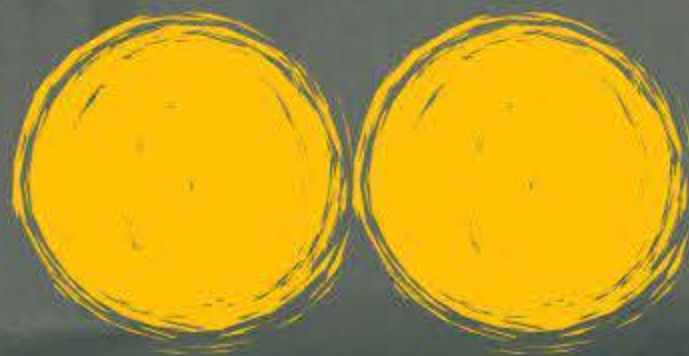


# CAR CHASERS

A SHORT STORY



BY  
RAMI UNGAR



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There are many tales that come out of Shan Woods, and nearly all of them have to do with Chasers' Run. One of those stories is the tragic tale of Asher Greenwich and Donnie Griggs, which has been retold and changed around so much that even those who were there when it happened aren't sure what's true and what's not. This is the actual version of events, or the one least convoluted by soap opera embellishment. And it all started on Saturday, July 6<sup>th</sup>, during one of the hottest summers on record.

Now normally on a summer weekend, kids would be going on dates, hanging out in movie theaters or in friends' basements, or getting into trouble in the name of fun. But in the county where Shan Woods is located, the first Saturday of each month is special. Teens, college kids, and even some adults pile into cars and trucks and make their way to the clearing outside the entrance of the forest, where they set up concession stands and tailgates and betting booths and wait in anticipation for Chasers' Run.

And of course, Asher Greenwich was there as well, as he had been nearly every month since freshman year. His yearbook photos all show a well-dressed, wiry young man with a mop of brown hair and glasses, but on a normal night he liked to wear jeans and T-shirts with different bands or cars on them. And as soon as he arrived he sought out Louie Dreyer, who had

been organizing Chaser's Run since anyone could remember, and to whom you paid fifty bucks' cash if you wanted to participate in a race that night. And like many people that night, Asher paid for a spot, his in the first race.

"Feeling confident tonight, Asher?" said Louie, counting out tens.

"Yes sir," Asher answered. It wasn't just teenage bravado or an automatic response: he really did feel confident, like he just knew that tonight was going to be a good night for him. He couldn't figure out where this feeling came from—perhaps it was just experience, or maybe it was the weird aura that Shan Woods exudes—but he had a feeling he'd make at least second place during his race. Hell, he might even make it into the finalists' race, go up against whoever won the other races. He'd probably lose that one if he got that far, but at least he'd have fun while he was at it.

Asher drove his car, a black 2000 Honda Civic that he'd gotten thirdhand and had spent the better part of his sophomore year fixing up into a respectable racer, to the starting line, where the other drivers were already assembled and ready to race. Asher spotted Garrett Holmes with his dark blue 2010 Nissan Armada; Angie Whitney, with her black 2012 Mazda CX-9 sporting painted-on flowers and a red dragon; and the Jackson twins, doing a rock-paper-scissors over who would drive the 2008 Subaru WRX they shared. Tough competition, but Asher had a secret weapon built into his Honda. And he had luck tonight.

"Yes sir," he said under his breath, adjusting his mirror and checking his equipment.

"Tonight's my lucky night. Nobody's gonna beat me this race."

When everybody was behind the wheel of their car, Louie ambled into the middle of the road, standing between Asher's Honda and Angie's Mazda. The crowd that had come to watch fell silent, eager for the night's events to start.

"You guys know the rules," he intoned, the same speech he always gave during the first race of the evening. "First one to make the circuit and get over the finish line gets to drive in the finalists' race. Do what you can to win, but don't be dirty or a dick. Stay on the roads, and don't let the chasers get you."

That last part always sent shivers down drivers' spines, and through most of the audience too. Everyone who went to Chasers' Run had seen the chasers, and they knew just what they were capable of. Getting caught was the last thing any driver wanted to happen, usually because it meant it would be the last thing that would ever happen to them.

Cars revved their engines. Inside his Honda, Asher squeezed the wheel, biting his lower lip, a bead of sweat was rolling down the side of his head.

"One!" Louie shouted, to the sound of more revved engines and cheering crowds. Asher gripped the wheel harder. Already his vision was narrowing, so that the world only comprised of the woods, race route, the three other competitors, and Louie's voice. "Two! Three!"

Louie raised his arm and let it fall. Angie and the Jackson twins surged forward, nearly ramming into each other as the road narrowed right in front of the entrance to the woods. Asher put his foot down on the pedal, moving into third place before Garrett Holmes could get in front of him.

"Croatoan!" Asher shouted as he entered the woods. It was a phrase he always shouted when he raced, a magic spell he'd picked up from a comic book as a kid, and which he had

gotten into the habit of saying for luck since his first race, when he'd sat with Donnie in the back of Jared Fecht's Nissan Rogue back in freshman year and discovered the magic that was Chasers' Run.

