



Pea Body

ELLEN BEHRENS

A Rollin RV Mystery

For my sweetheart and husband Robert Craig, whose love and support inspire me every day. You are my hero.



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First Edition

PEA BODY

Chapter One

Huge turtles swarmed toward us from the pond's shore, paddling their fat little legs to greet us from the water under the bridge where we stood looking down at them. Maybe they were hoping for food despite signs reminding visitors to the refuge that feeding wildlife isn't permitted. I pulled my camera from the cover I'd stitched for it using an extra paisley handkerchief, and I started snapping photos. "That one's huge!" I pointed into the water and looked to see if Walt had spotted it too. Instead, he was swatting mosquitoes from his bare legs.

"Damn bugs," he muttered. He waved his strong hands around his salt-and-pepper hair to swish away a particularly persistent mosquito, managing in the process to look as handsome as the day we were married more than thirty years ago.

I took a few more pictures then headed down the trail before Walt had the chance to give up on the hike and head for the truck. Maybe if I kept a quick pace we could stay ahead of the mosquitoes. "Look," I said, pointing across the North Pond. "I think that's a White Ibis!"

He followed my finger and squinted into the distance. "If you say so," he said. While I loved a chance for some good bird watching, Walt reveled in the hike itself. The longer or steeper the better. If a trail had great vistas, a stream to ford, a narrow path on a cliffside to negotiate, he was in his element. Throw in a chance encounter with a rattlesnake or bear and the day would go down as one of his most memorable. This short trail along the North Pond of the Pea Island National Wildlife Refuge had none of those features. The short, flat trail led around a large pond, but the story-high lookout tower about a half-

mile from the trailhead promised great views of the any of hundreds of species of waterfowl that visited and lived in the refuge. I clutched my camera and charged on.

On the other side of the bridge, the boardwalk ended and an old cement sidewalk lay before us. Branches greened by a wet spring stretched overhead, creating an earthy bower that would have been a romantic natural tunnel – if it weren't for those pesky mosquitoes.

I heard Walt slapping himself behind me so I paused just long enough to snap a photo of one of the small islands where a half-dozen or more long-legged white birds perched. Sometimes it was easier to take the photo, blow it up on the computer later, and identify the birds that way rather than try to see all the markings from so far away.

Despite a few years of watching and photographing birds, I was a newbie by all accounts. I didn't have the patience it took to stake out a nest and wait for a bird to appear. Instead, my method was to snap away and hope at least one of the shots was a keeper. Sometimes it worked. This day I was happy just to be celebrating the big 5-4 with a trek through this hot, humid, but quiet wildlife refuge. And Walt, because he loved me more than anything, was tolerating getting bitten into human Swiss cheese because he knew it made me happy to be there. Or maybe because I'd gone along with his desire to try kiteboarding a few days before – me, a barely adequate swimmer, giving something called an “extreme” sport a go – a combination of surfing and flying a kite, two things I've never excelled at in the first place.

“Overhead!” he shouted suddenly, and I looked up to see one of the long-legged white birds gracefully waving its long wings through the air. I pointed my camera skyward and waited for it to focus. This was one photo I didn't want to leave to chance.

“Hurry or you'll miss it,” Walt said, close beside me. “Did you get it?”

I sighed. “I got a great shot of its rear end.”

“You have a photo album full of bird butts,” he said, and I had to agree.

“But they're beautiful shots,” I said.

The breeze at the top of the wooden observation tower was enough to keep the mosquitoes away so we lingered there to watch thousands of birds wading in shallow water, plucking fish and algae from beneath the surface. A bird I couldn't identify flapped its wings hyperactively before suddenly plunging headfirst into the water. “Oh! I got that one just as the feathers broke the surface,” I said, clicking the camera's review function to show the screen to Walt. He peered at the photo and said, “Wow,” though it was possible he couldn't see the screen in the bright sunlight. He'd say something like that, though, just to be nice. He wiped a few beads of sweat from his brow and leaned to look into one of the viewing scopes set up on the platform.

“I love it when we're the only people in a place like this,” I said, looking around. Despite the size of the refuge, which stretched for thirteen miles down the Atlantic edge of North Carolina, we hadn't seen

any other people that morning. The parking lot had been empty when we pulled in. I looked at my watch. “It’s almost ten o’clock already and nobody’s here at all.”

“Yeah,” Walt said. “The more desolate, the better.”

I forgot to mention “desolation” when I was describing our criteria for a great hike. Call us anti-social if you want, but we’ve found that other people usually make noise, leave garbage, bring dogs, and generally disrupt any chance of seeing wildlife or enjoying the solace of nature. Most people just want to tromp through a place so they can say they’ve been there. But don’t get me started on that.

