

BEACH PARTY

You wake up in a strange bed. Bursting bladder, throbbing head, scummy teeth, yucky tongue. You're naked. Your stomach roils. Your thighs ache. Your nipples sting. Your pussy burns.

That last draws your full attention.

Think back. Beach, bonfire, hotdogs, beer keg, boombox, dirty dancing. Tequila, bourbon, Jagermeister. You shouldn't, but you do.

Some girl rips off her top. Everyone cheers. They all point at you, clapping rhythmically. "Show us your tits, Roberta! C'mon, babe, show us those knockers!"

You shouldn't, but you do.

They hoot and whistle like you slammed a walk-off homer.

Some guy kicks off his swim trunks. Others follow suit. For no apparent reason you drop your bikini bottom.

Well, for one apparent reason—let Barry see what he's missed.

Someone turns off the boombox and hands you a guitar. You go into your Janis Joplin routine, belting out "Me and Bobby McGee." The crowd loves it. You love the crowd. You love being the center of attention. You give it everything you've got.

At some point the bonfire flares like the end of the world. The beach starts to sway. Starts to spin. Starts to open up like a monstrous sinkhole and suck you down its black throat.

Then what?

Your white shorts and pink T-shirt lie crumpled on the bedroom floor. Your bikini, gritty with sand. Your sandals rest on top of your duffel bag. Your bra and panties.

You slip on the shorts and T-shirt, fish clean panties and toothbrush out of the bag, step into the long empty hallway, locate the bathroom a few doors down. You need to shower. Bad.

First you sit on the toilet and examine the red scratches on your breasts and inner thighs. You check yourself for semen. You're relieved to find nothing, though you know it proves nothing.

Someone left a glass on the sink. You drink two glasses of water and drop to your knees, head in the commode, puking. You wash out your mouth and brush your teeth. You spend too long in the shower trying to scrub away whatever you've done. Whatever's been done to you.

You go downstairs.

The blinds are drawn in the wrecked living room. Bodies sprawl in various states of exposure, draped across two ratty sofas, in chairs, crumpled on the carpet. Someone snores. Someone groans. The stench reminds you of an overheated gym.

You tiptoe around the bodies and slip out the sliding screen door onto the covered front porch. You weave through the clutter of chairs, chaises, and hammocks to a wicker rocker. The air is warm and humid, the grumble and whap of the surf soothing, the sun blinding. You should've grabbed your sunglasses.

You've been here before. The rambling old beach house is weathered gray, perched on a rocky bluff, comfortably shabby inside and out. A whiff of feathery cloud floats across a

brilliant blue sky. The Atlantic is vast and silvery. A small dark ship rests motionless on the distant horizon. Wooden steps at one end of the porch lead to a steep trail zig-zagging down to the beach. Smoke still rises from the charred remains of the bonfire.

How did you climb that trail last night?

Backtrack. When you arrived yesterday afternoon Connie met you at the front door. The beach party was in full swing and she offered you a toke. A tall, leggy blonde whose family has owned the house overlooking the ocean for a couple of generations.

“You can change in one of the bathrooms,” she said. “Leave your bag there, we’ll sort it out later. You don’t have to sing for your supper, but I brought a guitar just in case.”

You accept the joint, draw and inhale.

“You may not know everybody, but I know you’ve met my cousin Barry.”

Barry.

Hearing his name catapulted your heart into your throat.

“When are the fireworks?” you asked, because you could think of nothing else to say.

“Tomorrow night.” Connie winked. “Tonight, girlfriend, you can make your own fireworks.”

Connie’s parents are on a European river cruise. She’s invited about two dozen chosen ones for a long-weekend celebration of the Fourth. College friends. All except you, who’s no longer one of them, having flunked out. But you and Connie have known each other since middle school. And then there’s Connie’s cousin . . .

Barry Judge.

You're still in love with Barry. You always will be.

Once upon a time in high school you were warned about senior boys who asked junior girls to the prom. *It's because they consider us easy.* Totally true in your case. You honestly believed letting Barry pop your cherry in the backseat of his dad's Lincoln would lead to something lasting.

Then came summer vacation. Barry skipped off to college prep school. In the fall he started college, bent on becoming an engineer, shunning high school girls. By the time you became a freshman he'd forgotten you.

