

No More Roses

Rickie and Buddy had endured a long day, cleaning and painting a rental unit for Miss Winnie that the new tenant was dying to get into. Buddy, always a perfectionist, though a very slow one, resented the hurry-ups and dragged his scraping and sawing and painting out so that Rickie had spent most of the day trying to negotiate speed with him while placating Miss Winnie, assuring her that the job would get done on time. As a result, she hadn't finished cleaning until nearly dark. And that night Rickie's friend, Angelle the midget, came by so that Buddy could finish her tattoo, and to tell Rickie about Waylon's funeral.

Angelle claimed to be four feet tall, but Rickie knew she was only three feet nine inches. Her tiny back was now nearly covered with an almost completed tattoo featuring two leaping dolphins under a sun and moon on either side of a rainbow with a bubbling eddy of blue water underneath. This was no tramp stamp of hearts and flowers. Buddy was a very precise artist, and Angelle was pleased with his work. When it finally stayed warm, she'd be excited to wear backless sundresses to show it off, especially knowing that her tattoo would normally cost many hundreds of dollars.

Angelle, like Rickie, worked now and again at a local bar, just as their mothers had, but she made most of her money sewing custom draperies, curtains, pillows and other decorative textiles for a fancy interior designer. Although the work paid well, Angelle was frugal and would never have put actual cash into body art. However, whenever Rickie and Buddy were broke, which was frequently because they were not frugal, Angelle was good for a loan. Therefore, because Buddy would not take any money for the tattoo, Angelle forgave their loans, which would have paid for tattooing a completely illustrated sumo wrestler. But, in this way, Buddy could keep his pride, which had been wounded a lot of late, and Rickie wouldn't have to

feel guilty the next time she was money skinny and needed some cash from Angelle to get them through their next crisis, which was sure to crop up any day.

While Buddy, a slight man almost completely tattooed and nearly toothless, with an ever-present cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth, got his sharps and inks together, Angelle regarded Rickie's tiny kitchen. If not so messy it might have been considered retro-chic. Rickie never got anything new until the old one was no longer repairable, and then she tried to find a replacement as much like the old one as possible. Angelle, on the other hand, redecorated as often as her budget would allow. She had a couple of old solid pieces of furniture, including a huge solid cherry wood queen-sized bed that dwarfed her small frame and would not even have fit through the doors of Rickie's bedroom; and a beautiful mahogany drop-leaf table that sat eight to ten people, depending on their degree of intimacy. Her mother had bought both pieces on time and it had taken her years to pay them off. The interest she paid had probably been more than the initial cost of the furniture, though now such fine craftsmanship would be out of Angelle's price range. Her current taste was more modern—Ikea, Pottery Barn, Pier One.

On Rickie's drain board were mixed pattern dishes, some from Goodwill, some from Big Lots, and a few from Angelle's last season collection. The kitchen chairs too were mismatched, though colorfully repainted. A blue Formica table, straight out of the 1950's stood in the middle of the room. On the table, in an incongruously elegant crystal vase (a gift from Angelle) were the remains of a dozen white roses. But though beaten and messy, the trailer was meticulously clean. Rickie was never too tired after cleaning for others to make sure her own home was spotless.

Rickie, a barefoot, thin slip of a woman wearing a tank top and faded jeans, stubbed out her cigarette and embraced her old friend. "You look great, Ang."

Angelle smiled. She did. She was wearing her favorite soft leather boots with four-inch heels, a longish woolen skirt and a generous warm and fuzzy red sweater. She had wisely worn an undershirt too, just in case her new tattoo bled some. “Thanks Ric, you too.”

“Beer?” Not waiting for an answer, Rickie got two Miller Lite’s from the sighing refrigerator and after wiping the tops popped them open and handed one to Angelle.

Buddy shuffled in from the back of the trailer carrying the tools of his trade. “Ready?”

Angelle promptly shed her sweater, undershirt and bra and lay face down on the brown Naugahyde sofa, propped up by a black velvet pillow printed with a skull, and staring into the orange shag carpet.

“This will do it,” Buddy announced as he gently examined his previous work. “Just a few details and you’ll be good to go. Where do we go next?” He had tattooed a good portion of Rickie’s body, and except for his head, could have posed as the illustrated man.

