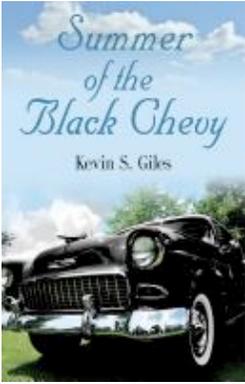


*Summer
of the
Black Chevy*

Kevin S. Giles





Paul Morrison launches his first teenage summer at a school dance, longing for girls and the smack of baseballs. His innocence ends quickly that night when a roaring black Chevy chases him into the dark, but it's the mysterious stranger driving it who scares him more. It's 1965 in Deer Lodge, Montana, far from the busy faraway world that Paul and his girlfriend Marcy read about in books...

Summer of the Black Chevy

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The car roared and bucked with heart-thumping power. The motor had a mind of its own, a beast of metal and explosive gases in eight cylinders. I screeched onto a paved street in third gear. The big steering wheel felt alive in my clenched hands, silhouetted against the yellow light on the dashboard. The speedometer needle climbed to twenty-five, then thirty. In third gear, the Chevy cut through the night like a charging army. I drove for three blocks consumed with the thrill before it occurred to me that I'd stolen the stranger's car.

*Kevin S. Giles has used his journalist's eye for salient detail and the truths behind the façades of human behavior to create an impressive and memorable narrative. This coming-of-age story combines compelling characters, taut plotting and hard-earned life lessons with just the right hint of nostalgia. *Summer of the Black Chevy* is a must-read.*

– Craig J. Hansen, author of the Jason Audley trilogy: *Skeleton Train*, *Winter Lake*, and *The Morning Door*.

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Kevin S. Giles

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Sky Blue Waters Press

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The characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

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First Edition

To the Hooligans.

You know who you are.

Homeward

My dying mother's eyes flamed with denial. "Paul, no, not you, it was Louie!" she whispered, her failing heart allowing nothing more. Then she was gone, slipping away from me and all I had hidden from her. I had just begun to tell her a secret haunting me since 1965, my first year as a teenager. Now she would never know the depth of my regret.

The wind blew mournfully that night in Montana. I sat on the porch of my childhood house watching a magnificent Halloween moon crawl over the sky. Its blue light, deathly as my mother's skin, washed into the shadows. Fallen leaves rustled over the road. The coroner had come. He reeked of Lucky Strikes and overheated coffee. Being a man accustomed to examining the dead, he probed casually at her with scabbed fingers and laid his ear to her mouth and shook his head as I knew he would. "No surprise?" He nodded to himself, anticipating my answer. Then he pulled her eyelids down and whistled his way to his car for a body bag to carry away what was left of my mother.

My trip from Oregon had commenced on a whim. It's always best that a man moves quickly when he plunges into the heartache of his past. I didn't want to drive the Chevy. It

would have roared up the highway, turning heads, and in some strange way distracted me from my mission. I knew I didn't have much time. The rental place found me a fast Jeep Cherokee, made for mountain driving, and put me on the road on a Tuesday morning in late October. I arrived in my hometown of Deer Lodge the next afternoon to find my mother's life ebbing under a pile of blankets in her bedroom. Regrettably I hadn't seen her for three years. Mom looked much older than she deserved.

My sister Sally, hearing of our mother's sudden decline, had arrived a few days earlier to take stock of an impossible situation. She began a storm of cleaning that uncovered liquor bottles of various quantities that Mom had used to wash down her heart medications. In tandem those substances had bleached away her youthful beauty and worse yet, stole her heart.

I tried to make my confession after Sally left for a drive home to seek peace in solitude. Mom, shivering, interrupted to say she was cold. I searched the closet in my old bedroom and found a sleeping bag she and Dad had given me for my first Cub Scout camping trip. It was a good memory of our young family, held dear before the trouble started. I unrolled it over her and when she smiled I held her hand and, finally, began choking out my secret. She spoke those few words of denial and died.

She had waited for me to admit what I had done because she wanted me to know she didn't believe a word of it. She wanted that understanding between us. She had followed life's trail to an improbable end, just as had so many others I had known and loved, especially Louie.

Blue and Max

Blue tugged on my tie until he strangled the daylights out of me. I watched him in the bathroom mirror as he cinched me like he did Old Betsy in the corral.

“Blue! You’re choking me!”

“You’ve got to plan for equipment failures during the ride, Paul,” he told me, using his best John Wayne voice. “We can’t have the tack coming loose.”

