

RUBYRED AND PARSHOOTER

by Howard Giordano

This stage of Junior's young life was static, moving very little off-center since his graduation from high school five years ago. Treading water both professionally and emotionally never worried him. Not until after what transpired that night when Providence, the divinity that shapes our end, urged him to turn on his computer.

"Time to go to the candy store," Junior said aloud as he typed in his password to his computer-dating web site, eSexysingles.com. The home page flickered to life across his new flat screen monitor and welcomed PARSHOOTER to this haven of lovelorn members. He immediately opened the library page of female candidates who were supposed to match the 36 traits of his on-file personality profile. So many choices, so many scores, his mind rumbled as he scrolled through the array of familiar faces and bodies, many he'd already sampled. He stopped suddenly at a new entry he hadn't seen before, screen name RUBYRED. He brought up her resume page and clicked on the first small photo. Her round, baby face filled the enlarged screen, blue eyes staring out above a painted red smile. A full mane of firecracker red hair framed RUBYRED'S accented, blush-on cheeks. Junior reduced the image to its original postage-stamp size and moved the cursor to her next photo, clicked it up to full size, this one posed in girlie-magazine fashion. Seated on the end of a diving board, she wore a bikini that looked like someone had drawn it with a sharp number-2 pencil. He could not miss her endowments despite the adoring white poodle perched on her lap and licking her chin. "Looks like another winner," he proclaimed as he clicked on the wink button.

It was close to midnight, his eyelids heavy from watching Monday Night Football on the small TV set in his one-room apartment above his parents' garage. No time to read RUBYRED's

profile description before crawling into bed, he decided. Besides, they make up most of the things they put into it anyway, all that crap about long walks on the beach, leisure suppers in candlelit cafes, good books and classical music. He was convinced the women he winked at electronically all harbored the same prurient interests he did. His almost perfect success rate did nothing to discourage that belief.

It was Junior's turn to open the pro shop at 7 A.M. He needed his rest for a 9:30 golf lesson with the lovely Mrs. Beaumeister, whose bra size, he joked to his head pro, matched her handicap: 40. Let's see if RUBYRED answers my wink with an email, he thought as he shut down the computer.

#

"Junior, what do you wanna be when you grow up?" Mike O'Toole, the Oak Tree Golf and Country Club cart barn supervisor, asked him the next day.

Mike ran his stubby fingers through his white, Brillo-like hair. The thumb and forefingers of his other hand, hooked under his wide belt, struggled to pull his khaki trousers up over his bulbous belly. His faded Oak Tree-monogrammed golf shirt reeked of Clorox and stretched beyond the intent of the manufacturer. Junior had just described his latest internet find to his former boss, taking pains to include accurate details of the diving board picture. Mike's rumpled expression was clearly one of disapproval.

"You can't just waste your life chasing girls and playing golf. There's not much future in the golf business unless you become head pro, or your game's good enough to make it on the pro tour. I mean, laddie, even I had a good run in the postal system for twenty-five years before getting into this business. This business is for retirees like me, or youngsters like you who just want free golf."

It was that fatherly connection that saved Junior from termination the many times he tempted Mike's patience, back when he worked summers in the cart barn during high school, before it defaulted into full time employment.

He'd worked three years in the cart barn before moving into the golf shop as an assistant teaching pro, despite not being PGA certified. "But you have to be in the PGA program," the head pro told him, "or I won't let you teach. That's the deal." Junior signed up immediately, with a loan from his father to help pay the tuition, and passed the Playing Ability Test the next month. "Finished three shots under for the two rounds," he had boasted to Mike the next day.

"I don't know, Mike. I've always thought about making a career in golf, become a head pro someday. They make good money, you know."

"True, laddie, at certain upscale clubs they do. That's a long hard grind. Think you got the stuff for it?"

"Well, yeah, I got the game."

"That's very nice, son, but there's more to the program than just your playing ability. You've been in the program, what, two years? And you barely completed the first phase of the bookwork. Sports bars and chasin' women take precedence over study, do they? You know, they give you three years to finish the book studying part," he reminded him, "otherwise you have to start all over again."