“No more, one is enough,”

“You just wait,” Rickie laughed, “they’re like potato chips, you can’t get just one.”

Buddy’s needles stung, but after a half hour of pricks and small talk he was done. “You know the rules, Angelle, keep from messing with it.” Leaving a tube of tattoo goo, he shuffled back into the depths of the trailer and shut himself into the bedroom with a reality television show.

Rickie helped Angelle back into her undershirt and sweater. “ Be a little sore, Ang, so don’t be wearing that harness of yours til it’s healed.”

Angelle nodded. “I know, I just feel naked without a bra of some kind.”

Rickie popped the tops of two more beers, and led Angelle out onto the porch. It was a nice add-on that Buddy had built. It was big enough to hold a table and chairs and was even painted the same shade of blue as the trailer.

“Aren’t you cold?” Angelle asked, snuggling into her own warm sweater.

“Nah, I don’t get cold. And this aint’t even January weather. Hell must have been nearly 70 degrees today.”

Rickie and Angelle had been friends since grade school, both flamboyant girly-girls at times; they were nevertheless tomboys who could punch and claw with the best of them. They were outsiders, bussed to school with other country kids. Unlike them, Rickie and Angelle didn’t live in neat little country houses scattered throughout the Louisiana backwoods, but in a cramped and dingy trailer park. Most of the other kids who lived in the park were either a lot older and drop outs from school, or just babies. A couple of boys a few years older than them were the only others who got on that school bus to be looked down upon by children, who, except for the grace of having a grandfather who survived World War II and had used G.I. bill to buy a home, would have been catching the bus from a trailer park too.

Rickie’s mother, Linda, had drifted to Louisiana from North Florida after her sister married a roustabout from Chalmette, and she invited Linda to stay with them. Her husband wouldn’t mind, she told Linda; he was seldom home anyway. Mind, hell no, he seemed to believe that he’d married both of them, and a week or so after being bossed around and leered at, but before being assaulted, Linda met Rickie’s father and they moved to the Shady Haven Trailer Court. Rickie’s father drifted off when she was eight, about the same time Angelle’s mom and dad moved in from Texas. Really, from Mexico, Angelle had whispered to Rickie, but she wasn’t to tell anyone.

Soon, Angelle's father too drifted away, probably back to Mexico, being unwilling or unable to learn enough of the English language to find work. Angelle's mother, Maria Katerina, got along right away with Linda, and soon they were sharing shifts at a local bar and Quick Stop. Linda helped Maria with her English, and soon she spoke as good as anyone around, with better grammar and diction than most.

Rickie and Angelle became lifelong, inseparable friends. Rickie was a gawky child with stringy hair of a shade called dishwater blonde. She grew into a skinny woman and now in her 50's wore her hair in a lank gray-blond ponytail, her eyes eternally smudged with mascara. Angelle never grew taller than three feet nine, but plumped out to a womanly roundness. Her thick black hair had only recently begun to show individual silver strands, and her large, black eyes nearly always sparkled with good humor.

But not tonight. Tonight, Angelle's eyes were very sad indeed. Rickie too had been crying off and on since receiving news about Waylon a little over a week ago. Then, she couldn't go to the funeral because Buddy had a job for them.

When Rickie and Angelle were nearly eighteen, ready to graduate from high school (who would have believed?) they were both in love with Waylon. He was John Travolta cute, but with a somewhat prettier face. He wasn't muscular but he wasn't skinny, and he was kind of shy. His family wasn't rich, but it seemed so to most of the rest of the students. His father wore a suit and tie to work, and his mother stayed home to take care of him and his younger sister. They had wine with dinner. The bums never got any aluminum beer cans from their trash. Waylon wore shined loafers and dress pants to school, not the tennis shoes and jeans worn by most of the other boys. In spite of that, he was well liked because he had a shy self-deprecating way about him and was always a touch for a few bucks or to back up someone's lame alibi. He played baseball

passably but wasn't really interested in sports. He got good enough grades, but not too good. He was, however, an excellent dancer. And he danced with everyone, all the girls that is, even Rickie and Angelle, whenever there was a dance, and in South Louisiana there are lots of dances. When no one asked either of them to the homecoming prom their senior year, he asked them both. And, he slipped them each a fifty-dollar bill to pay for their dress and shoes. Even their part-time jobs at the Dairy Queen never paid them more than twenty dollars at the most, and neither of them had ever spent that much on one dress.

