

A hot and sunny Wednesday afternoon found him with Ryz'n enjoying Clear Lake State Park beach. Dark shades, the yellow ribbon in her hair he liked so much, wearing one of her many two-piece bathing suits. This was the red one, covered with a pattern of yellow hibiscus flowers. He had noticed it was a popular style this year. Showed her curves better than anything could, except for her birthday suit. He knew cuz he had seen that suit, too. No one else he had seen or nothing else she could wear could top her look a la naturelle. Seemed like Ry had a different bathing suit like that for every day of the week. She said she and her mom had hit a mid-summer sale at Hecht's.

She lay beside him on her back, head turned away playing in the sand. Kept her right hand over her navel, fooling in the sand with her left. Liked to scoop it out, build a half-foot high mountain with a pointy top. Leave ski tracks down the sides with the backs of her two fingers, polished pink just for him, because he had told her they looked cool. Sometimes he liked to watch her do it as much as she liked to do it.

The girl had lost close to thirty pounds over the winter. Her determined swim and exercise program left her toned and sculpted just to his liking. Overjoyed with her stunning new figure, Ry had told her she had gone kind of nuts shopping: a kid in a candy store. First time she could recall feeling comfortable in revealing swimwear. Her mom had been happy to foot the bill for her, kind of like a reward. Made it even easier for her mom to pick up the tab she said because her kid sister Sheena had opted for true bikinis. That ticked her mom off. Ry said it had been Sheena's turn to feel jealous for a change. To go Ry one better, Sheena had gone with the more daring style. Nick observed Ry's olive complexion tanned up easily and told her so, to throw her off the track of his true thoughts. She thanked him for the compliment.

They lay side by side on the white beach on the army blanket he had bought from the surplus store, folded towels behind their heads for pillows. With his army surplus canteen and favorite camera in reach, her transistor radio turned down low played Rock'n'Roll. A few wispy clouds drifted against a sky blue background overhead. No whitecaps on the lake today. Light breeze nudged the unused red flag stuck in the sand next to the lifeguard's stand.

The guard, a brawny sun-bleached blonde, leaned back in his lofty wooden perch watching the roped off brown lake swimming area in front of him. Least, Nick thought he was watching. That's what the dude was getting paid for, wasn't he? Motionless, behind his cool wrap-around shades, he could have been sleeping for all Nick could tell. A few moms with tikes dotted the flat beach with their blankets and sand toys; hardly anybody in the water. Nick wondered where they hauled this sand from. Sure wasn't any out here in this country full of black Iowa loam. Couple kids no more 'n knee deep played with a plastic pail, taking turns pouring lake water on each other. School had started here on Monday and the older kids were in class, poor devils. No adult males that he could see, aside from the lifeguard. Only a couple teens out here besides him and Ry, out of town vacationers like them he figured.

On his left, Ryz'n played in the white beach sand beside the blanket; trailing her fingers through it, making ski tracks in the mountain snow; now destroying the tracks, picking up the sand and letting it sift through her fingers, building another little mound. Her hand acted like some mechanized piece of earth moving equipment.

"Think I'll stick my toes in, Baby." She said without looking up from her sandbox.

"Sure, go ahead." She turned to him.

"Wanna come?"

"Nah, too comfortable. Tired of lugging this dang cast."

"It's comin' off tomorrow, isn't it? Remember your appointment? You said it doesn't hurt anymore when you put weight on it, right?"

"Nah, it's good." She smiled sweetly

"You'll be all right. Start working out for real again. You'll feel better. You'll see."

"Quit bein' a grump, hunh?" Her smile broadened to show her dimples.

"Now, did I say that?" She turned back smoothing out her beach sculpture, clapping her hands together, careful to knock off the sand outside the blanket and stood up.

He countered, "Or a gimp?" She faked a pout, one of her favorite tricks.

"OK?" Ry nodded toward the lake, as if she were asking his permission.

"Go ahead, Baby, but not too fast. Ya know how I like to watch ya walk away."

