

## **Ruby and Russell**

What she wanted to say to him was, you look so delicious I could eat you like a slice of Bartlett pear in balsamic vinaigrette with a piece of my Aunt May's toasted potato chive bread. But instead she said, "Well hello there stranger! Haven't seen you for awhile." She made herself sound nonchalant and easy going, pretending that he was just one of the guys to her, even though he clearly wasn't. She wanted to grab him by the collar and bury her face in his chest so badly she could barely breathe. "How are ya Russell?", she continued, her voice a higher pitch than normal.

He was tall and slim and had a grace about him that argued with his wide toothy grin.

"Hi Ruby.", he drawled the Hi part out as if it was a question, and tipped his black straw hat in her direction. "I'm fine Ruby. You look lovely this evening."

She adored hearing him say her name and had been secretly destroyed that he'd been absent from church meetings now for almost a month. What she wanted to confess to him was, Oh my dear Lord I've missed you around here. Could we please go lie down in a corn field together and look at the clouds? But what came out was, "It's so nice you could manage to find time to come out for the dance Russell."

*I Saw the Light* by Hank Williams was playing on the sound system inside the community hall. Most people were lingering outside, greeting one another and enjoying the dramatic shadows of the setting sun on the surrounding birch trees.

"Are you waiting for someone?" Russell ambled a little closer toward the long shady spot in which Ruby stood.

"Oh, yeah, just my sister, I mean not really, I mean, I'm watching the sunset and maybe I'll run into her in the meantime, I mean, I'm sure I'll see her inside soon enough." She immediately regretted having said all that knowing how flakey it made her seem.

But Russell was offering her his arm and so she grabbed it and shut up.

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Unfortunately Russell was quiet too and so keeping her own mouth shut had the unfortunate side effect of allowing her imagination to conjure in vivid detail what it would be like to reach over, pull his face toward hers and kiss him right there. She was so distracted by the thought that she tripped and stubbed her toe badly on the door sill on the way into the hall.

"You OK?", he held her hand while she tried unprofitably to gather herself. He guided her away from the entrance toward an available table and couple of chairs. "Why don't you relax for a minute and I'll go fetch us a refreshing glass of punch."

Russell crossed the polished floor toward the gymnasium equivalent of a kitchen. Several folding tables had been set up and decorated with fruit themed oil cloths. A crowd of eight women on the serving side of the table were readying to satiate the thirst requirements of a dancing army. However, there was no dancing army yet and so the women were mostly just serving gossip amongst themselves.

A tangible current of nerves jangled the charm bracelet of women as Russell, their only customer and a handsome one at that, headed their way. Russell stopped a few steps short of the table line to take the women in at once. "Good Evening Ladies, Rossa, Sherri, Frannie, Darcy, Linda, Lorene, Annie, Daisy. Pleasure to see you all."

There was an epidemic of blushing and blinking and smiling, then Sherri pushed her grapefruit themed bosom to the front of the pack.

"Russell Hollingsworth. What ever are you doing here .. all alone?" She reached for the punch ladel which Darcy deftly whisked out from under her hand. Sherri eyed Darcy darkly, "Why thank you so much Darcy, aren't you a helpful one." Darcy held onto the ladel like it was the last piece of firewood in the Arctic. Russell turned to look across the hall to where Ruby was sitting. Sherri continued, "Will that be ONE punch Mr. Hollingsworth?"

Russell turned back, "Uh no, Sherri, uh Darcy, uh thanks no I'd like two." Sherri's face dropped the baton and Darcy, never one to give up, set to work ladeling juice into the little

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plastic faux crystal cups. Sherri retreated huffily into the gaggle of punch bar women in waiting.

"There's real pineapple in it." Darcy beamed a perfectly crooked smile while handing over two drippy cups. "Don't choke on the pieces," she quipped with cheeks approaching the hue of persimmons.

*Jambalaya* started up over the speakers and Ruby felt a wiggle in her backbone as Russell ambled back toward her with the colourful drinks. "Hey I hope you don't think this is too forward of me but....." Russell looked from side to side. "...buuutt, I've got a little something that might help ease the sting of that stubbed toe of yours." He waited for her reply. "If ya like?"

She stared up at him with owl eyes and thought, right here honey, right here, I am going to rip my dress open and lie down on the table in front of you, right here and right now, yes finally you fool, kiss me. She closed her eyes and puckered up.

