

Two of a Kind

by Rusty Barnes

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Crater was asleep on the couch when he heard a tub thumping black noise in his dream. He knew the sound was real the way you know in any dream, you wake up panting, feeling for your jeans, hoping it's not the end of the world. He wondered what day it was. Having no job, he didn't think about it much.

"Cass. What the fuck you doing?" Crater stood up and hopped into his pants on his way to the bathroom. Cass had upended half of a plastic 55 gallon drum into the old claw foot tub. Three bags of ice lay on top of the toilet like bags of broken glass, next to four cases of beer on the floor among the dust bunnies, bought from the generic store, in white cans with black lettering, and marked BEER.

"I'm icing down your dick, cuz, what do you think?" Cass flipped the first bag into the drum, then opened the first case of beer, tucking them into the bed of ice in artful poses. "Think Roberta will make it over?"

"I don't know if she will or not." Crater heard the Bellefleur's Dodge Ram go off next door, glasspacks roaring a protest. "You pissed in her pocketbook last time." The sound rose and fell as the truck drove away. Crater didn't see why anything had to be that loud. "I forgot it's Friday."

"Yep. It's time. She's the one left it by the toilet." Cass handed him a skin mag, thumb in the spine, flapped open.

Crater looked at the bare pussy and closed the magazine. "Jesus."

"She likes you, boy. Wants to get in them Levis. Can you take care of this?"

Crater tucked it under the sink next to the extra rolls of toilet paper and the bottle of JD Cass kept in there for emergencies. "I don't know her that good."

"Ah. Honest Crater. You silly fuck. That don't matter." Cass stood straddling the drum "Now pass me that beer."

* * *

Crater showered quickly, legs akimbo around the drum. He stepped out and rubbed dry, then put on a fresh tank shirt and a new flannel he ripped out of the plastic on the spot. He thought about shaving, but decided against it.

Coot Walker and Billy Roy had already shown without their women, which wasn't a good sign. The Pritchard boys. Walter and Melissa Wright. Shaggy from the Dandy-Mart had shown. They stood arranged just so, outside the bathroom, beers in hand, or by the stereo, the women swaying in place to the beat of some rap bullshit, cigarettes in their fingers, ashes ground into the carpet all over already. Crater nodded as he walked by.

He grabbed his board from by the door and gave the back wheels a spin. He needed cigarettes, and it would only take twenty minutes or so to get to the store and back, all downhill on the way and a steep walk back. The place was not meant for skateboarding. The door opened, and there was Roberta Ferris. He didn't know her well at all, but Cass had said she was into him. Crater had no idea, though. Something had thrown his internal monitor off and he couldn't tell when anyone was interested in him or what he had to say. He wondered if it had to do with his accident, and his hand automatically went to the seam in his head underneath his hair and the ball cap he always wore.

"Hi hun." Roberta looked pretty fine, but her face was off-kilter somehow, and Crater wondered if it was an affliction, like what happened after a stroke, how her face seemed caved in on one side. "You on your way out, Craig?" He liked the way she called him by his real name.

"Hi Roberta. Yeah." He wondered how big she actually was under all that sweater, how they jutted out like that, and knew he wouldn't find out. They were all Cass's friends, as he was staying with Cass until he got on his feet in town, got a job and a place and a car. He supposed it could have been worse.

“Can you pick me up some American Spirits? I'm going to die coughing if I have to smoke Cass's Marlboros all night.” She handed him ten dollars.

“Back in a few.” It would not be this night, but someday he would ask her what happened to her face, and then it came to him like a whisper. He wondered who had hit her. He clutched at her bill without tucking it into his wallet and put the board down, skating out onto the blacktopped driveway.

He had to go around a tire-flattened dog once, but the road was smooth for the most part, and he picked up speed as he went down the hill, wind whipping his shirt, and as it got rougher he slowed down and took the turn at a slow pace until he walked off to the Dandy-mart. He didn't recognize the girl at the counter, but that was no surprise. She was one of those scared-slim girls who would have hips someday soon, but for the moment she looked fine serving out the cardboard pizza boxes to some kids.