Blue was in a phase where he liked to talk like a cowboy because of westerns we had seen at the Rialto. His dad owned a few acres in the foothills east of Deer Lodge, a railroad and prison town. He kept Betsy pastured in a grove of trees. For two summers we rode our bikes out there to see the old mare until Blue’s fantasy to ride into the Old West began to unravel. More and more he made excuses to watch girls at the soda fountain downtown. I burned through quarters like crazy helping Blue hold vigil at the counter. After we each spent our allowance we’d head back out to see Betsy.

She grazed in a meadow at Zosel’s Grove where in summer we walked in sagebrush and mountain wildflowers that grew to our knees. Betsy mellowed under the warm sun but when the weather turned cold and raw so did her temper. One autumn day she bucked Blue into a fencepost. He stood

up crying and looking pitiful and holding his arm. The bones in his wrist pointed up, like when the gunslingers on television snap open a double-barrel shotgun to push shells into the chamber. He vowed he was done with Betsy but began to see renewed value in the cowboy life when girls at school clustered around him to autograph his cast. Blue had those movie hero good looks that drove girls wild. He wasn't short on confidence either. His black hair, longer than most boys in school, resembled Frankie Avalon in the beach movies when he cavorted with Annette Funicello. Blue liked winking at girls with his snapping blue eyes. I pictured myself in the same regard but Blue didn't hold out much hope.

"You look like a real idiot, Paul. You can't expect to hustle girls looking like you're fitted for a hanging noose. Put the knot in front why don't you."

"If you pull any harder you're going to kill me anyway." I watched him in the bathroom mirror as he leaned over my shoulder, laughing through his blazing smile. He tugged this way and that until he was satisfied. Blue bummed me out sometimes, to tell you the truth. He was the bossy type.

"At least now you don't look like some old lady down at the dime store dressed you. Go to the junior high dance looking like you got a hall pass from the mental hospital and they won't let you near the girls."

"Funny, Blue. What a comedian." He did make my tie look good but I wasn't going to tell him that. Blue had an ego the size of Montana. Give him one little compliment and around he'd go swelling up and telling me it's about time I noticed. He punched me in the gut one time to show off for girls. I was bent over trying not to throw up all over my black

tennis shoes while he stood there flexing his bicep for Rhonda Lou Bessett and her big sister, the high school cheerleader. I was so mad I didn't talk to him for a week. One night after school Blue came over to my house to give me his souvenir from Philadelphia as a peace offering. It was a silver model of the Liberty Bell that stood about eight inches tall. I figured he paid three bucks for it, maybe five, when his family took a summer vacation in 1963. It was his most favorite possession. He shoved it into my hands and started talking like the punch to the gut never happened. That's Blue.

His real name was Bobby Taylor. To the teachers he was Bobby and to his mother he was Robert. To me he was Blue, a nickname I gave him way back in grade school. I met him in second grade when we started messing around one afternoon recess at old Central School. He dared me to climb the fire escape. It was an enclosed slide standing two stories high, a metal caterpillar stinking like pee and rusty aluminum. Bare feet were required to shinny clear to the top to the wooden door that connected to the school auditorium. We left our shoes in the sand and crawled upward in the dark tube to the top. There we sat, satisfied at our conquest, until a pretty face poked into the white opening far below us.

"You boys come down from there right now!" That was the sweet voice of Miss O'Leary, our teacher. Blue squinted down at the sun-bronzed goddess in the yellow dress. "Stay still," he whispered. For an instant we hid in our lair, pressing into the dark. Then Blue, leaning forward for a better look at Miss O'Leary, slipped. He shot forth on his stomach in the second that I came to remember how many Saturday afternoons I'd brought sheets of wax paper borrowed from my mother's kitchen to polish the tube for a fast ride. Head

first he went, silently but at astonishing speed, toward Miss O'Leary's peering face. Blue must have launched out of the fire escape like a human cannonball because when I slid down after him, bracing my descent with my toes, I found him lying on top of our teacher in the dirt, his face only inches from hers.

I have to admit this incident started some wishful talk when we got older but by that time Miss O'Leary had gone off to Missoula to learn something new, or so we were told, and after that she married somebody and changed her name and we bragged she did it for good reason. Looking back, I can't say for sure Blue embarrassed Miss O'Leary when he knocked her flat on her back. Even with her glasses hanging from one ear, and her dress knotted above her knees and old Blue aboard, she was a dignified peach of a thing. In the seconds that it took me to get a good look, more and more little legs gathered around the fallen couple. Miss O'Leary told Blue to get off. He rolled aside like a spent lover, smiling at the attention. Our teacher stood up looking no worse for it. She smoothed her dress with sand-stained fingers before grabbing our collars. Off we marched to the principal, shuffling through the ranks of our playground admirers. The principal warned us to stay out of the fire escape unless we saw flames in the building. Then he sent us outside to bang chalkboard erasers on the school's weathered brick walls as punishment. We managed introductions in a cloud of blue powder.

