

Brake Lights

2300 words

ted.gross@comcast.net

Roy still hadn't gotten there with Tina and was thinking it may not be headed that direction--ever--and would that be so terrible?

They had fun and she laughed at most of his jokes. She had a good appetite, enjoyed ethnic food and was always ready when he picked her up. She could talk books and politics, typically over his head but better than the alternative.

With every other girlfriend either it happened by a certain point or you moved on. This time, in the back seat of Mike's Ford Explorer on the way to Tahoe, Roy said to Tina, "Do you want to break up after this weekend?"

"Whoa, I heard that," Mike said. "Me too," Penny said from the other front seat.

"Dude," Mike said, angling his head around, "what kind of new loose screw you got this time?"

"No it's fine," Tina said. "It's a reasonable request."

Roy said, “I don’t believe I requested anything. I asked did you want to, is all.”

“Fuck you,” Mike said. “You put a damper on us, we haven’t even hit Colfax.”

“Honestly,” Roy said, “I didn’t think you guys could hear me up there. You both have the stuff in your ears.”

“So take it back,” Mike said. “Let’s start the weekend over.”

“Fine. Teen I’m sorry. I meant it to be funny.”

“Oh--kay,” Penny said.

Tina said, “And that’s how I interpreted it.” She whispered something in his ear . . . and the weekend took on a different feel.

Mike and Penny said they were going across the road to the lake. From the cabin there was no sign of any body of water but the printed *Welcome* card assured you there was a small lake-job back in there if you followed the service road a quarter mile.

Tina said to Roy, “I do that. I push buttons. Until the tables are turned on me.” She was closing the curtains.

Roy started to say: “I think I know what you’re getting at . . . but I may not . . .” and Tina told him don’t worry about it, and her voice was dreamier . . . and soon enough she was up against the knotty pine dresser waiting, and Roy figured what could he do, you don’t argue.

In the shower Roy said, “Have to say, that was more intense than I would have predicted.” Her hair was up and he was soaping her back.

“Nothing personal--*but* . . . you mean?” Tina said.

“Right. After that last business, the cabin in Mendocino . . . the bar felt ridiculously high. Not even sure how we got on that topic, but coming home I’m thinking no way now.”

“I didn’t mind the topic. It was entertaining, the way you and Mike presented it.”

“Oh I know you didn’t . . . A friend of mine’s uncle from way back, he pointed out when guys come up short in the anatomy department--which we all do--they love to discuss that shit. It’s in the DNA, he said.”

Tina said, “What an odd correlation.” She was facing him now. “Except?” Roy said.

“*I don’t know,*” she said, and it was hard to miss the expectant tone, so once again you rolled with it, though this one was admittedly a crapshoot.

Twenty minutes later Tina was on her way out to find Mike and Penny and that lake, and Roy said he’d pass, unless she needed him for protection against bears or something, and she laughed like don’t be ridiculous . . . and he couldn’t tell for sure if she was laughing *at* him, since Round 2 hadn’t gone great.

There was however a fresh pie they’d picked up at that stand the other side of Auburn. Roy gave it the should I or shouldn’t I and opened it up and dug in--he was pretty dang ravenous--and it sure tasted good, some fruit foundation to it obviously but he didn’t worry about which one.

He fell asleep thumbing through a coffee table book on the railroad system they had up here in the Sierras a hundred years ago, with some great black and white photographs. Until Mike and Penny and Tina came stomping back in.

“You have *got,*” Penny said when she saw the pie a third eaten, “to be kidding me.” She had her hands on

her hips, Roy thinking you never know what can hit a nerve with someone.

“Babe, take it easy,” Mike said. “The man got hungry, what can you do, we stranded him.” Winking at Roy like he was in on some big secret . . . and could Tina have actually mentioned something?

After dinner Tina said it would be fun to go to a casino. Mike said sure, he’d be up for that. Roy said he was good right here but would come along if it made it happen. Penny said she hated casinos. That for one thing her college boyfriend was a degenerate poker player.

