

Had to be in the nineties. And the humidity couldn't have trailed far behind. He thought it could have been a scene right outta *Cool Hand Luke*. You know. The one where that chick comes out of the farmhouse to wash the car in front of the chain gang? Well, it wasn't quite that dramatic—erotic, but, like the humidity lagging just behind the heat, this here deal didn't lag too far behind. Not in his mind anyway. Then, diggin' in this muggy Maryland summer weather could make ya see things that really might not be there.

He was backfillin' an in-ground pool his brother Ramon had sold to this guy Clarence Cheseborough down here in Camp Springs. He was on the new crew working for Ramon and Stio, the guy who owned the company. Ramon had used this pool as a learning tool for the new crew—the schoolteachers—Baxter, Larry and Lou, since this was their first time out. Sort of a trial run for them since the public school year had ended earlier in the week. Ramon's main crew—Ralph, Lester and Weese—had worked side by side with him and the school teachers showin' them the ropes. The differences between the two crews were that the shirtless schoolteachers worked faster wearing only shorts, while Ralph's crew wore traditional work clothes—T-shirts and MacGregor work pants—and plodded. “Slow but sure,” Ralph said. “No foul-ups; no do-overs.”

They had dug the small 12 by 24-foot pool for Mr. Cheseborough, put up the galvanized, steel walls, anchored 'em with tiebacks and re-bars in concrete, sanded and troweled the sand over the bottom, installed the coping on top of the walls and hooked the vinyl liner into the coping and dropped the liner. A couple of garden hoses were peein' into the aqua, vinyl liner now, while he and the schoolteachers back-filled around the pool. It was grunt work. Ralph and his crew had moved onto another construction site, leaving them to toil alone.

Of course, this was the start of his second summer puttin' in these in-ground pools for his big brother. They also installed above grounds. But he kind of preferred these in-ground deals. Less working with tools, screwin' in nuts and bolts and more working with brawn, like this here back-fillin' chore. He wasn't good with tools. But he knew the business end of a shovel well. And he enjoyed the physicality of manual labor. Made him feel like a prize, stud bull. He could work all day, play a baseball game at night and still be frisky as hell afterwards. That was his problem. He had no chick right now to share his excess energy, to relax him, to help him unwind, so to speak. Made him dig like a mad man. Besides, the heavy work kept him in good shape for baseball. Just give him a shovel, point him at a dirt mound like the one before him and step outta his way.

And even though he was Ramon's kid brother, what with Ramon as the salesman bein' in management and all, he enjoyed the respect of B. E. Stio's blue collar construction crews. They respected him for his work ethic. He didn't mind the long hours of manual labor in the hot sun or gettin' down in the trenches with them and gettin' his hands dirty or the rest of him, either. Ramon never did that. He asked no favors of his brother and was granted none, except maybe to knock off a half hour early on nights he had an away ball game. And the other workers respected him for that, too. They got a kick out of the fact he played American Legion baseball, though he was in the coach's doghouse at the moment. He could tell his ballplayin' reminded them of younger, happier days.

He and the three school teachers had spread out around the pool, chippin' away at the dirt Himalayas, whittlin' down the huge red mounds of excavated dirt one shovel full at a time. He personally thought he had drawn Mount Everest or maybe that was more an allusion to sweet sixteen Betty Sue Everest, whom he'd just run out on last Saturday night for fear her old man would come downstairs to catch them together on the couch and blow his head off with a shotgun. He and Betty Sue were no longer related. That didn't help his present predicament none. No matter how you sliced it, he was standing on a damn huge pile of dirt.

It was hot as hell. There wasn't even a fart of a breeze. The one advantage he had was that he was dang close to the patio. He stood shirtless in long pants and construction shoes by the pool halfway up the red dirt mound, so that his torso and head were above the mound's crest. Every time he reached to fill his shovel with red dirt, he turned towards the patio and the house. He hoped like hell she'd come back out in that white bikini. She was due back any second now.

Mr. Cheseborough had sent her inside to refill his mai tai glass. As he jabbed his spade into Mount Everest, the glass door to the patio slid open. The girl stepped through the opened portal barefoot, carrying a glass on a large, circular tray. She shoved the door shut behind her with her elbow, jiggling her wide behind. The glass, decorated with palm trees, was filled with liquid and ice cubes. He could hear the ice tinkling against the inside of the glass. He was that close. The girl had put one of those little miniature, oriental-Polynesian, umbrella-like things in the glass so that the ornament bobbed up and down in the drink as she walked towards the patio table.

But it wasn't the bobbin' of that little oriental-Polynesian umbrella thing that interested in him. It was her bobbin' that his full attention. He didn't have to look around to know he wasn't the only one. The schoolteachers would have

their eyes glued to her, as they had for the last half hour since she'd first come out of the house.

She had naturally, thick white-blonde hair that streamed in dense strands well past her shoulders, with blue eyes shaded by ridiculously long white-blonde lashes. Her complexion was smooth—no acne—showing a nascent tan. She had the figure of Aphrodite. He knew she had to be about his age because, with a bombshell figure like that, she had to be high school probably, if not college. And he knew she wasn't older than a co-ed, because, despite her voluptuous curves, she still carried the kind of baby fat, that wasn't actually fat per se, but was more of a Shirley Temple-like pleasing plumpness that teen-age girls carried before they thinned out, developing into women. And probably, this here one was still growing in all the right places, as the Good Lord had intended when He'd invented Eve.

He quick-tossed his shovelful of dirt against the outside of the steel pool wall then quick-turned back toward the house to her, staring at her over Mount Everest, sinking his spade into the side of the mountain to draw out another chunk of red dirt.