"Name's Bobby," my new friend offered.

"You look blue. It's all over your face."

He drew a finger over his cheek and smiled. "Blue for sure. Maybe I'm blue all over."

"Then I'll call you Blue."

"My name's Bobby."

"Blue's good enough for me. Easier to remember too."

"You?"

"It's Paul. I go by Paul." First names were enough then.
"Crazy ride you took down the fire escape."

"Bet Miss O'Leary won't forget that, huh?"

You'll understand why young boys take things in stride, even when required to slap erasers for falling on top of gorgeous young Miss O'Leary. Life was a freewheeling joy without burden. *I feel no pain. I'm a child.* In those young years I thought that we would go on forever being boys, me and Blue and our new friend who moved to Deer Lodge from Butte when we were in the fourth grade.

Max was a big kid. He loved marble games and liked to play for keeps. Max went around coaxing kids into playing their best marbles before he smashed them to bits with a steely, a shiny silver ball bearing I swear was as big as a baseball. This was fair game on the playground because Max set the rules when he brought his steelies to school. If you hit his steelie with your glass marble he would give you a marble in return. If he won, smashing your marble into bits, he threatened to pound you if you didn't give him a new one. You then were out two marbles. Max liked to choose the marble he wanted from the selection in the leather pouches that hung from our belts. Usually it was the other boy's most prized cat eye, sometimes even a rainbow or a clearie. When a boy refused, Max would size him up. "I won you fair and square," he'd say, clenching his fists. That was warning enough, as we all knew, because Max came from Butte. Everyone understood the Mile High mining city bore its kids

fight-ready from the womb. When Max squared up, his eyes full of temptation on the dusty playground, the other boy always forked over a new marble to keep his teeth intact.

I wouldn't say Max was a bully. I was just a little afraid of him. When we got older he told me that boys who lived in Walkerville up the hill from Butte robbed workers of their lunch pails as they walked to work at the Mountain Con mine. Boys robbing men. I couldn't see Max doing that but he had an edge about him that came from living in a tough neighborhood in a city that had a reputation for hard times. Max and Blue shared the same instincts. They played hard the way boys do when they're set deep in their passions, headstrong and decisive.

I saw things more creatively. Mom advised me of that three times a year when she got home from parent-teacher conferences at school. "Paul, your teacher says you won't get anywhere by daydreaming. She says you need to buckle down and work. You've got brains but you've got to apply yourself." It was a familiar speech, full of arching voice inflections and stern references to test failures and other examples of my sloth. I can think of no better example of my undoing than when our fifth grade teacher, Mr. Klung, instructed us to build world maps on scraps of plywood. I volunteered for Italy. We had to build the country out of a mixture of salt, water and flour. I tasted the concoction before it congealed into a rock, ruining my fascination for the assignment. The salt left me thirsty for a week. The idea was to learn something about geography by constructing topography. I formed mountains with my fingertips and sculptured Italy the way it looked on a map. Then I painted a deep blue Mediterranean around Italy and turned in my

masterpiece. Mr. Klung wasn't impressed. It turns out that we had a sea without Sicily, and this was an assignment where attention to detail was paramount in his mind.

So it went as Blue pushed my skinny bespectacled face in front of the bathroom mirror in May 1965. "What girl is going to dance with you looking like a roped calf? Paul, you've got to fix that thing."

Blue tended to worry about matters of appearance. No friend of his was going to the gymnasium for our first school dance looking like an idiot. Sometimes Blue stood for hours in front of the mirror combing his thick black hair. I swear to it. We endured a whirlwind week as our gym teachers coached us through dance etiquette. On cue, we recited, "May I please have this dance?" It seems funny to think of it now, but Max and I took that instruction like commandments from Moses. Blue had his doubts. He figured the girls would come to him instead.

Blue came to my house that night in a new black suit straight from the Toggery downtown. His head glistened with Vitalis, his heart raced with impending romance. When he saw my tie he acted like I was going to ruin whatever chances he imagined that night with girls.

"Look, it's all crooked and everything." He tugged and prodded at the thin fabric tied around the collar of my white shirt until it resembled a black pencil hanging to my belly. Then he cinched it good, like I'd seen him saddle his mare Betsy until her eyes bugged out and she swung her head around to try to nip him. I felt like doing the same.

When my tie met Blue's satisfaction we slapped on a gallon of Dad's aftershave lotion and adjourned to the living room where my parents looked us over. Dad always got a

kick out of seeing me in a suit. He leaned back in his recliner, tapping tobacco smelling like cherries into his pipe. "You'll be a hit with the girls tonight, Bubby." That was a dreaded nickname. Dad was always pulling stunts like that in front of my friends. I kept telling him what it was like being a teenager. He acted like he didn't know anything about it.