Until yesterday. The way he watched you come down to the beach in your black bikini, the way he hustled over with a foaming red cup, the way he kissed you on the lips, the way his eyes scorched yours. Something had changed.

It was you. You no longer looked like a college girl, no longer acted like one. You were a woman. A celebrity. Big guppy in a small bowl. Lead singer in *Space Goop*, a rock band playing to packed crowds locally.

"Connie told me you might make an appearance," Barry said. "I kept my fingers crossed some last-minute gig wouldn't beat us out."

"Our drummer's appendix ruptured," you said. "He's irreplaceable."

"My good fortune." He flashed that toothy smile that made you want to suck his tongue.

You decided right then the night would belong to you and Barry. How delicious it would be. You'd learned a thing or two since that awkward tangle of limbs in the Lincoln.

This time you'd have Barry salivating like a hound dog. This time he'd come panting back for more.

Now you sit gently rocking, gazing down at the beach, less than pleased with yourself.

Will you ever grow up?

Your stomach gurgles as you try to recall walking up the trail, climbing the stairs, getting into bed. Did Barry help? Then did you fuck? Was he the one? Since you wanted him, would it be rape? Even if you didn't know it was happening? Would it?

The screen door slides opens and Connie eases out, steaming cup in each hand. She wears an oversized faded blue man's shirt that hangs to mid-thigh. Her blond hair looks greasy. A Marlboro Light dangles from her lips. Smoke curls into one eye.

"Jesus," she says, keeping her voice low. "Wasn't that the wildest fucking party ever?" She thrusts a cup at you. "How you feelin', kiddo? Can you keep this down?"

You raise the cup to your mouth. The black coffee scalds your tongue. Your stomach curdles and you set the cup on an end table. "Guess I made a royal ass of myself, huh?"

"What?" Connie streams smoke from her nose. "No, no, no. You were the hit of the party. You put on one helluva show even without your band. Jesus, you were awesome."

"Was I the only girl to strip?"

Connie thinks about this. "Cindy Marlowe . . . Dolly Pagano. Maybe more."

"Thought I'd learned to hold my liquor."

"Know how a French woman holds hers?"

You blink and shake your head.

“By the ears.” She laughs hilariously. “If I had a bod like yours I’d damned sure show it off. Scared me, though, when you got sick, when you passed out. I’ve heard of drunks choking on their own vomit.”

You seize on this. “How’d I make it up the path?”

“Couple of guys carried you. Like a rolled carpet.”

“Couple of guys?”

“Three guys. I showed them where to put you.”

You reach for the cup, blow on it, slurp coffee. “I don’t remember regaining consciousness.”

Connie laughs. “You were out cold. I checked your pulse to make sure you were alive.”

“I’d like to thank them.” You make it sound casual. “The three guys.”

Connie shrugs to show that isn’t necessary.

“Who were they?”

She clicks her tongue. Does she sense you’re fishing? “Jeez, Roberta, I was so goddamn wasted.”

“But you showed them the way. . . .”

She takes a long drag and stabs the cigarette out in an ashtray on the end table. “Well, Barry. The other two . . . don’t know them very well. Football players. Friends of Barry’s. Can’t remember their names. We put your stuff in your bedroom.”

“Did you, uh, all leave the room together?”

“Yeah. Sure.” Frowning, she scratches her eyebrow with her thumb. “Why?”

You smile to show it’s no big deal, but you can see she’s wondering. Try not to alarm her. Maybe nothing happened.

No—*something* happened. You’re just not sure who it happened with. Until you have more facts, tread light. Don’t go off half-cocked, don’t be a party-pooper. Just find out who came to that bedroom after Connie left.

“I feel like a walk on the beach. Care to join me?”

Connie shakes her head. “Gotta shower. If you want breakfast, there’s cereal and stuff—”

“I’m not hungry. When Barry wakes up, will you tell him I’d like to talk to him?”

You try to sound nonchalant, but Connie squints, giving you that look again. “Sure,” she says, “I’ll tell him.”

You stroll for a mile or more down the beach. The surf swirls around your ankles, oozing sand sucking at your toes. Occasionally you look back at the beach house. You scoop up a seashell to examine and toss it aside. You rack your brain trying to recollect anything that happened after you passed out. Like trying to remember a movie you slept through.