He took the wordless response as her complicit desire for a nip and stepped closer to her so that no one else would see him tipping his flask against her pinkly blossoming lips. Her hand flew up to meet his and she pulled the flask's entire contents of Jack Daniels whiskey back in one swift tip of her throat.

"My my, I didn't realize how much that toe must be hurtin you.", he looked on in amazement while thinking a few other less civil things to himself.

The moment she realized that it wasn't his, but the boozy lips of drink that she had sucked on so delightedly, was a moment too late. Tears gathered in Ruby's eyes. "Oh my goodness." She slapped her hand over her mouth. "I am such a fool." She turned away from Russell and didn't move.

Ruby had been dry for ten years because of all the trouble she and her ex-husband had gotten into over their drinking. They had lost their trailer and couldn't ever go back into the

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state of Ohio. Their marriage broke up and that's how Ruby moved to Plato, Saskatchewan where she had joined the Baptist church and had been living a righteous, sober and celibate life ever since.

The group at the next table stared back and forth at Russell then Ruby and back again. Even though he had been living in Plato for two years, Russell was still considered an outsider by most of the older townsfolk. He was the only man there over the age of twenty five who wasn't married and his Johnny Cash black shirts and long gone lonesome blue eyes didn't help to set any of them at ease about his intentions.

One of the gents at the next table stood and pulled up deliberately on the belt of his pants. Russell wished he was in his truck driving somewhere alone with the radio on. He leaned over and put his hand on Ruby's back, "Ruby dear...".

Alcohol fortified blood shot through Ruby's mascara stained brain and she spun around and grabbed Russell's face in her hands, "Yes Russell dear!!" She vacuum smacked her smudged and turbulent lips to the side of his mouth.

The attention of everyone at that sparsely attended dance was now fully rivetted on them. The wife of the man standing man at the next table yanked at his elbow in disgust. "Oh for Gosh sake, Bill, don't make a scene, sit down!", her heated demand jumped out into the silence between songs.

The stereo started up with Hank's yodeling *Settin the Woods on Fire* and Russell quickly extracted his face from Ruby's blubbery grip.

"Let's get some fresh air," he suggested and guided her by the hand out of the hall.

He put his arm around her waist as she negotiated the stairs in her heels and her slightly fuzzy state. She misunderstood his purpose and threw her arms around his neck knocking Russell's hat into the garden.

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"I don't think that's such a good idea right now Miss Ruby," he said and detached himself again from her arms at the bottom of the stairs.

"Wait here just a moment." He arranged her a little before turning to bend over and pick his chapeau out of the dirt but she followed him and they toppled into the geraniums together.

"Whee," she laughed and rolled over to look at him. The bewildered look on his face finally sunk in and she sat up.

"Ahhh..", she announced with drunken clarity, "..sorry Russell, I don't know what to say. Think I need to go clear out my head a little." She got up awkwardly patting at her rumpled and crooked party dress.

"Think I'll just go for a little walk.", she coached herself, turned to walk away and tripped over the edge of the lawn. She looked back at Russell again. He was still lying in the flowers watching her. "Sorry bout drinkin all your whiskey and knockin your hat off and .. oh god," she said softly then b-lined into the darkening light.

She had just turned onto the gravel walkway that followed the Meandering River when she heard the crunch of cowboy boots behind her.

"Would you like some company?" he trotted up beside her. She continued walking quietly and looked questioningly at him as he kept up.

"What are you doing here?" she said.

"Same as you, I suppose." he answered.

"Running away?" she ventured.

"Oh sure." he said thoughtfully. "Ain't no one I know not afraid of something."

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"What if you are afraid of your own thoughts and needs. What kind of person has to guard themselves against themselves?" She felt her throat tighten up and she had to stop speaking.

"Hmm," he drawled. "I wonder if that would be the kind of person who would like to have at least one real easy going friend to whom they could tell prit near everthing."

She started to laugh.

"Prit near?" she repeated. "OK well first off I like that you didn't make me feel horrible for being a fool back at the hall. Thank you for that kindness." She let out a big sigh of relief.

"My pleasure Miss Ruby." He smiled at her. "That's what I would like to find in this world so I try to give it out."

"Oh," Ruby stumbled on a rock, "S'funny hey how saying the so called right thing, doesn't really make you any friends anyways."

"Russell?" she continued. "Have I ever told you about my Aunt May's Potatoe Chive Bread?"

"Mmhmmm, no I don't think you have" Russell . "Are you warm enough there Miss Ruby?"