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HURRICANE SOPHIE

a working class love story



by
Sean Carswell



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I thought I'd had it made in Kill Devil Hills until August came in with a hurricane and worked its way up to a climax. I never believed it a coincidence that Sophie and the hurricane came into my life on the same night. I know now that she rode in on the storm.

The night looked less like a hurricane and more like a typical summer thunderstorm, with palm trees bending nearly in half, sea oats pushed flat to the orange sand, shrubs parted in the middle and folded back like Edward G. Robinson's hair, and street signs flapping back and forth as if the signposts were stuck between invisible but visibly nervous fingers. The devastation of front porches tumbling down main street and houses sacrificing the weaker wing to the sea and streets taking on a

temporary Venice style had all yet to come. We just had rain and wind and six drunk kids in a 1972 Ford Galaxy, me drinking a beer as I steered towards Jennifer's.

Of the other five drunks in my car, I'd only known Rick before the storm. Rick and I had grown up in the same hometown: Cocoa Beach, Florida. He'd moved up to the Outer Banks of North Carolina a year earlier, and when things weren't working out for me down in Florida, Rick helped me move up to Kill Devil Hills. The two girls and the guy in the back were friends of Rick's. Two of them, Marigold (no you can't call me Mary) and Christian, nuzzled against each other like lovers, but more than that. Her with her hemp necklace and tattooed flower shoulder and Birkenstock sandals over argyle socks, him with his white boy dreadlocks hanging over a golden boy movie star face, they looked like some hippie parent's greatest tripped out Woodstock fantasy. Marigold had a ring on her left ring finger. Christian didn't. I took that to mean that they were engaged. The other woman in the back, Sophie, casually glanced out the fogged up window of my car as if we were on a sunny Sunday drive down to Cape Hatteras. Sophie was

decidedly not-hippie and so I liked her all the more, though, at this point, we had yet to speak. At this point, I didn't even know her name was Sophie. A drunk chick named Jennifer sat in the front seat between Rick and me.



Jennifer had been sitting at my bar all night. I fed her drinks for free, and now at the end of the night, we were all headed back to her place to ride out the storm. Everyone in my car looked bright and cheery and

handsome against the black backdrop of the storm. Then I pulled my Galaxy into Jennifer's front yard.

Jennifer ran through the stinging rain first. She fought the pounding wooden screen door until she got the big front door unlocked. The other five of us ran from the Galaxy to the relative safety of the shack. The place was dry inside.

Jennifer set up a bunch of candles on the dark brown hardwood floor. I went into the kitchen with one of the candles and found a cooler. I dumped all of the ice from the freezer into the cooler, then dumped the beers in. By the time I got back, everyone was sitting in a circle on the floor. The skinny girl was introduced to me as Sophie.



Sophie looked up at me with big brown eyes and said, "Strip poker, Danny." Danny. I loved the way my name sounded coming out of her mouth. I always thought of Danny as a nothing name. Most people forget my name as soon as they hear it. But when it came off Sophie's lips sweet and liquid like watermelon or sex, I started to slip. Sophie shuffled the blue Bicycle cards one

last time, then laid the table out for seven card stud. I tried my best to turn away from her and remember that I'd spent all night trying to soothe and seduce Jennifer.

Jennifer went into her room after the first hand. She came back out after the second hand with a radio. Rather than trying to tune in news about the storm, she played a Willie Nelson cassette. Most of us started to complain, to say that we'd rather listen to the rain. Then Christian said, "Willie Nelson is the perfect rainy day music."

Jennifer gave Christian a drunken smile. Marigold shot a dirty look at Jennifer. Jennifer flipped her platinum blond hair off of her shoulders as if she were flipping off all of Marigold's hippie fantasies. Marigold turned her glare to Christian. Christian didn't turn to face it even though the heat of the stare burned into the side of his movie star face. The game went on. We listened to Willie and to the sound of the screen door banging itself into splinters and to the hurricane shrapnel pelting the house. We played slow games of draw poker. No bets. Just the one with the worst hand shedding an article of clothing. Rick was the first big loser. The poor kid was

naked while most of the rest of us still had shoes or at least socks on. He also showed us a hard-on when he dropped his briefs, and his member was somewhat misshapen. Sophie said, "Jesus, Rick, you could stand at the toilet and piss in the sink with that thing." Jennifer called her dog and told him to fetch the boomerang. Rick lay on his belly for the rest of the game.

