

Kentucky Chrome

A Novel by
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1.
The first casualty of his daughter's engagement to his boss was Jerry Bratcher's pet squirrel, Rocky.

Donna stopped off at the ranger station to give her dad the news on her way to work the lunch shift at Long John Silver's. She entered to a jangle of bells, flashed her ring (Jerry thought it sparkled grudgingly) and told him all about it as he stood at the wall of caged reptiles behind the counter.

Listening, he treated her to the sneer and the flipping back of his unlikely ginger thatch that he bestowed so freely on the public. In fact, she had to break off when one of the off-season trickle of campers stepped in to ask for a map to the park. Sneering, Jerry informed him they were out. The camper left, Jerry flipped back his hair and Donna resumed.

She lived with Mark, the wonder was that he would propose. After fleeing with her mother and brother to parts unknown when Jerry got out of prison the first time, she returned

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alone after his second stretch, the embodiment of the court's mercy in granting custody to a reformed and remorseful father. Naturally she fell for the handsome head ranger.

"Married, huh?" Jerry grunted. "He's a dog, you OK with that?"

Mark's affairs he was thinking of—besides those with park visitors, townswomen and outlying farm wives—included the one with his wife, Donna's mother, that led to the standoff that landed him in prison in the first place.

"He's changed," Donna informed him. "Turning forty. Wants to settle down, raise a family."

"Sure," said Jerry. "And you're—?"

"Nineteen in July." Which would also be the anniversary of moving in with Mark (Jerry did not care to revisit that battle). She turned to leave, opened the door without jangling the bell. "Don't fuck it up, Daddy, it wasn't easy. Hey, it's *Kansas*. Been legal since I was twelve years old."

"Set a date?"

"Saturday of Labor Day weekend, on top of Big Bone Hill. Not too bad: the dress, cake, rent a shelter for the reception. But if you don't want to pay for it, we'll elope."

"Won't get off that easy," Jerry growled at her departing yellow ruffles.

He watched her reach inside her ancient, one-eyed Isuzu to

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open it. Duct tape held the front bumper on and propped up its sole remaining headlight, brightened the smashed-up fenders and secured the back window's plastic sheeting. A bungee cord closed the hood.

One day Mark delivered to Donna a brand-new, turquoise Thunderbird convertible, with a broad golden ribbon across it to match her hair, and she laughed in his face. *That's my girl*, had been Jerry's thought.

After she drove off he returned to arranging the morrow's annual springtime burn of Big Bone Hill.

Over the radio at 4:59—he was nothing if not punctual—Jerry advised Ranger Ray, on evening patrol, that he was closing up. Wishing the snakes and turtles goodnight, he turned off the shortwave and the lights, locked the door and climbed, groaning, into his decommissioned park truck, which still had the siren and amber roof lights, but whose insignia were painted out in a darker shade of brown than the rest. He drove down the lane opposite the ranger station towards the swimming beach, but short of it turned into the woods where his old Airstream nestled against a slope like an undiscovered plane crash.

He went indoors and sat down heavily and with his inevitable groan. Rocky, glad to see him, chattering excitedly, ran over and jumped in his lap. Jerry, in no mood, brushed him to the floor. In the process Rocky nipped his finger. Two telltale droplets

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of blood welled up. There was nothing for it but to get up again, groaning, wipe the wound with alcohol, bandage it, grab the .22 from behind the couch, open the door and let the squirrel out. Rocky scurried onto the picnic table and Jerry blew his head off. He kicked the body into the trees, and stood listening to the echoes of the rifle's report to make sure there were no repercussions.

But the sound – startling in a state park, and illegal (doubly so from a two-time felon forbidden guns) – died out, and that was that. That was that, except that, unusually for a weeknight, Jerry cracked a bottle of Kentucky Tavern. Reviewing the history of Mark's worming his way into his family he missed Rocky's sympathetic ear and chattering counsel, but the facts never changed anyway.

By the time *Letterman* came on, Kentucky Tavern was running low and Jerry could only nod and snore. Still in his chair the next morning, he woke up to a dire, if relentlessly cheerful, Kansas City traffic report.