

First Kiss With Rubber

by Alex Austin

In the backyard of the opposite corner's house, an outdoor shower had been set up. I saw a girl in a two-piece bathing suit standing under the shower, her head tilted back, water running down her face. She scooped her hair from the nape of her neck, pulled it back and twisted it. Keeping her head back she let the water pound her face and neck, streaming down her tan skin. She tugged at her halter top, letting the water run through, her skin a flash of white. She turned her back to me then, bent her head forward, and let the stream splash down her back and flow along her smooth brown legs. A screen door slammed as someone came out of the house. I took my eyes off the girl to meet the eyes of a woman of my mother's age, who moved to the girl's side. The girl turned in the same direction as the older woman. She stepped out from under the nozzle, dug her fingers into her hair and combed back the wet blond cords.

"It's okay, ma," she said. "I know him."

Her mother studied me for a few seconds, then turned and slowly walked back into the house.

"What are you doing, Sam?" Julie called out.

I hesitated. "I was over at a friend's."

"Oh, yeah?" She turned off the shower, grabbed a towel from a cedar table and patted at her chest. "Who is it, maybe I know him. Or is it a her?"

"You don't know him."

"I can't hear you. Come over here."

I shoved my hands in my back pockets, took a step and tumbled off the curb into the street, just barely avoiding falling on my face. When I looked up, she was smiling and trying not to laugh. By the time I crossed the street and was standing by the fence, she was drying her legs, propping them on the bench of the cedar table. She wrapped the towel around her waist and tucked it in, so that it stayed like a skirt. Smiling at me, she grabbed a brush from the table and started pulling it back through her hair.

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"You don't have to stand there. Come on in." She pointed the brush at the latch. I shrugged, opened the gate and stepped inside her yard.

"You didn't come here with Leo, did you?" she asked.

"No. Just myself."

"Where's your car?"

"It's, uh, around the block."

"At your friend's, huh?"

"Yeah."

Julie studied her brush, plucking a strand of hair from it. She looked up and smiled. "My mother thought you were a peeper."

"A peeper?"

"Getting free looks."

"Hey, I just saw you and. . ."

I glanced toward the bungalow, where at the kitchen window her mother stood drying a dish and staring out at me.

"So you rent this?" I asked.

"We own it. But we just use it in the summer. To get away from the city, you know."

"Yeah, that's what we do," I said, glancing at the sky and trying to recall if I had told Julie this. "We have a summer house in Port Beach."

"Oh. That's nice."

"Yeah. But, uh, since my mother and father got³/₄since my father *died*, my mom stays in it year round. So I guess it's kind of an all-year-round summer house." Damn, I thought, what am I saying? I cleared my throat. "So you live in?..."

"Jersey City. Ow!" She closed her left eye, then dabbed at it with her finger.

"What's the matter?"

"I think I've got a piece of sand in my eye."

She pulled down the corner of her eye. "I close my eyes underwater just so that won't happen."

"If you keep them open the water washes it out," I said.

"But then the salt burns my eyes. Would you get me a tissue?" She pointed to a box on the table. I pulled one out and handed it to her. She held her eye open, dabbing the tissue as she rolled her eye upward. "Take a look, huh?"

I stepped closer and smelled her freshly washed body, which still held the familiar scents of suntan lotion and bay salt. Drunk and courageous on her fumes, I looked down into her eye. She had green irises, the edges jagged and pointed like a child's drawing of the sun and within the green, splashes of gold.

"Do you see anything?"

"No, not yet," I said, not wanting to leave those colors, but shifting my gaze to the white of her eye. She moved and her wet top brushed my chest. Through the cloth I could feel the heat of her skin. A faint, warm breeze curled around me. I touched my left hand to her cheek. She flinched slightly at the touch. The warmth of her skin burned against my hand. I nudged down the lower eyelid, peeping inside her. "I think I see it," I said, spotting a single grain of sand, brown and glistening in the corner of her eye. She held out the tissue. I took it, twisted one corner and gently drew the tissue along the base of her eye. When I finished the pass, the grain was gone.

"I think I got it."

"Let me see."

I carefully held the tissue out, but the breeze caught it and snatched it from my hand, dropping it in a puddle beside the shower. I picked up the wet tissue.

"It feels better," said Julie.

"Want me to look again?"

She looked at me. "No. You got it. It felt big."

"Size of a marble."

"Sure." She grinned. "You want something to drink?"

I shook my head, but she saw that I did anyway. She disappeared into the house for a minute, during which time I realized that to the other bull I'd added a car.

When she reappeared she had changed into jeans and a white shirt that hung out. It was too big for her and the cuffs came down to her fingertips, which held two red plastic glasses.

"You like iced tea?"

"Sure."

"It's about all we drink," she said, handing me the glass. "I mean, in the summer."

