

Joe Tougas

## TEXAS RADIO

Kelly was on her side staring past me, like a trance. She hadn't even reached for one of her Camel Lights yet. I was in that same zone, too -- a sudden, heavy grace still new and catching its breath.

On the radio, the San Antonio late-night deejay said he was now serving up a real special treat, folks: Merle Haggard singing "Silver Bells" for all the holiday travelers keeping it here on classic Texas radio, no better place to be. First came the thick string section, then the few electric guitar notes and, finally, that rich old voice that worked its way up to a shaky and perfect joy over how, soon, it will be Christmas Day. It was a sound that buffed up and filled the holes in this room of so much thin furniture, thin blankets and the thin scent of chlorine from down the hall.

My hair was damp, her arms were tan and I felt like laughing, maybe even singing along. I knew better than to blurt it out – Kelly was younger, tougher and didn't strike me as a heart-to-hearter – but I was so damn happy. Happy with who we suddenly were, now. A couple. A pair. Absolutely and officially. Old-timer me with the prom queen, who earlier in the day started pouring my drink before I even took my spot at the Top Notch.

"You again," she said.

"Me again."

She put my beer on a white Lone Star coaster and said "That's good."

That had been a first. And now, eight or ten hours later, here was another one. After the song and before I could figure out what I wanted to say, Kelly quick looked down at me, not moving one strand of hair on the side of her face, not moving anything but her dark eyes. "This, by the way," she said, "this never happened."

She stared past me again, and I thought maybe she was talking about something else, something that had not happened.