

The Double G

Before we could seat ourselves, she was on him like salt on a pretzel, a very large pretzel since my brother Harry is what anybody would call a big man. I looked across the table to our pal Nick who'd just placed his frozen mudslide on the hi-top. He was looking back at me for some kind of clue. I had nothing. I didn't know her, had never seen her before.

She stood just behind Harry's shoulder and wrapped an arm around his waist, her small, tanned hand nearly reaching the middle of his belly. In the other hand, she held a bottle of beer. Harry may have said hello.

"Hi boys," she said to the three of us. "Who's the giant ginger here?"

She meant my brother, I guess. I mean, he was large and had sandy colored hair, which had reddened in the sun. In fact, everything about him was red. He'd been out in the July sun all day, and we'd passed a joint on the way down to the bar. His face was florid in its redness, his arms, hands and fingers the color of radishes. Even so, he was a man who was comfortable in his own skin and the question seemed impertinent.

"Him?" I asked, pointing to Nick.

"No, no, say, are you busting ...No, I mean this big beautiful thing. This one," she said giving Harry a squeeze.

"That's Harry," I said. "That's Nick and I'm Pete."

"How do you do?" She said.

"Pete's my kid brother," said Harry.

"I don't get care about that, Ginger."

Nick fidgeted, got up and slid his drink in front of the next empty chair at the table. “Why don’t you sit down,” he began and paused.

“Sandy,” she said.

“Sandy, then,” said Nick. “Have a seat.”

“Oh, a gentleman.”

Nick smiled.

“You have some nice teeth there, you an actor?”

“No,” said Nick.

She slid her arm off Harry and took a seat.

“You look like an actor, someone I know from somewhere. Shit.”

I’d been around Nick long enough to have seen all kinds of people play the same guessing game, in bars, at ballgames, on the street. And here on the island, actors turned up occasionally. Why there could have been any number of celebrities marinating on pleasure craft around New Harbor, the great salt pond that sheltered countless mariners season in and season out.

She dropped it though, and turned back to Harry.

“And what do you do, Ginger?” she asked.

“Harry,” he corrected her. “I’m a disgraced professional baseball umpire.”

So he hadn’t been playing along with an old pal like I thought, having a laugh with her on Nick and me.

“Screw you,” she said and laughed, then added, “Maybe I would.”

We were sitting in the open air near the end of a dock. The bar was maybe six feet behind us and in between there were other high tops with other people sitting around them. Kids licking ice cream cones walked by. Other kids on skateboards. Families piled in and out of launches. And Sandy was not speaking in the one foot voice I recommend to my seventh graders. I worried that we might be causing a scene.

“Hey, hold on a minute,” I said.

“What?” She said.

“Just look around,” I said.

“Relax,” she said. “This is the island, man. What happens on the island stays on the island.”

“Oh God,” groaned Nick. “Really?”

“I know,” she snapped her fingers, “I know who it is. Michael Douglas,” she said.

That’s the one, I thought to myself, but said, “He doesn’t look so good right now, that Michael Douglas.”

“That’s what I mean,” she said and lit a cigarette.

Nick didn’t laugh. Harry said nothing but I noticed that he’d already drained his mudslide. I still had half a glass but I knocked it back. Nick’s was nearly full.

“Don’t you like the drink?” I asked him, hoping he’d do likewise and maybe we could blow.

“Oh yeah,” he said. But I knew the look. He was glad the attention was on Harry. For the time being he was content to lay back and watch what would happen. One joke at his expense wouldn’t faze him much.

Harry had had the idea to walk down to the Shoals. Just the three of us in honor of me coming out to the island for the day. Harry and Nick had been here with their wives on other summer nights but the girls insisted it be guys only tonight. So we'd hiked down from the rented cottage to tank up on frozen mudslides, take in the breathy mid-summer night and talk about whether or not we'd fish the next day.

But in blew Sandy.

And as it turned out, she was not alone. Two more women trailed her, one a sun-bleached blonde like her, the other a brunette wearing a turned around baseball cap. The blonde, who held a beer in a foam sleeve, looked at Sandy and said, "We wondered where you got off to, bitch."

Sandy rolled her eyes. "My twin," she said.

"I can see that," said Nick.

He should have been actor in any event. He put the line over so well. Sandy was lying of course. The crows feet under her eyes, the pallor under the sunburn, the grey flecks at the tip of her ponytail__ the blondes both wore ponytails__ all conspired against the claim.

The brunette gave the table a look around, winked at Sandy and said to the other one, "There's karaoke inside, and the Elton John guy is fuckin' hilarious. Coming, Ash?"

"No, I'm gonna hang here with ugly and her friends. I kinda like this one." She looked at Harry, but stepped behind Nick and circled his chest with her arms. With her thumbs and forefingers, she squeezed his pecs.

"Like that handsome?" She laughed.

Nick stumbled off his seat, the table rocked a bit.

"Who moved the bar?" Sandy laughed.

Nick said, "I'm getting another round. Who's in?"

