



Episode 10

On the Road Again

The car's roar sounds like the yawn of a hungry tiger. Or at least that's what Had Fleece thinks as he eases the stick into third gear.

"Great car," he says.

"Want to put the top down?" Cartier asks.

She doesn't have to ask twice. Had slows the Porsche down and pulls over to the side of the road; they are only a mile from the high school, on a back road in suburban New Jersey. It takes a mere two minutes before he is shifting the Boxter back into third gear, this time with the wind breaking in his face.

"Great car!" he says again, louder this time.

Cartier purrs, like a hungry tigress, and reaches out her left hand to flip on the CD player. A Chet Baker album. Also her father's, like the Porsche Boxter, the so-called affordable Porsche. The music is so mellow as to border on the comatose. Her hand gently passes over Had's hand where it rests on the gear stick. It rests there for a moment before she brings it back to her lap.

"Where do you want to eat?" he asks.

The road is your everyday suburban strip, lined with every franchise known to man, interspersed with Ray's Body Shops and Chex Kasht Kwicklys and Tiptop HMOs, where the "We profit from your health" slogan blazes brightly in blood-red neon above the front door.

"Wherever you want," she replies. She is easy to please, especially since she hasn't eaten lunch in seven years.

"How about Taco Bell?"

"Sounds great."

The restaurant is directly ahead of them, and Had maneuvers the car into the parking lot and into a space. For a second he is reluctant to turn off the engine, it sounds so pretty. With a sigh he turns the key and removes it.

"Great car," he says yet again.

Cartier nods. She eases herself out of the car and has her hand on his arm before he realizes it. She gently leads him in the direction of the restaurant.

Once inside he heads straight for the cashier. "What do you want?" he asks Cartier.

She thinks. "Diet Coke."

"That's it?"

"I don't eat much." She looks down at her trim, black-clad body. "I don't want to get any fatter than I already am," she says.

Had can't help following her glance, his own eyes riding down her perfect shape from sternum to stem. A sense of physical enchantment is beginning to grow in his brain. It is an effort to pull his eyes away. Fatter?

"Diet Coke," he confirms, and turns to stand in line.

"I'll get a table," Cartier says.

"Yeah. A table."

A perfect shape. From sternum to stem and back again. Had watches her walk away from him. From stem to sternum to stern, he mentally adds.

"Can I help you?"

Had turns back to the cashier, and puts in his order.

Five minutes later he is sitting across from Cartier eating a brace of tacos. She has pulled her sunglasses up to the top of her head, and for the first time he can see the blazing violet color of her eyes. They are like magnets, drawing his own eyes despite all his attempts to

keep his mind on his lunch. She occasionally sips from her soda, always looking up and him licking her lips softly after each sip.

Where has she been all his life, he wonders.

"So what activity do you do?" he asks her between bites. He is not so smitten that he will interrupt his lunch in any way.

"Dramatic Interp," she replies. "DI."

He nods. "DI. That's a great activity."

"You ever do DI?"

He hesitates. "No," he admits.

"You've always debated, haven't you?"

"Pretty much."

"You're good too, I'll bet."

"Pretty good."

"And modest. You won the District Tournament last year didn't you?"

He shrugs. "Yeah."

"Then that's not just pretty good."

He shrugs again. Had Fleece is not one to trumpet his own achievements. "You've taken some trophies too, I'll bet," he says.

The sip of the soda, the flash of the violet eyes, the lick of the lips. "A couple."

"You like doing DI?"

"I like theater. It's as close as you can get to the real thing when the school isn't putting on its play."

"You want to do theater professionally someday?"

"Oh, yes. I'm going to go to Yale."

"You know that already? You're already in?"

She shakes her head. "Not officially. But I'll get in. No problem."

"I wish I was so sure about where I'm going to go."

"What are you thinking about?"

"Well, I had thought about Yale myself. Even Harvard. But those are tough to get into. They only take one Toulousian a year."

"So why shouldn't that one be you?"