The Jackson twins were up ahead in first, with Angie just behind them, trying to find a way to pass ahead of them. Feeling Garrett moving up behind him, Asher sped up so that he was right behind Angie. The road twisted to the right, widening out a little, and Asher took advantage of it to move into second place. He glanced out to his right, caught Angie looking at him with shocked anger, and grinned. Good, second place was good. Now he just had to keep his eyes open, look for opportunities and for obstacles, and he could win—

*There!* Asher seemed to sense it before he saw it, the first obstacle of the night, the first chaser. It took the form of a woman wrapped in shawls, her arms waving spasmodically, her eyes bulging out of her skull, some sort of babbling coming out of her mouth. The woman was translucent, ghostly green, and was flying above the ground, her body bobbing up and down like an airborne dolphin. And she was coming from the right towards the road.

*The Gibberer*, Asher thought, calculating the ghost's angle. Judging by the direction and speed she was going, the Gibberer would hit the road soon, and if he kept the same speed as he was, there was a good chance that she would hit him right after hitting the road. Cautiously, Asher decreased his speed, and noticed the Jackson twins doing the same. It paid off, because the Gibberer flew into the road, overshot back into the woods, turned in a wide arc, and shot straight for their cars at an angle. At the same time as she turned though, the Jackson twins, Asher, and Angie Whitney sped up so that the Gibberer missed Angie's back bumper by a couple of yards.

The Gibberer, for her part, didn't let these two misses disturb her. Instead, she circled around again and flew after them, her rolling eyes and hysterical arms reaching for them through the shortening distance.

Asher kept his foot on the pedal, looking for an opportunity to pass ahead of the Jackson twins. He knew that if push came to shove, the Jackson twins would speed up so that the rest of them could avoid the Gibberer getting them, but Asher wanted to put as much distance between himself and her as possible. Plus, there was the prospect of winning, which required him getting ahead.

The road widened a little, and from his many runs on this road, Asher knew that there was a turn up ahead. If he timed it right, he could not only pull ahead, but he could give himself some major distance, further increasing his chances of winning. Of course, that was if the Jackson twins, who were experienced racers too, didn't get in the way. And if he failed, there was a chance he could fall off the road. And if that happened, getting back onto the road and finishing the race would be the least of his problems.

The turn was coming up. Asher drifted a little to the left and started counting. The Jackson twins were pulling ahead into the turn. Asher followed, putting his foot down on the brake pedal. And then, as he started to straighten out, he pressed a button on his wheel, activating his new secret weapon, which he'd added before school let out last month. Like a rocket, Asher's Honda zoomed forward ahead of the Jacksons, fueled by a tank of nitro hidden under the passenger seat. In seconds the Jacksons were eating his dust, and Asher was whooping like a madman as their headlights became tiny pinpricks.

*And I still have another tank left for the finalists' race*, he thought, pumping his fist. Returning his speed to an easy thirty miles per hour, Asher let himself relax a little. With the Gibberer back with the Jackson twins and Angie, and Garrett Holmes back in fourth place, he could coast along easily till he hit the finish line. Turning up the stereo volume, Asher let Papa Roach roll over him. A few times he thought he saw something glowing green, but it was always far away in the woods, which meant it couldn't hurt him. For now, anyway.

Finally, the entrance came into view, and Asher passed over the finish line, winner by a longshot. He got out of the car and bowed to the assembled, cheering crowd. *I was right*, he thought, getting back in his car and driving off the racecourse. *Tonight's my lucky night*. And he was sure that his luck hadn't run out yet.

As he stepped out of his car again, a well-dressed young man with Disney Channel star-good looks ran up to him, pulling him into a hug. "Dude, that was a record!" said Donnie Griggs, smacking Asher lightly on the back. Back by the entrance to the woods, Garrett Holmes came out to take a surprise second, followed a minute or so later by Angie and finally the Jacksons, the back of their car sporting burn marks. "Did you do something to your car? You had to, that old piece of shit could never beat those newer cars."

Asher smiled, glad to see Donnie, who had been his best friend since grade school. Their relationship had begun over the fact that they had been the only kids in the third grade who had cell phones, which made them the epitome of cool in the eyes of their peers. Of course, they had very different reasons for having their phones: Donnie was a Griggs, which in their county meant wealth and country nobility, so he had a cell phone just for the sake of having one; Asher, meanwhile, was a latchkey kid with an overworked dad and an absent mom, so he actually



needed the phone. Even so, this had led to a friendship between the two boys that had lasted through their school years.

“Sorry man,” Asher replied, smiling. “I’m just a good driver, that’s all.”

“Bullshit, man,” Donnie replied. “You did something to your car! I know you did! I bet you’ve been pulling extra hours at Louie’s garage, haven’t you? You got something hidden under your hood, don’t you! TELL ME! And wipe that smirk off your face. Only I’m allowed to smirk like that!”

“Dude, lay off!” Asher laughed as Donnie tried to noogie him. “You’ll just have to race me and find out yourself!”

“Well, alright then, my man,” said Donnie, letting Asher go and looking over at his yellow Mustang, the aptly titled Lady Blur, another symbol of the Griggs’ enormous wealth and their very generous use of it. “Just don’t cry when I kick your ass, ‘kay?”