That had been the best night in Rickie's life. Linda did her hair and teased it up so that it looked like she really had some. She smudged on blue eye shadow and pale pink lipstick, and in her cornflower blue dress Linda said she looked like Julie Christie. Her nylons had seams and her shoes and purse exactly matched her dress. When Waylon pinned on her white rose corsage with the blue ribbons (which she still had in a plastic bag in the freezer), she felt like a movie star. Of course, she wasn't beautiful like Angelle, but in her heels she was nearly as tall as Waylon, and she felt herself elegant and attractive.

Likewise, Angelle had her abundant hair piled high on her head and in her heels actually topped four feet, slightly. She looked like a dark, miniature Sophia Loren. And in spite of her legendary bravura—she was known to take on girls nearly twice her size--Rickie could tell Angelle was just as nervous as she was.

Waylon had picked them up in his father's immaculate shiny black sedan. He had brought them florist-made corsages, Rickie could tell, of real roses and pretty white flowers and lacy looking ferns tied together with expensive-looking ribbon. There were white roses with blue ribbons for Rickie and red roses with white ribbons for Angelle, perfectly matching their identical dresses, except that Rickie's was a cornflower blue and Angelle's a candy apple red.

Everyone in the gym looked stunned when they entered. Waylon, in a white suit and crisp navy blue shirt, wearing a boutonniere of one red and one white rose had a girl on either arm. Even the principal noticed. It was the first time he had ever acknowledged either girl except to lecture her.

“Well, Waylon,” he had said, “how did you get lucky enough to bring two of the prettiest girls in school to the dance?”

Rickie blushed, and she assumed Angelle did as well.

“I just asked them, sir,” Waylon replied, as though taking two girls anywhere was as normal as corn bread.

Rickie had insisted that he dance with Angelle first—alphabetical order—and as she sipped her punch from the bleachers, she noticed that nearly everyone watched how well Angelle and Waylon danced together. Rickie smiled to herself. She and Angelle had been practicing for weeks and could not only Hustle, Slide and Moon Walk, but also stroll, twist, Madison and Watusi, not to mention waltz and tango.

Of course, it was just a small town high school and almost everyone had known each other their entire lives. Of the nearly two hundred people there, including several dozen brought as dates from other schools, there were many girls and boys who hadn't come with dates. So, although Rickie wasn't surprised when the unescorted girls sought Waylon out for a dance, she was when Bobby Richard and others asked her to dance. Usually the extent of their attention to her was attached to the words *trailer trash*.

That night after the dance, other couples were making out in cars all around the town park. Rickie and Angelle, both tired and excited, were each wondering when and if Waylon would kiss them goodnight, and which one first. He parked in the darkest end of the park, as far

away as possible from any other cars. They sat quietly for a few moments, looking at the stars and the slip of a moon. Finally, Waylon let out a sigh.

“I have something to tell you,” he began. Both girls gasped inwardly, oh no, he’s dying, joining the Army, or moving away. This was the 1970’s, and he was a good boy from a small southern town. They couldn’t imagine anything more serious, and even in the dark they could tell Waylon was being very serious. They could barely hear him when he said, “I’m a queer.”

It was hard later, for Rickie and Angelle to remember what a shocking pronouncement that had been. There were always rumors, spread by people who had actually seen men holding hands in the wicked city of New Orleans, but not here. Of course after the AIDS epidemic, *Will and Grace* and *Brokeback Mountain*, there were gay people all over. Back then, Waylon’s pronouncement was scandalous.

Angelle, always the quicker of the two, put her hand on Waylon’s shoulder. “So what?” she said. “I don’t care. You’re still the Waylon I love and admire.” Waylon burst into tears and hugged her, then reached across her and hugged Rickie.

“You’re the best,” he said. “I knew I could trust you two. I had to tell someone.” And for the rest of that senior year the three were the best of friends, chatting on the phone, giggling over the boys in teen magazines, and dancing. Rickie later thought about how lonely Waylon must have been. She and Angelle had nearly always each other, but, until them, Waylon didn’t have anyone.