"I know, Mike. I know. I'm working on the books whenever I can. Hell, I already know a lot about running the cart barn."

"When are you gonna get real, laddie? What are you waiting for, some fairy to come sprinkle you with magic dust to jump-start you?"

The answer to Mike's admonitions was beyond Junior's self-control. His six-foot athletic frame, thick tousled hair, undeniable good looks, and innate Irish charm endeared him to the Oak Tree membership to whom he doled out his playing knowledge through numerous golf lessons. Female club members especially coveted his teaching times, and his lessons often did not stop on the practice tee.

RUBYRED answered his wink that evening. She suggested they meet for a drink. She said she hoped it could be an enlightening meeting—her words, exactly. Junior wasn't sure what she meant by it. His imagination ran wild anyway. She wanted to meet somewhere

quiet, somewhere where they could talk. He realized that left out his usual sports bar haunts. A sports bar, with its saturated beer aroma and high levels of testosterone, was suitable for meeting and connecting with those who were into the NFL, NBA, MLB, NHL, NASCAR and sometimes the PGA, although the noise level that accompanied these simultaneously televised sporting events drowned out anything that resembled social conversation. No, a sports bar was not the place to meet RUBYRED for a drink, he decided. Something in his gut told him this was going to be different. He emailed her, selected the bar at the local Holiday Inn for their date and RUBYRED emailed back confirming Wednesday evening, after work, was fine.

#

The Holiday Inn bar, an unfamiliar, older social atmosphere, was busy when Junior entered. He looked around warily and immediately decided he was smart to wear his new blue blazer. He slipped onto a stool near the end of the long bar, close to the door where he could watch for RUBYRED. He was certain he could pick her out, even fully dressed.

The bar area hosted a few visiting salesmen on the prowl. Two or three housewives tried to look innocent while their unmarried neighbor scoped out possibilities. Mostly locals made up the Holiday Inn's Happy Hour, a regular stop after work. The soundless TV set tuned to the stock market channel, hung over the back of the bar. Only the chatter from the patrons created the bar's moderate noise level. He had made the right call, he concluded, trusting his intuition to avoid the roar of the sports bar for this first date with RUBYRED.

"You want a glass or the bottle okay?" the bartender asked as he placed the imported beer in front of Junior.

Junior hesitated. They gave no one that option at sports bars. Everyone sucked beer from the bottle. He thought briefly about the impression that would make on RUBYRED. "Yeah, a glass is okay. Maybe a frosted mug, if you got it?"

"Yes sir, we can do that," the bar man replied and quickly returned with the iced container.

“PARSHOOTER?”

The soft voice reached the back of Junior's neck, nestling there while his brain processed the sound of his screen name. He had taken a sip of beer and was placing the mug back on the bar when the voice floated into his consciousness. Junior turned slowly in her direction. The blaze of red hair, backlit by a white halo of light, almost blinded him. He blinked and squinted several times before he could respond.

“RUBYRED?”

When she stepped in closer and out of the dazzling effect of the setting sun streaming through the windows behind her, she finally came into focus. Her smile was warm and intimate, as if she was greeting an old friend. Except for its color, her Kelly-green blazer duplicated the one he had on and set off her thickly textured red hair like a fire alarm. The soft, yellow shirt under her jacket, buttoned at the neck, sported a subtle, stitched design on the collar. A pair of form fitting khaki slacks covered her legs, the curvy ones he remembered trailing off the end of the diving board. She wore black ankle boots, turned up slightly at the toes. They were made of a smooth, satiny fabric.

“Junior?”

She knew his name.

“North Tampa Central High School, right?”

She knew that too.

“I thought there was something familiar in that bio of yours . . . six-two, sandy-blond hair, plays golf, loves the Dolphins and Marlins, hates math and studying but loves Elmore Leonard's novels.” Her voice was clear and articulated.

