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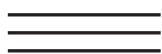
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Razor Girl



CARL HIAASEN


sphere

The logo for the publisher 'sphere', featuring a thin, curved line above the lowercase word 'sphere'.

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For Fenia, always dancing

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. However, true events in South Florida provided the lurid material for certain strands of this novel, beginning with the opening scene. The author also wishes he'd dreamed up the part about the giant Gambian pouched rats, but he didn't. Those suckers are real.

Razor Girl

ONE

On the first day of February, sunny but cold as a frog's balls, a man named Lane Coolman stepped off a flight at Miami International, rented a mainstream Buick and headed south to meet a man in Key West. He nearly made it.

Twenty-seven miles from Coolman's destination, an old green Firebird bashed his car from behind. The impact failed to trigger the Buick's airbags, but Coolman heard the rear bumper dragging. He steered off the highway and dialed 911. In the mirror he saw the Firebird, its grille crimped and steaming, pull onto the shoulder. Ahead stood a sign that read: "Ramrod Key."

Coolman went to check on the other driver, a woman in her mid-thirties with red hair.

"Super-duper sorry," she said.

"What the hell happened?"

"Just a nick. Barely bleeding." She held her phone in one hand and a disposable razor in the other.

"Are you out of your mind?" said Coolman.

The driver's jeans and panties were bunched around her knees. She'd been shaving herself when she smashed Coolman's rental car.

RAZOR GIRL

"I got a date," she explained.

"You couldn't take care of that at home?"

"No way! My husband would get so pissed."

"Unreal," said Coolman.

The woman was wearing a maroon fleece jacket and rhinestone flip-flops. On her pale thigh was the razor mark.

"How about a little privacy?" she said. "I'm not quite done here."

Coolman walked back to the Buick and called the man he was supposed to meet in Key West. "I'll be a few minutes late. You're not gonna believe what just happened," he said on the man's voicemail, leaving it at that.

The cops arrived and wrote up the red-haired pube shaver for careless driving. Naturally, she had no collision insurance; that would be Avis's problem, not Lane Coolman's. A tow truck hauled away the Firebird, which needed a new front end including a radiator. The woman approached Coolman and asked for a ride.

"Tell your 'date' to come get you," he said. One of the police officers had pried the damaged bumper from the Buick, and Coolman was trying to fit it into the backseat.

"He doesn't have a car," said the woman, who'd buttoned her jeans. She was attractive in a loose and scattered way. Coolman had a weakness for redheads.

"See, I work for an escort service. We go to where the client's at," she said.

"Yes, I understand the concept."

The woman's fleece was unzipped and beneath it she wore a black sequined top. Her toes must be freezing in those flip-flops, Coolman thought; the temperature was 55 degrees with a biting north wind, arctic conditions for the Florida Keys.

"My name's Merry," she said, "spelled like Merry Christmas."

"My name's Bob," said Coolman, "spelled like Bob."

"Does that mean you'll give me a lift?"

"Why not," Coolman said, the worst mistake he would ever make.

At Mile Marker 22, Merry told him her last name was Mansfield, like the bombshell actress of the Fifties. Coolman stopped at a Circle K where he got a cup of coffee and Merry bought three eight-hour energy drinks, chugging the little purple bottles one after the other.

“You running a marathon?” Coolman asked.

“I’m all about performance.”

At Mile Marker 17, she told him she didn’t really work for an escort service.

“Wild guess—you’re a dancer,” he said.

“On my own time,” she replied. “Not one of *those*.”

“I didn’t mean it in a bad way.”

“Why didn’t you just say stripper? The games you guys play, I swear.” Her eyelashes were a paler shade of red than her hair.

Coolman said, “Why would you make up a lie about being an escort?”

“Cause I needed a ride, *Bob*. If I said I was an artifacts appraiser you would’ve left me standing in the road.”

“What is it you appraise?”

“Sunken treasure. Doubloons and cannonballs and so forth. Business is slow right now. I’m an expert on eighteenth-century Spanish maritime.”

“Do you have a real date, or did you make up that part, too?”

