

“THE FILLY”

The Buena Vista Hotel. Room 231. Eleven O'clock. Don't knock. The door will be open. Simple enough. Even I could remember that.

Still in a daze I weaved my way through the couples dancing to the music of a Dixieland band and found my friend, Driver, waiting for me. He had a big smile of approval, even though he'd lost the bet.

“Well, you did know her,” he acknowledged. “And you got the lipstick to prove it.” He pointed to the smudge of lipstick Constance had left on my cheek when she'd given me one of those brush kisses girls do.

“I'll never wash my cheek again,” I replied, and we headed to the bar where I could begin to collect my bet, which was he had to buy me all the Jax beer I could drink for the rest of the night if I could go over to the VIP table and prove I really did know Miss America.

I really did know her. In fact, not only did I know her, but I was in love with her, and she'd professed to be in love with me, although there were a few complicating factors when she told me this, the first of which was she was the reigning miss Mississippi and striving to be the next Miss America. The second was that win or lose Miss America, she was going all out to be an actress. Bottom line, she was embarking on an ambitious journey, and the last thing she needed was boyfriend baggage to weigh her down. So, we'd agreed it'd be best if we severed the relationship we never had. Any intelligent person would have called it quits at that point, but, stupid me, I still held out hope that things might change down the road. When she won the Miss America of 1959 pageant, that should've been the final nail in the relationship coffin. But then I saw her again...

To my pleasant surprise she'd agreed to talk to me at the VIP table and even introduced me to our brainless governor, the mayor, our state senator, and her momma and daddy, who were not just any momma and daddy, but the richest momma and daddy in the whole sorry-ass state. I'd then entertained

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them all with my wit and charm for a few minutes. I congratulated her on her promotion to Miss American and wished her the best on her Hollywood odyssey. I departed the table, thinking I'd never see her again. To my immense surprise, she'd hurried after me and invited me to join her in her hotel room later that night.

Driver and the other guys with us all headed for the bar for fresh bottles of ice cold Jax, the drink of choice for us residents of Point Cadet, the white trash section of Biloxi. I drank two or three with them, but I had a few other things on my mind. Like what exactly did Constance's late-night invitation to her hotel room entail? Was it just to reminisce about our college days, or, miracle of miracles, was sex in the offing? Kind of hard to believe. Despite our professing love for one another, I'd never even kissed her.

I eventually excused myself, saying I wasn't feeling too well.

"Probably swallowed a baby catfish," Driver joked. He'd interpreted my mental anguish as a physical malaise. Jax was brewed in New Orleans at Jackson Brewery, which was located right on the Mississippi River. The prevailing urban legend was that Jax was brewed from water dipped out of the Mississippi, mud and all. That gave it its unusual taste. One guy I knew swore he'd actually found a baby catfish swimming around in the bottom of a bottle of Jax he'd bought. Hence, Driver's joke.

I didn't over-think the possibility of sex. Chances were remote, but it was better to spend a few dollars on a half-dozen condoms and have them if, miracle of miracles, I needed them, than to find out I needed them and didn't have them. So, I stopped at a drug store and picked up a six-pack. Worst case scenario now was I would have a bunch of decaying rubbers in one of my bureau drawers.

I arrived at my dumb uncle's house, where he let me room and board for half the measly salary he paid me for working in his printing shop and dropping off bets for him at his bookie, good old reliable Jake. I took a shower and brushed my teeth for ten minutes to get rid of the mud and catfish smell. I

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only had one sport coat and one white shirt, but Constance hadn't seen me in either, so I decided to wear them.

I surveyed myself in the mirror, wishing for at least that night I could've looked like Rock Hudson. That was before I knew Rock was...well, you know. I was tall and a little on the skinny side, although I had a modicum of muscle from playing year-round basketball for the last eight years. My hair wouldn't stay out of my eyes. I didn't have any acne or warts, and I'd been lucky enough to grow up with straight and even teeth, because I damned sure couldn't have afforded braces. Constance had told me I had kind eyes, whatever the hell that meant.