“Ah, thank you Doll,” said Mr. Cheseborough.

Aphrodite stooped to lower the tray before Mr. Cheseborough. The girl had no clue she was giving both of them a telescopic view of her cleavage, though Mr. Cheseborough got more of a microscopic job. No, she had no clue. Unlike the coy blonde in *Cool hand Luke* who feigned naïve innocence, this girl truly didn't have the slightest idea of what she had, nor of the effect of what she had had on the opposite sex. His very limited freshman experience with females the past year at college led him to know the difference. What he couldn't figure out was what she was to him—to Mr. Cheseborough. Maybe she was his niece? She couldn't have been his daughter because—

“You're welcome, Chucky” she said, smiling like a sunbeam.

—Because she never called him “Dad” or “Pop” or whatever, but always “Chucky” when he knew darn well the guy's first name was Clarence. Of course, she didn't call him “Uncle Chucky” either, so he couldn't figure out what she was to him, other than a good-looking, teen waitress.

“Looks like it's filling up. Do you think I could go in now?” she said.

Mr. Cheseborough stood up to peer over and through a pass in Mount Everest, with the back of his hand lifting the white fringe of the large, aqua patio umbrella, growing out of the center of the patio table, to see how far the water level had risen in the pool.

“Hopper’s nearly full,” said Mr. Cheseborough. “I guess it would be all right.”

He didn’t know if he should speak up. He hesitated, waiting on one of the schoolteachers to say something. She ambled around the table to the other side of the patio. The girl paused at the edge of the patio, figuring out how best to transverse the range of Himalayas that barred her way to the pool.

He glanced around at the school teachers who looked back at him but kept mum. Aphrodite reached out her foot taking a long stride off the patio. Her foot burrowed into the loose, red dirt, highlighting the inviting curve of her leg. Her broad hips wiggled before her weight fell back to the other foot still on the patio. Her captivating hourglass wobbled, struggling to maintain its balance, shaking her like multiple bowls full of jelly. The school teachers watched but said nothing.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea Mr. Cheseborough,” he said.

The girl faced him with her left foot out of sight, buried, sinking in the red dirt up to her calf. Her right foot clung to the patio, tethered there like a lifeline. She wasn’t quite doing the splits yet, but her lead foot kept sinking-sliding. She leaned to her right, bending over at the waist, to place her right hand back on the patio to steady herself. He saw just about all she had to offer and it was substantial. Those near splits she was posturing were dang provocative. She was in a pickle all right. The girl turned to look up at him and around at Mr. Cheseborough.

“Why not?” she asked.

“Well Miss, as you can see. These mounds ain’t easy to navigate, uh—for us even—in our work boots. You could fall and hurt yourself.”

He swiveled his head back to address Mr. Cheseborough.

“And the water ain’t up high enough in the pool yet, sir. If she goes in there now, she’d trample up that troweling job we did on the sand under the liner. Leave footmarks all over the place, not to mention maybe kicking dirt in your pool, when she climbs in. That won’t be a problem once the water has filled it and the weight of the water compacts the sand to hold it in place. And by tonight, we should have most of the hole back-filled.”

Mr. Cheseborough frowned. He looked at the girl with pity.

“And pardon my saying so Miss.” He swiveled back to the girl. “But if you do get in all right, it won’t be so good for ya getting’ out. You’ll be all wet and you’ll get muddy and it’ll be even harder to keep from fallin’ and gettin’ hurt.”

“Maybe you better not Doll, not just yet,” said Mr. Cheseborough.

“Well, when can I go in Chucky?”

Mr. Cheseborough looked to him, echoing her question to him via the blank expression on his face.

“What time is it now?” he asked.

Mr. Cheseborough glanced at his watch.

“One: thirty,” he replied.

“Well, with two hoses running full blast, I’d say by midnight, probably. Of course, if you could get another hose goin’, maybe by late evening.”

“Okay, Doll?” he said to the girl.

“Okay,” she nodded.

She turned back to the patio, but wobbled, losing her balance when the loose dirt gave way as she pushed off the mound. She fell down against the edge of the patio, banging her leg.

“Ouch.” She said.

Like a gallant knight of old or maybe Neil Armstrong taking a giant leap for mankind, he dropped his shovel, jumping to her aid. He took hold of the crook of her left elbow with one hand and supported her under her right armpit with the other, boosting her up onto the patio, careful not to touch parts of her he shouldn’t. But his feet sunk into the loose, red dirt. He fell down between the narrow vale of grass left between the backside of the Himalayas and the patio, banging his elbow on the concrete.

“Damn it!” he said.

The schoolteachers chuckled.

After gaining the patio surface with both feet, she bent down to him.

“All you all right?”

He looked up into her lovely young, make-up-less face, trying hard to focus his eyes on her hers when his nose was practically in her cleavage. She didn’t even notice. Her concern was for him. That touched him almost as much as the nearness of her ample bust. She seized his hand, helping him scramble to his feet and stand beside her.

“Thanks,” he said, feeling like an A-Number-1 klutz.

“I should thank you,” she replied.

Then he remembered why he’d done what he’d done to get into that predicament. He knelt down to inspect her wound. A cut was bleeding on her shin a few inches below her knee. A welt was already forming around the cut. He reached up with his finger to wipe away blood dripping down her shin.

“Better clean that up, Miss,” he said. “Don’t want it to get infected. Does it hurt much?”

“A little.” She nodded. “Maybe no more than your elbow. Let me see it.”