“Sure thing, dude.” Asher and Donnie grabbed each other’s hands and pulled each other in for another hug.

“Um...Asher?” said a voice. Both boys looked to see Melissa Hoover standing beside the Honda, looking nervous. “Er...great job. Good luck in the final race.”

Asher looked surprised but said, “Uh...yeah, thanks.” Then, clearing his throat, “I mean, thanks Melissa. I appreciate it.” That seemed to make Melissa even more nervous, though it also seemed to make her happy as well.

Melissa Hoover’s yearbook photo is at odds with the girl from the rumors, a seductress who could hold the attention of two different men and drive them wild with desire to the point of

insanity. But that's because Melissa wasn't a seductress. She was just a normal girl. Her family didn't have that much money, her clothes were mostly secondhand, and she was an introvert, which was why she didn't usually wear make-up or try to be flashy or put herself out there. It probably didn't help her social skills that she had skipped a grade and was a year younger than most of her classmates, either.

But that night, Melissa seemed to be trying to move past her quietness, and that interested Asher. He watched as she kept looking like she was on the verge of saying something big, something important, and he couldn't help but notice that the way the moonlight played upon her hair. It was almost kind of pretty...

"Hey Donnie!" a voice called, the kind of voice that draws the attention of anyone who's heard it, especially if they know who it belongs to. Donnie and Asher looked away from Melissa as Evynne Stiller approached, sashaying her hips from side to side in that sexy way she had. Blonde, stunning and confident, Evynne was every guy's wet dream, and her looks, status as volleyball team captain, and successful lawyer father made her the perfect girlfriend for the great Donnie Griggs, to every other guy's despair.

"Don't you have a race to run?" she said, grabbing her boyfriend by the lapels of his jacket and looking at him in that way that girls use when they want their boyfriend's full attention. "You better do well tonight. Got it?"

Donnie grinned, the grin men reserve when they have some hot chick all over them, and they're too stupid to even realize how hypnotized they are. "Yeah babe," he said, his hands traveling along her hips. All around the area, every available straight guy and a couple of girls looked at Donnie and felt a bit more jealousy than usual. Even Asher, who normally didn't envy

Donnie anything—not wealth, not popularity, not fancy toys—envied him for the girl he dated and probably slept with. “I’ll get right on it. See you after the race.”

Donnie walked off, looking like he was high on something really good. That left Asher with Evynne, and that made him nervous. He looked around for Melissa, but she’d disappeared at some point during the ten-second exchange between Donnie and Evynne.

“Um...hi Evynne,” he said, rather lamely. Sweat ran down the back of his neck, and he was sure it wasn’t because of the warm summer air. “Lovely night, huh?” Inside, Asher berated himself for sounding like the world’s biggest loser.

“Hey Asher,” she said, looking at him like she’d only just noticed him. “Nice driving out there. You think you’ll win in the final race tonight?”

“W-Well,” said Asher, rubbing the hair on the back of his head, “Donnie’s racing too, and he’s got Lady Blur. I’d be lucky to get past that. Especially during the final race.”

“Well, if you do end up beating him,” Evynne replied, placing a hand on Asher’s elbow, which immediately sent Asher’s stomach into backflips, “don’t be too spectacular about it. You know how Donnie gets when he’s not the best, and I want to have an actual conversation with him later.”

“You mean while he brags about what a great racer he is?” Asher joked, knowing how his friend got after a spectacular win, and how difficult he could be after a spectacular loss.

Evynne laughed. “Yeah, something like that.” And with that, she sauntered off to her group of friends, leaving Asher feeling pent up and wishing she’d stayed. In the meantime, he occupied himself by checking his car for problems so she’d be ready to race again soon. At the



same time, three more races went by. Donnie won his by a mile with Lady Blur. Pat Bertram won the third race by a hair in her 2008 Volkswagen Beetle against Ismail Fahri's 2009 Honda Accord. And the fourth race was a tie, which was broken by a coin toss that allowed Keith Joel to go to the final race in his 2010 Subaru Legacy.

By the time those races were over, not only had Asher made sure that his car was in perfect working order, but he'd worked out everything Evynne had aroused in him and was ready to race again. Pumped to go, Asher got into his car and drove up to the starting line. The other three competitors, including Donnie, pulled up beside him in a row, and Louie made his way out to the road.

Louie made the same boring speech he did for the finalists' race. Engines roared in anticipation. Asher clutched the steering wheel. Louie dropped his arm.

"Croatoan!" Asher yelled, and drove.

At once, it was a close race, with Pat in first place, Asher in second, Donnie in third, and Keith in fourth. Ignoring how close Donnie was to his Honda's bumper, Asher scanned for a way to get ahead of Pat and into first place. He found one, and took it, taking the lead. At the same time, Donnie followed him into second, though from the way he stayed close on Asher's tail, Asher knew his friend wasn't satisfied with second. Gritting his teeth, Asher blocked Donnie from getting ahead, and could almost feel the frustration coming from Lady Blur. *Not tonight, old buddy*, Asher thought. *Tonight's my night*.

At that moment, Asher saw two glowing green lights up ahead. One was the Gibberer, flying through the woods towards the road. The other was Balloon Boy, bouncing off trees and rolling down the road like a pinball towards the cars. Asher swore. *Right off the bat*, he thought.

