

# NEON SUNSET MURAL

written by Kris Hartrum | August 1, 2016



Being a large version of a small thing does it. The big, shiny brown ones that sit on the walls at night and wind up on your face before you wake to smacking yourself as the son of a bitch takes off behind the headboard. Most people have a natural distaste for them, but Debbi was one of those women who lost her damn head about it. Of course Florida was the worst place for that sort of thing. Called them palmetto bugs down there, and I learned very early in our marriage that she just couldn't take it. That was Debbi. She's was always like that, and during those long island summers there was usually something crawling around in the heat: rattlesnakes, cockroaches, lizards and whatever else. Like they ran the place. It was always in the back of her mind. Couldn't even breathe if she saw one getting close to her, creeping along the linoleum.

"I really hate them," she'd say. "Real hate."

I guess we'd been married about a year by then. She was pregnant and we didn't stay too long after you were born because of the size of the place, the rat and some other shit I probably can't remember. I told her it was only temporary. It was a small apartment, but cheap as hell and on Anna Maria Island, which might be my favorite part of Florida. Still is. Perfect for young, broke newlyweds. You'll have to ask her about the details and all. Had to have been around the first half of 83. Can't say exactly.

The duplex was the first home you ever had. Somewhere there's a photo of you sitting on the back of my motorcycle in the front yard. You in your tiny Cleveland Browns jersey and the silver Yamaha 650. You remember that purple Kawasaki? It was the bike before that. Bought it off my friend Barry Kid who worked with me at the resort, Club Longboat. He was a real funny guy. I don't think you ever met him. Loved to hit on married women out by the pool and at the tennis courts. Hilarious. Got lucky a few times too. He sold me that bike for real cheap. Said all I had to do was sing at his wedding, which I never did of course. Barry Kid had this long, curly, dirty blonde hair like he was Sammy Hagar or something. I still feel bad about that. Should've sang at his wedding. Real good guy. I need to call him.

Like I said, we had to leave not long after you were born. It was a cool spot but the place was small and pretty rustic out there. It didn't seem like

there were many people on Anna Maria back then. Just the beaches and a bunch of shrubs and palm trees everywhere. Green, and white sand. Can't remember ever seeing bad weather outside of hurricane season. Pretty fucking ideal if you ask me. Debbi liked it too but maybe not in the same way. The palmetto bugs alone were enough to kill her and the baby. I'm not joking. It was nuts. She'd see one and scream my name to high heaven. I swear to god, you should have seen her. A never ending battle against "the dark forces of nature," as she put it. Dramatic as always. She'll never admit it but I think she was losing it for a while. Lost it. Whatever. Maybe not.

I remember once we'd just come back from the doctor's towards the end of the pregnancy. Almost thirty years ago. Wild. So she leaves the passenger side of the old Subaru and on her way in the house steps right over a rattlesnake. No joke. Just walked over it without a second thought. So I ran up behind her and stomped the poor thing to death. It was brownish and gold and white with a fat, heart-shaped head. Tiny little thing. Must have been a baby, I guess. Still a rattlesnake though. I tried to be real quiet about it, but of course she heard the stomping. Probably turned around with all that black hair, narrowing at the eyes like she does.

"What are you doing?"

She was always holding her belly in that small, blue dress. The one with the strawberries her mother brought back from Germany. Don't know why I remember that dress. It was cut short just above her knees and she looked real pretty in it. Guess she wore it a lot. Maybe in a photo I remember.

"Just getting something," I said.

"What are you talking about, getting something?"

"Just had to grab something."

"What was that?" She said, looking over near my feet.

"Nothing. Go inside. I'll be in in a minute."

"Cockroach?"

"Yep. Big one," I said.

"Gross."

"Don't worry about it. I got it."

"So gross," she said.

I looked through the grass for the mother who I figured couldn't have been far off. Don't know much about snakes but I'm guessing that's how it works.