We’d gotten an early start because the weather forecasters were predicting one of the hottest days of the year – a record-breaker, they said. The heat index was expected to be 105°F or more. I could feel the warmth on us like an electric blanket starting to hit its highest setting – make that a hot, wet blanket, with the humidity – so I knew we’d have to head down the steps of the tower soon.

“Are you feeling warm yet?” Walt asked. He does that. He reads my mind. He knows my fair skin is sensitive to the sunlight, that I burn easily. But mostly he knows too much sun makes me sick. I get headaches if I’m not careful, and neither of us wanted that.

The heat had made our first visit to the Outer Banks in more than ten years less fun than we’d anticipated. Five days on the Banks had been five days of scorching sun, withering humidity, and the threat of storms. Our bicycles were still anchored to the back of the fifth wheel we called home. We’d spent every day shopping or walking the beach or driving up and down Route 12 hunting down restaurants, eating too much, then sitting in the RV the rest of the day with the shades drawn and the air conditioning running. Yes, it’s supposed to be hot in North Carolina in the summer, but this was beyond hot. This was record-breaking miserable.

On top of all that, the park where we’d put down roots for the next week hadn’t come even close to living up to its advertisement as an RV “resort.” It had a small pool overrun with loud kids and louder mothers who screamed warnings and scoldings and threats of punishment the likes of which frightened even me. The showers hadn’t been cleaned since we got there and – worst of all – none of the sites had sewer hookups. For those of you who are not RVers, you have to understand what this means: we have to pack up our fifth wheel (in our case, following my “take down” list of at least thirty individual steps), hitch the RV to our truck, and tow it over to the dump station to empty the gray and black water tanks – sort of like gas tanks in an RV, except the gray tank holds sink and shower water while the black tank holds toilet water (and waste.... but we won’t get into that). If we’d had a sewer connection where our RV was parked (something every other RV “resort” has had), we could have dumped our tanks into the sewer right at our site without packing up the RV, pulling in our three slides, hooking up the truck, and driving across the “resort” to a central dump station. After dumping we’d have to go back to our camping site, unhitch the truck, and set everything up all over again (a separate list of about twenty steps).

“Does anybody stay more than a few days?” Walt asked when we checked in. The woman nodded as if she were trying to explain something complicated to very young children. “We have some regulars who stay for weeks; some for months. They have portable tanks,” she said. I’d seen those in stores – you empty your tank into this plastic, pale blue (they always seem to be this color, for some reason) gizmo that looks like a short little enclosed wagon on wheels, then pull it (or take it in your other vehicle) to the dump station, empty it, then take it back. Lots of extra steps, too. Plus when you travel you have that extra little wagon to haul around. A stinky little wagon at that.

So we weren’t eager to leave the refuge, which was a sort of sanctuary for us that morning, knowing we were going back to a full gray water tank. We’d have to go through that entire routine to empty it – or shower in the scummy, skinny stalls in the common bathrooms. Neither option appealed to us.

“I’m almost thinking we should just pack up and head out tomorrow,” Walt said. “Since we have to take nearly everything down just to go empty our tanks anyway, why not dump them and keep going? We probably couldn’t get the money we paid in advance for next week back, but it might be worth it to leave anyway.”

He was reading my mind again. “We might be able to get a partial refund,” I said. “Oh, oh! There’s a juvenile Tri-Colored Heron! See it over there, on the top of that bush?” Yes, oddly, herons perch. We once saw a Great Blue Heron perched at the very top of a tall tree in Washington state. On a cliffside, no less. Quite a view over the sound, that bird must have had.

“I see it,” he said. “What makes you think we’d get any money back?”

I took off my eyeglasses and the oversized sunglasses I wore over them and peeked into the viewing scope. “Well, they only require a 24-hour cancellation, so we’d lose tomorrow night’s site fee and maybe the fee for the next night, but we should be able to get the rest of it back. They should have plenty of time to re-rent the site after that, which is what requiring notice of cancellation is all about, right?”

We’d been full-timing awhile and we’d been a lot of places – self-registration campgrounds where we stayed weeks and never saw a manager or any sign of a staff, high-end resorts where guests could shower in private bathrooms, and everything in between. We’d stayed overnight in rest areas and department store parking lots. We thought we’d seen it all, but this place was promising to be in a category all its own.

Full-timing? That’s when you sell everything you own, pack the basic essentials into four-hundred square feet of a recreational vehicle and live like a gypsy, following the road and nice weather, seeing the country. When Walt and I couldn’t decide whether to buy a retirement home in New Mexico or North Carolina or the coast of Maine, we decided we’d live in all the places we fell in love with in our

vacation travels. When we talked to those who'd been on the road full-time for many years, we heard lots of advice, but one thing we kept hearing was, "If you don't have a good relationship, you won't survive. You'll be with each other twenty-four hours a day, every day, in a confined space." We haven't looked back.

