

The Girl
with
Autumn
Eyes

R. F. Vincent

Chapter 1

THE GIRL ON THE BRIDGE

Nova Scotia, Canada, 1985

September!

Of all the months in the year, September is the one I get along with best. It's not that I have anything against the other months. March and June have proven to be pleasant company over the years, and I even have a soft spot for February, who punched me in the stomach once. To be honest, I could strike up a conversation with any of the months. But there exists a special friendship between September and me. Why? It was September when I met the girl on the bridge. And you don't share something like that without becoming close.

* * *

The first thing you should know about me, and the last thing I usually tell anyone, is that my life began in a dumpster. It was a frigid, snowy day in Halifax, Nova Scotia. A sanitation worker found me atop the refuse, blue and barely breathing. I survived the ordeal, but some people speculated that my odd behaviour as a youth was due to a lack of oxygen during my introduction to the world. I grew up in a foster home in rural Nova Scotia on the Bay of Fundy. The closest town was Mary Cannes Corner, which you're not likely to find on a roadmap or in any self-respecting atlas. My formative years were characterized by a crippling social anxiety that

R. F. Vincent

followed me into adulthood. I'm in my twenties now, but the shy, frightened kid who couldn't connect with anyone is still very much a part of me.

Working out of a tiny office in Wolfville, Nova Scotia, I'm involved in the sale of binzzbunzzers across the Maritimes. Binzzbunzzers are a type of office supply that falls somewhere between a poorly made paperclip and an inefficient clamp. Specifically, I'm the director of shipping and ordering, which is a somewhat inflated title since I'm the only employee in the office.

The town is quiet and picturesque with boutiques, restaurants and more trees than people. My days in Wolfville can be described as uneventful, mundane, routine. Except for one day. The most important day of my life.

* * *

It was a wild and windy morning in late September. The sun, a bright yellow splotch in a sea of blue, seemed warm and inviting but couldn't fight off a nip in the air. It was officially cold outside, and the wind only made things worse. What made me classify the day as *wild* was the way the wind picked up an armful of leaves at any given instant and cast them skyward in a cloud of colourful confusion. There was neither rhyme nor reason to the wind's swirling demeanour. It seemed to enjoy blowing the leaves this way and that, herding them into a corner, only to bully them into the open once more.

As I ate my traditional breakfast of puffed wheat, the radio DJ echoed my assessment of the day. "It's a crazy, windy Saturday out there, folks. You better tie down your hat, or it's going to get blown clear down to Yarmouth. But don't take my word for it. Just ask The Association . . ."

The DJ didn't have it right since the song was about a girl called Windy, not a windy day, but I enjoyed the tune, nonetheless. It made me want to meet Windy, who sounded like an interesting person. Just like her, I didn't like liars, so that was something we had in common.

At the end of the song, I felt inspired enough to brave the wind on my bicycle. It wasn't an ideal day for a bicycle ride. If the image in your mind's eye is that of a day not fit for man or bicycle, an unpredictable and tempestuous day that could blow a person from under their hat and off their bicycle, then your eye is in its right mind.

The Girl with Autumn Eyes

One might say that only a true enthusiast of two-wheel exercise would cycle on such a morning while another may contest that only a madman would put foot to pedal in such conditions. Either way, I went.

To comprehend the significance of what happened next, it must be understood that I *always* took the same route when I rode my bicycle. It was a circular path that sent me down various country roads, most of which passed cozy little farms or wound amongst huge maple trees. I was on a first-name basis with many of the cows along the route, and the trees provided pleasant shade on the warmer days. But on that day, for reasons I'm still unable to explain, I decided to try something new—another circular route, but one of a different temperament, one that would send me to the top of a few large hills, through rugged hinterland, and maybe all the way to the Bay of Fundy, depending on my gumption. I had inexplicably decided on the route change as I wheeled my bicycle through the front door of my apartment building. Just like that. The break with tradition was out of character for me, and sometimes I wonder how my life would be different today if not for that odd impulse.

