

The Taste of Chicory Root

by Katrine Raymond

The day I lost my virginity was scorching.

It was August twenty-second and Jim Talbot finally got up the nerve to ask me out. Only thirteen days left before the end of summer vacation.

He worked as a lifeguard at the splash pad in the park. Some girls from school would put on their bikinis and dance around with the little kids until a parent complained that wading pools weren't made for girls with fully-formed breasts.

It wasn't the most glamorous summer job. Even working the ice cream shop, like I did, was better. You could see who was holding hands and who was kissing who. But Jim didn't particularly care.

The day he called me, some kid had gotten sick in the water.

"They closed the pool early," he said. "So I was wondering if you'd like to, you know."

"Yeah," I said. "Sure."

He picked me up in his Dad's old station wagon. He parked with one tire up on the curb, but at least he had his license. When he got to my house, he pulled my phone out of my hand. "You won't need this," he said. "We're going back to nature." Weird. But kind of cute. "Grab your swimsuit and a towel." I wasn't used to this sort of take-charge attitude. Most guys I knew seemed terrified of me, or at least as scared as I was of them. While I ran back up to my room to get my suit, he handed my mom the phone.

“What if there’s an emergency?” Mom looked doubtful.

Jim said something about being a lifeguard, and that seemed to please her.

First stop was the gas station. We drove though the valley town of Dundas, then up a steep hill. More trees.

“So where we going?” I asked.

“Webster’s Falls,” Jim said. “I’ve got a picnic in the trunk.”

My insides started humming, all warm and buzzy. A picnic? For me? No phones allowed? Who was this guy?

When got to the parking lot, orange cones and a gate closed off the entrance.

“Oh God,” he said, banging his head against the steering wheel. The sign said we had to park somewhere ten kilometres away and catch a shuttle since the number of tourists were skyrocketing. *Relax*, I wanted to tell him. “No biggie,” I said, then felt like banging my own head. What was I, five?

“City of waterfalls,” Jim said. “Guess it’s catching on. My dad said they were running into trouble, too many tourists.”

Webster’s Falls was the sort of place they’d made postcards out of back in the day: 50 feet high, the water falls straight down in sheets.

It was the summer the city had started closing off the parking for the waterfalls. Jim continued. “Smithsonian says we’re the waterfall capital of the world, and now? Crap. I don’t even know how to get to Mizener’s for the shuttle.”

Jim pulled out a paper map from the glove box. Old school.

Twenty minutes later, we had found our way to Mizener's Antiques, me reading the map and directing him with a few mistakes along the way.

I guess he was so intent on taking me swimming because it's what he knew best. Maybe Jim picked this spot because he figured he could show off his back stroke. But an hour later, after the awkward drive out to Webster's Falls, and then the shuttle drive from Mizener's, when we got in the water, he mostly floated around, staring at the too-blue sky.

We swam far away from the falls, in the clear blue water of the stream.

I tried my best to tread water beside him, looking at his teal blue suit and the gold hairs glinting on his arms.

Suddenly he dove underwater, lunging for my legs, pretending to be a shark.

I laughed until I coughed up water, splashing it all over his face.

He filled his mouth with water and blew it into the air like a fountain.

He was seventeen and had freckles all over his arms and legs. I envied his careless ease and his A's in school.

"This place is great," I told him. I'd never seen it before, despite living in Hamilton my whole life. My parents had taken us up to Niagara Falls and Toronto, even all the way to England once to see Stonehenge, but I hadn't even seen our own waterfalls.

After our swim, we sat on the picnic blanket, eating the fancy sandwiches Jim had packed.

Jim had done his homework.

He told me an old story about a girl named Evening Star, who falls in love with a blue-eyed boy who'd just shown up in a canoe. A raging old guy ends up killing the boy from jealousy. But the girl can't bear it, so she hugs his dead body and flings the two of them over the brink of the falls. When it rained, and the silver mist rose by the light of the full moon, some could see the lovers embracing in their watery grave. The story gave me the shivers.

"It all happened here," Jim said, gesturing to the falls below us.

It sounded like a story made up for tourists. Didn't she *just* meet the blue-eyed boy? Was it really worth hurling herself over?

I looked over the edge.

The centre of the gorge was deep, safe for diving, but you had to know the rocks and the shallow pools around the edges. Only the stupid tried to jump from the top.

