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The Sheila Ryker Guarantee

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THE SHEILA RYKER GUARANTEE

Sheila Ryker Guarantee – guarantee surpassing all other guarantees; one’s ultimate word. Made most valuable by condition that each person in possession of guarantee only retains Sheila-giving power until wrong, whereupon holder is stripped of Sheilas for life.

-Sheila Ryker Constitution, Article I, est. 1993

GO BACK AND SAY you’re James “Winston” Churchill, the one who came up with the Sheila Ryker Guarantee that night in December, 1993. You walk outside into the Minnesota winter night. You take a deep breath. Clean, you think. There in your driveway idles DeLuco’s yellow station wagon with the fake wood panel siding, a real pile of shit. DeLuco rolls down the window, asks, Hey Winston, how was Vanna White looking tonight? Suck my wang, you say.

Fifteen minutes ago you were just hanging out at the house, watching some tube with your mother—your friends constantly bust your horns because you watch Wheel of Fortune nightly with her, but that’s exactly what you were doing—when the phone rang and it was DeLuco, asking what was happening.

Nothing, Luco, you told him.

You’re in the middle of watching Wheel with your psychopath mom, aren’t you, Winston? said DeLuco.

You hated when he said things like that, things about your mother. It was a sore subject.

You asked him what was with the horn-busting but he ignored you and said a bunch of guys were going to Redwood and were you coming along? You asked who was going, and DeLuco said, Who do you think? and you assumed that would mean yourself, DeLuco, Phelps, Jonce, Ole and Benny.

You asked who’d be driving and DeLuco snapped, Dammit Winston, what’s with the twenty questions? Do you want to ride with us or not? Yeah yeah, you said, and DeLuco said he’d be over in ten shakes of a lamb’s tail. DeLuco was very fond of saying those sorts of things. You asked him if he was driving then, but DeLuco’s answer was that he hung up.

Mother asked who called and you told her it was DeLuco,
and you'd be heading out in a few minutes. Mother turned away from the TV, a rare move for her when Pat Sajak was holding court. She faced you full on and you noticed her hair looked like it usually did, like nothing. It just looked like hair, general issue. Obligatory. What made it worse was her hair represented the rest of her, so plain. If you were ever made to write a descriptive essay about your mother, you would write: Hair, face, body. More descriptive? Eyes, nose, mouth, skin. More descriptive? Impossible. You often wonder how someone can look so bland. You worry you look the same.

Mother sighed. She said the final puzzle was coming up right after commercial, and she thought the guy was going to go for the car. You said you hoped he'd win, but you had to get ready because DeLuco'd be there any minute. You knew Mother would hate if you left before the final puzzle—especially to hang out with DeLuco—and now you'd hear it from her. A guy can't win, you thought. If I watch Wheel of Fortune I lose, and if I don't watch Wheel of Fortune I lose. You thought it was no way to live a respectable life. But you could take a razzing from Mother. Better her than DeLuco, anyways.

She started in, asking just what you thought you boys would be doing running all over the countryside and you told her not to worry about it, that it'd be a regular cruising trip to Redwood Falls. You reminded her you did that kind of thing all of the time and she was well aware. She asked whether you'd finished your homework. Yes, you lied, because you weren't finishing that homework for Señora Jones' Spanish class even if God himself came down and badgered you to do it. You hate Spanish, mostly because you don't care to study it. Spain's a long damn ways off to be visiting anytime soon, and if you went to Mexico, it would only be a weekender when you were in college or something, so what was the use in learning anything but the swear words for now? Plus, what was wrong with English? It was like DeLuco said to Señora Jones last week when she was trying to rag him out for getting a three out of ten on the vocabulary quiz: English is the official language of the United States, last time I checked. Everyone laughed at the way DeLuco said, last time I checked, including you, but Señora Jones just shook her head

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and probably thought he was hopeless. You thought DeLuco had a point.