He lifted his elbow for her inspection. When she took his arm in her hands, he forgot all about her obvious pulchritude to marvel at her compassion for him, when she was hurt worse than he was.

“I don’t see anything,” she said, poring over his elbow. “How does it feel?”

“Like it does when you hit your funny bunny, kind of tingles and burns down your forearm. It’s going numb. But it’s not my throwing arm.”

“Throwing arm?”

“Yeah, you know—for baseball.”

“Oh,” she said. She smiled. She stared into his eyes and he knew what that look meant. She liked him.

“You really should take care of that leg Miss.”

He pointed to her shin, smiling back at her.

“Yeah Doll,” said Mr. Cheseborough, ambling around the table with the mai tai in his hand, in front of his beer belly. “In the medicine cabinet in the hall bathroom, there’s all kinds of first aid stuff. Just help yourself.”

She didn’t seem to hear. She was still staring at him, holding onto his wrist.

“Beverly?” said Mr. Cheseborough, raising his voice. She jumped.

“What?” she said, turning to Mr. Cheseborough. “Did you say something Chucky?”

“I said there’s first aid stuff in the medicine cabinet Darlin’, in the hall bathroom. Use whatever you need.”

“Oh, sure. Thanks Chucky. Thanks a bunch.”

She shimmied around the circular table supporting the giant umbrella the way she had come, opposite of the side where Mr. Cheseborough stood. She favored her left leg as she walked. When she reached the sliding glass door, she paused to turn around.

“Do you think we can we go swimming tonight, Chucky?”

“Sure,” Mr. Cheseborough said. “Sure we can. I don’t see why not, do you Kid?” Mr. Cheseborough turned to him for confirmation.

“Probably. I’ll finish this side first and pull some of those planks over there against the fence down to make a walkway from the patio to the pool. Shouldn’t be any problem at all. But it’ll be pretty late tonight without a third hose.”

Grinning, Mr. Cheseborough raised his glass.

“Don’t worry Doll, it’ll be all right. No school tomorrow. You can stay up late. Now go fix yourself up Darlin. Go ahead now.”

As she slid open the glass door, placing her left foot on the door sill, Mr. Cheseborough stopped her saying—

“And Doll, I got a case of Schlitz in the bottom of the refrigerator. Appreciate it if you could bring back a six-pack for the boys here, once you’re okay of course. It’s a hot day and they deserve a break. Will ya do that for me Darlin’?”

She had a hand lifted to the door behind her, the farther foot on the sill and one still planted on the patio, holding her weight. She had turned to them so he saw her in profile with her right hand hanging limp at her bare thigh. And he thought—*mercy!* She could be in one of them girlie magazines. He clicked a mental picture, freeze-framing her image in his brain for future reference.

“And grab yourself a soft drink—whatever you like,” said Mr. Cheseborough.

“Okay,” she replied. “Thanks, Chucky.”

Beverly stepped inside, closing the door behind her, disappearing behind the curtains. Mr. Cheseborough shook his head.

“Ain’t she somethin’? If I was your age kid, with the way she looked at you? Umm. Umm. Good Lord, Miss Agnes. Umm. Umm. Umm.”

He wagged his head some more, pointing with his glass towards the house.

“If I was you kid—you know she’s the sweetest little gal. There’s not a false bone in her body. And she’s got one helluva body, hey kid?”

Mr. Cheseborough reached over with his free hand to slap him on the back to emphasize his point.

“Yes sir,” he replied. “That’s a fact.”

Mr. Cheseborough must have been close to forty. Mr. Cheseborough was dressed in blue Bermuda shorts and an unbuttoned blue serviceman’s, collared work shirt, that exposed a vintage man’s sleeveless undershirt. A white name tag oval, sealed by a red border over the left chest of his work shirt featured the name *Chucky* inside of it. As affable as anyone he had ever met, Mr.

Cheseborough was what you might call a zany, life-of-the-party kind of guy.

Mr. Cheseborough had just come into some money. On his vacation now to oversee the installation of his new pride and joy and to enjoy his purchase thereafter, Mr. Cheseborough was sowing the seeds of his joy with his good fortune with all who happened to come within hailing distance.

“You’re Ramon’s kid brother, aren’t you?” he said.

“Yes sir.”

“You don’t look a damn thing like him, except maybe around the mouth. In fact, you couldn’t look more unlike. With you being dark and swarthy and him so fair. How’d you account for it?”

Grinning wide, because MR. Cheseborough had just served up a center-cut fast ball. He replied, "Well, guess that's cuz I'm the good-lookin' one."

Mr. Cheseborough shook with laughter while slapping him on the back.

"I believe you're right," said Mr. Cheseborough. "I believe you are."

"Yes sir. That's a fact, too."

Mr. Cheseborough cracked up. He offered his hand.

"Call me Chucky."

"Okay Chucky, will do." He shook Chucky's hand.

"Good, good," said Chucky.

"Hey?" called Larry from the other side of the pool. "You gonna pitch in and do your share kid or you gonna let us backfill this hole by ourselves?"

Larry was one of them guys who was born a butt-hole. Larry musta started out as a small butt-hole and just grew into a bigger one with each passing day. As far as he was concerned, he doubted Larry had reached his full potential yet.

"Gee, I dunno Larry, wouldn't wanna steal your thunder. 'Sides, you need the experience more'n I do. Ain't that what Ramon said?"

Lou glanced from him to Larry.

"Forget it, Larry," he said. "If the kid wants to cruise, cuz his brother's the big shot, let 'em."

