**Apples to Tennis Balls**

By Buck Storm

A happy wind swirled off the sea, dancing and dipping through the saltgrass and tugging at his hair and un-tucked shirt.

He lay back and rested his head in his hands studying the perfect deep blue sky. A gull crossed the pallet, punching staccato questions into the afternoon.

“He thought we were too young.” The girl lay on her side facing him, elbow in the sand, head propped on her hand.

“Who thought we were too young?”

“The judge… If he even *was* a judge. I couldn’t understand a word he said. Mexican is so fast.”

“Not Mexican—Spanish. And yes, he was a judge. Judges are just as much judges in Mexico as in the United States. They just marry younger down here. We’re as official as we would be if we’d been standing in St. Gertrude’s back in Slope City. And we have the paper to prove it—even if it’s not in English. Anyway, does it matter what he thought?”

“Are we? Too young, I mean?”

He rolled to face her. “Probably. Do you care?”

She flicked sand at him with her finger. “No.”

He sat up. Shifting his weight back on one hand he angled his body to better view his bride of exactly one hour and thirty-six minutes. He leaned in and kissed the scattering of freckles across the bridge of her nose. When she smiled, a perfect, tiny pit formed in the middle of her forehead—the little sister of the deep dimples on her cheeks.

“Your eyes are the same color as the sky,” he said.

“You probably say that to all the girls, sailor.”

“Only the ones with blue eyes.”

She punched him in the arm.

“Careful, you’ll hurt your hand.”

“Oh brother… It’s strange, isn’t it? There’s snow back home, at least in the mountains. But it’s so warm here. I can’t get over it.”

“Let’s not think about home yet. Let me enjoy the few days I have left to live before your father kills me.”

“You kidding, junior? Kill the son he never had? He wouldn’t get rid of his best hand. At least not until after harvest—then all bets are off. Me on the other hand… I’m a goner! He’s gonna dip me in syrup and eat me with pancakes.”

“He’s big enough to do it.”

Far out on the Pacific white sails billowed against the haze of the horizon. A big ship—at least three masts. He pointed it out to her. “Never see those around anymore. Mostly steamers and diesel now. Probably coming from San Diego. I wonder what it’d be like to be on a ship like that?”

“You’ll never know now that you’ve got the old ball and chain. Where is it going, I wonder? I’ll bet someplace exotic. Like Siam… Or Bora Bora.”

“Or Fiji. Or China. Or Antarctica.”

“Not Antarctica. It’s too cold there.”

“Ships don’t go to cold places?”

“Not my ships.”

“It gets cold in China, I think.

“Then China’s out of the picture.”

“I’d go to Antarctica. I’d like to see the penguins.”

“I’ll see ‘em in the zoo.” She sat up, pulled her knees to her chest, and wrapped her bare arms around them. “A warm zoo. In the desert.” A gust of wind pressed the gingham—her best Sunday dress—outlining her thin legs. A strand of dark hair blew across her face, sticking itself to her lip.

He brushed it away and kissed her again. “If you won’t go, I won’t go.”

“Now you’re talking like an obedient husband. Good job, junior.”

Lazarus from the dead. Water to wine. A miracle. That’s what she was. *His miracle.* One look at this girl and any sane person would drop to their knees and be born again. Because only God—a good God—a wild, wonderful, free God—would dare make eyes that color. Beauty that stole breath from your lungs and wouldn’t give it back till you looked away.

“Let’s go swimming,” he said.

A delicate eyebrow arched. “You kidding, junior? No dice. I don’t have a suit.”

He looked up and down the wide beach. “This place is deserted. Not a soul—c’mon.”

“If you think I’m gonna take my clothes off and jump in that water naked as the day is long—“

“As a jay bird.”

“Whatever. If you think I’m going to do that you’re crazy!”

“You said you and Lettie skinny-dipped in the lake last summer. What’s the diff?”

“Those are two whole different ball fields, pal.”

“I don’t thinks that’s how that saying goes.”

“Stop comparing apples to tennis balls.”

“Oranges.”

“I hate oranges.”

“Let’s go swimming.”

She touched the pearl button on the pocket of his shirt. “I love this shirt. You were wearing it the first time I saw you.”

“I love *you*.”

“Still not swimming.”