Mom waved him off. "Frank, don't encourage Paul. He shouldn't be going to dances in the first place. He's too young." Mom knitted away on a sweater for yet somebody else in the family. I had a drawer full of them. She was younger than Dad by seven years. While he had grayed at the temples, her bountiful hair was red and thick. Tonight she had it pulled into a ponytail. She always looked like she would bounce up any moment to cheer for the high school football team.

"Mom, all the kids are going."

Dad came to my defense, waving his pipe for emphasis. "Paul is going into eighth grade in the fall, Martha. It's time the boy learned his way around the opposite sex. Can't have him sitting at home while Blue's out grabbing all the pretty girls."

"I don't care, Frank. He's barely a teenager right now and needs to act like it. He'll have plenty of time for girls when he's in high school." Having her say, she turned back to her knitting. I felt Blue tugging at my coat sleeve.

"That was embarrassing," I told him when we got outside.

Sure enough, he started laying it on me. "Going to kiss a girl tonight, Bubby?"

I gave him a hard shove. "Hey, careful of the suit." Blue got sore about things like that.

“How would you like it if I called you Bobby all the time? Then we could be Bobby and Bubby.”

“Sounds like an English assignment, Bubby. Tales of Bubby and Bobby. Too bad your hair isn’t red. We could be Red and Blue.”

I balled up my fist. “How about Black and Blue?”

Having worn out that conversation, we walked silently down the dirt road into town. I lived in a 1912 farmhouse at the edge of town, where the scattered neighborhoods of Deer Lodge ended and the vast treeless foothills began. We had a real barn behind the house, its hip roof still proud and strong, but Dad didn’t farm on the place. I knew only that somebody had bought most of the land long before we moved in, turning Herefords loose in the sagebrush. From one side of the house we saw empty land and the Deer Lodge Mountains. To the other we saw town, where occasional paved streets dissected orderly blocks of houses. Beyond our little town, Mount Powell loomed over the wide valley.

Blue and I hurried along in silence until we reached the chipped sidewalk in front of Mr. Pearson’s house. Green buds peered from the weeping willow in his yard. He was a war hero who flew an American flag every holiday. Mr. Pearson never talked to me, or anyone else, either. Shell shock, I had heard somebody say about him. Whatever that was. It was Friday evening but the streets were quiet. Black and white television images flashed behind windows as we walked toward the school.

“You never know about these girls,” Blue announced.

I wished he hadn’t said that. I was already nervous at going to my first dance. Soon summer would come and then baseball. Dancing with girls scared me. They would come

wearing pretty dresses and eye makeup and we'd hardly recognize them. I wasn't confident like Blue. Maybe that's why I hung around with him.

"Paul, you listening?"

"Maybe so."

"They want to hold hands and kiss as much as we do, right? So how come they're going to stand on one side of the gym while we stand on the other? And why do we have to go back to our own sides after every dance?"

"Because the teachers told us to, that's why." That seemed reason enough to follow the rules. Blue lived to protest authority. Since that collision with Miss O'Leary he didn't spend much time in the principal's office but I could tell he was eager to make his own way in life. Problem was, he was only thirteen, like me.

We met Max at the gym. "I've been inside," he told us right away, nodding his fresh crew cut at the Alamo-like facade. He squeezed his broad face into a worried expression. Looks like a carnival midway in there." Max tended to exaggerate but you had to admire his capacity for description.

The three of us hurried up creaking stairs into the old gymnasium. It smelled of ancient wood and stale laundry. I thought of our jockstraps tangled on the floor in the locker room downstairs after gym class. Every boy in school wondered if the girls threw their bras in a heap in their own locker room. For about two weeks straight it was the only topic during lunch hour.

I hardly recognized the place. The basketball floor was dark except for orange light bulbs and flickering candles. A bowl of punch waited in one corner, a hi-fi with a stack of records in another. Streamers in our school colors, orange and

black, fluttered above the dance floor. Some of the younger teachers from the junior high school came to chaperone. They herded girls to one side, boys to the other. None of us were allowed to cross the glistening wood floor until the signal was given. The boys stood around on their side, making jokes and bragging about their intended conquests. The girls waited demurely in folding chairs like a row of piano keys, a few dark dresses accentuating the light ones, blanching at us as if we were an attacking army preparing to assault the castle.

"You scared, Paul?" Max looked at me for affirmation. He didn't dare ask Blue. We both knew Blue wouldn't let on anyway, but Max and I were different. Max was a tough kid but not around girls. I steadied him with a reassuring grip on his wide shoulder. "Sure, Max, sure I am."