I inched the viewfinder toward the southwest to look across Pamlico Sound. The two large ponds now behind me were active with birds, but the ponds across a service road toward the Sound looked empty. "I wonder why all the birds prefer—"

Was it a bird? That tan form near the back pond? I strained to see through the scope. This was one of those times I wanted Superman vision. If I had Superman vision I'd know if it was a brown pelican. They were big and bulky at a distance. I stared at the shape, which looked out of place near the water's edge. I watched for it to move, but it was still. Could it be a nest? Something about it just didn't look right. Amidst all this natural beauty, the brown shape just didn't fit, like it was something that had been put there, rather than something that had grown there. Or flown there.

"Why do all the birds prefer what, honey?"

"There's something out there," I said.

My handsome husband laughed. "I'm thinking we've been out in the sun long enough."

"No, really," I said. I steadied the scope on the shape and backed away from it. "Take a look. What does that funny brown shape look like to you?"

He peered through the scope, then leaned back, took his sunglasses off, and peered through it again. "Looks like a funny brown shape to me," he said. When he stood up, he was grinning, but he touched his fingers gently to my nose. "You're getting pink," he said.

"Seriously," I said. "That brown thing just doesn't look right."

"It's probably just a Lumpy By-The-Water Bird," he said. He loves coming up with his own names for birds, and they're usually much more accurate than the official names.

I was heading down the steps, tucking my camera into its cloth cover on the way. "Let's go see," I said.

"Let me go first," Walt said. He knew I'd lead us all the way around the world backwards and back before I got us anywhere near that brown shape. He was better at picking the way through high grass and scrub where no trail existed. I fell into step behind him. I brushed away the mosquitoes that buzzed near my ears and tickled my calves.

"Probably some blanket covering a couple that would rather not be interrupted," Walt said, turning his head a little to the side so I could hear him.

"It wasn't moving."

"So maybe they're gone and they left their blanket," Walt said.

“I hope so,” I said. “Sort of a human nest. Love nest. You know.”

Walt laughed. “Whatever it is, it’s nothing.”

Amazing birds flew overhead. White Ibis, Little Blue Heron. Lots of Laughing Gulls. I ignored them all. I ignored the hotness on my neck and upper arms. We’d just check this out and be done with it. I could rest assured it was nothing. “Maybe we’re on a wild goose chase in the bird sanctuary,” I said, and Walt laughed again.

“I’ll bet you a million dollars that’s exactly what this is,” he replied.

The ground near this back pond grew mushier as we got closer to it, and the mosquitoes attacked like an army defending its base camp. I tried to stay close enough behind Walt to smack at errant bugs trying to land on the back of his neck and shoulders. We pulled our handkerchiefs out and waved them around, probably a fruitless gesture, but it made us feel as though we were doing something to fight back.

Walt stopped suddenly, so suddenly I nearly walked into him. Normally we like to warn each other when we’re stopping or slowing down to avoid collisions like this. Seems like a silly thing, but if you’re on a narrow trail and you decide you want to stop to take a photo or look at the vista, you could throw the other person off their footing – disastrous if you’re along a cliffside. Whatever had gotten Walt’s attention so surprised him that he’d forgotten this important bit of hiking etiquette.

“What is it?” I asked.

He didn’t answer at first, but when I reached out to swipe away a black fly hovering near the back of his head, I saw his body tighten. “Walt?”

“Do you have your cell phone on?”

“I have it but it’s not on.”

“Turn it on.” He fumbled with his GPS – he always brings it so we can find our way back on complicated hikes and to see how far we’ve gone.

I got my phone out of the purse I wear like a backpack and turned it on. “Can you see the brown thing? What is it? Is somebody poaching?” I thought maybe it was a dead deer. Were there even deer on the island?

“Not exactly,” he said. His light mood was gone; I could hear a tenseness in his voice.

“What is it, Walt?”

He took a deep breath and turned to me. “You don’t want to see this, Betty.” His face was pale – despite all the sun. My stomach knotted up. “I think it’s a body,” he said.

“A body?” I went limp, but I also wanted to see. It’s like going past a terrible car accident on the freeway where you don’t want to look but you can’t help it. Something in the human psyche is drawn to the very things we should run a hundred miles an hour away from.

Walt nodded. "I think it's a woman, but I can't be sure and I don't want to touch anything or disturb this site or anything so is your phone on now or what?" He held out his hand and I placed my cell phone in his palm.

"If 9-1-1 doesn't work, we can call the park service," I said, my voice shaking. "I have their number on this brochure somewhere." I pulled the paper from my purse and unfolded it, looking for the number, but Walt was already talking to someone, giving our names and our GPS location.