The titular head of the three schoolteachers was Baxter Suggs. He was the diplomat of the group and a high school classmate of Ramon's. Bax was also a neighbor who had lived two doors down and across the street from him for many years. He knew all three Suggs boys and their parents well.

"Kid?" Bax said, and nodded towards Mount Everest.

"Okay, Bax. I gotcha." He nodded to Bax then trudged back to work.

A few minutes later, the girl, whom Chucky had called Beverly, came back, sliding the glass door open and closing it with her foot and an elbow. Pressed against her chest in the crook of her right arm was a six-pack of Schlitz in the bottle. An unopened bottle of Pepsi dangled from her left hand. She held a can-opener cross-wise in her mouth with her teeth. Her shin bore a large band-aid but he spotted no trace of blood on her leg. What wouldn't he give to be that six-pack of Schlitz right now?

Chucky had sat back down in one of those old-fashioned white whicker arm-chairs with the high back that fanned out above the head, kind of like his throne. It was the only such chair on the patio. The four other chairs were iron, armless, metal, white-painted jobs with two front legs molded to a rear U-base that gave a spring to the chairs when you hopped in or out of them. They must have come

with the table because they looked like they did. Chucky couldn't see the girl behind him for the over-sized chair.

"Chucky, behind ya."

Chucky turned just in time to accept the six-pack from the girl, thumping it down on the table. The girl set the Pepsi bottle down next to the beer. Chucky broke open the cardboard covering the six bottles. He called for them all to take a break and come "grab a cold one." He handed each bottle to the girl, who removed the opener from her lips to pop the caps off the bottles before setting the opened beer down on the table.

The sweating school teachers traipsed around outside the dirt mounds encircling the pool, sometimes slipping on the loose dirt. Chucky handed each one a bottle of Schlitz as they came up to the table. The girl popped off the top of her Pepsi last.

Chucky turned to him, as he whittled away at Mount Everest.

"Hey, Kid. Don't ya wanna beer? Come on take a break. Come on over here."

He poked his flat shovel into the mountain to trudge over Everest, feeling the loose, red dirt seep between his high-topped work shoes and his socks, as it had when he'd fallen, helping the girl earlier. He hated that feeling, but chose to ignore it, letting the dirt work its way down under his foot. Shaking his head as he reached the patio, he said.

"I'll take a break but not a beer."

"Why not?" asked Chucky, "you an alcoholic or just a teetotaler?"

"Neither. Just that I ain't used to beer that much but I know enough that if I drink one now in this heat, I won't be worth a damn. These boys'll have to finish the job without me and I don't believe they'd appreciate that."

"Well, how 'bout something else—a soft drink, glass of tea—water?"

"Somethin' like that Pepsi'd do me just fine."

He pointed to the bottle Beverly was mouthing. She lifted the bottle from her lips.

"Here," she said. "I only took a sip."

She walked around Chucky's chair to hand him the Pepsi bottle.

"There's more in the house," said Chucky as she came around his throne.

"Gee, I didn't see any. Not in the refrigerator anyway," she said.

"Check the pantry. I'm sure there's some on the floor in there." Chucky said.

She smiled. "All right." She pushed the bottle at him but he pushed it back.

"No need for me to take yours from you," he said. "I can have one of them others from iniside."

“No,” she said. “They’ll be warm. You take this cold one. I barely touched it, honest.”

She pressed the cold bottle into his hot hand. The sensation of cold against his hot, callused hand persuaded him.

“Okay, thanks. Thanks a lot.”

When he accepted the bottle, she beamed. It was easy to look her in the eye now. He didn’t care about checking out her ample curves. He liked her regardless.

As she turned back to the house, Chucky caught her by the hand. Chucky drained his mai tai then shook the empty glass before her.

“Would ya be a Doll, Darlin’ and do me another?”

She nodded. “Sure Chucky, right away.”

“Little heavier on the rum this time, would ya Sweetie?”

“Okay Chucky.” Beaming a smile, she took the empty glass out of his hand.

“Thank ya, Doll. You’re such an angel.” Then he handed her the tray.

The girl took both glass and tray then scurried into the house. Her broad butt shimmied and shook behind her like two bowls of Jello. They all turned to watch her go. She never looked back.

“She ain’t got a clue what she’s got there,” said Chucky. “Never knew a more humble girl.”

“What’s she to you,” asked Lou.

“Here, sit down in the shade there fellas,” said Chucky, spreading his arms out, motioning to the four iron chairs around the table. “Take a load off.”

They took Chucky up on his offer to sit under the shade of the wide umbrella.

“Yeah,” said Larry. “She your niece or something?”

“Nah,” replied Chucky. “She lives next door there.” He pointed over the pool to the brick and siding rambler just up the hill. “She goes to high school around the corner at Crossland. Her old man’s a major, stationed out at Andrews. Got a kid brother and sister. Real nice folks.”

“These *real nice folks* know she’s over here in a bikini servin’ you mai tais and beer?” Baxter asked.

Chucky laughed. He slapped his thigh.

“As a matter of fact they do. Well, don’t know about the mai tais. When I showed her how to make one, I said we could keep that just between us. Might say I’m trainin’ her up.” He winked. “But they know she’s over here servin’ as my girl Friday. See. I told her folks that the family could come over and swim anytime they wanted. The mother said that was awful nice of me, but they

wouldn't dream of accepting if they couldn't return the favor. The girl—Beverly—offered to help around the house and her kid brother is cuttin' my grass tomorrow. I didn't wanna accept but the old lady said it was only fair. She said her kids had to learn you don't get somethin' for nothin' in life and it would teach them what it meant to be a good neighbor, too. But it was only when she said she wouldn't let them swim if I didn't let them help that I gave in. The looks on those kids' faces when she said they couldn't use the pool just killed me. It did."