When the teachers put the needle to "Little Old Lady from Pasadena," about half the boys breeched the great divide toward the waiting girls. The bold excursion prompted a few others to follow.

I shot forward with the first wave. To my right, Max charged ahead like a blocking back for Blue, who twisted and turned behind him as if evading tackle. It soon became apparent that the fastest boys found the prettiest girls. Boys collided and pushed. I aimed for Marcy Kersher, who wrote me long letters of endearment when she sat behind me in English class, but I got shoved sideways into a girl who offered a hand soggier than a wet tuna sandwich. Boys and girls reeled and swerved all around us, attempting the "Swim" and the "Monkey" and other corny dances we learned in gym class. I heard Blue whoop. Max stumbled around underneath the basketball hoop with a sad-faced girl, trying to keep time to the song. They looked everywhere but

at each other. I didn't recognize the girl. Her expression suggested she didn't want Max to know her either.

"You dance good!" my partner shouted through lips brimming with bubblegum. Someone at the beauty parlor had entwined her locks in enormous swirls. As she rocked to Jan and Dean I thought the weight of it would topple her to the floor. I pranced around on my toes with a dancing style I made up on the spot until I lost my balance and fell. I caught a quick look up her dress at a pair of thunderous white thighs before she stormed away in disgust.

Blue came by to console me. "Smooth move, Ex-Lax!" he shouted over the music, reminding me again: "You look like a real idiot!"

I retreated to the sidelines to hang out with the wimps, feeling sorry for myself, while Blue hopped and kicked like Betsy in springtime and Max snared the waif for a second dance. A boy next to me picked his nose. The boy next to him drank punch. There we stood, satisfied at our fraternity, until a skinny kid known as Nick the Stick hurried off the floor to let a rank one rip. He ran back to his girl, trailing a ghastly odor behind him. That seemed like a good time to clear out. When I saw Marcy standing alone I made a break for her.

I tried out my new etiquette. "Marcy, may I have this dance?" She looked at me with inquiring eyes. *So cute, she digs me.* I think we both felt embarrassed that we had exchanged glances in class but never had a real conversation.

"*Paauul.*" That's what she said, dragging it out, as if she had expected me all along. A white ribbon tied back dark chestnut hair streaked with blonde, different from all the other girls. It was a new daring look and I liked it. I sensed a hint of perfume. Unlike most of us, she didn't wear glasses,

and she looked back at me from pools of green eyes. My glasses weighed at least five pounds and kept slipping down my nose but she didn't seem to mind. We held hands and danced slow, standing two feet apart and trying hard to avoid stepping on each other's feet. At the start of each dance I hurried across the floor to ask Marcy and she always said yes but little else. This continued until the music stopped for good, announcing an end to whatever love was being forged in the sunset of our evening. Somebody switched on the bright gymnasium lights, shattering our close feelings, while a few eager parents bunched at the door to gawk at our pubescent behavior.

We looked around at one another in our unfamiliar costumes. After two boys who were clowning around knocked over the punch bowl and were made to mop the hardwood floor with threadbare towels from the showers downstairs, the teachers ushered us toward the door. I walked Marcy outside where her mother waited in a Buick station wagon that coughed gray smoke. "I had a good time, Paul. Really I did. What was your favorite dance?" Shaking, I leaned forward to kiss her. Instead she squeezed my hand and hurried away. I saw her shining face under the dome light for a second. *I'm in love*. The Buick turned and groaned into the night.

Blue and Max and I assembled outside the gym. I checked my watch. It was an hour before midnight. Except for the floodlights from the prison three blocks away the night was dark and still. We stood in front of the gym, watching everyone go.

Blue turned to us, looking urgent. "We don't have much time."

"To get home?" Max inquired. He looked concerned.

I knew what Blue meant. "Girls? School will let out in a few months and then we won't see them all summer. I don't even know where Marcy lives."

"Hey, cowboy, better get a rope on that gal."

Max looked perplexed, which wasn't unusual. "What are you guys talking about?"

Blue smiled. "Max buddy, I see you had one on the line. Did you kiss her?" He snickered. "Could you even find her lips? She's a skinny one."

Max looked dejected. "I wanted to, but she had to go home."

"You wanted to what? Find her lips?"

"Knock it off, Blue. Yours wasn't so hot either." Blue laughed again.

"Paul?"

"Same deal."

"Same deal what? You couldn't find her lips?"

"I wanted to make out but she had to go home."

Blue decided to rub it in. "You losers missed out. I kissed two girls tonight."

"Liar!" Max alleged. Then, "How was it, Blue?"

