

Way Deep

by Katherine Wilcox Burger

1 Jolene — fifteen

Female

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(Two teenagers, Jolene and Tate, fall in love and decide to run away from home. On the road, the first gush of love quickly sours and they decide to return home. Jolene, who is fifteen, resembles a sixteenth-century religious madonna — no, not the rock icon! But she is also a fragile and vulnerable romantic, a good example of the naive beauty and innocent wonder found in youth.)

10 What I've heard is: there are only two stories in the whole
11 world. 'A stranger comes to town' and 'I go on a journey.'
12 Everything else — boy gets, loses, recovers girl; X betrays
13 Y over Z, Y stabs Z with a corkscrew — it's all variations
14 on the theme. Someone you know can turn out to be a
15 stranger, and the other way around. A journey can be
16 local. Not everyone has the wherewithal to travel. And
17 some journeys are inner, and I don't mean 'The Incredible
18 Voyage,' those medical rescue people bopping around in
19 some guy's bloodstream. Sometimes a person is exposed
20 to, I don't know, a new thought, a different perspective,
21 and it's as boggling as if they'd gone to outer space.

22 So here's the deal. In the summer of my fifteenth year
23 a stranger showed up in town and I ended up going on a
24 journey and then I went home again. In a nutshell. But it
25 was more complicated than that, at least to me. I guess I
26 should start at the beginning. He — the stranger — was
27 visiting his aunt Betsy because his parents were getting a
28 divorce and they wanted him out of the way. The first time
29 I saw him I felt like all the air in my chest just got

1 compressed, as if a hand was squeezing my heart. It didn't
2 get any better. It was, like, agony to see this guy. Not
3 seeing him was worse. I'd moon around and wear black a
4 lot, even though it was summer, and look in the mirror for
5 skin imperfections for hours. It's embarrassing to admit
6 how much time I spent looking in that mirror. Maybe I was
7 trying to go through the looking glass and find a backwards
8 world where I'd fit in more. And then one day he spoke to
9 me. I was nutzoid, gonzo, gone.

10 We started having these really deep conversations, not
11 a lot of gossip and hot air like the other kids. We talked
12 about important stuff. Big stuff. The eternal questions.
13 Death, life on other galaxies, is there a god or is life just a
14 panoply of chaotic happenstance.

15 I brought a blanket and some iced tea. I know what
16 you're thinking. Teenagers, a blanket, the stars — but it
17 wasn't like that. But then he touched me. He touched me
18 and the world was never the same again. And all above us
19 the stars were streaming, streaking through the black
20 night sky with a dying fall, like music too lovely to be
21 heard, too lovely to live.

22 I wanted to die. I figured that whatever else happened
23 during the whole rest of my life it would never be as good
24 as this. I wanted to die right now.

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