"...yes, we'll go back to the visitors' center," Walt said. "Do you want this number? Oh, sure, of course, it's in your phone now. No problem. Whatever we can do to help."

Eventually he finished the call, and before I could go another step or sneak a look around his shoulder, he shielded me from the brown shape, the victim, the body, and turned me around to guide me back to the trail. Without a doubt, this was going to be the most memorable birthday yet. And for all the wrong reasons.

Chapter Two

“We were birdwatching,” I said for the umpteenth time. Weren’t my wrinkles and gray hair enough to tell this young ranger what I was saying had to be true? Isn’t birdwatching what brings most people out here, especially gray-haired folks? “I was looking through one of the viewing scopes up on the observation tower when I saw something brown that didn’t look right, so we went out there to see what it was.”

“Did you think it was a bird?” he asked. He looked at me with what he probably thought was an intimidating stare, but instead he looked like one of our kids when they didn’t like the decision Walt and I had made about something they wanted when they were young. His spikey red hair and smattering of freckles across a nose that would have been called “pert” if he’d been female, rendered him absolutely boyish. He looked to be about twelve years old, poor guy. I peered at his name tag, a little brass rectangle pinned over his right breast. “Riddley,” it said.

Thankfully we’d moved from the front porch of the visitors’ center into a small back office where the air conditioning, probably cranked to its highest level, let out an occasional wail like a desperate call for help, a plea for relief from the agony of having to work so hard on such a hot day. Every time it wailed, it startled me and I twitched. I stole a look around the office. What did they keep in places like this? An old file cabinet, this rickety desk. Boxes stacked against one wall leaned at a precarious tilt, one with a split side leaking the same ‘Birds in the Refuge’ brochure I’d snatched that morning from the rack on the porch. The shabby room made me glad we stuff a few dollars in every donation box we come across in the national parks and refuges where we haven’t been charged an entry fee.

I took a deep breath. “We didn’t know what it was,” I said – again.

“That doesn’t answer my question. Did you think it was a bird?”

“No,” I said. “I didn’t think it was a bird.” What *was* I thinking when I looked through the scope? Hours had passed since that first sighting and I’d been asked the same questions dozens of times. If young Riddley thought switching around the phrasing of his questions was enough for me to think he was asking

different things, he was underestimating me. But I'd repeated the same story so many times and he'd asked the same questions so many times I was beginning to wonder about things myself.

"Did you know you were going into a restricted area?"

I tried to remember whether we'd passed any signs saying we shouldn't go any further. "Well, we saw the sign pointing to a trail that went the other way on the service road... south, I think. We didn't go that way..." Trying to envision our walk from the tower to where the body lay, all I could see in my mind's eye was Walt's back and the heels of his hiking shoes as I tried to follow in his steps. I had been concentrating on reducing the number of off-trail footprints. We hike all over the country and this was the first time I could think of when we ventured off a marked trail. Not because we weren't tempted – but because we respect the need to give wildlife space without human encroachment, to leave plants and rocks as untouched as possible. Call it naïve, but it is what it is.

"Did you realize you were walking into restricted park grounds?" he asked, his brown eyebrow arched, pen poised over his notepad. (You'd think they'd take notes on a laptop or tablet – so much faster and with the spelling check, more accurate in some ways.)

"No, I guess not. We just wanted to see what that brown thing was."

"Why?"

His question was quick and simple and one I'd been pondering myself for at least the last hour. "What?" I'd heard the question, but wanted a few seconds to collect my thoughts – which seemed impossible at the moment, the cars in my train of thought de-railed and scattered nilly-willy along the track.

"Why did you decide to investigate yourself instead of notifying refuge personnel and letting them investigate?" The air conditioner cried out so loudly even Riddley jumped. I tried not to smile. He seemed as nervous as I was. Maybe more.

"Never really thought about it," I said. It was true. Who thinks what they're looking at could be a dead body? "We've been other places where people left blankets and tablecloths and things like that," I said, trying to explain what seemed inexplicable, "and this just seemed to be something like that. How could we have known it was a body? That we should have reported it at the visitors' center instead? Believe me, if I'd known then what I know now, I would have called from the tower, right when we spotted – it – her – through the scope." Seemed hard and cold to call someone an "it" even if we didn't know for sure it was a woman.

"How do you know it's a female?" he asked, his eyebrows scrunched together now. A retired schoolteacher, I suddenly saw this young man as he must have looked to his grade school teachers – earnest and ready to please. He would have been what we called an apple-polisher. Someone who cleaned

the chalkboards (oh, those were the days) during recess because he didn't really fit in with the other kids. He was the local science geek who was more fascinated by bugs and plants than the girl down the street. Now he wore a badge he was proud of – not just because it made him a law enforcement officer everyone was supposed to respect, but because it validated all those lonely Saturdays staring at spiders through his microscope in his quiet bedroom.