I said, "Sure." Just to help him out. He hadn't known what to do, so he did anything.

Who hasn't?

Harry nodded.

The sisters said, "We got ours."

Ashley plopped herself down in Nick's seat. She lit a cigarette and looked at me, "Why you so uptight?"

The question confused me. I'd been off somewhere, wondering if tomorrow's weather would favor fishing or a bike ride.

"Who says I'm uptight?" I said.

Sandy and Ashley laughed.

"Don't get your balls in a sweat about it. We see all kinds," said Sandy.

"How's that?" I said.

"We're cops," Ashley said. "Yeah, the both of us, with the Nassau County Sheriff's Department."

Harry leaned in closer.

"You're sisters and you're cops?" I said.

"Drug squad," said Ashley.

"Don't listen to her, Ginger," said Sandy.

"Where the hell is Nassau County?" I said. I really didn't know.

"Long Island," said Harry, who'd traded commodities in Manhattan before moving to New England.

"Say," he said, "did I run in to you two before? You ever work together? A tag team on motorcycles out there in Massapequa?"

“No, you never did,” said Sandy. “I’d remember writing you up.”

“Just looking at you tells me you’ve done things,” said Ashley. “Your eyes are a little bloodshot.”

“The brother here is innocent of all charges,” I said.

“He likes to smoke,” said Ashley, who went on to say she’d earned a master’s degree in criminal psychology while Sandy made a yack yack yack sign with her hand.

Nick returned with the drinks and pushed one to me and one to Harry.

“What are we talking about?” Nick asked.

“Ginger was saying how he likes to smoke weed,” said Sandy.

“Smoke or purvey?” winked Ashley.

“I wouldn’t do either,” said Harry. “You know they test for that in baseball?”

“Baseball?” said Ashley. “What the ef?”

“He owns a baseball team,” said Sandy.

“Yeah, I bet. Who is it, the Metsies?”

“No, the GIANTS!” Sandy laughed.

Ashley looked at Nick and said, “I hate her, you know?”

Before Nick could finish saying, “Aww, no you don’t,” Sandy was pointing a finger at Ashley,

“Hey Ash,” she said, “Bobby looks lonesome over there, sittin’ all by himself, why don’t you go keep him company?”

“You keep him company,” Ashley barked, “he’s your freakin’ husband.”

“Husband,” I said and looked around the table without making eye contact with either of the sisters. The tabletop was strewn with empty beer cans, plastic drink cups, straws, the butts of cigarettes___ everywhere cluttered with nothing, and I started thinking this should be over.

“I don’t believe you,” Nick told Ashley. “Her husband’s here? Where?”

Harry looked up from his cell phone, where he’d been checking tide charts. “Yeah, where?” he said.

“Hey, B.,” Sandy hollered in the direction of the bar. “Say hello to my new friends.”

A little guy wearing an FDNY baseball cap and a salty moustache spun around on his stool and waved his beer in our direction. “Sorry, suckers,” he said.

“Join us,” said Harry, but the guy had turned back to the bartender, who was sleek and tanned, like the sitcom roommate who flirts with all the fellows the lead brings home from the office. And I wondered suddenly if she was a prop and if the sisters were actually sisters. Salty moustache could have been anybody.

Anyway, Nick didn’t like it. He’d been fidgeting on his feet since he returned with the drinks. “I’m gonna split,” he said. “Get home to the girls.”

“Girls,” Ashley said. “What girls?”

“They have wives at home,” I said.

“No shit,” Ashley said, looking at Nick. “I thought you were gay.”

“It’s the teeth,” said Sandy.

“No, I think it’s the tan,” said Ashley.

“No, it’s the teeth, the tan and the hands,” said Sandy and reached across the table to high-five her sister who was doing the same thing.

Nick turned and walked away.

“He’s really going?” said Sandy.

“Hey, come back handsome, we’re just busting,” said Ashley.

Harry stepped off his stool. He exhaled and said he never been more charmed by women he’d met purely by accident. He started to say something else, about a collision at sea, but stopped to insist he had a curfew and had to go too.

“They can go, Ginger, but look, you gotta stay,” said Sandy.

Harry shook his head, “Sorry, but rules are rules.”

“Rules were made to be broken, honey, every good boy knows that. I’m thinking especially you.”

“And you call yourself a policewoman,” I said.

“Can it Pete,” Harry said to me, and the two of us stepped away fast.

“See you around,” called Sandy and I thought I heard Ashley tell her to shut up.

We caught up to Nick who was waiting just out of the light at the street end of the pier.

“Jesus, what the hell was that?” He said.

“I don’t know,” I said, “but I think I need a moral shower.”

Harry was quiet and we began to walk again.

A breeze had come up from the southwest and pushed away some of the sickly closeness of the previous hour. Still, I felt uneasy. I began to feel less certain that the blondes’ cheesy chitchat had been the chemical result of running into us. I needed to understand a few things, and I had begun to say just that when I felt my brother’s mitt-sized hand clamp down on my arm.

“Nobody talks right now,” he said. “I mean it, nobody.”