

Trust

It was a hot night. John and Jackie had left about an hour earlier. They were the last guests to go. The drainboard was stacked high. The dishes were all but finished. I had learned from experience that washing up was easier with a nice high than a nasty hangover. Harder on the dishes for sure, but chips and cracks were easy to live with, and there was always Elmer's glue.

"Here's the last of 'em," Warren mumbled as he bumped his way through the swinging door. Each wine glass on the tray was in a different stage of emptiness. Warren set his booty down beside the sink.

Swoosh, swoosh . . . swoosh, swoosh swoosh. The pink bubbles rode on top of the water, swirling down its path away from me. Warren put his chin on my shoulder and watched too.

"Gone," he said.

"For good," I added.

The sink made a sucking sound, wanting more.

A hand slid under my tee shirt; fingers caressed, lightly. Bushy lips brushed the nape of my neck. I turned my head slowly and found the lids closed over Warren's oval eyes. I kissed each one quietly.

The right eye opened. It moved about, erratically. The left eye opened. It darted here and there. Suddenly Warren jumped back and looked directly at me, wildly.

He screamed, "Praise the lord. Praise the lord. I can see. He has given me sight! He has given me light!"

"Stop it, Warren," I laughed.

But Warren fell to his knees. He grabbed my foot and kissed it. "Thank you, thank you."

"You silly goose." I jumped astraddle Warren's back. He wheeled around the kitchen on all fours neighing like a mad horse. I yelled, "Whoa!" and held on for dear life.

He sang out, "Hi-ho Silver," and reared up, flailing at the air with his hoof-like fists.

Warren's whinny faded as I slid over his butt and onto the floor.

He turned on his knees and looked down. "That'll teach you to ride bare back," Warren puffed, catching his breath.

He leaned down and gave me an Eskimo kiss. I could smell him, nut-like and warm. I reached up and put my hands on the back of his neck and invited. He crumpled beside me and nestled his head carefully between my breasts, a hand on either side, making things closer.

We stayed like that for minutes. Warren's heart slowed down to a regular pat . . . pat . . . pat. I stared at the bright bare bulb glaring down from the ceiling and remembered how many times I had promised myself to buy some sort of fixture for it, knowing I never would. I liked it the way it was.

Warren raised his head, ready for more. "Let's get naked and go for a swim."

I thought for a moment. "Only if I can have some of your white lightnin'."

Warren smiled evilly, uncrumpled himself and said, "Just you wait." He disappeared down the hall and into his workroom.

The year before, Cole, our neighbor, and Warren had set up a still in the abandoned barn which sort of stood on the boundary between the two properties. They had concocted a clear, fiery liquid which, in the next few months, gained quite a reputation locally. I didn't know how much was left, but Warren always seemed to have some for special occasions.

He returned, potion in hand. "Come, my little mermaid."

I peeled myself up off the floor, egged on by the delights to come. White lightnin' was guaranteed, if nothing else, to give a second wind.

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Warren and I picked our way across the field of alfalfa, trying hard not to scare the fireflies. I asked him for a sip from the jar.

"For your tee shirt," he bartered.

All the wine from earlier had left me with a thirst for something substantial so, rather than argue, I slipped the shirt over my head and handed it to him. He dropped it as he held the jar to my lips and poured. Warren was accurate. I got a sip, and only a sip. I reached around my back and undid the clasp. An undergarment apparently held more value than a shirt. For it I received two portions. I found my willingness to give up clothing increased proportionately to the amount I took off.

By the time we arrived at the creek I had the white lightnin' and neither of us had a stitch on. Just like spin the bottle, I thought. The boys were always willing to take something off even when they didn't have to.

Warren took the jar, sealed it, tossed it into the swimming hole, splash, and shouted, "Last one in's gotta make the bed for a week." He jumped in. Bigger splash. I followed him. The water was hot from the spring that bubbled up above the place where we swam.

"Warren . . . oh, Warren," I said into the night.

"Over here. To the left," he teased, taking a big gulp of air as he spoke.

