

The Hot Seat
By Jerry Peterson
www.jerrypetersonbooks.com

It was our last chance for a boffo party what with summer jobs and college ahead. Graduation was gonna break up the crew as we liked to call ourselves, so when Ernie said, “Hey, we got two hours before we gotta be in our caps ’n’ gowns. How about a last swim?” sure, we said yes. Fred had the beer.

Well, actually, we all did. It was darned hot and it seemed stupid to let the stuff cook in the trunk until after we got our diplomas.

So Ernie wheeled his top-down Ford off the main highway and onto the gravel road that led to the old quarry, the turn setting the pine-tree air freshener hanging from his rearview mirror to swinging like a metronome.

We winged a couple bottles, like they were distressed tulips, over the side as we roared down the road, Bob jacking open replacements. One he handed to Ernie and the other he kept for himself. Was it his third or fourth? I couldn’t keep track of his. Heck, I couldn’t keep track of mine.

Ernie slammed on the brakes, bellowing as he threw the car into a slide, “Who the who-ha put that chain across there?”

The road into the quarry had never been chained. Never. But it sure was now.

Bob waved his bottle. “Oh, for a magic sword that we might cleave in two that barrier to good times.”

Ernie stared at him. “You swallow a dictionary?”

“Just beer. We kin walk in.”

So we did, peeling off shirts and pants and shorts as we went along. We made bets on who could throw his trousers the farthest, and Ernie won with that outfielder arm of his.

Our shoes and socks went last, after we tramped across the riprap to the water’s edge. And then it was in. Oh, I tell you, that water was a relief. The races, the hollering, the seeing who could dunk who, we never saw them coming until Rosemary Holland called out, “We got something here.” She and the Deahl sisters and Betts Miller, they held up this collection of clothes and shoes – our clothes and shoes – Betts waving my pants at me.

Now you don’t joke with Bob, not after he’s had four beers or was it five? He dove under and came up with a fistful of mud and rocks and pitched it at them, and they ran . . . with our clothes. Hardly a minute later, we heard Rosemary’s Chevy peel away.

“What da hell you do that for? They got out clothes, man.” Ernie dope-slapped Bob, the thwack echoing off the quarry’s walls.

Fred, jay nekid as the rest of us, splashed his way out of the water. “I don’t know about you, but I’m gonna catch hell from my dad if I’m late. My cousin lives over the hill. I’ll get some clothes from him.”

“You goin’ barefoot?” I asked.

“How else am I gonna get there?”

Ernie sloshed up to the shore. “I kin drive ya, drive us all.”

“They got your keys, man.”

“I got one hid under the fender.”

And so we trekked out of there, ooching and ouching across the riprap and up the road to Ernie’s car. Fred, the first in the back seat came up swatting at his fanny, squalling, “I been branded.”

Those naugahide seats baking in the sun, they’re like fire, so we ripped the rugs up off the floor and used them for seatcovers, and Ernie barreled us out of there and onto the highway and this siren went off behind us. Fred hollered, “You can outrun ’im.”

“The hell I can.” With that, Ernie stepped his bare foot over onto the brake pedal.

We waited a long time after he stopped the car, none of us daring to look over our shoulders. And then we heard it, the crunching of gravel under boots, and there he was, Deputy Grunge leaning on Ernie’s door.

“You boys lose something back there?” he asked, and he hauled out that damn camera phone. “Sheriff’s got a new rule, boys. We gotta take a picture of every traffic stop. Now step out here and smile.”