

Surviving Dawn

By C.W. Spooner

Dawn was a great kisser. I loved making out with her. She had a way of looking at me, kind of sleepy-eyed, lips parted, that said, “Come and kiss me, Chet, right now.” Pretty amazing for a fourteen-year-old girl, but she was mature for her age. I know what you’re thinking—I’m a cradle robber. But hey, I was just sixteen, going into my junior year in high school, only two years older. Did I mention she was mature for her age?

Dawn was cute, going on pretty, about five-five, still growing into her body. She had an amazing mane of blonde hair that fell to her shoulders, green eyes that never looked away, and those very kissable lips. She was something. I met her through my friend Brock. They’d had a few dates, but Brock quickly figured out he was more interested in Dawn’s mom. Her name was Kirsten, and she was a very pretty lady, maybe late thirties. Brock called her Kirsten, but I couldn’t bring myself to be that bold. I called her Mrs. Worrell. I never did learn what happened to Mr. Worrell. He was just gone, and no one mentioned his name.



Brock and I would go over to the Worrells' and hang out, me and Dawn in the front room watching TV, and Brock and Mrs. Worrell talking and smoking in the kitchen or out on the patio.

Kirsten Worrell was a teacher, and she knew better than to get involved with Brock, who was about to begin his senior year in high school. That kind of thing could wind up on the front page of the local paper, and she'd lose her job for sure. So, she kept ol' horndog Brock at arm's length. He was determined to wear her down, persistent SOB that he was. Funny thing—she never told him to buzz off. But then, Brock was a nice-looking guy, just under six feet, athletic build. I guess she liked the attention.

All through the summer of 1958, we hung out with the Worrells. When I got my driver's license, Dawn and I had some freedom. We'd go to the movies, or over to the beach for the day, or down to Toby Jean's, the local drive-in, for burgers and fries. There was a lot of parking and making out, too, but she made it clear that kissing was the limit. Nothing beyond that. Heck, she was only fourteen. That was fine with me because I didn't know what came next or how to do it. So, that was our deal. No expectations, no pressure.

And then she dumped me.

I admit it stung like a bitch, and I cried a lot of hot tears into my pillow. Dawn was my first girlfriend, and I was sure it was love. Brock told me to suck it up, no big deal; there were a lot of fish in the pond, all that baloney. It hurt even more when I heard she was dating Dom Wilder, a friend of mine who had graduated high school in June. Dom had a job and money in his jeans, and he drove a cherry '55 Chevy, dark blue with white tuck-n-roll upholstery. I drove my mom's beat-up '51 Ford sedan. I knew Dom pretty well, kind of a nerdy guy, smart, funny. A good guy, really. I just wish he'd picked another girl.

Come to think of it, Dawn picked him.

What made it hard was Brock still wanted to be with Mrs. Worrell, so I'd have to drive him over to her house and sit around while he tried to work his magic. Dawn was never around, out somewhere with Dom Wilder. I was sick of the whole scene, ready to move on, tired of being Brock's wingman, or chauffeur, or whatever.

I did a status check. "Brock, what's up, man? Is this gonna happen with you and Mrs. Worrell?"

"Patience, Chester, my friend. Ya gotta keep the bait in the water."

"Oh, crap. And what am I, your deckhand?"

"I'm trolling, man, trolling right along. And I'm getting a few nibbles, too."

“Oh, sure. Adelai Stevenson has a better chance of being president than you do getting her into bed.”

Brock laughed. “Oh, ye of little faith.”



The holidays rolled around, and I'd finally moved on, dating girls my own age for a change. I was downtown one day, shopping for Christmas presents, and there was Dawn walking toward me with a couple of her friends.

“Hi, Chet. How are you?” Big smile, all warm and friendly.

“Hey, Dawn. I'm good. How you doin'?”

It went on like that for a while, her being sweet, me pretending I didn't care. She surprised me with a question.

“Chet, I'm through shopping, and my friends want to stay for a while. Can you give me a ride home?”

“Sure, no problem.” Alarm bells were ringing, but I wasn't listening.

When we got to her house, the place was empty, her mom out and about somewhere. She invited me in, brought me a cold Coke, and sat down to chat. After a few minutes, I said thanks and started to go. She moved over next to me on the couch, her knees touching mine, and leaned in with that come-kiss-me look.