“Well, I don't. When Walt saw it was a body, he said he thought it looked like it could be a woman.”

Now that I'd been inside for the last few hours – how long had it been, anyway? – I had cooled off a long time ago, and the air conditioning, despite its struggle, gave off a chilly breeze. With the high humidity, I had the cold sweats of the flu without the aches, pains, or vomiting. Although the last one might not have been too far away with all the questioning.

“How is my husband? Is he still here? Is he waiting for me, Officer Riddley?” I asked, hoping addressing him this way would bring him over to my side, if only a little. Walt, I was sure, sat in another room somewhere (did this little building have more than one office? Did he get the short straw and end up in a storage room?), probably getting asked exactly the same questions. I wondered how he was doing, wherever he was. Walt could be your best friend or your worst enemy, depending on how you treated him. I suspected whoever was questioning him was getting just as many questions back, maybe more. We wanted to be helpful, but it was ridiculous to be spending so many hours getting grilled by different people and going over the same things again and again. I just hoped Walt was keeping his cool. I figured Walt wasn't just sitting around someplace waiting for me, but I was curious about how Riddley would answer.

“He's fine. I'm sure he'll wait as long as this takes. Let's focus on you.” Riddley ran his stumpy fingers through his red hair. For such a slight man, his hands were surprisingly chunky. What would make a person's hands big like that, I wondered. Maybe he exercised them? Excessive note-taking seemed like a good bet. “Why did you come out to the refuge today?”

“I told you we heard it was a great place for birdwatching, and we like to do things like this during the week when there are fewer people.” I shifted my position in the chair. I have more patience than most people I know, but chairs like this are always a little too high. If I sat much longer I was going to lose all feeling in my legs from the thighs down.

“What birds did you see?”

At first I thought he was really interested. “White Ibis – I've never seen a White Ibis before, so that was very cool. I even got some great photos of them flying overhead. We saw Little Blue Heron, Tri-Colored Heron, Great White Egrets...” He wasn't writing these down, just giving me that stare. I realized

he was checking to see whether we were really birdwatching or not. “It’s a great place to see a large variety of birds in one place,” I said. It might have been a quote from the brochure, but it was also true. I was running out of things to say and I was tired of repeating myself.

“Sounds like something we’d put in an advertisement,” Riddley said, and we both grinned. He closed his notepad and squelched his smile. “Thank you, Mrs. Rollin,” he said, mispronouncing our name. Everybody likes to give it a short ‘o’, like ‘Ow, the water is too hot’ and this guy was no different.

“It’s pronounced ‘roh-lin,’ like just rollin’ along,” I said. I let out a sigh before I could stop myself. I didn’t want to seem relieved or tense or too happy – too anything, really, that the questioning was finally over. A fan of *NCIS* and *CSI* and *Law and Order* and *The Closer*, I knew the police have all kinds of tricks up all sorts of sleeves. I was trying to be a blank slate. Impossible, of course. There’s a reason I don’t play poker. It’s the same reason somebody in eighth grade dared me to try to talk without using my hands. Without gestures I went completely mute. My fellow eighth graders, on the other hand, went hysterical watching me try to form words while holding my arms rigid at my sides.

“Does that mean we’re through? Can I go now?” I leaned to pick up my purse from next to me before I remembered they’d asked me to put it in a cabinet that they locked up. “Could I have my purse, please?”

It was his turn to sigh. “I realize it’s been a long day and we appreciate your help. Let me make sure they’re done with you.” He gave me another one of those grins before closing the door behind him.

The room didn’t look like it got much use. Old style paneling gave the office a rustic cabin look, and despite all the time I’d spent in that room I still hadn’t gotten used to the mildew smell. The humidity was so high many of the papers in the room were crinkled from being damp in the summer then drying out in the chilly winter months. I wondered why someone didn’t put a soapy mop to the floor and a feather duster to the desk. I sighed again. Out the window I glimpsed a quick bird with a flash of white in its wings. Northern Mockingbird.

When the door opened I nearly jumped out of my chair. When I saw it was Walt, I did. We held each other a long time and I couldn’t help crying a little. It was as if we’d just been through something awful, and maybe we had – though answering questions about discovering a dead body wasn’t on the same level as a near-fatal car accident, or barely surviving quintuple-aortic valve replacement or something, was it?

“We’re okay,” Walt whispered. “Let’s go home.”

We said “home” even though home was our 38-foot fifth wheel, parked at that “resort” I mentioned earlier. “Home is where we park it,” we like to say.

