THE BOAT

                                                                 By Sherry Shahan

It must’ve been the summer of 1957, which would’ve put me between the third and fourth grade.

Tony and Anita Bierbaumer, which sounded like Beer Bomber to me, lived a few blocks from our house in Canoga Park. Anita and my mom were best friends, though their connection is lost to history.

Tony owned a filling station, the kind where a squeaky clean guy in a button-down, collared shirt pumped gas, washed windshields, checked tire pressure. No extra charge. He’d change your oil and charge your battery. All cash. Bank cards were still a novelty. In 1959, American Express launched the first “‘plastic”’ card. Previous cards were cardboard or celluloid.

Gas hovered at 19-cents a gallon. Fill ‘er up for less than four bucks. Earnings from the filling station provided the Bierbaumers with a Chris-Craft cabin cruiser. I saw it whenever the garage door was up. Man, only movie stars and presidents had boats like this.

A swimming pool took up half their backyard, shaped like a big blue, watery kidney bean. Oil-fueled tiki torches wavered outside a tiki hut where we changed into our swimsuits.

Twin sons Larry and Gary were marginalized, developmentally slow from lack of oxygen in the birth canal. The six-foot tall fifteen-year-olds didn’t have any friends in the neighborhood. I didn’t have many friends either. We became a little allied nation by default.

I have to interrupt at this point to relate the twin’s secret tale—probably heard from their older brother, whose face and name has been sucked from my cerebrum—of prostitutes having sex with donkeys on barroom stages in a country called Tijuana. They laughed like crazy, and I laughed too, loved being in on the joke, though I didn’t know what they were talking about.

The twins taught me armpit farts, which I used to torture my younger brother. I taught them how to blow bubbles off the tip of their tongues. Tinny spit bubbles could float forever.

Since I don’t remember the name of their older brother, let’s call him Dick. He was a year or two older than the twins and clean cut, could’ve been his own twin to Eddie Haskell on *Leave it To Beaver*. You know the sickening type, always sucking up to adults.

Behind his parents’ backs Dick tortured his brothers until they wet themselves. The smart thing would’ve been to stay on his good side, but I feared him too much to lick his penny loafers.

Anyhow, back to my mom and Anita and their glamorous girlfriends. Audrey had the same cat-green eyes as Elizabeth Taylor. Her husband owned the largest western nightclub east of the Mississippi. Orchid had a flamboyant mass of red hair accentuated with a fall—a popular kind of a hair-piece wiglet. Her muscled, freckle-faced husband was a city cop. On duty, he’d stand on the deck of the pool in his uniform, instructing us in cannonballs off the diving board.

Every one of these women struck movie star poses poolside, parading in caftans or gauzy cover-ups, and sunglasses. Hair swept into sleek waves, accentuating rhinestone clip-on earrings. A tall, frosty glass with a sprig of mint or orange slice finished off their ensembles. They were so *Vogue.*

I was bonkers over their backless pastel pumps with pom-pom flowers. Not one of them perspired. Not ever. I have volumes of fifty-year-old photo albums to prove it. Fake leather covers, four-inch thick plastic sheets protecting their perfect figures.

On Mom’s day off she’d lounge in the Bierbaumer’s backyard in the shade of a woven aluminum umbrella. Unlike me, Daddy, and my brother, my mom never touched water. Not wading in the ocean or dangling her feet in a pool. I used to think it was because she didn’t want to mess up her hair or makeup. But now I think she was afraid of anything that moved.

My brother Steve sat on the steps in the shallow end. His inflatable water wings endowed him with neon-green biceps. My dirty-blonde hair turned the same weird color, floating around my face while I had an underwater tea party.

I don’t recall if the Bierbaumer’s were Daddy’s pool-cleaning clients. Maybe that’s how they met? Or, maybe it was at the filling station, swapping dirty jokes, matching each other beer for beer? Some things are blurry.

But I have a clear memory of one afternoon, diving in the pool with the twins, collecting pennies and nickels off the bottom—and of coming up for air and seeing Dick spying on me from inside the living room. He stood by the sliding glass doors, partially hidden by shimmery drapes. The water from the pool splashing onto the sizzling hot concrete deck was about to be seared off.

Dick opened the slider, nodding his blockhead. *Pssst!*

I had that fizzy feeling. “Has anyone ever told you how cute you are?”

I expected him to say something about my freckles like everyone else.

“And sexy.” Then he dangled an irresistible carrot. “Want to see the inside of the boat?”

And, so I nibbled the bait.