Junior sprung from his stool, almost falling into her before he regained his balance. Her full size reached the middle of his chest, and her shapely figure was everything the photo on the web promised. The luster of her skin was a pale pink, and when she held out her hand, he took it gently into both of his and held it like a piece of fragile porcelain.

"You know me?" He was clueless. Nothing was familiar, not from the pictures on the web, not from seeing her now in person.

She continued to smile with the confidence of someone about to reveal a secret. "I guess you don't remember me. Ginger Tibsen, geometry and American History. We were in those classes together in our senior year at Central."

Now Junior was baffled. The name Ginger Tibsen was familiar. However, he remembered only a girl with reddish hair who had a ruddy complexion, a dumpy body and nerdy personality, who sat just ahead of him in both classes. She was smart as hell, he remembered, and aced every test as if someone gave her the answers in advance. He remembered that much. He couldn't think of a time when he saw her outside the classroom.

He suddenly realized they were still standing. He reached back for the stool next to him and pulled it out. "Well, for Pete's sake, let's sit down while I figure this out. What would you like to drink?"

She climbed onto the stool and said, "Something diet, I think. A Coke is fine."

"Nothing stronger?"

"No, that's okay."

Motioning to the bartender, he flashed back to the photo on the diving board. "So, you have a dog?"

"Got him last Christmas. My folks thought I could use the company."

He wanted to get right to the question of her physical transformation. He hesitated. How do you approach that tactfully? Ask, hey, how did you get from being a pudgy nerd to a gorgeous fox? He didn't think so.

The bar man appeared. "A Diet Coke for the lady, and I'll have another Becks." He pushed the empty mug forward to trade for a frosted one. "Well, let's see, how long has it been? Three, four years? You graduated the same year I did, didn't you?"

"Yes, but it's been five years, she answered." The bartender returned with two mugs, one of beer and one filled with Diet Coke. She raised hers and extended it toward Junior. "Here's to old

friends, and may the best day of your past be the worst day of your future," she said. Ginger carefully clinked their two mugs together.

"Five years? Jeez, where the hell did the time go?"

"It goes by fast, that's for sure," she answered, "We shouldn't waste it. Want to tell me what you've been doing since graduation?"

"Why don't you go first? My five years can't be anywhere near as interesting as yours," he said, thinking again about her physical change.

"Okay. Promise to stop me if you get bored."

Junior repositioned his stool to permit him to face her straight-on and placed his shoes on the rung of her seat, just below her dangling feet. "I doubt that will happen," he said.

"After high school I enrolled at Dowling College upstate, majoring in philosophy."

"I thought everyone who went there majored in basket weaving or surfing," he said, reciting an old joke about Dowling's supposed easy curriculum. She ignored his interruption and continued.

"When I got there, my freshman-year roommate was into a rigid physical fitness program.

In self-defense, I got involved. After four years, I not only graduated with honors in my major but with a new body. Which, incidentally, in my senior year made the "Girls of Florida Colleges" edition of *Playboy Magazine*."

"No shit!" Junior said it and immediately put his hand over his mouth like he wanted to stuff back his words.

"That's okay," she replied. "It surprised the faculty and administration too. They almost suspended me . . . nearly didn't graduate. My folks supported my decision to do it. They argued that the college should allow me to graduate because of my academic record. The Dean relented, none too happily."

Junior remained motionless, starring at Ginger like a stun-gun victim. If she had been a sports bar pickup, the concept of her posing for a *Playboy* layout would have been easy to grasp.

Nevertheless, Junior could not make that connection with Ginger. She was a college honors graduate. She was too smart. He shook his head slowly. "What in the world made you do it? Pose for the magazine, I mean. I'm not being critical, understand, just amazed."

Ginger's cherubic expression belied her answer. "I did it because I was asked and because I could. I'd worked long and hard those four years to develop into who I am now and I saw no reason to hide it. Do you think I should have?"

"No, no . . . jeez, no. You know what they say, if you got it, flaunt it."

