

## DEER

by Susan Tepper

Monkey lets me drive the colonel's convertible. We're spinning along Reservoir Ridge clocking eighty-five; as usual hoping for deer — herds of them to come rushing out of the woods. Whoever happens to be driving will have to show-off incredible driving skills, to keep the deer from ramming the colonel's metallic-blue Pontiac. Bits of bloody deer body falling onto the white leather seats. After two entire spins around the reservoir only dry leaves have landed inside. The most deer we've ever seen on The Ridge were three: small, timid ones huddled around the ditch drinking rainwater.

"Where's the colonel — Nam?" I laugh into chilly wind that's beating my hair around my face, and picture the tall colonel ordering his soldiers to kill every single Viet Cong.

"Nah. Not this time. He had to go to Fort Bragg for another colonel's wedding."

Fort Bragg! I like the sound of it. In Monkey's *southern* it sticks, rolling off his tongue like thick syrup. "Does everybody brag at Fort Bragg?"

"Only the colonel," he says.

"Hah!" I smack his leg. But Monkey's looking dead serious. He worries that the war will never be over. That in four years time, when we graduate high school, he'll have to fight in Nam. Kill VC. Even VC babies. Monkey is crazy about babies. Big Heidi says that he's the

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only boy in school who stops to talk to strange babies in their strollers. His mother died a long time ago. When people ask how many brothers and sisters he's got, he says: It's just me and the colonel.

Near the electrified section of the fence I take the loop on practically two wheels, flying past a huge gate plastered with red signs reading: *HIGH VOLTAGE - KEEP OUT - THAT MEANS YOU!*

"That means you!" I scream.

He screams back, "That means you!"

The road straightens and I step harder on the gas.

Last night Monkey had this nightmare where he was a soldier in the colonel's platoon. The colonel kept yelling orders, then different orders; totally confusing him: Montgomery torch that hootch! Montgomery step back from that hootch! Montgomery did you hear me? I said to torch that hootch!

When Monkey woke up the bed was soaked from pee. He taps my arm. "Stop here, I'll drive. Let's go pick up the two Heidis."

"Okay. If you want to."

I take my time slowing the car. I'm thinking that I like Big Heidi better than Little Heidi. "Where should I stop?"

"Anywhere."

"Here?"

"Here's okay."

Sorry to have to give up the wheel I take the car around another bend then drive slow along the edge of the ditch. "This could be muddy. We could get stuck here."

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"It's time to switch, Leanne."

I brake hard; letting the car idle; looking at him from under my eyelashes — like girls do in movies. Right before they go-all-the-way. So far, I've only allowed Monkey to touch my breasts. A couple of times I let him try licking them. When he smacks his hand up against my crotch, I punch it away. A rumor going around homeroom is that Little Heidi went all-the-way with Billy Simone. Behind his back, Monkey calls Billy *grease monkey*! So weird. And Monkey's been giving Little Heidi these funny stares. I even told him so. And the other day after school, at Friendly's, he let her scrape all the colored sprinkles off the top of his sundae. When she wasn't looking I whispered: "You never let me. Not one single sprinkle."

Shoving one another, we climb over the hump in the middle and switch places in the convertible.

I lean back in the seat. "You know, I think Little Heidi has to stay after to make up a science lab."

"Big Heidi, too?"

"No, she's not stupid. Just Little Heidi."

I watch to see if this pisses him off. But he just nods, and the car lunges forward leaving a dirt cloud.

"We can smoke roaches in the parking lot while we wait for her," he says.

In our entire school, Monkey is the only kid who lives on Fort Dix. Because he's out of the district the colonel has to pay shit-loads of money to send him. It's the only school for miles around with a science lab. The colonel believes that science is the wave of the future. Whenever the colonel's at home, a special green army car, driven by a soldier, takes Monkey back and forth to school. When the colonel's away, Monkey borrows the convertible. Paying the soldier off in fat joints to keep quiet.

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He pulls out a roach clip made from a paper clip. "If we put the top up we can toké while we drive."

"No, thanks! I don't need you getting all horny on me while you're driving."

"Who said anything about that?"

"Then put it up. What do I care. Put the goddamn top up." Cramps are moving through my stomach like I'm about to get my period. That could be some mess on the colonel's white seat. I reach out and spin the radio dial so fast it screeches. "Don't you just hate that *Murray the K* dee-jay with his stupid *submarine race watching club*?" I spin the dial away from that station, keeping an eye out for any possible deer.

Monkey is stomping on the gas pedal making the car jump.

"Submarines my ass," I say. "It's just a make-out club. Cousin Brucie is a much cooler station. By the way, do they have submarines in Nam?"

"In the paddies with the water buffalos?"

"Forget it, Montgomery!"

Slapping the sun-visor down, I stare into the little mirror. Because of my green sweater, my eyes look more greenish than grayish. I can't decide if I'm pretty or not. I used to think Little Heidi was pretty, then Big Heidi.

"Don't *you* start that Montgomery stuff," he says. "First you call Little Heidi stupid, now you're the one's being stupid."

I smack the visor up, kicking off my Indian moccasins and peeling off my sweat socks, putting both bare feet against the windshield. "Foot prints," I tell him. "If the colonel dusts the car for prints you're screwed."

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We screech out of The Ridge onto Fairway Road, where old-men golfers wear strange plaid pants and spend whole days whacking golf balls.

"I don't like you that much anymore," Monkey says.

