

Secondary Universe Bikini

2000 words

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With a minute and a half to go, the other team driving and down by 1, their halfback catches a swing pass in the right flat, tries to make a move and the ball squirts out.

This is the sectional semifinal playoffs. High school football. 15 years ago.

Ike is playing left defensive end. Ball rolls right to him. Though of course footballs don't roll smooth, it's more a herky-jerk action.

Still he scoops it up. Unfortunately, since it didn't roll smooth he doesn't have an ideal grip. The ball's sitting too high on his forearm, he doesn't lock the nose up great.

None of which would matter if Ike just fell down, the ball in his team's possession, to end the play.

And the game. Since all they do then, kill the clock twice and everyone's shaking hands.

But, Ike got fancy. He tried to run with it and someone hit him from the side and the ball came loose and the other team recovers.

And the other team scored in the closing seconds and won it, and Ike's team's season was over. Obviously. What would be the point of the story otherwise?

Ike had his old man drive him home. He couldn't get on the team bus, he couldn't deal with it.

Back in school Monday, no one brings up the fumble directly. That's worse, makes you more the center of attention than you already are.

Ike's last class of the day is math. He has a major crush on the teacher, Mrs. Barrows. A lot of them do. She's dark and exotic and friendly, can't be more than 30, has an amazing body.

At the end of class she passes out the corrected tests from Friday and the bell rings. Ike doesn't get his and a couple other kids don't either, so they stand there while she digs around and finds them.

'There you are,' she says. 'And how did your game go?'

Directing it to Ike and this kid Radich, knowing that they're on the team since on game days they wear their jerseys in class.

She asks it so innocent, and man she's beautiful.

Radich says, 'Maloney here--he blew it for us. What are you gonna do?'

Now Ike is the last one in the room. The good part, he made it through the day without getting in a fistfight, and without one of the football coaches hauling him in to rehash it.

Mrs. Barrows is finishing with her desk and says to Ike, 'Hun, are you okay? I didn't quite get the gist of what Spencer said.'

'Except you did,' Ike says.

She says, 'My brothers played. Team sports. One individual doesn't make or break the day.'

'This time *I* did,' Ike says, 'he got it right.'

'O-*kay*,' she says. 'Do you want to talk about it?'

'Sure,' he says, hoping she means close the door and stay right there a while, but she says good, maybe one day at lunch then, hers is 4th and 5th period, the teachers' lunchroom but that's fine, he's welcome there.

Tuesday Ike figures why fool around and drops in. Mrs. Barrows is eating an orange and reading a John Grisham paperback. There are about 6 other teachers, no one reacting to Ike, even though he's had a couple of them.

Mrs. Barrows is happy to see him, he doesn't think she's faking it, doesn't seem to mind being interrupted, and she gets him a soda.

'So, now,' she says.

'Well, I guess for starters,' he says, 'I never rode in a car with a full uniform on before. And my dad had the Mazda. If I didn't fit in there I was going to walk.'

She says, 'You have a sense of humor.'

'More like I'm trying to keep it real,' he says. 'Even my dad on the way home is shaking his head what the hell was I doing.'

'I mean that though,' she says. 'Don't *lose* your sense of humor. Believe me, take my word on that.'

Ike's a little thrown off by this one but continues. 'I've replayed it, in my mind, like a hundred times now. I try to un-do it, but it comes out worse. It's got me messing up and not scooping the ball up in the first place.'

She listens, puts her hand on his shoulder . . . an unbelievable development . . . and bells are going off all over the place.

She says, 'You don't realize it yet, but you have character. Whatever happened on the field, if anyone can turn it into a positive, you can.'

He's not sure what to say back and says thanks.

'Anyhow,' she says, 'I need to do some prep. I appreciate your coming by, and don't be a stranger.'

Ike gets up and says he won't.

The next semester he has a different math teacher and before you know it they're getting ready to graduate.

A few days before graduation is the senior picnic. It's at an old country club that's seen better days, but there's a huge pool and there are diving boards and people are flying around.

There are a bunch of teachers there as watchdog chaperones, and Mrs. Barrows is one of them.

It's warm for May and Ike would give anything to see her in a bikini and is tempted to go over and tell her that--and might, if this was some kind of secondary universe.

He does speak to her for a moment, thanks her for being his teacher, and says the same to a couple others.

He sees her one more time. The next summer, at the aquarium. She's with her husband and Ike has a new girlfriend, Trina, who he met working at In-N-Out.

Everyone gets introduced, Mrs. Barrows' husband seems like a decent guy, and she wishes Ike plenty of

luck going forward and tells him he looks great and he's on his way.

When they're gone, Trina says wait, that was your *teacher*? She's hot.

He says yeah she is, was . . . and let's get some nachos . . .

15 years later Ike's at the airport. He's got Monday off and is headed to Palm Springs for a long weekend. Someone with a time share they can't use offered it to him.

One counter over, checking a bag to it looks like Phoenix, Mrs. Barrows. If you can believe it. Which he can't.