I didn't believe Blue for a minute. He was a big talker, full of razz. I wanted to hear more because he might give me courage to kiss Marcy. I had to kiss a girl sometime. I hoped it would be her.

"You sad cases want to know, huh? Well, I knew what I was doing the whole way. They kissed back too."

"Did they slip you the tongue?" Max seemed eager to know.

“Me to know and you to find out, Maxy.” Blue was on a roll.

“Well, Blue, who were they? Name them.” I knew I had him with that one.

“Not telling. They asked me not to tell.” Blue acted like the matter was closed. Knowing him, he’d bring it up again at school when he had an audience. I didn’t care if he was telling a big story. It was fun to think about kissing a girl. Marcy, maybe. If not her, somebody. Soon. Every boy in school had kissed girls. They all said so. *Hope I’m not a nerd all my life.*

We turned toward home. A gentle wind blew the sweet scent of spring snow off Mount Powell. Stars sprayed across the sky. Living in Deer Lodge, Montana, was the best. School would end soon. Then came summer vacation and baseball and swimming lessons at the old pool and riding bikes to the river to fish for rainbow trout. Blue was right. We wouldn’t have much time for girls this summer.

We stepped onto a dirt road that ran between the gym and the darkened field where our high school team, nicknamed the Wardens in recognition of the prison downtown, played football. We fell silent for a moment, each of us thinking about the dance. We would see the girls at school on Monday. I never thought I’d look forward to school that much except for going to shop class where we could cut up boards on machines. Our shop teacher, Mr. Melvin, liked to see joints planed to perfection where not even a sliver of daylight showed under the T-square. Mr. Melvin was a Ford guy. When you messed up he’d lay you low with one of his car jokes. “Fits like the door on a Chevy,” he’d say, before

sending you back to whittle your board until it resembled a toothpick.

Blue broke the silence. "Sure is quiet out here. What we saw tonight was just a taste of things to come, boys." We walked side by side, the three of us, flush with romance. Blue and Max were my best friends in the whole world. I admit that I looked up to them in some unexplainable way. It didn't matter what. That's the thing about being best friends. You don't go around making excuses.

As we walked home, gravel crunching under our feet, I wondered what Marcy would write to me in her next locker note. Would she say she loved me? *Dear Paul, I think you are the best boy ever in the seventh grade. Would you like to kiss me?*

Out of nowhere a roaring motor invaded the night. Headlights shot in front of us. Our shadows loomed like giant men. We turned to see an intruder of light and noise bearing down on us. I jumped to the left, Blue and Max to the right. A gleaming black sedan, horn blaring and dust roiling in its wake, shot between us.

"What the hell?" That was Blue, yelling his head off. Furious, surprised that I wasn't dead, I reached for the largest rock I could find and flung it at the vanishing car. I should explain. In Little League they put me in centerfield because I could throw a mile. It's true that my accuracy was in dispute, but I once threw the ball from centerfield right over the backstop. Nobody could say that I didn't have an arm. It's just that I couldn't hit a target.

Now why did I throw the rock with perfect accuracy? Just as the car surged beneath a streetlight, giving me a clear view, the rock whacked the windshield. The driver slammed to a stop, then kicked the car in reverse, showering gravel from

the rear tires. It streaked backward toward us with frightening urgency. Blue and Max disappeared down the path that led to the football field. Blue yelled my name, hoping I would follow. I tried but the car stormed between us, a black thundering menace in the night. I ran away from the road toward the school. I would get home safe to where Mom and Dad would be waiting in the living room watching the late news from Butte.

The driver spun the car and gunned it and he was after me again. A loafer flew from my churning feet. I shot into a grove of pine trees near the gym. I stumbled and fell in the gloom, rolling to my knees in the branches. A car door wrenched open behind me.

"Somebody help!" Was that me or did I just think it? The gym was dark. Everyone had gone home.

The maniac stepped out of his car and headed for me in the trees. I couldn't see his face. His long muscular arms, bare to his shoulders, looked blue in the moonlight. A cigarette glowed orange. He said nothing, as if the rumbling car spoke for him. Blue and Max called to me but I couldn't see them. If we were together they would at least throw up their fists to fight. The dark figure crept through the trees. Would he murder me? What would Marcy think about that? All the magic of the dance was gone. I waited for the first blow. A soothing wind feathered through the trees. I smelled beer. It was a ripe odor, like when Dad came home from the bar downtown.

