

Dropouts

by Mike Cohen

All this happened in the month that high school ended in 1961. My oldest friend Barbara Wagner (I called her Bar) began pushing at me to go to the prom with Louis Floyd—her choice, not mine. I could care less about the prom. I'd rather go to a movie any day instead of some dance, but Bar would not let up.

"You listen to me, Marilyn Martin," Bar said. "Louis is a smart one, even though he's a little quiet."

Bar normally called me Mar, so I knew she expected me to do what she asked. I didn't say no, and not surprisingly, Louis called to ask me out on a double date the next Saturday with Bar and her regular, Jerry Prebe. That was Bar all the way, assembling her team in advance for the prom.

When I told Mom that a new guy asked me out, I added that I would need new shoes to go dancing.

"Is this boy college bound?" I nodded.

"Good. That's a lot better than dating dropouts." By "dropouts," Mom was referring to my boyfriend, Wayne Porter. Actually, Wayne was hardly a "boy." He was twenty, and had quit high school to work at a golf driving range. We both loved movies and each weekend we went to one together. I carried Wayne's picture in my wallet. Even Bar conceded he was cute, although she refused to let me take a dropout to the prom.

I found a gorgeous pair of slip-ons at Nordstrom. They felt and looked great. I called them my dancing slippers, even though they had little heels. Mom frowned when she saw the price (she had to work since she and Dad divorced). But I also worked part-time at Little's, a stationery store, and chipped in some of my savings to buy them.

At home wearing my new slip-ons, I posed in front of our mirror as if I were in front of a movie camera. The shoes made me feel smart, and helped me ignore the bump on the bridge of my nose. Bar said the bump kept my face from looking symmetrical. Actually, Bar said that about my nose more than once, mostly I think because I was taller and my figure was curvier than hers. So I usually forgave her for petty nitpicking.

Bar and I prepped for our double date in the Wagner's cozy colonial house. The word *fresh* was the only way to describe the Wagner's. Fresh flowers. Fresh baked cookies. Fresh carpets. Even the dog smelled fresh.

We were dressed in matching spring skirt and sweater sets that we had bought together, mine in persimmon, hers in a soft spring chartreuse. In addition Bar wore her honor society medallion high up on her sweater's collar where it could catch the light. She liked to remind everybody that she was attending a fancy women's college in the East—Wellesley, or something—even had a little scholarship. For me, college—in my case acting school—had to be put off. Earning some money came first.

When Bar spotted my new dancing shoes, she put on that crooked pretend smile, the one she used when she was about to say the opposite of what she meant.

"Ooh! Those look classy," she said, raising her eyebrows. I sensed she might be annoyed that I had bought them without showing them to her first.

"Mom wanted to buy them for me," I lied, red-faced.

"Oh, I get it," Bar said. "It's like my new purse in here." She opened her closet door where seven purses hung in a row as if they were on display in a store. I couldn't tell the new one from the others.

"Like it? I just had to have it." That was Bar. She did not want to be the admirer. She wanted to be admired.

We drove on the double date to the school dance in Jerry's Nash Rambler, Bar next to Jerry in front, Louis and me in the back. So Louis would get the right message, I moved away from him against the door.

Jerry was going to a religious seminary in the fall but he was hardly serious. He turned everything into a joke, like calling me "Marilyn Monroe," probably his way of making fun of my dream to be in the movies. I thought he was a goof.

"Hey, Floyd," Jerry said, snarky, like a little boy about to pull a fast one "Do you know why they call this car the Mayflower?"

"Why, Prebe?" Louis answered.

"Because so many Puritans came across in it."

Bar just ignored him and turned toward me.

"These car seats fold down into a BED," she whispered as if no one else could hear. "I told Prebe that I'll never go out alone with him in this."

"Did you hear that, Prebe?" I laughed. "Another night wasted in the Mayflower." But I couldn't help but imagine what it would be like in the dark on fold-down seats with Wayne, my actual boyfriend.

A week ago when Wayne took me to an art film movie house instead of our usual drive-ins, he slipped a curved metal flask into my purse before we went inside.

"Vodka. Just in case we want a shot."

I must have looked alarmed.

"Don't worry," he said. "They never check purses. And for sure not yours. You look older."

