

Revenge at the Nudist Camp

by Jerry Ratch

When my mother called to tell me what had happened with Francine, she was crying. The minute Francine left, my mother understood that woman had bamboozled her. We got on the next jet down to L.A. and rented a car. Gina and I drove all the way out past Ontario, took a right on Highway 15, and headed south down toward Corona. I was furious.

Then there was the smell of cows along Highway 15 outside Norco, at Limonite Road. It was unbelievable. As soon as we saw the road sign for Limonite Road, we had to hold our breath for as long as possible because the stench was so great. It was a stench I had hoped to forget, but it brought back everything there was about the loss of my brother, and I found myself suddenly getting angry again. I'd hoped by now to get over the anger, but instantly there it was like a giant hole in my side, from which everything vented.

When we drove up to the gate at The Sun Club, the old gentleman guard was sitting at the open Dutch door, wearing his conductor's cap and little else. His full white handlebar mustache was exactly the same as I had remembered it my first time at the camp.

"Remember me?" I asked. "I'm Bess' other son, Robbie."

"Robbie," he said. "How could I forget? Your mother doesn't live here."

"I know that."

"Oh, you're here to visit Quebec."

"That's right."

"Is she expecting you?" he asked. "I don't see your name on the list."

"We were hoping to surprise her. It's her birthday."

"When?"

"Tomorrow."

"Another party!" said the guard. He reached down, pushed the button, and the gate started sliding to the side. "Welcome back," he said.

We drove on into the Garden of Supposed Eden. When I glanced over at Gina, she shook her head.

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

I was feeling low and kind of mean. I couldn't shake the sense of anger. It kept gnawing away at my left side. I tried taking in a deep breath and breathing out, to see if that would help. This was something I had seen my father do a thousand times when he used to drive in rush hour traffic back in Chicago. Breathe in deeply; slowly let it out. Especially when my mother was sitting in the back seat telling him how to drive, even though she had never driven a day in her life.

We passed by the tennis courts where two nudes were volleying. I watched the flesh on these people moving up and down on their bodies as if in slow motion. We stopped and watched them. The scenery seemed to turn blue, like a blue-toned print, as if we were experiencing another eclipse.

* * * * * * * * *

Francine and Donald saw me coming up the roadway. I caught them lounging in a hammock right outside the trailer where they were staying. They had nothing on. They didn't even have time to put on their clogs. Donald's bare ass went lumbering up the path beside the concrete block building that housed the public showers. Francine was way out in front of him. She was much faster.

I leaped out of the car.

"Robbie, what are you going to do?" cried Gina. "You'll get hurt! Stop, Robbie, stop!"

"No!" I yelled.

"What are you going to do exactly, even if you do catch up with them?"

"I don't know, exactly."

"Robbie, stop now. I want you to stop. You really need more self-esteem. You can't let yourself sink to these people's level. You've got to think this through."

I watched Francine and Donald running bare-assed up the road, disappearing up a trail that led into the mountains. Why should they be so afraid of me? I thought — a one-armed guy.

Because they think you have a gun, came the reply. It was a voice out of thin air, that sounded for all the world like my brother's voice. Or my dad's. I had to wonder who the heck this was, speaking to me.

Gina saw me looking all around, up in the air, everywhere.

"What? What is it?"

"Must be one of those bees they have here," I said.

I opened the trunk of the car and searched through my suitcase for my Swiss Army knife. I pulled open the corkscrew and jabbed it in one of the tires on their trailer, then I began twisting and shoving it in. Air started leaking out. I could feel it whistling past my wrist.

Gina eyed me with about the same look my mother used to give me when I was eight years old and she found me and some buddies smoking corn silk cigarettes, which we'd rolled up in newsprint in a tree fort in my back yard. We were busy pretending to be grown up like our older brothers, who were already smoking real cigarettes and driving cars.

I twisted the corkscrew back out, and the tire went flat in about 30 seconds. I went around the other side of the trailer and inserted it into another tire. When that went flat, I went to the rear and flattened both of those. The trailer settled to the ground, giving out a creak like an old man's bones.

"Okay," Gina said, when I came back to our car, "happy now?"

"Not yet," I said. A fire was lighting up in my eyes. I felt like a kid again up in that tree fort, smoking corn silk.

Next came their car. They were driving a tan-over-black older model Lincoln Town Car with a dented right door and one taillight wrapped with red plastic, which was held on with duct tape. On the license plate I saw my own name: **Robinson 2**. I pointed out the plate to Gina, then flattened all four tires. It only took a grand total of eight minutes. When I straightened up from that job, I was flushed with renewal.

A naked woman, who must have been about two hundred fifty pounds of unadulterated animal flesh, came walking up the road. She was breathing pretty hard, but wolfing down a hamburger as she went. The tires kept hissing as she lumbered past. She gave a kind of lurch and kept walking more briskly, when she saw me straightening up from the dirty work. I watched her from behind for a moment. It wasn't a pretty sight. It nearly ruined my zest for living again, which I was just starting to redevelop.

In my mind's eye I could see my brother shaking his head at me.

You are something! he would say.