I listened. I could almost hear the water close over the top of his head. It made me feel uneasy, imagining Warren suspended in the black water, hiding from me. He might have disappeared. He might have dissolved. I might never have been able to find him again. I had always felt if you couldn't see people there was no telling what they might do, and up to that time in my life the instinct seemed to be a reasonable one.

He surfaced near me and put my fears to rest. I held my breath. I could tell he didn't know where I was. I sunk beneath the water and enjoyed being the missing one in our game.

The water surrounded me tenderly and I yielded. Above, Warren called my name, at first tauntingly, and when there was no answer, anxiously. I knew I should go up, but I stayed, resenting the need to breathe. I slipped back to the beginning. The first nine months must have been the best.

Finally the fright in Warren's voice reached through the water and grabbed me. I kicked up off the slippery stones,

shooting to the surface.

"I'm right here," I sputtered.

"Dammit, don't do that," Warren said, taking me in his arms.

I found his lips in the dark and kissed them. "Sorry." Another kiss. "I couldn't resist not being." The moon came out from behind a cloud, lighting up the night.

"Be careful." Warren hugged me closer. "I'd miss you."

The rustling bushes warned us of Lucy's arrival.

"Darn it," Warren said.

We untangled our bodies.

Lucy bounded up to the creek's edge, smiling and wagging.

Warren splashed some water at her. "Hi, pooch."

"Be nice to him," I said quietly. "He's had a rough time of it lately."

Warren said, "What's new?"

Cole's depression preceded him, like his dog. As he walked into the clearing I could practically feel it descend on Warren and me and wrap itself around us, wanting to bind the three of us into its gloom.

Cole was a painter when he wasn't working at the hardware store in town. He had grown up on the streets of New York and was named after Nat King Cole. He had fought in Vietnam. He was trying to get away from violence, but it was always right there, just beneath the surface, just one coat away. We were all friends, but Cole and I were good friends.

Warren had had to work in Boston for several weeks once. During the evenings Cole and I had sipped and talked a lot. That was when he had told me about the horror, about the death, and about how it all haunted him like phantom feelings in an amputated limb. That's when I had told him, too, about Warren at seventeen. For some reason it had slipped out.

"Hi-ya, Cole." I tried to resist his mood.

"Hi." He was completely submerged.

Warren was losing patience with Cole's fragile state of mind. He grabbed the white lightning' as it bobbed by. "Here, have some of this. Maybe it'll cheer you up."

Warren held the jar up toward him, but Cole made no

effort to take it. He was looking at me. For a brief moment I could see the moon reflected in his moist, broken eyes, but a cloud put us back into darkness. We were merely shapes again.

"When you didn't answer the phone I guessed you'd be down here," he said to me. He could have guessed Warren was here with me if he had thought for a moment.

"Come on into the water. It feels good," I said.

"It sure does." Warren scooted up behind me, spoon style. He whispered into my ear, "I don't want to be blue." He put the edge of the jar to my lips and poured some of the hot liquid into my mouth. I felt it in my toes before I swallowed.

Cole looked ghost-like, weaving in front of us, his arms raised over his head, struggling with his shirt. His voice was muffled. "God dammit." Rip. The fabric gave out.

"Patience." Warren warned.

"Fuck patience," Cole muttered, flinging the ruined garment into the bushes.

Lucy thought it was time to play. She pounced on the shirt and returned it to her master's feet. Cole didn't notice. By then he was fighting his way out of his pants, a drunk in a Japanese shadow play.

Finally without clothes, Cole sat on the big boulder at the edge of the creek and dangled his toes into the water.

"What's up?" I asked.

Cole hardly needed encouragement. "Nothing works. Nothing's alive anymore."

"Well, I'm alive," Warren said. He took a big slug out of the jar to prove it.

"I feel dead inside," Cole challenged.

I said, "Maybe you should call Lisa. Maybe she's ready to come back." Lisa had moved out about six months before. Cole loved Lisa.

"Lisa doesn't care. Nobody really cares."