I nodded. But I knew we wouldn't go straight home. We'd stop for ice cream or maybe for some of the best key lime pie in the country at the Dolphin Den restaurant in Avon. We tried not to eat too many sweets, but on travel days – and rough days – we indulged. Today was one of the rough ones.

My glasses fogged in the steamy heat as soon as we stepped onto the porch so I paused a minute to let them clear. Our truck had been sitting under the burning sun for so long Walt couldn't touch the steering wheel until the AC cooled the interior, so we sat half-in and half-out of the cab. I tried not to shake, the nervousness I'd been feeling since we discovered the woman's body near the back pond finally overcoming me. "I'm so glad that's over," I said.

Walt squeezed my hand. "Me too," he said, but he didn't sound convinced that anything was over.

The mockingbirds flew around us and I heard a Laughing Gull as it passed overhead. "I think we should skip lunch and go right to dessert," I said, and Walt nodded, leaning to pull his door closed. It was after four in the afternoon. We should have been starved – we don't eat breakfast and usually have a late lunch, but even this would have been extra late for us. With all we'd been through, we weren't in the mood for a meal, but something sweet would hit the spot.

By the time we got back to the "resort," it was dinner time. And we still had to pack the rig. "Maybe we'll stay one more day," Walt said. "I'm not really in the mood to get everything set up to leave tomorrow."

"We'll still have to dump our tanks," I said.

"Let's just pay them the extra money for them to bring their wagon around," Walt said.

So we did. He called them and they said they'd come around in the morning with the "honey wagon" so we could dump our tanks without leaving the site. That meant we'd spend the morning waiting for them to come by, so we thought it would be a good time to do some laundry. Our rig has a washer and dryer, but without a sewer hookup we didn't want to use the washer. Being charged for every kilowatt hour meant we'd use the resort's dryer too. In the long run, especially because we were running the air conditioner nearly non-stop, we'd probably save money using their equipment.

Plus using the laundry meant we might be able to dodge the neighbors, providing they didn't venture into the laundry room when we were in there. There's a saying among full-time RVers: "If you don't like your neighbors, you can move." And sometimes that's the best thing to do. Sometimes they leave before you can – always a nice coincidence. Of course, sometimes the neighbors are wonderful people and you swap e-mail addresses and promise to keep in touch, which you almost never do.

Just in the few days we'd been here at the "resort," we'd met – and narrowly avoided meeting – all manner of neighbors. Before we'd even unhitched the truck, big, balding Talkative Ted had waddled

across the gravel street to invite us (a strong scent of alcohol on his breath) to join him and his wife for a beer. He shifted his belly as if it were entirely separate from his body, and it was easy to imagine it might have been because it stuck at least a foot out in front of the rest of him. Black hairs coiled from that immense stomach. I wanted to turn and run. We politely declined his invitation but instead of lumbering back to his crowded campsite, he started asking questions about our rig (“What type of fifth wheel is that? How long is it? How long you had it? You like it?”) without waiting for an answer to any one of them. Then he started telling us about how he wanted to “graduate up” to a fifth wheel from his pop-up camper and listing all the reasons why. Eventually we saw what he never mentioned – that he was camping with a wife and four kids – two of them looked like they could have been teenagers – plus four dogs (apparently each of the kids had his or her own pet), all in that small camper. I wondered why they didn’t just pitch a tent or two for the overflow crowd but I didn’t want to ask. You know what they say, if you don’t want to hear the answer, don’t ask the question.

Clingy Caroline was a few sites down the lane – empty spots sat between us, so I guess she thought of us as next-door-neighbors. She didn’t live in a moveable RV like our fifth wheel and clearly wasn’t camping like Ted and his family. Instead, her site was occupied by what we’ve learned is called a “park model,” a metal-sided rectangle smaller than a mobile home but similar in shape and layout. Short pieces of rusted white skirting covered the nether region on her trailer – making it unlikely the trailer would ever be moved from that spot. A rickety picnic table with a teetery umbrella sat to one side of it.

At least she managed to wait until we were unhitched and hooked up before she came over, her thinning, dyed-black hair a weak defense against an aging process that was defeating her on all other fronts. Her skin had a pale tone and leathery texture, as if she’d spent many years in the sun but was now inside more than out. “You going to the movie tonight?” We didn’t even know there was going to be a movie, much less have the time to think about whether we’d go. “It’s gonna be a good one. Tom Cruise in *A Few Good Men*. Oooh, I love that when Jack Michaelson says, ‘You can’t handle the truth’!”

I bit my tongue to keep from correcting her. We said we had a long day on the road and would just be staying in, and that seemed to satisfy her until the next morning, when she came knocking before nine to see if we wanted to go to breakfast with her. “No thank you,” we said. “We don’t generally eat breakfast.”

