

Bootsy Goes on a Bender

by Gita M. Smith

Bootsy Sykes was wasting away again in Margaritaville.

At 9 a.m., wearing only University of Alabama Crimson Tide boxer shorts, Bootsy lurched down his driveway with a frosted mug in one hand and garden hose in the other to spray away the pollen on his battered pickup truck. His flamboyant Irish setter, Bear, whose farts could clear an auditorium, pranced alongside, ready to catch any drops of high-test Tequila that Bootsy might spill.

Even in Hayneville, a town known for its gentle tolerance of eccentric drinking habits, Bootsy's recent bender was causing a stir. But the cause was known only to Bootsy. For on this, the Spring Equinox, when dogwoods and azaleas bent low with bee-heavy blooms, when warm sunshine lured women outdoors with their winter-pale arms exposed, he, Bootsy Sykes, felt the full and lonely force of his too-lengthy bachelorhood.

Bootsy had woken with a hangover that caused a seam to open in the known universe, leaving Bootsy on one side while all other matter sped away, away. Medicating himself with a strawberry-banana-tequila smoothie was his usual m.o., except that on this day, he could not tolerate the sound of his blender.

He let Bear outside to pee while he propped himself in his doorway, shading his eyes from the springtime sun.

He could hear his hair growing and another sound, a kind of sad tinkling that might have been his Margarita-soaked brain cells singing "*adios.*" A pretty young woman in a copper-colored Mitsubishi convertible slowed momentarily to admire Bear (thinking perhaps that the Irish Setter's coat matched her car perfectly, and what a nice picture he would make in her passenger seat) then sped away.

Bootsy followed her with half-mast eyes, wishing that he could be the one at the wheel with her dark curls against his shoulder, but his sifting thoughts jumped their track an instant later, and the world was a blank, again.

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Public health nurse Temerity Shiner had been watching Bootsy from her next-door breakfast nook window, and she felt it her duty as a medical professional to do something about his alcohol consumption. But what?

She smoothed her skirt and lilac twin set, pulled a six-pack of spring water from the fridge and walked unswervingly to his front door which, as was Bootsy's custom when drinking heavily, was ajar. Temerity surveyed the detritus: empty bottles of tequila, triple sec and Margarita mixers; crushed cans of Pabst Blue Ribbon; sauce-stained Domino's pizza boxes; squashed Krispy Kreme doughnuts leaking crème filling and, in the middle of it all, the keg-shaped body of Bootsy Sykes snoring like a howitzer.

Suddenly, Bootsy awoke and fixed his gaze on Temerity with hangover-eyes that seemed to be ringed by wild-cherry Lifesavers. "Unh, hey, whaddup?" Bootsy said before rolling onto his stomach and vomiting a weekend's worth of rejected junk food onto his University of Alabama "Winning Season" coffee table book.

"Here, drink this," Temerity said, separating one bottle of spring water from its blister pack. "You're dehydrated and you smell like a buzzard's breakfast."

Bootsy glugged the water and reached for a second while Temerity assessed his possible blood alcohol level. "Dang, I'm sorry about this," Bootsy said, scraping pizza crust from the bottom of a sock. "There's some in your hair," Temerity said, but smiled because the pepperoni pieces looked like they were trying to make a run for it, kamikaze-style, by sliding down his forehead.

"I think I should probably take a shower," said Bootsy, but his eyes were yo-yos in their sockets, and he couldn't muster the strength to stand.

One hour and four bottles of water later, Bootsy was shampooing under a hot spray while Temerity excavated his coffee pot from the kitchen debris.

At that point, both were thinking, 'What should I say now?' although each hoped the other would speak first. Towel-dried, Bootsy accepted an un-spiked mug of coffee and folded himself into his

recliner as Temerity kicked aside enough cans to clear a path to the sofa.

"How can I help you, Boots?" was all Temerity knew to say.

Bootsy thought about that a moment and while he would have liked to say, "Do you know any real pretty women who bow-hunt," he replied instead, "I never been this drunk, this long, before, so I don't rightly know."

Bootsy hired his neighbor, Cora Jean Shiner, to clean his house for \$50 and a six-pack of designer beer from some microbrewery in godforsaken North Carolina.

The beer had a six-word, New Age-sounding name, like Honey Golden Wheat Dew Drop Inn, but Bootsy was all too glad to pay up just so he would not have to look at the litter of dead soldiers and pizza cartons, ever again.

He took himself for a barbershop shave-and-towel, and then he sat at the counter of the Pancake Palace -- the old one on Route 80 that smelled like a hundred years of maple syrup, not the new antiseptic one at the EastDale Mall -- for a cup of no-kidding coffee and a boysenberry short stack.

Bootsy -- who kept so much to himself, who slept with a police scanner by his bed so that he could jump into his truck from a dead sleep and chase ambulances for the sheer adrenaline, who drew strength from the triumphant, kindly ghost of Bear Bryant, football coach among coaches, who would give a kidney to his friend Hoot Shiner and whose laugh could melt the icecaps -- wondered seriously if there was a woman anywhere who might put up with him for longer than a weekend fling.

He stirred three Splendas into his coffee, took a slurp, and reckoned Cora Jean might be halfway finished the clean up, maybe more if she'd cranked up Lynyrd Skynyrd to top volume.

The wall clock above the cash register said 11 a.m., and Bootsy knew he could get to a drinkers' meeting in the church basement if he hurried, right then.