It took a while before the next one of us got naked because, for some reason, Rick kept losing the hand. Finally, we made the rule that if Rick lost the hand, the person with the next worse hand had to lose some clothes. This led to Jennifer's nudity. She hadn't been wearing a bra and, strangely, with just a shirt and panties to choose from, she'd taken her panties off first. She sat on her knees with her t-shirt hanging over all the hidden body parts that I squinted to see. Then, a fateful pair of eights, second only to Rick's pair of threes, blew the t-shirt off stronger than any hurricane force wind. Jennifer continued to sit on her knees, posture perfect probably because she was a little chubby and didn't want any slouch in the back to push down a wrinkle in her belly. The chubbiness worked for her, though, making her boobs

full and round and her smile that much prettier. Rick made a crack about her not being a real blond. Jennifer told him not to be bitter about his boomerang dick.

The card game went on. Sophie lost all of her clothes, but she seemed glad to be rid of the wet rags. Sophie was a lean girl, not thin like she had an eating disorder, nor real fit like an athlete. Just lean because she was young still, only twenty-two at the time, and hadn't filled out yet. She seemed to feel very comfortable being nude, though. There was something very soothing and



sane about her that directly contrasted both the drunken silliness of the immediate room and the raging fury outside the shack. Sophie sat as if we were in art class, and she were the model. Or at least it's what I imagined it would've been like if I'd ever taken an art class.

The Willie Nelson cassette ended. Jennifer walked drunk and gracelessly, but sexy anyway because she was nude, to her room. We played another hand that left Marigold shirtless but hanging on to the bra, which surprised me because I didn't count on the hippie girl wearing a bra. I got up and went to the bathroom. When I returned, the dreadlocked golden-boy, Christian, was gone. We played another hand. I lost my boxers. We played another hand. Marigold lost her bra. Neither Jennifer nor Christian came back to the game. The screen door kept slamming into the front door. The windows rattled. Drafts inside the house pushed the flames of the candles in strange directions. Wax burned unevenly. Sophie gathered up the cards to deal another hand. Marigold turned her glance from the circle of Sophie, Rick, and me, and stared down the dark hallway towards Jennifer's bedroom. Sophie finished dealing. We all picked up our cards. Marigold stopped looking at the dark hallway long enough to look at her cards. Then she slammed them against Jennifer's dirty hardwood floor and said exactly what I'd been thinking for the past ten

The chubbiness worked for her, though, making her look

minutes. She said, "Goddamn it. They're fucking in the back room, aren't they?"

Our wordless response spoke a soap opera's worth and suddenly the hurricane's fury took a back seat to Marigold's rage. "That goddamn little whore. I'm gonna kick that goddamn little whore's ass." Marigold yelled "whore's ass" like it were one word.



Sophie, very calm, demure in her nudity, softly touched Marigold's arm. She led Marigold away from the dark hallway and towards the kitchen. Sophie's whispers soothed the rage inside the shack, equalizing the pressure.

Of course, I wanted to rage, too. I'd spent all night working on Jennifer only to make a silly crack about Willie Nelson and blow a night's efforts. I had to regroup, though. The night still left me with two naked women. That was something. Marigold was hopeless, but even if she hadn't been, I wouldn't have wanted her anyway. There was something insane about her: her wild, brown, curly hair or asymmetrical eyes or her iron worker style biceps. I was only twenty at the time, but I'd already had my share of mad women and wanted someone calm and soothing. Sophie struck me as calm and soothing from the time I first made eye contact with her by way of the Galaxy's rearview mirror. I'd been digging Sophie all night, her whiskey brown eyes, her slender fingers dealing out blue Bicycle playing cards, the way she kicked out a force field against the hurricane as if she herself had become the antibody to natural disaster. My only problem was lying belly down on the dirty floor. Rick had long since traded his cool for another drink. I watched him sit up as the women walked into the kitchen. He brushed the red beach sand out of his red chest hairs. He drained his beer, grabbed another, and took a long pull

off it, too. He was priming for his big move on Sophie. It was the last glint in his drunken eye. In the North Carolina hurricane, I went for the boondoggle. Sharply but at a low volume, I said, "Rick, what's up with you and Marigold?"

