

Damages

IT'S MIDSUMMER, 1998, about 3:00AM on a hot, moist night. Fire Island is quiet, except for the giggles rising wraith-like out of the weeds. There is no moon. The only light comes from the windows and doors of the many cottages built alongside the boardwalks.

The boardwalks are typical of a beach community—hand built, wooden walkways, an extended grid that speaks of an optimistic attempt to impose urbanity on this fragile sandspit that sells for about \$12,000 a square foot—an exaggeration, perhaps, but not by much. The Kid is alone, still luxuriating in the ecstasy-induced mind-set that has tweaked his sex during the past few hours. He's stark naked, feeling very good, and walking east toward the Meat Rack.

Interestingly enough, Red has never seen the Meat Rack, the notorious stand of scrub-pines that looms like the promised land at the east end of *Cherry Grove*. Considering that he's lived nearby for years, and isn't at all shy about sex, this might come as a surprise, but he's never been much of a beach-goer. When he was five, his parents took him to *Santa Monica*. It was his first trip to the beach, and he got such a bad sunburn that he had to wear swimming trunks to kindergarten. He's barely seen the sun since.

Like most redheads, he avoids it. Fifteen minutes of direct sunlight at noon can poison him, resulting in a *lot* of pain and flakes of skin falling off like wet *Saran Wrap*. So, he stays out of the sun and enjoys being a really, really, white guy — not a skin-head type “white guy” — but a guy who is really, really white, except where he’s pink, which is so pale that it might as well be white. Too bad he isn’t attracted to the vampire chic so fashionable in the twenty-first century. He’s colorless enough, but he loves to eat, and if he’s going to squander his calories, he’s sure as hell not going to waste them on blood.

Because of this, he’s never spent much time on Fire Island. Except for a day-trip with Rabbit back at the dawn of time—1974 or 1975—and once for the Invasion, when everybody dresses in drag and attacks the local bars, he’s never been there at all. He doesn’t need the sex. He lives in Chelsea, for God’s sake. Nor can he escape his long held conviction that sex at the beach is like fucking a pile of sandpaper. Whatever, he’s going to try again. Out here, at least, he can reasonably expect to stay in the shade. He and the droogs are planning to play for three days, and he figures that since he’s there, and since there’s no risk of sunburn at 3:00AM, he might as well take a look at the famous Meat Rack, which is what he’s doing now.

The boardwalk stretches ahead like a striated ribbon. It’s six-feet wide and built of narrowly-spaced planks. It’s perpetually in need of repair, so there are always nails sticking out and they can turn bare feet into mincemeat. Maybe that’s why Red isn’t paying too much attention — he’s watching his feet — that, and he’s stoned, and it *is* a hell of a night and he’s naked and the warm summer air is flowing around his still-aroused body like the breath of sin.

No one else is in sight. He’s humming a mindless little tune and counting his toes. He passes the cottages — crammed into every inch of pricey real estate — and walks out of the light. As

mentioned earlier, there is no moon and Red is in strange territory, so how can he possibly know that, in something less than four steps, the boardwalk will just END.

He'd like to scream, but only in retrospect. When he falls, it's sudden and more than interesting, and screaming doesn't happen. The "snap" is very loud. Rationalizing, the Kid finds it appropriate, the sound a bone *should* make when it breaks, but he doesn't connect it to his own leg, which is, perhaps, why it isn't painful.

Yet, he *is* being injured — his heel strikes the stairs he could have used to descend to the sand had he not so unexpectedly stepped off into empty space — and it happens in no time at all. Almost immediately, he is no more than a confused heap, lying on the sand under the boardwalk — a naked, confused heap, actually — that still does not quite appreciate the reality forced upon it so suddenly by that dreadful "cracking" sound. Thanks to the ecstasy, he feels just fine. Did he really break his fuckin' leg?

The irony of all this is that the Red-Headed Kid doesn't really *need* any more sex, not that he'd say "no" if pressed. It's curiosity, not lust, that has him wandering around in the dark. He, and some of his crew, including his young lover, Pup, are staying at *The Belvedere*, an enchanting stage set that dominates the north shore of Fire Island. A faux Venetian palace, with useless towers and gingerbread scrollwork fronting some very creative architecture, it *is* detailed like a stage play, with stairways to nowhere and *trompe l'oeil* windows and landscapes. Throughout, languid boys *à la Quaintance* float naked through pastel dreams brushed skillfully onto the walls, their polished bodies drifting through seaweed with only tiny wisps of cloth to keep them decent — images of the fifties — the sensibility of a generation of stage designers who have created all this whimsy during the half-century of the hotel's existence.

It's a very hot place, as it happens. Clothing is optional, always a good start, and they barely get naked before the *E-Train* chugs into the station. Joints are passed around the pool and skinny dipping feels better than practically anything. Afternoon drifts into evening and everybody loves everybody. Some of the guests provide drinks, *mojitos* are passed around, and lots of interesting things begin to happen in the hot tub.

There are new friends in the hot tub. Red spends quite a bit of time feeling up four or five of them, two of which can't stop giggling because they think they're cheating on their lovers, although how anyone can think that spending a few pleasant hours playing with naked strangers in a more-or-less public place—with any number of spectators scarfing down *mojitos* and masturbating—is anything more than a fun recess, is beyond me. It isn't exactly a secret, is it?

A man's ability to engage in recreational sex is a great thing. When practiced openly and honestly, it can facilitate physical release without destroying otherwise healthy relationships. It also provides a practical way to deal with the very real biological imperatives forced upon a male animal simply because it produces so damned much sperm. But, we are taught that love is *possession*, so we seldom even consider that it's something that ought to be freely given and freely received. Certainly, many women view it like that, and it burdens every physical act with so much emotional baggage that even considering orgasm without guilt is next to impossible. Is that fair?