Afterwards we parked on a lonely road, hugging and kissing, with one sip each on the vodka flask as a warm-up, our breath frosting over the inside of the windows. I passed on a second swig, but Wayne pressed. I didn't want him to think I was afraid, so I took it, hoping Mom would be asleep when I got home.

Later I asked myself: What parts of the night with Wayne should I tell Bar about, and what parts should I keep to myself? Wayne's flask was still in my purse—I could show her, which seemed exciting. But I knew Bar would disapprove of everything else.

The school dance was boring. Louis barely spoke. I wished we had gone to the movies, where at least not speaking was part of the idea. Suddenly Jerry rushed over.

"Let's get out of here. Some guy says there's a party over on Capitol Hill; someone's parents are out of town. There might be some brew."

We piled into Jerry's Nash. On the way toward Capitol Hill we crossed over the Ship Canal's old drawbridge. You could feel the change when the car's smooth hum on the pavement began to chatter on the metal grid of the bridge deck, then went back to a hum when we got to pavement on the other side.

Suddenly Jerry pulled the Nash over to the curb.

"Wow," he said pointing up. "Check out that thing."

Bright red lights strung on overhead powerlines flooded the car's windshield. In the light we could see the outline of the huge new interstate span hovering over the drawbridge that we had just crossed. The new interstate seemed to clump across the canal like a glowing red monster in a sci-fi flick.

Next to the Nash, a wire fence protecting the bridge construction site held a large lighted sign: NO ACCESS: TRESPASSERS PROSECUTED. An opening in the fence, though, was big enough to let a truck through.

Jerry rubbed his face like he had a great idea.

"Hey, check out the tracks through the fence. It goes right up to the new interstate bridge. Let's park the car in there and walk across the thing while nobody's around. Hey, Floyd, Marilyn Monroe, what do you guys think?"

"I'm in," Louis said.

"Why not?" I said. Maybe this would pick things up and I could stop thinking up excuses for why I had to go home early.

Bar looked at me, not Jerry, as she shook her head.

"It may not bother you to go somewhere you're not allowed, but it bothers me." Her forehead wrinkled.

"OK, Wagner," Jerry said. "Marilyn Monroe and Floyd can climb the new bridge and we'll have the Mayflower to ourselves." Jerry began creeping toward Bar like a perv.

"Come on, Wagner," Louis said. "You'll be safer on the bridge."

"Back off, Prebe," Bar said, then sighing, "Okay, okay."

Jerry wedged the Nash carefully through the fence opening. The track was blocked by wooden stakes sprayed with Day-Glo paint marking stacks of lumber and iron bars, rain puddles and mounds of sand everywhere. There was no dry footpath up to the concrete lip of the bridge. Just mud, way too messy for me.

"I've changed my mind," I said. "My shoes could get wet and ruined."

"I'll park closer," Jerry said.

"No you won't," Bar said in the warning tone of a teacher monitoring a schoolyard. "You'll get us stuck in the mud."

"Better yet," Jerry said, "Floyd, let's give Marilyn Monroe a lift onto the bridge pavement. Gotta protect those fancy shoes."

Outside my car door the two formed a kind of sling with their arms.

"C'mon jump on," Jerry offered. I put my arms around their necks and jumped into their sling.

"I love to be carried," I said

"What about me?" Bar glared, complaining loudly. "Do I get a lift? And why do you keep calling her Marilyn Monroe? Her nose is different."

It was the second time that night that Bar upset me. When we were in the ladies' room at the dance, I had shown her Wayne's vodka flask in my purse. Bar had wagged her finger at me, smiling in her crooked pretend way. "Naughty, naughty," she had said, and I'd known right away it was a mistake to let her see Wayne's flask.

It was midnight and the May moon was yellow and smoky. The spring air smelled like pollen. Where I stood the interstate bridge looked so high, it seemed to arch over the whole city. As breezes thrust my hair forward flooding my face, I imagined being photographed for a movie magazine story. Louis must have noticed.

"You do look like a movie star with your hair like that," he said.

"Hardly. I'm a mess," I said. I wondered if Louis was about to make a pass. I changed the subject.

"You must be excited about leaving home for college."

"No big deal," Louis said. "What about you?"

I told him about working for a while, then maybe applying to acting school. The truth was that I talked myself into believing that getting Mr. Little's part time job offer was like getting accepted to an acting school.