Junior thought about the stark contrast of their lives. Ginger was sure of herself, in charge. She knows who she is, the image she creates, and is perfectly okay with it, like, this is the way she was born, and she can't imagine herself behaving in any other way.

His mind looped back to the present, and he blurted, "My God, I think I love you."

Ginger laughed. "So soon?"

The bartender's head swiveled around. Junior caught his smirk. "Just kidding," he said, trying to salvage some dignity. "Yeah, well, you know what I mean. Wow! I envy you." In that instant he realized he did. "You do any more posing . . . I mean modeling?"

"Only in sweat pants and tee shirts at Gold's Gym. I'm a physical fitness trainer there. I've looked at ways to use my philosophy education. There's little opportunity, except maybe teaching. Right now I'm working on my certification as a physical therapist."

The word therapist triggered a medical image, of someone on an uphill career path toward a goal that required study, dedication and total commitment. Junior wondered how much time that would leave her for a social life. He could guess the answer.

"Okay, your turn. Tell me what you've been up to since Central," she said.

He leaned back against the bar, supporting his head with an elbow. A sense of awkwardness seeped in when he thought quickly

about the past five years. "Sure you want to hear about it? I mean, it ain't exactly Gulliver's Travels, you know."

Ginger's expression reminded him of Mike O'Toole's when he got into one of his parental moods. "What happened after graduation," she asked, "when you were offered a golf scholarship to Florida State? Why didn't you accept it?"

"Jesus, how the hell do you know about that?"

"Class gossip, that's all."

She rolled her eyes toward the ceiling. Junior never looked away.

"It was true, then?" she asked.

"Yeah. Anyway, my SAT scores sucked, and the truth is, I knew a few of the guys on State's squad. My game wasn't even close to theirs back then." Junior suddenly realized it was the first time he had admitted that to anyone other than Mike O'Toole. He searched Ginger's face for a reaction. He found none.

"The cart barn supervisor at Oak Tree offered me a full time job. I figured it might be a first step toward becoming a pro. I teach now, but I'm not certified yet. I'm in the PGA program though. As soon as I complete the course, I'll be certified," he said as he flagged the bartender.

"You really want that, don't you?"

Junior stiffened and shot her a puzzled look. "Hey, I've only had two. I can handle a—"

Ginger cut him off. "Not the drink, you goof. I meant, you really want to finish the program . . . become a PGA professional?"

Junior's shoulders relaxed. He laughed. "Sorry," he said.

Ginger smiled and waited.

"Well, yeah, sure. Very much." He could feel his chest swell when he spoke the words. The bartender arrived. "Two more of the same," Junior ordered.

"Not for me, thanks," Ginger said, "I still have a little left here." She lifted the mug to her cheek as if to verify her reply.

This was not going the way he hoped it would, he thought. He was accustomed to taking charge of his dates, and this one seemed to be slipping away. "Just the Becks, then."

"How long is the course?" she asked.

"Well, it really doesn't have a time frame. I mean, it's as long as it takes you to complete all the required book stuff. They . . . uh . . . the PGA, that is . . . gives you three years to do it, and if you don't finish, you start all over again."

"How far along are you?"

Junior hesitated. He felt the back of his neck getting warm. He picked up the fresh beer mug and brought it slowly to his mouth, sipping deliberately. Ginger had not taken her eyes off him. Her penetrating look was that of a teacher waiting for her pupil to answer the question.

"Not very," Junior finally said. This time his ears felt warm.

"Oh? I guess you've just started, then?"

Junior's first impulse was to lie, say he began the program this year. Ordinarily, lies would have tumbled out like an overturned bucket of golf balls. Now, he couldn't find the voice. He was certain Ginger could read him, see right through his lying.

"Two years ago. I started the program two years ago. I've completed about a quarter of the work."

Ginger wrinkled her nose. Junior noticed.

"I guess I've been lazy." He attempted to look away. Her eyes would not let him go. He struggled to remember why he had made this date. The picture of her on the diving board started to form in his mind. The full image would not come.