I had a watch that was so decrepit even my dumb uncle wouldn't wear it. He'd graciously sold it to me for \$5, which he promptly deducted from my salary. It did keep time, and I hoped it wouldn't quit on me that night.

It held up, and at five to 11, I found myself standing outside the Buena Vista, the Taj Mahal of Biloxi, or at least it was at that time, 1959. I expected that they might have a little extra security out that night, as Miss America was on the premises. I had the ability to summon up the actor in me, especially when I was nervous or tense. I realized I had to act like I belonged there, so I tightened my tie and buttoned my sport coat. I smiled at the desk clerk as I walked by and bid him good evening. He looked up, saw the coat and tie, and smiled brightly back at me. I'd passed the white trash test.

“Good evening, sir. Our coffee shop is still open if you need anything.”

“Don't think so.” I patted my stomach. “Think I ate too much at Baricev's tonight.” Baricev's was the most expensive restaurant in town. Not necessarily the best, but it was where all the big spenders dined.

I climbed the stairs to the second floor and soon arrived at Room 231. As instructed, I didn't knock. I turned the knob. The door opened, and I stepped inside. The room was unlit, but there was enough light filtering through the several windows so that I could see, and I saw Constance standing in front of

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me in one of those terry cloth robes that the better hotels keep on hand. She was barefoot and surprisingly tall in her bare feet.

“Lock the door behind you, Ford.”

Never was an order so promptly obeyed. No sooner had the bolt snapped shut than she was in my arms. I kissed her for the first time. It was a long kiss, but I still kissed her a second and third time. After each kiss, we moved closer to the bed. She’d pulled the covers back. A thick hotel towel lay on the bed.

“It’s my first time,” she explained. “There may be a little bleeding.”

“It’s my first time, too,” I said. “At least in a bed.”

“Have you had many girls?”

“If many is defined as more than two, the answer’s no.”

She loosened the sash on the robe and let it fall to the floor. She stood there naked, while I stood there, mouth open, in awe, as I gazed at what had to be one of the world’s most perfect bodies. Her legs were long and muscular, but not overly so. She’d told me she’d studied dance for years, and her body reflected her athleticism. Her waist was small, contrasting nicely with her wide, but slim, shoulders. Her breasts were teacup-sized and firm.

“Are you going to get undressed or just stare at me all night?”

I disrobed in what had to be record time. There was a chair by her bed, and I not so neatly stacked my clothes on it. My pants, which contained the condoms, went on the stack last. The LIFO, or last in/first out, stock storage system.

“I assume you brought some protection.”

“I never make any assumptions,” I said diplomatically, “but on the oft

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chance you might bestow certain favors upon me, I did make a purchase at a nearby drug store.”

“I hoped you’d take the hint. I thought I made it pretty clear.”

I, too, was now naked, and she gave me the once over. Inasmuch as she didn’t run screaming from the room, I assumed I’d passed the Mr. Darby barely tolerable test. She pulled me to her, and we sank into her large bed, which was almost bigger than the bedroom my dumb uncle let me sleep in.

I took my time with the foreplay, realizing it was her first time. When I felt she was sufficiently prepped, I proceeded to steal away her virginity. There were some small cries of pain but also some gasps of pleasure and discovery. When we’d completed her exodus from maidenhood, we propped our pillows against the headboard and passed around a ceremonial cigarette.

“Can you see that small refrigerator over there?” She inquired. “There’s a bottle of wine in it. I opened it and left two glasses on top. Why don’t you pour us a glass?”

“A kiss in a cup, and I need no wine,” I said dramatically. I sprang up and fetched two glasses of red wine.

We lay close together and sipped our wine.

She laughed. “Boy, if the pageant officials could see me now, lying in bed with a naked man, drinking wine, and smoking a cigarette, they’re rip the Miss America crown right off my head.”

