

Cherry Money Baby



JOHN M. CUSICK

Chapter One

The Loop

Cherry's run was a loop, from her trailer park, down Hope Avenue, up Route 9, past the bottling plant, and back down Webster. The same every day. Same direction, same view.

Except today.

The road ahead was blocked. She slowed a few yards from the sawhorses, stopped, bent, stretched, and spit onto the pavement. The kid in the traffic vest made a face.

"What's going on?"

"The road's blocked," said the kid.

There were police cruisers and wooden barriers and detour signs.

"No kidding," said Cherry. "I mean, why?"

"They're filming a movie," said the kid. He was maybe in college. He had those super-geek glasses that

actual geeks bought when they decided to embrace geekdom. He was probably wearing old-fashioned sneakers. Cherry stretched her calves and checked.

Yup.

“What movie?”

“It’s a remake of *Alive and Unmarried*, the one about Stewart Cane, the guy who, like, invented soda.”

“And they’re filming it here?”

Aubrey didn’t have much to recommend it besides a nightclub, Shabooms, and they had one of those over in Worcester, too.

“Yeah. So the road’s blocked. You gotta go around.”

Cherry put her palms out. “Okay, okay, I’m going. Easy.”

She spit one more time for good measure and started back home. She jogged past the nice houses, then the slightly scrubbier houses farther down, then the just-plain-scrubby houses, and at last came to the entrance of her trailer park, two streets of mobile homes called Sugar Village. Next to the village was Sweet Pond, which was clear and dead, thanks to runoff from the cola bottling plant. The lake sort of smelled sweet. She always liked that.

A weed-clogged crack separated the darker concrete of Hope Ave. from the paler cement of Sugar Village, and some part of Cherry, left over from avoiding cracks and broken backs, hopped over the threshold.

That hadn't been too bad. She didn't flip out or swear at the glasses kid. See? She could be chill. She decided today was Day One of her new life of not flipping her shit at people. Today was Day One of not being a crazy bitch.

Their trailer was small, even by trailer standards. Cherry's bedroom was half a bedroom, split down the middle with a flimsy wall of Sheetrock. Her younger brother, Stew, had the other half. No wall was more than two inches thick, which meant a stray elbow or angry fist could easily knock through to the next room. Every snore, conversation, or cough was audible through the walls. Privacy was a dream—except in the glass phone booth of the shower, which was a great place to get some thinking done.

The faucet sputtered and gagged, releasing a jet of scalding water and steam. She stood under the flow, letting her thoughts wash away with the sweat and road grit. Hot showers were the best, with the water so hot it turned your skin pink, as if you could shed it gecko-style. And just when she couldn't stand it any longer—*twist, crank, rattle*—she'd torque the cold water to full. The shock *nuked* conscious thought.

A quick change and Cherry flounced into the kitchen in her work uniform. Burrito Barn staff were required to wear vomit-yellow polo shirts with matching visors. She'd

spent the previous evening scrubbing a chipotle stain off the lapel with a toothbrush.

The percolator bubbled, filling the trailer with an oaky, burned smell. Cherry's father sat at the kitchenette table, palms enveloping his favorite mug. She kissed his forehead.

"Morning, Pops."

Grunt.

"I'll make you breakfast."

Pop flipped a page in the *Aubrey Times*. "Donuts in the fridge."

"No donuts." She retrieved the frying pan from its drawer. "You gotta eat healthier, Pops, or your heart's gonna 'splode."

The sink was filled with last night's pasta dishes. No one asked her to wash them, but the men were just fucking *incapable*. Pop and Stew might be content to eat off a plate with congealed gravy stuck to the underside, but *someone* had to have standards.

"How was your run?"

"Aborted," said Cherry. "They're filming a movie at the bottling plant, I guess."

"You couldn't just go around?"

"Nah. If I can't do *my* route, I'm not running."

"You're a crazy girl."

"I know."

She set the eggs sizzling and retrieved a Yow-Gurt

from the fridge. According to the package, it was both nutritious *and* delicious. Pop eyed the pink sludge as though he doubted both counts.

“How come I gotta eat eggs and you get to eat that shit?”