I tagged behind him to the garage where he flipped on the overhead light, and took a folding ladder from a peg on the wall, hooking it over the stern. “Stay clear of the propellers,” he said and offered a hand. “You first.”

Once inside the cabin, he took me on a tour, pointing out the fake-wood-paneled head with a toilet that really flushed, and the galley with its playhouse size stove and fridge. My doll Betsy Wetsy would’ve loved it. And, finally, the berths. The beds had comfy-looking red-and-green plaid spreads.

“My brothers bunk here when we go to Catalina.”

I let him boost me up, bouncing on the foam mattress, having so much fun I forgot who I was with until he told me to take off the bottom of my swimsuit. I must’ve looked like I didn’t hear him, because he repeated it.  “If you don’t, I’ll beat the twins bloody.”

I imagined the pool filled with a glob of guts.

So I did it; I took off my suit. The bedspread made my butt itch.

He grabbed and grabbed before wiggling out of his trunks and holding out a nubbin of a penis. (I’d seen my brother’s plenty of times in the bathtub. But this one had hair. So *dumb*.) Pressing his hands against my shoulders, he held me down and positioned his puny penis between my legs.

I don’t remember any pain. But I was unable to say *no* or *stop* because I wasn’t even there. I knew how to be invisible. Sometimes invisible felt like an actual place.

A few thrusts with his bony hips and a pathetic grunt.

Dick beamed, proud of himself. “Better keep your mouth shut, if you know what’s good for you.”

I had no interest in telling anyone what had happened. I didn’t cry, or even sniffle, struggling to put my swimsuit on wishing it could shield me. I saw my chance to get away when he left.

 I climbed out of the boat and walked in the house through the living room passing a monster TV in a cabinet with a hi-fi—to the swimming pool, where Larry and Gary were in a splash war in the deep end.

During that time I became obsessed with the biology of baby-making. I pestered Mom constantly. “Honey, we just talked about that,” she’d say. “Don’t you remember?”

A straight-faced lie: “I forgot—tell me again.” And she did.

Never mind that I wouldn’t get my period for another seven years; I believed slimy Dick seeds were growing inside me. The slightest bellyache turned into morning sickness, as did the stomach flu. I threw up imagining baby seeds drowning in the toilet. But . . . what if some stuck to my ribcage?

I borrowed the tape measure from my grandmother’s sewing kit and wrapped the yellow paper around my waist. Day in, day out, I tallied the black lines, recording quarter inches in code. This went on for years.

When people talked about having babies, I had no flipping sense what that meant. I certainly didn’t imagine that a living, breathing creature would emerge from the same place I peed.

Mom didn’t include this in her tutorial, and while I vaguely remember her watermelon belly when pregnant with my brother, I couldn’t conceptualize it. I never considered how the little guy got out of there.

On one of those breathless summer days, Mom and Anita rounded up us kids for a beach outing. My brother, Steve, and me, twins Larry and Gary, and Dick. Seven of us squeezed into a four-door sedan, back when seats stretched from door to door. We were cramped and cranky, sticking to the ribbed vinyl seats. No air conditioner. No seatbelts, which weren’t invented for another two years.

I was pinned next to Dick, his sweat-soaked body crushing me against the door handle. And, I was suddenly terrified I’d have to marry him, because only married people had babies. And equally terrifying: I’d be having a baby before I’d memorized my multiplication tables.

Mom and Anita bubbled up, singing off-key to The Everly Brothers, “All I have to do is Dream.” They sang with their hands; the wind tousled their hair.

Soon after turning onto PCH I saw a tractor-trailer through a smudge in the side-view mirror. It filled the lane directly behind us, piled high with new cars, and was picking up speed.

Then Anita noticed it in her mirrors. “Oh, my gawd!”

Dick squealed like a pig and crouched in an oddly similar way to the position he’d taken over me on the boat. His skinny neck flushed the same crimson, only now he cried like a big fat baby. “Don’t let me die! I don’t want to die!”

God, it was magnificent seeing him grovel like this in front of all of us. The twins pointed and laughed loudly, clearly as unconcerned as I was about being crushed by tons of steel. Then, we were still, while Dick tried to fold into the space between the front and back seats, clasping his hands and pleading with the heavens. “Please Jesus, please don’t let me die!”

Not *us*, but *me*.

The truck must’ve found its brakes because it swerved around us and we were saved. But I didn’t care about that, and I don’t think the twins did either, because Dick no longer had power over us. He knew it too. I could tell.