“That’d be their great loss.”

“Why?”

“Well, for openers you’re the most beautiful Miss America they’ve ever had, and secondly, you’re unquestionably the most intelligent.”

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“I appreciate that, but do you have any science to back it up?”

“Alas, only my subjective opinion as to beauty. As for intelligence, your use of the word ‘epiphany’ in the question and answer part of the contest undoubtedly sent most of America scurrying to their dictionaries to learn what the hell it meant. At last, they thought, a Miss America with a brain.”

“I didn’t know what it meant either until I read your story about Jesse and your own epiphany.”

“Well, no one’s born knowing everything, or anything, for that matter. Someone’s got to tell them. You knew, and you used it in the perfect spot at the perfect time.”

“You watched the pageant?”

“Of course. Every night. I was amazed at how calm and under control you were.”

“Only because of you.”

I kissed an ear. “Do you have any science to back that up?”

“As a matter of fact I do,” she laughed. “You remember how you broke the pageant down scientifically and then went into each part of it, reassuring me I would do well?”

“Yes.”

“You told me not to worry about the beauty portion. I was a lock there. You ogled my body and told me I would unquestionably do well in the bathing suit completion.”

“Was my ogling that obvious?”

“You saw me blushing, didn’t you?”

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“A little flush in the cheeks perhaps.”

“And then you said I would wow them in the evening gown portion, as tall girls always looked great in evening gowns, so long as they weren’t prom gowns. I assured you my momma had bought me something flattering.”

“You did indeed look stunning.”

“Thank you. But where I really owe you thanks is for your insisting I use my accent to my advantage and read something southern. My advisor had been on me to read a selection from Shakespeare, and you said you hoped I wasn’t paying him cash money for that kind of dumb advice. And you were right, it would’ve been stupid for me to have done that. You insisted I do the Scarlett O’Hara lines you excerpted from GWTW for me, and you made me promise I would rehearse them until I literally became her. And I did. I rehearsed so much I nearly drove my momma crazy. Then a night or two before the talent competition in Atlantic City, I read them to her and she gave me a look of sincere admiration. ‘My God, Constance, you’re really starting to hammer it!’ She exclaimed.”

“You sure as hell hammered it the night of the talent competition.”

“Standing ovation,” she pointed out, “if you’ll excuse me for bragging a little. My mother was backstage crying. She asked me how I could be so calm. Know what I told her?”

“That you’d rehearsed a lot?”

She leaned over and kissed my cheek. “Well, that she already knew. But I told her you were with me. That you’d walked out on stage with me holding my hand. You smiled at me and told me that you would stay on stage with me and that I should just look into your eyes and unleash Scarlett O’Hara. I swear, Ford, at that point, any nerves I had just vanished.”

“There must be something to mental telepathy,” I said, “because I distinctly remember trying to will every ounce of support I could to you at that time.”

“Mental telepathy gratefully received, although I have to concede it hardly

qualifies as science. And then there was the final night, the question and answer competition. Could you believe the question I drew? There were still five or ten questions left in the bowl, and I drew that one. What did I, Miss Mississippi, think about segregation? I couldn't believe it."

"It was amazing. But it was the perfect question for you."

"I think so, too, Sweetheart. You know, if I hadn't read your story about Jesse and had my epiphany, I would've tried defending that bullshit about 'separate but equal' and segregation. I think that would've killed any chance I had of winning."

I said I agreed with her, and I really did. Any answer other than the one she gave, wherein she talked about her epiphany and how wrong and cruel segregation was, would have handed the Miss America title to another state. No way, even in 1959, a Miss America could travel the country railing against integration. It was inevitable and long overdue, and that part of the country with an actual functioning brain knew it.

"And to think that I, at least for three or four weeks, actually hated you for writing that story."

"You and lots of others."

"I loved the way you lied your way out of it. I told my mother about it."

"And she said..."

"That your creative skills weren't confined to writing."