“I’m not fat, Pops.”

Pop huffed, turned a page. “I’m big boned.”

“And your big bones are covered in clogged arteries,” said Cherry. “You’re like a bacon-wrapped dino skeleton.”

Pop chuckled and handed her the comics page. Charlie Brown missed the football. Cherry missed *Calvin and Hobbes*.

“Your quarterly report card came in.”

Her eyes jerked up a little too quickly. She lowered them. “Oh?”

“Yeah. Apparently it came a week ago, but somehow it fell out of the mailbox.”

“Weird.”

“And into the trash.”

“Huh.”

“And got ripped into a million pieces.”

Cherry ate her yogurt. “Must have been mice. I told you we need an exterminator.”

He pushed the document across the table. It had been reassembled with Scotch tape, roughly, but the writing was still legible. Next time she’d burn it.

“Look, what does it matter?” She tossed the empty Yow-Gurt cup over her shoulder. It landed squarely in the trash. Pop raised his eyebrows, duly impressed. “I’m graduating, aren’t I?”

“Yeah, *high school*,” said Pop. “What about college? How do you expect to get in with report cards like this?”

Cherry allowed herself a peek at the Aubrey Public stationery. The details had not magically transformed:

Lacks drive.

Vulgar language.

Impulse-control problems.

“That last one is bullshit,” said Cherry. “I do *not* have fu—” She took a breath, smiled, turned her palms out. “I am rage-free. And my language isn’t *vulgar*—it’s . . . colorful.”

Pop chuckled. She started to stand, but he stopped her with a gentle hand on her wrist. “You’re not getting off easy because you make me laugh, Alice Kerrigan.”

Cherry swallowed. “I hate that name.”

“Cherry.”

“Pop.”

He released her. “What do you wanna do?”

“I want to save your eggs before they vulcanize.”

When your pop’s an auto mechanic, you pick up some choice vocab.

Pop sighed like a deflating bouncy castle and turned out his palms—a family gesture.

She wasn't sure how it had happened, this Grand Canyon of a misunderstanding between her and Pop. She was on one side, missing early decision for college, pretending to forget early enrollment, dropping hints about taking a year off. Then way the hell and gone on the other side was Pop, who usually respected her decisions, but now he was wringing his hands, waiting for those applications to go out, still expecting Cherry to be the first Kerrigan to go to college, the family vanguard, the one with *potential*.

She wasn't going to college, and she just couldn't bring herself to tell him.

She added some chopped peppers to the eggs. (In addition to washing the dishes, the boys were incapable of shopping for anything other than microwave pizza and beer.) She served it up on Pop's favorite Patriots plate.

“What's all this green shit?”

“Vegetables,” said Cherry.

“No cheese?”

“Are you serious?”

She flicked away the report card and tossed it in the bin with the coffee grounds, browned paper towels, and other garbage.

Something smacked her on the back of the head.

“Goddamn it, Stew!”

“Language,” said Pop.

“Morning, family!” Cherry’s brother opened the cabinet and took down the Cap’n Crunch. “How is everyone this fine Sunday?”

Cherry socked his shoulder, then leaned in close, sniffing. Stew looked at her like she’d just farted. “What?”

“You stink like weed,” she said in a whisper.

“You can’t smell shit,” he hissed.

“You better have left some hot water for me,” Pop said, examining a green-and-yellow wad at the end of his fork.

“I got hot water for about two seconds. Blame Cherry,” said Stew. He arranged himself in Cherry’s seat with the cereal and a carton of milk. Cherry checked the clock on the stove and sat between the boys.

“Eat quickly, all right? We gotta go soon.”

“Go where?” Stew asked.

“I got work, genius,” Cherry said. “You’re driving me, like always.”

“Can’t today,” said Stew, mouth full of cereal. “Pop’s got me driving out to Marlborough to pick up a new muffler.”

Cherry’s jaw dropped. She looked to Pop. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

He shrugged. “You can walk it. It’s not that far.”

“Work starts in five minutes, and it’s a fifteen-minute walk!”

“Then I guess you better start running,” Stew said.