Maybe the stranger wouldn't murder me. Just beat me to a pulp. He was a big man, a monster out of control, raging and ruinous. He would pound me before branding my forehead with his cigarette. I would lay in the dark on a Friday night

until Mom called the police and the single cop on duty in Deer Lodge found me bloody with a brand to warn all the other kids to never throw rocks at cars. The stranger would smash my glasses. It would take weeks to get a new pair and I had trouble seeing without them. He thrashed through the pine boughs. The glow on his cigarette grew brighter when he stopped to inhale. *Never be afraid of the dark, just what it covers up.*

“Hurry up!” yelled a girl in green pants. I saw her now, waiting in the headlights of the black car that still rumbled on the road, its driver door yawning open. She didn’t look anything like the girls at the dance. She was tougher, more grown up. I saw enough of her to decide that a pretty face hid beneath all that makeup. She was an old lady of maybe sixteen.

“Don’t hurt him,” she called to the stranger, who now was close enough to touch me.

“Shut up, Faye.” He was on me in an instant. Instead of killing me he lifted me off the ground and dragged me to the car. I was afraid to look at him. He shoved me into the driver’s seat and pointed to the broken windshield. Fear brings oddities. I looked past the crack to Faye, her denim jacket flapping open to reveal a memorable plunging cleavage. I didn’t know what I should respect more, my criminal act in breaking a windshield or this sudden appearance of the lovely Faye.

The stranger’s hand shot out to grab my tie. I wished Blue hadn’t cinched it so tight. It was choking me now. The stranger’s grip felt like iron. He twisted me around, banging my head against the steering wheel.

“Let go! I can’t breathe!” I felt like bawling. He was going to hurt me bad. I wanted to explain to him that I threw the rock because he nearly ran me over, but Faye yelled at him again.

“Louie! Let him go!”

The stranger released me. Faye stepped out of the headlights to swear at him. They began to argue.

There I was, sitting behind the wheel in an idling car. I remember the day Dad allowed me to drive his old Ford pickup to the city dump. “Hell, you’ll have to learn how sometime,” he said, a few minutes after Mom left for the store with Sally, my sweet sister. He taught me how to release the clutch and shift through the gears. We jerked to a stop again and again until I got the hang of backing the clutch pedal out while depressing the gas pedal at the same time.

This car, a rumbling mean Chevy I now realized, had a steering column with three on the tree. It would be easy after what Dad showed me to do. Work the column shift with the clutch. Down and close, up and away, down and away. It was clear to me now. Get away before they dumped my body in some lonely ditch in the country. I whipped the shift handle into first gear, hit the gas and felt the motor roar. The car shot ahead, past the dark stranger and the curvy girl. The door beside me slammed shut as I gained speed. They chased me in the red flare of the tail lights until I dropped the transmission into second gear. The car burst ahead, leaving them in the night.

If this guy Louie caught me now I’d be dead for sure. I managed to weave the car through the school playground without hitting a tetherball pole that loomed from the shadows. The car roared and bucked with heart-thumping

power. The motor had a mind of its own, a beast of metal and explosive gases in eight cylinders. I screeched onto a paved street in third gear. The big steering wheel felt alive in my clenched hands, silhouetted against the yellow light on the dashboard. The speedometer needle climbed to twenty-five, then thirty. In third gear, the Chevy cut through the night like a charging army. I drove for three blocks consumed with the thrill before it occurred to me that I'd stolen the stranger's car.

If the police didn't find me, this guy Louie would. I wondered which would be worse. At the corner near the Catholic Church I spun left and shot down Montana Avenue, nearly hitting Blue and Max. They ran, but I pulled over and jumped out and yelled to them.

"We thought you were dead," said Max, all out of breath. I told him that was still a possibility.

"You stole his car?" Blue was incredulous. "He's going to kill you."

"You mean my dad?"

"Geez, Paul, that guy you stole the car from. He'll kill you and then your dad will and then the police will send you to prison." Blue sounded a little riled. It wasn't much like him but none of us had stolen a car before either.

Blue and Max climbed into the front seat beside me. For a moment they seemed in awe that I was capable of driving but then Max turned his interest to the Chevy's mechanical ability. "What's this got in it?" he asked, showing sudden interest in the rumbling motor. When I figured we were a safe distance from the school I pulled over quick and we popped the hood and bent over for a look.

"This guy knows what he's doing," Blue observed in great reverence, although none of us knew for sure. We couldn't

see much in the dark and, except for Max, didn't know anything about engines anyway.

After a brief inspection, we climbed back into the car and headed down the street. A faded green sedan crossed in front of us, creeping into the night. Blue fiddled with the radio dial. The Rolling Stones burst into the front seat. He couldn't find much but KXLF out of Butte and some big rock and roll station way down in Omaha, a thousand miles away, which faded every time we turned a corner.

Max asked if he could drive. "This is stupid!" I told them, feeling a sudden impulse of conscience. "We're in big trouble!"