When you turn and start back you spot Barry making his way down the zig-zag trail. He wears white sneakers and cut-off jeans. No shirt. His brown hair is tousled, his lithe, muscular body gleams coppery in the sun. You lose sight of him momentarily behind a sand dune. Then he crests the dune and turns in your direction. He wears a shy smile.

When you raise your arms for a hug, the tightness around his mouth softens. The

wariness in his blue eyes dissolves.

“How’s it goin’, Bert?” He nuzzles your cheek and pats your back. His overnight beard is scratchy. He hasn’t showered. His body gives off an earthy scent.

“Better,” you say. “Coming back to life. Guess I went a little crazy last night.”

He laughs. “You were in good company.”

“You must’ve been the only sober person there.”

“Well . . . I’m on the wrestling team. My body’s a temple according to Coach.” He flashes a wry grin.

“Thanks for rescuing me.”

“No problem.”

You hesitate, then blurt, “I-I *wasn’t* any problem . . . was I?”

His eyes turn questioning. “Problem? Not sure what you mean, Bert.” He’s the only person who’s ever called you that.

“No.” You offer him a flirty smile and instantly feel cheap. You can make up for this deception later. “I’m not either. I just . . .”

His return smile wavers.

“I can’t remember much . . . that’s all I’m saying.”

He nods now, a little too eagerly. “What *do* you remember? Anything?”

“Sure,” you lie, watching his face carefully. “Of course. I remember you . . . you touching me.”

He glances out at a big wave rolling in, then back, his gaze wavering. “Nothing else?”

You laugh. “C’mon, don’t make me spell it out.”

He keeps nodding, his smile growing more distinct. “I’d like that actually.”

You breathe easier. This is what you hoped for. Time to cut to the chase, let him know it’s okay.

“Was it better this time?”

“Better?”

“Compared to the night of the prom?”

“Oh, baby, big time. I’m just glad . . .” He lets the sentence trail off.

“Glad? Glad of what, Barry?”

“That you aren’t . . . that it *is* what you wanted. Right?”

You cock your head. “I told you, didn’t I? Told you what I wanted?”

He shoves both hands deep into the pockets of his shorts, shoulders hunched. “Uh . . . not in so many words.”

“Surely you asked . . .?”

He shrugs. “Kinda. You didn’t have much to say.”

You chuckle to disguise your disappointment, to conceal a hot flush. “Damn. If I was that far gone it couldn’t’ve been very exciting. . . .”

His smile is replaced by a knowing leer. “That’s where you’re wrong.”

“Oh?”

“It *was* exciting. Different . . . y’know? Kinky. A total turn on.”

You force another chuckle. “Well, I really wish I could remember.”

Now he laughs. “But then it wouldn’t be the same, babe, would it?”

Now you laugh. “Not for you, maybe. But I can’t enjoy what I don’t know is happening.”

“No. No, of course not.” He pulls his hands free, cups your chin, gives you a quick kiss on the mouth. “Well . . . we can sure fix that.”

Yeah. This is what you needed to hear. All is forgiven, and you smile expectantly.

“Tonight?” he asks.

“Why not.”

“Repeat performance?”

“You bet.”

“They’ll like that.”

And your heart stops beating.

“They?”

He nods toward the house. “Harold, Woody . . . all three of us again . . . right?”

You stare at him for the longest time, struggling to get your breath. When your heart decides to thump again, it labors like an overloaded bus. You reach out and grab his arms, sinking your nails into his flesh. His eyes widen in alarm.

“My God, Barry!”

“What?”

“Say you’re joking! Please!”

“What-what-what?”

“You don’t know? You honestly don’t know?”

His eyes flutter. “I-I thought . . .”

“I thought it was *you*.”

“It *was* me, sweetheart!”

“*Only* you.”

He jerks free of your grasp and takes a step backward. “Whoa now. Whoa. That’s not—what’re you trying to pull here?”

“Barry—”

His cheeks turn crimson, his grimace accusing. “You let me believe you remembered. That it was okay. You fucking set me up!”

True enough. And now you hate him. “And you—you *raped* me. You and two other guys!”