“Fuck!” Cherry jumped up, knocking over her chair. “*This* is why I need a fucking car, Pop! You said you were gonna fix up one of the old junkers at the shop for me!”

Pop leaned away as if her anger were a hailstorm. “I will, soon as I can.”

“You been saying that for two years! *Goddamn it!*”

She grabbed her keys and slammed open the screen door, making for Hope Ave. at a dead sprint.

For the record: Cherry knew she was a crazy girl. She had been since forever. The oldest example, the earliest moment of craziness Cherry could recall, transpired on a humid Tuesday afternoon, after a morning spent doodling with chalk on the sticky-hot driveway. Cherry was bent over her flower, scribbling with a diminishing pink nib, when she heard shouting inside the trailer. She was seven, knees tacky with driveway grit, pink tint on her neck and shoulders from two hours in the hazy sun. The screen door slammed open.

Here the memory skips a frame. It was later, the humidity had hatched thunder and rain, and Pop sat at the kitchen table, just . . . paralyzed. Cherry’s mother dragged a flower-print suitcase to a big red sports car of a make and model that all of Cherry’s subsequent automotive education could not discern through memory’s

downpour. There was a man at the wheel. Her mother did not look back or say good-bye. The suitcase's casters jittered over the driveway where Cherry's chalk flowers were rapidly dissolving.

She was too young to get it, what was happening, but knew she now hated her mother. In her childish understanding of the situation, the chalk, which her mother had purchased, was somehow to blame. To hurt Momma, Cherry threw the yellow Crayola chalk box at the big red sports car and screamed, "I don't even *want* it!"

Momma didn't notice. Trunk slam. Door slam. Lightning flash. The brake lights flared, and the red mystery car was gone, taking her mother with it.

This is what Cherry discovered about herself: while her brother hid in his room and her father stared glumly into his coffee, it was Cherry alone, seven-year-old Cherry, who, in so many words, told their selfish, disloyal, inconstant mom to go fuck herself.

Chapter Two

The International Sign for *Help Me, I'm Dying*

She'd worked at Burrito Barn since freshman year, when it was Jeb's Chicken Jamboree. In addition to her perfect attendance, Cherry Kerrigan was a master burrito roller. A monkey could fold a taco, but it took an artist to make the perfect burrito. Roll too tight and it exploded in your mouth, too loose and the filling landed in your lap. Burrito rolling wasn't a career plan or anything, but she liked having something she was good at, unlike school. Working hard, getting paid—these were things to be proud of.

Cherry arrived at ten thirty, soaked through and breathing hard. Her manager glanced up from the break-room whiteboard.

“What are you doing here?”

Cherry took a drink from the bubbler. “I work here. Remember?”

“Not today you don’t.” He pointed at the whiteboard, a grid of indecipherable squiggles. “You’re working tomorrow, the twenty-fifth.”

“I can’t work on Monday. I go to school.”

The manager squinted at her, looked back at the board. “You do? How old are you?”

“Also, you didn’t tell me I had the day off.”

The manager tapped his chin with the marker, leaving an ink soul patch. “Oh, yeah.”

“So?”

“So, you’re still not working today. It’s not on the board.” He gestured to the squiggle grid as if this explained everything. “See?”

Cherry plucked the marker from his hand and wrote her name in the 10:30–4:30 slot. “Voilà. It is written.” She handed him the marker. “Okay?”

He swallowed and nodded. He was a little afraid of her. That was fine by Cherry.

The burrito station was a long table with a sneeze guard and a sink at one end. The blotter was stenciled with burrito-rolling instructions, which Cherry largely ignored. Above the sink was a three-paneled safety poster. The poster featured two characters: Red Guy and Green Guy. Red Guy was choking, and Green Guy was performing the Heimlich maneuver. Some joker had drawn

a fourth panel in which Red and Green were smoking cigarettes, like they'd just had sex. The poster *did* look dirty. Once you saw it, you couldn't unsee it. Though in Cherry's version, Red Guy was a skinny burrito roller with her hair dyed blond, and Green Guy wasn't green at all, but coffee colored, with a leaf-rustle voice and warm, soft hands.