James (that’s what your mother calls you because she named you that, even though no one has called you anything but Winston since the third grade when it was DeLuco—who else?—who set the trend), you know I don’t like you running around with that DeLuco, he’s no good.

Mother, you said, DeLuco’s a good guy and you know it.

Mother said she remembered when he got a speeding ticket last year, and she did—she remembers dumb little things like exactly who was in the police log in the newspaper from a year ago but she forgets a thing like your birthday, which she has done two years running now. But you stopped blaming her long ago. She is hard to hold responsible.

Mother, you said, you know DeLuco is a good guy—don’t make a mountain out of a molehill.

There was a honk outside the door. You went for the kill. You went up to Mother and gave her your sappiest hug and a kiss on the forehead.

Mother, I love you, you said.

The Wheel is back on. He’s going to go for the car. You said you’d see her later. James, tell that DeLuco to drive 55. You walked out the door. And wear your seatbelt just in case, you suppose she said, turning back to the television and Mr. Pat Sajak.

Jeremiah R. Phelps—Loss of Sheila Ryker Guarantee privileges: May 2, 1995. Fatal statement: “I Sheila Ryker Guarantee I will beat you.” Phelps, hunched over on the University of Minnesota campus tennis courts, sweating and angry, responds to DeLuco’s taunts and trash talking with The Guarantee of Guarantees. Phelps gives a Sheila he will beat DeLuco despite the fact that this is just his second time ever on a tennis court, he has a sore ankle, and he is down 1-6, 2-5 in a best-of-three-sets match with DeLuco, who is set to serve for the match. Phelps loses his Sheila two and a half minutes later and DeLuco rubs it in, first by collapsing on the court in mock disbelief, then by jumping to his feet and prancing around the court for a victory lap, waving to pretend admirers. Phelps throws his tennis racket at DeLuco, but it misses. His one and only Sheila Ryker Guarantee gone, Phelps promises not to speak to DeLuco ever again, a promise that lasts not forever, but a day-and-a-half nonetheless.
You see DeLuco has already picked up the others so you open the back door. Ole gets out. I called Not Fag-In-The-Middle, he says. C'mon, you say, I'm way bigger than you. And you are—six-foot-two, almost two hondo compared to Ole's squat, five-nine, hundred-fifty-pound frame—but what Ole says is, You ain't bigger where it counts, dumbass, and grabs his crotch, giving it a couple inspired thrusts for good measure. You suck, you say to Ole, and pile into the back seat's middle next to Jonce. No, Ole says, your mother sucks. Why just last night she— but you cut him off and tell him to go to hell. Ole gets in beside you and yanks the door shut. DeLuco backs out of your driveway. You notice it's just him and Benny in the front seat. Where's Phelps? you ask, and Jonce informs you that Phelps's mom made him go to church. That sucks, you say, and you mean it, because only Phelps gets more shit on account of his mother than you do. No, says Ole, your mom sucks and at that Jonce and DeLuco and Benny start laughing like a bastard. You shake your head and think what it would be like if your stupid friends would stop giving you shit about Mother. What do they know about her problems anyway? What do they know about the way you use that extra money from your second job at the bowling alley to help pay the monthly electricity because Mother's disability check doesn't cover it? Nothing, because you don't mention that. They just go on teasing you because she has been to the looney bin a couple of times, and because working at the bowling alley is a chump job and you look like a buttwipe in the puffy green Jerry's Bowl hat you are made to wear. But still, you are glad you are not Phelps at church tonight, sitting in a pew.