The bike ride began routinely. I was dressed in mittens, scarf, toque, long underwear, wool socks, track pants, turtleneck, and sweater, so I felt about as comfortable as the wind and my bulk would allow. After about ten minutes of cycling, in which my exposed face became numb to the elements, I settled into a steady cadence and began to enjoy the scenery.

I realized early on that my decision to change the route had been a good one. No traffic, lots of trees, green pastures, and friendly cows grazing in the fields. The wind had decided not to blow leaves in my face, opting to send them skittering across the road as though it were sweeping them under a giant carpet on the other side. The leaves were orange and red plus a myriad of colours like magenta and crimson, which probably don't mean anything to most people but sound smart if you can slip them into conversation every now and then. The effect was dazzling, the type of feeling that can cast a person adrift in a sea of imagination. I pretended the leaves were multicoloured mice scurrying across the road. Sometimes my mind drifts like that—thinking leaves are mice or socks or Pop-Tarts or something very *unleaf*-like. This time they were mice, and it became a game not to run over them. I swerved this way and that, attempting to avoid collisions.

R. F. Vincent

It was fun for a while. I even seemed to be winning, rarely squishing any of the mice, until the wind became angry at losing and started blowing the mice in my face.

Drifting in a sea of imagination is an enjoyable excursion, but sometimes my mind doesn't know when to drop anchor. Sometimes it realizes a fraction of a second too late that the leaves aren't mice, that the mice are leaves, that a lot of them are blowing in my face, and if I don't stop swerving, I'm going to end up in the ditch. That's what happened this time. I found myself in a ditch full of water, leaves stuck to my tongue, a finger poking through a mitten, mud on my sweater, a scratch on my face, a rock digging in my back, and my bicycle on top of me. If I hadn't hurt my leg, ripped my track pants, and left myself open to pneumonia, the whole ordeal would have been hilarious. I may have died laughing.

Undaunted, I picked myself up, brushed off my tongue, and pushed forward. I hated going back once I had started something. My leg throbbled in the vicinity of the knee, but I decided to work it out. I'd just go a bit easier. Nice and slow. No problem.

Then came a bark.

Another bark, only deeper.

That couldn't be a third bark, could it? Yep.

I had a problem.

I glanced behind me and saw a platoon of dogs. They seemed to be in formation, as if they were in the dog military or possibly the reserves. *The dogs of war*, I thought, scarcely believing my predicament. One or two dogs I could understand—with three I'd be suspicious of a conspiracy—but there were eight or nine! Fresh from my tumble, I didn't feel like a sprint. But self-preservation intervened, and soon I was pedalling with manic desire.

Much to my dismay, the pursuing pack was not out for a leisurely jaunt and appeared intent on tracking down their quarry. Led by a huge German Shepherd, the platoon kept pace for several minutes, even managing to gain some ground. But eventually, one by one, they fell by the wayside.

An overweight bulldog was the first to run out of gas, plopping himself in the middle of the road for a well-deserved nap. Then a wiener dog, whose legs barely reached the ground, wandered off as if he had never been

The Girl with Autumn Eyes

interested in the first place. A Cocker Spaniel veered absent-mindedly into the trees, a Scottish Terrier tumbled into the ditch, and two mongrels halted their pursuit to fight each other instead.

I kept peering behind me, my heart lightening as the troops diminished. Only two left. Just the German Shepherd, who I considered the platoon sergeant, and a big old Boxer who looked as if he had been in a few skirmishes in his day. The two of them were tiring, their tongues almost dragging on the road. My odds of survival were increasing with every rotation of my pedals.

Happy with my improved odds, I swivelled my head forward, only to be greeted by a horrible sight. A relative of Mount Everest loomed in front of me. I couldn't remember a hill with such a genetic background residing so close to Wolfville. It was the type of geologic structure that devoured bicycles, a monolithic hunk of granite that warped the road upward at an acute angle.