He raised one eyebrow and let his head roll about a bit on his neck. "What the fuck are you talking about? It's gonna be me and Sophie tonight. Marigold's Christian's girl. They're getting married."

"Is that why she kept playing cards while Christian was in the back room fucking Jennifer? Is that why Marigold didn't lose her temper until after she lost her clothes?" I paused, but not long enough for Rick to answer. "This is an act. It's all for you, Ricky. She's just trying to show you that she's free and available for you. Now step up to the plate. Swing if you want to hit something."

Rick lingered in thought for a minute but his brain clearly wasn't up for much thinking. I'd spoken to him in the language of his youth, took him back to the ball fields of Cocoa Beach when Rick was the little star and girls didn't require any more out of him. He gulped down

more of his beer, then staggered into the kitchen on two sleeping legs.

He stood against an ancient gas stove next to Sophie and Marigold. He paused. I worried that he'd lose his nerve and spend the rest of the night blocking my moves on Sophie. I watched the three of them chatting in the kitchen, a normal sight made bizarre by the candlelight and the nudity. Being temporarily alone in the room had a horror movie eeriness to it. I closed my eyes and listened to the storm, the whispers, the vague traces of sex in Jennifer's room.

When I opened my eyes, Sophie was standing above me, a fat orange candle in one hand, Jennifer's cassette player in the other. "Let's escape this insanity, Danny," she said. I stood up and followed her into another bedroom. Sophie shut and locked the door behind her. I could barely see around the room. Clothes of an evacuated roommate were scattered in lumps. An unmade bed with a tarnished brass frame sat in the middle of the room. I looked around me three times to make sure, then I breathed more easily because there were no windows. I made a comment to Sophie about the lack of windows in a

bedroom, about how strange that was. Sophie pointed out that there were no closets, either. "It's probably a dining room that they put a door on to get an extra bedroom," she said. She handed the candle to me. "Pick out some music." She walked away from me and sat Indian style on the middle of the bed. I held the candle up to the music collection. I honestly didn't know who most of the bands were and the ones I did recognize were typical radio pop.

I walked back to the bed, holding only the candle. "I have a better idea," I said. "Let's listen to the storm."

We blew out the candle and lay beside each other on the bed. Sounds of destruction surrounded us, muffled through the walls and pounding the roof above us. "Are you tired, Danny?" Sophie asked.

"No."

"You promise you won't fall asleep on me?"

"Yes."

"Then try this. Listen real closely. Don't pay attention to the air on your skin or the beer aftertaste in your mouth or Jennifer's roommate's smelly clothes or anything your eyes can pick up, and just listen." She stopped talking and took four deep breaths. "First you'll

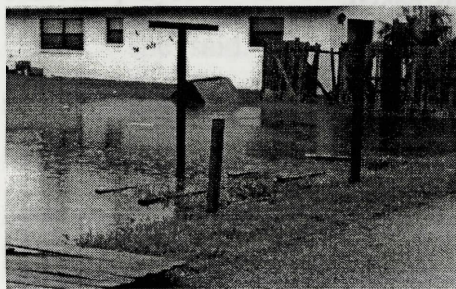
listen to what's close to you. My breathing. Your breathing. The creak in the mattress. Then listen more. What do you hear?" No talking.

After a half a minute, I said, "Rain on the roof. Bare feet on the hardwood floor. An angry knocking on the door down the hall. Marigold must be going after Christian."

"Don't worry about them. Stay with me. Listen. Tell me what you hear. Only what you hear."

"Glass bottles clinking...voices arguing...wind through hollow places...trees breaking up..."

"See how you move from what is immediate to what is distant, from yourself and your breathing to the



world outside, the wind and the trees? Now come back." Pause. The screen door crashing. "Get inside the house."

