."

After a forty-minute drive, we reached Ocean City and had to crawl along the main stretch of road leading down to the water. Out the window, I could see the lights coming into view on the fairway, the dome of the Ferris wheel just visible over the buildings. We stopped and pattered forward and stopped again. A constant stream of people ducked around

the stop-and-go traffic in bathing suits and chic little sundresses, holding surfboards or oversized bags with towels drooping out like tongues, their legs and arms and the soft white tops of the girls' breasts bared in the fading light. Beyond them, the sky flashed pink and purple and red like a bruise. Every time we came to the beach, there seemed to be more and more people packed into the same fifteen-street radius, flicking their brightly-patterned towels onto the sand to lay claim to increasingly smaller patches of beach. After Stacy pulled into the parking lot that used to be nothing more than metered spaces (now guarded by two squat ticket booths), I dragged the bag of snacks onto the still-warm sand, trying desperately to keep up with Stacy's long-legged stride.

"So what's the plan?" I asked once we were on the boardwalk. "Want to get a slice of pizza?"

"As if," Stacy said, and I felt momentarily dumb for even suggesting it. "We're meeting some guys here at eight."

I glanced down at my pink and purple top that hung flat against my chest and wondered if I should have traded the bathing suit for a push-up bra. I could see the way Stacy's terrycloth dress hugged her curves, the strap of her bathing suit suggesting what was underneath. Even my cut-offs looked silly and childish in comparison.

We sat on the stone wall that separated the boardwalk from the beach and watched the people walk by. It was almost eight, but the boardwalk was still packed. The tourists were easy to spot in tank tops and shorts in loud, primary colors. They clutched whining children, each set of voices equally tight and hysterical, and dragged them down the endless wooden planks with red faces flash-fried by the sun.

"When the guys get here, don't tell them we're in high school," Stacy whispered as if they were crouched below the brick wall, eavesdropping.

"Should we make up names for ourselves, too? I could be Natasha Petrova, your Russian pen pal visiting you on summer vacation."

"Your Russian accent sucks. Besides, this isn't dress up," Stacy said. "This is serious."

At ten after eight, two figures separated themselves from the throng of people and strolled over to us. One was toned, with floppy brown hair. In his board shorts, he looked like every other local, minus the surfboard. He was the kind of guy who could be eighteen or twenty-five – it was

impossible to tell. The other guy was older, in his late thirties maybe, with thin blond hair and tiny features that made him look sharp and rodent-like. I knew immediately which one was meant for me.

"Evening fellas," Stacy said. "Out for a stroll?"

"You know it," the guy in the board shorts said.

"Your escorts for the evening await," the older man said with a little bow. At least mine was somewhat articulate.

We hopped off the wall and followed the two guys back onto the boardwalk. I learned that the guy in the board shorts was named Tommy and that he came to the beach every weekend. The older guy was Steven, and he worked at a small software company in Delaware fixing lines of code. Stacy told them that she worked for Bath and Body Works and left the rest of her life open to interpretation. I followed her lead and told Steven that I worked at Dollar Tree, which was almost true, as I had worked there last summer. For a moment I allowed myself to image a life of retail: an unending series of days spent ringing up sullen customers and unloading freight stacked high over my head, like forty-something Barbara who was undoubtedly still there. She had one of those severe faces that seemed incapable of joy, and she hated the teenagers who worked there, especially me. She hovered near the endcaps so she could watch me ring up customers, just waiting for me to make a mistake serious enough that she could report to the assistant manager, the position she was obviously gunning for. I imagined walking into that store day in and day out, my entire life contained within those four dirty walls for six to eight hours a day until I too cared deeply whether or not the new girl rang up the giant jawbreakers as two for a dollar rather than three for a dollar. When I emerged from my reverie, Steven nodded and grinned, revealing a front tooth curved longer than the others.

Around Twentieth Street, the crowds thinned and the shops became sparser until they disappeared entirely. We stopped, briefly, and gazed out towards the ink-black sea.

"Want to go for a swim?" Steven asked. His hands hung like two meaty paddles by his side. Stacy and Tommy hung back; Tommy's arm was already slung around her waist, claiming her.

I nodded, even though the last thing I felt like doing was diving into the icy water. We shed our clothes, and underneath his pale blue

polo, Steven was surprisingly taut. He caught me staring and flashed me another snaggletoothed smile. Down at the water, I dipped my toe into the endless black of the ocean before allowing the waves to wash over my legs.

We waded out until the people on the boardwalk became tiny specks of brightly-colored fabric. He slid beneath a wave and swam over to me, his body a dark shape under the water: silent, predatory. When he emerged, the moonlight hit his face at odd angles, highlighting the deep wells around his eyes, the point of his chin. He looked like an actor from an old black-and-white horror film: Boris Karloff or Bela Lugosi emerging from the black lagoon.