Too bad more people don't understand this, but they don't. By adolescence, we've been programmed to believe that only one paradigm exists, which is ideal if one wants to raise children, admittedly the intention in the majority of cases.

But, what about the millions who make it to adolescence, both girls and boys—most, complete mental blanks except for what they've been told—who are already locked into a

paradigm that will never apply. I mean, is *that* fair? It's the very birth of misery. How many lives have been ruined because of the inability to become what we've been told we're supposed to be when we're fourteen?

Which takes us back to the hot tub. Here we have a couple of healthy men who have accepted the fiction that in order to be legitimate they have to live monogamously as husband and wife. In other words, because of the way they're programmed, they have to adopt unsuitable roles in order to satisfy their preconceptions. How long can that last? What is the inevitable result of living such a lie? Devastation? Divorce? Despair?

Wouldn't it just be easier to be honest? For instance, Red thinks monogamy is unnatural. The innate needs of the animal speak against it, and when two men are involved, the added complication of two male libidos constantly jockeying for dominance certainly cries out for a rethink. In 1994, before Pup moves in, the Kid tells him that he is promiscuous, likes being promiscuous, and is going to continue to be promiscuous.

"But, I'll tell you about it," he says. "You only have to worry if I keep it a secret. So, I'll tell you about it."

Since then, for more than twenty years, the Kid has told Pup every time he has contact with anyone else. Pup says he has never felt threatened. So, in this case, at least, honesty seems to work.

In a long, long life, the Red-Headed Kid has seen too many otherwise working relationships, both gay and straight, torn apart because one of the partners had meaningless sex. That is such a mistake. So much is lost, and it's so unnecessary. It's possible and natural for most men to enjoy sexual release without emotional commitment, but too often, when they do, preconceptions turn it into something it's not. Setting that aside, the guys in the hot tub are hot little fuckers, and they are very entertaining for about two hours.

The rest of the evening is a lot like drifting through seaweed with only tiny wisps of cloth to keep you decent, except there isn't any seaweed or cloth. The sex is lazy and fun, with a somewhat pastel quality overlaying everything because of the alcohol and drugs—and it goes on here and there and on the stairs, in someone's room, and finally on a chaise lounge in the back garden—which is where Red is resting when he gets the bright idea to wander out to the Meat Rack. Shortly after that, he's lying naked on the sand at the end of the boardwalk wondering who he is.

But, help is close at hand. Amazing. Out of nowhere, I mean *nowhere*—very much like that time outside Albuquerque—a state trooper appears. What is all this cop imagery?

"You okay?" he asks, as he leans down to offer a hand, which brings him close enough to reveal that he's all of nineteen and his hair is too long. "You okay?" he asks again.

"I don't know," Red lies, as he's propped up. "I think I broke something." He looks down, trying to find his foot. It still doesn't hurt, and that helps him lie some more. "Maybe not, uh, thanks" he calls out as the not-quite-trooper vanishes once more into the undergrowth. Hold that thought.

He's alone again, with his foot dangling at the end of his leg. It's too dark to see it, and he doesn't want to believe the sound he heard was really so deadly, and why doesn't it hurt? That's an interesting point. Red doesn't recall any pain at all before seeing the damage, and that won't happen until morning.

But, that's hours away, and the Kid has no time to think about it, anyway, because suddenly, two naked men come running out of the trees yelling "fire." Once again, you can't make this stuff up.

Apparently, as Red learns later when he's more rational, an arsonist has been active in the woods that summer and has just set another fire. Coincidence? Of course, but it's true, and even

more fun when somebody pushes a button somewhere and a bright, harsh light shines out over the Meat Rack to the sound of a klaxon horn honking loud enough to shatter glass.

Men are crawling out of the woods like bugs — from behind trees, from under rocks, from holes in the sand dug under the boardwalk — there seem to be dozens of them, in every state of *déshabillé*. Our boy just stands there, dimly beginning to understand that he needs to do something while, at the same time, wondering *where in hell did these guys come from* and *why doesn't somebody DO SOMETHING about that goddamned horn?* He still can't find his foot.

That helpful cop comes running up the path, his pants around his knees. He's got a great butt, but the Kid only gets a glimpse before he pulls up his pants and runs up the boardwalk steps. He nods and grins and vanishes back toward town. Back toward town? There's a thought.

Off in the distance, Red hears a siren. It's amazing he can hear anything over the "oh-gah, oh-gah" of that godawful horn, but he can, and suddenly everything clears up. He connects "fire, fire, fire" to the sound of the siren and cleverly figures out that the fire department is coming — the volunteer fire department — the largely lesbian volunteer fire department, as he's been told. My god, solid citizens are coming. Women, no less. Time to regroup.

He hops over to a slightly higher piece of ground where he's able to hoist himself onto the boardwalk. Then, he crawls under the railing and uses it to get to his foot. By this time, the traffic heading toward *Cherry Grove* is waning. The Kid looks back at the Meat Rack for any sign of a fire. He can't see anything, but by now he doesn't really give a fuck, so he turns, and with nothing in his head except "oh-gah, oh-gah" and the sound of that damn siren coming closer and closer, he hops his naked ass all the way back to the *The Belvedere*. By the time

the lesbians and their fire equipment pass the hotel, he's on a chaise lounge, on the other side of the garden wall, making another new friend.

And, yes. He broke his leg. ■