DeLuco turns up the radio, 94.3 KDOM out of Windom, and starts to sing along with Tommy James and the Shondells. Crimson and close, over and over. You know all the Oldies. But DeLuco and Benny know all the Oldies. Only one song ever came on KDOM where DeLuco didn't know the words, at least that anyone saw. That's never happened to Benny; he truly knows every one. You're at about 90 percent. You and your friends started tuning to the Oldies on KDOM about three years ago—exact, it was the day DeLuco got his shit-mobile station

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wagon—and have been listening ever since. On account of you and your friends, KDOM has a lot more listeners from your high school during their Oldies broadcast every evening. It's funny too, because Tom Satterly, the DJ, takes dedications Tuesday and Thursday nights, and you can't believe how many dumb kids started calling in dedicating songs to their stupid girlfriends, their teachers, their dog. DeLuco fixed that one night when he dedicated songs, in succession, to "Mike Hunt" and "Sharon Peters" and "Jack Mehoff." Stupid Satterly didn't even get it when DeLuco called back an hour later and dedicated one to "Dick Face," just broadcasted it happily over the airwaves as everyone laughed themselves mental. But the next time DeLuco called in, Satterly told him there were to be no more dedications for a while because he got quite the talking to from his boss for cussing on the air. DeLuco laughed, told Satterly he was sorry he got him in trouble. After he hung up he told everyone Satterly actually used the word "cussing," which everyone thought a gem and made into a buzzword for about the next month at school. You done with that damn pencil, you dipshit? Oh, stop your cussing. Chuckle, chuckle, ha, ha.

Orson L. "Ole" Olson—Loss of Sheila Ryker Guarantee privileges: April 17, 1997. Fatal statement: "I Sheila Ryker Guarantee I will never drink again." Out drinking with his grain elevator work friends one evening, Ole gets bombed and, against everyone's advice, tries cajoling into bed the girl who just broke up with him two days before. He strikes out big time and looks pathetic. Ole doesn't commit the cardinal sin of giving a drunken Sheila, but does commit a fatal error by giving a Sheila about drinking, the next morning when hung over and depressed. I will never drink again, he says. No one listens, so he packs some wallop. Giving one of the most ill-advised Sheilas in Sheila history, Ole says, No, seriously guys, I give you a Sheila Ryker Guarantee I will never drink again. This time, friends listen and try to reason with him—take it back, Ole, take it back! But the Sheila's out there. It's like making a move in checkers and taking your hand off. Some seven hours later, Ole buys a round of Coors for his table of friends and himself, committing Sheila suicide.

You ask DeLuco why it's Redwood tonight. DeLuco says, Why not? You say that there is just as good cruising going
down in Jeffers these days which is only ten miles away, not the forty it takes to get to Redwood, and Ole gives you an elbow to the breadbasket, no difficult task for him beings you’re riding Fag and your ribs are his for the poking. Minor pain precedes enlightenment when you remember Tara Nickel, the girl from Jeffers who dumped Ole on his ass last week in favor of some other monkeynuts. You’re no world traveler, but those Jeffers girls have ultra-limited cruising range; they’d never be in Redwood. They love Jeffers and why fix what ain’t broke in terms of cruising excitement? Jeffers is fine for the like of Tara Nickel and Kimmy Sappington and Robin Olsem and Nicki Pudenz and Frenchie Minion and Laridee Anderson and Sophie Schoper and all the tagalongs you can’t keep straight because they tend to melt into each other. Those Jeffers girls. You imagine they’ll be there forever. Ole probably won’t ever get out of town either but he’s just recently been a fool for Tara Nickel, and he’ll probably be that way even when he’s sixty and Tara Nickel’s sixty and neither of them ever go anywhere, just think about the old days when they were young and bucky and in love with something. You don’t want to ruin Ole’s life—hell, you might be stuck there right alongside Ole when you’re sixty too—so you try to apologize. Oh, sorry, Ole, you say, I forgot about Tara Nickel. Ole says, Tell it to the judge, and you say, What? and Jonce says, What? And Benny says, What the hell is that supposed to mean, Ole? and DeLuco—who is usually the prime thorn in the ass—just sings along to Aretha Franklin and pays attention to the road. But you are into Ole’s problem now and it’s a good one as women problems generally are. Plus, it keeps them from chiding you about your mother. Benny is demanding an answer to what the hell Ole meant by the Tell it to the judge comment and Ole says, Screw you man, who cares? Jonce tells Ole he doesn’t need to be an ass just because that rotten old skank Tara Nickel tossed him aside like a ten-cent jizrag and then you and Benny are all over Jonce for that stupid one, the kind Jonce is famous for pulling when he tries to come up with the good ones like DeLuco does.

