



Under the Water Tower

Fiction by Dominic Mangiocco

Secluded under the spindly legs of an abandoned water tower, Danny fumbles with the honeysuckle cigarillo in his hands and tries to catch the bud falling onto his faded jeans while Ronnie urinates loudly behind him into a grove of pine trees. Danny struggles to avert his gaze.

"How's it going?" Ronnie asks eagerly.

"About expected," Danny replies. "What's taking you so long?"

"I can't see shit and I could ask the same of you!"

"You bitch; I drank more than you." Ronnie roars. "Is it loud?"

"Is what loud?"

"My piss: is it loud? I've got a theory that the louder a guy's piss sounds, the bigger his dick is."

Danny laughs and carefully searches for a neutral answer. "Sure."

"Don't be such a prude, *Danny boy*."

"Can you hurry up and come roll this fucking thing?"

Ziip! Ronnie gently confiscates Danny's work in progress, gasping in faux horror. "Have I taught you nothing?"

"Can you save her, doctor?"

"It's a risk I'm willing to take!" Ronnie, with surgical precision, begins to roll.

Danny slicks his sweat back, taming his unkempt mane as he relaxes into their routine, a twist here, a lick there. Ronnie carefully opens layers and seals folds. Once finished, Ronnie delicately places his masterpiece below Danny's cupid's bow and sparks his lighter. Parchment burns, embers glow, and Ronnie holds the flickering flame steady. The two boys stare at each other, transfixed, afraid to move. Finally, Danny inhales.

Ronnie's lips curl into a smile. "Let it out."

Danny exhales, leans forward, and kisses Ronnie.

Danny's wavy black hair lashes his face as the wind whips it wildly. Ronnie rubs his fresh buzz cut as he maneuvers his Mustang down the

nimble streets glowing under amber lamplights. Danny cracks into a soft smile when he feels Ronnie's arm brush against his. Ronnie keeps driving. *Thirty-five. Forty. Sixty-five. Eighty.*

Danny nervously protests, "Ronnie, what the hell are you doing?"

Ronnie glances over at Danny, death-gripping the leather seat underneath him. "Let it out."

"How come I *never* know what you mean?"

"You wanna be a poet someday, right? Shakespeare or Wilde? You gotta get in touch with yourself. Your emotions, your fear. How you feel. Let that shit out, man." He twists the volume hard and high, and gestures toward the radio. "Like Springsteen, dude! He lets it out!"

"You're literally insane."

"I want you to scream,"

Ronnie says, and increases his speed to *ninety-five*.

"For fuck's sake, Ronnie!"

"Scream!"

Danny tries to laugh it off, but Ronnie persists: "I dare you."

Ronnie challenges Danny with his signature Cheshire Cat grin. Danny accepts with a throat-

searing scream. Ronnie hammers his fist on the steering wheel in thunderous approval. They burst into liberated laughter. Danny screams again. Ronnie joins him.

The shower faucet drips. Steam lingers around Danny as he enters the dimly lit bedroom. Ronnie lies asleep, his briefs on the floor. Danny discreetly slips on his gym shorts and crawls under the covers beside him. They lie in silence. Danny's eyes flicker around the room. He never sleeps well when Ronnie spends the night. Too close to be relaxed, too far away to be comfortable.

"I can hear you thinking," Ronnie grumbles.

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be." Ronnie turns over and curls Danny into his chest. Danny reluctantly allows himself to sink into it.

Aspangled banner adorned in red, white, and blue writing reads, "*We Will Miss You, Ronnie!*" and looms over the idyllic chatter. Danny drowns himself in his Rum and Cola and counts the pool's ripples. Off the bank and back again.

"Daniel!" A booming voice pulls him up.

"Mrs. Rodriguez! How're you?" Danny asks through a

clenched smile.

"I'm trying not to burst into tears!" Mrs. Rodriguez turns to the flushed woman beside her.

"Theresa, this is Daniel, Ronaldo's best friend. He and his parents are so generous to host Ronaldo's goodbye party."

"Oh, that is generous of you! The two of you must be such good *friends!*" Theresa squeaks out.

"Sure." Danny nervously swirls his ice cubes. "Can I get you another drink?"

Mrs. Rodriguez ignores him as she performatively scans the crowd. "Where's Ronaldo?" "Oh! He's over there with Lina," Theresa interjects.

Danny lasers in on Lina, a slender woman whose bouncing blonde hair complements a vivacious yellow

sundress. Lina intertwines herself with Ronnie's bicep as he charms his cousins.

"She's so beautiful, and Ronaldo's so handsome. They're perfect together," Theresa squeals.

Ronnie sips Corona while his eyes flicker to Danny across the lawn; Danny subtly signals his need for saving with wide-set eyes, and Ronnie returns the gesture. The two snicker

until Lina demands Ronnie's attention with a passionate kiss. Danny quickly returns his focus to the bright blue ripples, off the bank and back again.

Cocktails and "goodbyes"; sundresses poolside, White sheets and a locked door, Calvin Kleins on the floor, Amber lights and leather seats, windows down in summer heat, Honeysuckles where pine trees grow, say you love me before you go.

The years of tension are finally broken. Danny and Ronnie sink into their first kiss until Ronnie fearfully shoves Danny back. The two boys stare at each other. Ronnie speaks first, asking, "Why'd you do that?"

"I wasn't sure I'd get another chance."

Ronnie cradles his head in his hands, mind reeling. When he looks up again, his eyes are filled with tears. Ronnie whispers, "I'm sorry."

"Don't be."

Ronnie leaves. In the distance, the Mustang rumbles and peels out.

Danny sits under the water tower, alone.

Ronnie challenges Danny with his signature Cheshire Cat grin. Danny accepts with a throat- searing scream.