She got it out of me later, of course. Starting going on about stress being bad for the pregnancy, getting over-excited in the middle of the tiny living room with shit-brown carpet. She'd pace and I'd sit on the sofa near the

sliding glass door that looked out towards the soccer fields and the community center just beyond the yard. On Saturdays you could go out and watch the games. I probably never did, but you could. The bleachers were only a stone's throw from our backdoor. Nothing too exciting. Just jr. high-school kids playing soccer. So I'd sit there and kind of listen to her. She'd talk about how she wanted to move back to the mainland, or out to California to be near her mother and sisters and the dry heat. She was tough sometimes, but she was the prettiest thing on the island. Anywhere, maybe. Difficult, and pretty wild back then. Her black hair and dark skin. Short as hell, and long fingers moving around when she spoke. I'd grin and look out at the bleachers and patchy grass, hardly visible under the one field-light.

There was a stretch of time at the end when I was having strange dreams about losing the baby. Scared of a miscarriage or something. Usual fear stuff. There was this bad one where I could see Debbi's body in bed, except it didn't really look like her. She was pale and pregnant but she looked sick or dead. Very white. Not moving. Like a horror movie. I'd wake up covered in sweat. Wasn't a big deal, really. I'm sure everyone gets a little fucked up around that time. Still freaks me out when I think about it. The mind likes to sneak up on you. Gotta stay cool, ya know?

Anna Maria Island. I do miss it some. Back then it was still pretty cheap to live there. I don't know about now. Haven't been back since 95 or so. Old Manatee County. Our place was a duplex owned by this older lady named Mrs. Nettles or Mrs. Needles. She lived in the connection. The first thing that comes to mind is the small door in the water heater closet that lead to her side of the house. One water heater for both sides. We made jokes that she'd sneak into our side at night and drink beer and take pictures of us sleeping. Stupid shit. The tiny door was locked of course, but it was like a secret passageway, except there was nothing on the other side but Ms. Needles or Mrs. Noodles. I can't remember her name. She didn't do much, and she had these very big, flabby arms. They flapped like wings when she pointed at anything or talked about the neighbors. I think there's a photo of her and you somewhere. She had this fake-looking, curly hair and wore big, tinted glasses like you see in photographs from the 70s, or movies from the 70s or about the 70s. She mostly kept to herself. We only ever heard from her when she complained about Cheyenne taking a shit on her side of the yard.

That was one hell of a sweet dog. You remember her. A big yellow lab with a pink and black nose and a mask of white fur around the eyes. Debbi found her as a pup, abandoned in a shopping cart out in front of a Ralphps supermarket. She had a knack for bringing home stray animals. Once her mom told me that when Debbi was little she would find cats and dogs in the street and sneak them into the house and put them in her closet, and feed them scraps of food from dinner. She was a big softie when it came to animals and kids and stuff like that.

Debbi had Cheyenne for a couple years before I met her, but I fell for that dog quick. Sometimes she'd chase down the palmetto bugs when they were brave enough to venture out in the daylight.

Once I made us a chicken for our six month anniversary. I remember it was

kind of gold and I can still see it because it was shiny from all the juices or whatever. Like in an advertisement for the perfect chicken.

We were in the backyard having a few drinks while the bird cooled. I had these two lawn chairs set up outside. It was pretty nice to sit out there and drink with the sunset and shoot the shit and go on about whatever and the future. We loved talking about the future, like everyone else. Our plans and what we'd do afterwards.

So I went inside to check on the food and found nothing but a shredded carcass hanging out of Cheyenne's mouth. She had jumped up and pulled the chicken to the floor. Nearly devoured the whole damn thing. Only little chunks and grease and fat left scattered across the linoleum. I was pissed about the chicken but Debbi was scared Cheyenne would choke to death from swallowing all the damn bones. She was fine, though. Just threw some of it back up in the yard not long after. But she was real a good dog.