DeLuco finally gets into the act by turning down the radio and telling you you’re all nuttier’n squirrel shit—one of his favorites—and that Ole doesn’t have to worry about stupid old Tara Nickel anymore because there are probably at least ten vix-
ens to be picked up tonight in Redwood, and if you do the math that’s two apiece. This seems to be a good thing to say and quiets everyone down, at least on the topic of Ole’s woman troubles.

You tell DeLuco to pull over for a piss break and he says, What the hell, Winston, you piss more than a sick camel! and you’re not sure that’s one of DeLuco’s best, but you laugh like an asshole anyways because of the way DeLuco says it, and everyone else laughs too and when it comes down to it, thinking of a sick camel taking a piss is pretty funny. The whole time you stand near the back side of the DeLuco’s wagon on the lip of the ditch, waiting to commence with the pissing, you’re sure they are trying to think of something about Mother to bust your horns about. You feel weird thinking about your mother with your dick out, waiting to piss. So you stop thinking. You look up into the sky as your piss begins to arc, steaming, onto the ground. You think, The stars are pretty clear tonight.

Daniel J. DeLuco—Loss of Sheila Ryker Guarantee privileges: January 17, 1999. Fatal statement: “I Sheila Ryker Guarantee Gary will knock this one through.” DeLuco, an ex-tight end with the Augustana College football team and lifelong Minnesota Vikings fanatic, at Jonce’s house in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, to watch the NFC Championship with the rest of the guys, is sure Vikings field goal kicker Gary Anderson—“who hasn’t missed all year” as DeLuco reminds the guys—will make the 38-yarder he is about to attempt and thus send his beloved Vikings to the Super Bowl. DeLuco gives the Sheila as a show of support, maybe some extra magic; Anderson misses. The game goes into overtime and the Vikings lose. His Sheila gone and his Vikings sent packing, DeLuco pries the stuffed moose head from above Jonce’s mantle and hurls it through the picture window, glass exploding onto the lawn. Everyone’s amazed, and a little bit scared. Definitely disappointed.

You finally hit the big hill that leads into Redwood Falls and DeLuco sings California Dreamin’ by the Mamas and the Papas at the top of his lungs with Benny—probably the most musically-talented of your group, since he was still singing in choir and playing the trumpet in the pep band into your senior year—singing the harmony. Sure, Phelps still plays in the band when do
his mom isn’t demanding he’s somewhere else, like church, but everybody knows Phelps sucks in band, as evidenced by the way Mr. V. sticks him on the least used instrument—the cymbals—if he lets Phelps play in the band at all. Phelps never gets to play cymbal in the most important performances, the Star Spangled Banner at football games. He played once sophomore year but was so all over the place with his rhythm that the visiting crowd booed when it was over, nearly inciting a patriotic riot. Regardless of musical talent, you and Ole and Jonce join the chorus from the back seat, but even you know it’s most likely way off key and the sound from the rear is like a sorry pack of alley cats howling into the night, so the backseat keeps the volume down to let DeLuco and Benny shine.

The wagon hits Redwood’s Main Street and DeLuco slows to cruising pace. Town looks pretty dead, says Ole, but he is most likely just being pessimistic because he’s thinking some other bonerhead is back in Jeffers scouting out that two-timing hussy Tara Nickel instead of him. DeLuco finishes the main drag in less time than it takes The Stones to get through Hey You, Get Off Of My Cloud and DeLuco whips it around the block and makes for another loop. You cruise Main eight or nine times and are hoping things will liven up, but you don’t want to be the one to say it. No one besides Ole wants to say it. Shit, you came all the way to Redwood on a school night. Thankfully, Jonce breaks the string and says he’s hungry. You pull into the Phillip’s 66 and DeLuco says he needs some gas anyway, so as he fills up, Jonce and Ole go into the store for some eats, leaving you and Benny in the car.

