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Beauty Queen Waves

Sipping a whiskey sour at Capistrano's on Buena Ventura Street, I glance over at the guy who bought me this drink and wonder how long I should let him hang around before I tell him I'm waiting for some other guy to arrive. Capistrano's sits at the end of the oceanfront block and is often enveloped in cool, damp fog by the time the after-happy-hour crowd of gray stubbled surfers and processing plant workers fills up the place. I'm at the end of the bar with the surfers who drink shots of tequila and talk about finding that perfect wave like it was a religion and I don't really give a shit because I don't think that wave exists. Me and my girlfriend, Evonne, come here often, mostly because there's nothing much else to do after we've spent all day packing lemons in the Saticoy Packinghouse. And the bartenders at this place sort of look out for us and they're in on our little game of counting how many offers for drinks we get each night.

But tonight Evonne isn't with me and the guy I'm waiting for is our friend Rhonda's idea of a blind date. She said, *You gotta meet him, Nikki, he's your type*, and even though I told her I've had a string of bad luck with guys and I don't know what my type is, here I am waiting for what she described as a *tall guy who used to be a surfer*, and that just about describes all the guys around here, and who knows, he might not even show up. So I play our little game and see how long it takes for a guy to offer to buy me a drink and almost as soon as I sit down at the bar, this guy sits down beside me and says to Miguel, the bartender, while pointing at me, "I'd like to buy her a whiskey sour." I'm trying to be nice by drinking this whiskey sour, but I wish I had insisted on ordering a frozen margarita, extra salt, instead of allowing him to order this concoction. He is trying to start a conversation with me, but we keep getting interrupted with *Hey, Nikki, where's that Hot Tamale?* That's Evonne's nickname and all the guys think she's drop-dead gorgeous. She's got this California look, like she just walked off Rincon Beach with every strand of her long brown hair in place. Her skin is dark because her mom is Hispanic and her eyes, when you can see them peeking out behind her Gucci knockoff sunglasses, they're almost as dark as those little black stones you see along the beach. My Midwestern pale skin and mousy brown hair can't come close to Evonne's beauty, but when my mom and stepdad moved to Payson, Arizona, I discovered that a slight tilt of the head, a big flashy smile and a

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beauty queen wave, like the ones you see on the Miss America Pageant, will get a girl almost anything she wants. And I was the one who taught that to Evonne.

I let the back screen door ease shut when I get home from school, and Elijah, my pit bull, is at my side, his nails clipping crisply across the blue and white linoleum kitchen floor. The TV blares from the other room. "The school called again today, Nikki." My mother's voice, slow and bored, rises above the TV. "They don't want that pit bull hangin' around." I yell from the kitchen, "I don't care what they say, Elijah isn't goin' nowhere." I grab a soda from the refrigerator and run out the back, letting the screen door slap against the frame, and I catch a few words of "Wait until Hank . . ." and as I run past the window where she's sitting, slouched on the couch, her thick legs splayed open, sipping a vodka tonic, a floor fan blowing up her skirt, I know my stepdad won't do nothing about it because he likes to sit next to me and put his hands on my thighs and say "Angelbaby, the whole valley lights up when you smile." And when I look up at him he says, "You should be an actress, 'cause your eyes are so blue," and then he removes his sweaty palms when I wiggle to get up.

I keep sipping on my whiskey sour until it's almost done, and the guy wants to buy me another, and I look towards the door, and think, *This is part of the game*, so I tell Miguel, "Make it a *curacao* martini, please." And the guy, I've forgotten his name already, sits up and raises his eyebrows and says, "Where'd you get that sophisticated taste?" And I want to call him Freckles because his whole face and arms are smothered in freckles, and I say, "Jesus, all you have to do is spend some time hanging out in bars," and he pulls his stool closer to me and leans over and asks, "Oh, so you do this often?"

On one of our nights out last month, Evonne pulls me aside and tells me she missed her period and she's sure she's gonna have a baby. She says her man wants her to get rid of it but she wants to keep it. She's not showing yet and she says, "Lenny's got some crazy streak in him," and she's scared he's gonna do something, so she tells me she's thinking about going away to have her baby. And I worry about her, especially since the other night I saw Lenny at Riley's down the street and he didn't see me, and I heard him talking to a few of his friends, they were laughing pretty loud, and he called Evonne a "Mother Cunt."

And I know he thinks I'm gonna go home with him, I can tell by the way he's smirking, that he's thinking I'm his catch for tonight and I don't want to answer his question, so I ask one instead. "Do you have as many freckles on your legs as you do your arms?" And he looks down at his whiskey sour, I see a grin come across his face, and he says, "Yeah, wouldn't you like to know?" And I stick my finger in my blue martini to stir it and he opens his mouth and I lick my finger.

On Friday nights Parker comes home from being on the road all week, pulls a beer out of the refrigerator, changes the channel on the TV no matter what channel I'm watching, and announces, "I don't want no one to bother me now, okay?" Each week he asks, "How're you and Elijah doing, Pet?" and then reaches for the remote and turns the TV up a bit louder. I don't bother telling him that I've met another guy at a bar who wants to take me out of the desert to a beach town called Ventura, California, a place I've never heard of, but he says it's real cool and nice there and I can take Elijah too. And the night I have my bag packed and am ready to leave, Parker wakes up from his six-pack slumber and I can see Elijah's eyes just inches from Parker's drunken face. I swear Elijah hates him more than I do and is thinking Parker is gonna keep me from going and that's why he bites into Parker's cheek and won't let go. I run into the other room screaming and yelling, "Elijah, Elijah," then I hear a loud crack of a gun and Parker shouts, "That goddam dog turned on me." I can't stop screaming, but Parker, all he does is fall back asleep, and I get the hell out of there.

