

## Arizona Quarters

by Jennifer Robbins

We all sat around a dull white kitchen table with fading gold specks trapped under a glossy coating. In the middle of the table was a hexagonal juice glass, just tall enough that you had to have a good bounce on your quarter to make that clinking sound on the clear bottom when you shot.

We loved playing quarters, my brother's friends and I. I liked how they didn't care that they were all twenty and I was only fifteen. We sat in Boo-Boo's kitchen in the hot desert summers of Arizona with jugs of wine that we drank in juice glasses like the one in the middle.

Boo-Boo was my brother's best friend. They were both waiters at the Whaling Station restaurant with their other friend Ranger Smith. That's where they all met. Everyone was always teasing them about the similarity of their names, (Jim, Jack, and John) so that night while we were playing quarters, we came up with nicknames for them. My brother Jim was donned "Yogey" (actually inspired by a love for frozen yogurt rather than the bear) and the nicknames "Boo-Boo" for Jack and "Ranger Smith" for John sort of fell in line.

My best memories of summer were those in that Jellystone world in the heart of Scottsdale, only dried out Saguaros lined our forest instead of towering pines, a river-bottom rock yard replaced the carpets of green grass, and the dry heat of the sun replaced the cartoon blue skies, but I didn't mind.

I was one of the "snowbirds" from the north who came to the desert, like the seasonal migration of birds, to escape the humidity and mosquitos. Every summer I flew out to Arizona to spend some time with my mother and Yogey. When my parents divorced, they split custody of my brother and I so half of my childhood life was spent flying across the country and back. It wasn't seeing my mother though that I looked forward to the most—it was hanging out with Yogey and his friends.

Boo-Boo's kitchen was always cool in the summer, with the windows closed tight to keep the air-conditioning in, and the heavy beige curtains in front of the sliding patio doors were always drawn tight to keep out the sun. That is why we always met at Boo-Boo's house; and because his parents would always let us crash

over there—everyone on the floor of the living room, lulled to sleep by the hum of the TV that no one watched.

In the morning we would sit around the white table with our bare feet dangling on the cool yellowing linoleum, while Boo-Boo's sister Karrie cooked omelettes with Velveta cheese oozing out the sides and flakes of pepper speckled on top. Sometimes Boo-Boo and I would pick up the trash scattered about the house while we waited, but mostly we just moved the cans and bottles to one side of the table so we could have a place for our plates.

My brother and his friends were really close. Sometimes during the day when my mom and stepfather were at work, they would all come over to our house and swim in the pool. Karrie in her leopard print bikini, and I, in my navy and white speedo, would lay in the orange and white nylon chaise lounges next to the pool and watch the guys do cannon balls off the diving board. I would watch my brother as he glided back and forth across the deep end, avoiding the waves of water his friends pushed at each other. My eyes trailed his body as he dodged the waves, cutting through the silvery water as he torpedoed for the drain. I always wondered how he could stay down on the bottom so long.

When it came to quarters, my brother was by far, the best shooter; even when he'd had a lot to drink. He placed the juice glass in front of him, several inches from his raised shooting hand. He lowered his head in a parallel line with the target. He brought his hand down and hit the table with the side of his fist, releasing the coin from his fingers so that the ribbed edge hit the table at the same time as his hand. The silver disk sparked upwards into an arch and rimmed the bottom of the glass. He raised his gaze, but not his head, looking for his victim. Catching one of the female's eyes, he smiled. Consume, he said.

Sometimes when my brother had to go to work and I had the house all to myself, I would slip into my speedo, grab my white beach towel and spend the whole day engraving white criss-cross marks on my back. The pool wasn't refreshing like you would think. It was hot, like swimming in a large bathtub. Sometimes the water would get up to 90 degrees, and it made my body feel heavy as I tried to prac-



tice my breaststroke. I usually gave up and resorted to floating on our fading red plastic raft. It is bad to fall asleep in the sun, but I couldn't help it. The sun was so warm; the waves rocking the raft until slowly there would be no movement around me but a quiet buzz of the black Chinese beetles crawling in the shade of our Oleanders.