I watched her eyes as she talked. I loved them so. She'd never make a good poker player. Her eyes would be her tell. Any decent poker player could take one look at her eyes and know in a second exactly what her hand was. "May I do something kinky to you?" I asked.

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She gestured to our naked bodies and giggled. “I think I’m up for anything tonight.”

“May I kiss your eyes.”

“That’s kinky?” She asked, kind of disappointed.

“I love them.”

“Can I shut them first?”

I laughed and kissed her eyes.

“I hate to disappoint you, sweetheart, but that’s not one of my erotic zones.”

I kissed her on the lips and placed my hand on a known erotic zone.

She moaned softly. “How many condoms did you bring?”

“Enough for a small fraternity,” I replied.

“You don’t have to be so tender this time.”

Post second condom, I asked her why she’d decided to recouple the severed cord of our non-existent relationship and invite me over that night.

“I know you thought I was just a hard-hearted, selfish bitch, Ford, but, God, when I saw you tonight, I realized how much I loved you, how much I wanted you. Okay, I’m going to give Hollywood a shot, but you were here now, and Hollywood was somewhere in the future. Sooner or later I was going to give up my virginity, and I thought why not do it now with the man I love and respect most in the world? At least I’d always have that.”

“Believe it or not, that makes sense to me.”

“May I ask you a question?”

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I gestured to our naked bodies. “I think you’ve earned that right.”

“When did you first fall in love in me?”

“You won’t believe me.”

“Try me.”

“When you first read the Scarlett lines I typed up for you. Your eyes danced from surprise to pleasure to interest and finally to the most sincere expression of gratitude I’ve ever seen. It was like you were letting me into your soul. For the first time in my life I actually believed it might be better to give than receive. Now,” I challenged, “when did you first fall in love with me?”

“You won’t believe me.”

“Try me.”

“That same instant. I knew you had no ulterior motives. I knew you weren’t trying to ingratiate yourself to me so you could get a date. I knew you felt I was off-limits to a second-string basketball player like you, that I was the property of rich fraternity boys or star football players. I realized you’d done something for me solely out of the goodness of your heart, that you just wanted to help me, to be of assistance, like a chivalrous knight-errant. You were so selfless.”

“How’d you know I was a second-string basketball player?”

“How little boys know girls.” she mused. “After you gave me the Scarlett lines, I went to see every home basketball game you played. I’d get mad at the coach for not putting you in the game, and, when he finally did, I’d watch no one but you. I’d watch you sneak around and steal the ball and then fly down the court with it and then, instead of shooting it yourself, you’d pass it off to someone else. Typical Ford Hayes, I’d tell myself. He’s just plain selfless. He doesn’t care about himself. He just wants to help the

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team. And I'd wonder how the hell does he run so fast on those skinny damned legs?"

I held up a leg for her to examine. "Are my legs really skinny?"

"They're not bad close-up." She squeezed my thigh. "Even a little muscle."

"Careful, that's one of my erotic zones."

"Care to prove it?"

I proved it and even coaxed a few climaxes out of her.

My Cinderella hour was five a.m., she advised me. Her mother was usually up around six, so I needed to vacate the premises early.

"She really likes you, Ford. She kept telling me how handsome and charming you were and what a damned fool I was to think about running off to Hollywood with someone like you so obviously in love with me."

"And you said..."

"I said I knew it, but that you understood and only wanted what I wanted."

"And she said..."

"That I was still a damned fool."

"I do understand, sweetheart. I really do. How could I ever be happy if you were unhappy?"

The eyes I loved so much grew moist. "Selfless, as always. That's why I love you so much, Ford."

"It's academic. I won't be around anyway."

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“Why, did you get a job somewhere?”

I grinned ironically. “Yeah, peeling potatoes for the good old army. I got drafted. I have to report in three weeks.”

She waved the thought away as if it were nothing. “Don’t worry about it. I’ll get Mama to take care of it.”