Working the register was Ned, a boy Cherry knew from school. Kids called him Ned the Sped because he took special ed classes. Cherry and Ned were Speds together until eighth grade, when Cherry had graduated to Below Average while Ned stayed Way Below Average. Cherry just called him Ned. When you took special ed, you called *yourself* a Sped. You didn't need reminding.

The morning passed. The lunch rush came and went. Cherry reheated her twentieth package of Zesty Amp-inadas. Ned was picking his nose when two girls approached the register. They weren't local. Their fancy clothes were from catalogs with deck chairs and sailboats: visors and white polo shirts and bug-eye sunglasses that hid their features. They were probably wearing high-heeled sandals. Cherry pretended to need something under the counter and checked.

Yup.

Nobody dressed like that in Aubrey, not even in the nicer parts.

The girls read the menu, the dark-haired one tapping her chin. Her blond friend's lips kinked at the end in a perma-grimace. The bitchy blonde mumbled something, and the pretty brunette giggled.

“Hush, Span. Not everything can be Nobu.”

She had a British accent. Because, of course.

Ned cleared his throat. “Howdy and welcome to Burrito Barn. Would you like to try our Border Burrito with Chimmi-Salsa Tater Stackers?”

The dark-haired girl gave Ned a megawatt smile that made her look somehow familiar, though maybe it was only that all rich people looked like they came from the same crystalline gene pool.

“Two . . . Win-Chiladas,” she read from the menu, her accent making the ridiculous words sound sophisticated. “And Perrier.”

“Who?” said Ned.

“We don't have Perrier. Just soda,” Cherry said with her best customer-service smile. “I recommend cherry. It's my favorite.”

The brunette smiled back. “Two cherry colas, then.”

The blonde made a face like she was choking something back.

Cherry rolled the Win-Chiladas, and the girls took a corner table. Ned stared at them.

“How's the view?”

“I’m pretty sure she’s famous,” said Ned.

“How can you tell?”

“Famous people wear sunglasses inside.”

“Oh, yeah. Good point.”

It was the typical midafternoon lull. Standing still drove her ape-shit bonkers, so she wiped down her station and worked to unclog the finicky soda fountain. Her mind wandered as she worked, drifting back to her poster fantasy. The coffee-colored hands had unfastened her bra (and here was where *real* imagination took over; Cherry was seven-tenths a virgin) and were working their way south when a noise yanked her out of the daydream.

Someone was screaming. The bitchy blonde jumped to her feet. Necks swiveled. The other girl, the brunette, was doubled over like she was laughing, but no sound escaped her throat. She clawed at her collar, clutching her neck in the international sign for *Help me, I’m dying*.

Burrito Barn was frozen. The patrons, the manager with his mop, Ned the Sped mouth-breathing at the register—everyone stood stock-still, staring at the choking woman like she was doing performance art.

They can’t move, Cherry thought.

They can’t move.

I can move.

She dropped her rag, ran one-two-three steps to

the counter; she swung her legs up and over, and then another four strides across the dining-room linoleum, slipping once on the spilled cola. The choking girl's face had turned lavender, not red like the poster. Cherry slipped her arms under the girl's and heaved. She folded her hands into a big fist and punched *in and up, in and up*, just like the poster said. The girl's visor had fallen off, and Cherry could see the dark swirl of hair and the pale scalp underneath.

With a wet, thick hack, something popped out. The girl held her hands to her mouth and caught the gummy brown obstruction. Cherry helped her to a chair and knelt in front of her. Color was returning to her face. Damp hair clung to her cheeks and forehead. All the beauty had been squeezed out of her.

"You okay?" Cherry said.

The girl nodded, clutching the obstruction to her chest like something precious. Her eyes, tearful and bloodshot, fell to Cherry's name tag.

"Cherry?" she wheezed, her voice the texture of powdered soap.

"That's me."

The paralysis in the room was broken. The girl's friend rushed to her side, weeping, kissing her forehead. They hugged each other. A sound like rain filled Cherry's ears.

Applause.

Cherry wandered, dazed, back to her burrito station. People clapped her on the back. Her manager appeared—he'd lost his visor, too—and took her by the shoulders. Cherry felt herself ushered into the back room, a fog filling her brain like steam from the morning's shower. She couldn't think. She wasn't sure she could breathe.

