



Water Park

It was hot that Sunday in the high desert. No surprise since it was mid-summer, but Joshua Tree is not St. Louis, (my home town), where summers are thick with stifling heat, and so it was odd that on this day in the desert the air was heavy, the sky thick with cotton ball clouds threatening a downpour. Naturally when a friend told me about the water park at the Joshua Tree Community Center, I ventured over there with my 10- year- old daughter, Lily, and her friend, Daphne, relieved there was something fun for them to do in spite of the heat.

The water park sat behind the beige non-descript community center beside a huge parking lot. The girls stripped down to their bathing suits and ran across the dirt and sand to the fountains. I sat at a table under one of the shade structures and watched as they dashed between green and yellow plastic palm trees dripping with water, then stepped into the center of an enormous upside-down horseshoe that spewed water from every angle. Their favorite was three red buckets hanging from a yellow pole high above their heads. The buckets filled and then, one at a time, dumped water on the children below. Drenched, the girls giggled and ran to the next spot.

I sat near a young woman whose blond baby girl crawled all over her lap. If she hadn't had a child with her, I would have thought she was one herself. She was petite and dressed in a short jean skirt with a pink sparkly tank top. Her big brown eyes were layered with mounds of blue eye shadow, a look I hadn't seen since I was a teenager in the '70s.

"Sure is hot today," she said swigging water from a plastic cup.

"Sure is." I drank from my own plastic container.

"They don't have parks like this in Needles where I come from," she said as she handed her child a stuffed bear.

"Where's Needles?" I asked.

"Further east and north of here -- still desert, but it's got a river -- The Colorado. I just moved here from there."

"Really?" I said, though I was only half listening as I struggled to find comfort on the hard bench.

"Yeah, after the guy I was livin' with for 8 years beat me up, I thought it was time to change scenery."

Now she had my attention. "Wow, what happened?" I asked, trying to sound nonchalant.

"Hell if I know. All the time we were together, he treated me like I was a princess, buyin' me pretty things, and then one night he got shit faced with

his brothers . . .” She trailed off, as she looked towards the water park. I followed her gaze and saw two little girls, 3 and 4, crossing the hanging bridge toward the red slide. Mine were standing under the buckets again, waiting for the big drop.

She turned back to me. “Did you see that guy who just cruised the park then took off in the white truck?”

“What guy?” I looked around but saw nothing. “What happened to the guy who beat you up? Are you hiding from him?”

“Oh no, I put his ass in jail, but listen,” she leaned closer and looked into my eyes, “you can never be too careful!” She sat back, pulled a cigarette from her purse, lit it, sucked in and blew smoke out sideways through pursed lips. “I was raped when I was 6 by four men and molested by my cousin when I was 11. I mean, what the fuck was that guy doin’, checkin’ out the park -- know what I mean?”

I nodded yes, but I was trying to imagine being raped at six -- by four men? I grew up in a middle class Jewish suburb, and I could understand only in a detached way, like something I’d heard about on the 10’clock news. In my world, molestation and rape seldom came up in conversation.

But this was the desert, and I realized I’d just crossed the threshold into the other side of Joshua Tree -- a town full of those who co-exist with people like me -- artists and weekenders who live comfortably somewhere else during the week or live in the desert year ‘round because of its natural beauty. The desert has always attracted loners and those on society’s fringe -- drug users, ex cons, welfare recipients, poor people pushed out of cities by urban sprawl -- the forgotten people. Comfortable within my cocoon of friends, hikes and art openings, I too had forgotten them.

Fifteen years ago, when my husband and I first bought property up Burns Canyon, poverty in the High Desert was more evident. The local coffee shop in Yucca Valley brimmed with leather-faced smokers, vacant-eyed parents with wild looking kids hanging from their limbs. Once, as we were eating breakfast I watched a little girl covered in dirt with matted hair coloring a picture on the floor next to her dad who sat at the counter. He was in bad shape, his hands shaking so hard he could barely raise his cup to his lips. The sight had so unsettled me, for years I couldn’t return to that coffee shop.