Mike said, “Come on, I’ll run us all over to State Line. Crystal Bay. They re-did the old Biltmore nice, if you guys have never been. We’re talking twenty minutes away here.”

“It’s okay,” Tina said. “it was just a suggestion.”

“No, don’t be silly,” Mike said. “*We’ll* go. Let the party-poopers be.” He gave Penny a peck on the cheek and grabbed his keys and Tina kind of shrugged and you heard the car start and they were gone.

“One thing I’ll say for the guy,” Roy said, “he doesn’t screw around, he makes stuff happen. Not the worst quality.”

Penny said, “We haven’t done it for like 2 months.” She was pouring herself a glass of sherry, not asking Roy if he wanted one.

“Dang. Jeez, I assumed . . . you guys so loosey goosey and all . . .”

“That you were the one with the problem? Until earlier?”

“Oh no.”

“You know something, don’t be going all wide-eyed. There aren’t any real secrets.”

Roy said, “Not even when people keep their mouth shut?”

“You *are* naive,” she said. And a pause, and her maybe with the look now.

“What?” he said.

“Nothing.”

“Except?”

“You said it. I didn’t.”

Roy said, “And pardon my butting in, the first deal . . . but what’s the problem?”

“Me and Michael? I brought up something, it was dumb, I meant it lightly. He seized on it, and said he lost the urge. Temporarily.”

“Which . . . morphed into a couple months and counting.”

Penny said, “He said he's working on it.”

Roy said, “Funny, that expression. We were kids he’d lay it on you, same thing.”

“Really? Like when?”

“Okay, like once we were at the Russian River. This was high school. We had these two girls with us, out there in canoes. I remember them being twins.”

“Identical or fraternal?”

“You’re blunting my point. Which is they didn’t look alike at all. Mike and I decided on the way home we got hosed with that part.”

“Okay you need to be clearer when you tell a story. You established they were twins.”

Roy figured instead of arguing this petty bullshit, might as well put his hand on her leg, see where that went.

“Now that’s interesting,” Penny said.

Roy left it there and said, “You know the river at all? Johnson’s Beach?”

“No.”

“Well, we’re talking downstream between Guerneville and Monte Rio. There’s a couple pull outs. One of them, we’re passing by and these red-neckys dudes start making comments about my twin. They had a fire going which I’m guessing you weren’t supposed to be doing.”

“What, she was statuesque or something?” Penny said.

“No, she was overweight. I’m not into body shaming anyone, but really, no way she should have been wearing a bikini.”

“Oh . . . So you guys didn’t ignore it, obviously. Otherwise there’d be no story.”

“Yeah, it got bad, one idiot in particular, and the girl tried to keep it together but then she started crying.

I think her name was Alice, but I could be way off . . . Keep in mind we met them *up* there, we didn't know them."

"Get to the crux of this please."

"So Mike and me and the twins, we've stopped paddling, we're bobbing around in place, and I go to Mike, *do you want to do anything about this.*"

"And he says he's working on it."

"Right, how'd you guess. Sizing it up. Advancing the story, we drop the two gals on a beach further downriver, tell 'em relax a few minutes, we'll be back. They had some picnic tables there, it wasn't like it was totally remote."

"Not out of the movie Deliverance."

"No. But our business, we leave the canoes and walk back."

"So Mike had a plan by this point."

"Not at all. It was like let's take a closer look at these dipshits, see if it's worth a confrontation. Anyhoo . . . that's when Mike surprised me. They recognize us, and before anything gets going Mike picks up a piece of metal, something they were using to tend the fire. He

hits the guy in the face with it, the main one trash-talking my twin.”

“This is *Mike*? . . . Are you joking?”

“I know. I’d never seen that side of him. Even now I wonder was that like a psychotic break, was he temporarily possessed by some alien force, what.”

“Well was the man okay? I mean did anyone fight back?”