He considers turning away and not finding out for sure. But you have to, don't you?

So he intercepts her when she's done at the counter. Her face is a little fuller, hair a little different but yep.

'Excuse me,' he says.

It takes her a moment like someone stepping outside adjusting their eyes to the sun.

'Why Ike,' she says. 'My goodness, how are you?'

'I'm well. What's going on in Phoenix?' He's nervous.

‘I remember you were a funny kid,’ she says. ‘Not surprising that’d be the thrust of your interest.’

‘No, I mean are you still teaching? Where do you live?’

He’s wondering if she’s still married, no ring this time.

She says she's still at it, she’s teaching middle school in Los Gatos . . . and *Gee* this is a pleasant surprise, how about a cup of coffee and you catch *me* up.

They’re at a kiosk at one of those high round tables. She’s pretty talkative. Says she loves running into former students, it’s one of her most rewarding experiences actually.

Ike says well we like running into you guys too. She says indeed, and asks him which *other* teachers he’s run into and he can’t think of any but throws out a couple names and fakes it.

She asks him did he take any more math.

‘I did not,’ he says, ‘I started off in one at the JC but I switched out of it. I realized no other math teachers were as beautiful to observe as you were.’

There you had it. It popped out. Half-intentionally.

‘That’s very kind of you,’ she says. Ike can’t tell if he threw her off. Or if she’s glossing it over smooth.

‘You didn’t ask where I’m flying,’ he says.

‘You let *me* off the hook,’ she says, ‘on why I’m headed to Arizona.’

Ike thinks about it and goes for it. ‘When you come back, let’s get a bite to eat.’

You can feel her sorting it out, which way to go.

She says that could work and gives him her number.

First is an Applebees, and a week later a steakhouse in Santa Clara.

Then a comedy club, and they end up at a Holiday Inn near Stanford University.

‘Not something I would have foreseen happening,’ she says, following the main event. She’s rubbing his earlobe, her voice is a purr.

‘Full disclosure?’ he says. ‘I foresaw it happening many times. But it was like I’m watching a movie. I’m not in it, up there on the screen, but it’s me. It was like one of those old westerns, where the wagon wheels look like they’re going backwards.’

‘You’re silly,’ she says. ‘I have a daughter.’

‘Ooh boy,’ Ike says. ‘Surprised you didn’t mention that until now.’

‘She’s seven.’

‘Same person then? Mr. Barrows?’

‘Oh no. You don’t want to know.’

‘No? Any other . . . *noteworthy* ex-students . . .
you’ve run into along the way?’

‘There’s been one. Yes.’

‘Jeez Louise. Have to say, you’ve got a bit of a streak
in you.’

‘I did back then as well. I worked in a card room on
the weekends in El Cerrito, as a hostess.’

‘Wow. You had to dress a certain way and stuff?’

‘Yes . . . I thought you might react more, to the other
individual.’

‘The who, what, when? I was trying to play it cool,
but sure, let’s hear about it.’

She says, ‘Several years ago. A former student left
college and needed a pat on the back. He reached out to
me.’

‘Ah, so not a chance encounter then. You’re good at
the pats on the back, can’t deny that.’

‘Yes, and I should say the student was *forced* to
leave. There was an allegation of plagiarism . . . I didn’t
intend to, but I cheated on my husband.’

‘*Oh* brother. That do the trick, pacify him?’

‘I apologize if I’m tainting the image you may have
had.’

‘Not necessarily,’ but Ike thinking dang . . . ‘Don’t tell me, if it *is*--but anyone I would know?’

‘I don't think so.’

‘And do you still . . . get together with this person, on occasion?’

‘I do.’

‘Welp. I think I’ll take a shower, kind of get organized here.’

‘Please don’t just yet,’ she says.

‘Oh no?’

‘That football game, are you past it?’

‘Hmm. It’s crazy, but honestly no. I mean it doesn’t follow me around, but yeah it can surface on you now and then.’

‘I’m so sorry to hear that.’

‘Not going to go there, not my style, but probably a little therapy could help. Figure out why I tried to run with it instead of doing the right thing and ending the game.’

She says, ‘Ike I believe you’re ignoring a very real component, which is making a judgment decision in the heat of the moment.’

‘I get you,’ he says, ‘but common sense is I was trying to draw attention to myself.’

‘That’s fine too,’ she says. ‘Though you didn’t need to. But you didn’t know that back then.’

Ike takes a minute. ‘Gettin a little heavy here . . .
Mrs. Barrows.’

She’s rubbing his chest. ‘I’m glad I could help you blow out some of the cobwebs then,’ she says.

‘You may *have.*’

‘So don’t be a stranger. You never know.’ She starts scrolling her phone.

‘Yeah I heard that once before,’ he says.

‘Ah.’

‘I think I’m good. I mean fun to relive the past and all, but not overdo it.’

She’s a little taken aback, and she turns on the TV and Ike starts the shower, and it seems to work, since by the time he’s lathered up she’s making it difficult and what could you do.

