

Nature Girl and the Barely-There Bikini

The man we were watching was alone in apartment 33. He had giant eyes like Marty Feldman and giant teeth like Mr. Ed, so you'd think he'd be easy to identify. But in fact we weren't sure whether he was Timothy Trey or Thomas Trey.

The two suspects were identical.

I squinted through the binoculars and wiped a bead of sweat off my forehead before it could roll into my eye. We'd set up surveillance in a poorly-vented fourth-floor attic office across the street from apartment 33, the Trey brothers' third-floor flat. The attic was rarely used, and the afternoon was hot.

My partner Dixie Bastante moved the small electric fan we'd found in the closet six inches closer to our side of the room, stretching the cord to its limit. The breeze felt good.

"So, what's he doing now, Frank?" she asked me.

"Tim, or it might be Tom, is in his easy chair, eating yogurt from a plastic cup, and watching *Family Feud* on TV. He's nursing a can of Bud Lite."

"Bud Lite and yogurt?" she said. "Scoot over."

I scooted.

Dixie bent over the binoculars, which were mounted on a tripod in the shadows a few steps back from the window. From our vantage point, we could see most of the living room in apartment 33, and some of the kitchen. We couldn't see the front door.

But we had a clear view of the third-floor corridor exits, and in three days of surveillance, we hadn't seen Tim (or maybe Tom) take one step outside of his apartment.

"It must be cool over there," Dixie said. "He's wearing a jacket over his T-shirt. Lounge pants and socks, too. And his ball cap."

"Satisfied?" I said.

"What do you mean?"

"Admit it. You just wanted to make sure I was watching Tim, or Tom, and not the girls by the pool."

"You can't stop thinking about her, can you, Frank? Nature Girl."

She shook her head and I didn't answer.

Okay, it's true that I scan the pool area occasionally, but strictly for situational awareness, which is essential during a covert surveillance operation. Right? The complex was full of good-looking young people who strolled around clearly unconcerned with how

much skin they bared during the heat wave. One woman in particular had a problem keeping her naughty bits reined in behind her bikini. She wasn't voluptuous, but what she had, she flaunted.

We called her Nature Girl.

She's the one I couldn't stop thinking about, remembering her hair, long and lush and midnight black, flowing from under the floppy straw hat she wore with her oversize sunglasses. Her wide tight-lipped smile seemed to hide some secret she might be persuaded to share with the right guy. Nature Girl: a bewitching blend of mystery and over-exposure. As I watched her, those big dark lenses turned my way now and then, and she seemed to look right at me, right into me. Into my eyes. My mind. My heart, And my—

“—not even listening, are you,” Dixie said.

“Sorry, what?”

“I said, how long do we have to stake this guy out?”

“Not much longer,” I said. “As far as we know, Timothy and Thomas have never been separated for more than 24 hours at a stretch in their entire lives. Now it's been three days. So if we keep watching this one, we'll catch them both. Sooner rather than later.”

“He looks pretty content on his own,” she said, “if you ask me.”

“They're con artists,” I said. “It's an act. A performance. That's what it feels like to me. Like we're seeing just what they want us to see. But identical twins like that, who've never been apart, you can bet they—”

“I heard they're not actually twins,” she said.

“What? Says who?” I picked up their rap sheets and compared the mug shots. I mean, those eyes. Those teeth. These guys had to be identical. And the stats backed it up. Same birth parents. Same birth date: same month, same day, same year.

“One of the brothers said it himself,” she told me, “when we brought them in last fall. Sarge made a comment about identical twin suspects, and one of them said ‘Nobody believes we’re not twins,’ and he laughed and winked at the other one.”

“Maybe he was just being, I don’t know, enigmatic,” I said. But I felt the spark of an idea sizzling to life in a shadowy corner of in my mind.

I peered through the binoculars. Tim (or Tom) was reclining in his chair—now picking his big teeth with a long fingernail, now sipping his beer and grimacing, now yawning, now rolling those big round eyes around the room as if he felt restless. On the TV, Steve Harvey mugged for the camera as *Family Feud* wrapped up another episode.

“Why didn’t we keep them when we had them?” I said. “Last fall.”