“Be with you in a second,” she said behind the glass case, closing the sliding door and wiping her hands on a rag. She turned to face him.

“No problem. Pack of Spirits and a pack of Camels.” Crater picked up matches too. He didn't know if Roberta had them or not. Better safe than sorry.

“Roberta Ferris.” The girl—Nora, her nametag said—handed him the two packs with a studiously bored expression.

“What?” He didn't think he'd heard her right, but she was cute. Crater wondered if Cass thought having him around would attract the women. He thought about asking this girl up to Cass's, but something stopped him. Cass was an older guy, and divorced, and wanted plenty of pussy around, the younger the better, but still.

“I can tell almost every person in this town and who's dating them by the cigarettes the men buy. You're buying smokes for Roberta Ferris.” Crater would have to disappoint Cass tonight. This girl would be trouble—he couldn't invite her back to the party. He couldn't have someone else thinking he was into Roberta Ferris when he wasn't even sure he was.

"You're fucking crazy," Crater said. He walked out and started the walk back up the hill, board in hand.

Nora yelled after him. "She's the only one in town smokes them goddamned things, you know."

What was it about women that made them know these kinds of things about one another, about people, the way they came together, the future? Crater thought back to Dresden, the exchange student from Holland. She knew things like that. She'd taken one look at Crater on graduation day. "You will have an accident today, but you will be fine. Please take a picture with me for my family." Someone had snapped the picture, and she had sent him a copy later on. It was the last picture taken of him without a ball cap on, as that same day, still in his graduation gown, he had missed the kink on the handrail outside the gym while skateboarding and broken his head open, brain fluid and blood everywhere. The hair never grew right after, and so he spent his time avoiding women he thought might be able to predict something. He didn't want to hear what they might have to say. The Crewdall boys came by just then in their yellow Nova, and he jumped into the trunk for the quick ride up the hill.

Roberta and a couple of Van DeGraft girls were standing on Cass's deck talking. "Hi hun," she said. She turned away from the women and held her plastic cup up in salute.

"Here you go, Roberta." No better time than the present. "What happened to your face?" One of the girls coughed into her cup. The other stared at him like he'd thrown up.

Roberta just nodded. "Everybody asks eventually," she said, handing her cup to the bigger girl. "Would one of you get me another beer?" She crossed her arms. "My dad clipped me on the side of the face once when I was a kid."

"No shit?" Crater said. He didn't know how people could do that to each other, especially kids and parents. His dad hadn't been a saint, but he'd never broken Crater's anything, let alone his face.

"They fixed it most of the way, but one cheekbone is lower than the other one."

"What happened to your dad?"

“He went to court—my mom made him—and paid for it like it was an accident.” Roberta took her beer back from the big girl. “I don't think much about it except for when everybody brings it up.”

“So you talk about it a lot?” Crater couldn't figure how she felt about it, really, from her face. Maybe she couldn't express things like a normal person.

“No. It makes me shaky.” She blew smoke out of the side of her mouth. “Satisfied?” Before Crater could talk Cass came up and put his arms around the both of them, breath like a blast furnace of liquor already.

“How're you kids getting along?” Cass squeezed Crater's shoulder hard, and leaned in for a kiss on Roberta's cheek. ‘I told you she liked you, boss.”

“Fuck you Cass,” Roberta said, and tossed her cigarette away. “I'll talk to you later, Craig.” She walked into the house, leaving a perfume trail behind her.

“What, Crater? Did I mess with your smooth talk?” Cass slapped Crater on the back and moved in on the big Van DeGraft girl, laughing.

“He wasn't smooth. He was practically tripping over his tongue and drooling.” The big girl took Cass by the hand and led him off behind the house.