She grinned and pivoted, walking away slow, swinging those lovely broad hips a little more than her already natural sultry walk allowed, just for him. Loosening her yellow ribbon, she tied her hair up off her shoulders, elbows at ear level, keeping her sunglasses on her face. Nick pulled his shades down the bridge of his nose to get a clearer view. He shook his head. Mann, she was somethin' else and only seventeen. A woman and half already. Shoulders as broad as her hips. No waist to speak of. She could be a cover girl on that magazine. Hell, she should own the magazine. Yessir, a woman and a half all right, who didn't quite realize that fact yet. He loved her for that. He picked up his nearby fancy camera, adjusted for range and light and snapped off a few of her swinging back side and chorus girl legs, knowing the pictures wouldn't do her or the moment justice. Too short to be the girl from Ipanema; still, she just doesn't see.

Making sure to keep her hair out of the lake water, he watched Ryz'n cool off, wading and dipping up to her neck. He noticed the lifeguard sit up straight his chair. Dude was watching now. Yeah buddy, Ry could make you sit up and take notice all right. A group of four teenage boys were swimming, horsing around near her. Nick sat up on the army blanket, pushing his dark glasses up above his eyebrows, adjusting the range on his lens, to snap candid photos of her when she stood out of the water all majestic, looking like a Greek sea goddess. The fancy camera had become a good friend since he had been lame.

The boys started to talk with her out at the corner formed by the boundary ropes. Too far away for Nick to hear, but for a word now and then. Why wouldn't they? He sure as hell would try to make time with her if the situation was reversed. Ry was a knockout and in that scanty two piece suit, more tempting than a playboy bunny. He watched her shrug her shoulders and the boys nod. They followed her back to the beach: four hound dogs in heat, trudging over the sand, letting Ry lead the way, swiping water off her arms, their tongues hangin' out of their mouths, enjoying the same rear view Nick had enjoyed a few minutes ago. He wondered if Ry had told them he was her boyfriend. Maybe not. Maybe they thought, hoped, Nick might be Ryz'n's brother or cousin. They could pass for it. Some folks said as much.

Lying on his left side, propped on his elbow, Nick poked the shades back up on his nose to be cool and watch her naturally sexy stride from the front this time. Tan legs, one foot in front of the other, hips swaying. She angled back to him, with those dogs sniffing at her heels. A natural athlete, Ry loved to swim and dive. She had downplayed her enthusiasm for water sports to stick by him this vacation. On the injured reserve list, so to speak, he had been holding her back the whole trip with his cast. He felt bad about it. Who came to a lake resort in a leg cast on crutches?

"Nicky, these boys have a motor boat and they offered to take us for a ride around the lake." She looked down over herself, swishing lake water from her body with both hands. Nonchalant. But then she tipped her hand. "I've never ridden in one before. Whaddaya think?"

Ry looked up to him and smiled, stooping over for her towel, picking it up to dry off, standing off to the left side of the blanket, all eyes on her. Ryz'n waited for his answer as if she didn't care what he said, making a skirt out of the blue and white-striped terrycloth. She tied it about her narrow funnel of a waist to cover herself. Then she knelt down before Nick at the foot of the blanket, couple feet away from his knees. Straightening her back, she stretched her arms down, placing her hands on her knees, hidden under the towel. She bent forward granting him a great shot at her deep cleavage, phat twin torpedoes ready to launch, not realizing the effect her posture had on him—arching his eyebrows and somethin' else, too. That's the kind of girl she was.

He looked to the boys. They dripped water from their denim cut-offs. He figured they ranged in age from fifteen to eighteen. Dirty blond. Seemed like everyone out here in Iowa was blonde. To a man, they folded their arms across their chests. The older two in particular had solid builds, looked like they could be athletes, pushed their biceps out with their fists. Those two were bigger than he was, for sure. Three of them bore a strong resemblance to each other. The other guy had an acne problem. Typical square heads, all blonde and blue-eyed. They studied Nick as he looked them over, forming a semi-circle around the foot of the blanket, dripping on it but Nick ignored that. Who was he to hold her back from a boat ride?