“Holy shit, holy shit.” The manager literally jumped up and down. He locked the break-room door. “Oh, my God. I need to call the cops. No! The paper! No, fuck the paper. I'm calling *People* magazine.”

“I need some water,” Cherry said. The room was spinning much more than usual.

“Cherry, snap out of it. Don't you realize what you've done?”

“Huh?”

“That was Ardelia Deen!” the manager said. “You just saved a movie star!”

You searched for Ardelia Deen.

Related searches: Arden Deen, Lucifer Deen, Maxwell Silver, Cyrus Dar, Cynthia Sundae.

Ardelia Deen

Born: [January 1, 1989](#), [London, England, UK](#) [more >>](#)

Mini-biography:

Ardelia Deen, daughter of acclaimed film director Arden Deen (1954–), made her cinematic debut at the young age of . . .

[more](#) >>

Trivia:

An amateur architecture historian, Deen has published several academic papers on Edwardian mansions . . .

[more](#) >>

Up 71% in popularity this week.

Awards:

Nominated for 2 Golden Globes. Another 15 wins & 24 nominations . . . [more](#) >>

[Ardelia Deen and Maxwell Silver slated for remake of 1961's](#)

[Alive and Unmarried](#), to film in Massachusetts

(From Retrovid.com, February 1, 2013, 2:02 PM, PDT)

[Cyrus Dar discusses his torrid affair with costar Ardelia Deen](#)

(From Filmgasm, January 21, 2013, 2:58 PM, PDT)

Filmography:

1. *Alive and Unmarried: The Stewart Cane Story* (2014)

(*in production*) . . . Olive Aubrey

2. *Lady of the House* (2012) . . . Jane Austen

3. *Cinema Royalty: Arden Deen's Family of Stars* (2007) . . .
Herself
 4. *Low in the Morning* (2006) . . . Hazel Low, age 14; age 16
 5. *Red Shift* (2003) . . . Ruby Blue
 6. *The Rented Girl* (1997) . . . Rachel Spatz; Rebecca Spatz
-

You searched for Cherry Kerrigan.

Your search yielded no matches.

Did you mean cherry cola?

Chapter Three

You're Blowing Up

Burrito Barn was like a crime scene with no victim. News vans clogged the parking lot, stacked bumper to bumper along Hope Ave., a forest of satellite dishes rising over the treetops. On the ground, crews reported within earshot of each other:

“No news yet whether Ms. Deen survived the attack . . .”

“ . . . largely due to unsanitary eating conditions . . .”

“ . . . was saved by local high-schooler Alice Kerrigan . . .”

Yokels strained against police tape, while the cops crooked their fingers in their belts and everyone craned to catch a glimpse of Keira Knightley or Nicole Richie or whoever it was (reports varied). Other onlookers were gossip fiends who'd seen the news on Twitter and rushed over.

#BurritoBarn was trending.

Squawker Squawker Magazine 2 min ago
@therealArdeliaDeen suffered from an obstructed wind-
pipe, sources confirming she is okay guys! #ArdeliaDeen

CelebsTalker Stan McDonald 4 min ago
@therealArdeliaDeen saves local girl from choking at
some barn! <http://brd.ly/6B04R>

ardentforardelia Nicole 12 min ago
@therealArdeliaDeen is dead??? Someone please
confirm! #panicked #sayitaintso!

shutthefunkup Olivia Fenchetti 17 min ago
Pic of #BurritoBarn parking lot. Crazy! Anyone
else hear @therealArdeliaDeen was saved by
@CherrySmack? #IKnowHer! twitpic.com/6mD4s

Ardelia and her blond friend had vanished, escaping in a little Italian sports car just before the press arrived. The manager was more than eager to give his statement, but

no one cared what he had to say. Cherry, on the other hand, was cornered in the break room by half a dozen news crews. The reporters were packed shoulder to shoulder pad in the tiny room. The cameramen stood just behind, like a second layer of shark's teeth, squinting into viewfinders. The sound guys were at the back, balancing fuzzy boom mikes that bumped against the ceiling, making headphones squeal. The wall of plastic, paisley, and heavily made-up faces formed an advancing semicircle around Cherry. Now she understood why they were called the *press*.