Years later when we lived back on the mainland some half-blind lady pulled up onto the curb and took Cheyenne half a block under the back wheel. The dog didn't die that day but she couldn't walk. Debbi slept in the kitchen with her for a few nights and cried before I finally had to take her to be put down. It was bad. Debbi didn't speak about it for a while. Cheyenne was a really good dog. Good with the kids and everything.

But anyway, the weather was always nice on Anna Maria. It was never that humid. Coldest it ever got was around fifty-something at night. From April through October it stayed pretty warm. Nine miles long and full of white sand. Fucking paradise, really. Something about unchanging beach towns. Hand-painted signs and old, shitty fishing piers from leftover bridges. Even our apartment with that orange mural of the soft, fading Florida sunset just behind the sofa. Neon pinks and orange. The thing stretched all the way to the ceiling. We didn't pay for it or anything. It was there when we moved in. I thought it was cool. The reflection off the dropping sun shot this spear of light down to the wide brush-strokes of the sand and palms. Lots of shadows in it. Almost thirty years ago and I can still see it pretty clearly. Can't remember if Debbi liked it or not. I think she did. I think she'd say she liked it if I asked her. Wish I could get that thing back. It's probably been painted over or scraped away by now.

She was pretty funny sometimes. She used to sit in the backyard on Sunday afternoons and read before she went in to wait tables at a little French place not too far from us.

"Honey," she'd say. "Come out here and sit with me."

"I'm here. I was out here before you were, babe."

"But you're not sitting with me. Sit next to me."

"I'm right here. I can touch you I'm so close." I touched her forearm.

"Move closer," she'd say. And then she'd go on and on until I was practically on top of her.

Or I'd come home from work sometimes and find Debbi on the floor with Cheyanne in front of the sunset-wall listening to Beach Boys tapes on the boombox. Mostly Pet Sounds. I remember *Don't Cry Put Your Head On My Shoulders* and *Caroline* No played a lot.

"Have a beer," she'd say. "Come sit next to me."

"I need a shower."

"Where should we go?" She'd ask.

"When?"

"After the baby?" Touching her belly.

"Anywhere you want. I'm gonna shower."

"I just want him to have fun."

"Who?"

"The baby."

"He'll have plenty of fun."

"I want him to be really happy though."

"He will be."

"I know, but more fun. I want him to have more fun than us."

Shit like that. Funny stuff.

The night air always came through the screen door and it felt good, and I thought we were pretty damn happy. Thinking about it now, I think we were happy as anyone else. At least I was. Our place wasn't great, but at the time it was really something to be young and married and on a fuckin island together. Debbi said a lot of funny stuff during that first pregnancy. I'm sure she was having fun, though. I think she got nervous because of the baby. That's normal. She was a very complicated girl. Especially back then. Very pretty, and a little crazy. She said a lot of nutty things and she was gorgeous as hell. I'm not kidding. She was hot.

When the rat showed up it was late in the pregnancy. The rat was a whole thing in itself.

The first time, Debbi woke me, shaking the hell out of my shoulder. It usually meant there was a cockroach sitting on the wall.

"Wake up. Wake up. Can you hear that? Do you hear that?"

I woke to the shaking and heard a scratching noise coming from the closet. Claws on wood. Scratching. Stop. Scratching. Stop. Like that, over and over.

"Something's in there," she said. There's an animal in there."

I told her it was Mrs. Nettles digging through her side of the closet, but she knew that was bullshit.

"There's something in here," she whispered, digging her fingernails into my arm.

"It's probably just a mouse," I said.

"I have to go."

"I'll get it."

"I'm going to leave."

"Relax."

"I'm leaving here in the morning."

"Dammit. Just relax. I'll see what it is."

I turned on the light and threw open the closet door. I was pretty pissed off at that point.

"Don't kill it," she said after a long pause.

"What?"

"Don't kill it. Just get it out of here."