"Well, now, then there," said Nick friendly-like, misquoting James Dean again. No one picked up on it. She said, "S'ppose we could go for a motor boat ride, Baby? Be somethin' to do." Ryz'n beamed, hoping

to overcome the boredom he knew she felt. But before she could rise to her feet, the biggest kid re-crossed his arms over his chest and spoke to Nick.

“Golly gee, *friend*, ‘Fraid there ain’t enough room for all of us, just enough for us and the lovely lady.” Kind of snippy, the dude didn’t sound too broken up that Nick couldn’t join them. Seemed his tone more ‘n his words halted Ry. She paused, half-standing, hands still on her knees; a ballplayer waiting on the next pitch with a towel draped almost to her ankles.

Yeah, I’ll bet thought Nick. Maybe there was nothin’ to it. After all, this was the heartland and only good, honest folks lived out here, right? But Nick didn’t like what he was sensing from these dudes. Half standing, Ryz’n looked to Nick and knelt back down on the blanket closer to him in her makeshift shift. Maybe she was beginning to pick up the same vibrations. Sure weren’t the ones the Beach Boys used to sell. When Nick didn’t respond right away, the pushy kid said.

“She only seats five, ya see.”

The smallest kid dropped his hands to his sides and said, “We got skis, too. Ever water-ski before? It’s awesome.” The kid’s eyes gleamed with enthusiasm.

Ry glanced toward him and then to Nick. Her back to the boys, she inched her shades down her nose with a look in her almond-shaped eyes that melted his heart, as if she were a kid asking for an ice cream cone on a hot day, a puppy dog begging for a walk. Damn her eyes—hazel green behind long lashes and beneath sweeping brows, black as coal. No make-up. Broad lips coated in pink gloss mouthed, “Please.”

Nick wavered. “Well, one of you boys could stay here I guess. Enjoy the beach.”

“Uh, I don’t think so. See. The boat’s anchored out there by that buoy.” The guy with the mouth pointed to it. “And you couldn’t make it out there in that cast, let alone do any skiin’.” The kid stepped forward and kicked a couple raps against Nick’s cast with the side of his heel. Nick felt lake water drip on his cast, wetting his exposed toes. He was starting to burn a little, worried the drips might rinse off some of his signatures. “And you look like you’re enjoyin’ the beach enough for all of us. Don’t wanna disturb ya.”

Nick joked. “Ya don’t hunh? Damned thoughtful of ya. Sure I couldn’t slalom-ski?”

The guy frowned. “We ain’t got on one of them kind o’ skis on board.” The dude was dead serious.

“Well, we appreciate the offer. But if that’s the case, *friend*, we better decline.”

Ry’s hopeful smile vanished. Her eyes turned fearful. She slid her dark glasses back up her nose and began to scoot on her fists and knees a little closer to Nick, scrunching up the blanket beneath her. The big, strong boy reached down over Nick’s legs, placing his hand on her left shoulder. Ryz’n froze with her back to him. Nick knew she didn’t want any trouble, nothing that could bust his bail and land him in back jail for the next five weeks until the trial. He knew it because not a day of their vacation had passed without her begging him to be on his good behavior. He picked up his crutch behind him and reached out, resting the rubber-tipped stump against the boy’s outstretched forearm. He rubbed the crutch back and forth lightly over the kid’s tan arm, knowing the rubber tip would pull against his white-blond hairs irritating him. When the kid looked up, Nick shook his head. “Unh-unh.” The dude smirked.

He took hold of the stump end to shove it aside, but Nick’s strength held the crutch in place. He shoved again, harder, knocking the crutch from his arm. But Nick’s intense grip rebounded the hard rubber tip right back only out of control, smacking down hard on the kid’s forearm. The dude rose up, hate in his eye—linebacker about to stop the fullback for a loss. He stretched out his hands diving for Nick’s throat.

Nick rolled right onto his side and wedged one end of the crutch arm rest into the sand and the other against his armpit. Planting the rubber-capped stump into the kid’s solar plexus below the guy’s arms, the dude impaled himself on the blunt end of the crutch. “POOOOOOFFFFFFFFF”. Anyone within twenty feet could have heard the air gush out of the kid’s body. He flopped down, with Nick’s crutch helping direct the limp body over onto the beach to his right. The guy flopped around on the sand; a fish out of water. The other three scooted around the blanket to help him.

