

Breaking Up Light

Infrared

Nicholas and Alex had been friends since junior high, and while Nicholas had heard many stories from Alex about the infamous Frank who lived in his neighborhood, the three of them had never been in the same place at the same time. Based only on those stories, Nicholas had developed a peculiar kind of respect for Frank: he started a fire in his backyard and burned down a whole tree, he got himself arrested at age sixteen when he started a fight at the Radial Bar and Grill, and things had escalated from there. That's what Alex said, anyway.

Nicholas and Frank met for the first time at a convenience store, just a chance encounter. Nicholas was filling up his tank with gas when Alex and Frank squealed into the parking lot. Frank charged inside to get a tin of chewing tobacco and a pack of cigarettes, and when he returned Alex made the belated introduction. Frank didn't look Nicholas in the eye as he packed his cigarettes; he was tall, rough-looking, and not particularly social.

"Frank's setting me up," Alex said. "He hassled his girlfriend Sylvia to set me up with a girl from her debate

R U B B E R N E C K E R S

team. He claims this girl is hotter than hell. Honestly, I think he wants a crack at her himself." Alex slapped Frank's back to punctuate the joke, and didn't get any reaction from Frank. "We're headed to a party at Sylvia's house now. You should follow us!"

Nicholas had been heading home from a double shift, but Alex could be persuasive and a detour to a party did sound better than what Nicholas had planned. Frank was in a hurry. He sped through a yellow light on Fort Street and Nicholas had to jackrabbit across the intersection to beat the red light.

"Where's Sylvia?" Frank roared, clomping through a room packed with party guests. A little girl, maybe nine years old, led him up a staircase. He told Alex and Nicholas to wait there in the foyer. Alex explained that Sylvia's mom had just graduated from law school and had invited all of her colleagues and professors for a celebration. It looked like an upper-class cocktail party from a Woody Allen movie or a soap opera. Almost every man in the house wore a coat and tie. Nicholas felt underdressed.

Alex saw a girl he knew in the next room and they stepped over to chat with her. "This is Nick," Alex said.

"I'm Nicholas," he said, holding out his hand for a shake, "please don't call me Nick." The girl narrowed her eyes in confusion. Nicholas thought she was wearing too much eye makeup, and wondered how her hair looked when it wasn't teased up with hairspray.

B R E N D A N H O W A R D

Alex apologized, because Nicholas used to go by Nick until he went away to college and asked everyone to start calling him Nicholas. "I forgot," Alex said, "it's like one day you wake up and orange juice is called green juice."

The girl told them to grab a piece of cake. "It's angel food," she said. "So good."

Nicholas got bored with the conversation Alex started with the hairspray girl, so he slowly wandered through the house. Art had been hung in most rooms, large photographic prints of dramatic landscapes and other tasteful adornments. A shelf in the dining room had been populated with strange clay knick-knacks carefully arranged for unknown reasons. As he moved from room to room, he paused near a group of party guests and listened to them gossip about vacations in Greece and the ideal mix of stocks in a mutual fund. Before long, Nicholas found himself on the back porch. The air was buzzing with junebugs dive-bombing the house, so Nicholas turned off the porch lights. Now everything was dark and quiet. He felt comfortable. All the backyard colors faded to black-and-white.

Red

Alex's blind date, the girl who was hotter than hell, left the party with some other guy, so Alex came out to the porch and asked if Nicholas was ready to leave. "Frank's gone," he said, "so I need a ride from you."

"I never met Sylvia," Nicholas said.