"Time to die!" one guy yelled as he plunged over.

"Ignore them," Jim said, pointing to the crowd.

There were six or seven of them sitting on a rock. The sweet skunky smell of their smoke drifted by.

"Just lizards, coming out to sun on the rocks," Jim said. He grabbed my hand and pulled me towards the water again.

In the water I swam away and Jim grabbed my ankle. I pulled and he held on to it for an extra moment.

One of the lizard boys suddenly scrambled up the rocks. This boy held a razor blade. He looked younger than us, but it was probably just his size. He was skinny and tanned brown with wiry muscles on his arms. He put the razor in his mouth and dove, his thin body straight and graceful.

I held my breath until his head broke water. He shook his head, slick black hair throwing water droplets in an arc. I blinked as one landed on my face.

A little boy's voice from the bank was shrill and persistent. "Hey, Dad, can I do that? Dad? I'm trying that."

He ran up the cliff, fingers grabbing at rock and moss and grass like a little monkey. His Dad couldn't keep up. He followed, defeated, watching his son get away.

The boy ran up to the edge, a few rocks over from the spot where the razor boy had jumped.

"No, not there!" the boy with the razor yelled. The kid was diving in shallow water.

But before razor-blade could stop him, the boy's feet skidded on slippery rock.

Our bodies tensed. The water stilled. We were silent.

I'd left my glasses on the blanket. I couldn't make out details, though I heard the muffled scream under a splash of water. The boy with the razor turned around and dove into the water. At the same moment, Jim started to swim, his arms doing what they were meant to do, moving towards the boy, and then underwater when he arrived at the spot. Jim reached him first. When he finally resurfaced with the boy in his arms, the head was hanging limply, blood gushing out of his forehead.

Later, a crowd gathered around the ambulance.

The boy with the razor held out a towel for me. I nodded weakly.

"Thanks," I said.

The kid's dad entered the ambulance in the silence of shock. Jim asked to come along. He'd rescued the boy, put him in the prone position and sat with him until the ambulance arrived. He'd be calm enough to explain what happened in the ER.

Jim said he'd pick me up at the gas station in a couple hours. He had enough presence of mind to make plans like that, to account for the unexpected in a stressful situation.

The black-haired boy with the razor was the only one still around. His friends had scattered fast. He'd known that little kid, he said. Everyone knew everyone around here. They could pick out the city-folks, the tourists. He seemed at loose ends.

“I’ll stay with her,” he muttered after Jim left. Then the ambulance drove away.

We stood on the pavement, over the gently arching bridge. The crowd slowly left, like walking wraiths, stunned and lulled into a stupor by the heat.

We looked at the river swirling below.

“It’s bloody hot out here,” I finally said, wiping small beads of sweat from my eyes. My suit had already dried.

“Yeah.” He looked around. Neither of us wanted to move back towards the falls.

“There’s some shade there.” He pointed to an old inn set back from the road. “That place hasn’t been running for the last ten years. Sometimes we go there at night, to hang out.”

As we walked along the overgrown driveway, he pointed to flowers growing along the way. “Catnip, funny looking thing eh? Not real pretty. And there’s some tiger lilies and fleabane.”

I raised an eyebrow. “How’d you know?”

“My mom’s a gardener.” He looked embarrassed.

He pushed open the door and led me into a dim, musty-smelling foyer. He looked sleepy. He rubbed his eyes. He left the front door half open to let some light in. I wrapped my towel around me.

“You okay?” he asked.

I nodded. The open door and the sight of flowers in full bloom calmed me down.

“You can hang out in the driveway for a few minutes if you want. I just need a place to sit for a minute.”

“Sure.” I stood near the door and then asked, “Why do you do it?”

“What?” He sat on an old couch.

“Dive like that.”

You could tell the front foyer was once inviting, high-ceilings with a chandelier. The wallpaper was fading red damask.

“Like what?”

“With a razor in your mouth.”

He scratched his leg and ignored my question.

I tried to start again. “Was this a fancy hotel?”

“Naw.” He snorted. “My Dad used to run it, back in the day. Not fancy.” He closed his eyes again.

“I’ve gotta go,” I said.

He looked up at me in surprise.

“No, I’m just gonna pee. I’ll be back.”

He looked relieved. “Fine.”

I started to walk back towards the falls, but I couldn’t find a bathroom.