The back door opened. Her mother held out a sugar shaker and a couple of spoons. She glanced at me with a sad look, as if she'd learned that I wasn't a peeper, but a guy dying of something.

Julie set a spoon and the sugar shaker in front of me and took a seat on the other side of the table. She waited for me to do something, tugging on the sleeves of the shirt and smiling at me. She stared at me as if I were a kitten. I finally took the sugar and dumped about five tablespoons of it into the tea.

"That's a lot of sugar." I stopped pouring. "You must have a sweet tooth." I tightened my lips, running my tongue across a couple of cavities. The last time I'd been to a dentist was in elementary school, where the school dentist worked without Novocain, and let you guess what he was doing. Since then, I'd read that teeth, like wounded flesh, heal themselves, and I hoped that was true. As far as I could see, Julie's teeth were perfect. White and even.

Julie put one spoonful of sugar into her tea and stirred about twenty times.

"You were down the beach, huh?" I asked.

"We go every day unless it's raining."

"That's the best time," I said.

"In the rain?"

"For swimming."

"That's crazy," she laughed.

"No. You swim underwater and when you look up the surface is like it's on fire."

"That would be scary."

"It's not, really."

"I believe you."

I took a swallow of the iced tea. I put at least five or six teaspoons of sugar in everything I drank, but today the tea tasted sickeningly sweet. "What beach do you go to?"

"By the pier. My brother's a lifeguard there."

"No kidding?"

"You have dimples. How sweet."

I frowned.

"You're embarrassed, huh? Well you do. I like dimples."

"How'd your brother get the job?"

"He's on the swim team at St. John's."

I must have looked confused. "St. John's, the college," she explained.

"Yeah. Sure."

"He'll be home any minute." Julie peered over my shoulder toward the street. "Maybe you shouldn't be here."

My shoulder blades tightened. "What do you mean?"

"He picked us up the other night. We told him everything and he's pissed."

"What did you tell him I did?"

Julie squinted. "I said you tried to cop a feel. And when I wouldn't let you, you made us get out of the car and walk home."

"What did you tell him that for?" I said, looking back at the street, where a car was approaching.

"Those dimples are really cute."

"Julie. . ."

She grinned. "I'm kidding."

The car pulled to the curb beside the house. A guy with a crew cut, broad shoulders, and a square face got out.

Julie's words drowned under the thunder of the gate closing. All I could think was that she had been nice to me just to keep me here until her brother got home and could beat the crap out of me.

"Tony, this is Sam."

Here comes the punch, I thought, turning my head up glumly to receive it. But as I met Tony's eyes, her words broke through. "Looks like Chester," Tony said.

"Yeah, he does, doesn't he?"

"Nice to meet you," said Tony, holding out his hand.

I lifted my hand warily. He took hold like a pair of Vise-grips.

He wasn't much taller than me, but he had those swimmer's shoulders and his legs and arms were cut up. His eyes were green like Julie's, but his complexion was even darker, except for his nose which had zinc oxide all over it.

"Sam goes to Princeton."

"We kicked their butts," said Tony, dropping my hand, and looking bored with me already. "Dad home?"

Julie shook her head. Tony gave me a last look, one side of his mouth turning up as he gave his evaluation to Julie.

"Take care, buddy," he said, as he walked into the house, letting the screen door slam behind him. I heard, "What's for dinner, ma?" and then Tony singing something I didn't recognize.

We sat in silence.

"You want to go for a walk?" she said.

Before I could answer, Julie jumped up, took my hand and pulled me to my feet. She yelled out to her mother that she was going for a walk down by the creek. Her mother called back that dinner would be ready in forty-five minutes.

"Okay, ma."

At the marsh, we followed a sandy path that cut through waist-high swamp grass to the creek, where an old sun-bleached dock rose above the bank. Julie released my hand, climbed on the dock and sat down, her legs dangling over the edge as below the green, muddy water flowed toward the bay. I dropped down beside her, careful to keep a gap between us, but not so large that if I put my hand down it wouldn't brush against her jeans. I gripped the edge of the wood and pushed myself up an inch, letting the muscles tighten in my arm, hoping she would notice the bulge of my triceps.

She looked over at me and smiled and I dropped back down. A short distance away, where the creek curved left and then disappeared into the marsh grass, seagulls circled above, squawking irritably, until suddenly one would drop like a sinker to the creek and rise back up with something in its mouth. It was low tide and most of the opposite bank was visible. I pointed out a soldier crab scuttling over the black mud, holding up his one huge claw like a shield, and then a sudden rippling on the water, a school of killies converging on garbage or something dead.

"There's a muskrat trap," I said.

"Where?"

I pointed to the brown metal trap on the opposite bank. Planted in a crevice, its open jaw awaited the unsuspecting paw of a muskrat coming down for a meal of soldier crabs.

