

# Living Guilt-Free in These United States

*by Andrew Scott*

Back when Richard was still skinny and mean, we fought at The Island. He broke a pool stick over my head. I bruised more than his ego. We fought over a woman, as always. We were best friends and that's what we did.

We met her at Monster Truck Madness. Richard swears he saw Mindy first, but he was crazy-drunk, worse than me, and he's plain wrong. I found her inside the well of a truck tire so large she could stretch her arms wide like Jesus without touching rubber.

The big names weren't there. No Bigfoot. No Grave Digger. So we ate corn dogs while El Diablo, a sweet red machine with painted horns, mashed up the competition. Then all three of us left for the bar.

We've all got our vices. Richard could never handle the gin. Tastes like pipe cleaner to me. I'm a whiskey man. My people hail from Tennessee.

While Mindy is off bumming a smoke from some chickenhead, Richard leans over to say he's taking her home. He's determined, with eyes like two pissholes in the snow.

Suppose I make a better offer?

You're welcome to try, he says. Just then Mindy returns with another drink for each of us, clearly a woman worth the fight.

Fast forward. Two in the morning. We're all of us on the road to nowhere good. Richard beats me in three straight games of 9-ball, then points to a table at the other end of the room where a woman bigger than me holds court. He says, How about her? You could take her home.

She's bigger than a state fair pumpkin.

First prize, he says. Blue ribbon all the way.

I like my chances here, I say.

He brings the cue down on my head, snapping the butt-end of 20-ounces of maple against my skull. I follow with a series of rapid blows, 1-2-3. Again like that, whap, 1-2-3. His face looks like a melon dropped at the grocery. He's knocked out cold and we all get tossed from The Island, but the bartender doesn't call the cops.

Mindy and I load Richard in the backseat of her hatchback and start for her place, leaving Richard's car in the lot. We prop him up on the couch while she and I get to business right there on the living-room floor. Mindy gets sore. You're taking too long, she says. Finish up. But I can't help it. After I've been drinking, it's like squeezing coins from a coconut. It's just not going to happen. I roll off and we pass out.

A few hours later, Richard wakes me, but I tell him to go back to sleep. Before morning, I wake and call a cab. Three days after that, he says that Mindy's the one. She made him breakfast and tended to his wounds. They talked, minus the booze. If you can tolerate someone during a hangover, perhaps it's meant to be.

He doesn't remember the fight. Doesn't remember me at Mindy's house—his house, now that they're married. But Mindy does. Last week I received a note, signed with her initial and a lipstick kiss, asking me to keep quiet.

You won the fight, she wrote. But you didn't win the girl.