Merry laughed. “He’s an Air Force pilot based at Boca Chica. Why else would I be doin’ my trim at sixty-five miles per hour?”

At Mile Marker 8, she blurted, “Did I say Air Force? I meant Navy.” She was buzzing like a flagpole in a lightning storm. “His name’s Rocky.”

“What about your husband?”

“He’s a Rocky, too.”

“Stop,” said Coolman.

“Don’t be judging me. I go for men with strong names.”

The closer they got to Key West, the more Southern her accent became. Coolman was foolishly intrigued.

“What about you?” she said. “What’s your field, Bob? Your expertise.”

“I’m in the entertainment business. I manage talent.”

RAZOR GIRL

“Your own, or somebody else’s?”

“Ever seen the show *Bayou Brethren*?” Coolman asked.

“Little Rocky watches it all the time.”

“That’s your son? Little Rocky?”

“No, it’s what I call my husband. Don’t make me spell out why.”

“Anyway, I manage Buck. You know—the family patriarch? Buck Nance.”

“No shit?”

“Leader of the clan,” said Coolman.

“Yeah, Bob, I know what a fucking patriarch is.”

The show was taped in the Florida Panhandle at a swampy location that somewhat resembled a Louisiana bayou. Buck Nance and his brothers were actually from Wisconsin, but the network paid for a Cajun dialogue coach.

Merry said, “So what brings you all the way down here?”

“Buck has a personal appearance.”

“Where?”

“Parched Pirate.”

“Doing what?”

“Just being Buck.”

Coolman hoped the guitar player had found the bar. Buck Nance had trouble speaking in public unless he was accompanied by a live musician. For his road gigs the writers at the network had come up with eight or nine amusing redneck stories, what you might call a monologue, and afterward Buck would take questions for ten minutes or so. The questions were printed on index cards distributed in advance to random fuckwits in the crowd.

Coolman offered to take Merry to the show. “We’ll hang backstage,” he added. Like there *was* a backstage.

“What about my date?” she asked.

“Bail,” Coolman said. “Tell him the truth—you had car trouble.”

“But then I shaved down there for no reason.”

“Not necessarily.”

The redhead smiled and shook her head. “For the Zac Brown Band I’d ditch my Navy boy in a heartbeat, but not for some yahoo from the bayou.”

“It’s only the top-rated cable program in the whole country.”

“I prefer the nature channels. You know—penguins and cheetahs. Shit like that.”

“Buck converted his Bentley to an ATV with rifle racks.”

“Why would a grown man do something so ridiculous?”

“America worships the guy. You should come hear him tonight.”

“Another time,” said Merry.

At Mile Marker 5, she made a call on her cell phone. All she said was, “Don’t wet yourself, sugar. I’m almost there.”

At Mile Marker 4, after they’d crossed the bridge into Key West, she flipped open the visor mirror and checked her makeup. Freshened her lipstick. Brushed her hair.

“You look terrific,” said Coolman.

“Damn right, Bob.”

At Mile Marker 3, she exclaimed, “Okay, pull in here!”

It was a small shopping center with a Sears as the high point. Merry directed Coolman where to park. He was surprised when a white Tesla rolled up beside them.

“That’s your boyfriend?” Coolman knew a couple of CAA agents back in L.A. who drove jet-black Teslas. The white model looked pretty sweet. Coolman himself leased a corpuscle-red Mercedes SLK 350 that required no electric outlet.

“I thought you said he didn’t have wheels.”

Merry shrugged. “Must be a loaner.”

The young man who got out of the Tesla was wearing a leather bomber jacket. If not for the gold earring and oily long hair he could have been a Navy pilot.

“It was nice meeting you,” Coolman said to the redhead.

“Oh, you’re coming with.”

“Me? What for?”

RAZOR GIRL

The man in the bomber jacket yanked open Coolman's door and put a pistol to his neck.

"Let's go, dipshit."

"Just take my wallet," Coolman said, breathless. "The Rolex, too, whatever you want."

"You're adorable, Bob," the woman whispered. "Now get out of the fucking car."