If he didn't time this right, either one of those ghosts could hit his car, and there'd go him and the Honda.

Staring ahead, Asher's mind clicked and calculated. He'd focus on Balloon Boy first, because that ghost was the most immediate threat to him and the other racers. The Gibberer would take her time getting onto the road, so he didn't need to deal with her right away. Forgetting her, Asher watched the oncoming giant ball, a face and limbs appearing every couple of seconds on its surface. Instinct took over, and he prepared to change gears and speed up.

Balloon Boy was almost upon them, only fifty yards away. Behind him, Donnie was honking his horn. *Hurry up!* shouted the horn. *Before we're both killed!* Just a little longer...

When it seemed like Balloon Boy was going to spin right into him, Asher changed gears and floored the accelerator. The Honda Civic shot past Balloon Boy, its passenger mirror scraping against the ghost's glowing green side and leaving a trail of sparks. Behind him, Donnie sped up behind him, missing Balloon Boy entirely, while Pat and Keith managed to dodge it and continue the race. Asher whooped as he heard Donnie rev his engine in celebration. *Yeah!* Asher thought proudly. *How do you like that, you giant bowling ball?*

As if in answer to his challenge, Asher saw something in his rearview mirror fall out of the sky and land right behind him and Donnie, spinning towards them at a good thirty-five miles per hour. It was Balloon Boy, and he was about to roll over Lady Blur.

Moving quickly, panic rising in him, Asher drifted to the side to let Donnie pull up beside him. Even as he did that though, Balloon Boy kept up with them, and Asher could hear some sort of keening sound coming from the ghost that sounded like laughter. He couldn't see Pat or Keith,

but judging from the lack of an explosion, they were probably still alive and behind Balloon Boy. Maybe they were dealing with the Gibberer.

Asher looked out the window at Donnie. Donnie looked at him. A message seemed to pass between the two through their eyes, and they nodded. Looking back to the road, he let his finger hover over the button for the second nitro tank. *Desperate times*, he thought, glancing out the rearview mirror as Balloon Boy closed the gap between it and the two vehicles to a couple of yards. He looked at Donnie, got another nod, and looked back at the road one last time. One...two...*three!*

Roaring in unison, the Honda and Lady Blur zoomed away from the giant green ghost, barely staying on the road as they zoomed around a corner and onto the next stretch of road. Behind them, Balloon Boy disappeared completely from view. Asher and Donnie whooped and grinned at each other, but a moment later, the Honda began to slow down, while Lady Blur continued at the same intense speed. Gunning it, Asher tried to keep up, but soon Donnie was leaving him behind. He could almost hear his friend shouting “Eat my dust!” as he took first place.

*No*, Asher thought, switching gears and squeezing the steering wheel. *This race isn't over yet, dude.*

Asher turned a corner, doing a dangerous seventy miles per hour on the dark forest roads. And that's when he saw Lady Blur again, under attack by what was probably the scariest ghost at Chasers' Run: The Cavalry, seated on his spectral horse and slashing at Lady Blur with his long sword with all the ferocity the dead can muster. Donnie was trying to get away from it, but every



time Lady Blur moved, the Cavalry moved alongside it, his horse keeping pace with the car as if nothing in the world was easier.

*Oh, Jesus*, Asher thought, feeling cold suddenly. Of all the ghosts, this one terrified him the most, and it wasn't hard to understand why. Anyone would be scared to see a zombie-like Confederate soldier on a horse trying to get at you with a saber. And to Asher, it seemed like it was on the verge of getting Donnie.

An image passed through Asher's head of Donnie's car exploding in a blaze of flames and careening into one of the ancient trees off the road. Shaking his head, he floored the accelerator again, sure that his car would break down in the middle of the road despite all the improvements he'd made to it. Instead, the Honda actually caught up with Lady Blur and the Cavalry, the latter looking behind it as if surprised to find someone else sharing the road with it and the Mustang.

*Let's hope this works*, Asher thought, and turned on his brights. Jared Fecht had showed him once that the ghosts could sometimes be confused by putting on your brights, but it only worked for a few seconds, and only if you took them for surprise. And it never worked twice in one night.

This time though, it worked. The Cavalry raised an arm above its eyes and veered off to the left side of the road, away from Lady Blur. At the same time, Donnie drifted towards the right and slowed down, allowing the Honda to pass by. Turning off his brights, Asher flashed Donnie the thumbs up and hoped his friend saw it before he passed by. Another turn later, and Asher came out of the woods and over the finish line. The race was over. He'd won first place.

As the Honda came to a stop, Asher heard a roar go up from the crowd. He looked out the window, saw people applauding and cheering, saw bookies laughing while the people who placed bets on the other drivers swore, and even glimpsed Louie giving him an approving smile. *That's all for me*, he thought, with a bit of wonder. It took him another second to realize that this was his first time winning first place in the finalists' race, and then the winner's joy finally sank in. He stepped out of the car and raised his arms in victory. The crowd responded by cheering louder.