Firm but calm, Nick said. “s OK. Just got the wind knocked out o’ him. He be all right in a minute. Roll him on his back and bend his knees up with his feet flat on the ground.” Nick waited as they did what he said. The kid gasped for breath, as if he were dying, his helpless eyes squinting, then opening and closing. “Pull up on his waistband a couple times, so his butt comes off the ground.” Nick motioned with the end

of his crutch showing them what to do. One of them followed his instructions. "Yeah, that's it, slow and easy." Nick rolled to his right and rose up on his right elbow.

"You're gonna be ok Mann. Try to relax." Clenching his fists by his sides, the other large kid stood tall. "Who do you think you are telling us what to do?" The kid grimaced and kicked at Nick's crutch, knocking sand on him. The other dude scowled too, while the third applied first aid to their buddy.

The lifeguard arrived out of nowhere wraparound shades in place. Red trunks, a whistle hanging down from his neck over a faded yellow tee-shirt, looked like it'd been washed once too often. Nick guessed he had been watching more than an empty lake. "I thought I told you Youngers to stay off this beach." One of them spoke up, "Why pick on us? He's the one done it." The kid pointed to Nick. "Just look, look at what he done to Cole with that crutch of his." Cole was regaining his breath. The lifeguard countered, "I saw the whole thing. Your brother was about to kill 'im. This kid," pointing at Nick, "was only defending himself. Your brother's all right. Take him and clear off the beach and don't come back." They all stared at the guard, whose eyes remained hidden behind the dark glasses, reminding Nick of "the man with no eyes" in *Cool Hand Luke*, but without the black Stetson. They didn't budge. "Now. I said. Now!"

They lifted the injured boy to his feet, backing off toward the lake and their waiting motor boat. The kids turned around and walked down the beach to the water, helping the hurt boy, who staggered away, coughing and holding his gut with both hands. One of them yelled back, pointing at Nick.

"We won't forget this kid. We'll see ya around one of these days." Nick smiled and waved good-bye. Ryz'n stood on the blanket to thank the lifeguard reaching over to shake his hand.

Nick quipped. "Real friendly types you got around here."

"Aw, that's the Younger boys and Joe Ford. They're not from around here. They think they gotta live up to their namesakes, you know the old west outlaws? They're always up to no good. Spendin' the summer up here, in a cottage on the South Shore. Royal pains in the ass!"

Ryz'n volunteered, "They seemed real nice at first. Wanted to take me for a ride in their motor boat."

"Yeah? I'll bet. They wanted to take you for a ride all right. You were smart not to go with. Those boys have a reputation. No tellin' what they might have done once they got you alone in their boat. Them and that Evinrude. Think that suped up outboard gives 'em a license to do whatever they want. Then it would have been your word against the four of 'em. Know what I mean?" Ryz'n nodded, subdued, glancing towards the ground and then up again.

"Well, I don't know much about an Evinrude, but I know bad behavior when I see it and those boys were just plain rude."

"Yeah, you got that right." The guard faced Nick again.

"How long you gonna be at the lake?"

"Another week, I guess."

"Not from around here."

Nick shook his head. "Nope, back east."

"School starts in Missourah next Monday, so those boys'll be goin' back home this weekend. Just the same, you better watch yourself 'til then and your pretty friend here, too. Those boys are mean."

Nick tipped the guard an imaginary cowboy hat. "Much obliged, sheriff." Ry smiled her three-dimple doozy. The guard chuckled, nodded and moved off back towards his chair, Ryz'n thanking him again.

"Don't mention it," he said. "Prob'ly be my excitement for the month."

Nick waited til the guard was out of earshot. "The masked man to the rescue," referring to the fact the man with no eyes never removed his shades. "Well, at least we got a chance to thank him." His joke went right over her head.

"You never cease to amaze me Nicky."

"Whaddaya mean?"

"Always getting into these scrapes and come out smelling like a rose." She looked hard at him.

He shrugged. "Anh, this wasn't much of a scrape." He looked out toward the lake. "Been in worse."