After the accident, the whole park had cleared out. The last few people were lingering in the parking lot, waiting for the next shuttle to get the hell out. I’d find a quiet spot in the trees and pee there.

I followed a path and the rushing of the water. Part way along, the trees filled in and I could see some stones up ahead.

It wasn't those damn slippery river stones but a tiny cemetery.

I sat down and traced the letters on the gravestones jutting out of the earth. Webster. Joseph and Maria. I don't know if they'd had any kids. The sun was setting in that quick, smooth late August way, illuminating their names on the stone. No kids listed.

For a minute I sat like that. Then I heard footsteps.

"There you are. I thought you'd left." He knelt down to see what I was looking at.

As he sat down beside me, he started to cry. "You know I tried to stop him." For a few seconds, the sound coming out of him was a whimper.

I moved closer.

"Did you see the blood?" he asked.

I put my arms around him to stop his body from shaking as when he cried. I pointed to little purple flowers on spindly stems growing beside the gravestone. "What're these?"

"Chicory," he said, recovering. "Not much to look at, but you can eat the leaves and roots."

He pulled two out of the ground, holding them out in his palm. His tears had stopped. "You hungry?" he said with a smile. "Tastes like bitter salad."

I took a bite.

"You seen that old movie with Luke Perry?" he asked.

“What movie?”

“You know, with the aliens who try to take over and Luke Perry saves earth.”

“Nope.”

“Oh. Well, Webster’s Falls is in the background, only it’s lava pouring over the falls, all red and boiling, and it nearly kills him.”

“Eww.” I sat, imagining the falls red and demonic, like in the movie. Dark would come soon and I didn’t want think about that.

“I think the movie was called Descent,” I said.

“What? You’ve seen it?” He rolled over towards me and poked me in the thigh. “Liar.”

Silence.

“Why’d you say you didn’t?”

I shrugged. “Maybe I just like to hear you talk.”

He finished eating the chicory, tossing the stem aside. “If that kid dies, I’ll never forgive myself.”

I nodded. “I watched that movie with my gran. She was terrified.”

He smiled weakly.

“Think the kid’s okay?” I asked.

He shrugged. Probably not.

I reached over and pulled him in close. His upset breathing slowed down.

As the last of the sun went down, the taste of chicory root was still in my mouth, bitter and minty. His lips were red. I wondered if mine were red too. We leaned in closer and I could hear his breath.

We were sitting against the cold stone with our hands entwined around the chicory plant when he tentatively pulled the crotch of my bathing suit to one side exposing the dark curly hairs. I could feel my cheeks turn red, but I liked the feeling. His fingers started prodding gently first, then insistently, like he was looking for something he lost. I thought about his razor, wondered where he kept it. I couldn't see any pockets in his swim trunks.

I reached out to feel his trunks, to see if there were any pockets on the back, pulling him into me. He didn't say anything when he entered me. Nothing about the heat or what was happening between my legs. It seemed sad when I thought about how long it had taken me to tweeze the hairs from my nipples. He didn't even get to see them.

He sat on his haunches and started to rock back and forth. I pictured myself with a razor in my mouth when his thrusting grew rhythmic. And somehow I knew why he'd done it, why he needed to, why it made jumping from that cliff so much easier.

His thin legs were strong, muscles growing taut from the exertion. I stifled a yelp.

I thought about all that time I'd spent filing my toenails. I was sore from the strange pounding but my bathing suit, pulled aside, grew wet again. The falls nearby kept a steady beat behind us as our breaths slowed down together.

A couple months later, I looked up the legend of Webster's Falls. There were all sorts of versions of Jim's story. Turns out it wasn't even Jim's story to tell. It's not mine to tell either. Yet I couldn't forget it, like the boy who went over that day. As much as it might be easier to just forget. The stories belong only to the waterfall, I guess.

But that evening, as the boy with the razor sat beside me, his breath quick and his hand in mine, I didn't throw myself into the falls. Instead I bit into the chicory root. He was right. It tasted like bitter salad.

I'd been waiting all summer for something to happen and it had.

I wondered about the kid's father. I wondered if he'd ever be able to forgive himself for not stopping his son. We would read about it the next day in the *Spectator*. Another waterfall story in that summer of waterfalls.

I walked away first, leaving him sitting on the ground, propped up against the grey stone, still warm with the heat of our bodies.

It was almost dark and Jim would be waiting for me.