Warren was bored. "We care. We really care."

Cole didn't seem to notice. "I mean, does it really matter, one way or the other?"

Warren was getting angry. "Not when you get right down to it. But don't forget, Lucy needs you. She depends on you.

As a matter of fact, in her dog like way, Lucy probably loves you." Lucy snapped at the air. She knew she was being talked about.

"Quit it, Warren," I said, defending Cole.

Warren said, "Okay, Doctor." He swam away from us.

"He's drunk. Don't pay any attention to him."

Wasted breath.

Cole only heard what he wanted to hear.

"Nothing's going anywhere." After a moment Cole continued, "I sit in that house and feel my life decaying from the inside out. I can't stand it."

"You're lonely." I looked over my shoulder and found Warren's silhouette on the shore, steaming eerily against the sky.

Cole's despair drew me back. "Everyone is always lonely. Companionship just takes the edge away, that's all. It's still there, lurking, waiting to pounce." He paused, searching for further definition, waiting to describe more clearly. "Friendship is a sham. We all use each other because we're afraid of the dark"

"Well, as long as it's between consenting adults . . ." Warren joined us, momentarily. He nuzzled my ear. "Want to camp out? I'll get the sleeping bags."

I said, "Sure."

Warren headed for the house.

Cole drew his knees up to his chest and wrapped his arms around his legs. "I wish I could believe in God." His voice quavered.

"Believe in love."

A stinging, mean, "Ha," hit the air.

"You believed in love when Lisa was here."

"Love is worse than friendship. With love you grow to expect even more. With love you're even more insulated from the truth."

"No, Cole. You're all wrong. There's always . . ."

Cole didn't let me finish. He didn't let me utter some saccharin statement about love and friendship.

"No. I'm right," Cole said. "We would have been much better off if our brains had stayed small. We complicate our

lives to amuse our memories. To occupy them." He tilted his head back and looked up into the cloud covered sky. "And then the nasty little buggers turn around and torture us." Cole's head fell forward. "Oh, God," he sobbed.

I didn't know what to say. Cole had such a different perspective. He could make any optimism seem foolish and back his position with personal accounts from the dark side. He knew more about LIFE than I possible could because I had never put someone's guts back into their body and then tried to make them whole again with my tears. Who could argue against that?

"Cole?"

He didn't respond.

I got out of the water and sat on the rock next to him. Cole and I had never been alone and naked before. I wondered if Warren imagined he was challenging me in some perverse way.

I reached over and put my hand on Cole's leg. I ran the tips of my fingers along the soft, brown hair I knew was there.

"You're going to catch cold," he said.

Cole picked up my hand and wrapped his warm fingers around mine. It was the second time he had ever held my hand. The first time had been on the day we met. I had had an abortion. No one knew about it, not even Warren. I had gone to the hardware store on my way home. The faucet in the kitchen had been dripping for months. I fainted in the washer department, then threw up all over Cole, who was holding my hand when I woke up. It was his first day at work.

After he helped clean me up, I had started crying and couldn't stop. Cole patiently listened to me blubber on about my missing fetus. We drank some whiskey in the back room. He called Warren for me. Six months later he rented the farm next to ours. Warren had always been bothered by the way Cole and I had gotten to know one another.

Cole put my hand on the cool stone between our hips. He stood up and stepped down into the water. He swam slowly over to the cool side of the creek.

A few minutes later Cole was back on the rock next to me. He laid back and covered his eyes with his hands. If I listened I

could hear Lucy and Warren in the clearing not a hundred feet away. Warren was zipping our sleeping bags together. Lucy was running circles around him. Cole sighed, wearily.

"Don't be afraid to need other people, Cole. It's normal. A person isn't meant to be alone, really alone."

"But they always leave. They always die or go away."

"Not everyone."

Smooosh, smooosh. Warren primed the Coleman lantern.

Cole took a deep breath. "I want to kill myself."

"No you don't." I grabbed at straws. "Your painting's going good. You used to say that was all that was important." I tried to sound casual. "Anyway, you want to know how it turns out, don't you, just like the rest of us?"

