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## **Just Chocolate Syrup**

**by Cameron Strittmatter**

And suddenly it occurs to me: I am a pedophile. In light of the circumstances, I am unusually aroused. We continue to take the pictures. A bit of skin there, a hint of torn blouse, a pinch of letter jacket. We are building immortality. A shot of cleavage, bruised calves, bloodstains on brown locks of hair. The makeup is unquestionable. If it wasn't imperative that Sarahbeth lay herself there with red-spattered lips parted just enough to let the chocolate syrup trickle out, she'd be smiling. The Polaroid's flashing makes just enough light for the school colors to be visible. It is cold in the warehouse- probably colder on the floor in a miniskirt. Carefully, carefully. No identifying marks, no eyes, no noses, no clarity. Fear is built on such things; uncertainty, breasts, blood.

We are building an urban legend. Five minutes later, and Sarahbeth can spit. I should've thought to bring a toothbrush. Gregory, Donny, and those other two collect the photographs as deftly as ski mittens, latex, and a shirt corner will allow as I watch her adjust her clothing and walk out to the car. Bryan has to admit he is brilliant, and I turn, focused, and the consensus is this: yes, yes, a devious construction is begun indeed. The architects and their assistants sigh, and in my backseat the girl we pretended to murder is a silhouette changing shirts.

The plan began, irrelevantly enough, at a birthday party; one of the girlfriends after one of the shows at one of those places with some of that pizza in a month nearly a year ago today. What started innocuously as a discussion evolved into an idea. The idea went outside for a cigarette, and four aspiring young gentlemen later, the idea became so alluring that it had no choice but to become a theory. Naturally, in the theme of youth, of vitality, of sciences, theories are to be tested. With adolescent consideration, two smirks, and a leather jacket the game was set: we had it, a ploy, a platform, a procedure; a plan.

By the third week, Greg, the other two, they will be more than nervous. Shockwaves of unprecedented response will ripple to other counties, the state borders. News coverage, investigative reporters and detectives whose names I will probably never know will want to know who this girl was, where these photos are coming from. Visiting the ranch is out of the question, so photos will have been appearing at bus stops, children's parks, I won't be able to reach Bryan anywhere. There are partial fingerprints, patterns in smudged nail polish, and I am worried for my conspirators. And still they look for the girl who never died, my Sarahbeth become legend. My Sarahbeth, who is putting on strawberry lip gloss.

We get in the car and leave in the afternoon sun. She talks about high school things, about high school boys and high school problems, I think about the way I tousle my hair when I'm focused. It will be Tuesday when Donny will start with the curiosity. Donny will tell his friends about the horrible rumor he heard, the pictures of the girl he found, he will talk about how he found them out by that stop sign after that guy's ranch party. He had to pee, and there they were, at least twelve of them arranged about the seldom-traversed intersection. That is where it will start. I turn a sharp corner just as her favorite song comes on, I admire the curve of her smile: it is a wonderful place to begin to say something to her. But she looks out the window, and I don't interrupt her.

She won't know it, but the boy three rows in front of her in her sixth period class, the one with the long hair, will be the first one curious enough to see for himself. Naturally, he won't go out there just to see- he will be leaving the ranch, and Will will need to use the bathroom, and then he will remember. Monday morning, two weeks from now, it will be bigger than I believed. Two student newspapers and a concerned parent-teacher association meeting: somebody wearing a letter jacket is obviously dead- but nobody's missing. She won't know it, but in three weeks the police will be perusing the shot of cleavage, the bruised calves, the bloodstains on brown locks of hair.

I drop Sarahbeth off at her house and regret that I never said anything she'll remember later tonight. I remember another car ride,

the third one, an earlier, different year, the windows were rolled down and she politely asked for some things I couldn't give her. A kiss suited her question, and she never asked for any secrets from me again- which, I suppose, fueled my decision to participate.

In the plan, that is.

What I mean, and what I want to tell her, is that I've missed the secrets. My parents were always happy, my relationships always healthy. I want to tell her that my friend from kindergarten that I accidentally caused the partial paralysis of in the fourth grade isn't real, that I made her up and that I don't really blame myself for it every day, and that I never owned a pot-bellied pig and was never beaten up once by an alcoholic uncle at a family reunion. I do have a secret, then. Two, even now, as Bryan and his Polaroids spread to the dark corners of our town.

We thought we thought of everything. Faking murder for attention had to be illegal. Some inspector, some third eye would notice the calculated angles of her wrists. We knew that control would be an issue, that many unexpected things would occur. Who could pass this scheme up? Who could deny such sparkingly wicked intellect? Not I, sir. Turning again, this time onto the street where my house is, I revel in what we are about to do. The pictures are in place, the rumors are being written, this is dynamite. This stuff is scary.

So scary that all of Sarahbeth's scholarships will be revoked from her because of a high school stunt that started not with the boy three rows in front of her with the long hair, but by Angela Tisby, aged a ripe forty-two years, mother to Brandon, fourteen, a student. Her car will break down out near some ranch. She will find the pictures. Gregory won't ever be nervous during the third week- it won't make it that far. On her way to the authorities of her choice, little Brandon will recognize the freckles just below the murdered girl's collarbone.

Bryan, the other two, they couldn't have calculated that the cost was more than the money spent on film. She wouldn't talk, my silhouette changing shirts, but everyone would know. In a week our

immortality would be forgotten, our point. Of course, as she signs on instant messenger tonight, as Donny drives out to the ranch, none of this is important. She'll wonder why I didn't say anything she could think about, maybe while she's taking off her socks. Angela Tisby, the freckles, the fingerprints, all part of Bryan's fuse that was lit today. Later on the architects and their assistants will sigh a second time, we will not understand what the big deal was. After all, it was just chocolate syrup.

### **About The Author**

Cameron Strittmatter is a student at Arlington Heights High School and enjoys writing as a hobby.

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