Bayou Brethren had been conceived as a reality show about moonshiners, but another network snatched that idea first. Next on the concept list was pig farming, the unsavory auditions dragging on for months. Eventually Buck Nance and his three younger brothers were chosen to star in the program, though they knew nothing about swine husbandry. They got the nod because of their exquisite beards, rough-edged banter and punctuality.

The pilot episode of *Bayou Brethren* was a major disappointment, the visual appeal of high-def hog shit having been overestimated by a network vice president who was summarily promoted to a more harmless position. The new network vice president in charge of the project felt the brothers needed a more esoteric vocation to distract from their unappealing personalities, a view shared by potential advertisers who'd screened the off-putting pilot. Specialty chicken breeding was chosen as the alternate milieu—Buck and his brothers would raise prize roosters whose multi-hued hackle feathers would be crafted into beautiful flies for catching gamefish such as trout and tarpon.

Midway through the first season Buck got pecked in the eye while chasing one of the birds, which he vanquished indecorously with a Babolat tennis racket. The show's ratings soared, and the Nances made the cover of *People* magazine. Currently Lane Coolman's agency was negotiating preposterous new contracts for the clan, and during a short break in taping it was decided to put Buck on the road in a few soft markets, South Florida being one of the softest due to its diversity.

The Parched Pirate was packed, so Buck was on edge. Coolman hadn't arrived yet, which meant no pep talk, no wild stories about the hot babe (or babes) Lane had banged the night before. Even though there were direct flights to Key West, Lane had insisted on driving down from Miami because he said he wanted to see the islands. Now he was late for the event, something that had never before happened.

Buck and Lane had a certain way of getting ready, and Buck faltered if their routine was altered. Plus the guitar player was nowhere in sight—some cow-eyed slacker from Pasadena, all he had to do was pick a few notes while Buck told humorous redneck yarns. Buck had lobbied for a banjo player but Lane said they cost too much, which made no fucking sense to Buck because a banjo's got fewer strings than a damn guitar.

Before the show, Buck waited alone in a small room that had a card table and a couple of folding chairs. He would have preferred to park himself at the bar except he would have been mobbed by fans. The manager said several male customers had torn off their shirtsleeves in homage (Buck always wore a wifebeater on TV). Sometimes he'd stay after a gig and autograph the shirt fragments, but not tonight. No way.

The bartender poked his head in the door. "Ready, dude?"

"Born that way," said Buck Nance, though he was definitely *not* ready. Where the hell was Lane? The message he'd left on Buck's phone said something crazy had happened.

Everybody cheered and wooo-hoed when Buck ambled onto the small stage. Lane had assured him that the Parched Pirate drew a good biker crowd, and Buck was relieved to see lots of black leather mixed in with the cruise-ship garb.

He relaxed a little. Waved. Gave a fist pump. Somebody handed him a Jack-and-Coke, which he gulped, then somebody handed him another.

The first bit started out fine. It was the one about a good ole boy who comes home drunk and rolls into bed with what he thinks is his wife but it turns out to be a bear, only the man is too trashed to notice, and the two of them—him and the bear—are sleeping spoon-style when the wife walks in . . .

RAZOR GIRL

But storytelling wasn't the same for Buck Nance without the accompanying guitar, which set a laid-back mood. He started blanking—not stage fright exactly, just a few crucial gaps in the memory loop. It had happened two or three times before, but Lane Coolman had always been there, stage right, with a verbal cue to lead Buck back on track.

Not tonight. The microphone felt like a barbell in Buck's sweaty hand, and he wrapped up the bear-and-hairy-wife story as best he could. People chuckled, though it sounded to Buck like a communal politeness and not the genuine guffaws he'd come to expect in working-class sports bars. He wondered if he'd been given some faulty information about the Parched Pirate, and Key West in general.

He couldn't remember the second yarn on his set list. So, in an ill-considered burst of spontaneity, he decided to tell a joke he'd heard from one of his brothers.

"Hey, why can't homos drive faster than 68 miles an hour?" Buck Nance said. "'Cause at 69 they blow a rod!"

The barroom didn't go silent, but the walls weren't exactly shaking with riotous laughter. Buck wondered whether the joke worked better if you used "faggot" instead of "homo."