"That means you have another year to finish three quarters of the work." Her tone was firm, not scolding. She took the beer mug from his hand, set it down on the bar and slid it out of his reach. Junior sat still. "That's a heroic task. Do you believe you can do it?"

He remained quiet, feeling a strange calmness. As he considered his answer, he felt the sense of a wall of silence wrapping around him like a blanket. He wasn't able to hear anything but his own thoughts, and they became a series of loud sentences in

his head. *Can I finish the program work? Within the next year? Of course I can. I'll just have to put in the time. Get serious. Knock off the bullshit. I know I have the ability. I know I can do it. I'm going to get certified. Become a PGA Professional.*

Junior heard a soft pop! He looked around, startled. It was as though he had dozed off and suddenly awakened by the popping sound in his head. He looked at Ginger. She was grinning. With a force of conviction that surprised him, he said, "Of course I can."

"I believe you can too. I think you would be a terrific professional. Tell me something," she said. "Isn't your real name, Dennis?"

"How did you . . . oh, of course, the yearbook?"

"That's right, and the blurb under your picture said Florida State . . . golf professional."

"Well, I got a shot at making one of those goals come true." His voice was strong.

"Where did the name, Junior, come from?" she asked. "Was Dennis your father's name, too?"

"Yeah, and when one of the guys on Central's golf team found out, he saddled me with that label. As a joke at first, but eventually the whole team picked up on it. Somehow the name stuck. I became known to everyone as Junior."

"Dennis Boylan would look much classier on a leader board than Junior Boylan. Don't you think?"

Junior thought about the clown who first tagged him with the name. "You know, you're right. Anyhow, I think I've outgrown Junior."

"Dennis, I think you're on your way." She slipped down from the barstool. "Excuse me, I have to visit the ladies' room," she said, and disappeared into the shadows of the Holiday Inn.

#

The next morning, Mike approached Junior, alone on Oak Tree's kidney shaped putting green, a tranquil place where members spent hours practicing in solitude that part of their game requiring serious concentration and studied repetition. He pulled his golf cart

along side the lush, sprawling, green expanse and motioned him over. "Junior, where in hell is the tee sheet?" he said quietly. "My guys haven't a clue whose bags we need to load on carts for today's rounds."

Junior looked up from his bent over position. "I'm sorry, Mike. I completely forgot to print you a copy. My head's somewhere else this morning." He picked up his putter and walked to Mike's cart.

"Something wrong, laddie?" Mike asked.

The story of last night's date came pouring out while Mike sat listening attentively. Junior was short of breath when he finished.

"I mean, it's absolutely eerie, I'm telling you, Mike." SMACK! Junior's putter head bounced off the front tire of Mike's cart. "She just disappeared into space, like she never existed. When she went to the ladies' room and didn't return to the bar, I thought, well maybe she had enough of me and decided to duck out. That would have been nothing new. I've had that happen once or twice, especially when I get a little sloppy after too many beers. But I was stone sober, on my best behavior." SMACK! The putter hit the tire again. "I went right home. I tried pulling up her page on the web. She wasn't there. Then this morning . . . get this . . . I called Gold's Gym, and they told me they never had a trainer named Ginger Tibsen. I'm stumped, Mike, absolutely stumped. I don't know what to make of it." He punctuated his frustration with another whack against the tire.

"Well, if you stop and take a breath a minute, laddie, maybe I can shed a little light on the matter. For goodness sake, put the damned club away before you hit me with it."

"Aaah, man, I really liked this girl. She got to me, got me thinking about my stupid life here at Oak Tree, got me believing in myself and all fired up about finishing the PGA program this year. What the hell am I going to do now, huh?"

"You're gonna finish the program this year, that's what you're gonna do."

"Yeah, well, I tell you what, though, I'm going to keep looking until I find her again. And I'll find her, I promise you." He raised the

putter to slug the tire, and Mike leaped out of the cart with an agility that misrepresented his sixty-five years.

"Hold on, Junior. Hold on, will you? I don't think you'll ever find her."