James C. “Winston” Churchill—Sheila Ryker Guarantee pending as of June 3, 2002. Statement: “I Sheila Ryker Guarantee I can get all fifty states.” On a fishing trip in Winnipeg with DeLuco and Phelps, Winston gets deep into an argument with a Canadian woman who sports a backpack with proud maple leaf patches all over it about who knows geography better. After failing to name even half of Canada’s thirteen provinces, Winston challenges the woman to name all fifty American states. The woman gets just thirty-two, and Winston begins jeering, but then DeLuco, ever the fair-minded, challenges Winston to get all fifty himself if he thinks he’s so smart. The woman thinks this a grand idea. Winston says he could
do it easy, so Phelps asks him if he'd like to put his Sheila where his mouth is. Winston complies, but after an hour, he still hasn't come up with Utah or Vermont. DeLuco, Phelps and the Canadian woman (now duly informed about the wonders of the Sheila Ryker Guarantee and eager to spread it to her own homeland) tell Winston to give in. He won't. He says he didn't put a time limit on his Sheila, and while he is technically right, DeLuco urges him to be fair about it and give up. That night around 4 a.m., in their tent, Winston crawls from his sleeping bag to DeLuco's, waking him up to whisper in his ear, "Utah and Vermont." DeLuco tells him fine, but next day informs him he must take this matter to the Great Council of Sheila, because the late Sheila may have bent the rules. Winston is upset about this, because he knows that while he is the President of the High Council, DeLuco and Benny (back home in the States), are the two swing-voters that round out the Council. The matter is still pending, but Winston fears all is lost.

Just as Ole and Jonce get back to the car in time with DeLuco, you and Benny see a red little beater, jam-packed with girls, swing through the plaza. You look at Benny. There was Sheila Ryker in that car, you say. No, Benny says. DeLuco, Jonce and Ole all pop into the car. Guys, you say, trying to hide your excitement, There was Sheila Ryker in that car. No, says DeLuco. No, says Benny. No, says Jonce. Who cares? says Ole as his longing for Tara Nickel has never become more evident.

Dudes! you say, I am telling you Sheila Ryker was in that car! I'm giving you a Sheila Ryker Guarantee! After all your friends stop laughing at the novel stupidity of you throwing out a "Sheila Ryker Guarantee," DeLuco shouts, Hell's Bells, then, we better go find out! and he squeals the wagon's tires out of the 66.

Now it's not that Sheila Ryker is some kind of beauty queen—in fact, there is nothing spectacular about her in any way. She is one of the Jeffers girls' tagalongs, a random. Short and on the chubby side, Sheila Ryker is in fact very average as far as looks go, non-descript, possibly, in the same way as your mother. You know this. But she is from Jeffers, your usual cruising town, and you were so adamant just then about that being Sheila Ryker in that red beater!

DeLuco guns it down Main and pulls even with the red Honda. I don't see her, says Ole. That's 'cause she ain't in there,
says Benny. She is, she is! you say. She’s riding Fag-In-The-Middle in the back! This sets your friends off on a fever wave of laughter, and DeLuco almost rams the red beater off the road with his welfare boat because he can’t physically control himself when he gets laughing that hard. He motions with his thumb for them to pull over, and the girls get the picture. DeLuco motors in behind them and you all barrel out and run up to the girls’ car. They are all screaming because they all don’t know any of you and probably think you’re out to assault them or something dumb like that, but one of them is not screaming in the back seat in the middle, and that is Sheila Ryker, and when you see this, you all jump into a giant hug together and start yelling and jumping up and down like you won the Super Bowl.