“Not enough evidence,” she said. “And they weren’t inclined to confess to anything.”

“And now things are different?”

“A little. Until now, most of the people they’ve conned weren’t willing to come forward.”

“Well, most of the victims were criminals themselves, right?” I said.

“Right,” she said. “And when crooks get conned out of dirty money, they don’t come boo-hooing to the cops. Not usually. But lately some of the marks have been semi-legit—legally anyway. They’re the ones complaining.”

“Like who?”

“Well, like so-called investment advisors who prey on half-senile old people. And used-car operations that won’t sell you a car unless they can rip you off coming and going. Low-lives like that.”

“And Tim and Tom are targeting these guys?”

“Yep. And the targets are squawking, and here we are.”

She settled in behind the binoculars while I stretched out on a ratty sofa. The mental spark I’d felt earlier was heating up. Ready to burst into flame.

“What’s he doing now?” I asked.

“Still in the chair. Looking through a magazine. A car magazine. He looks bored.”

I closed my eyes and imagined the scene.

“Still got his jacket on?”

“Yes.”

“Check your notes, will you? What was he wearing yesterday?”

I heard the rustle of pages turning.

“Ball cap. Hoodie. Sweatpants.”

“Okay,” I said. “Now, what about Nature Girl. Is she by the pool?”

“Hold on. Uh . . . no. Don’t see her.”

“Look around. Check the walkways and stairs.”

“Okay. Um . . . nope.”

“Okay,” I said. I sat up and looked at Dixie. My brain was on fire. “When we *do* see her, where does she come from? Where does she go?”

“Uh, I guess usually the third floor corridor.”

“Same floor as the Trey brothers’ apartment,” I said.

She tilted her head. "You're really hung up on this girl, aren't you?"

Okay. That's when I knew. The pieces snicked into place.

"Let's go introduce ourselves," I said.

"To who?"

"Nature Girl," I said.

We knocked on the door of apartment 33 and it opened within seconds.

"About time you guys showed up. Come on in."

"I don't suppose Timothy and Thomas are around," I said.

She took off the ball cap and ran her fingers through her blonde pixie-cut hair.

"After three days?" she said, stripping off her jacket. "No, you've got to be quicker than that. When those two take off, they leave no trace."

She continued shedding layers until there was nothing left but pure girl and that notorious barely-there bikini. I saw the floppy hat, sunglasses, and black wig on the table by the door.

"Nice," I said. "Outside, you show off your body not only to make it clear you're not a man—so you can't possibly be Timothy or Thomas in disguise—but also to distract from your face, which you keep hidden with the hat, glasses, and wig, and you never open your mouth. But inside the apartment, you put your eyes and teeth on display, but cover your hair and body with men's clothes, and you can easily pass for Timothy or Thomas."

She smiled. "It took you long enough to figure it out."

Dixie stepped forward.

"What are you so happy about? You're an accessory. Aiding and abetting."

The girl shrugged. “Timmy and Tommy are the good guys,” she said. “They don’t rip off anyone who doesn’t deserve it. Anyway, I’m just apartment sitting. I’m not involved in any of that other stuff.”

“Just apartment sitting,” Dixie said.

The girl shrugged again, and her bikini top shifted dangerously.

“Um,” I said. “You’re starting to get a little wardrobe malfunction that you might want to, uh, nip in the bud. Or not.”

“So how’d you figure it out, copper?” she said, getting herself organized.

“Yeah, copper, how’d you figure it out?” Dixie said.

“You gave me the clue,” I told her, “when you said they weren’t twins.”

“Timothy and Thomas,” she said.

“Right,” I said. “And how can two people with the same biological parents, and the same birthday, in the same year, not be twins?”

“Wait,” she said. She turned to the girl. “It’s because you’re . . .”

The girl grinned and her eyes gleamed and her teeth sparkled. On her, they looked good, like the best of Emma Stone and Keira Knightley. She stuck out her hand.

“My name’s Tammy,” she said. “I’m Timmy and Tommy’s sister. And yes, they’re identical, but it’s true, they’re not twins.

“Because the three of us—we’re triplets.”