I tried pumping my legs harder, to no avail. I was slowing down. Slower, slower, slower—was I still moving? Despite standing on my pedals, my progress had all but halted. Sensing my difficulties and forgetting their own, the dogs moved in for the kill.

The German Shepherd got to me first and yanked on the leg of my track pants. I tried to keep my balance but found it impossible to remain upright and toppled over. The bike fell and slid part way down the hill. The Boxer grabbed a tire, then dragged the bike back up the hill toward me.

Sarge continued to gnaw on my track pants. He growled and snarled, pulled and tugged, dragging me in fits and starts down the hill. Thankfully, the big Shepherd didn't have any of my flesh clenched between his teeth—just a mixture of polyester and cotton.

My initial reaction was to kick him with my free foot, but then I thought that might be an unwise provocation. Instead, I twisted around and slipped out of my track pants, though I lost a shoe in the process. Due to my sudden maneuver, Sarge flipped head over heels, but he still managed to maintain his grip on my pants.

The Boxer, who was beginning to realize that bicycles weren't particularly appetizing, eyed Sarge's prize. In a swift, snarling movement, he

R. F. Vincent

grabbed the free leg of my track pants. Sarge tugged. Boxer heaved. Then the pants ripped in half—exactly down the middle.

Lying in the center of the road in torn long underwear, I watched in amazement as both dogs darted back down the hill, each dragging half of my pants. Remarkably, Sarge had also managed to pick up my discarded shoe before departing.

I scrambled to my feet and collected my bike. Feeling it prudent to make myself unavailable for another attack, I ran up the remaining part of the hill, pushing my bicycle beside me. Once at the crest I mounted the two-wheeler and coasted down the other side. The cool air felt invigorating as it brushed past my face. The wind and leaves had settled down. I could still salvage the bike ride.

Ahead of me a rushing river gurgled under a bridge at the bottom of the hill. A car was parked on the far side of the bridge. Something old, something blue. A Chevette, perhaps. Then I saw a person on the bridge, leaning on the rail as they looked at the river below. It seemed peculiar that someone should stop in the wilderness to stand on a bridge.

Before I could ponder the mystery any further, I felt a bump, another bump, and then an even bigger bump—the undeniable symptoms of a flat tire. The Boxer must have chewed a hole in my tire. It was going to be a long walk back to Wolfville.

I climbed off my bicycle and looked toward the bridge, about fifty yards away. The person was unaware of my presence, staring at the water below, deep in thought. Even though they could conceivably give me a ride back to town, my first instinct was to walk in the opposite direction. It's almost impossible for me to talk to people. I usually only speak when spoken to, and even then, I don't say much. I'm always polite, but social situations make me anxious to the point of nausea.

I turned to leave, but there was something compelling about the individual on the bridge. I sensed that something was wrong. Amiss. Perhaps the car had broken down. I had a strong feeling that I shouldn't abandon the person. Summoning all my courage, I walked toward the bridge, my heart aflutter, the splashing of the river concealing my approach. As I moved closer, the lower part of my long underwear, shredded from my

The Girl with Autumn Eyes

encounter with Sarge, became lodged in my bike's chain. Great. Now I could barely move.

Then I saw her.

The girl on the bridge.

And my life changed forever.

I looked at my watch—9:42 a.m. on the twenty-eighth day of September. It was the exact moment I fell in love with the girl on the bridge.

Love.

It was a sensation I had never experienced in my life. It struck me as a little absurd that I was mentally logging this information though she had yet to notice my arrival. The river below, thrashing out an autumn symphony against the rocks, absorbed her attention. And then I took stock of the state in which my disastrous bicycle ride had left me—one shoe, no pants, leaf-matted toque, torn mittens, scratched face, and tattered long underwear stuck in my bicycle chain. I realized I would strike her as more than a *little* absurd.

The river's symphony allowed me to lift the bike and shuffle closer to the girl unnoticed. I stopped when I came within a few yards. I stared in amazement, awed by her beauty, my heart pounding. Then she looked at me. The thumping of my heart must have risen above the river's crescendo and caught her attention.