"You're terrific with the customers," Mr. Little had told me after my first week. It was hard not to smile inside after that, but I had to admit, in the afternoon at Little's Stationery, shelving paper reams, and envelope packages, I felt stuck. The traffic on Aurora Avenue rocketing past the front windows reminded me that everyone was moving but me.

But up here, high on the empty bridge in the night air, anything was possible. I imagined being behind the wheel of a car, gas pedal to the floor, going seventy miles an hour, surrounded by the roar of ten lanes of traffic, the interstate taking me somewhere new.

What happened next was kind of a blur. First Jerry took off like a zany up the bridge in the red blinking lights and the moonglow, leaning out over the bridge rail, shouting "Hoo Ha," the sound echoing off the roadway. It was like the black air had made him drunk.

"Knock it off, Prebe," Bar hollered back. "Somebody will hear us." The dark emptiness made Bar's yelling even louder than Jerry's blathering and we started laughing at her. I liked making fun of Bar and her bossiness, in part because Bar had ticked me off by talking about my nose bump again.

Meanwhile Jerry had slipped his legs over the low stub wall under the bridge railing and wanted us to do it too.

"Let's all put our legs over the edge and dangle." Jerry's directions sounded like he was prepping us for a line dance at a sock hop.

"We're making history. Someday when we're old, we'll be able to say that we were the first to come up here and dangle."

"Do we have to?" I asked, stepping back. I was getting tired of Jerry's daring us to do this and that. It seemed like elementary school again, when in the dead of winter somebody dared you to put your tongue on an icy door handle. Bad idea.

"Oh, well," Bar said, gripping her purse in one hand as she clambered onto the wall and inched into place near Jerry, at first holding the rail, then fumbling with her purse, which she left teetering on her knees. If Bar could do it, I had to follow.

As it turned out, hanging my legs over the wall next to Bar wasn't a big deal, but, unlike her, I didn't let go of the railing. No one said a word as we sat hip to hip on the concrete ledge in the windy air, our legs hanging into the dark, hundreds of feet above the Ship Canal and the old drawbridge that we had just crossed. The only sound was a solitary car rattling onto the metal grid below.

Suddenly Bar cried, "I'm slipping." She jerked back as if to avoid something from below, and fell flailing to the road, her butt landing with a thump, her right foot kicking off my left shoe as she flew by. I saw my shoe flicker for a second in the moonlight, then disappear into the inky night.

"My shoe's gone," I cried as I scrambled, in one shoe, off the ledge. Seconds later I heard tires squeal below, followed by a grinding crunch of concrete.

"Jeez, Marilyn," Jerry said. "Your shoe broke the old drawbridge."

Bar stood up, limping a bit. She tugged at her skirt and sweater, which had gotten dirty and rumpled from her fall.

"Prebe, just shut up for once," she said. "My hip hurts and I can't find my purse."

Louis was leaning over the rail looking at the drawbridge below.

"There's a car crash down there," he said. "Let's get out of here."

Bar kept peering about.

"I am not going anywhere without my purse." For a moment Bar's voice blended with a whining siren wail of a cop car from below.

"Now we're in for it," she said. "I warned you we shouldn't have trespassed."

"We can sneak down the opposite side of the interstate," Louis said pointing north.

"I got nothing to hide," Jerry said. "My shoe didn't cause the crash; hers did."

"You're an idiot," Louis said. "Marilyn's shoe had nothing to do with that."

Bar looked about in desperation.

"We are going to get arrested, I know it."

"Cool down," I said. "Cops are no big deal." (Cops came into Little's Stationery all the time; some flirted with me.)

"You don't care; you're all but a dropout anyway," Bar said. "But I could be thrown out of school and lose my scholarship. I bet someone saw the shoe that you threw down at the bridge."

"That's not what happened and you know it," I said. "You kicked my shoe off." Bar glowered at me, hysterical, her hair tangled, her clothes soiled.

"What did you do with my purse, Marilyn?"

"You have totally lost it," I said. "No one touched your purse but you."

Jerry interrupted us with a warning "Uh-oh."

Two cops with their wobbling flashlight beams were walking up the empty interstate toward us. One cop was short, his partner taller. As they got closer, none of us took a step.