“Is Mama on the draft board?”

“No,” she laughed, “but she’s the one you go to when you have a problem.”

I figured she was just blowing smoke and forgot about it. It was getting close to five, and she prompted me to get dressed and prepare to depart. It was hard to leave, as I honestly had no expectation of ever seeing her again.

“I love you, sweetheart. Break a leg in Hollywood.”

She knew the term and knew it meant good luck. “I love you, Ford.”

I eased out the door at five on the nose. As I reached the stairs I heard a door behind me open and then shut. I looked back but couldn’t tell whether it’d been the door to 231 or a room near it. Had to be Constance, I concluded.

Several days elapsed, and I was cleaning the ink off one of my dumb uncle’s printing presses while he was reading the racing form and preparing to contribute to Jake, the bookie. The phone rang, and he grumpily picked it up and shouted a hello into it.

“It’s for you,” he yelled. “Some military guy. Probably about the draft.”

I dried my hands and spoke a civilized hello into the much-abused phone.

“Is this Mr. Rutherford B. Hayes?”

I winced at being called Rutherford but answered yes.

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“This is Captain Marshall at the Mississippi National Guard in Gulfport. It’s kind of embarrassing, Mr. Hayes, but we screwed up and neglected to notify the draft board that you’d joined the National Guard three months ago. They’re mad as hell about it, but they said if we hand-carry the papers over to them today, they’ll cancel your induction.”

Put your hands together for Mama. “What can I do to speed things along, Captain?” I asked, gladly joining the charade.

“Well, we’re so screwed up over here, seems like there’s a whole bunch of papers we forgot to have you sign. You think you could get over here pretty quick and sign them so my sergeant can hand-carry them to the draft board?”

“I think that’s doable, Captain. An hour or so okay?”

“Be fine, Mr. Hayes.”

I hung up and began to plot how I was going to borrow my dumb uncle’s precious Pontiac to drive over to Gulfport, which was 12 miles away. He solved my problem for me when he decided how he was going to lose his money to Jake. He handed me his car keys and a \$20 bill.

“Twenty bucks on Double Deuce to win the fifth race at the Fairgrounds. Got it?”

I took the money and the keys. “Twenty bucks on Double Deuce to win the fifth race at the Fairgrounds. Got it. No problem.”

My uncle thought I was dumber than I thought he was. It was my fault, though, as I loved to play mind games with him. Usually I’d act confused about his bets and repeat some gibberish back to him. He’d scream and yell it back to me several times more until I’d finally repeat it back to him error-free. No time for mind games today. He still looked at me suspiciously.

I stopped by Jake’s crummy bookie joint to lay off the bet. Jake, following the ancient Biloxi tradition of according its braves nicknames when something of note occurred to them, had nicknamed my uncle Whiner because he bitched so much when his horse lost, which was nearly always,

and inevitably whined that all of the damned races at the Fairgrounds in New Orleans were fixed.

Jake saw me coming and gave me a greedy smile. My dumb uncle's bets were like manna from Heaven for him. "Hey, Lawyer. Who's Whiner bettin' on today?"

Lawyer was my nickname because I'd attended college. Biloxi white trash believed that the only reason someone would go to college was to become a lawyer. As an English major I was a long way from that.

Jake was waiting for Whiner's bet.

"Twenty bucks to win on Double Deuce in the fifth race at the Fairgrounds."

Jake eagerly took the \$20 I slid to him and gave me a bet stub. I checked to make sure he'd filled it out correctly. God forbid I ever returned with an incorrect bet stub. That would be the one day the horse Whiner picked would win. He'd take it out of the measly salary he paid me for sure. Everything checked on the stub.

Jake had blackboards all around his place with the names of the horses running in the various races and the current track odds neatly printed on them. Just out of curiosity I stopped to look at the horses running in the fifth at the Fairgrounds. Old Double Deuce was up there, but my jaw dropped when I read the name of one of the horses running against him. The horse's name was Constance Companion. She was a filly and a 40 to one shot.