From the woods came a roar, and Lady Blur flew out, skidding to a stop twenty feet beyond Asher's Honda. Donnie stepped out, looking steamed. "What the hell, man?" he shouted.

Asher ran to Donnie, ignoring the latter's anger. "Dude, you alright?" he asked. "Did the Cavalry get you? Donnie, I won first place!"

"No, he didn't get me!" Donnie shot back. "I said, what the hell? Your brights cost me the race! That's cheating!"

"What's the commotion?" Louie appeared beside them, pulling out a cigarette from his pocket and lighting it.

"Asher used his brights!" Donnie complained, gesturing angrily at Asher. "They distracted me and cost me first place!"

"I was trying to get the Cavalry off your ass, man!" Asher shot back, now steamed himself. The least Donnie could do was thank him. "That ghost nearly imploded your car! I was trying to save your ass!"

"Oh bullshit!" said Donnie. "You cheated, I won!"

“Was the Cavalry on your ass?” asked Louie, puffing on his cigarette.

Donnie looked almost surprised by the question. “Well, yeah he was. But—”

“Did you use your brights to surprise the ghost?” Louie asked Asher. Asher nodded the affirmative. Turning to Donnie, Louie said, “Then you should be thanking your friend. The Cavalry’s a tough mother to beat off. You’re lucky to be alive.”

“He distracted me!” Donnie protested.

“And you’re not dead,” Louie pointed out. “You should be grateful for that. Now say thanks and go sulk somewhere else. Kid, here’s your winnings.” Louie handed Asher his two-hundred dollars cash prize and went to collect his take from the bookies. Asher looked at the roll of cash. He felt like he’d won a million dollars. Asher turned to Donnie, expecting to finally get that thank you, but Donnie only stared furiously at him before stalking away. From the crowd Evynne followed him, looking slightly worried.

It didn’t matter to Asher though, because a moment later he was surrounded by people, telling him how awesome he was, asking him what he was going to do with his prize money, wanting to know what had happened in the woods. He basked in his glory. *I knew tonight would be my lucky night*, he thought blissfully.

Sometime later, Asher got back to his car, and found Melissa Hoover there. Again, she looked nervous, but there was a look of determination about her too that Asher had never seen before outside of the classroom on exam day. “Um, hi Asher,” she said. “Great job out there. First place. That’s really something.”



“Thanks, Melissa,” he replied, noticing again how nicely the moonlight shined upon her hair. “It’s my first time winning Chasers’ Run.”

“Really?” she said. “That’s so cool.”

Asher smiled. “Yeah, it is.”

They might’ve talked more, but then Asher heard someone calling his name. He turned, and saw Evynne standing at the edge of the crowd, beckoning to him with a commanding finger. To Melissa he said, “Excuse me,” and walked towards Evynne. He never saw Melissa’s look of disappointment.

“Hey,” he said, very aware of how pretty, and how upset, Evynne seemed right now. “What’s up?”

“It’s Donnie,” she said with a scoff. She crossed her arms in front of her chest, and Asher became aware of what was underneath those arms. “He’s gotten all worked up. I hate him when he’s like this. He’s such an ass!”

“What he’d do?” Asher asked, though he thought he knew what Donnie had done.

“Oh, you know,” she answered. “The usual. Walked into the forest, threw a tantrum, talked about cheating and his victory being taken away from him, kicked some rocks and scared a couple of owls out of their nests. Called me a bitch too, if you can believe that.”

“That’s awful!” said Asher. He meant it too; if Evynne was his girl, nothing in the world could ever make him call her a bitch. She was just too awesome for that.

“You’re telling me,” she said, huffing. And then a gleam came into her eyes. “Walk me to my car,” she said. “It’s at the edge of the lot.”

Asher didn't even look back at his Honda. If he did, he might've seen Melissa looking crestfallen and running off to get a ride from a friend. Instead, he said, "Sure," and grinned a look not too different from the one Donnie had worn earlier in the night.

Smiling, Evynne led him to the edge of the mishmash of vehicles known as "the lot." Evynne's car, a burgundy 2012 Ford Edge, was at the furthest corner of the lot, waiting patiently for her. Asher expected her to say goodbye then and get in and drive off, leaving him wishing for something he knew that he wasn't cool enough to have. Instead, she unlocked her car, and opened the passenger's side back door.

"Well?" she said, looking at him coyly. "Aren't you going to get in with me?"

She climbed into the car, and Asher, hardly believing the invitation he'd just received, followed in after. That night, with the doors closed and her backseat leaning all the way back, Asher racked up another personal first on his lucky night.

He also provided another reason for what Donnie Griggs, who saw Asher get in his girlfriend's car, planned to do the next time he came to Chasers' Run.

The month of July passed by in a slow, hot haze. Asher worked shifts at the community center as a lifeguard, where he complained how the parents saw him as a free babysitter and earned the money to do work on his Honda at Louie's garage. Melissa Hoover started hanging out at the pool too, and Asher learned to look forward to seeing her, to talking to her on his breaks and finding out that they had a lot in common.

He also hung out with Donnie, who seemed to have lost his anger over losing to Asher and didn't seem to have any idea that Asher had gotten it on with Evynne. Asher, on that note, had come away happy to have become a man with Evynne, sad that he couldn't have her again, and aware that it had been a one-time thing, so it was best not to get hung up over it.