"That's terrible," Julie said, asking what they did with the muskrats. Did they eat them?

"Skin them. They get five dollars apiece for the skins."

"Poor muskrat," she said. "That's cruel."

I told her the trap was probably so rusted it couldn't close. There were useless traps all over the marshes, I explained, left by old trappers who had died long ago. The muskrats were safe. I didn't tell her that Hector and I had repaired some traps once, set out to catch muskrats and sell the skins. We caught one, too, which was still alive when we found it. Its leg was half off, the blood spread out like ribbons on the water. I wanted to let it go, but the fear that we were afraid to kill it made us club its head with a bat. We tried to skin it, but knew nothing and only carved it out like a pumpkin. I finally wrapped the body in a gunny sack and dumped it in the creek, where I hoped it would float to sea, far from my dreams.

A tarred, dented beach ball whose stars and stripes had faded bobbed by. Julie followed it, so that her face turned toward me, then snapped back. I looked sideways at her soft, round chin moving slightly as if she were talking to herself, her eyes glistening as they stared across the marsh at the low-lying houses.

"What do you think of Candy?" she asked.

"She's okay."

"She's confused."

"What do you mean?"

"She has that boyfriend in the Navy. She says she loves him, but she fools around."

"Yeah?"

"You know, she likes your friend Leo."

"Really?"

"Did he tell you what he did?"

I shook my head.

"Liar."

"What do you mean?"

"It's okay. I know guys talk."

I looked down at the creek, remembering Leo bragging about what he'd done. The tide was starting to turn and the articles floating by slowed down, gathering into an island of garbage. I thought I saw a jellyfish floating by and realized it was a rubber.

"Jack--that's the guy in the Navy--wants to marry her. I told her she's too young. But she's gonna get knocked up for sure, if not from Jack then from somebody else."

She turned to me and smiled. Her hand slipped over mine, her fingers sliding across my knuckles to settle between my fingers. Her hand felt light and cool. She tightened her lips, then opened them slightly, a bubble of saliva perched on her lower lip. I twisted and reached around with my free hand to touch her arm. She leaned into me and closed her eyes. I think the marsh and creek and seagulls all stayed there, but like that instant before sleep when the world recedes, I felt it disappearing as I tilted my head to kiss her. Was I supposed to close my eyes, I wondered, staring at the movement of her eyes under her lids. Where were my lips supposed to go? I'm going to do it wrong, I thought, as I adjusted my head and caught a glimpse of the ghostly white condom floating below. I closed my eyes and kissed her. Somehow she gave way and pressed

back at the same time. Her mouth opened more and her breath came through the hollow. I breathed her spearmint scent. I slipped my hand across her shoulder and down her back, over the speed bump of her bra strap to the slope of her waist and the swell of her hip. She leaned backwards on the dock, and I twisted over her, our legs jutting out over the stream. When did it end, I wondered? Lips together, lips apart. Her mouth over mine. Mine over hers. Sliding right, then left. Catching her lower lip between mine. Mouths barely touching, then clamped like the sides of a vise. And then the kiss within the kiss, which I'd only imagined. She finally drew away, putting my hands on either side of my head and lifting me from her lips. She smiled, sat up and opened her eyes, smoothing the oversized white shirt. She stared across the marsh at the row of summer bungalows, where smoke rose from backyard barbecues.

"That was nice."

"Yeah."

She glanced down at the creek.

"Is that a jellyfish?" she asked.

"I think so."

She stared down at the olive-green water now slowing as the tide changed, which would be an instant when everything should stop, but it never stopped entirely. It just changed directions. She turned toward me, her head tilted and her mouth turned up. I kissed her again. Behind us something pounded the dock. The deck shivered beneath us and the sun seemed to fall behind a cloud. A man's voice boomed, "Julie, you have to get home for dinner."

I jerked my head around. A pair of black boots was planted on the dock. Tucked into the boots were blue pants with stripes up the side. I followed the stripe of the right trouser to the holster and the shiny black revolver.

"Dad, this is Sam. Sam, this is my father."

I looked up, catching the blue shirt and badge of a Jersey State Trooper, then the square, stony face, topped by curly, iron gray hair, cut short. His eyes were the same color as Julie's, but deeper set and cold.

"Hi."

"Hello," he said, taking in my hair, black jeans and roach killers. He sniffed and shook his head.

Above the creek, a couple of seagulls squawked and swooped down on something. I glanced that way just to get out from under his eyes. Bobbing along on the water's surface was that old rubber jellyfish. When I looked back I saw that Julie's father was staring at it, too.

Julie's hand slipped into mine.

"Your mother's waiting," said her father.

I said goodbye at the gate and watched them disappear into the house. I walked a half block before I opened my hand and saw the slip of paper with the phone number that I was not supposed to already have.