“What went through your mind when you saw that Ms. Deen couldn't breathe?” a woman in a neckerchief asked.

Cherry took a breath and tried to gather her thoughts. There weren't many to gather. Her brain felt emptied. Was this really happening? No, obviously not.

“I think it was, *That woman can't breathe*,” she replied.

A cameraman chuckled. She hadn't meant to be funny.

“Are you a big fan of Ms. Deen's?”

Cherry shrugged. “Not really.”

She judged from their expressions this wasn't the answer they expected or wanted. “My brother's obsessed with her, though. He's got a poster of her above his bed.”

More laughter from the camera guys. This time even some of the reporters smiled.

“Which poster?” a girl in a Freaktallica T-shirt asked, holding out her mini-recorder.

“What’s the one where she plays Jane Austen and hunts vampires?” Cherry asked.

“*Lady of the House*,” everyone seemed to say in unison.

A few of the reporters chuckled this time. The bored newspaper guys glanced up, pens poised.

“Yeah, that’s the one,” said Cherry. “She’s in that white nightgown and holding the bloody stake. The movie was okay. I heard the book sucked, though.”

“Were you excited to meet a celebrity?” the local news lady asked, inching forward.

“No,” said Cherry. “I mean, I dunno. I didn’t really know who she was. I just thought she was some hot chick in a polo shirt who didn’t know how to chew her food.”

This time, they *all* laughed.

“So, you didn’t recognize Ms. Deen when she entered?”

“No, but I knew she was rich.”

“How’s that?”

“Her clothes are from Star and Liberty,” Cherry said. “We don’t really have swanky shit like that in Aubrey.” She winced. “Shit. Can I say ‘shit’?”

“Sure!” said the girl from TMZ.

“We can edit it out,” said the Worcester Cable News guy.

“You seem pretty unimpressed with celebrity,” the *Boston Globe* man said.

“I don’t know,” said Cherry. “I never met a celebrity before.”

“So, how does it feel?”

She thought about it, searching for something profound. “She’s so . . . small. She looks big on-screen, you know? Not *fat* just . . . like a *giant*. And in reality she’s this tiny person. I mean, I could wrap my arms around her twice.”

“Are you worried that Ms. Deen has an eating disorder?”

“Could this incident be related to bulimia?”

“Why do you think Hollywood is so obsessed with body-image issues?”

“Whoa!” Cherry put out her palms. “I just said the bitch was fit. I don’t know if she’s anorexic or whatever. In fact, she ordered some pretty fatty food, so . . .”

“I love it!” someone said.

“I have a question,” a woman in no-nonsense glasses asked. “The restaurant was full of people, and by all accounts you were the farthest from Ms. Deen.”

“Yeah,” said Cherry. “That’s right.”

“Why do you think *you* ran to her aid, and no one else did?”

The room got very quiet, and for the first time Cherry was aware, *really* aware, that she was talking to an audience of millions, to more people than she had ever or would ever meet in a lifetime.

“I guess it’s because most people, when something goes wrong, they think about what to do,” said Cherry.

“And you knew what to do?” someone offered.

“No,” said Cherry. “I just don’t think.”

“Amazing,” someone said. “This is way better than Christina’s leaked photos.”

More questions. More photos. She felt faint. She was going to go down like a prizefighter if they didn’t give her some air. They loved her, they couldn’t get enough of her, but Cherry’d had more than enough of them. Finally she said she had to pee and locked herself in the bathroom. There was a skinny window near the ceiling. It took a few attempts, but soon she was able to squirm through the small gap and out into the alley behind Burrito Barn. She dropped to the pavement, her top streaked with grease and grit from the windowsill.

Ned was there, smoking a cigarette.

“What’s wrong with the door?” he asked.

“Those fuckers don’t know when to quit.” Ned offered her the smoke. She shook her head. “See ya, Ned.”

She started down the alley, but Ned stopped her.

“You wanna go the back way.” He nodded over his shoulder. “There’re still a bunch of news guys in the parking lot.”