“*What!*” He takes another step back. “Hey, hey, hey—wait a sec now. Wait just a goddamn second. That’s not a word to use lightly, Bert.”

“Can’t you see what you’ve done?”

“Don’t give me that shit. Wow! Not after what *you* did.”

“Was it your idea?”

“My—*no*. Woody. They did it first. They used condoms. Don’t worry, you’re safe.”

“Then you took sloppy thirds?”

He holds up both hands, pushing back. “Bert, for God’s sake, you wanted it.”

“I was unconscious!”

“Before that. Prancing around naked, offering it to anyone.”

You close your eyes for a moment. When you open them again nothing has changed. “I can’t believe this.”

“It’s true. They could’ve all lined up and screwed you right there on the beach. Every swinging dick. You would’ve welcomed it.”

“Oh, Jesus, Barry. Oh, sweet Jesus.”

“Let’s just forget about it. Okay, Bert? No more wild accusations. No more bullshit. Please, I’m begging you.”

You can’t stand to look at him any more, breathe his smell. You shove past him and walk away. Your stomach feels like you swallowed a rancid piece of meat.

You climb the zig-zag path without looking back. When you reach the porch you stop to shade your eyes with one hand and peer down at him.

He stands where you left him, his back turned, staring out to sea. His shoulders slump, his arms dangle at his sides—a forlorn pose meant to elicit sympathy. And for an instant your heart does go out to him. You can almost hear him pleading: Try to see it our way, Bert. There you were—naked, spread-eagled, helpless. What else could three hot-blooded studs do? Now be a good sport and don’t cause a ruckus.

And then a creeping chill makes you feel like something wild released from a cage.

You step inside the house. The crowd at the breakfast table stops eating to cheer. Why, you’re not sure. You study their faces one by one as it grows quiet. You call out two names in a loud, clear voice: “Harold? Woody?”

They say nothing. They don't have to. Everyone else at the table turns their way.

And now you see them too. Cold-eyed, fidgety, they stare back at you, looking nothing like you imagined. Oh, they're as big and muscular as you expected, but not dumb looking. Not stupid. Not slimy. One appears almost professorial behind his mustache and horn-rimmed glasses; the other is freckled and pug-nosed, boyishly innocent.

You can almost feel sorry for them, just as you did Barry.

Until they smile.

They look at each other and actually smile.

You turn and go upstairs to the bedroom where it happened. You stand in the middle of the room and take in the tangled bed sheets with sickening self-loathing. Knowing what they look like, you can picture it now. All too clearly.

You begin to pack. It isn't long before Connie appears in the doorway, just as you anticipated. She leans against the door frame, arms crossed, watching you with shaded eyes. At last she sucks in a long deep breath.

"Let it go, Roberta."

You look up at her. "Excuse me?"

"Don't do this to Barry. To me."

"To *you*?"

"You know what I mean."

"Did you try to stop them?"

"I was drunk, Roberta. I'm not your caretaker. You brought it on yourself."

You consider her words carefully before zipping the duffel bag shut.

“Say you’ll forget about it. Please? Those poor guys are sweating blood out there.”

You gaze out the window, seeing nothing but parked cars. You turn back and slowly shake your head. “Those *poor guys* raped me, Connie. Barry too.”

“No one will buy that,” she says quietly. “You’ll regret it. Everybody will hate you. You can’t win. Think of the lives you’ll mess up—yours included. And for what? What does it truly matter? No real harm was done.”

At this you’re forced to laugh.

You grab your bag and walk past her, out the front door to your car. You don’t look at her again. You don’t even say goodbye.

You drive back to town feeling more alone than you’ve ever felt in your life. Your eyes sting, but you fend off tears. Connie’s probably right—you can’t win. The fatigue of defeat is already settling into your bones.

But you shake it off.

Because it’s not about winning, is it?

It’s about fighting back.

You grit your teeth and tighten your gut and scan the oncoming traffic. You spot a black and white approaching and flash your lights. But it’s not a police car. Where the hell are they when you need one?

At last you settle down, sit back, force yourself to relax and not tailgate the car in front of you. Patience. Be calm. Focus. Resign yourself to the long haul

You turn on the radio to some oldies but goodies, unclinch your teeth, let your hands ease their grip on the wheel as you prepare for what lies ahead.

END