He rose, sand warm beneath his bare feet. From the seat of the truck he retrieved a grease-stained, brown paper bag, then returned and dropped back onto the sand. From the bag he pulled four *tamales* and a Coke.

“Our wedding feast?” she said. “You *do* know how to show a girl a good time.”

“Best tamales in Rosarita. Said so right on the sign.”

“You don’t know what the sign said. It was in Mexican.”

“Spanish.”

“You’re lucky they even sold food at that place. It could’ve been a hardware store for all you knew. And you couldn’t pop for two Cokes, Baron Rothschild?”

“We gotta have gas to get home.” He swallowed a bite and took a small sip of the Coke. “Besides, it’s mostly for you.”

They ate, and for a long while said nothing. The happy wind stole a tamale husk and whipped it down the beach. A seagull dove at it, screeching.

She dribbled sand into the empty Coke bottle.

“Apples and tennis balls,” she said at length.

“What?”

“I said let’s go swimming.”

“Really?”

“Don’t say really. I might change my mind.”

“I love you.”

“I know.” This time she kissed him.

An hour—or maybe five minutes—passed before they returned, sailors home from the sea, dripping and shivering to their nest in the saltgrass.

She pulled the gingham over her shaking body. He pulled her down, put his arms around her, and drew her close.

She brushed his face with her fingers. Hands white and delicate as a bird. Tears touched her eyes.

Oh woman. The eternal mystery.

“You’re freezing,” she said.

“I’m warm.”

A chill shook her. “Bora Bora, definitely. Not Antarctica.”

“Doesn’t matter. I’m never leaving this beach.”

“Promise?”

Her lips were blue. An excuse to kiss them. “I’ll build a house right here. Just us. The ships can go wherever they want. Bora Bora, Antarctica, Finland—who cares?”

“Not us, junior. We’ll be here, snug in our Mexican house.”

“Yup.”

“But they could bring us back a penguin,” she said.

“We’d appreciate the gesture.”

She laughed and snuggled closer. Her heart beat against his side.

“We could name him after my dad, the penguin I mean.”

“Orrin the Penguin. I like it.”

“I was kidding.”

“Why? I like the name Orrin.”

“Not about that. About him waiting till after the harvest.”

“The penguin?”

She pulled his hand to her lips and kissed it. “My dad. He’ll kill you as soon as he sees you.”

“I imagine he will.”

“I’m trying to decide which he’ll be madder about, taking his daughter or his truck?”

“Apples and tennis balls.”

“What in the world is that supposed to mean?”

“It means he can have the truck back but I’m keeping his daughter.”

“He’ll still kill you.”

“Yup.”

“Was it worth it?”

“A thousand times over.”

They lay back in the sand, her head on his shoulder, her arm across his chest.

*A million times over…* His eyes closed and he slept. With the exhaustion only lovers know.

A gentle hand shook him awake and kind eyes peered down. Not blue, not miraculous—just kind.

“It’s time now.” The nurses voice was firm. “She needs to get some rest and so do you. You’re exhausted. You come back tomorrow, okay? Your grandson’s waiting in the lobby to drive you home.”

He sat up, blinked, and looked down at the small form on the bed beside him. Machines, tubes, so many things for such a small person.

He touched his wife’s hand. *The wife of my youth*. White and delicate as a bird.

“Just ten more minutes,” he said.

“You said that ten minutes ago,” the nurse said.

“Ten more. That’s it. I promise.”

“But your grandson’s waiting.”

“Ten more.”

The nurse shook her head and sighed. “I’ll see you in five.”

She shut the door behind her.

The woman beside him offered a weak smile and the tube in her nose shifted a little.

He straightened it. “Your eyes are the same color as the sky.”

“You say that to all the girls, sailor.” No more than a whisper.

“Just the ones with blue eyes.” He stroked her cheek, brushing away a strand of white hair. “Close those blues now. Rest.”

“And you’ll bring me a penguin?”

“You bet. From Finland.”

“Antarctica—Finland—apples to tennis balls.”

“You can say that again.”

“Don’t tempt me.”

Ten minutes. A lifetime.

He didn’t let go of her hand as he allowed his own eyes to fall shut…

And a happy wind swirled off the sea, dancing and dipping through the salt grass, tugging at his hair and un-tucked shirt.