And Freckles's hand brushes the back of my neck and he puts his head back and laughs and I know he's laughing because he thinks he's found a good fuck for tonight but I'm laughing harder because I know as soon as this other guy walks in the door, if he ever does, I'll blow him off. Then he tells Miguel he wants to try some tequila because this is his lucky night, and Miguel looks at me, I know he's watching out for me, and I look at Freckles and ask, "Whatcha feel so lucky about?" And I glance at my watch and wonder if this guy is gonna show up.

Evonne is holding her hands like they're gonna fall off and I notice they're shaking when she pushes her sunglasses up on her nose. That's when I see she's trying to hide a big bruise on her face. "What's this?" I ask, but she pulls her face away and says, "I'm gonna name my boy Oxnard." And I say, "Did Lenny do this?" and I put my hand gently on the side of her face and feel a big lump. She says, "No, my mother-in-law threw a lamp at me while I was sleeping. She drinks too much." Her lips are quivering and she's whispering, "I got to get out of that place, Nikki, I got to get out of that place." I put my arm on her shoulder and say, "Where you gonna go?" Then some guys walk up to us and we make our beauty queen waves and smile with our lips and they offer us a drink.

And Freckles is now giggling and trying to drape his arm across my shoulder, but I scoot my stool just out of his reach so that his arm drops into dead space, and I see a guy walk into the bar and he looks like he just came off a ranch up in Ojai, and he's trying to stuff his oversized hands into his jeans pockets and he looks around before he walks towards me and I notice he's got cowboy boots on and I wonder if a former surfer would wear cowboy boots and I let him walk past me without saying anything and watch him out of the corner of my eye.

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Jarrood comes home one night from the warehouse, smelling like the plastic containers he moves onto freight trucks all day long and tells me he's got to pack up and go, says Ventura isn't the place for him, the job sucks and he just doesn't want to be in a relationship no more. I look at Denzel, the pit bull he gave me, and try to ask questions, but none come. He says he's got a hundred dollars, maybe two, he can give me and says I should call a friend of his who lives in Oxnard, maybe she can help me. The next morning I watch him leave in his white Chevy pickup, his belongings in black plastic bags thrown in the back. I don't stop holding onto Denzel for hours.

I notice Freckles has this silly expression on his face when Miguel hands him the shot of tequila, and offers me another drink, but I decide against it. I'm thinking any minute my blind date, Mr. Rancher Dude, is gonna tap me on the shoulder. I can see Mr. Rancher Dude throw back a shot of whiskey and Freckles asks, "Where do you work?" but I'm not listening because I hear my blind date's cowboy boots scuff against the hardwood floors and I hold my breath when they stop near me.

"Hi, it's me." I think I recognize Evonne's voice but it's so low that at first I think it's one of the guys we met at the bar last week, but I never give out my phone number. "Where are you?" I ask and she says, "I'm at home, but I got into a big fight with Lenny and he says if I don't get rid of this baby, he's gonna take care of it himself." I hear the quick little breaths she always takes when she's nervous and I tell her she should call the police but she's scared, says what can they do, and maybe she's right, I think, what can they do. I ask her what time he gets home from work and she tells me he's delivering something up north and won't be back for at least two more days.

And I'm waiting for Mr. Rancher Dude to figure out that I'm his blind date and watch Freckles down another shot of tequila like it was a glass of water and he presses his leg up against mine and his hands fidget when he licks his lips. And I decide to lie to him and tell him that I don't have to work because I spent time in Vegas where I made lots of money, and he looks at me like he believes me, and gets close enough so I can see a tiny raised scar on his smile line at the corner of his mouth.

The night after Jarrood walks out I'm still thinking he might change his mind and return but I'm fingering the piece of paper scribbled with a girl's name, Evonne, and her phone number and I dial the number because I don't know anyone else I can call. I hear this girl's voice and I tell her that Jarrood gave me the number and she tells me that she knows Jarrood because he and Lenny work together. And it's news to her that Jarrood has packed up and left, and I tell her I've got two more weeks at this month-to-month place and I have to get a job,

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somewhere I can take Denzel, and she says, "I can check at work to see if they need someone, but they don't have no daycare." And I say, "Oh, Denzel, he's not my kid, he's my dog," and she laughs a throaty laugh and says that maybe they can hire me at the packinghouse and I can tie Denzel up in the citrus groves out back. And I don't tell her I've never worked in a packinghouse before, but I figure I can tilt my head and smile the way I always do, and I think I'm gonna like this girl Evonne.

And I can almost feel Mr. Rancher Dude standing near me because I don't hear his boots scuff anymore and I start to get up off the stool and Freckles says, "Hey where you going?" and the next thing I know he's got his slippery mouth on my lips and I feel his sweaty palms pushing my skirt up and in my mind I hear my stepdad whispering, *Angelbaby, if you just relax it'll feel real good.* And I try to push Freckles away and the next thing I know Miguel jumps over the counter and pins Freckles to the counter and Freckles is so drunk he doesn't know what to do except laugh. And I pull down my skirt when I stand up and look over my shoulder and see that Mr. Rancher Dude is sitting at a booth next to a woman and they're smiling and holding hands and they don't even look up at the commotion Freckles just caused. And I say, "Thanks, Miguel," and then I point to the door and say to Freckles, "Denzel, my dog, he's a pit bull, by the way, he's waiting for me outside and he don't like strangers to follow us."

And I look at my watch and I know Evonne is still up and I figure it won't take her but a few minutes to pack her things and come with me.