

Ricky's Condition

by Julie Britt

At first it was just holding hands and talking about Ricky's condition. Then it was leaning into each other on the sofa, Ben whispering my name into my hair, me wanting to put my hand on his thigh.

I keep trying to convince myself it was meant to be, and that fate cancels out sin. After all, I had met Ben first and kissed him, too, before I ever met Ricky, his brother, back when we were all in high school.

But that first kiss didn't mean anything. It was one of those kissing game things at Sheila Cobb's sweet-sixteen party. I kissed a *lot* of boys that night. Ben's kiss was nothing special — a little too wet for my taste, if I remember correctly.

I don't remember how me and Ben had paired off at Sheila's party so long ago. Spin the bottle, more than likely, since Ben was never the type to just come up and say, "Hey, Ida, wanna go off with me and fool around?" That's exactly what Sheila's dumb cousin said to me soon as I walked in. He was from Richmond, thought he was something: Gonna get me a hick girl. "Dream on, Dr. Pepper breath," I said, showing him that Pender County girls knew what was what, just as much as those citified females he was used to. He ignored me after that.

So Ben and me ended up sitting in the dark, just off to the side of Sheila's back porch, hidden from view by the old Ford Falcon perched on blocks in her yard. He was acting real shy and sweet, so I just hauled off and gave him the best smooch he'd ever had. He said so. And Ben is not a storyteller — you can believe him every time.

I met Ricky at the pool about three months later. He was trying to impress us all with his diving abilities, which weren't all that impressive, to tell you the truth. But he did look some kind of fine in those cutoff jeans. My heart was thumping so loud I thought sure Sheila and them could hear it.

When Ricky finally quit showing off, splashing everyone in the process, he walked over to us and sat himself right down, straddling the end of my beach chair. Man. "Hey, ladies," he said, including all of us, but looking special at me. "Anybody want to go swimming?"

"I do. It's too hot to lay out, and I could really use some pointers from an expert," I said, remembering too late my grandmother's advice that I should act *demure* when approached by a gentleman.

We swam and splashed around for a while. Ricky taught me how to tread water and float in case I ever fell overboard. I pretended I needed his hands underneath my arms or back to keep from sinking like a rock.

I saw no point in being demure. It saves a lot of time to find out, right up front, how a boy's hands feel. If they're too soft, then he probably doesn't work and gets money from his parents. If they're too rough, he most likely works so much that he doesn't have time for girls, and he still doesn't have any money of his own to spend on them.

Ricky's hands were about right. Kind of roughly smooth.

We got engaged after high school graduation. It was right. We never thought about not getting married. We just fit. Ricky's daddy and mine were in the Jaycees together. Our mamas were pillars of the Jesus Name Charity Circle. Sometimes Ricky and me would help them deliver food and stuff to the less fortunate so we could be together on a school night.

Our wedding was a big deal. I wore white, because all I'd done, mostly, was kiss guys. Me and Ricky did a little more than that, since we were in love and engaged and all.

Not long after our wedding, Ben moved to Raleigh to find himself or something. He read a lot. He called and sent cards on the appropriate occasions and visited on your major holidays: Christmas, Easter, Thanksgiving. And the first day of quail season. But by then I was real busy as a homemaker, wife and manicurist/tanning bed operator down at Nails & Sun. Then Junior came along, and I hardly had time to do my own nails or work on my tan lines

and other stuff, much less get too sociable. So I didn't really talk to Ben that much. He was just another one of the men you had to feed and clean up after while they watched football or golf.

When Ricky got cancer, Ben came home to help take care of things. First, he had to take care of their mother, who just couldn't believe that her precious boy, who'd never hurt a fly, had a dreadful disease that was sure to cut his life short.

I was torn up about it, too. Things had been going so good for me and Ricky. He was a manager at the Food Lion, and I was in the running for assistant manager of the nail department at work. We had our little boy and were talking about not using protection so we could maybe get a little girl, too. Since we made love every Wednesday, Friday and Saturday, and even on Sundays once I convinced Ricky that it wasn't a sin, I think we had a pretty good shot at it.

But things were never the same again after Ricky passed out at work. He keeled over right in the middle of cleaning up aisle seven. The last thing Ricky's hands ever did was wipe up some busted jars of strained peas and sweet potatoes that had been knocked off the shelf, most likely by one of the Thompson brats.

It was a brain thing. A tumor that couldn't be stopped with drugs, scalpels or all the Jesus Name Charity Circle's prayers. Fortunately for him, Ricky went downhill fast. Now that sounds ugly, but what I mean is he didn't have to be aware of his own suffering or the misery his condition was inflicting on his loved ones.