She was startled by my presence, but not nearly as much as I expected. She simply smiled at me, a sad smile as though something weighed heavily on her mind. I'll never forget the way she looked. It's like a picture engraved into my brain, only it's better than a picture—an image with dimension, sound, smell, as if the actual occurrence is trapped inside my mind. I smell the water, the leaves. I hear the river rushing below. A bird is chirping merrily in the woods. A squirrel scurries into the underbrush. A cool breeze caresses my face and kicks up her short dark hair, causing it to dance about her delicate ears. Her eyes are a reflection of autumn, warm and vibrant. Her smooth skin, slightly blushed from the briskness of the day, contrasts sharply against the blackness of her eyebrows. She's wearing blue jeans, white sneakers, and a light grey sweater, everything perfect. A backdrop of intense fall foliage frames her angelic face. It's so clear in my mind. *A captured moment.*

R. F. Vincent

An instant later she was gone. She had taken notice of my dishevelled appearance and vamoosed. In the middle of nowhere, a woman should understandably bolt from such a strange character. And she did. Before I had a chance to say anything, she went to her car and drove away.

I felt like crying. I'd probably never see her again. Maybe she had a boyfriend or was married, but I wished I had said something—explained my predicament or at least mentioned the magenta and crimson leaves. I wished with all my heart that I had spoken to her.

I managed to liberate my long underwear from the bike chain and then limped toward home. I tried to forget about the girl on the bridge, but I couldn't. There was something about her, some inexplicable quality that refused to leave my thoughts.

About halfway to Wolfville, a dark cloud drifted over me and began spitting huge drops on my head. It was a strange rain. The sun was shining everywhere else, but soon I was drenched and shivering.

As I slept that night, I dreamed of the girl on the bridge. Dreams are usually bizarre wisps of reality, but this one replayed our encounter precisely—smell, sound, colour, texture, everything. I tried to speak to her, but the words wouldn't come out. I woke up with my heart pounding in my ears. As I tried to settle back down to sleep, her image persisted, clear and beautiful.

Chapter 2

LIFE IN A COFFEE MUG

As of 9:45 a.m. on the twenty-eighth day of September, I began feeling off kilter, afflicted, inflicted—in a word, crummy. Initially, I chalked it up to a bad can of Scarios that I had ingested the night before my bicycle ride, but it didn't take long for me to determine the real reason. It was the girl on the bridge. She had driven out of my life three minutes after I had first laid eyes on her, and with her she had taken my heart. In my mind I could see my heart buckled up in the passenger seat as she drove away.

It's funny when I think about it. Not so much the image of my heart driving off with the girl on the bridge but the word "crummy," as in crummy car, crummy apartment, or crummy job, all of which I have crummy ones of. I used to spell the word c-r-u-m-b-y since the letter "b" is always hanging around on the end of "crumb" like a vagrant looking for handouts. My neighbour, Bert Fennut, pointed out the folly of my ways. Flashing a peace sign, he took a protracted puff on his cigarette and said, "No *b* in crummy, dude," which came out in a big puff of smoke. Fennut being Fennut, which is an unavoidable state for him, I didn't know if he was being serious or indulging in a "Fennutism." A quick trip to the dictionary proved him to be correct.

As I considered the inanities of life and the pitfalls of spelling during my coffee break, a crumb from my jelly donut fell into my coffee. It floated for a while, then sank into the dark brew. I could have poetically compared the crumb's plight to my heart being overtaken by a sea of emotion, but

it didn't occur to me at the time. Although I like to think of myself as an artsy-fartsy type, I'm probably closer to the latter than the former.

As more crumbs dove into my coffee, I didn't see them as hearts; I saw them as crumbs, and mostly what I thought about was that extra *b* and where it had come from. Maybe it had fallen off another word like "bubble" or "bumble," who thought they had one too many "b's" and that "crum" didn't have enough. The only problem is that "crumb" didn't need any to begin with, and now it's compelled by Webster to lug that lazy son of a "b" around wherever it goes. And what about "crummy"? What happened to the "b" there? The extra "m" must have told the "b" to take a hike. It may have even resorted to fisticuffs for all I know.