He also learned not to get too hung up on the fame of winning Chasers' Run, because, as it turned out, that fame wasn't talked about much outside of the actual events, and only if you managed to win quite a lot. As a first-time winner, Asher would have to be a much better racer if he wanted to feel the high of winning again.

Days passed. Bad movies were seen and laughed at, while good movies were seen and cheered for. Jokes were made, stories were swapped, memes were traded around the Internet. It was a normal sort of summer. No one would expect that a ticking time bomb was waiting to go off in Asher's face, let alone Asher himself.

But go off it did, on the night of August 3<sup>rd</sup>, the next Chasers' Run. And even before that bomb went off, things got weird for Asher, starting with his dad. Asher was walking down the stairs of his house, car keys in his hand and entry money in his pocket, looking forward to tonight, and the possibility of winning again when, from the living room armchair, a voice said, "Asher, can I talk to you?"

Asher stopped, and turned to his father. Mr. Greenwich was a balding man in his mid-forties, an accountant who didn't look very much like his son. He stared at Asher sternly, a hardcover novel in his lap. Normally he looked very tired because of the hours he pulled, but tonight he seemed wide awake. It was kind of unnerving.

“Yeah Dad,” said Asher, kind of surprised. He sat down on the couch, stowing his keys in his pocket. “But can we make it quick? I have to be somewhere.”

“Out to Shan Woods, right?” said Mr. Greenwich. “To Chasers’ Run?”

Asher stared. He had never heard an adult other than Louie, who was kind of an exception to the rule, speak about Chasers’ Run. In fact, many of the kids around town, Asher included, were convinced they didn’t know about it. They certainly never hinted that they knew where their kids went every first Saturday of the month. And Asher’s disbelief must’ve shown on his face, because his dad continued speaking.

“Yeah, I know about it,” he said, shifting in his chair. “I used to race too, back when I was a teen. Let me guess, someone older than you took you there your first time—in my case, it was your Uncle Will, he’d been racing three years before he took me—and showed you a wonderland. At first you thought it was something out of a movie, a bunch of street racers out in the middle of the woods. How am I doing so far?”

“Doing well,” said Asher, still feeling stupefied.

“And then you saw the ghosts for the first time,” Mr. Greenwich continued, as if his son hadn’t spoken. “The Gibberer, the Cavalry, Little Kitten and the Refined Gentlemen—”

“Wait, who were those last two?” asked Asher, shaken out of his amazement for the first time since this conversation began.

“Exactly,” said Mr. Greenwich. “You’ve never seen some of the ghosts I saw. You’ve never even heard of some of them, have you? I bet you didn’t know that the ghosts at Chasers’ Run change, do you? When I got there, the Gibberer had only just appeared. No one could

remember seeing her before. And around the time of my last race, the Refined Gentlemen just stopped showing up. People were glad to see them go, because it's hard to drive when they're crossing the road and you have to dodge each and every one of them, but nobody questioned why they disappeared, or why the ghosts only appear when people are racing and only go after the racers, or why they appear at all. So much of what goes on at Shan Woods is just taken for granted. At least, not until they stop racing. And then they start asking the questions that no one has answers to."

For a long time, Mr. Greenwich didn't say anything, leaving Asher to process these revelations. It was so much, it made his head ache a little. Finally, he asked, "Dad, do you want me not to race?"

Mr. Greenwich shook his head. "I doubt I could make you stop even if I tried," he answered. "Because that place has a hold of you. You can't stay away, not even if you wanted to, and it will keep a hold of you till you either get tired of racing or go off to some college far, far from here, and you're only back on holidays. People have tried to stay away, have tried to keep their kids away, and it never works." Pushing up his glasses up his nose, he finished with, "I just want you to do something that none of the other kids at that forest tonight do, and what none of their parents encourage them to do: to think about what Chasers' Run is. And maybe be a bit more cautious when you go out on that road and put your life at risk for a bit of petty cash."

After that, Mr. Greenwich picked up his book and resumed reading, signaling that the conversation was over. Feeling more confused than he had ever felt in his life, Asher got up and left the house. And as he did, he was startled by another voice, a girl's voice, and one he knew.



“Hey Asher.” Out of the darkness of a tree and into the moonlight Melissa appeared, and Asher was transfixed. Instead of her normal glasses and casual clothes, she had left the specs at home and was wearing a black, sleeveless, midriff-showing blouse and a black skirt, along with black stockings and flats. In addition, her hair had been done up with a ponytail, and she seemed so different from her usual self, Asher almost didn’t recognize her.

“Melissa,” he said. “What are you doing here?”

“I’m here to see you,” she answered.

“Me?”

“Can we talk?” asked Melissa. “Maybe on the way to Chasers’ Run?”

“Um...sure.” Asher unlocked his car, and Melissa slipped into the passenger’s seat. As Asher pulled out of the driveway and turned in the direction of the forest, all thoughts of his conversation with his dad left his head. Instead, what he thought about was Melissa, how different she looked. How pretty she looked, with moonlight in her hair and her glasses off.