“Huh,” she said, puzzled, her voice raspy from years of cigarette smoking. “Must be a Yankee – excuse me -- *Northern* thing.”

Every time we started to get into the truck to go someplace, Clingy Caroline appeared as if she’d been hiding in the bushes, wanting to know where we were going. When we got back, she was practically waiting at the door to ask how we liked wherever we’d been.

“How was your tromp through the refuge?” she asked, that day that was my birthday but so much more, too. Rather than try to explain, we just said there was a lot to see. I tried to tell myself she lived alone and was probably eager for someone to talk to, but unfortunately that didn’t give me the endless patience I needed to deal with her every time I turned around. Go ahead and call me cold and unfriendly. That’s okay. I’m just being honest.

Fortunately, Clingy Caroline and Talkative Ted were nowhere to be seen when we toted our laundry to the truck the day after my birthday. And, lucky me, neither poked a busybody head into the laundry room while I sat watching the suds swoosh in the front-loading washer. I tried to concentrate on the novel I’d brought with me, but my brain was having none of the who-dunnit on the page. The real-life body we’d found meant the book I’d been reading for escape brought me no relief.

So I sat and watched the washer, then listened to the dryer, wiping sweat from my neck and face. The weather bureau had issued a heat warning for the day – again – with heat indexes expected to be well over 100°. I was sure the laundry I pulled hot and dry from the machine would be damp before I got home. Limp laundry. Just what we needed on top of everything else.

Two African American kids – a boy and a girl – ran past in their bathing suits, chased by two white girls a little older, squealing and tripping in their bright flip-flops. “Wait up!” Two adolescent boys, hair straggling into their eyes in styles I remembered from the seventies (things do keep coming around again, don’t they?) zoomed by on their bicycles. The scent of barbeque ribs and steak and grilled veggies filled the air and it occurred to me it must have been closing in on lunchtime already. My stomach growled. As I made my way down the dirt path to our site, carrying a laundry basket that seemed heavier than when the clothes had been dirty, I started my daily meal-planning ritual: listing all the possibilities for what we might eat and where. We could eat at home. Walt does all the cooking when we eat at home, so when he’d rather eat at home than out, I’m always all for that. Nobody can make healthy food taste as good as he does. So Walt’s food is always at the top of my list. Then come the local restaurants – places we’ve tried and liked, or places that sounded interesting because we passed them or read about them. Choices for restaurants abound on the Outer Banks, though we were saddened to see some of our favorites from our last visit years ago hadn’t survived the down economy. But still there were options....

“Honey?”

I looked up to see Walt in his sweat shorts and tank shirt motioning to me from in front of the RV. Standing next to him were a man and woman in uniforms with dark green pants and light green shirts. Odd for a campground, even one that thinks it’s a “resort.” I set the laundry tub down next to him while he introduced me. “Honey, Officer Gosser and Officer Abraham are here from the US Fish and Wildlife Service.”

Great. But at least they weren't more crazy neighbors. I snuck a look around to see that Ted and his clan were gone, their little campsite looking lonely and abandoned without them. Caroline's car was sitting in its spot, but if she was watching what was going on with us, she was doing it from behind one of her curtains.

"How do you do?" I said, holding out my hand to shake. Each took my hand in turn; I was surprised when the female officer – Gosser – had a grip stronger than her male partner's. "I talked to a ranger yesterday at the refuge. Riddley, his name was."

They nodded, though their faces were expressionless. I was becoming convinced this was part of the training law enforcement folks of all stripe went through.

"Mr. Riddley is a volunteer wildlife specialist, not a law enforcement officer," Officer Abraham said. "But we appreciate you giving him such a full report. We do have a few more questions for you, Mrs. Rollin." I was glad I'd set the laundry tub down or I would have dropped it. Or maybe thrown it down.

"Okay," I said, as evenly as I could. Walt must have corrected their pronunciation of our name. Or maybe Riddley had finally gotten it right when he relayed his report to them – assuming he talked to them. "Why so many different agencies with all the same questions?" I asked. Couldn't help it. "We talked to the people at the refuge, plus someone from the sheriff's office, and now you..."

Officer Abraham allowed himself a small smile. "I can understand the frustration, Ms. Rollin," he said. "But the wildlife refuge is under the jurisdiction of the US Fish and Wildlife Service."

I nodded.

"We do appreciate your willingness to cooperate," added Officer Gosser.

"We don't have a lot of space inside," I said, letting go of my frustration, "but you're welcome to come in." I gestured toward the rig. Though I was glad I made the bed and cleaned up the morning coffee dishes every day, I couldn't help picturing our backpacks in the chairs and all the free newspapers and brochures lying on the sofa. I didn't want them to think we were slobs – there's only so much room in a fifth wheel. Imagine living in a small apartment. A small efficiency apartment. Now divide that space in half. Then divide it in half again. Maybe now you've got some idea of the entire four-hundred square feet we were living in.