Chucky pointed at him. "I was tellin' your boy here what I'd do with her if I was his age."

He sat down in the only empty chair, the only one left because it was in the sun and closest to Chucky's white whicker throne.

"Shee-itt," said Larry, "the kid wouldn't know what to do. That stuff would be wasted on him."

They all looked at him. He smiled and sipped his Pepsi, saying nothing.

Chucky said, "Don't know 'bout that. He looks like the cat that swallowed the canary, you ask me."

"That right Kid," said Lou, "you know what for, do ya?"

He shrugged. "Been ta college a year," he said.

Chucky reached over and slapped his thigh, laughing loud.

"You bet he has. Gettin' a higher education, aren't ya boy? Just look at that dirt-eatin' grin."

He didn't know what Chucky meant by a dirt-eatin grin. He still had a lot to learn—everything.

"All I meant was, in college you don't just learn from books," he said. "Ya learn about people, too. See? That's what I meant."

Chucky chuckled. "And you learned about a few in particular, hey?"

Chucky slapped his thigh, as laughter grew all around the table. Sure, he'd learned about a few. He learned some girls, like guys, were jerks like Larry and some weren't, but he'd always known that. As far as romance was concerned, he might as well have been in kindergarten. He didn't have any sisters, so he didn't think girls were quite human, like maybe they were from another planet.

"Hear ya had a little trouble with Betty Sue Everest the other night. Heard her and you aren't on speakin' terms any more," said Baxter.

"How'd you hear that Bax?"

"Oh, little birdie told me. What happened there?"

“Nothin’ happened. I was jus’ scared outta my gourd her old man was gonna come down ta the basement any second and blast me with his shotgun.”

They laughed.

“Didn’t have ta worry about such nonsense at college,” he added.

They laughed harder, but he was serious.

“Yeah,” said Bax, “That was probably a prudent decision on your part. Her old man’s got the reddest neck I ever saw. I grew up with the older one Wiley. Your brother Ramon and Wiley and me hung out together. Her old man is a pip. If he’d caught you with his daughter, who’s as spoiled rotten as they come, doubt you’d have a chance to carry on the family name, cuz I don’t think Ramon is gonna have any more kids, not after three girls.”

The girl returned with two glasses on the round tray. Like a good waitress, she bent over from the waist between Chucky and Lou to deliver Chucky his mai tai. All eyes were upon her, but she didn’t know it. If she did, she had tremendous poise not to betray her emotions. She stayed bent over until Chucky tasted his drink. He and the others got to see all of both of her, or sdamn near all. That angle didn’t leave but a smidgen to his imagination. Kind of stunned him.

“Wow!” said Chucky. “Now that’s what I call a mai tai Doll. Thank you so much.” He patted her fanny. The girl blushed crimson.

“You’re welcome Chucky,” she said, beaming, tickled to be of service.

She set down the tray on the table to drink from the other glass she’d brought out for herself. He rose out of his chair.

“Here,” he said, stepping around behind the chair to hold it for her. “Sit down here, why don’t ya?”

“Are you sure it’s all right?”

“Sure, I’m sure. I’ll just sit down on the patio here next to Chucky. You should get off that leg. Does it hurt much?”

“Not too much,” she replied.

She walked around Chucky’s throne, favoring her leg just a bit more than she had just a minute ago when she’d come out, like she remembered the hurt all of a sudden. She sat down side-saddle on the patio, not in the chair, between Chucky and him, leaning on her left hand and drinking with her right but looking at him.

“Don’t you wanna use the chair,” he asked. “That concrete ain’t too soft.”

“Nope,” she shook her head. “I don’t mind. I figure you’re sort of a guest here and my mother says we should always give the guest the best chair.”

He shook his head, stepping around to squat on the chair anyway. Was she something else or what? Except for Bax, they all could peer down her cleavage. And they did. She didn't seem to notice. How innocent was this chick?

"I put a six-pack of Pepsis in the fridge, Chucky." Turning back to him, she said "so they should be cold if you want another one later, if it's all right with Chucky?" She looked up at Chucky behind her.

Chucky patted her on the head as if she were his pet poodle.

"Sure, of course it is Sweetie. Of course it is."

"Will the pool really be ready for swimming tonight?"

"Should be, if we can get a third hose going," he replied, smiling at her.

Her face brightened saying, "We've got a long hose that might reach. Should I go get it?" She made an effort as if to rise.

"Not right this minute Darlin'," said Chucky, patting her head again. "Just stay put a minute and keep us old farts company until these boys finish their drinks. Then you can go."

She sat back down as before. "Okay." He tried not to stare at her cleavage, but that was no easy task. She looked over at him, blushed and then looked down to the patio.

They gabbed, all except him and the girl, who just sat there like a pet Lab, just breathing. That was good enough for him, just watching her breathe. He couldn't take his eyes off her. He didn't join the adults in conversation either, just watched her breathe and drank his Pepsi, looking away whenever she looked at him. She did the same to him. It went on that way with the men talking and them stealing glances at each other until the schoolteachers finished off the six-pack. Best damn work break he ever had. Based on his extended closer inspection of Beverly, what Chucky had called her, he thought mebbe he should follow Chucky's advice, ask her out, if he could get up the nerve.

Chucky sent her off with him to her house to hook up her hose and drag it down to the pool. The long garden hose reached just far enough. He assured her that with three hoses working full blast, the pool should be ready for swimming that evening before dark.