The door to Francine's trailer was slightly open, so I went inside. I took everything I could find out of their cabinets. There wasn't that much, they were living pretty lightly. I took one of her fluorescent pink lipsticks and smeared it in growing circles on the bathroom mirror, and again on the mirror by the bed. On the full length mirror I wrote: **KISS KILL KISS**.

I pulled everything out of the refrigerator, dumping bottles down the drain, everything but the liquor. I drank that. Nearly all of it.

At one point Gina peeked inside. "Don't you think they'll be coming back?"

"Let them!" I roared. "Want a drink?"

"Okay," she said. "What do we have?"

"Everything, pretty much. We got bourbon, gin, cheap scotch. Vodka. Want a chilled gin and vodka?"

Gina nodded. She was smiling at me. "You're pretty happy now, aren't you, Mr. Robinson?"

"Feeling somewhat better, thank you."

She raised her glass of vodka, and I tried hitting it with my bourbon on the rocks. I missed her glass on the first pass, but hit it on the second.

By the end of the second bottle, I couldn't even remember what it was we were drinking anymore. I was down on my hands and knees, begging Gina to marry me. It was high time we got married, I said.

On the spot, she said, *Yes*.

We smeared Vaseline all over every surface, including the toilet seat. I found some object, a pan, and heaved it through the TV set. I started feeling pretty good about things. I went along smashing out each window with a piece of two-by-four I found under the bed. The ceiling needed a few holes, and I created them. Every wall took a beating. I became deadly with my feet. I got up under the shower spigot and shoved the thing straight up toward the ceiling.

I opened each can of beer, simply popping the tops, and left them open on the kitchen counter.

I gathered every piece of clothing they had into one pile on the counter next to the stove. I set a pan with a little water in it on the stove and started it boiling. That was when I spotted a pack of Parliaments, the same ones my brother's first wife, Beryl, used to smoke. I lit one off the stove. After taking a deep drag, I put an ashtray right in the middle of the pile of the clothing and placed the lit cigarette on the edge of the ashtray. To be sure, I tipped it back so that it would fall onto one of Donald's loud Hawaiian silk shirts.

It didn't take long. But to be absolutely sure, I dragged one of Francine's dresses over and laid it at the edge of the blue flame that was licking up around the bottom of the boiling pot.

Then we left to go get a bite of food from the cafe beside the pool.

While we were there, suddenly the ground shook when the propane tank went up. A small mushroom cloud developed over the

location where their trailer was. People started shouting, running. Then it went quite silent. In about twenty minutes we saw a fire engine go charging up the lane past the hot tub area.

I felt Gina's eyes on me, so I pulled her face close to mine.

"Gina, I'm a bad, bad boy."

"Rotten," she said. I loved it when she smiled. There were lovely little creases beside her mouth, that gave her face real character.

"Do you know how much I love you?" she asked me.

"How much?"

She held both her arms out wide. "Thi . . . i . . . s much."

We took off our clothes, hanging out by the pool all afternoon and into the evening, before we started in on the drinking again. We got into the hot tub. The Jacuzzi churned up the waters, and steam reached up into the starry night.

At one point I told Gina, "I think I'm going to go kill those two."

"No, you're not."

"I know it. It just feels good to say it, that's all. I'm feeling the booze."

I was putting my hands all over Gina's breasts. Anyone that made the mistake of coming by to take a hot tub, readily got out when they saw me feeling her up like that. But then one couple got into the tub and didn't seem like they wanted to leave.

"Did you hear about the fire?" the man asked. "Say, aren't you Harris' younger brother? I was at your brother's wedding before he . . ."

I put my head under water and sucked on Gina's breasts. They got out of the hot tub right away.

Then we heard a rumbling coming down the lane, next to where we were. There was no mistaking that noise. It was the sound of a car driving fast on four flat tires. The wheels made a loud thumping, flapping kind of noise, like a large mechanical duck. We saw their tan-over-black Lincoln Town Car, license plate: **Robinson 2**, go rumbling past. This time Donald was behind the wheel. Both of

them were naked, going like hell toward the front gate. You could smell the burning rubber from the tires.

* * * * * * * * *

We waited. It took about an hour for Det. Gunther to get there. We took a dip in the pool to cool off, then went back for another soak in the hot tub. The detective looked me over when he got to the side of the steaming water.

"You don't have to get out of the tub. Weren't you the one whose brother we found earlier in the year, in the field out by Chino? I remember him. The guy who was dressed so well, lying on his back in the rain with his wallet still on him?"

I nodded, looking up at Det. Gunther.

"What was his name?"

"Harris," I said. "Harris Robinson."

"So . . . you two get married yet?" he asked, looking Gina's chest over.

"Not yet."

"I would if I was you. Somebody will, if you don't."

I think Gina actually blushed.

"Was this the trailer of the same Francine woman that the Shooter was looking for?" Det. Gunther asked. "The one who had the books to the company? Same person?"

"The same," I said. "You have a pretty good memory."

The detective looked all around at the grounds, the swimming pool, the hot tub with steam rising up from the surface of the roiling waters.

"Any idea how this trailer fire might have happened?"

"I know they smoked cigarettes," I said.

The detective nodded his head.

"Sounds like a theory to go on. You can put your clothes on, Mr. Robinson, whenever you want. You're free to go."

I watched him walking away. The Detective walked with a slight, but noticeable limp.