"A little monkey business up here?" wheezed the little cop. He was panting.

"We had nothing to do with the wreck," Jerry said.

"What wreck?" the tall cop asked, shining his flashlight in each of our faces.

"We heard a crash down there on the old bridge," Jerry explained.

"I don't know what you're talking about," said the little cop. He took off his hat and wiped his bald head. "I just want to know who owns the dreamboat Nash that's parked where it says no trespassing."

"The Nash is mine," Jerry said. In the flashlight's beam, Jerry looked way too young to have a driver's license; his huge ears and acne spots belonged on a thirteen-year-old.

"Of course!" The small cop said. "You're the dreamboat pilot." He turned to the tall cop. "Fred, did you know that the seats in that dreamboat drop down into a bed?"

"I want to report a theft," Bar said, her voice high, willowy. "She took my purse."

"Not true," I said.

"This purse?" the little cop asked, snatching mine before I could pull it away.

"That belongs to me," I said standing straight like a grown up. "Please give it back." The little cop fished around inside my purse.

"Aren't you a little old to be hanging around these kids?" he asked.

"Actually, we are the same age," I said.

"Aha," said the little cop as his hand extracted Wayne's flask, like a magician pulling a rabbit from a hat. "What have we here?"

Jerry and Louis stared at me, their eyes wide with surprise, Bar's missing purse forgotten.

The little cop sniffed the flask lid.

"Who gave you the booze?" he asked.

The little cop didn't scare me—he was trying to be a heavy, like an actor in a movie—but I still had to come up with an answer.

"It's my dad's." No way would I give him Wayne's name.

"It belongs to one of the dropouts she runs around with," Bar said eagerly, wanting so badly to be of help to the little cop. He ignored her and looked at me.

"Again, who gave you the flask, honey?"

"Don't call me honey," I said. I stayed movie-star cool, so cool that I even surprised myself.

"Then we'll just have to take you on a trip to Stationland," the little cop said.

"Are you taking us in too?" asked Bar. She was trembling, her clothes in disarray, her honor society pin covered by the folds of her sweater. Louis stood there speechless; Jerry's eyes were wide open like a puppy that's begging for a treat. The three of them looked so frightened that even the little cop lightened up a bit.

"Nah, you get a pass for good behavior," he said. "So take off, and next time when the sign says stay out, do what it says, okay?"

"You got somebody you can call?" the tall cop asked me, his voice concerned.

"My mom. She just bought me new shoes and one is missing. I don't want to lose it."

"Your shoe will just have to wait for Prince Charming," the small cop said, smirking at his own joke. "You got bigger problems, believe me." He grabbed my arm to let me know how important he was. I pulled my arm back.

"Then let me take my other shoe off so I can walk."

After putting me into the squad car's back seat, the tall cop got behind the wheel and drove us back over the canal bridge, its deck grid now lit up by flashing lights from an EMT

medical vehicle. A car was crumpled around a concrete bridge-brace. Steam curled up from the car's buckled hood

"Could I get out for a minute?" I asked the tall cop. "My missing shoe could be around here.

The tall cop stopped the squad car next to an EMT medic who was checking out a man sitting on the curb, blood stains on his shirt, head in his hands.

"Did your car get hit by a shoe?" the tall cop asked. The driver looked at him hard.

"You mean a handbag," he answered. "Goddam thing hit my windshield."

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Bar's purse on the bridge deck, crushed and torn. My shoe was nowhere in sight. It had nothing to do with the crash.

I shut my eyes with a relieved sigh, my head humming with possibilities. The night on the bridge was tailor-made for a film and up on the interstate Louis had said I looked like a movie star.

Sitting in the back of the squad car I saw myself in an adventure flick, playing the tough girl. I had broken into a forbidden place, stolen a bootlegger's booze, crashed my getaway car, after which I was chased by the cops on foot over an empty interstate bridge in the moonlight where I lost one shoe and was busted. With the cameras rolling I hold a cigarette between my lips and ask the cops in front if they mind if I light up, then just do it anyway, blowing a cloud of smoke at them.

So they suspend me from school, so what? I'll just start work early. With a little walk-around money in my pocket, who knows what can happen. After all, the life of a dropout, with its wild quirkiness and ups and downs, it could make a good movie.