“So what’s a pretty young girl like yourself doing with a dork like me?”

“I don’t know,” I said. It was the truth.

“I can’t imagine you’re too interested in the finer points of writing code,” he said and smiled. Drops of water glistened on his forehead like tiny points of light, and I had the urge to reach out and touch them.

“I don’t really know much about it.”

“It’s pretty simple. You just have to know what you want the program to do. The hard part is fixing other people’s code. There’s more than one way to write a command, and finding one error in a sea of functions can get a little tricky. But you learn to recognize other people’s tendencies, the types of errors they make. It’s like psychology.”

“Oh,” I said. “Do you enjoy it?”

Steven shrugged. “All things considered, it’s not a bad job. It pays the bills.” He peered closely at my face, as my mother sometimes did when she was scrutinizing a cluster of pimples. “So what about you? Do you like working at Dollar Tree?”

I laughed, but it came out more like a bark. “Not really. It’s pretty boring and the little kids are really obnoxious.”

“I bet.” Steven inched closer. “So what do you really want to do?”

I opened my mouth and then shut it again. All of the answers that sprang immediately to mind would destroy the illusion that Stacy had worked so hard to create for us: graduate high school, get out of my parent’s house, move far, far away. I pictured myself in a little café with a cup of coffee and a book, a light layer of snow on the ground and

the day turning quickly to dusk. Some guy wearing funky glasses and skinny jeans would approach me and casually inquire as to the book I was reading. Slowly, slowly I would put down the book (it was imperative to make him wait) and offer a searing in-depth critique in just five sentences. After a twenty-minute conversation (I didn’t bother imagining this part), we would walk back to my apartment, a light dusting of snow falling across the lamplight and muffling our footsteps. Then, we would have another cup of coffee on my sofa surrounded by artifacts from my world travels: a clay pot from Brazil, a mask from Zimbabwe. He would touch my arm, lightly, and I would lean forward and his lips would meet mine, and then the rest was a pleasant blur, creating a solid center of warmth within me.

When I snapped back to the present, I felt the chill of the water. “I’d like to get out of Salisbury. Maybe travel the world.”

“What’s stopping you?” He inched until he was right beside me. My breath quickened.

“Nothing.”

“Exactly. A girl like you can do anything she wants. I bet you have guys lined up outside your door.”

“As if,” I snorted. “I’m not exactly popular.”

His finger slid up my just-wet arm and I shivered. “Now I just can’t believe that.” He snuck a finger around my bathing suit top, brushing the skin inside.

“What are you looking for?” I whispered. What a stupid question.

Just then, his finger grazed my nipple; I nearly jumped out of my skin. “Found it,” he said with a grin.

I stood stock still while his finger continued to explore my tiny breast, and I wondered how long it would take for him to grow bored and begin scouring the beach for blond bimbos. But he remained where he was, his eyes cast off in the opposite direction as though distracted by something more interesting. Maybe it was better this way, more anonymous, so I shut my eyes. I felt a terrifying rush when he let his hand slip below the water. With my eyes closed, he could be anyone, even Scott Birch with his perfectly tousled blonde hair who had said he liked me “just as a friend” at the end of the Homecoming dance before walking

off arm-in-arm with Nikki Anderson. When he pulled back the fabric of my bathing suit bottom, I felt a rush of cold, salt water and my eyes popped open. I said, "Not here."

"You're the boss," he said and let my bathing suit snap back into place.

We walked out of the water and up the beach in silence; I felt a light buzzing in my head. When we reached them, Stacy and Tommy were leaning up against the wall, Tommy's hand brushing Stacy's thigh, Stacy's chest thrust out as far as it could go. Tommy whispered something into Stacy's ear and she laughed her high, fake laugh, the one she had studied from *Days of Our Lives*, a show she would never admit to watching to anyone (except to me). All at once I wished we were back in Pemberton Park, just the two of us, the long, empty night stretching before us.

When we approached them, Tommy kept his hand on Stacy's leg. He turned to us, and his dark eyes flashed. "What are you kids up to?"

"Came to ask you the same thing," Steven replied.

"Feel like getting a drink?" Tommy asked, directing his question to Stacy.

"We can't," I said before she had a chance to reply. She shot me a withering look, but I pretended I didn't see her. "We're not old enough."

"Whoo-ee, Big Daddy," Tommy said, "You're really robbing the cradle tonight."

"Don't I know it." Steven placed an arm around my shoulder. "Besides, we weren't talking about a bar. We've got a room not far from here."

"A hotel room?" Stacy asked, a note of breathless excitement in her voice.

"You know it."