But she’d always been kind of pretty, hadn’t she? He’d noticed that at the last Chasers’ Run, and every time she’d showed up at the pool in a swimsuit. She was pretty. And she’d come to see him.

“So,” he said after a while, “what’s up?”

For a moment, Melissa didn’t say anything. Then, not looking at him, she said, “I’m trying not to be nervous. I’m always so nervous around you, but I’m trying not to be tonight. Because I want you to notice me.”

“But I do notice you!” said Asher, surprised.

Melissa shook her head. “Not in the way I want you to notice me,” she said. “I have to dress like Evynne Stiller if I want you to look at me the way you look at her.”

Asher stopped the car. He looked at her, and saw her looking back at him, scared and determined at the same time. “I can be better than she can,” Melissa said. “I know a lot about cars. I mean, I don’t have a license, and no one has time to teach me to drive, but I’ve read a lot on it. And you know, we have a lot in common! We’re both smart, we both like the same kind of movies and books. We could be good together. So I—!”

Asher pulled over to the side of the road. God, how could he have been so blind? Here was the girl he should’ve been paying attention to.

Without a word, he took her in his arms. And with that, he sealed her fate to his.

By the time they arrived at Shan Woods, they were so late Asher nearly didn’t get a spot in any of the races. Still, Louie gave him a spot in the third race, and Asher and Melissa strolled back to where the Honda was parked, neither one aware of the whispers going on around them. Whispers about them.

During the first two races that night, Asher and Melissa seemed in their own little world. Not much was said, but what was said wasn’t too different from their normal poolside conversations. They just had more emotion and meaning behind them now.

And when they didn’t talk, they lapsed into comfortable silences, during which Asher thought about what his dad had told him. And the old man was right: there was a lot of weird at Shan Woods, enough to probably make any ghost hunter’s wet dreams come true. So why

weren't there any here? Why had there never been a viral video of a race, or a camera crew of any sort filming the races, documenting the ghosts, figuring out why the ghost of a Confederate soldier was being seen this far north? And when did the races even start? Perhaps Louie knew. That guy had been around the races for years, surely he knew something about the subject—

“Hey Asher?” said Melissa. “I haven't been in a race since my very first one.”

“Oh really,” he said, coming out of his thoughts and squeezing her to him. “Well, how about you ride with me tonight?”

She smiled. “I was hoping you'd say that.” They moved towards each other to kiss again when a voice called out to them.

“Hey!” Donnie Griggs appeared with Evynne Stiller in tow. Donnie seemed in great spirits, while Evynne seemed mostly curious and possibly a little peeved about Melissa's presence. Her boyfriend, on the other hand, seemed not to notice Melissa at all. Clapping Asher on the shoulder, he said, “Dude, we're racing against each other again tonight. Ready to get your ass kicked this time around?”

“No way, Donnie,” said Asher, full of defiant mirth. “I'm kicking your ass again tonight. And then I'm winning the grand prize!”

“Oh, I wouldn't be too sure of that,” Donnie replied. “I've got a few tricks up my sleeve this time.”

“I look forward to seeing them,” said Asher, and that ended the conversation. Donnie and Evynne left for the Lady Blur, Donnie looking over his shoulder at Asher and making grabbing motions at Evynne's ass. Asher only rolled his eyes and went back to talking with Melissa.

Finally, it was time for the third race to start. The lineup was Donnie in Lady Blur, Asher and Melissa in the Honda, Pat Bertram in her Beetle, and Danny Cho in his 2013 Suzuki Swift. Louie stepped out onto the road and gave his usual speech. Asher and Donnie exchanged one final nod between them, the kind that said, *Let's do this*. And then Louie lowered his arm.

“Croatoan!” Asher yelled, hitting the accelerator. The Honda rushed forward into the woods, getting in right behind Lady Blur and Cho’s Suzuki. Beside him, Melissa gave a small, delighted scream, holding onto Asher’s shoulder and looking for both opportunities to get ahead and for ghosts.

For the first leg of the race, however, no ghosts appeared. It was eerily quiet, which Asher found weird for the third race. Usually by then the ghosts were pretty active. Where were they?

The first turn came up. Asher spun the wheel—and heard a weird coughing sound coming from the engine. The Honda seemed to slow and then speed up, slow and then speed up, as if it couldn’t decide what speed it was supposed to be at. *What the hell?* Asher thought, putting his foot down on the accelerator. All that seemed to do though was make the car pick a speed, and that was slow. Slower than was safe during a race.

As they slowed, Asher looked at Melissa, who was looking at him with concern and fear on her face, before looking outside the car. Besides Pat Bertram passing them into third place, there was nothing else outside in the woods. But even so, they had to speed up, or else when something did show up...

Asher’s phone started buzzing in the front cup holder. He had a call. “Could you get that?” Asher asked Melissa, trying to shift the gears and maybe get a response. The car was

zigzagging on the road now, and no turning of the wheel seemed to fix it. Was the ancient Honda finally saying it had had enough? But how? He'd checked it in Louie's garage last week!

Suddenly Donnie's voice filled the car. "Hey guys," said Donnie, his voice bright and cheerful. "Having car trouble?"

Asher took his eyes off the road and stared at the phone with Melissa. How the hell did Donnie know about Asher's Honda? He was way ahead of them in first place!