That evening, he made good on his promise. Mount Everest had disappeared, now filling in the hole on the house side of the pool. He laid down two ten-foot by eight-inch, wooden planks side by side to stretch across the mud moat between the patio and the pool's edge. When he gathered his stuff to leave, she asked Chucky if he couldn't stay and swim with her.

Chucky told them they were all welcome to stay and swim. He said he'd break out the rest of his case of Schlitz for them. But the schoolteachers had to get home to their wives and he had a ball game to play. The schoolteachers agreed to take one with them for the road. Beverly did the honors.

He was walking around the side of the house to his Buick convertible parked out on the street, when she stopped him. She asked him to wait a minute. She hurried off towards the house, jiggling all her lovely parts before disappearing inside. She came out with a Pepsi that she opened for him with a can opener.

"Here, take it. It's good and cold now," she said.

He took the Pepsi, thanked her and told her he looked forward to seeing her tomorrow. She beamed like a light bulb.

The next day after work, she and Chucky again invited him to stay and swim. But it was Friday night. He had promised to play cards with the Salvaranos and their crowd. She looked heartbroken. He asked her if she would like to go out with him the next night—Saturday. He offered to take her putt-putt golfing. She said she'd ask her Dad. She ran next door, flying back to him minutes later. Yes. She could go. He told her he'd pick her up the next night at eight. The light bulb inside her turned on again. Her beam overwhelmed him.

The next evening he knocked on her door at the appointed time. She answered then ushered him in to meet the family. He sat down on the couch. Her folks asked him where he lived, where he went to high school and how he'd gotten into the pool business. He noted that his high school and her high school Crossland were rivals. He didn't say anything about college because he thought it might be too much like showing off. And they didn't ask. They said she had told them he played baseball. He said he did but he was kind of in the coach's doghouse for a spell and wasn't seeing as much playing time as he'd like. Her dad asked where he was going to take Beverly. He told her dad he planned on taking her mini-golfing and maybe for ice cream afterward, if she wanted. Her dad told him to have Beverly back by midnight and to drive safely.

The evening played out as planned. This girl was a polar opposite of Betty Sue Everest. She didn't think to unlock the door for him. She didn't sit close to him. She didn't hook her arm in his when they walked. Didn't even carry a purse, though she produced a ten-spot from her skirt pocket.

"In case you need it," she said, but he told her to keep the bill.

Other than that, she said little. He thought she might have been self-conscious. It was, after all, their first date. But she seemed at peace with herself, unpretentious. She seemed content. She carried herself with a humble, quiet dignity that he came to appreciate more as the evening wore on. She was lovely.

Beverly dressed in a navy blue A-line skirt that stopped a few inches shy of her knees and a sleeveless, collarless, white cotton top that buttoned up the front. A pair of navy blue Keds completed her ensemble, matching her skirt. One thing struck him as odd, setting off a faint alarm in the back of his head. Now that she was clothed, with her hair out of her face, he noticed how young she really was. Her hourglass shape was still very much evident. It just didn't smack you in the face. Clothed, she looked much younger than sweet sixteen Betty Sue. But he decided not to let his concern spoil their evening. Besides, perhaps it was unwarranted. Betty Sue looked as old as co-eds he'd known out at college.

He chose to take her to the putt-putt course off Pennsylvania Avenue extended, just outside the Beltway rather than to the one around the corner from her house, because he wanted to sit next to her longer in the car just to admire her presence. He'd never played at the Penn. Avenue course, but he'd seen it and the driving range from the highway when he'd waited there at the stoplight.

The course turned out to be crap—old, plain and in disrepair. If he had known it was like that, he wouldn't have come. It was no wonder they were the only couple on the course, even though it was a Saturday night. She didn't seem to mind. She seemed to be delighted just to be with him. The only problem was her blonde hair. She wore her hair long, parted high and off center. In the car with the top down, the road winds had played havoc with her hair. She'd combed it constantly with her fingers so she could see. On the miniature golf course, her hair fell in her face whenever she bent over to putt the ball. It was a problem.

He offered to hold her hair for her when she putted. That didn't work out as well as he'd hoped. Finally, she condescended to pull a burette from the pocket of her A-line skirt to keep her long hair out of her face. When she tied her hair back, he noticed she had a straight Roman nose that was neither too large nor too anything bad. Beverly had high cheek bones with chubby, rosy, teen girl cheeks, a nicely formed mouth—no braces, no acne. She wore no make-up, not even lipstick. Didn't need any. Her lips were a smooth light pink and demure and understated as she was. In fact, her complexion was smooth and creamy except for the rose of her cheeks. Her chin was neither pointed nor square. She wasn't quite sloe-eyed but her blonde brows rode straight over her blue eyes that

were perhaps the most honest pair of eyes he'd ever met, true windows to her soul. Chucky had been right. Her name was Humility in every sense of the word.

They finished putt-putting so quickly that he took her over to the driving range. She had never struck a golf ball so he had a lot of fun teaching her how it was supposed to be done. She made the experience grand because of the varied looks of unassuming emotion that crossed her face after each swinging attempt. Looks ranging from horror, to surprise, to humor, to angry determination, and wondrous joy once she started to get the hang of it. By the time they had emptied the second large bucket she'd driven two balls to the 150-yard marker on the fly. She said she thought she could like golf.

He drove her over to the Carvel ice cream parlor across from the air force base. They sat in his convertible, eating ice cream without talking much. He had Bev home by eleven, so they sat in his car in her driveway with the top up, talking for a while because she said she didn't want the evening to end just yet. During the course of their conversation, she learned he was going to college out West. He learned that she was fourteen.