One night when we played quarters at Boo-Boo's house, Boo-Boo and I stayed up after everyone had gone to bed. The TV flickered and the flash of colored lights made the dark cherry wood furniture pop in and out of view. I sat on the couch with a white afgan on my lap. The air-conditioning whirled and blew on my feet hanging over the edge of the coffee table. Boo-Boo sat next to me on the couch and we talked about the summer. His hand felt cool on my face. The lights cast shadowy blue on his face and highlighted his cheek bones and razor stubble. His eyes hid in caves-dark and sallow. His hand moved down my cheek and along the hollow of my neck, tracing the collar of my shirt. He didn't say anything. He ran his fingers through my sun-bleached hair and pulled me towards him. I leaned to kiss him, closing my eyes. His lips felt smooth and wet and tasted bittersweet from the wine. We stayed up for a little while longer messing around on the couch. The afgan had slipped to the floor. An empty beer can clattered across the table and fell onto the carpet.

Whenever Yogey and I had to stay home, we would sit in his room and read Mad magazines. We didn't like to watch TV because then we'd have to sit in the living room with our mother and stepfather. So we just sat in his room instead. Sometimes he would let me listen to my tapes on his stereo but Olivia Newton-John wasn't his style. Instead we'd listen to "Black Sabbath" or "Led Zeppelin." I guess his music was okay sometimes. We could barely hear the two out in the living room fighting over the loud rock music.

Boo-Boo didn't drink for his twenty-first birthday. During the fall while I'd been at my dad's, Boo-Boo had started dating a Mormon girl who didn't believe in drinking. We all met at his house for a celebratory game of quarters. We shared a fifth of whiskey and just passed the bottle around when it was someone's turn to drink. All except Boo-Boo and his girlfriend. She sat in his lap with her Clairol streaked hair tied-up in a ponytail and squinted at everyone. The only time she smiled was when Boo-Boo announced their engagement. Karrie dropped the bottle of whisky on the floor. I just stared down at the brown liquid

as it wound its way around the shattered glass and dribbled across the floor along the pattern in the linoleum.

I hated whenever my step-father came home before my mother. I was in the living room watching TV when I heard the kitchen door open. I looked around the room—it was a wreck. I quickly gathered up the laundry I was folding and started to carry it back to my bedroom. As I passed the entryway to the kitchen I saw my stepfather putting his usual case of beer in the refrigerator. I hurried to my room and shut the door. I sat down on my bed and listened as he yelled about the dishes in the sink, the lint on the living room carpet, and the towels left out by the pool. I looked at my clock—no one would be home for another hour. I laid down on my bed and stared at the mustard flower print wall-paper. The little flowers began to float before my eyes. I could hear the TV in the living room, he must have turned the volume really loud. I rolled on my side and put my pillow over my head. When I woke up it was after seven and my mom was home. I could hear my step—father yelling about dinner and the dishes. A door slammed. The TV was still blaring. Yogey knocked on my door and then walked into the room. He handed me a magazine.

Karrie threw a surprise party at their house for Boo-Boo's twenty-second birthday. Boo-Boo didn't date the Mormon anymore. We all sat around the whit kitchen table and played quarters with two bottles of Jack Daniels to celebrate.

I woke up one morning about a quarter past 11. Everyone had left while I was asleep so the house was still, except for the whirr of the refrigerator in the kitchen and an occasional rumble from the ice-maker. The sun was shining bright through the dining room windows that looked out across the pool. I put on my speedo and headed for the pool. I put the raft into the water and laid back, watching the clouds melt into one another from the heat. I could hear children at play out in the street. The hollow clatter of tin on the pavement filled the silences between their laughter. I was almost asleep when I heard a car door open and close. Through the windows I saw my brother enter the kitchen. Yogey was still in his waiter's jacket, but the front of his soiled white shirt was half-unbuttoned and his tie was missing. I grabbed a towel and went inside to see why he was home so early. He told me he had been fired for stealing alcohol from the bar. The restaurant had call my stepfather. It wasn't long before he was home. Yogey hadn't even changed his clothes yet when