This woman at the water park, I will call her Rhonda, talking so matter-of-factly about child abuse, had only begun. As she talked on, I learned she had been in prison for possession of crystal meth, and believed those two years saved her life. “I got clean,” she said, “and those men that raped me? Well, they’re dead as doornails. I took care of that.” Rhonda tossed her

cigarette butt and smashed it hard beneath the heel of her delicate mesh sandal. She explained that she had once hung with a bad crowd, and her “boys” tracked down those men and killed all four. It occurred to me that she could be pulling my leg, but who could make up this stuff?

“Yeah, prison saved my life,” she repeated, “if I was still in Needles, I’d be dead myself.”

“From an overdose?” I asked. We both watched as the mother of another tow-headed child helped Rhonda’s two-year old into a toddler swing.

“You hear of the seven women who were decapitated a few years ago in Needles?” she asked.

I shook my head no.

“Well, the guy that did all that killin’, he was a good friend when I was doin’ drugs, and I could have ended up with my body scattered all over like those others. I knew some of his victims.” She scooped her middle daughter into her arms and hugged her. “Now, if I could only find me a job,” she said.

The woman who had been swinging the girls, who I will call Becky, walked over, the two little girls trailing her. She sat down beside us. Becky was probably in her late 20s, but she had no front teeth, so her mouth sank into itself the way my grandmother’s mouth had when she forgot to wear her dentures. Dressed in a wife beater T-shirt, Becky was soaking wet, and everything about her seemed tired – shoulders slumped forward, her belly hung three rolls thick. She wore her dull brown hair pulled back in limp ponytail.

“How old’s your little one?” she asked Rhonda.

“Two.”

“So’s mine.”

As I watched the children play, I was struck by their innocence – staggering beside their mothers.

Becky’s older daughter and her little boy ran over and started playing with the baby girls. The daughter, who looked to be around eight, had the face of an older child, not hard, but stoic, bereft of wonder or joy. The little boy’s mullet suited him, and though he was only 5, I could see the difficult teenager he could become.

I stood up to look for Lily and Daphne. They were still laughing and clowning around. “Ten minutes, girls!” I called.

When I sat down Becky was talking about a belt. “I figure I can get one, and by the time this little one is old enough I can hand it down to her,” she said.

“Well, mine are so close in age, I may have to get more than one. Whatever it takes to keep ‘em safe,” Rhonda said.

“What kind of belt keeps you safe?” I asked, puzzled.

“A chastity belt,” Becky said. “You can get ‘em on the Internet, but they’re not cheap.”

“You’re kidding, right?” I asked in disbelief

“No, I’m not kiddin’,” she said and went on, “the teenage cousins have already messed around with my oldest,” she tilted her head in the direction of her 8 year-old now playing on the swings. “I gotta keep her safe somehow”. Rhonda nodded.

I thought about conversations I’d had with mothers at parks in West Hollywood when Lily was small -- teething, tantrums, food allergies, diaper rash, pre-school. Never chastity belts. My biggest concern for Lily, who had just turned 10, was that she wear sunscreen and a camisole under her top, but rarely had I even considered her being “messed with.”

Back home that night, I googled chastity belt; “A locking device passing around the waist and between the legs, used in medieval times to prevent a woman from having sexual intercourse.” I found no chastity belts designed for young girls, but I did find many articles spewing a desire for the return of the device; most of these were posted on Christian forums. And of course I found plenty of sites selling them as sexual paraphernalia.

I also learned that sexual abuse is common among methamphetamine users; apparently when they take the drug, crystal meth creates a sexual urge so strong the user doesn’t care who he assaults, or who is watching. She told me meth rewires the brain, and without it the addict feels nothing but the need to do more.

How could a chastity belt protect Becky’s little girl from the repercussions already in place? I wondered if Becky and Rhonda knew about therapy, or if I was being bourgeois -- just part of the other, forever separate Joshua Tree — our greatest concerns revolving around stopping a housing development and boycotting the local Wal-Mart where Rhonda would give anything to land a job.

Throughout the summer we returned to the water park many times. I never again ran into Rhonda or Becky, but I couldn’t stop thinking about them, wondering what would happen to them and their children. The last time we went to the park that summer was Labor Day. As we were leaving, a guy in a white pickup truck dropped off a young boy in the parking lot and drove away. The boy immediately took off on his scooter and began to race all over the park. Both Lily and I were surprised that he had been left alone, and Rhonda’s words reverberated in my mind:

“Did you see that guy in the white truck? You can never be too careful!”