Fourteen?

Though he'd had his suspicions, voicing her age shocked him. She seemed to take their age difference with aplomb. She showed the same modest poise she had displayed all evening. It didn't seem to bother her at all.

He walked her to the door to say good-night about eleven: thirty. He pecked her on the cheek and bent over to kiss the back of her hand. When he looked up, the joy on her face was infectious. Before leaving, he offered to take her out for pizza at a classy restaurant the next evening after his ball game. He said he'd pick her up at six: thirty. She accepted.

The next night when he knocked at her door, her father—the Major—answered. Her father asked if they could have a word out on the porch. He saw Beverly standing on the other side of the front screen door just inside the house. She was dressed sloppily in a baggy T-shirt and Bermuda shorts. She did not appear ready to go out for dinner at a classy restaurant, if only for pizza. Her lower lip jutted out. She looked like she may have been crying. Her eyes were red and swollen. He had never seen her sad before. That depressed him. For her depression was as contagious for him now, as her joy had been infectious for him last night standing in nearly the same place.

Standing before him now, Major McMichael sighed. He looked as if he were about to undergo a root canal without Novocain.

“Son,” he said in a quiet tone. “From everything I’ve seen and heard, you are a fine, upstanding, respectable young man. My wife agrees with me.”

He saw Beverly’s kid brother and sister pop up to stare out the front picture window at him and their dad. They must have been kneeling on the couch he knew stood beneath that glass the other side of the wall. He heard their mom scolding the kids to come away from the window. They disappeared but Beverly remained not five feet away behind the screen door. He was sure she could hear every word of his conversation with her dad.

“We have nothing against you, you understand. It’s just that when Beverly told us you were eighteen and going to be a sophomore in college—well—last night was Beverly’s first date, and we would not have let her go if we had known you were that old. You look more like sixteen to be honest. And as you learned, Bev is only fourteen. She’ll be a sophomore too, but in high school. I have some young men in my squadron your age and I would never consider letting one of them date Beverly no matter how gentlemanly they might be. I just think that four years and being away from home, a college man so to speak as you are, is too great a difference for her at this time. She is very naïve. We’ve sheltered Beverly all her life. She has no idea of worldly ways and what it means to keep company with a boy, which frankly, I really don’t consider you to be.

“Now I mean no offense son and I can see this is difficult for you. It’s difficult for her mother and me and most definitely, it’s difficult for Beverly. She likes you very much and I can see why. But you see the difficulty of the situation? I’m afraid I cannot permit Beverly to see you tonight or any other night. I hope you will understand. If you are the young man I perceive you to be, I believe you will.”

Major McMichael inclined his head while arching a questioning brow. The major waited for him to speak.

He peeked around the major’s shoulder at Beverly standing in the doorway. One arm crossed under her chest, supporting her other elbow with her fist. Her other hand reached up to her face. She appeared to be chewing on a fingernail, holding her breath. He faced her dad.

“You’re right sir. The thing was I had no idea Beverly was only fourteen until she told me last night and it shocked me, to be honest. So I was probably as surprised as you were to learn of the difference in our ages.

“I’ve been thinking about it too and confess it troubled me but then I thought—well, Beverly is such a fine girl, sir. Like I said I never would have guessed, never did guess that she was only fourteen. Not just because of the way

she looks, but also by the way she carries herself. I don't believe I've ever met a girl of any age who carries herself with such a humble, polite—uh modest—poise. I think that's the right word. But really Major McMichael, you give me too much credit. I'm a lot closer to Beverly in social age than you think. I only dated a few times myself and that's mostly been since I got home—all but once.

“So I thought maybe, just for the summer, we could see each other a few times and just be friends kind of. But ...”

He peeked around the major's shoulder again. Beverly remained as before. He bit his lower lip.

“Well, I guess what I mean to say sir is Beverly sure is a fine girl and I see your point. I really do. But I truly would like to get know her better. I would treat her with all the respect she deserves, all the respect you would like but ...”

“But what,” asked her dad.

He nodded then stared at his feet. When he looked up, he said.

“I don't really like it, but I'll respect your wishes. But I really hope you change your mind and give us a chance—sir. See, I been kind o' sheltered, too.”

“Daddy,” called Beverly from behind the screen door. “Can't he come over and going swimming with us in Chucky's pool? Chucky said he could. Chucky will be there, too. The kids can come over.”

The major spoke over his shoulder. “No honey, I don't think that would be a good idea. We discussed this. Now don't make this more difficult than it already is Beverly. You know how your mother and I feel about it.”

Her mother appeared at the door taking Beverly in both hands by Beverly's shoulders as if to turn her away.

“Look Major McMichael, could I just take Bev for a short ride, just, just around the block is all, just to say goodbye?”

The major hesitated.

“Mike, I think that would be all right,” said Beverly's mother from the doorway.

The major grimaced then smiled.

“Okay, just around the block now. I don't want to have to come looking for you.”

“Yes sir, just around the block, but don't expect me to drive too fast.”

The major nodded.

“Beverly. Come out here,” the Major said.

Beverly opened the door and stepped out beside her dad on the porch.

“You heard him. Just a ride around the block now, Honey. That's all.”

Beverly shook her head. “Yes, Daddy.”

“All right, go ahead then.”

Beverly lowered her head as she descended the stoop with him. He walked her over to the passenger side of his car and opened the door for her. He walked back around the car to climb in behind the wheel. He backed out of her driveway then took off around the block, with the top down.

Beverly sat in the passenger seat staring straight ahead. They didn’t speak for a short while. Halfway round the block, he felt compelled to speak.