When school was finally over and the graduation ceremony was behind them, Rickie and Angelle looked for full-time work. Waylon took the money he had saved and hopped a bus for New York City, leaving behind a tearful family, and Rickie and Angelle. They were excited for him, but also sad and scared.

Over the years they had stayed in touch. Husbands and lovers and even children would come and go but the Three Musketeers remained loyal to one another. Waylon somehow escaped the AIDS epidemic—and not because I’m careful, he had laughed. He got a degree in theatre arts and dance and returned to New Orleans “for good” he said in 1987. New York was fine, he claimed, but full of too many New Yorkers.

The first year he was back, he got a job teaching theater and dance at a popular private school in New Orleans. He stayed busy. and he fell in love. Unsure about how to introduce his new interest to Rickie and Angelle, he invited them to Jazz Fest. Neither had been before and they were therefore excited. Rickie was apprehensive as well as she always felt uncomfortable in crowds. They both dressed in cut offs and halter tops, but when Waylon arrived to pick them up, he nixed Rickie’s flip-flops and Angelle’s high-heeled sandals, insisting they wear tennis shoes. Angelle hadn’t worn anything less than a four-inch heel in years, so in spite of her shapely figure, her short stature combined with a huge straw hat decorated with red silk roses, made her look like a child playing grown up. With her long skinny legs and big tennis shoes, Rickie resembled some kind of swamp bird. But Waylon insisted, so they complied.

Traffic was terrible, and it was nearly noon by the time Waylon had found parking in someone’s yard--\$10, a bargain said Waylon, a rip-off claimed Rickie—and they were through the gates of the Fair Grounds and part of a throng of partiers surpassed only by those seen during Mardi Gras. Waylon seemed to know a lot of people for someone who had been back in town less than a year, but he also seemed “nervous,” Angelle whispered to Rickie.

Waylon made sure they did the Fest. They stopped at all the craft booths and he bought them each a tee shirt printed with the festival poster design. They tried crawfish pies and alligator sausage po-boys and crawfish Monica and boiled shrimp, and drank beer from plastic

cups that only stayed cold for the first few minutes after being poured. They stood in line at Porta-Potties. The day was hot. Waylon gave them money to stand in line for a signed festival poster and disappeared into the crowd, saying, “just wait here, I’ll be right back.”

“Well, what do you think?” asked Angelle.

“I think everything costs too much and there are too many people,” Rickie replied.

“No, silly, I mean about Waylon?”

“What about Waylon, he’s just hisself.”

“Don’t you think he’s acting a little...strange, like he’s looking for someone or something?”

“Not that I noticed.” Rickie shrugged. “He’s got a right to be strange if he wants to.”

“Well, watch,” Angelle admonished, paying for Waylon’s poster and stepping aside for the next purchaser. “I just think something is going on is all.”

They watched people and commented on them for the next several minutes. Rickie commented that not too many people were dressed up and that was good. Angelle stood on her tiptoes trying to see over people’s heads and complained about her tennis shoes.

“I wonder if they ever will really make high-heeled sneakers?” she grumbled.

Before long, Waylon returned, a little calmer, thought Angelle, and suggested they go to the tent where Cajun music was being played. It turned out to be their favorite tent. Everyone was dancing, and as Waylon had predicted, those who had once been wearing sandals and flip-flops were nearly all barefoot. Both Rickie and Angelle were popular partners because they were such good dancers. Waylon danced only a few songs and went to get more beer.

Rickie and Angelle spread out a blanket at the edge of the crowd to sit one out.

“I don’t care what you say, can’t you see that he is acting different? He hardly danced at all. It’s like he’s looking at a watch he’s not wearing.” Angelle claimed.

“You are so dramatic, Ang. He seems like the same old Waylon to me.”

But Angelle wasn’t listening. She was looking over Rickie’s shoulder when she noticed Waylon approaching. She turned Rickie around. “See?” she said knowingly, “I told you something was going on.”

Waylon was at least three entertainment tents away, but it was plain to see he wasn’t alone. A shorter man with sandy-colored hair, wearing a tight muscle shirt and cut off jeans was with him. Both men carried two beers and were laughing. The shorter man hip-bumped Waylon. As they drew closer, Angelle gave a soft whistle. “Would you look at that, if he isn’t the sexiest man alive, I don’t know who is.”