“Oh no. The guy was fucked, like he might have lost an eye, I’m not kidding. We walked back down the road, the twins were gone, maybe they thought we’d abandoned them, who knows.”

“But you left the canoes.”

“Good point, maybe they didn’t think that. For *whatever* reason they’re gone. Mike and I wait a while--like an hour--and then we paddle back upriver to where we rented ‘em. Then we got in the car and drove home . . . That was another adventure. We get to the toll plaza, the Golden Gate Bridge, and neither of us has any cash left. Back in those days before Fast Track, that happened, they’d write down your information and send you a bill.”

“So why are you telling me this? The last part.”

“I’m just saying, it was one more thing piled on that day.”

Penny said, “I thought the punch line was going to be: they tracked you guys down because you couldn't pay.”

“What, you mean the bridge? The license plate?”

“Unh-huh. Or the address you apparently had to give them.”

Roy said. “This was San Francisco now. Where Mike clocked the guy, you had an hour and a half distance on it, at least. But fine, maybe we got a little lucky.”

“I don’t know,” Penny said. “I’ve been watching too many TV series obviously.”

“I hear you. They jump on every mistake, connect the dots. Lot of it wouldn’t happen that way, but beefs up the storyline.”

There was noise outside. Mike and Tina were coming up the stairs, laughing about something. Roy figured he should take his hand off Penny’s leg, though she was admittedly up pretty tight against him by now.

“Hey gang,” Mike said.

“Babe let me ask you something,” Penny said. “Roy was recounting an episode? You striking someone with a fireplace implement? You’re not serious.”

“Gosh,” Tina said.

“Oh yeah,” Mike said. “More like a tire iron though. It was interesting, the thing was damn hot, which I didn’t expect, I could barely hold it, but I’d committed to it, so . . .”

“I never thought of that,” Roy said. “That it was sort of in the fire.”

“Right,” Mike said. “Listen . . . Tina’s not feeling that great, it turns out. She asked would it be okay if I drop her back home.”

“Home . . . as in San Rafael?” Penny said.

“Yeah,” Mike said. “Then I’ll be back.”

“That’s, quite a curveball,” Penny said. “But suit yourselves.”

Roy said to Tina, “Meaning you picked up, like a medical condition, from the casino experience?”

“No we didn’t make it,” Tina said. “There was a checkpoint. We ended up forgoing our plan.”

“Near King's Beach,” Mike said. “First I thought it was road construction. So we line up like all the other sheep. When we get close I see it’s a DUI set-up. I wasn’t entirely sure I’d be okay, so I made a U-turn.”

“Jeez,” Roy said. “Don’t they watch for guys doing that?”

Mike nodded. “This dude runs us down a quarter mile up the road. It took a while but we got out of it.”

“I expressed that I was under the weather,” Tina said, “and it had become increasingly difficult to wait.”

“But you were doing okay?” Roy said.

“Oh yes, I was fine.”

“I see,” Penny said. “But then that triggered the not feeling well for real.”

“Must have been the introduction of the thought,” Roy said. “Like when you see someone throw up, next thing it feels like you have to too.”

“Absolutely could have been,” Tina said.

“Anyways,” Mike said. “If there’s nothing else, we’re off.”

“Safe travels,” Penny said.

“Hey I’ll give you a call,” Roy said to Tina.

When they were gone Roy re-positioned his hand on Penny. “Guy’s a trooper,” he said. “Lots of driving today.”

Penny said, “Wow then. Did you ever follow up, make sure the person was all right? I mean really didn’t lose an eye or something.”

“No, what for?” Roy said. “You would have?”

“I think so,” she said. “Do you have any others?”

“Stories?”

“Unh-huh.”

“I can find one or two probably . . . Not sure how interesting they are.”

“They’ll be okay,” she said.

Well . . . so Roy figured he’d tell her the one about having to lay low in Tuscon for a couple weeks, though that was Mike by himself but he made it him.