"You know," Donnie continued, "I hate cheaters. I hate it when people cheat me out of a win and say they won their races fair and square. And I hate it when they go and screw my girl in the back of her car right after they cheat me out of a win."

Asher and Melissa glanced in shock at one another before looking back at the phone. "Um," said Asher, "Donnie, how did you know about—?"

"You're gonna pay," said Donnie, his voice full of hate, a hate Asher had never heard in his friend's voice before. Anger, Asher was familiar with, but never hate. "You're gonna freaking pay. Nobody cheats me of what's mine, Asher. Nobody!"

"What did you do to my car, man?" Asher shouted, his voice betraying a quiver. "Tell me what you did!"

"I did what you did to me." Donnie replied in a hiss. "Now you can rot in hell."

"Donnie," said Melissa, at this point on the verge of tears, "I'm in the car with Asher! You're gonna kill us both!"

There was silence for a moment. Then he said, "Well then you can thank Asher for what's about to happen. It's all his fault. He made me do this." And with that, he hung up.

Asher looked away from the phone to the road. There was an approaching green glow coming from off the road. Terror rushing up inside him, Asher tried to take back control of his car, but it wouldn't listen to him. Instead, it veered off the road and towards the woods. Even slowed down, it hit one of the trees at a fast-enough speed that the front of the Honda crumpled.

Airbags deployed, slamming Asher and Melissa into the backs of their seats. As they deflated, he looked at her and asked if she was alright. Melissa told him that something was pinning her leg. Looking around for help, Asher saw which ghost was coming for them: the Cavalry. Of course, it would be the Cavalry. The one ghost Asher feared the most was about to get him. It was almost like a bad movie.

Asher tried his door, but it was stuck in place. Melissa tried hers and got the same result. She looked at him in despair, and he did the only thing he could do, which was take her in his arms again. For the first time since he was a little kid, tears rolled down his cheeks. "I'm sorry," he whispered.

"I love you," was her reply.

"I know," he said, aware that he sounded nowhere near as cool as Harrison Ford as he said it, but what did it matter? He only just held her close and tried not to look as the Cavalry ran straight into his car.

The explosion could be seen from the clearing where the spectators waited for the racers to emerge from the woods. There were gasps, curses, screams and cries of anguish as they saw the Cavalry fly out of the flames and fall somewhere deep into the woods like a glowing green piece of debris. It was only when the three surviving racers emerged that anyone had any idea who had died.



Asher and Melissa's deaths were attributed to shoddy workmanship on Asher's part, causing the car to veer into a tree and catch fire. No one spoke of ghosts or the races, because it just simply wasn't done. And while everyone who knew Asher, who during the school year was vice-president of the Auto Mechanics club, was surprised that he could do a bad repair job on his beloved Honda, they accepted it.

That is, until Donnie's confession. In the month since Asher had died, he'd become moody and argumentative. During Asher and Melissa's double funeral, he was drunk through most of the service and burials. People assumed that he was just grieving for the death of his friend.

That was, until the night before September's Chasers' Run, on the fifth. Evynne had gone to his place prior to their usually Friday night date night, intending to break up with him for his too-boorish-even-for-grief-to-be-tolerated behavior. Instead she'd gotten the shock of her life when Donnie, drunk on his father's beloved twenty-year-old Scotch, confessed to sabotaging Asher's car and then paying off the insurance investigators to keep quiet about it. Being the millennial that she was, Evynne had filmed the whole thing. If you know where to look, you can still find that video, in which Donnie alternately blames himself, blames Asher, and cries about Melissa's needless death (this last part is where the rumors of him having a relationship with her as well come from).

Evynne struggled with her conscience for a day before going to her father, who took her phone to the police. By that time though, Donnie had already gone to Chasers' Run. And that night, he died. Pat Bertram, who raced against Donnie that night, witnessed the whole thing. She

said that Donnie hadn't seemed drunk or grieving at all. He'd said he'd been feeling good for the first time in a month, and they'd talked a bit before their race. But during the race, two new ghosts appeared, a couple of teenagers who looked very familiar. As Pat put it, it was as if Donnie's Lady Blur had been pulled towards those ghosts. There was a great blast, and then Asher and Melissa disappeared, never to be seen again.

Donnie's death was ruled a suicide. Again, no mention of ghosts or races were mentioned.

October came, and the races resumed without any death, though it was reported that another new ghost, a preteen ballerina who skipped alongside cars, had appeared. Louie called her Little Kitten, though no one knew where the name had come from, and it stuck.

Asher's dad moved to Florida, wanting to get away from the memory of his son. Evynne graduated, having never dated another guy after Donnie died, and left for college. She never came back to town, and she never mentioned Chasers' Run, or her own role in the deaths of Asher, Melissa, and Donnie, ever again.

But people talked about it. The story of Asher Greenwich, Donnie Griggs, Melissa Hoover, and Evynne Stiller became one of the legends of Chasers' Run, like Pat Bertram the Chaser Queen, or the Kid Who Became a Ghost For Love, or the Walpurgis Race, becoming more and more unrecognizable with each retelling. But people like it that way, because they love a story with some good drama.

And the races continue on.