Constance, Constance, I kept repeating. Constance was the name of the girl I loved, and I would've loved it even more if she were my companion. Could it be a sign from the gods? Like the gods had nothing better to do than to sit around fixing races for me. I still had over \$200 of the \$250 I'd received for winning the Faulkner Award for that short story about Jesse, and I had the money on me. I was actually giving serious consideration to betting on the filly and betting her big. Not everything I had, but \$100 was the figure I was tossing around in my train-wreck brain. At one point I laughed at how I'd

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caught my dumb uncle's disease and actually headed for the door. But something pulled me back. I knew I'd spend all of the prize money on Jax or some other vital necessity and that eventually I'd be broke. So, what the hell? At least this way I'd have a bet stub to show for my \$100. You've got to play to win, and, as someone once wrote, "To win without risk is to triumph without glory."

Pathetic, huh? I walked back to Jake's cage.

"Whiner got another bet, Lawyer?"

"No, this one's for me, Jake."

"Hey, Lawyer's gonna make a bet for himself," Jake yelled out so all the dozen or so horse-racing addicts in his joint could hear. Everyone knew I was just a transporter of money from Whiner to Jake, and so they all laughed at Jake's fantastic sense of humor.

"How much you gonna bet, Lawyer? A dollar?" He inquired, again dialing the volume up to extra loud. More laughter from the gambling addicts.

I laid out five \$20's on the counter. "A hundred bucks on Constance Companion to win the fifth race at the Fairgrounds."

Jake's mouth flew open like one of the starting gates at the Fairgrounds.

"Look, Lawyer, I know you ain't got much money. That horse is a filly, and fillies run in the pack. She ain't got a chance. That's why she's a 40 to one shot. Bet a few bucks if you want, but don't be a sucker like your dumb uncle."

Sympathy from a bookie? I couldn't believe it. I repeated my bet. He shook his head and dutifully wrote up my bet. I triple-checked my stub.

Somehow I didn't get a ticket speeding over to Gulfport. I arrived at the Gulfport Armory, where the guard meetings were held, and found Captain

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Marshall and his sergeant waiting for me. Piles of paper were on a table. I sat down, and the sergeant handed me a pen. They'd slide a paper to me, explain what it was, and I'd sign it. After about 20 signatures, the captain told me to stand and raise my right hand. He then swore me in. I was now a member of the Mississippi National Guard and would have to serve only six months on active duty instead of two years.

The captain shook hands with me and, with a half-wink, said, "And tell the governor we were happy to oblige."

The governor? Momma had the governor put in the fix for me? I was starting to like this woman more and more.

"Will do, Captain."

"Thanks, Mr. Hayes. We meet every Wednesday from seven to ten."

I'd been gone almost two hours, and I knew my dumb uncle would be furious with me. Half an hour tops to go to Jakes, lay off the bet, and then get back to the good old printing shop. Any longer, and I caught hell.

I was so stunned by the governor, or one of his go-fers, actually getting involved in the activities of Ford Hayes, that I'd actually forgotten about my insane bet on Constance Companion.

My uncle was on the phone, yelling as usual, when I made it back to the printing shop. "Jake? That you, Jake? Oh, it's you, Sonny. Where the hell's Jake? Oh. Well, who the hell won the fifth at the Fairgrounds? A filly named Constance Companion? A 40 to one shot! Jesus H. Christ! All those damned races are fixed." He slammed the poor phone down.

He turned his wrath on me, whatever that is. John Steinbeck thought it was grapes. "Where the hell you been? You been gone almost two hours. This is comin' outta your pay, you lazy shit."

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I had two bet tickets in my pocket. I made doubly sure I gave him the one for Double Deuce. I placed his keys on the table and headed for the door.

“Where the hell you going?”

“I quit.”

The filly had won. Now, if only another long-shot came through for me...

THE END.

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