They shook their heads. They'd already thought of this. "We just wonder if you recognize this woman," Officer Abraham said, holding out a photo. I took the edge of it, almost afraid to look. I'd seen plenty of TV shows where cops passed photos of dead people around and I wasn't sure I wanted to see an actual image of what Walt had been so careful to shield me from the day before. What I was curious about then I had no interest in seeing now. I looked at Walt, who gave me a reassuring nod.

I peeked at the photo. The woman in the photo was blonde and smiling, posed in front of a kiteboard – anything but dead. The wind had caught her hair, blowing it lightly across her tanned face. I recognized her right away. “It’s Lisa,” I said. “She was my kiteboard instructor last week.”

The officers shared a glance, then looked at me. Officer Abraham took the photo back. “How did your lesson go?” he asked.

I’d learned enough the day before to suspect he wasn’t just making conversation. He wasn’t curious about the lesson. He wanted to know what I was feeling about this woman. “Not very well,” I said. “I’m a lousy swimmer and I was terrified I’d fall, so of course I kept pitching over into the water. Walt rocked the kiteboard, though,” I said, grinning. He reached out to squeeze my shoulder. “Lisa was great,” I said. “Very patient with me, and what a sense of humor!” I smiled, thinking of the bright twinkle that played in Lisa’s eyes when I finally admitted defeat, telling her she could keep her fee for the lesson as long as we could quit right then and there.

Then it dawned on me. Were they asking me this because she was the woman whose body we’d discovered? I swallowed hard but my throat had gone dry and I coughed. I tried to speak, but couldn’t. Walt offered a bottle of water he’d been holding. I gulped water as though I’d been stranded in the Sahara for a week. Finally, I found my voice. “Is she –?”

All three of them nodded.

“Oh my God,” I said. “Oh my God... What happened to her? How did she – get there? Like that?”

Walt wrapped his arm around my shoulder and held me close.

“That’s what we’re trying to figure out, Mrs. Rollin,” said Officer Gosser. “What did her mood seem to be to you?”

Just picturing her face brought her infectious laugh back to me. Even when she managed to keep a smile from her lips, her eyes gave away a laugh threatening to erupt. “She was laughing and joking and seemed very happy,” I said. “She said she was the luckiest woman in the world to be doing what she loved and getting paid for it – I remember because I said no, *I’m* the luckiest woman in the world because I’m married to Walt and we get to travel wherever we want together.” I took another swallow of water. “I can’t believe she’s....” I couldn’t say “dead.” Just couldn’t say the word. Nothing about finding that brown shape out near the pond matched up with the beautiful woman we’d had the pleasure of meeting a few days before.

“So she didn’t seem depressed or upset about anything to you?” Officer Gosser pressed. She wasn’t taking notes like Riddley had been doing yesterday. Neither of these officers was writing anything

down. Did they just remember everything? Or did my exact words mean less today than they had yesterday?

I shook my head. “Not at all. The only thing that seemed to upset her was when her boyfriend called. She said something to him about ‘the damn beach closings.’ Her words. We’ve heard about that from some of the local residents... people have some pretty strong feelings about it. After the call she apologized and said her boyfriend was a fisherman and the closings really affected his business.”

We’d seen bumper stickers that said “Piping Plover Tastes Like Chicken!” around town and even saw a pick-up truck with this painted on the tailgate: “I Like Piping Plovers Under My Tires.” Signs on shop doors said things like “Everyone Welcome EXCEPT NPS!” When we asked about them in a grocery store, the cashier, whose blonde hair had bleached nearly white from age or the sun and whose skin wore the creases of waves and sand and dangerous exposure to the elements said, “Honey, this here’s a fishin’ community. Do anything to make so fishin’ can’t happen and you got trouble.”

“So the National Park Service is restricting beach access in places where the locals can’t fish?” I asked the cashier.

She looked at me as though I was more dense than the concrete retaining wall outside the store. “Tourists can’t fish out there neither,” she said, “and that’s worse. Drivin’ our local economy into the shithole, pardon my language.”

Outside our RV, the two wildlife officers nodded. “Well, that was all we wanted to ask you about. We appreciate your taking the time to help us.” They each held out a hand to shake before they got in their SUV and drove away.

I looked at Walt. “Could it get any weirder?” I asked. He shrugged. “Poor Lisa,” he said, and I nodded. He held my hand and we were back in the fifth wheel before I remembered the laundry and went back out into the heat to collect our tub of steamed clothes.



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