Cherry smiled. “Thanks, Ned.”

• • •

She jogged up Hope Ave., a crazy girl with wild hair in a filthy Burrito Barn uniform. She was halfway home when her brother's tricked-out Dubber came over the ridge. She flagged him down.

"I was just coming to get you."

She slid into the passenger seat. "Work let out early. On account of extreme craziness."

"Holy shit, so it's true?" Stew showed her his cell phone, a text from his latest girlfriend:

Stewie ur sis saved Ardelia Deen from
poisoning!

"Choking, actually."

"Damn."

He pulled into traffic, reaching across her lap for the glove compartment. Stew extracted a joint and lit up.

"You're kidding, right?"

Stew shrugged. "This is a *situation*. You want?"

"No." She waved the smoke away from her face.

"Okay, so, you gotta tell me."

"Tell you what?"

His voice was like a frog, smoke tumbling out with his words. "Are they real? Her tits?"

"Jesus, Stew!" She punched his arm, and the Dubber swerved a little.

"I'm just saying, when you did CPR or whatever,

you probably got a good feel. I mean, you're in the position to answer a question many a young man has pondered. . . ."

"You are *such* a guy."

"That's what they tell me." Stew smiled around the joint in his lips.

"All right," said Cherry. "Yeah, they're real."

"Oh!" Stew let go of the wheel, throwing his hands up like he was on a roller coaster. "She noticed! I *knew* you were a lesbian!"

"You *fucker*." She socked him again, plucked the joint from his fingertips, and flicked it out the window.

They were both laughing so hard, Stew had to pull over a block from their driveway, just so they could contain themselves.

Pop was MIA. Cherry and Stew booted up the family's HP. The dial-up buzzed and sang its weird music.

"Cherry, you are blowing up," said Stew.

It was true. Not only did she have 217 new friend requests, but her followers on Twitter had tripled. The YouTube video of her interview already had 127,000 views. Cherry read the comment stream:

LOL fucking hick

Mrjazz 1 min ago

don't be a hater dickhead shes sweet

starcruiser45 1 min ago

WE LOVE YOU, CHERRY!

Believerbelieves 1 min ago

That girl is tooo skinny someone tell her to eat something

stackED27 1 min ago

Is anyone else fantasizing about her giving Ardelia the Heimlich maneuver?

FallGuy 1 min ago

I am!

anonymous 1 min ago

the squawker.com clip is higher rez check it out on myfeed

ArdeliaTube 2 min ago

Squawker, TMZ, all the major celeb blogs were talking about her. The front page of Trip'd featured a publicity shot of Ardelia next to a photo of . . . *shit*.

“I look terrible!”

The photo they'd used was from the Burrito Barn break room. Cherry was sweat stained, pale, and haggard. It had been taken while Cherry was midsentence, mid-blink, possibly mid-sneeze.

“*I just thought she was some hot chick in a polo shirt who didn't know how to chew her food,*” Stew read. “Did you really say that?”

“*Jesus.*” Cherry gripped the sides of the monitor. “I sound like an idiot! It didn't sound that stupid when I said it.”

“Check it out,” said Stew. “You're even on Auto-Tune the News.”

“You’re kidding me.”

Someone had set a clip from Cherry’s interview to music, editing her words together so it sounded like she was singing.

“No, but I knew / I knew / I knew she was riiiiich,” the web Cherry sang. *“Shit! / Can I say ‘shit’? / Well. / I knew she was riiiiich!”*

“My sister the meme,” Stew said. “Also, thanks for mentioning the poster thing, asshole. You made me sound like a skeeve.”

Cherry leaned her forehead against the desk. “Damn it. Why can’t I just keep my mouth shut?”

“Maybe this is the reason.” Stew brought up SweetWear.com, the design-your-own T-shirt site. Top rated was something called the Cherry Tee, a red-and-black tee with a message in white lettering over the outline of a cherry. It said:

I DON’T THINK.

“Fabulous,” Cherry said. “Fucking. Fabulous.”

“Where are you going?”

“Out,” she said, unlocking the back door. “If Pop asks, I’m at Lucas’s.”

Cherry Money Baby

John M. Cusick

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