

Ten Little Indians

by Jake Barnes

Wastrels

Mark's family had turned their backs on him; I had a bum leg and couldn't work. We had no place to stay; we lived in my truck. One of us slept in the cab; the other in a sleeping bag in the truck bed. Nobody would hire us. Our families threw us out. No wonder we drank.

Climbing Mountains

One day we went for a hike. We climbed a small mountain. It's called Mission Peak. We got about halfway up a steep trail, decided that was far enough. We embraced. She said "I love you," and I said, "I love you, too." We pitched our tent. That night we were sound asleep. We woke up when a bolt of lightning poked a hole in the tent. Blew our boom box to kingdom come. We were just kids.

The Apartment

When I got back to The City after my accident, I needed a place to live. I got a fourth-floor walk-up apartment. I figured the exercise would be good for my bum leg. At the time I was in love with a girl I went to high school with, a dark-haired minx with glasses and a heart-shaped face.

One night I took her to an outdoor concert. Afterwards we went back to my apartment. When she saw my second-hand furniture, and the cheap prints on wall, she wrinkled her nose. I dimmed the lights. I wanted to fool around, but she nixed that.

Bingo

Ben and I had just sat down when who should walk in but my ex and her boy toy. They sat down in a booth on the other side of the room. They didn't see us. "Whew," I said. "That was a close call!"

Our waitress came and stood by our table, pencil and paper in hand. "What'll ya have?" she asked through her chewing gum. Ben's eyes were fixed on her T-shirt. A message was stenciled on the front. It said, Good Girls Do Bad Things. Ben cleared his throat. "Can I ask you a question?" he said. The girl gave him a look, then nodded.

"What bad things do you do?" "Why do you ask, you old fart?" she replied. She took our order, then turned and marched away.

I looked at Ben and Ben looked at me. "What?" Ben asked.

Mom

Mom was very happy in the Old Folks Home. She didn't like it, however, when they moved her out of her little apartment and into the home proper. She didn't like having a roommate. Then she called me one day some months later and said that she was very happy. She just knew she was going to live for a long, long time. A few months later she had a stroke. She survived that, but she couldn't walk or talk. All she could do was babble.

My First Mrs.

My first wife left me when she found out about my girlfriend. By sheer coincidence sometime later my LA friend Bob met her second Mr. "Nice guy," he said, "but when I mentioned Ruth, he looked kind of sad. She was sick a lot, he said. Always in the hospital." I shook my head. Makes sense, I told him. She was scared to death of childbirth, and a friend of hers died of a stroke. Her friend was on the pill.

Bag Lady

You'd see her everywhere, pushing her "borrowed" grocery cart heaped with bags of her stuff. I don't know where she slept. A fat black woman, always walking, walking. One day I was going into a local grocery store, and I spotted her sitting on a bench just outside the entrance. I stopped, pulled out my wallet, and offered her a twenty dollar bill. She wouldn't take it. "Thank you, sir," she said, "but the good Lord provides me with all that I need."

Tennis Lesson

My Dad and Mom didn't get along. He complained to me that she was "cold." My Dad and I were pals. He was a wonderful tennis player, even as he aged and put on weight. His game was doubles. He and his partner won our city championship many times. He was a terrible teacher, however. He would take me out on the court and whiz one zinger after another right by me. Later on I took up golf. I liked that better. I could beat my dad at golf.

Funeral

My Dad died in his sleep. He was much too young. He died when he was sixty-four, just a year before he planned to retire. He worked forty-seven years for the same company, a power company in my home town.

My mother was widowed for thirty years. She had a stroke many years later, lived four more years, bedridden and unable to speak intelligibly. She was ninety-four when she passed.

At the reception after her funeral I talked for a time with a long-lost second cousin whom I had never met. He was a lively little cricket. His wife was dour. "Your mother was a good Christian woman," Jimmy told me. I replied that you couldn't hold that against her. His wife she looked like she had swallowed kerosene.

Treading Water

After my wife left me, I took up with one of my former students, a flower child. She lived with me off and on for three years. Officially she still lived at home with her parents. Then she enrolled at UC Berkeley, and there she met a young man who was secretary-treasurer of the Berkeley chapter of the Sexual Freedom League. My friend left me and moved in with the fellow and his wife. Afterwards I drove myself crazy wondering about their sleeping arrangements. Did he sleep with one of the women one night, the other the next? Or did they all sleep together in the same bed?