I may have been contemplating the word "crummy" because, if you want to know the worst-kept secret in the universe, I have a crummy job that doesn't pay a lot of crumbs. My primary responsibility is taking orders for binzzbunzzers and producing the mailing labels. For seven hours a day, five days a week, I sit at a desk, answering the telephone: "Good day, Binzzbunzzer Enterprises, shipping and ordering division, how may I be of service?" Then I take down the pertinent information from customers with a pencil and paper. Sometimes I sharpen the pencil, which relieves the monotony. I'm also the de facto contact for queries, complaints, and wrong numbers. Strangely enough, despite my social anxiety, I'm good at talking on the telephone. It's one of my specialties. As for breaks, I have two fifteen-minute coffee breaks—one in the morning and one in the afternoon—and thirty minutes for lunch.

The man who invented the binzzbunzzer and seems destined for fame and fortune by virtue of his cleverness is my boss Mr. B. Buzz Smith. He spends a lot of time at home producing the gizmos with a contraption of his own creation. Nobody is allowed to view the device since, in Mr. Smith's estimation, everyone would be compelled to duplicate it and make their own binzzbunzzers. His nephew, Elroy, who is second in command as chief operating officer, once told me that he suspected they were made in China on account that nobody could make that many binzzbunzzers on their own except for maybe Superman. I nodded politely at his hypothesis despite having no expertise on the procreation of binzzbunzzers or the dexterous abilities of Superman.

The Girl with Autumn Eyes

Mr. Smith shows up occasionally to make sure I'm not stealing any pencils or sleeping on the job. He's a large man, about half the size of my office, which makes it a bit uncomfortable when he barrels in to discuss business. He has a blustery face that he likes to stick about two inches from my nose. I don't understand blustery-faced people. They're driven by nature to stick their blustery faces as close to you as possible. It's a fact of life.

My first encounter with Mr. Smith was memorable. Elroy had conducted the interview and approved my hiring, so I was several weeks into the job before I met the elusive Mr. B. Buzz Smith. He charged into my tiny office like a runaway continent and nearly made me fall backward out of my seat by sticking his blustery face two inches from my nose. His first words, riding a current of curried onions on garlic toast, will forever be emblazoned on at least one of my brain cells.

"Hey there, you must be the new fella. The name's B. Buzz Smith, but you can just call me Mr. Smith. Elroy says you're a good man. How's it going, eh?"

"I'm fine, sir. How are you?"

"Not too good, not too good. My ass is on fire, what with these hemorrhoids."

I'm far from an authority on social protocol, but that didn't seem right. He should have said he was okay even if there were flames shooting out of his pants. I didn't want to hear about his medical problems. That's the other thing about blustery-faced people. They think that having hemorrhoids is something that everyone wants to know about. They think the world is waiting to hear about the condition of their rectum, whether it's on fire or just a bit tender. I swear it's true.

You may wonder why I put up with a crummy job and a blustery-faced boss. The main reason is my degree in philosophy. My orphan background earned me the designation of "disadvantaged youth," for which I received a full scholarship to Acadia University in Wolfville. After two years of not knowing what I should major in, and having no guidance on the matter, I pursued a degree in philosophy. Following graduation, I spent several months searching for a job that required a philosopher, only to learn that my degree had no direct application to the real world and that four years

of my life had ostensibly been spent assimilating volumes of worthless information. Eventually, I settled for a job that required no expertise in anything and paid minimum wage: director of shipping and ordering, Binzzbunzzers Incorporated.

When I began university, I thought that any degree would be good enough to get me a half-decent job. Eventually, I concluded that this was, in fact, true—with the sole exception of philosophy. By the middle of my fourth year in university, as my misgivings took a firm hold, I developed a theory that philosophy was a joke degree. I conjectured that it was an imaginary area of study devised by a network of bored academics who had decided to relieve the tedium of a rainy afternoon by inventing a degree, preferably one with humorous qualities. I pictured those professors getting together after a class and laughing so hard that their pants fell down.