Crater didn't know exactly how to feel. On the one hand, she called him by his real name. On the other hand, he should probably not have asked her about her face in public. Sometimes the internal monitor didn't work, but he couldn't tell whether it had bothered her, really. They'd been talking just fine until Cass came horning in with his bluster and cock-talk. Crater figured he'd give her some time to think it over, maybe an hour or two, then he'd try to find her off by herself and talk to her again.

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Later that night more people showed, and someone threw a beer bottle into the TV, which he had to clean up. He couldn't find Roberta, but he found Cass in the guest room, rooting around between the big Van DeGraft girl's legs. He watched for a horrified

second, her thick pubes all slick, with a pillow in her mouth, and backed out, closing the door gently.

One of the party-goers he didn't know said, "Roberta's looking for you, Crater." The party was dying down now and the Pritchard boys had turned the Playstation on. Crater was surprised the TV worked, but glad. He walked outside and found Roberta leaning against the side of her car, smoking. When she saw Crater, she dropped the butt onto the gravel and stubbed it out with one callused bare foot. In the light from the pole, Crater could see her toes were painted.

"Craig. Hi." He could see the side of her face dragging down now that it was late at night. Or early in the morning, depending on how you looked at it.

"Hi Roberta. You were looking for me?"

"Tell Cass he's a fuckhead for me, would you?"

"I'm not telling him that," he said. "I've got to live here for a while yet." He stuck his hands in his pockets momentarily then pulled them out again.

"Well, you keep in mind that he is, then." Roberta stood close to him, and he could smell that perfume smell again. "You have anything you want to say to me, Craig?"

"No. Not that I can think of." He wanted to know what she felt like in the morning, how it would be with her. He could only think of Cass, though, and the Van DeGraft girl.

"You just come here." She took one of his hands in hers and brought it up to her face, traced his fingers down her broken cheek. "See. It feels just like the other. Just lumpy sort of."

"You know. I have one too." Crater thought this ought to be a way of showing her something about himself without Cass interrupting.

"One what, dear?"

"A lump." Crater took her hand and pushed it up under his hat. "It's a seam there just like a line of thread. Where my stitches were." Her fingers felt like silk against his hair, and he thought about Cass. What it was like for him and the other girl, the Van DeGraft. He wondered if he could manage anything like it, if his internal monitor would let him, if he wouldn't say the wrong thing. Roberta laughed

quietly, almost as if to herself. He heard a crashing sound in the house but didn't turn from Roberta, who was looking straight at him like clear moonlight.

"Aren't we a pair?" she said. "Aren't we a pair." She leaned inside the car and fiddled in her pocketbook, coming up with the pack he'd bought for her. "Let's go for a ride."

"I guess we are." Crater pulled himself up and sat on the hood next to her. The radio inside the car played a song he'd never heard before. It had a tricky rap-like vocal, but the song had guitars and everything.

"Did you not hear me?" Roberta asked.

"I guess." Crater played out in his head the three or four options of how this might end, and couldn't think of a way he wouldn't be embarrassed by.

"Get in, then." She flicked her cigarette into the gravel.

"You just lit that," Crater said.

"I don't like to smoke in the car. It distracts me. I don't listen to the radio or nothing. Just drive."

Roberta slipped her hand into the steering wheel as she gassed it. The Acura flipped around, spinning gravel, and they torpedoed out onto the dirt road.

"I see why you don't want any distraction," Crater said. He'd have pulled the safety belt over himself but she'd notice.

"What does that mean?" she said. He noticed the grin pulling up her top lip, so he relaxed a little. He could see the obituary and the notice in the police report already, though.

"We're going to take a little trip," she said. The road grew gray in front of them, their breath catching in mist on the windshield. She took the curves tight, so that he pressed up against her at every turn. He felt for the knot of scar tissue on his head. "You're always fucking with that thing," Roberta said. "Give me your hand." She held it tightly. "Repeat after me: I will not fart around with my scars."

"I will—not fuck with my scars." Crater laughed. She didn't let his hand go as she fishtailed into another turn. The rear end thumped against something, but she didn't stop.

