

Where the Flower Lives

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We can only know that from the unknown, profound desires enter in upon us, and that the fulfilling of these desires is the fulfilling of creation. We know that the rose comes to blossom.

—D. H. Lawrence

Even at the beginning of that summer it was apparent to Steven that something would change. This would be the summer. He couldn't say how he had come upon this knowledge—certainly it hadn't been asked for—but the knowledge came to him somehow, and he, not knowing what else to do with it, but knowing he must do something, took it in. He was fourteen at the time. It had been a placid fourteen years, this growing up in a small Ohio town, this chasing of dreams and fireflies through the twilight of thirteen summers—but now, suddenly, he felt boyhood giving way to the man in him, felt the muscles in his arm harden whenever he helped his father hoe the garden behind their house, and with this sensation of hardening came a fear. A fear of he didn't know what, although he suspected it was of women. For as long as he could remember he both loved and feared women, craved their touch and at the same time wanted to run from them. He loved them; and yet they terrified him. He wanted to know them; and yet he didn't know them. He wanted to know them—heached to know them—he *would* know them. But for now, because of his lack of contact with them, he knew them only secondhand, through vague imaginings and those rare nights when they walked hand in hand with their lovers down the lane, their laughter trilling in the treetops and hiding amid the leaves, then swooping down to gentle Steven in his quiet bed. O, how he thrilled to hear their voices! They were wonderful. He would know them.

Steven had never considered himself handsome. In fact he wasn't. Girls had made fun of him for as long as he could remember—his large ears, his too-large nose, his slightly buck teeth—and this cut him deeply, for as much as his mother told him he was a strapping and handsome boy, he knew himself for what he was: an awkward, gangling adolescent, all elbows, knees and chin. At fourteen he had yet to fill out, and this left him with an impression of himself as hovering uncertainly between toddlerhood and Charles Atlas, leaning, if anywhere, toward the toddler. But this was Steven Hart in the summer of 1967, this was the boy as he knew himself and as others knew him, and the painful awareness of his image as he knew it must appear to others drove him wild with distraction and despair.

He looked at his face in the bathroom mirror. He traced his cheekbones with his index fingers. They were too high—made him look like an Injun. But he wasn't an Injun—there wasn't a drop of Indian blood anywhere in his parentage. Even so, his nose was a little hooked at the end, with a slight hump in the middle, as if it had been broken once or twice (maybe he was an Injun after all). His eyes were deep brown, almost black. His skin was fair, with freckles along the arms and legs. His face, as he looked at it in the mirror that morning, showed not even a hint of a beard—not even any peach fuzz; he hadn't shaved yet, although he'd tried once and cut himself miserably. Some of the black guys in his class had been shaving for more than a year. This upset him.

"Hey, Steve—phone!" his brother's voice said through the bathroom door.

"Coming!"

He washed his hands and stepped out into the hallway. He picked up the phone.

"Hey, Steve!" a voice said.

"Hey, Rich," Steve said.

"Gonna meet me there?"

"I said I would, didn't I?" Steven said.

"Yeah," Rich said. "I just wanted to make sure you weren't gonna wimp out on me."

"I told you I wouldn't."

"I just want to make sure," Richard said.

"I won't," Steven said, a little perturbed, "okay? What time is it?"

"Nine-thirty," Rich said. "Half an hour."

"Well, I'll see you in half an hour," Steven said.

"If you don't wimp out on me," his friend said, laughing, and hung up.

Steven returned the phone to its receiver, swore to himself, and walked into his bedroom. His brother was listening to the Rolling Stones.

"Mick Jagger sounds like he swallowed a bowling ball," Steven said.

"Aw, the Stones are keen!" his brother said.

Steven gathered his things together and made for the door.

"Bob Dylan sings like he has asthma," his brother challenged.

"At least you can understand the words," Steven said, and walked out.

"Hey—close the door!"

"Close it yourself!"

Steven walked into the kitchen, picked up a pencil from the counter, and scribbled a note to his mother. He was leaving to go to the pool. He would be there all day with Richard (he didn't feel a need to mention the girls). Yes, he'd taken the garbage out. No, he had not mowed the lawn as he promised he would—would do it tomorrow. He felt terrible about not mowing the lawn—in fact, he wanted to kill himself. He hoped she still loved him, though he didn't think she did. Regards, Steven.

He folded the note in half, wrote "MOM" across the front of it, laid the pencil down, retrieved his towel and slipped quietly out the back door. He cut across the back yard, hopped the white board fence at the far end, cut through the Barkers' back lot, waved to Mrs. Barker in her kitchen window, and came out onto Mockingbird Lane. His mother wouldn't see him if he went this way.

He paced down the long slope of the hill, feeling the insistent Ohio sun on the back of his neck, listened to the steady flip-flop-flop of his faded blue rubber thongs as they slapped endlessly against his heel, swatted a few pesky gnats, then turned right onto Hillbrook Street and continued down the lane. When he got to the creek at the bottom of the hill he walked onto the bridge and stopped to have a look. Those scientists certainly had cleared up the pollution. A few years ago you couldn't have stopped here for more than thirty seconds—would've been asphyxiated. He spat into the creek, threw his towel over his shoulder, and continued up the other side of the hill.

Girls, girls, girls. He pulled up the steep hill and tried to shove them out of his mind, but they wouldn't go. They never went anywhere you told them to go, they never did anything you told them to do. They talked to much, they organized little enclaves and cliques, they made enemies quickly, they held grudges. But they were lovely, they were so very, very lovely! Steven's face flushed and beads of sweat broke out on his forehead as he cleared the crest of the hill. He could feel himself sweating inside his orange swimtrunks; he could feel himself sweating all over.

He walked over to the crosswalk button and pressed it.

A sleek, silver Chevy, driven by a young brunette in a frilly white blouse, glided by. The brunette's hair trailed in the wind. Steven watched the Chevy float past him and around the bend. Girls everywhere. And all so very, very lovely.

When the light changed he walked swiftly across the street, breaking into a lazy jog on the other side. He jogged

past the red brick, two-story high school, past the half dozen yellow-orange school buses parked around back, then slowed to a rapid walk. He could see the pool up ahead. He walked across the asphalt lot and came to rest on the bike rack near the pool entrance. He was eight minutes early. No Richard. He sat on the bike rack and waited.

He sat there for two minutes until he saw Richard's short, stocky form coming across the baseball field next to the Police Station. Richard was the exact opposite of Steven—all muscles, bluster and braggadocio. He kicked up dust as he came. About halfway across the baseball field he bent over, picked up a rock, stood, and flung it at a stray dog. The dog yelped and bolted. Richard's face broke into a grin, and he waved to Steven. He started to trot.

It was getting hotter. Steven could feel a trickle of sweat wend its way down his backbone; his shirt was getting wet with it. That pool would feel great right about now.

"How's it going, Shakespeare?" Steven said.

"Aren't you hot?" Steven said.

"The ladies think so," Richard said. "Where are they?"

"Haven't seen them yet."

"That's women," Rich said; "always late."

Just then a blue Ford Fairlane pulled up, stopped and the three girls got out. The woman who was driving—Cathy's mother—turned the ignition off, got out, and opened the trunk with her key. The girls removed their things. Cathy's mother had to borrow one of the girl's towels to shut the trunk—it was that hot.

"Hey, Rich," Cathy said. "Hey, Steve."

"Hey, