

Kathy Stinson

“Feels like a night for a pop,” Dad says. “What’s anybody think?” He lifts the heavy lid of the big metal chest.

I hang my face over the chill air. Like a dive into deep water, it cools. Inside the chest, row upon row of exotic caps offer choices. Mountain Dew. Cream Soda. Orange Crush. Root Beer. Tahiti Treat.

“What would you like, Nan?”

“I think I’ll have Cream Soda.”

“Cream Soda!” Mom says it as if no one in their right mind would choose such a drink. “I thought you liked Orange Crush.”

“I do. I just want to try something else this time. Is there something *wrong* with that?”

When we go outside with our pops—Susie and April both have Orange Crush—the couple on the step is gone. After the muggy closeness of the store, the air outside feels cooler. I can feel the sweat on my back drying as I sit in a baked patch of grass away from the rest of my family.

Against my palm the glass bottle is cold. Beads of sweat have formed all over it. I run my finger down its side and dab the drips across my forehead. When I hold the bottle to my eye, the clear red drink inside looks like a giant ruby. My name—Ruby. I slide the cold bottle down my hot face. Mom didn’t want me to be Ruby, Dad did; it was his grandmother’s name and he liked it. And since Gary’s middle name was given to honour some relation of hers, Mom

could hardly argue. Nan Ruby Larkin had lousy rhythm, so I ended up Ruby Nan Larkin. But called Nan.

With the cream soda bottle's opening under my nose, I breathe in. The drink's fruity sweetness then the glass neck against my lips feel full of promise. I tip the bottle. Holding the liquid in my mouth, I let it slide over and under my tongue. Its ticklish fizz hits the roof of my mouth. The taste is like a circus, like flying in a balloon. I can push the sweet head right through my nose and breathe it back in again. Ruby.

At last, when my first mouthful of cream soda is warmed and flattened by heat, I swallow. The taste is still there, softly, inside my mouth and down my throat. The next mouthful I swallow right down. Cold and fizzy. And the next. If I drink too slowly, Mom will say to Dad, *See. I told you she wouldn't like it*, like she did when I was little and tried Poppa's Coke and didn't like it because when I burped after, it was like bumblebees inside my nose.

Dad returns the bottles for the refund and we start back along the road. Again, Gary shambles on ahead. His shoulders are broader than I've noticed before. Maybe I haven't really looked at him in a while. Susie helps April pick wildflowers from the side of the road; they're making a bouquet, but the stems of the ones April likes best are too tough, so they drop the others in the ditch and skip to catch up. I run on up the road. A little ahead of my parents

and sisters, I turn and announce, "I want you to call me Ruby."

Mom looks as if I've just said I want to be called Scab or Diarrhoea.

Dad smiles. "I've always liked that name."

Gary, close enough to hear my announcement, says, "You don't want to be Nan any more?"

"No. I don't."

Gary looks at me like he's trying to figure out if I'm just trying to make trouble or what.

Mom hands Dad the bag of groceries and lights a cigarette. She blows out a mouthful of smoke. "It's a difficult thing to change your name," she says.

"I'm not changing it. I just want to be called by my other name. My first name."

"Well, you can't expect everyone to suddenly start calling you Ruby when they've been calling you Nan all your life."

"You haven't been calling me Nan all my life; you've been calling me Nanny."

"Ruby's pretty," April says. "I wish my name was Ruby."

"April is pretty too," Mom says. "And so is Nan."

As obnoxiously as I know how, I yell, "Nan ban can fan man pan ran tan van. Nanny bananny canny fanny—"

"Nan, stop it!"

All the rest of the way back to the cottage, I say no more about being Ruby but behave in a way that's impossible for

Mom to find fault with. I walk tall, lift my feet, don't kick at loose gravel, and I keep to the left side of the road.

But my name *is* Ruby.

And Ruby likes cream soda.