"You screwed up. I didn't say that." Roberta took his hand and put it on top of her thigh. "I said fart around, not fuck."

"OK." The car headed up a little-used road, a strip of grass like someone's Mohawk in the center. County Road 4105, a bullet-holed white sign said.

"I don't like to use the word fuck except for that specific act." She glanced at him quickly then returned to the road.

"It's an old word, I heard," Crater said. "It goes way back. To the Crusades and stuff."

Roberta laughed. "How do you know such dumb things?"

"History Channel, I guess." The road slanted, maybe an 8 or 10 percent grade, he thought. The car slowed for a wrought iron sign that read "Friendship House." The car bumped to a stop.

"Here's my place," Roberta said. The dashboard clock casting its 4:45 light over the car before Roberta killed the engine. They sat in silence as the engine ticked. Roberta's house sat on the steep sidehill like a rock. The entire house rested one wall on a shelf of stone and had been built upward, it looked like, on a slight lean. Steel cables anchored the far wall of the house to the ground. Roberta had hung race flags and colored banners along the length of each cable.

"That's some setup," Crater said. "It looks like it would still go down in a strong wind."

"Nope—just rattles a little." Roberta opened the door. "Come on. I want to show you something."

Out of the car, the early morning mist caught at the legs of Crater's jeans and began to soak, and he'd just begun to wonder about what would happen next when Roberta took him by the hand and redirected him to a stone-inlaid path that led up the hill and behind her house. He walked the stiffness out of his calves in the first forty yards, and they began to burn at a hundred. "Didn't know this would be so steep," Crater said, breath puffing. The woods

closed in around them, a skinny line of poplar along one side and poor-looking pines off to the right. He passed an old gas engine overgrown with grass, two refrigerators, and a woodpile, maybe half a cord.

"I got to get somebody to get rid of this stuff someday. That wood is just a perfect nest for snakes." No doubt Roberta was in shape. She'd dropped his hand and walked ahead of him, the long stretch of her legs nearly pulling at the ground. The grade began to level out into a plateau, with a gap between thick bushes, and his breath began to come more easily. The fieldstone trail petered out at a couple logs that had been planed flat to make benches. A small pile of wood sat next to a fire ring dug a few inches into the ground. "Can you start a fire, Craig?" Roberta said as she pulled some newspaper out from a #10 can hidden under a bench.

"It's five in the fucking morning," Crater said.

"Just a little one," Roberta said, offering him a wad of paper, which he took.

"All right." He bent and struck Roberta's cheap plastic lighter to the paper once he'd triangled twigs around it. "It'll take in a second."

"Honey, nothing takes in a second," Roberta laughed. "You want some gum?" He declined the gum and sat down next to her. "Some things take even longer than an hour or a night." She poked his thigh with a long finger, left it there slightly longer than necessary for her point.

"I worked this puzzle once, of a big sky and a Scotch fir in the middle of a field," Crater said suddenly. "It was part of the therapy after I busted my head open. They wanted me to push myself, to help the brain reconnect things." He threw two small logs on the fire, one in front and one in back. "The fucking thing was like twelve thousand pieces or something fucking ridiculous and it took me a month and a half to get it done. It turned out there were two pieces left over, part of the sky, that my brother added to the puzzle from another box. Just to fuck with me." Crater watched the flames come

up and inwardly wished he'd shut up. Too much fucking talking. "So anyway."

"Sun's coming up soon." Roberta spread his jacket out on the ground and sat with her back against the bench. "Come down here with me." Crater sat down and she rested her head on his shoulder. "That direction." She pointed.

"I know where the sun comes up," he said.