My heart began beating fast, and I was certain they could see the pumping through my shirt. The last thing I wanted to do was go to a hotel room with these guys, especially when Steven's earlier eloquence and gentlemanly demeanor seemed to have all but disappeared. But if I said no, I would probably have to take a taxi home and I didn't want to leave Stacy all by herself.

We took Tommy's car, an old beat-up Toyota filled with fast-food wrappers, balled-up plastic bags, and various other objects I decided not to look at too closely. Steven placed a hand on my knee gently, almost primly, and stole surreptitious glances in my direction as though assuring himself I was still there. Part of me was flattered, but the other part wanted to whisper to him that I wasn't his.

The hotel was a sand-washed yellow three-story with a white marble staircase. I headed for the staircase immediately, not noticing that it ended at a pair of long, high windows. Steven slipped an arm around mine and guided me away.

"So how long are you boys here?" Stacy asked in the elevator.

"Two weeks. I got our rooms as a timeshare back when the hotel was new. You'd pay an arm and a leg just to rent a room for a night now."

I glanced at Steven's face and tried to count the wrinkles at the sides of his eyes like rings in a tree. Did anyone still purchase timeshares, or was Steven from a time when the word was foreign and new, a promise of never-ending beaches sliced into affordable chunks of time?

Steven and Tommy each had a room connected by a door, and we congregated in Steven's room. His was the cleaner of the two – Tommy's was a mess of dirty towels, piles of clothing, and trash, just like the floor of his car. Steven pulled a bottle of rum, a bottle of tequila, and a six pack of Coke from the fridge. "What can I get you ladies?"

Stacy arranged herself on the edge of the bed, and I found a chair. "Gin and tonic, please." I stifled a laugh – no way had Stacy ever had a gin and tonic. The most either of us had drunk were cans of warm Bud Light nicked from her parent's basement. She had probably just heard it on a TV show and thought it sounded grown-up and cosmopolitan.

"How about a rum and coke?" Steven handed us each a large glass filled with the black liquid bubbling like tar. I took a sip, my first real alcoholic drink, but it just tasted like really terrible coke.

"A toast," Steven said, and we all lifted our glasses. "To the two lovely women that have graced us with their presence tonight. I'm not sure what we've done to deserve such beauty, but we'll take it."

"Here here," Tommy said and downed his entire glass in one gulp. Stacy, not to be outdone, did the same. Both guys hooted like construction workers when Stacy was finished.

It was at that point that my surroundings came sharply into focus – the painting of the sea in muted colors, the same kind of painting found in every hotel; the water stain creeping across the ceiling and down the wall like fingers reaching out for us; and the bedside table with the drawer slightly ajar, as though something had just been placed inside of it or removed. Something about the ordinariness of these objects

brought the whole evening down on me with a terrible clarity: We were both in a hotel room with two complete strangers, and Stacy was well on her way to drunk.

“We can’t stay here,” I said suddenly. Everyone stopped and looked at me. “They’ll be wondering where we are.” I couldn’t mention our parents without shattering the illusion that we weren’t in high school.

Stacy hopped off the bed and walked me to the bathroom, calling out, “We need to visit the ladies’ room.”

Stop speaking in clichés, I wanted to yell, but instead I said, “There’s only one toilet.”

Inside the bathroom, Stacy ran the tap and used the water to smooth back her hair. “Tell your mom you’re staying with me and I’ll do the same thing.” She gripped my arm tightly. “And don’t ruin this.”

After Stacy left the bathroom, I pulled out my cell phone and called my mom, certain that she would see through the obvious lie, certain that she would hear the guys talking and the clink of glasses in the background and, in a fit of panic, would drive the forty minutes to come pick me up. The sound of her anger would be a comfort, an s.o.s. cast into the dark and answered.

Instead, all she said was: “Okay, sweetheart. Be safe.”

Why was it never easy when you wanted it to be?

After two more drinks, the edges of the room became a pleasant blur. Steven and Tommy got out a deck of cards and taught us Asshole and Circle of Death. I kept getting the rules mixed up – or Tommy kept changing them – so every few minutes, Steven would whisper in my ear what I was doing wrong. His voice was throaty and wet.

After his third straight win, Tommy led Stacy, drunken and stumbling, through the door that separated their rooms.

“Where are they going?” I asked. Steven grinned. He stroked my leg and all I said was “okay,” and again “okay” even though what I meant was “knock it off.” Why couldn’t I just tell him to stop? Why did it feel like I would be doing something wrong, like I would be scolded? My body felt slow and numb, like I was entering a long, deep sleep. I lay down on the bed, grabbing the comforter and pulling it until it covered my entire body. “I’m sleepy,” I said and rolled onto my side. All at once, I felt a pressure that I slowly recognized as Steven’s growing erection.

“Hope you aren’t too sleepy,” he said.

“Actually, I am,” I said, peeking over my shoulder. “Sorry.”