"Christ," I said and looked into the empty closet, not really looking for anything. Dark shadows folded over shapes. The water heater. Clothes, cardboard and bullshit. Lots of bullshit.

"I don't see anything," I said. "It's nothing. There's nothing here."

The next night I heard it in the kitchen. I thought it must have been something pretty big. Best thing to do was keep it from Debbi, of course. Cheyenne didn't help. Started barking to high heaven one night out of nowhere, the sound of her toenails tapping on the kitchen floor as she ran after the thing. Cheyenne was a big dog. Couldn't get into cupboards or behind the fridge. Meanwhile, Debbi was about to drop the baby on the damn rug. Doctor said it was just about time, and I had this huge rat to worry about. Pain in the ass, to say the least.

Finally, I brought some rattraps home from work. Those big Victor brand traps with the thick, copper gauge wire. I loaded the triggers with peanut butter and put them around the kitchen and in the closet. I didn't want Debbi to

know about the traps, but I had to make sure she didn't catch her little hand in one. Those things are mean. Crush your fingers, no problem.

"Will that kill it?"

"Probably."

"That's terrible."

"It's unhealthy to have it in the house," I said. "Bad for us. Bad for the baby."

"It's just too terrible."

"You won't even know when it happens. I'll take care of it."

"What if she's pregnant?"

"Who?"

"The rat."

"You're nuts."

"What if it is?"

She said it just to mess with my head, I'm guessing. Maybe she really wanted to know. One mother looking out for another. Dark thoughts. Too much.

When it happened we were on the carpet in front of the sofa again. Usual conversations, sea-air coming through the screen door, Beach Boys playing through the little boombox.

"You want something to drink?" she asked.

"I'm gonna get a beer here in a second."

"You want me to get it for you?"

"I'm the one who's supposed to wait on you, preggo."

"I'm not so useless yet."

The trap went off with a loud snap.

"What was that?" she asked. But the way she looked at me...she knew.

The scream started as something very small, a ringing in the ear, like I'd imagined it, but it got louder until it was drowning out the sound of the music. Ear-splitting. Child-like.

"What is that? What is that?" She was starting. Tears running down her cheeks. Maybe on the strawberry dress. Maybe not. I don't know if it was that

dress but that's how I see it now. Taking liberties. Good for the story.

I ran to the closet and opened the doors. I could see its tail flailing around like a goddamn bull-whip. The thing was huge and grey and wet-looking. Nasty. The copper bar had crushed its back but it was still alive, screaming for its life. I mean it was deafening. Like I was murdering someone. I guess that's the way Debbi would say it.

I went over to the bed and picked up the baseball bat I kept next to my night-stand. I walked over to the closet and decided I didn't know what I was doing.

"Is it dying?" Debbi yelled, standing behind me at the door.

"Go into the kitchen," I said calmly.

I could hear Cheyenne barking over the music and Debbi repeating something unintelligible.

"Hold the damn dog," I said.

"Is it dead?" she whimpered, voice cracking.

"Calm down," I hollered back. "Just hold the dog. It's already done."

I picked it up by the backend of the trap and walked through the living room, feeling its weight, past the neon sunset wall and out to the backyard. It was very dark except for the single white light on the soccer field. I dropped it in the grass and picked up a big cinder-block that was near the old bleachers. The thing had gotten quiet and was breathing slower. Barely hanging on. Its damp, gray body was still squirming but not much. No more sound. I dropped the cinder block and walked back to the house. Debbi was at the door holding Cheyenne by the collar.

"It was just a rat," I said.

"Why did it scream like that?"

"I don't know. It was pretty big."

"It sounded like a baby," she said.

"Don't say that. Just try and forget about it."

I stood there with her for a while until the record finished playing *Caroline No*. We didn't stay long after that. Moved over to the mainland as soon as she had you. It was a pretty strange thing, I guess. It was just one of those very funny things.