"I know." He felt her looking hard at him again..

"Well, hope I still smell like a rose on my birthday." He meant it as a joke, but couldn't force a smile.

He cut his eyes at her to catch her reaction, knowing she knew what he meant. His manslaughter trial started that day. Some joke. Wasn't she supposed to be taking his mind off that? One of the reasons she had come out here to vacation with him? She shot him another look, something between cross and worried. She got it all right. Then her face went blank and she sighed.

"Wow, nothing like that ever happened to me before," choosing to gloss over her last remarks.

Relieved now, Ry plopped down to her familiar place beside him. Feeling the blanket messed up under her, she worked her hands and knees to smooth out the wrinkles she had created. "The boys always went after Sheena, not me." When she had fixed the blanket to her satisfaction, she looked up out over the lake with him. They watched the Youngers revv up their boat and drive off towards the north shore. Two of them turned around and flipped him off; flicking their birds high to make sure he saw them. Nick grinned, lifting his crutch high, chugging on it, setting it down beside him once he got their fist-shaking response.

"Nicky, What are you doing? Don't make them any angrier than they already are. Just what are you thinking, anyway? You know, we can't afford any trouble out here."

"I'm thinkin'. I'm damned lucky to have this crutch." He lifted it off the beach and wiggled it, so she could see. "You know that's the third time in the last week that my crutch has saved us? Think I'll have to tote it along just for protection, even after the cast comes off."

"Third time? I only count two. Here and in that saloon on the road trip with Bill."

"You're forgettin' the rattlesnake."

"What rattlesnake?"

"You remember I told you and Bill and Candy about it at brunch."

She laughed. "Are you serious? That was in your nightmare. You can't count that." She chuckled.

"Aw, who's countin' anyway?"

"Me." She said, faking serious. She faked serious good, too, almost as good as the pout.

Nick tugged at the yellow ribbon, letting her dense, wavy hair fall loose about her shoulders. She swung back to him, smiling, resting on her elbows, pushing her breasts up out from under her, tidy melons bulging out of her top. She just didn't know what she was doing. Or did she fake innocent that good too? Nah. He knew her too well. He pretended to ignore 'em, putting on his best little boy James Dean look.

"So you never had anything like that happen to you before, hunh? I find that hard to believe."

Totally oblivious to her pose, she said. "Of course, not. Oh, it happens to Sheena plenty over at the base pool, but not to me."

"How you figure that? Too naïve, mebbe?" Hoping she'd make the connection between her new tempting looks and her actions with those boys just now.

She rolled over on her back next to him, her chest flattening out a little, but just a little, the top keeping them together and firm, but hell she didn't need a top for that. Best damned pair o' knockers he had ever come across. Real gunboats. Made him feel like Goldilocks when she set down to feast on 'em, cuz they were *ju-u-u-ust right*.

"Gee, I dunno. I was kind of chunky you recall." She cast him a sly glance from the corner of her eye.

"And I don't know. I guess I never encouraged boys the way Sheena did."

"*Did?* Hmmm. You lost weight in all the right places Baby that's for sure and kept it where it suits ya. But you've been lookin' good like a playboy bunny should all summer. Seems to me *somebody* would have hit on you."

She grinned. "Nope, they didn't. Not like that. Just you, Baby." She pecked him on the shoulder. "You know I swam before the pool opened in the morning. Nobody was there but me. I got away with it because Dad runs things over there, all the facilities and stuff, you know, and he said it was OK. He knows I swim well. Don't need supervision. Then in the afternoon when I dived, Don was usually hanging around. Plus, I always wore one of my mom's old one-piece suits and my bathing cap, so I wasn't so attractive."

"Oh yeah. Well, I can see where that would discourage 'em.! Shooo!"

"Well, it must have, because no one ever bothered me. Maybe it was that black belt I got from Jhoon Ree Karate I wore around my waist did it, ya think?" She grinned her leprechaun grin. He chuckled. "Maybe."