One of my professors, Dr. Jerkins, always seemed on the verge of laughing. He could barely wait to get in the back room with his friends and whoop it up. Dr. Jerkins usually wore yellowish corduroy pants that looked perilously close to falling down even in a serious environment, so I think a small chuckle would have sent them sailing to the floor. After earning my bachelor's degree, I thought about getting a PhD in philosophy and joining the group. But it's not for me. I'd feel lousy teaching an imaginary subject. Besides, I don't think I could ever get comfortable having my pants fall down like that.

Although I make light of my university days, it was a difficult time for me. The only reason I went to Acadia in the first place was because of the scholarship, which my foster parents had aggressively pursued. They were happy to give me an opportunity for higher education and even happier to get me out of their house. In early September I boarded a bus for Wolfville. I had an old trunk packed with all my belongings and was wearing a second-hand suit augmented by a bright red bow tie, of which I was quite proud. It seemed to me that one needed to look their best when going to a big city. The bow tie gave me a modicum of confidence and a smidgeon of bravado, two things sorely lacking in my persona. In truth, I was petrified.

When I arrived at my dormitory, a wild party was in progress. Students were running in the halls, laughing, screaming, cursing, throwing food, drinking beer . . . it was utter mayhem. I managed to find my room through

The Girl with Autumn Eyes

the chaos, only to discover the door wide open with a gaggle of students inside. They were holding someone upside down as he drank from a tube attached to a keg. An inebriated reveler put his arm around me.

“Are you my roomie? Hey, roomie, have a beer!”

Another person came from behind and tore off my bow tie. It was a clip-on, and it came off easily. “Hey, bow tie, loser!” My tie was tossed into the crowd to a round of cheers.

My heart pounded, skipped beats. Air refused to go into my lungs. I felt certain I was about to die. Breaking free of my “roomie,” I bolted from the dormitory and into the afternoon sun. I wandered about for some time, dragging the trunk behind me, until I found a bench in a secluded park just off campus. It was getting dark, but I had nowhere to go. I sat there all night, afraid to sleep, contemplating my uncertain future. I thought of my bow tie and how it had been discarded like garbage—like I had been—which made me as sad as anything.

In the morning, I found the number for student services and called them from a payphone. I explained my predicament, how I would not be able to live in the dormitory, that I needed my own place. The woman on the other end was very kind, and within a day she had found me a one-room apartment just off campus. I would get a stipend from my scholarship, but since it was not enough to pay for food and rent, I would need a part-time job. As it turned out there was a position as a parking attendant on campus, which had been difficult to fill since it entailed two twelve-hour shifts, midnight to noon, during the weekend. I was happy to take the work.

Over the next four years I never missed a shift at the parking lot. My only task was to sit in a little booth and raise the gate when permit holders came through or charge an hourly rate for those without a pass. The booth was climate controlled with a radio and a small television. The lack of traffic at those hours meant I could read or do puzzles. In the summer my schedule expanded to five midnight shifts a week. I also worked every holiday, including Christmas, since I never had any plans for these occasions. My foster parents were busy with all their foster children and did not extend an invitation for me to visit during the holidays, or any other time of the year. We spoke occasionally on the telephone when I began university, but those conversations petered out by my second year.

R. F. Vincent

After several semesters of taking a variety of courses, ranging from geology to astrophysics to economics, I decided upon philosophy as a major, partly because it was one of the few options that would allow me to finish the degree within the four-year limit of my scholarship. From a curricular perspective, I liked the idea of using critical reasoning to solve complex problems, which could give me a better understanding of life. Maybe it would help me understand myself. I had visions of having deep conversations with my classmates, but it never happened. I sat in silence and contributed little to the class discussions. I think my shyness led people to think I was haughty, snobbish, aloof. Nothing could have been further from the truth. It's not that I didn't want to converse; I just couldn't.

