The Deepest Blue

by kim williams justesen

Tanglewood • Terre Haute, IN
To Morgan and Ryan.
Your strength and courage in standing up for what was best for you has proven to be an invaluable inspiration to me.
We have been stocking and cleaning our fishing charter boat for hours and finally give in to tired muscles and hunger. Dad steers the truck out of the parking lot and waves to Jack Sutton, who’s sitting in front of his boat, the Lolly Gag, bobbing side to side in the slip where it’s docked next to our boat. The sky is clearing from an earlier storm, and the air smells like damp asphalt and pine. I roll my window down, letting the fresh breeze blow in.

“You did a great job getting the boat cleaned up and ready for tomorrow.”

“Thanks,” I say. My arms ache, and I stretch them up and press my fingers against the roof of the truck. “Maybe I can practice driving.” My words are hopeful, but Dad shakes his head.

“We’re running late as it is.” He shifts gears, and the truck lurches a bit. “We’ll go soon. I promise.”

“Should we call Maggie and let her know we’re on the way?”
“That would probably be nice of us.” Dad pulls his cell phone from the holder attached to his belt and hands it to me. “Tell her we’ll be about twenty minutes.”

I punch in the number and listen. It rings a few times till I hear the familiar, “It’s your nickel.”

“Hey, Maggie.” I can hear Rocket barking in the background.

“Hey, Mike. Hush, dog,” Maggie says. “So are you boys on your way? I’ve got a chicken in the oven that’s just about finished.”

At the mention of chicken, my stomach growls loudly enough that I bet she can hear it over the phone. “Yeah,” I say, “we just left the marina, and we’re about twenty minutes from helping you out with that.”

“Would you ask your dad if he’d mind stopping real quick for a loaf of bread and some lemons? I just realized I’m out.”

“Maggie needs some lemons and a loaf of bread.”

“No problem,” Dad yells toward the phone.

“Okay, so I’ll see you two in about thirty minutes then.”

I push the off button and hand the phone to Dad. “She’s making chicken,” I say. Not that it matters much. I’m so hungry I could eat my own tennis shoes. My stomach rolls over itself again in anticipation. It’s so noisy even Dad can hear, and he pats my belly and laughs.

“Worked up an appetite, did you?”

It’s quiet for a few minutes, and then Dad clears his throat and adjusts the cap on his head that says MIGHTY MIKE—the name of our charter boat. He smiles, and I
wonder if he’s thinking about Maggie or the chicken in the oven. I imagine it’s a little of both.

I smile, too. Maggie is a great cook. Dad’s smile makes me wonder, and I decide to ask something that I’ve been thinking about for months. “You ever gonna marry Maggie?”

Dad steers the truck along the road in silence, and I am almost sorry I said anything. Then he sucks in a deep breath. “Funny you should mention that, Mikey.”

“Dad, I’m almost sixteen. Don’t call me Mikey.”

“Right. Sorry, Mike.” He shifts in his seat and clears his throat again. “So as I was saying, it’s funny you should mention that.”

“Really?” I turn to look at him. He likes to tease me all the time, so I don’t want to get my hopes up just in case he’s messing with me.

“Well . . .” he says, dragging the word out like he’s letting out a trolling line.

“Seriously, Dad, are you thinking about it at least?”

Dad gives me a quick glance and then shifts the truck into a lower gear as we turn onto the Atlantic Beach Bridge that leads from Moorehead to Atlantic Beach, then to North Carolina Highway 58.

There’s still a lot of water on the road from the earlier storm, and I can hear the tires splash as we turn. I roll up the window so I can better hear whatever Dad might say.

“I always said I’d never get married again because I’d never get divorced again.”

I sit at full attention.
“But I never thought,” he says, and then he pauses and his voice gets softer. “I never thought I’d meet someone like Maggie. And I sure never thought she’d be interested in a guy like me.”

There is something in his voice that almost makes me sad. Why wouldn’t a girl, well, a woman like Maggie be interested in him? My dad is a great guy: strong, capable, able to fix anything.