Voices. Marigold and Jennifer yelling. The lid of the cooler slamming. "Inside the room." Sophie exhaling through her nose. My heel scraping the blankets. The

brass bed stand groaning like an old man standing up after dinner. "Deeper inside." To the white noise in my head. Muscles in my neck straining. Blood flowing. I opened my eyes but still listened. Sophie only breathed, not rhythmic like in sleep. Stilted. Awake.

"Open your mouth," she said. I don't know if she hypnotized me or put me under a spell or if I genuinely fell in love in that North Carolina shack in the midst of a hurricane. Whatever it was, I was ready to do whatever she asked. I opened my mouth. "Stick out your tongue." I stuck out my tongue. She placed a tiny scrap of paper on it. It tingled. I braced myself for a trip. What followed flowed naturally, like a longboard ride on a powerful wave where I constantly have to move my feet and pull my weight and swing my board, but I'm always right on the source of power.

We groped for matches and lit the candle and watched the flame. We talked until we drifted into sex. Afterwards, Sophie found a Replacements cassette, and we listened to the whole album. Sophie sang along. I watched her mouth and listened to the drums. The album ended. We listened for the storm, but it was gone. The

others in the house had long since wearied of fighting and passed out.

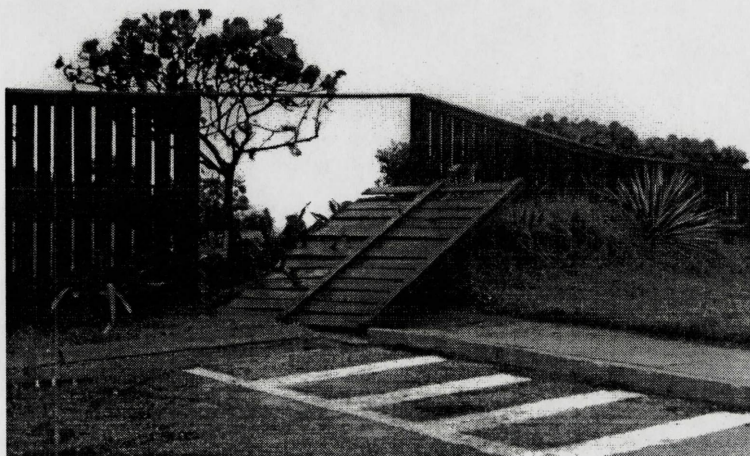
Sophie and I walked out into the breaking morning, the sun shining through the eye of the hurricane. No birds flew in the upper atmosphere. The fronds that still hung off palm trees hung loosely. Jennifer's yard was covered in wayward roof shingles and shutters and a Big Wheel that would never peddle again. Not even a light breeze blew, and the air was wet hot like a jungle. Sophie and I started towards the beach.

An unsettled calm passed over as we walked through the deserted streets, surrounded by fences torn asunder, a house without a roof, a broom handle that the storm had flung through a palm tree, sticking half in, half out like the gag arrows we used to wear on our heads when we were kids. The detritus of the storm enveloped us, sunny and wet with the sky swirling as if to say, "It's only half done."

We walked all the way down to the beach, where we caught our first glimpses of the second half. The black clouds stampeded from the east, fast and angry and climbing over themselves. The ocean frothed white like

some great rabid god. We started back for the shack. The rain pelted us from the side, as if it were being shot out of a low flying war plane. A baby doll flew past Sophie's head.

The house was only a hundred yards away. I could've sprinted to it in seconds but not without Sophie. Sophie walked. A palm frond hit my bare back at eighty miles an hour and left a welt. I grabbed Sophie's hand and made her run with me. She ran.



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rain pelted us from the side, as if it were being shot out of
a long-barreled gun. A baby doll flew from Sophie's
head, and she hit the ground with a thud. Sophie
No! The doll was flying through the air, and she
could not see it. It was in the air, but not in the air.
Sophie walked. A light breeze was blowing, and Sophie
walked in the air, and she was walking. Sophie was
and she was walking. The air was blowing, and she was
and I started to walk.

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around us, and the air was calm.



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