"Me too," she said. "Right about here." She tapped him on the forehead and laughed. "You are dumb as a stump sometimes." She spat her gum out and bent her head up under his chin, placed a small and light kiss on his artery. He felt his heartbeat in her lips and began to speak. "Shush," she said. "Wait till the new day starts." Crater'd been waiting for something to happen, something he could organize his thoughts around, and he'd expected this, or something like it, yet he remained completely silent. He'd even been known to crack a joke during a party once in a while. He had good comebacks that worked every time—*fuck you/you wouldn't like it I just lay there and sweat/kiss my ass/make it bare/pick the spot, you're ALL ass*—except tonight. He didn't get caught entirely by surprise because he thought of the possible outcomes for every situation, and yet this one thing he'd even planned on stuck him like a fourth-grader caught with pornography. He felt trapped. What would she expect from him? What should he expect from her?

"We'll watch the sun come up and I'll take you back down the mountain." Roberta slipped her arm around him and buried her head on his chest. Together they watched a mean sun come up. It looked like a sunrise ought to, he thought. Her cell phone buzzed at 5:30 am. "Time for work," she said. Off the ground in a second, she pulled Crater to his feet and snatched his jacket up. They giggled a little, both of them, as they tripped their way down to the car. In the sunlight both her car and her house looked pretty poorly. He didn't know why this had happened. He thought he was good enough to fuck, but this seemed like the beginning of something else,—she wanted more than sex?—and he wasn't sure he wanted it, though he could see her crooked face leaning into his unshaven jaw still, and it

felt. . . good, if not right. They didn't speak on the way back, an uncomfortable silence he nonetheless didn't want to break.

"Taxi service, twenty bucks," she said suddenly in front of Cass's house, car engine idling high. Crater laughed. "I'm serious," she said. "Almost ten miles to my place, and this car sucks gas like Cass eats pussy."

"I guess that's funny," Crater said. "How you know what he does??"

"Jesus, kid. Gloomy suspicious Gus, why don't you." She winked at him. "Of course I don't know. Give me a call sometime." Crater got out of the car and waved at her. Still a couple cars in the driveway, and Cass's window open to the cool morning air. Crater walked in the open door. One of the Pritchards had wrapped an old quilt around himself and curled up in the corner. The couch had been puked in. He kicked the beer cans aside and walked upstairs. All the upstairs doors were open. Cass's fat hairy ass gleamed from Crater's bed. Crater swore at him and thought for a moment, and took Cass's bed in the next room, kicking off everything but his shirt and briefs, and slept nearly immediately.

In his dream Cass was pulling at his clothes, trying to get him up. Someone had died, or had been in a car accident, or caught their arm in the chipper. Something. He woke to find Missy Van DeGraft fiddling with his undershorts, and he jumped back. "Shh," she said. "Best cure for a hangover is sex." It was hard to avoid her nakedness. It seemed to take over the room, her breasts with huge nipples, dark line of hair on her razor-burnt privates. "Come on now, Cass is passed out."

She jumped on him and tried to pin his shoulders, which was when Cass came in. Cass pulled Missy off and pushed her into the corner. By that time Crater had gotten up, but not in time. Cass hit him twice in the stomach and once right on the jaw. Crater kicked at the inside of Cass's leg, trying to stop him, get him down. He knew he had no chance at one-on-one, and he stayed quiet even while Cass beat him down the stairs, screaming, out the door, and into the driveway. Crater crawled under someone's car to protect himself,

and Cass, finally quit of his rage, went inside. Crater took inventory of himself. Somewhere his fingers had been stepped on, maybe broken. Every single joint hurt. It took all his energy to get his cell phone on. He had to call information to get Roberta's number, then remembered she was at work, so he set the cell phone under his ear and put his head on it. Crater knew he looked pitiful. He half-rolled out from under the car and began to pick the gravel from his hairline. She'd said they were two of a kind, and he wanted to believe that, but he had a faceful of gravel now and probably some broken fingers, and nowhere to go. It was time to find out what her words meant. When he called her cell, she picked up immediately.

"Hello. Hey you." Roberta said brightly. How could she do that after last night?

"It's Crater," he said.

"I was hoping I'd hear from you," Roberta said. "Uh. Just not quite this, um, early."

"I wanted to ask you something," Crater said.