What he knew that Ryz'n failed to mention, what Sheena had told him down at the Outer Banks, was that their old man, who was the head honcho at the Base Welfare and Recreation Office, had put out the word

among his employees, that he didn't want his daughters bothered by servicemen or their dependents. If he were to find out that anyone had bothered his girls, her old man promised he would make the base entertainment facilities off limits to them. Nick remembered Sheena telling him that with a proud simper on her puss. Said she could get away with whatever she wanted. Nick had believed that, believed she did, too. He had never known two sisters so close in age with more different temperaments than her and Ry.

"You Really Gotta Hold on Me" played on her transistor radio, featured as a "golden oldie highlight." Nick turned it up. Happy for the diversion, she said, "Remember the prom, Baby? When you got the band to play this and sang it for me at midnight, just like I asked?"

"Yeah, you first heard it drivin' us to the base pool to teach me the twisty flip start o' school last year."

"I remember. I remember."

She stood up in her red and yellow hibiscus-flowered two-piece to sing, cinching the towel about her waist, swaying to the music, dancing slow on the beach, putting on a show for her man. Was she something special or what?

"Ryz'n, you're, you're . . ." He was speechless.

A small, sandy-haired boy with big brown eyes, who had been playing a few yards away, yelled out to Ryz'n in a loud, clear voice: "Hey, bean-keen-ee girl! Dancing in the sand. Hey, bean-keen-ee girl! You're the best one in the land!" Not much more than three, sporting a green bathing suit drooping wet off his butt, the sway-backed little man stuck out a little tanned pot belly at Ry and grinned.

Astonished, Ryz'n stopped dancing and laughed out loud. Nick said, "The little tike took the words right out o' my mouth." The kid half-skipped over to them one foot in front of the other, scooting toe to heel, looking an Egyptian hieroglyph, sway-backed—leading with his small, pot belly, flashing white baby teeth. His idea of dancing, Nick figured, reminding him of Ralph Cramden. Ry bent over to the kid, kneeling down to his eye level to shake his hand. "Why thank you Mister, what is your name anyway?"

"Bwett!"

He stuck a finger in his mouth and batted his eyes in embarrassment. Nick adjusted his camera and snapped a photo of Ryz'n and her miniature admirer. "Why thank you Mr. Bwett for that lovely compliment." The kid grew bold, "Gibb me kiss?" Nick rolled his eyes and fell over laughing. Ryz'n laughed, too. She spoke seriously with the little fellow. "Well, I have to ask my boyfriend first? How 'bout it, Nick?" He nodded. "If I can get one, too."

He noticed his rival Romeo's little twig poking out underneath his droopy green swimsuit. Nick thought yeah buddy, she'll do that to you. Or maybe the kid just had to go? He snapped a photo of Ry kissing the boy on the cheek. Throwing his hands up in the air in a touchdown signal, Bwett yelled, "Yippeeee!"

Then Ryz'n crawled over the blanket on her hands and knees, trying not to wrinkle it up again, to give Nick a kiss on the mouth. He felt his stick start to rise inside his suit, too. When she was done, Nick said "That was great Baby, but I meant from the kid."

She faked another pout, scooting aside while Nick half-crawled, half-rolled, dragging his leg cast, over to the edge of her side of the blanket next to the sandy-haired boy. "How 'bout it little guy? How 'bout a kiss for me on the cheek, too?" Nick touched his cheek, but the boy frowned and shook his head no. This time Ryz'n took the camera and snapped the picture. Instead of a kiss, Bwett offered Nick a handshake.

"Allriiiiight!" Nick shook Bwett's small hand. Nick thought the little guy's mom didn't have to worry about this kid. The boy smiled. Ryz'n snapped another photo when Bwett's mother strolled over.

"Come on now Brett, honey, you've bothered these people long enough." He waved bye and turned. Off he skipped to his mom, happy as a clam, arms flapping in the breeze like a bird's wings, singing his new song. They watched him trip away, holding his mom's hand not looking back, on to the next adventure.

"To be three again." Ry mused aloud. "Love to have one like that someday Nicky." He didn't answer.

The boy sang in a few simple words a tune that Nick, under a ton of wasted adjectives, had failed to compose in his mind all afternoon. He sang loud enough for her to hear: "You're the best one in the land."