After university I transitioned from the parking lot booth to Binzzbunzzers Incorporated and graduated to an apartment with an actual bedroom. I am accustomed to the quiet routine of my life and enjoy living in Wolfville. I exercise at least an hour every day, go to work, solve crosswords, knit, do jigsaw puzzles, read books, and sometimes write funny little stories. If I don't analyze it too much, my life is quite full and satisfying. There's even some room for promotion in my job. During one of his visits, Mr. Smith confided to me that his opinion of Elroy had diminished over the years, that he considered him an idiot who was barely capable of packaging and mailing pre-labeled boxes of binzzbunzzers. As such, I may be in line for Elroy's lofty position in the company.

The building where I work has a bunch of offices. There's a travel agency, an accounting office, an insurance place, and a number of other establishments that I either can't remember or can't be bothered to describe. I don't see the sense in describing things that don't make any difference. For instance, I could tell you about the door to my office being blue with a poster of a monkey in a business suit stuck to it, but I don't think it matters. I doubt if anybody cares what colour the door is. I could say it's red, and it wouldn't change your life in any conceivable way. The monkey on the poster is smoking a pipe, but I'm not even going to mention that tidbit for the sake of brevity. I guess what I'm saying is that I'm too lazy to check exactly what offices are in the building, and there isn't much point in making something up because I'm probably never going to mention them again. There are a bunch of them—twelve or thirteen, I believe. That sums it up nicely.

The Girl with Autumn Eyes

The biggest attraction in the building is a cafeteria called The Donut Hole. It's a cozy establishment with plastic plants, several tables wearing red-checked tablecloths, and a large woman standing behind a counter ready to sling a cup of joe here or an insult there. Despite its name, they sell things other than donuts, such as coffee, sandwiches, and those sticks that resemble meat, but nobody knows what they're made of. It's not like one can purchase culinary delights like sardines on Pop-Tarts or Alphagetti with fried baloney, but it has all the staples of a fatty diet.

I enjoy drinking coffee and eating jelly donuts. That's my favourite—a donut filled with raspberry jelly. The large woman behind the counter likes to say, "You're going to turn into a jelly donut one of these days!" She's always quick with a one-liner like that, thinking it's funnier than all heck. And at times it is. Sometimes it's the funniest thing I hear all day.

Occasionally, I like to sit and watch the people drift in and out. I recognize most of them. They're as regular as coffee at The Donut Hole. There's Nice-As-Pie-Girl and her friend, Hustling-Bustling-Girl, both of whom show up daily, and usually find time in their busy schedule to throw a "Hi" in my direction. I'm always quick with a "Hello" and sometimes manage to comment on the weather. The two of them are normally in the company of Good-At-Everything-Guy and I-Have-So-Many-Muscles-I-Can't-Move-Guy, both of whom seem quite pleasant. Then there's Giggly-Giggling-Girl, who laughs at anything remotely funny, which warms my heart for some reason.

Quite often I see Everybody's-Best-Pal-Guy. He's always mixing me up with somebody else. "Hey, Danny Boy! How's the wife and kids? How's the dog?" At first, I tried to tell him that my name wasn't Danny, that I didn't have a wife, kids or even a dog, but he was always too busy being the next person's best pal before I could get the words out. It's to the point now that I'm too embarrassed to correct him, and some other people are starting to call me Danny as well. I may just change my name to Danny to ease the confusion. Speaking of names, all the people I've mentioned have one, and I mean no disrespect with my descriptions. It's just easier for me to keep track of who's who.

When I get tired of watching people, I watch myself. The inside of myself. I drift away. I'll dive into my coffee mug and let myself sink to the

R. F. Vincent

bottom. Contrary to popular belief, you can see clearly and breathe freely in coffee. The caffeine feels good piping through the lungs, coursing along the veins, pumping in and out of the ventricles.

In the bottom of my coffee mug, I'm king. King of the mug. No bluster-faced guys telling me what to do. No pencils, papers, or telephones. Just peace and quiet.