“Do you have to go so soon?” Lips parted, head tilted just so.

There was a fine gold chain around her neck with a signet ring hanging from it. I knew it was Dom's ring, signifying they were going steady. That's the way you marked your territory in those days. It might as well have been a hubcap. I couldn't get my mind past that ring.

“Yeah,” I said. “Gotta go. Thanks for the Coke, Dawn.” I was out of there in a flash. I couldn't believe it. Dom Wilder's girl wanted to make out with me like it was summer all over again.



Brock and I had big plans for New Year's Eve. My mom said I could use the car, and we had an older guy lined up to buy us a case of Budweiser. We had a spot down by the bay where we could party all night and nobody would bother us. A bunch of guys and gals joined us, several carloads, and things got crazy real fast. Brock didn't like beer that much, so he became the designated driver. Good thing, too, because I was two Buds past hammered. After a while, I could tell Brock had other things on his mind.

“Come on, Chet. Let's get out of here. This is boring.”

“What? Why? Where do you want to go?”

“Let’s go over to Kirsten’s. She told me she was staying in tonight.”

“Ah, geez, Brock. Give it up, man. It’s never gonna happen.”

“Well, it sure as hell isn’t going to happen hanging around here.”

Before I could think of an argument, we were in the car on our way to the Worrells’.

“Hey, is Dawn gonna be there? ’Cause I can really do without seeing her tonight.”

“Nah.” Brock laughed. “She’s with Wilder over at Jake Wilkerson’s house. Jake’s parents are out of town. I heard they’re going to have plenty of booze, and all of Jake’s buddies are bringing their dates. Big-time party, man.”

I finished my beer, crushed the can and tossed it under the front seat. So, Dawn Worrell was going to ring in the New Year with a bunch of college freshmen. What could possibly go wrong?

When we arrived, Mrs. Worrell was home alone. Maybe she’d been out earlier because she was dressed to the nines in a clingy black dress, her short brown hair styled just so, pearl earrings and a strand of pearls around her neck. She looked like a million bucks. No wonder Brock had the hots for her. She held a champagne flute, half full, as she opened the door. An

ice bucket and a half-empty bottle of Christian Brothers bubbly sat on the coffee table. She’d obviously had a few. It was getting close to midnight, and the TV was tuned to the celebration in Times Square. She refilled her glass, and we chatted for a while. I tried to keep my mouth shut, knowing I’d slur my words, but she wasn’t fooled.

She looked at me and smiled, then turned to Brock. “I hope you’re driving, Brock.” She nodded in my direction. “This one shouldn’t be behind the wheel.”

That stung a little, so I tried to whack the ball back into her court. “Where’s Dawn tonight?” *Yeah, Mom, where is your fourteen-year-old daughter?*

Mrs. Worrell sipped her champagne. “Oh, she’s with Dom over at Jake Wilkerson’s. They’re having a couples’ party. She’ll be home by one.”

“Oh? I heard Jake’s parents are out of town and the liquor cabinet is wide open.” I knew it was a mistake as soon as it came out of my mouth, but there was no way to pull it back.

Mrs. Worrell stared at me for a few seconds, then turned to Brock. “Is that true? There’s alcohol at that party? His parents are gone?”

Brock just shrugged his shoulders. She got up from the couch and went to the wall-mounted phone in the kitchen, where she had a short, intense

conversation with Dawn. She banged the receiver into the cradle and came back to the living room.

“Come on, let’s go, both of you. Brock, you’re going to have to drive.”

A minute later, we were on our way to Jake’s place to collect Dawn. When we got there, Mrs. Worrell went to the door. Dawn was waiting, sweater over her arm, little purse in hand, ready to go. I didn’t see Dom, which is probably a good thing. I’m sure Mrs. Worrell would have had some choice words for him.

I watched Dawn as she made her way down the walk to the car, wearing a pretty skirt and sweater set. Her blonde hair was its usual wild, wavy tangle, framing her pretty face. She was something. She climbed into the back seat with me, sitting to my left. I figured she’d be mad as a hornet, but she gave me a little smile. Maybe she was glad to be out of there? Or maybe her radar locked on another target?

Brock pulled away from the curb, and we headed for home. He and Mrs. Worrell chatted away in the front seat, ignoring the two of us in back. I tried to strike up a conversation.