"At least you are, Paul." That was Blue, stating facts.

I drove to an alley a few blocks from where Max lived. When I killed the engine the car fell silent with a whimper, sorry to see us go. A big moon emerged over the mountains, shining a great wash of light over our criminal undertaking. Blue wanted to throw the keys in the bushes. I put them on the floorboard beside the gas pedal instead. Maybe Louie would find the Chevy and drive off and forget about me. *I'm just a boy.*

We slipped to our houses through backyards, under clotheslines and around garages, sometimes hearing a dog's low growl. When we parted I stuck to the deep shadows. I felt some relief at seeing the porch light burning at my house until I met my mother, a sentry in curlers, waiting at the kitchen table with a look that would set fire to an igloo.

"Where have you been, young man? We both know the dance got over a long time ago." I knew by her curt tone of voice how the line of questioning would go.

"I was out walking around with Blue and Max." It was better not to offer details when making up a lie. Otherwise the conversation would become longer and more involved.

"What possibly could you be doing in Deer Lodge until this time of night?" She arched her eyebrows at our orange wall clock for emphasis. She loved orange. Everything in that kitchen was orange, even the phone, but she'd never use it to call anyone past ten o'clock. That's how I knew she didn't have anything on me like some parents did when they checked around and gave their kids the business after catching them in a lie. Max got the belt once when his old man found out he smoked cigarettes in Terry Musselman's garage. Max told me he almost fell over after taking the first puff but that was nothing compared with what happened when his parents found out. His old man smacked him hard. Then he pulled out a pack of unfiltered Camels and made Max smoke four or five of them at the kitchen table. Max puked all night.

"Not too bad once you get the hang of it," Max reported to me and Blue the next day at school.

I felt obliged to follow my mother's eyes to the clock, given her preoccupation with it. I was surprised to see it was after midnight. I guess we had put some miles on that Chevy.

"Well, we walked some girls home and got to talking and stuff." Telling a lie like that felt wise in light of the evening's developments. I wondered what Marcy would think if she saw me tooling around in that stolen Chevy, black as midnight.

"Uh-huh. And where is your shoe?" My foot hurt but I wasn't going to admit it.

“We were horsing around walking home and it fell off someplace in the dark.”

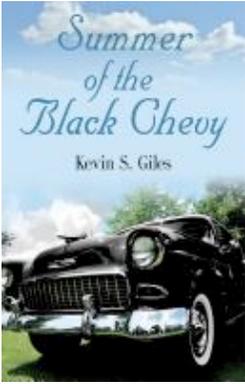
Mom watched me like she wasn't buying any of it. She acted like having a teenage boy in the house was new trouble. Sometimes I understood her and sometimes I didn't. She stood, glancing again at the clock and pulling her bathrobe tighter around her throat. “You're an hour past your curfew, young man,” she hissed in a low voice as the rest of our family slept. “Wait until your father hears about this tomorrow morning. Now get to bed and just be grateful you're not lying dead on a road somewhere.” *Little did she know.*

For some reason Mom locked the back door, which I considered a blessing knowing that guy Louie was running loose out there. We never locked the back door. Then she stormed to bed. I didn't expect trouble from Dad on the kissing story. If anything he'd brag about it to his buddies down at the lumberyard that he owned. *Old Bubby, kissing girls and only thirteen.* No doubt some other dad would counter that his son had been kissing girls since he was twelve or ten. You know how it goes.

I crept into my tiny bedroom at the back of the house, at the back of our town, at our long-ago farmstead where the well water ran clear and cold from the faucet. A sliver of moonlight peeked under the shade. It was the same window I broke playing catch with Blue. *You can't see him in the dark. If he's out there, you won't know.* In the weak closet light I pulled off my tie and hung up my suit. I won't tell you that I fell asleep right away, or that I didn't dream of fast cars or awake in a sweat when my sleeping mind encountered an angry face. I won't tell you that at all. Somehow a boy who's

thirteen thinks the bright light of morning chases away phantoms of the night. Our little town of a few thousand people was the world, no smaller than everything else outside of it. I was sure nothing ever changed in Deer Lodge. It didn't occur to me that my car theft would divert my boyhood the way that a fallen riverbank changes a stream for the course of time.

"He'll never find me," I whispered as I curled deeper into my blankets, far away from the shadowy stranger named Louie.



Paul Morrison launches his first teenage summer at a school dance, longing for girls and the smack of baseballs. His innocence ends quickly that night when a roaring black Chevy chases him into the dark, but it's the mysterious stranger driving it who scares him more. It's 1965 in Deer Lodge, Montana, far from the busy faraway world that Paul and his girlfriend Marcy read about in books...

Summer of the Black Chevy

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