Next he told the one about four black guys in an Escalade arriving at the gates of Heaven, and this time not a living soul chuckled, not even the Caucasian drunks in sandals. A couple of heavysset individuals in the back of the room called Buck a racist asshole and began a sharp-elbowed charge toward the stage. Buck was unaccustomed to such naked hostility, and he'd prepared no clever comeback lines like real stand-up comedians do.

"Just chill out, sports fans," was what he said, desperately scanning the crowd for Lane's face. *Where the fuck was he?*

Soon enough it was explained to Buck Nance that Key West was a bad location to be making fun of homosexuals and also African Americans. This bulletin was delivered by a 275-pound biker who happened to be both gay and black, and owned a right hand that fit easily around Buck Nance's stringy hirsute neck.

Bouncers pulled the aggrieved patron away before the strangulation was complete, and Buck revived coughing and beet-faced. Angrily he began spewing down-home expletives that included the n-word, igniting a melee between a few diehard fans and the rest of the audience. Buck got walloped by flying fists and Budweiser bottles, and at one point a man costumed as Lady Gaga attempted to rip the beard from his chin. The man was surprisingly strong and wore just enough jasmine perfume to be distracting.

With the bar manager's assistance Buck shook loose and fled through a back door. In no particular direction he ran through the alleys of old Cayo Hueso fearing, not irrationally, that he was in mortal danger.

Yancy was bummed because Rosa couldn't drive down from Miami for the weekend. She had the night shift in the E.R. at Baptist. Selfishly he sometimes wished she still worked at the morgue; the hours were better because no urgent care was required.

He finished his glass of rum, grabbed his only sweater and went outside to stare at the stars. After a few chilly minutes he wished he'd put on some shoes and long pants. Somebody with a flashlight was walking back and forth in the vacant lot next door. The lot was blooming with weeds, and still littered with charred rubble from the arson that had leveled the previous owner's unfinished villa. Yancy hadn't set the fire though he bore indirect responsibility, and no remorse. Afterward the property had been surrendered in savage divorce litigation to the owner's wife, who'd recently sold it.

Yancy stepped down from his backyard deck, gingerly climbed the chain-link fence and made his way toward the stranger carrying the flashlight. It was a woman, and he startled her.

She aimed the bright beam at his eyeballs saying, "Hey, just back off!"

"Relax. I live in that house." Yancy reached out and repositioned her flashlight. "What are you looking for?" he asked.

"A ring."

RAZOR GIRL

“What kind of ring?”

“None of your business. I must’ve dropped it this morning.”

“When you were here doing what exactly?” In the darkness Yancy couldn’t see the angles of her face, but her skin looked glossy and her hair was light-colored. She sounded younger than he was.

“I was with our landscape architect,” the woman said with a ludicrous air of importance. “And my fiancé.”

“So it was your engagement ring you lost. That sucks.”

“Hey, do you mind?”

It was an odd place to drop an expensive piece of jewelry. Obviously the woman hadn’t told her future hubby; otherwise he would have been out there helping her search for it.

She said, “If you don’t go away right now, I’m calling the cops.”

Yancy tipped an imaginary cap. “At your service.”

In the not-so-distant past he had been a real detective. Now he was stuck on the roach patrol, scouring local restaurants for threats to public hygiene. “My name’s Andrew Yancy,” he said.

“Let’s see your badge.”

“I’m in my boxer shorts, and crushed that you didn’t notice. My badge is back at the house. You want some coffee? It’s freezing out here.”

“What I’d like is for you to leave me alone,” the woman said, “unless you’re planning to arrest me for something.”

“How many karats?”

“What?”

“Your missing ring,” Yancy said. “Karats as in diamonds, not bunny food.”

“That’s such a rude question.”

“My specialty. Is your rock bigger than, say, a pistachio? I’ve got a cordless spotlight is the reason I ask. You want some help?”

“No,” the woman replied. “I do not.”

Yancy walked back to his place thinking she didn’t believe he was a cop, or else she would have been more respectful. On the other hand, his nocturnal approach in underwear and bare feet might have made a sketchy first impression.