“So, how was the party?” Brilliant opening line.

“It was okay. Lots of fun, really. We played records, danced. What did you guys do?”

I couldn’t believe she wasn’t pissed. I went with

the flow. “Ah, you know, we went down to the bay, hung out, had a few cold ones.”

“Yeah, I can smell it on you.” She smiled again.

The conversation went on, friendly, warm, inviting. I had moved over on the seat, turned toward her. And there it was, that come-kiss-me look. I was too drunk to hit the brakes. I leaned in to kiss her—and my right hand went directly to her left breast.

Suddenly, I was airborne, literally flying. It was a short trip as I slammed into the back of the front seat and landed on the floor of the car. Damn, that girl was strong! Brock and Mrs. Worrell reacted as expected.

“What in the hell?”

“What’s going on back there?”

“Chet, why are you on the floor?”

I struggled onto the seat, mumbling, “Sorry...jeez, I’m sorry...really sorry.”

Mrs. Worrell glared at her daughter. Dawn held her stare, saying nothing. I don’t know; maybe there is a special code between mothers and daughters. They didn’t speak, but somehow the message was delivered.

Later, I told Brock what happened in the back seat. He laughed and called me Chester The Molester. I didn’t see the humor.



I woke up New Year's Day with a headache I'd never forget. I gulped some aspirin, but it didn't seem to help. Brock came by and tried to convince me that hair-of-the-dog was the only solution, but I couldn't look at another beer. It was past two in the afternoon when my head stopped pounding. We went to Toby Jean's where everybody hangs out and ordered milkshakes and fries. There were about a dozen cars in the parking lot, everybody milling around, swapping stories about their New Year's Eve adventures. Brock and I were leaning against the fender of my mom's car when four guys walked toward us. It was Jake, Dom, and their friends Ryder and Ernie, guys I'd known for years and considered friends. They didn't look happy, but it was too late to jump in the car and leave.

I tried being cheerful. "Hi, guys. How's it goin'?"

Jake was big, over six feet tall, and well-built. He'd been an all-conference defensive end on the high school football team. Ryder and Ernie were jocks, too, starters on the baseball team. Dom was the only non-athlete.

Jake stepped toward me. "I hear you told Dawn's mom that my parents were out of town, and we had a lot of booze at my party. Is that true?"

My heart dropped to my stomach. I was busted. I tried to answer, but it was a stammer.

"You know if Mrs. Worrell says something to my folks, my dad will kill me." Jake paused. "Well? What about it? Did you rat me out?"

"Jake, I'm really sorry, man. I had way too much to drink. I didn't mean to cause any trouble—"

He stepped in and grabbed me by the collar. "You little shit! I'm gonna kick your ass all over this parking lot."

Brock tried to come between us. "Jake, listen, man. He's telling the truth. He was plastered last night. I had to drive all night long. He didn't know what he was saying."

"You think that's an excuse?" Jake wasn't buying it.

Dom, Ryder, and Ernie were glaring at me, backing Jake all the way. I was devastated. I'd known these guys since grammar school. Ryder lived about a block away from my house, and we'd been Little League teammates, for God's sake! Now I'd screwed up, and I'd never live it down.

Brock wasn't giving up. "Look, Jake, he was shitfaced last night. I can vouch for that. We've all been friends forever, man. Give him a pass this one time."

Jake let go of my collar and stepped back. "Ah, what the hell. You're not worth it...right now. But if Mrs. Worrell calls my parents, I'm gonna come looking

for you.” He gave me a light shove and turned away.

I was watching Dom, waiting for him to speak up, but he never said a word. Apparently, Dawn hadn’t told him what happened in the backseat. The four of them walked away.

I looked at Brock. I wanted to say *Thank you*, but the words stuck in my throat.



Mrs. Worrell, God bless her, never called Jake’s parents, so my New Year’s Eve blab ’n grab faded into history. Brock gave up the chase and found far more willing partners, just keepin’ his bait in the water. But he never forgot Kirsten Worrell. She’s *the one who got away*.

I look back on that time and realize I was fortunate to come through in one piece. I didn’t succumb to alcohol, though Lord knows I tried, and I never got my butt kicked in the parking lot at Toby Jean’s. As for a certain green-eyed girl, they say you only get your first love once, and she was the one. I was lucky to survive Dawn.

But man, she was a great kisser.