“Why Waylon is, Ang.”

“No, Waylon is handsome, this guy is S-E-X-Y.”

Before the men got within speaking distance, but close enough so that they could examine Waylon’s companion more carefully, Rickie replied. “Well, he might be sexy, but he’s not as handsome as Waylon.”

“Come on, Ric, you’re not blind. This guy is dangerously sexy. He damned near swaggers.” Rickie was shocked. Angelle seldom swore.

Angelle nudged her. “You’re getting to be a bit of a prude, Ric. There isn’t a woman here who wouldn’t want a piece of him.”

“Oh, stop it, Ang,” complained Rickie.

Angelle just laughed. The men approached, smiling.

“Ah, the ladies! I’ve heard so much about you,” the sandy-haired man said, passing a beer on to Angelle. “I tried to make Waylon hurry so that the beer would still be tepid, but he wanted to talk.” His voice was low and modulated, like a television cowboy. Rickie was staring so hard she almost dropped the beer Waylon handed her.

Waylon proceeded with introductions. This was Mitch, the man he was in love with he told them. Rickie and Angelle stared, while trying not to. “Such blue eyes, like turquoise,” thought Rickie. “Contacts,” thought Angelle. Mitch winked at her conspiratorially and whispered, “blind as a bat.”

Mitch was not as young as he first appeared, probably more than five years older than Waylon, with the laugh lines to prove it, but his body had the shape of an athlete. Mitch worked at a health club, which as Waylon explained was the reason he was late. He had a “regular” client who scheduled Sunday mornings at eleven and would not be re-scheduled.

“That old man acts like he owns your time,” exclaimed Waylon.

“Well, he does, in a way, dear,” countered Mitch, “he pays this whore.”

Neither Rickie nor Angelle was prepared for that kind of talk. Waylon interjected, “he’s just using that as a figure of speech. That old man thinks Mitch is his own Richard Simmons. He has Mitch all to himself for an hour every Sunday. He works out on the machines, swims, lifts weights and does calisthenics.”

“And consequently has the body of a thirty year old.”

“Well,” Waylon sniffed, “it wouldn’t have killed him to let you have one Sunday morning to yourself.”

“What matters, is I am here now, love, and the afternoon is young and there is drinking and dancing to be done with the lovely ladies, and Dr. John is closing the festival. It is sunny and warm and I’m with the one I love the most. What more could a person need?”

Mitch unconsciously hugged Waylon, then proceeded to take over the tour of Jazz Fest attractions. At the end of the afternoon, Angelle was in front of the Dr. John stage; everyone assumed she was about twelve, though a well-developed twelve, Waylon and Mitch were standing behind her holding hands, and Rickie stood a little back, still wondering about Waylon and his new love. It had been her experience that the more attractive something is, particularly people, the more apt they are to be hard to hold onto.

But things seemed to work out for Waylon and Mitch. The girls saw less of Waylon, but he stayed in touch, and in spite of his new love interest, he never forgot his girls. Even when he wasn’t able to be there in person, gifts were delivered on their birthdays and on Christmas. King cakes and fancy beads arrived at Carnival. Bags of crawfish came at the beginning of crawfish season. On the fourth of July he sent beer and steaks and fireworks. And, on New Year’s Eve he always sent a bottle of champagne and a dozen roses to each, white roses for Rickie and red roses for Angelle.

Buddy was jealous of Waylon, Rickie could tell. “He’s gay,” she’d say and Buddy would grumble. Buddy had never graduated from high school and he was hardly what one might consider good looking, let alone drop-dead handsome like Waylon, but he had a kind heart. And, although she was really angry when Buddy said she couldn’t go to Waylon’s funeral, to be honest, Buddy was a slob and he had a job that had to be finished on that very day, and someone had to clean up after him. The someone who had continually cleaned up after him for twelve years now was Rickie. There was no way they could put off this job. Miss Winnie was picky

but she paid cash, and she had scheduled her party long before Waylon had scheduled his funeral.

Rickie sniffed into her beer. “No more roses.”

“I guess not.” Angelle hugged her friend and gave her the program from Waylon’s funeral.

“Did him and his dad make up, before, I mean?”

“He, he and his dad,” corrected Angelle. “Yes, don’t you remember, he told us that Christmas eve when he and Mitch came to my party, just a little while before Mitch died.”