Before long he just sort of faded. His body mostly looked the same, thanks to the nutrition he was receiving through the tubes at the Pine View Nursing Home. But my Ricky was gone. I'd squeeze and squeeze his hands, hoping for some sort of response. I'd lay my cheek in his palm, just to feel him touch me. But it wasn't the same. It gave me a sick feeling in my stomach, just like when I used to ask him if I looked pretty while I was pregnant and swoll up. He'd always say, "Why, of course you do, baby. You're still my little Ida under that baby fat."

Anyway, when they put Ricky in the nursing home, Junior became a royal pain in the you-know-what. The family counselor tried to explain things to me. "Children have a keen sense of abandonment. I know you're not neglecting your child, but that's how he interprets your frequent visits to the nursing home, during which you leave him with an alternate caregiver. He compensates for these negative feelings by demanding your attention."

Whatever the reasons, however you explain it, I just knew I needed another set of hands. I'd done lost the ones I'd counted on since that day in the pool. They were of no use to me for nothing. So Ben stepped in. I got my first real night's sleep in months when Ben let Junior spend the night with him. "Ida, you just stay home and take it easy tonight," Ben told me, gently brushing a strand of hair off my face. "I'll take care of Junior. Don't you worry a bit."

Ben and the baby had been gone nearly an hour when I realized I could still feel Ben's touch on my forehead — there was a sweet kind of warmth and a little tingle there.

Otherwise, my routine was fairly, well, routine. Getting Junior dressed and fed and redressed. Later, washing Ricky's clothes, making sure his name was in each item. Sitting in his nursing home room all day, wondering if he knew I was there.

Prayers? I had done prayed myself out. The doctors said Ricky would never get better, so what was there to pray for?

But I couldn't even cry. I was just numb. I needed a little caregiving myself.

One day, after Mama took Junior to her prayer circle meeting, Ben was mowing our lawn and checking out our car. Something needed flushing out, he'd said.

Standing at the kitchen window, scrubbing a roasting pan, watching a man do man stuff in the yard, made me feel real womanly all of a sudden. I took a tall glass of tea out to Ben. That's all. He wiped his hands on his shirt before taking the glass. Then he grinned at me and chugged it down. "Thanks, Ida. You doing all right today?"

I don't know what made me do it. Maybe it was the way Ben's eyes were scrunched up in the sun. Or the way he licked a dribble of tea off his lip. Or plain old loneliness. I just up and grabbed hold of his hand and hung on for dear life.

"Ida?"

"Ben, I'm not all right. I may never be all right again. I can't stand this."

Ben just smiled and squeezed my hand, which was shaking and sweating and holding him so tight I don't know how he ever got loose. Then he gave me a brotherly pat on the shoulder, sniffed, wiped his eyes and went back to his work.

I reckon he thought I was talking about Ricky. Mostly I was thinking about how strong Ben's hand was. It wasn't laying white and pale against a sheet. It wasn't tethered to an IV.

Ben and I started spending more time together. Mama, thinking I needed extra time for Ricky, kept the baby a lot. But Ricky didn't know which end was up, and sitting by myself in his stale room day in and day out made no sense.

Ben was doing a lot of the man stuff around the house. I cooked his favorite meals and let him watch his favorite television shows while I cleaned up. Then I'd sit real close to him on the couch.

There was a crackling in the air every time we were together. I knew Ben felt it, too. I could tell by the way his eyes glittered, the way he would glance from time to time at Ricky's chair.

I knew Ben was going to kiss me. One night we'd been watching television for a while, but we hadn't said a word or laughed at the shows or mentioned Ricky or anything. We just stared at the screen, both of us wound up so tight you'd have thought we would bust. I got to where I couldn't breathe right, kind of raggedy. Ben seemed to be holding his breath. I never knew anybody could go that long without breathing.

Then all of a sudden at the same time we just looked at each other and took a great big breath like we were about to dive into something. Next thing I knew I was straddling Ben's lap and he had

his hands under my shirt, unhooking my bra, spreading his warmth all over my back and shoulders and breasts. I was sucking on his bottom lip and trying to get his belt undone.

There was something I needed to catch up on, and Ben was glad to oblige. When he finally got inside me, I thought I would die. His hands were everywhere, comforting and thrilling me at the same time, while I just kept thinking, I'm so glad Ricky will never know about this, it would kill him.