I take my feet off the windshield and look at him. I'm trying to picture him old like the golfers. I can't. His baby-face is a pale circle like the man-in-the-moon. Around his ears blond hair is starting to shag real nice. When the colonel gets back from Fort Bragg, and sees, for sure he'll take him to the army barber. Last summer Monkey hid-out for a couple of weeks in Big Heidi's mother's fall-out-shelter, built inside the potato cellar of their basement. He ate tuna straight from the cans and Dole peaches. He slept on their emergency cot. Till his hair grew long enough to cover his scalp; till he wasn't ashamed anymore.

As we drive down the road into town I can see the maroon bakery awning flapping in the breeze.

Bouncing on the seat, I tell him, "I need an eclair. You want one?"

"Yeah. One of each. One cream, one custard."

"Custard? You hate custard."

He stretches his arm across the back of my seat, tapping along with Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band.

"How can a Sergeant get lonely?" he says. "Those guys never get a second away from their men. They don't have time for any bands. This is a really stupid song."

I lean my head back until it touches his arm. "You hate custard."

"The custard one is for Little Heidi." And he slides his arm away.

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My mouth drops open. "I was going to treat, but I've changed my mind."

Across from Dreesen's Bake Shop he parks in a space under a thick tree with orange leaves. Looking up, I'm thinking: more leaves, more leaves in the car.

"Do leaves stain?" I rub the white leather seat then sniff my palm. "I mean, if you let them stay on the seats for a long time? You know, this seat smells real animal."

"I always let you drive, Leanne. You should treat for the eclairs."

I put my socks back on, then my moccasins, and push open the heavy car door. A nice sweet smell is blowing from Dreesen's. Skipping a little I follow Monkey across the road.

"Let's first look at the fat," he says.

Through the bakery window we stare in at the doughnut machine. A tray at the bottom holds a deep pool of fat. Right now it's still golden liquid. By supertime, after the bakery closes, we like the fat best — turned hard and solid white. We like to imagine how it tastes.

Monkey thinks it tastes sweet like Halvah bars that are the colonel's favorite candy. I think it tastes sour like hard cottage cheese. "No such thing as hard cottage cheese," he always tells me — "it's soft. And that's that."

Inside the bakery Monkey orders three eclairs — two with whipped cream. I drop sixty cents on the counter for mine, then grab the bakery box by the string before he can.

Back in the convertible, I slide the string over and lift the lid to have a look. "I'll take the one farthest away from the custard."

"Just keep your hands off that custard one, Leanne."

I throw him a sly smile. "What if I clean my ass with

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my finger then give Little Heidi hers?"

"The colonel is right, you are disgusting." And he squeals out of the parking space and turns up Walnut Street toward school.

"What's that mean? Did the colonel say that? That I was disgusting — is that what the colonel said?"

It's Monkey's turn to look sly. "Maybe. Maybe."

"What is it — yes or no?"

I don't like hearing this. I don't like the colonel not liking me; it's upsetting me; I can feel cramps again. I close the lid on the bakery box and slide the string back over the top, folding my arms around it, moaning, bending toward the floor.

"I may get my period any second."

"Leanne, do you have Kotex?"

"When I bleed, I really bleed. Practically as bad as butchered deer. This white seat will be some mess."

"You're squashing the eclairs!"

Straightening up slowly, I say, "Stains everywhere. Blobs of blood stains. It will be horrible."

Monkey cuts to the left, screeching the tires, heading up the driveway to the WAWA store. Chunks of gravel knock against the blue sides of the convertible. He slams to a stop in the yellow slashes of the *no parking* zone. His both hands squeezing the wheel; his shoulders hunched up around his ears. He stares straight ahead. "The colonel won't like that. He'll find out we've been driving. It's illegal to drive without a license. I'll be in big trouble. If I get in trouble again the colonel will send me to base school."

"Base school?"

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He jerks his head. "You better check Leanne, you better look and see if your period's coming."

"How am I supposed to do that? My mother could come walking right out of WAWA. She buys her cigarettes here."

Monkey hits the steering wheel with his fist. "Well that's just great, just great."

And he turns toward me and his baby-face looks hard like a white rock. I almost jump. His face is changed into the same face as the colonel's. Only smaller; shrunken. Kind of how the colonel's looks when he's wearing his big, wide colonel hat with the scrambled eggs embroidered on the brim. For a second I'm almost scared of Monkey. Lowering my eyes I pluck the bakery string, listening to it slap against the box.

"Did the colonel really say I'm disgusting? Did he? Or did you make it up to get back at me for Little Heidi? Which is it? Tell me. I need to know."

"Both, Leanne."

Shoving the box at him I start to scream and tear out of the convertible. "I hate you!"

"I hate you!" he screams back.

Jumping up and down, I'm kicking at the gravel. "I hate you more than I hate my father!"

Monkey lifts the box of eclairs over his head. He pulls his one arm back and heaves it like a football. I watch it fly through the air, then it starts to sink, skids across the WAWA lot, comes to a stop in some weeds by the soda machine.

"Look what you've done!" And I'm picturing the three eclairs oozing their cream and custard. Ripped apart like broken bodies. I say, "Poor Little Heidi won't be getting her eclair, now." Monkey drums the window ledge with his



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fingers. "Who cares," he says finally.

"Yeah. Who cares."

"So I didn't know you hate your father, too."

I give the gravel another kick, swallowing down hard so I won't start to cry. "He gets drunk and pounds my mother."

Monkey is looking serious. "That's no good."

I shake my head, squatting to brush dust off the tiny turquoise beads sewed to my Indian moccasins. Then I walk around the front of the convertible and climb back in.

- Susan Tepper

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