Junior stopped in mid take-away. He heard something in Mike's tone that he'd never heard before. Slowly lowering the club to the ground, he asked, "Why not?"

"Because, laddie, she doesn't exist."

"What the hell you talking about?"

"What I mean is, I don't believe she exists."

"But I spent two hours with the girl, and she sure as hell existed then."

Mike climbed back into the golf cart. "Get in laddie," he said softly, sounding like a father picking up his son at school. Junior obeyed, and Mike started in the direction of the practice aqua-range.

Several early-riser members were already on the freshly mowed range driving floater golf balls across the large lake, trying to reach the island green 200 yards out. Sharp, metallic pinging sounds rang out in the cool morning air as clubface and golf ball came together. Each time a member's club made contact, the snowy-white egrets searching out roots and bugs at the base of the water's edge would take flight, returning moments later further down the shoreline.

Mike drove to the far end of the range, the end where they conducted lessons, where no one could overhear their conversation. He parked the vehicle and turned to face Junior's staring profile. "What I'm gonna tell you is strictly speculation, you understand. You may not believe it. Then, I'm not certain I believe it either. Nevertheless, it sounds a lot like something I've heard many times before." Mike's face was deadpan.

Junior twisted around toward Mike. "What the hell's going on?"

"Son, what we got here is probably a visit from the Leprechaun of Good Works."

Junior's mouth opened wide, his eyes squeezed together. He'd heard the term, Leprechaun, referred to once during an English lit class in high school. He wasn't certain what it was. He remembered only that it was in a class discussing mythical creatures in literature. "Mike, you been drinking?"

"No, No, just listen to what I'm saying, son. Leprechauns are an Irish superstition, to be sure. No one has ever been able to disprove their existence. The leprechaun is a pygmy sprite dressed in green, sometimes living in wine cellars, sometimes farmhouses. They're supposed to be cobblers making beautifully crafted shoes for the fairies." Mike stopped and peered back at Junior. "His other trade is banking," he went on quickly, "and he's also guardian to their ancient treasures. Legend has it that if you caught one of these creatures, he would lead you to a crock of gold. If you take your eyes off him, he would vanish into thin air with the gold."

"Come on, Mike, you're shittin' me now, aren't you?"

"Son, keep in mind this is superstition. Let me ask you something. Did you ever take your eyes off the woman while you were with her?"

Junior thought about the question. He recalled how difficult it was to turn away from her face when she spoke. "No, I guess I didn't. Anyway, not for long. Why?"

"That's good. That's really good. Now, I'm not saying you're gonna become a rich man, but it certainly sounds like you've benefited mightily from this experience."

"You're telling me that Ginger Tibsen was a Leprechaun? Ginger was a beautiful redhead with a body of a goddess. Leprechauns are supposed to be little men dressed in green, aren't they?"

Mike sat for several seconds thinking how to handle Junior's question. He turned to face him again and said, "That's true, laddie. It's what puzzles me too. You see, Leprechauns work for the fairies and fairies come in both sexes, don't you know. So, perhaps Ginger was really a fairy, a female fairy sent to you to do a favor for the

Leprechaun of Good Works. He could have been too busy to make the trip himself. What was she drinking?"

"Only Diet Coke."

"That's it, then. Leprechauns drink beer. Fairies don't drink."

Junior shook his head. "I don't know, Mike. Either you're bullshittin' me or I'm the luckiest guy in the world." He started to get out of the cart.

"Where you goin', son?"

"I'm going to walk back to the pro shop, Mike. I've got to think about this alone. My head is pounding. I don't know what to believe."

"Okay, but don't forget my tee sheet and your 9:30 lesson with Mrs. Beaumeister."

Before Mike could start the cart and disappear up the path, Junior leaned in, took him by the shoulder and squeezed it hard.

"Mike, one thing I'm sure about."

"What's that, laddie?"

"No more Junior. I'm using my real name. It's Dennis from now on."

With a twinkled expression, Mike said, "That's just fine with me . . . Dennis."

-END-