my stepfather walked into his bedroom. He and Yogey began to fight. I ran to my room and slammed my door. Suddenly I heard Yogey's door slam. I opened my door, but I didn't know what to do. I felt like screaming but nothing would come out—then my stepfather opened Yogey's door and went to watch t.v. in the living room. I ran into Yogey's room and found him lying down on the floor. His hand was covering a red swollen cheek. I sat down beside him and cradled his head in my lap; just rocking back and forth until we both fell asleep.

The summer of Boo-Boo's twenty-third birthday, his parents put in a pool. After a game of quarters, we would move the party outside and try to build human pyramids in the pool. I was a diver on my high school team so one night they asked me to do some dives. I decided to do an inward where you jump backwards then dive towards the board. Their board wasn't a spring board, though, and I scraped my back on the end of the board. My back stung from the chlorine in the water. I screamed. Blood was floating in the pool. Karrie screamed. Boo-Boo looked at my back as I was climbing out of the pool. It's only a scratch, he said. So we kept on swimming. I still have the scar.

It was about 8 o'clock in the evening and Yogey and I were in his room playing *Dungeon and Dragons* when the doorbell rang. Yogey's window faced the front door so he glanced through the shades to see who it was. His eyes looked funny as he looked at me. He jumped up and ran out of his room. I tried to see out the window to see who it was, but they must have stepped into the doorway. I could hear my mother and stepfather arguing with someone in the next room so I went out to see who it was. "Go to your room!" my stepfather shouted. Yogey was trying to get past my stepfather to see who was at the door. My stepfather kept saying to the person something about not belonging here and he asked them to leave. Yogey finally stopped fighting with my stepfather and grabbed my arm and dragged me out the back door. He began running to the gate that led to the front of the house. I was watching him wrestle with the iron latch. He began hitting it and cussing, but he couldn't get it open. I ran over to help him, but I could barely see the latch in the

dark. Yogey began pounding at the fence. Tears began to streak his face. He stopped and rubbed his splintered fists and then started kicking the wooden boards of the gate. Finally, the gate broke away from the latch and he grabbed my hand and began running around to the front door. As we got to the driveway we saw a rental car pulling out onto the street. Yogey ran after the car, but the driver didn't see him. I stood in the driveway and watched as Yogey crumpled into a little ball on the curb and sobbed. I walked over to him and sat down. "It was dad—it was dad," he kept saying over and over. "Don't you get it, he'd come to see us." He had been on his way back from a trip to California and had come to surprise us, but my stepfather wouldn't let us go. I sat and listened to Yogey as he finally stopped crying. It was a clear night. A little breeze was blowing through the Oleanders and the crickets were calling to their mates. Somewhere a dog was barking to be let in for the night.

My dad didn't let me visit my mom after that summer. After a couple of years I didn't care anymore anyway. Karrie and her family had moved to Washington. Boo-Boo had gotten back together with the Mormon girl and was living with her in an apartment in the same complex as Yogey. Yogey lives with his girlfriend because she has lots of money and pays all of his bills. He only came to visit me once at my dad's. He told me his girlfriend had paid to send him to cocaine-rehab for six months. I didn't tell my family though. They never knew he did cocaine—they never really cared either.

I sat in the lounge of Hogan's grill with a couple of my college friends and nursed a Tom Collins. I wasn't really listening to what they were saying—something about a dance or a party probably. I was thinking about my past life and what this summer had in store for me. I had met a great guy and he wanted to marry me. He hadn't known me very long—but he didn't care. He doesn't know about me, but I've told myself I'm going to tell him as soon as I quit. I'm going to quit before we get married. I swear I really am. I handed the waitress my empty glasses and ordered another Tom Collins—one more won't hurt.