But the most important aspect of my coffee mug world is what I'm seeing down there. That's the reason for diving into mugs. It's a place to dream, a place to unleash one's mind. Lately, I've been seeing a bridge in my mug, a bridge with a girl on it.

It's strange. We never spoke, and I haven't seen her since. Our meeting lasted a few minutes. Yet I can't seem to stop thinking about her. In my mug she's smiling at me, just the way she did on the bridge, and I can feel myself turning to putty. I melt right before her eyes and become part of the river, which is made of coffee and surrounded by donut crumbs. Ten days have passed since I saw the girl on the bridge, my dream girl, and her image persists as clearly as if it's happening over and over in my head. An endless loop of madness and ecstasy. In that loop I'm also keenly aware of the sadness that betrayed her smile and how I lost my chance to help her through whatever distress she was feeling.

I have bicycled back to the bridge a few times since our encounter with the absurd notion that history would repeat itself. One time I stood there for a few hours, hoping she might show up.

Sometimes I wonder whether she's a figment of my imagination. I have a good imagination, something I acquired out of necessity during my childhood, and figments aren't out of the question. Then I think that maybe I was a figment of her imagination. Can a one-shoed stranger show up in the middle of nowhere in shredded underwear demonstrating an unnatural attachment to his bicycle chain? Things like that just don't happen. I can't possibly be real. And the funny thing is—the conundrum, as it were—if the girl on the bridge hadn't imagined me, I wouldn't even be here telling you this.

As I sat there pondering my existence, watching a crumb bob here and there, willing myself to the bottom of the mug, my life took a bizarre and unexpected turn. The girl on the bridge really was in my coffee mug. Not at

The Girl with Autumn Eyes

the bottom but on the surface, her face somewhat marred by donut crumbs that floated like tiny life rafts on the surface. She was standing directly behind me, her reflection bouncing off my coffee. In my astonishment the last remnant of the donut fell from my mouth and into the mug.

Coffee splattered. I turned. Looked up.

She regarded me warily, taking stock of the mess on the table and the piece of donut that struggled to stay afloat in the low tide of my coffee. There wasn't an ounce of recognition in her eyes.

I was mesmerized. Too mesmerized to smile or speak. The only thing I managed to do was squeak. Or it may have been a peep. It was something like a peep or a squeak, perhaps even a tweet. I don't know. Medically speaking, it's impossible to be sure of anything when you're mesmerized.

Amidst my captivation she disappeared. Gone again. But I recovered quickly and caught a glimpse of her leaving the cafeteria. I sprang from my seat with such excitement that I knocked the table, spilling the rest of my coffee on the floor.

"You're going to clean that up you . . . you jelly donut!" the large woman behind the counter shouted.

I hated to be rude, but I didn't have time for large women behind counters at the moment. I waved in acknowledgment and then ran to the door. Glancing down the hall, I saw the girl on the bridge walking into the travel agency. Did she work there? Was she going on a trip? Was she lost? I had to know.

I crept along the wall until I reached the travel agency, then I peeked through the open door. I couldn't let her see me. She'd think I was spying or being nosy. My heart jumped when I saw her. She was sitting behind a desk. She had to be employed there. The girl on the bridge worked in the same building as me. What were the odds? Ten zillion to one? That sounded about right. I couldn't believe my good fortune.

It made me smile so wide that my face hurt. Sometimes life is good. Sometimes it makes up for all the bad things it throws at you from time to time. For the first time in my life, I had met a girl who turned me inside out and upside down—and she worked just a few doors away.

Before I had time to ponder the likelihood of the girl on the bridge being spoken for or the unlikelihood of me speaking to her, a thumb and

R. F. Vincent

index finger had a firm grasp on my ear. The next thing I knew, the large woman from behind the counter was dragging me back to the cafeteria.

“You’re going to clean up that mess, Mr. Raspberry Donut!”

I should have been upset that a large woman was practically pulling my ear out of its socket, but for now, even that felt good.