

Summer Nights - II

By [Lou Gallio](#)

Average Rating: 10

Excerpt from a story about growing up in Southeast Texas and driving an ambulance. A town bully, a car accident, teenage love and pranksters are pivotal to intense conflicts.

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Bizarre is the only way to describe it. One evening, I was transferring a heart-attack patient to the hospital in Galveston. On the way back, a ghostly white figure popped up in my headlights.

I was driving a black Cadillac hearse, on loan from Gambrel's Funeral Home in Port Arthur. We didn't have anything suited for long trips in our fleet, and we often did trade deals with Gambrel. I picked up a patient and his wife at St. Mary's Hospital and headed towards Galveston.

At night, the desolate forty-mile stretch of Texas asphalt rimming the Gulf of Mexico made the hairs on the back of your neck curl. Stars flickered in a cobalt sky like candles. The eerie expanse of marshland on the right was a black abyss. To the left, a misty-ringed moon painted a wavy stripe on the water, and the sand dunes flew by like fuzzy meteorites.

On the way back, the beach road was twice as lonely, so I turned on the radio to break the monotony. KPAC and Gordon Baxter came alive. Baxter, a local DJ, was also a writer and a private pilot. For me, at seventeen, writing and flying were vague ambitions.

Frankie Carello stuck in an oil refinery town with no career path? Not ready for college or marriage. And Marcy's family was pushing for us to get married.

Suddenly, amid the grassy sand dunes, a ghostly white figure sprang into sight. I caught a blurry, fleeting glimpse of a person as I whizzed by. I slowed to a stop, turned my head and looked back. The water and white-top waves glowed in the ray of a waning crescent moon, but the beach was shadowy. Using the road shoulder as a guide, I backed up to the spot. I couldn't believe my eyes. There stood a woman . . . in the nude!

I got out and stared at the surreal scene. She stumbled towards the ambulance in the soft sand. As she came near, I said, "What are you . . ."

She rushed up to the passenger side and struggled to get in. I slid across the seat and unlocked the door. The woman hopped in. I handed her a set of clean sheets. "Here, put this on."

She promptly wrapped herself. Lights from the dashboard lit up a leathery face, framed by wet, scraggly blonde hair. Prominent smoker wrinkles lined her pasty lips. Her eyes were glassy, weary. She looked older than her young body would imply.

Jeezus, I can't believe this! Why me? I shook my head, shifted into first gear and eased the clutch out. "What happened?" I asked.

"I was stranded," she muttered. Her voice had a gruff, deep-throated sound, vocal cords likely gutted by smoking and drinking. "This guy drove off with my clothes."

"Just left ya?"

"Yeah. We was skinny-dippin, and we had a fight."

What a jerk, I thought. "Where can I take you?"

"Beaumont. I live in Beaumont." A whiff of stale booze drifted my way.

I had to go to school that morning, and a diversion to Beaumont was out. "Look, I don't have time to take you, but somebody else will. Okay?"

"Appreciate ya."

Poor woman, I felt sorry for her. Naked, deserted in the middle of nowhere. What a freaking nightmare. And I thought I had problems!

"I'm really tired," she said. "Mind if I get some sleep?" She turned and looked at the gurney in the back. "Can I get back there?"

"Sure." I stopped and let her crawl under the covers. Seconds later, the beach woman had dozed off.

I stopped in Sabine Pass to call the office. "Knight's Ambulance Service." Nick's sleepy voice was a welcomed sound.

"Nick, this is Frankie. I'm in Sabine Pass. Wait for me, I need a ride to school. Okay?"

"Yeah, okay."

“Something else. There’s a naked woman with me.”

“Asshole, it’s too early for corny jokes.”

“No kidding. I picked her up on the beach.”

“Oh, I get it. You met a hot one in Galveston.”

I grimaced. “Just tell Johnny she needs a ride to Beaumont. Okay?” I got back on the highway.

As we approached Port Arthur, the rising sun silhouetted the maze of smoke stacks and pipes at the oil refinery. Relief valves belched billows of white vapors that blended with the morning fog. Kerosene-like odor permeated the air. School buses dotted the neighborhoods, picking up children laden with books and lunch boxes.

As I rounded the corner for the Ambulance Service, lined up on the driveway were six wide-eyed drivers. They all had half-moon smiles, waiting to gape at the beach woman.

I shut the engine off and hurried inside. I washed my face, changed clothes, slicked back my hair and gathered my schoolbooks.

I jumped into Nick’s car. “Let’s go, we’re late.”

Nick peered at me with a smug grin. “Okay, stud.” He burst out laughing, popped the clutch and spun his wheels in the seashell gravel.

The rumor at school went something like, “Have ya heard? Frankie made out on the beach last night.”

I sometimes wonder about the mystery beach woman. How did her life play out? Frolicking on the beach with someone you love and trust is one thing, but how did she end up with such a lowlife? Where do people like that go for help? Or do they even want help?

I’ve picked up too many suicides; beautiful young prostitutes who had reached the end of their wits. It’s sickening. Are we really in hell?