"Maybe," he admits. "I probably have the grades. And my SATs are good."

"And you're a top debater. And an athlete too, I'll bet."

"I do some track."

"There you are. A perfectly rounded individual." Another sip, another lick. "You'll go to Harvard. Unless we both go to Yale."

Had finishes the last bite of his third taco, and takes a look at his watch.

"You have to get back yet?" Cartier asks.

"Soon. The second flight should be ending. I don't want to not be there when the skems for Octos come out."

"I wouldn't let you miss it for the world."

Had's eyes pull themselves away from Cartier momentarily to pass around the restaurant. There is no one there from the tournament, but that is no surprise, as most of the students, if not all, arrived by bus, and have no transportation to get this far away from the school. Most likely they're all now paying a dollar each for a cold slice of tasteless pizza in the cafeteria. He's had many of those cold slices himself over the last few years.

"Are you going to the Messerschmitt tournament next week?" Cartier asks him.

There is something in the word Messerschmitt that strikes an unexpected chord of reality somewhere deep within him.

"Messerschmitt? Oh, yeah." Messerschmitt is the first big college tournament of the year.
"Are you?"

"I am now."

"I've got to ask you," he says tentatively. "That girl, Jasmine?"

Cartier's right eyebrow lifts slightly. "She's very nice," Cartier says. "In her way."

"She's really going out with that novice?"

Cartier pushes her empty soda forward on the table and lowers her eyeglasses, so that Had can no longer look clearly into her eyes.

"I know it's strange," she says. "We all think it's strange too. She's known him for a long time. I think they live in the same neighborhood or something. Are you going to want to be getting back now?"

"He just seems so young for her."

"I think she skipped a grade. Fourth grade, if I remember correctly. So she's pretty young too."

Had stands up. "But..."

Cartier rises and takes his hand as they leave the restaurant. "But?" she repeats.

"Well, he's such a dork."

"Some girls like dorks, Had. Or maybe she doesn't see him as a dork. Have you thought of that? Girls see guys differently than guys see each other."

"I don't know--"

"It's true. Girls don't look for good looks or things like that. They look beneath the surface." She gives Had's hand a squeeze. "Although sometimes the surfaces aren't all that bad either."

He looks over at her again, and once more takes an appreciative view of her own not so bad surfaces. It's not as if he really knows Jasmine or anything, although he has noticed her for awhile and wanted to get to know her. There's that thing sometimes when a girl just gives off a ... feeling. That's it, he thinks. A feeling. Or maybe she just stirs a feeling inside of him. Whichever, the feeling is there, and you just have to meet her and talk to her

and get to know her. And he had felt that way about Jasmine.

And then Cartier came along. She is better looking than Jasmine, there's no question about that. And she seems smart. And mature. A lot more mature than the girls Had is used to. Not that he hasn't dated his share, but those girls have usually been younger than him, or at most the same age. He's sure Cartier is his age too, but there's something older, more grown up, in the way she acts. She's sure of herself, more sure of herself than anyone Had has ever met.

And, he thinks, as they get back into her car, she has a Porsche. Or at least her father has a Porsche, which leaves her with just a Miata. She could be real young and ugly and still be good for a few spins around the block, as long as the Porsche or the Miata came along.

He starts the car and looks over at her in the passenger seat one last time before pulling out of his parking space. But she's not real young and she's certainly not real ugly.

And she certainly looks ready for a few good spins around the block.

He tosses the car into first gear, let's the car rev a second with its sound of a yawning hungry tiger, and heads back to the Andrew Johnson Reconstruction Memorial.

He still has a debate tournament to finish before he can let his mind freely roam where it so obviously wants to go.

Will Had and Cartier become an item?

Are three tacos enough to fuel a varsity debater?

Do they still manufacture the Boxter?

Will the Messerschmitt tournament in October ever equal the prestige of the Harvard tournament in February?

How far in does an ingrown toenail have to grow before you call the podiatrist?

Don't even think about finding the answer to any of these questions in our next installment: "Fritters -- Where is thy sting?"