DeLuco goes, Sheila Ryker, what the hell are you doing here?! and she says, all confused-like, Cruising? and the way she answers with her voice lilting up at the end like she doesn’t know what she’s doing there herself tears the guys to pieces. Jonce is on fours banging his fists on the highway and Ole has his elbows on his knees with his hands holding in his gut, which he acts like is going to bust. The Sheila Ryker Guarantee! says Benny, I can’t believe it! Hot damn! says DeLuco, and you all laugh some more. You look over at the girls and they look mostly confused, like maybe they won something too but aren’t sure what the prize is, or if they would want the prize anyway. The driver, a long-haired goddess none of you have seen before, yells out her window, What’s wrong with you guys, what’s so funny? and DeLuco says, Haven’t you ever seen a pack of morons in love before? and you all howl and the girls drive off, Sheila Ryker in tow.

So the Sheila Ryker Guarantee is born, and the whole ride home from Redwood you all make up rules for it, like you only get one your whole life, and if you give a Sheila Ryker Guarantee and are wrong, you lose it forever, and can’t ever have another one. It’s DeLuco who first puts a Sheila to some practical use when he gives a Sheila Ryker Guarantee that Tom Satterly will play a Beach Boys tune before midnight, and, even though everyone knows Satterly loves The Beach Boys, it’s a somewhat risky call. But it’s also DeLuco making the call, and he comes through like he almost always does, because Satterly plays Little Deuce Coupe halfway home. Benny finds a sheet of paper and he
even writes down a Sheila Constitution and you make up all these rules and intermingle it with some Bible so it reads like, *Thou shalt have no other Sheilas before me,* and *In the beginning was Guarantee, and the Guarantee was with Sheila, and the Guarantee was Sheila’s.* There is serious talk of a bi-monthly Sheila Ryker Guarantee Newsletter.

The Sheila Ryker Guarantee is the only thing in the world that is better than a regular guarantee, and, in fact, it spreads like prairie fire the rest of that year. It's the ultimate in calling out a bullshitter. People at school are losing their Sheilas left and right. Oh, you think you can drive from Jeffers to the Twin Cities in under two hours? Gimme a Sheila! You say you hate hotdogs that much, huh? You say you are never going to eat one again as long as you live? Put a Sheila on it. You promise you’ll give me that twenty bucks you owe me by Friday? I don’t want a promise, I want a Sheila. You say you’re asking Tara Nickel to the Prom? Yeah right. Stop with the yammering and Sheila up.

Everyone vows to keep telling new people you meet, wherever you are after high school, about the Sheila and promise to not stop spreading the word until someone sees a headline in a national newspaper that today the President of the United States gave a Sheila that he was going to bomb so-and-so and everyone across America knows that means, Shit, the guy isn’t fooling around!

After DeLuco drops you off back home, you start up the sidewalk, then stop. You step out onto the lawn. In the window, soft-glowing blues and whites flicker. Your mother may be a psychopath, but you know by the way she waits up like this for you that she cares. Who, with a decent heart, could make fun of that? You give your first one, to yourself, when you Sheila Ryker Guarantee that you will tell your mom you love her before she goes to bed. It won’t be hard to make good on this—you try to do it every night.

You walk in the door and see your mother slumped over, asleep in her chair. You tiptoe over to her, try to wake her softly. Mother, get up, you whisper. She opens her eyes and says, I taped the end of the Wheel for you, James. The guy gets the car. You can watch it. Thanks, Mother, you say. I love you Mother, you say. You help her up to bed. When you look at her for a
minute in the dark before closing her door, you listen to her breathing and you feel like you want to cry and you want to laugh but you don't know which one would be louder. You walk back downstairs.

This is the first Sheila Ryker Guarantee you've given since you came up with the original. It's the first time you knowingly put one to use, and you came through. The guys would think you're a big pussy. You don't need that. You might as well keep it to yourself.