He takes off the blue cap and runs a hand through his black hair. I can see flecks of white speckling around his temples, but I’ve heard more than one of the local ladies describe him as a handsome man. I hope women think he’s good looking, ’cause I look just like him—without the white speckles, of course.

“So,” I say, impatient for a real answer, “is that a ‘yes I am’ or an ‘I don’t know but I’m thinking about it’ or what?”

“It’s an ‘I’m giving it some serious consideration, but I thought you and I should talk about it first.’”

“What’s there to talk about?” I practically jump out of my seat. “She’s a great cook, she likes you a lot, she likes your kid, she puts up with the two of us sticking our stinky feet on her furniture, and did I mention she’s a great cook?” I catch my breath and then go on. “What more could you want?”

Dad lets out a big laugh. Then he grips the steering wheel tight in both hands as the truck fishtails. “Whoa,” he says, the laughter gone from his voice. We drift dangerously close to the bridge wall, and I can see the white-capped waters of the channel below.
I grab for the arm of the door. My fingers wrap tight around the plastic handle. I take a deep breath to control the shaking I’m scared will show in my voice. “Slick?” I ask as Dad gets the wheels straightened out and maneuvers into the far right lane.

“Going a little too fast. A lot of water still on the road. We hydroplaned for a second, but I’ve got it under control.”

I turn around in my seat and look at the road behind us. Water stands in big puddles on the bridge, and passing cars shoot up rooster tails in the air as they pass. Then I let out the air in my lungs. Dad has it under control. He’s always got it under control.

We pull into the Food Lion parking lot, and I wait in the truck. I flip on the radio and scan through the stations. I settle on a classic rock station Dad and Maggie like. Okay, I like it, too. My heart is sort of thumping in my chest, partly from sliding in the truck, partly over Dad’s hinting about Maggie.

For ten years, it’s been just me and Dad. He runs fishing boat charters for tourists during the spring and summer and works a handyman business in the fall and winter. A few years ago, he let me start coming along on the boat as his first mate. I cut bait, get lines ready, clean up after tourists, and help Dad with whatever he needs. Some of the clients have been coming to Dad for almost ten years. He doesn’t spend a lot on advertising—word of mouth is all he’s ever needed really. Then about five years ago, we met Maggie. I thought she was the prettiest and nicest lady I’d ever met. I still think so.
After a few minutes, Dad saunters across the grocery store parking lot. He pulls on the door handle and slides back into the truck. “Now listen,” he says, “don’t say anything to Maggie just yet. If I’m going to do this again, I’m going to do everything the right way. No mistakes this time. No rushing in and going too fast.”

“You’ve been dating for five years,” I say. “I don’t think anyone could accuse you of rushing anything.”

“Okay, smart guy, but listen.” Dad puts a hand on my knee, firm enough for me to know he’s serious. “On Tuesday, since we don’t have anything chartered, I’m driving up to Raleigh. I know a guy who’s a jeweler up there. He’s done a couple trips with me. He makes custom stuff, real nice, and that’s what Maggie deserves. So the story is, I’m going to Raleigh to get some supplies for the boat. Cheaper for me to drive up and get them than to have them shipped. I’ll be gone overnight, so is it okay if you stay with Maggie?”

“I can stay by myself, Dad.” Visions of hanging out on the computer all night and playing games or messaging Rachel begin weaving their way through my head.

“Not overnight. So can you play along? Not let on there’s anything up?”

I let out a long sigh. “Yeah, supplies in Raleigh, stay overnight with Maggie. Gotcha.” There is no point fighting about staying home alone, even though I know I’m old enough.

Dad pushes the truck into gear and pulls out of the parking space. “Good. Now let’s go eat.”
I’m disappointed at not being able to stay by myself, but right now, that’s not my biggest worry. I’m wondering how I’m going to keep this stupid grin off my face once we get to Maggie’s. I make myself frown, but that only makes me laugh, and that makes everything worse. *Think bad stuff. Think English papers and chemistry tests. Think about failing your driver’s license test.* It doesn’t matter. I just feel like a big Cheshire cat with a goofy smile. As we near Maggie’s house, my heart starts racing, and I doubt I’ll be able to keep from blurting out the secret the minute we arrive.