“Did he have AIDS?”

“Not that anyone knew. Just like us, after the wild years, he and Mitch pretty much settled down.”

“Yeah, until some fuckin’ jerk killed Mitch and a bunch of other people in a bar in the French Quarter. I remember.”

Angelle only nodded sadly.

“Well it seems that then was the time to kill hisself. Why’d he wait? Musta been at least two years.”

“Don’t you ever watch the news, girl?”

Rickie hugged her friend and took a long swallow of beer. “Don’t need to, Ang. I got you.”

Angelle shook her head sadly, her luxurious hair swaying. She was somehow grateful for the twinge of pain she felt from her newly finished tattoo. Waylon had loved dolphins and the design was inspired by his suggestion. “If I ever went for women,” he’d told her, “you’d be my kind.” But, maybe he’d told Rickie that too.

“Well?” Rickie prodded her friend.

Angelle took a deep breath. “The man who shot up the bar and killed Mitch got out of jail a couple of weeks ago.”

“No!” Rickie slammed down her beer. “Goddamn mother fucker.....”

Angelle put her hand on Rickie’s arm. “There’s no need for that now, Ric, we all know the system is broken. It may not be God’s will, but He will make the final judgment.”

Rickie growled and mumbled under her breath. She knew that Angelle didn’t approve of swearing anymore, especially taking the Lord’s name in vain, since returning to the Church and confessing, every week now for many years. She didn’t cross herself all the time like some fools, but sometimes her platitudes grated on Rickie’s nerves.

And besides, God wasn’t paying one bit of attention as far as Rickie could see. People were getting murdered left and right and for no damn good reason. She and Buddy had a shotgun, but she swore she’d use a damn pistol if she owned one, and Buddy said he’d seen enough killing in Nam to last him pretty much forever. That’s why they never watched the news, it should be called the bad news cause them reporters never reported anything good.

Angelle cleared her throat. “Are you ok, Ric?” Rickie nodded and Angelle continued. “Anyway, you can imagine how Waylon felt when they let that man out.”

Rickie caught her breath and tears rolled down her cheeks again. “Poor Waylon, like having a bone broke again just when it’s startin’ to heal.”

“Well, Waylon found out where the man’s family lived. They were having a welcome home party—grannies, cousins, aunties, babies, balloons, beer, barbecue, the works.”

And Waylon, well, all good southern boys learn how to shoot. He drove over there with a pistol. He picked that guy out from that crowd of people and shot him right through the heart,

just like in the movies. Then he drove off, plain as day. People were screaming. Kids were crying. Some of the men got guns and got into cars and started after him, shooting. They even shot out his rear window.

Well, the police came and finally got everyone calmed down and confiscated their guns and got all the information from them. They knew who they were after, but when they got to Waylon's house, he was already dead.

"Shot hisself," spat out Rickie, "over that no good son of a bitchin' asshole scum."

"I know, Ric, I know. Just more useless violence."

"Useless!" screamed Rickie. "He should have shot the whole damn bunch of 'em."

"I know you don't mean that. Those babies didn't ask to be born, and those grannies didn't want their boys to become thugs."

Rickie's mascara was even messier than usual, and Angelle gently cleaned her face. Rickie smiled through her tears. "You always carry those wipe things with you?" She asked. "You tryin' to keep the whole world neat and clean, ain't you Ang?"

"And so are you, Ric, and so are a lot of people. There are more good people than bad ones."

"God, I didn't see Waylon much over the past few years, Ang, but I loved him, and he was always so kind and gentle. I didn't never care that he was queer or gay or whatever. He was just Waylon, my friend. I remember at Mitch's funeral, he was really tore up. Then later, when he got that award from the mayor and then was on *The Ellen Show*, he seemed to have come out of it. He was a good man."

"Yes, he was."

"Did he leave a note?"

“No, I guess he didn’t think it was necessary.”

“Did you tell his family I was sorry I couldn’t come? I shoulda been there.”

Angelle nodded. “His father said they’d notify us when they read the will.”

Rickie was crying again, silent sobs. Angelle wrapped her short plump arms around her friend.

“No more roses,” sobbed Rickie

“Si,” replied Angelle, in her lapsed Spanish. “No hay más rosas.”