"I already know. We all know. We're just pretending we don't," Cole said.

He sounded so serious I was afraid I was getting out of my depth as "friend". "Cole, if you really mean what you say . . . and aren't just experimenting with me, you should see a doctor or . . ."

"Don't worry. If I had the nerve to do it, I wouldn't be talking about it, right? I mean, isn't that what they say?"

"Go over to the V.A. and ask them."

Cole sat up. The words came out of his mouth matter of factly, like he was asking for a recipe. "Tell me, how did Warren ever find the courage to actually pull the trigger?"

The mantle in the Coleman lantern burst to life, too late for the question not to be asked. Warren's amazed eyes glistened across the gulf between us, Cole's words branding me, "The Defector." Ten years crashed like so much shattered glass. Warren looked away and unfolded the drop cloth, rectangle, square, rectangle, square.

I could only watch Warren and wonder why it had seemed so natural to tell Cole at the time, and so outrageous that he should know now.

Cole stood up. "Well, I better go." He knew what he had done. What I never figured out was whether it was done on purpose.

I stood up. "Are you okay?"

He nodded. "Don't worry about me. All talk and no

action."

Cole picked up his pants and shirt. He said "Sorry," to me and, "Goodnight," to Warren.

Warren didn't acknowledge.

I didn't know what to do. I simply stood there between them.

Cole whistled. "Come on, Lucy," he said, and started along the path toward his house. Lucy raced in front of him as soon as she was sure he was serious about going somewhere.

Warren, on all fours, smoothed the joined sleeping bags out over the drop cloth. I started toward him, feeling more naked than I had ever felt before.

He brushed out imaginary wrinkles. "Just leave me alone for a while, okay?"

I stopped.

He looked up at me. How could his confessor have forsaken him? "Okay?" He demanded, again.

I went back to the rock. I toyed with the white lightning and cursed it for loosening my tongue.

I had betrayed him. I had broken a vow.

Warren had tried to blow his head off when he was seventeen and would have succeeded if he hadn't used a hunting gun. Under his beard, around his right ear, there were scars where they had sewed his face back together. He hadn't told me about it until the night before our wedding. He only told me then to explain his attitude about children. He wanted me to understand, completely. He had waited until the lights were out and I was half asleep before starting the story. We talked about it all night in the dark. It was never mentioned again.

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I slipped into the sleeping bag beside Warren. His back was to me. I thought he had dozed off, but he reached over and turned off the Coleman lantern before I had a chance to.

The clouds had blown away; the moon had set. The Milky Way was stretched out across the sky—forever.

"I'm sorry, Warren."

He rolled onto his back and looked up into the night sky with me. "So am I."

Warren turned to me, but his touch was tentative, like the first time. He wanted to show me it wasn't going to come between us, but couldn't.

I counted falling stars and gave him my wishes.

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Cole dropped by the house a few days later. He seemed to be on top of the world. He borrowed the vacuum cleaner. He said his was broken. I told Warren that Cole must have called Lisa and that she must have said she would come back to him, since he was cleaning house. Warren hoped I was right.

The next day I went to Cole's house to use his typewriter. I owed my father a letter. I found Cole in his truck. He was dead. He had taped our vacuum hose to his vacuum hose. He had attached the end of his vacuum hose to the truck's exhaust pipe, and stuck the end of our vacuum hose in through the wind wing of the truck's cab. The gas gage read empty. Cole's lifeless fingers were wrapped around a pistol. Lucy was in the house, under the kitchen table, dead, with a bullet in her head. Cole hadn't left a note.

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After a while Warren and I were back to our normal routine, more or less. I missed Cole. I missed his obsessive need to corral life and define it in absolute terms. Warren didn't feel his absence as I did. At times I thought Warren was relieved that Cole wasn't around us. Perhaps Cole's constant questioning reminded him too much of his own delicate grasp.

Warren changed, slowly, afterwards. He wasn't as sure of himself, and every once in a while I would catch him looking at me apprehensively.