“Look Beverly, I feel as bad about this as you do. I do—really. If there’s anything I could say to make it easier for you, please tell me and I’ll say it. If there’s anything I could do to make it better for you, please tell me and I’ll do it.”

She just shook her head, clasping her hands in her lap so tight that he believed he saw her fingertips turning white.

“Look Bev, your dad doesn’t want me to have anything to do with you and well, you heard our conversation. I may be eighteen, but when it comes to girls and stuff, I really ain’t any older than you are. He just don’t seem to understand that. I guess I might do the same thing if I was in his spot. I guess I really can’t say as I blame him.”

“I can,” she said.

“Yeah, I know. You feel like that right now but you’ll get over it. You will.”

“Maybe I don’t want to get over it.”

“Look, if you want, maybe, mebbe I can write you—from college maybe? Would you like that?”

She shrugged. “Only if you want to,” she said.

They were rounding the far turn heading down the homestretch. This was not going well at all and he felt helpless to save the situation. He felt like a heel.

As he approached her driveway, her lower lip trembled. He pulled to a stop behind her dad’s car. He pivoted on the bench seat to take her hand. Peering into her blue eyes, the transparent windows to her soul, he felt his stomach turn.

“See, I’ve never, and I mean *never*, met a girl as nice as you. Maybe it’s just because you’re so young that you are the way you are. I dunno. Maybe you’ll change as you get older. I dunno. All I know right now is; you’re a great chick. And I’m proud to have known you, proud we were able to go out at least once together. And I promise I won’t forget you.”

He leaned over and, raising her hand to his lips, he kissed the back of her hand as he had the previous night on her front porch.

“I guess this is good-bye Beverly. I’m sorry as hell.”

“Good-bye,” she said, staring straight ahead again towards the back of her dad’s car in front of them. She threw her hand over her mouth and bolted out of the car, walking fast between the cars then running up the steps into her house.

The door closed.

He took a deep breath and wagged his head.

“Damn,” he said to himself. “Dammit all to hell. She must think I’m the biggest heel ever. Funny, I don’t mind so much that Betty Sue thinks I’m a ‘bastard.’ She may even be right. But she’s probably over me already after a week. But this girl here, she’ll always remember I dumped her after one date—her first date! For cryin’ out loud. Always remember I wouldn’t stand up to her old man and fight for her.”

He slumped over resting his head against the steering wheel.

“First Betty Sue and now this. I guess that’s strike two for the summer. One more strike and I’m outta there. I gotta find a girl my own age for the summer. I just gotta. And I gotta do it soon.”

First Date

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~ Post Script ~

About three years later in the spring, he had finished college a semester early to save his dad some money. The newspapers reported 1975 as the worst year for job opportunities for graduating college seniors since the Great Depression. To make ends meet, he took jobs substitute teaching at local, public schools until he found a more permanent position. He was in love with a girl he’d met a couple years before, who was a year behind him in college. They were thinking of getting married, but they couldn’t get married if he didn’t have a decent job.

One day that Spring, he found himself substituting at a nearby high school. He was babysitting an advanced math class for senior students bound for college, who needed no babysitting at all. Unlike some of the rowdier vocational classes for which he’d substituted, this class was quiet and well-behaved, no problem at all. It was the one day of substituting that he felt that he was stealing his paycheck. At the end of class, two girls approached him at the teacher’s desk.

One of the girls said she knew him. She said they'd gone out together once about three years ago. Failing to recognize her at all, he said she must have mistaken him with someone else. But she persisted. As she presented details of their brief history, it began to dawn on him she may be telling the truth. But, as he looked at her, he couldn't believe she was the girl whose father had once broken them apart. The teen standing before him did not resemble the girl he remembered, the one of whom he'd taken that mental snap shot, which had been frozen in the recesses of his memory for posterity. She had thinned out quite a bit and her hair had darkened. She had a melancholy about her that was far removed from the girl he had once known.

As she presented more details that only she and he could know, his brain told him this girl must be telling the truth that his eyes refused to believe. Once he realized she must be the girl, he lied in a cowardly fashion for selfish financial reasons, denying in front of her friend that he ever knew her. The girl left with her friend, bewildered, embarrassed, disenchanted and sorely disappointed.

Though there is no excuse for the inexcusable, there are always reasons, though not justifiable ones in this case. He was *afraid*—read cowardly—that if word got out that he had dated a fourteen year old girl—this student—when he was a rising sophomore in college, he would be crossed off the list of potential substitute teachers. Or, perhaps worse, if he were invited back to sub and their relationship was known, he could easily lose the respect of the students he was paid to supervise. Already he had been mistaken for students in the hall. His youthful appearance made it tough enough to retain their respect, especially, when he substituted in vocational classes, where school rules precluded students from working on their projects under the supervision of a substitute teacher. The situation led to boredom, shenanigans and was a breeding ground, rife for teen rebels with a cause.

His cowardly lie ate away him that night. He had shown more class at eighteen when he first met her than he had at twenty-one when he should have known better. He promised to seek her out to apologize if he ever substituted at her school again. He did—once more—but was unable to locate her. In retrospect, nearly two score years later, he probably should have visited her home to seek her out and apologize, but he never did. Perhaps he was discouraged by the last memory he possessed—knocking at her door and standing on that porch when her father had separated them. In any event, he never did apologize.

~ First Date ~

But, if it truly is “never too late,” please accept my sincerest apology now Barb for my inexcusable behavior so long ago. I hope and pray all is well with you and yours and that the Good Lord will bless you and keep you and make His face to shine upon you always.

— M. Shegoque