“Let’s see what we can do about that,” he whispered in my ear. His breath smelt stale, like flat soda and peanuts. His hand snuck under the cover and began tickling the hairs of my legs, and I felt my body respond like dry lightning, a dizzying lift that was part elation and part revulsion. Then, his hands were pulling off my shorts, and I helped wiggle them off, my eyes firmly held on the water stain of the ceiling like a point of focus before spinning and spinning. When his finger slipped between my legs, I understood what all the fuss was about. I could feel a gnawing itch blooming inside me, and the sound of the waves outside mirrored the motion of his fingers. When he removed his hand, in the brief moment before he would disrobe and thrust himself inside me, before I would lose my virginity and be finally, irrevocably changed, I felt regret like cold oil poured over my skin. *Wait*, I wanted to say, *stop*, but my mouth was dry and filled with sand and I didn’t say anything. A moment passed, and another moment, and then I felt soft, fleshy skin against mine. And then his fist banged against the headboard and he yelled “Damn!”

When I peeked over my shoulder, he was lying perfectly still, arms crossed, the comforter pushed away and a sheet spread thin and flat across his body. I could barely keep the relief out of my voice. “Are you all right?”

“It’s the medication I’m taking. It has a few side effects.”

“Oh,” I said. “Sorry.”

“This doesn’t normally happen to me.”

“Okay.”

A pause, and then, “Guess I’ll be going to sleep, then.”

“Goodnight,” I said and hoped it didn’t sound too relieved.

I listened to the water outside, unending waves clawing at the sand before retreating. I thought I would probably stay up all night and watch the sun rise, but before I knew it, I was asleep, the night’s events shifting into the dizzying images of dreams.



I was in the middle of a dream in which a man I couldn’t see was trying to cover me with blankets – they were soft and wet and smelled of the ocean – when I heard a noise like muffled crying. After a few moments

I opened my eyes and the shifting gray shapes focused into the now-familiar objects of the hotel room – the brown-rimmed glasses, the dusty television, the painting of the ocean in muted shades of green and blue. I listened, but I couldn't hear anything, and after a few minutes I allowed myself to fall back asleep, certain that I must have been imagining the sound, that it was a remnant of my dream.



When I woke up again, Stacy was standing over my bed, completely dressed, her mascara smudged and an empty look on her face. When I sat up, she thrust my purse at me. "Ready to go?" she asked, her voice carefully nonchalant. I looked over at Steven, his thin hair slicked across his forehead and a small bead of sweat across his upper lip; I wanted to toss the comforter over him to hide his existence. We left the hotel room without saying goodbye.

We walked for what felt like an hour in silence. I wanted to ask Stacy what had happened, if she had done it, but she walked with her arms crossed tightly under her chest, which meant she wasn't in a chatty mood. After we reached Twenty-Fifth Street, I asked her if she wanted to grab some breakfast. She nodded. It was barely seven a.m., so the majority of the customers were tourists with sleep-encrusted eyes, trying to get on the road before traffic got too heavy.

We ordered ridiculously large breakfasts, and when Stacy's mountain of pancakes with hash browns, eggs, bacon, and sausage was set before her, I said, "All right, Carnivorous Wombat, want to break your old record?"

Stacy smiled without showing her teeth. "Mmm. Not today."

While I waited for my food to show up, I decided to finally broach the subject, the one that felt taboo, even though nothing was taboo between us.

"So, did you guys ..."

Stacy nodded and continued to shovel food in her mouth. Same old Wombat.

"How was it?" I asked, curious about the mechanics of it all, if that feeling that Steven had created (a pleasant knot in my stomach at the memory) would continue until I burst or if it would flower into something completely different, something unimaginable.

"It was good," she said and wouldn't say any more.

"Did he ..." I began, uncertain what I was actually asking.

"No. He didn't," she said and looked me in the eye before returning to her food. I had no idea what had just transpired between us, but I knew in the pit of my stomach that this exchange was meaningful and that this was the last time we would talk about it.

Just then, my plate of equally mountainous pancakes arrived with a side order of bacon. On the menu it had looked delicious, a feast to commemorate the evening, but now that it was sitting before me, the pancakes looked soggy and misshapen, drowning under globs of butter. Stacy's looked even worse: a battleground of sticky syrup and pancake remnants torn open and left scattered on the plate. I knew with a sinking certainty that when I got home, I would confess the entire evening to my parents. I could feel the childish tears building up behind my eyes, ready to leak out when faced with my punishment. And I knew that this wasn't what I feared the most, that what I feared had been left in that hotel room: a half-open drawer, a painting of an ocean held paralyzed, and a water stain that would creep toward us endlessly. I imagined one long hallway after another filled with those rooms: quiet, still, just waiting for me to return.

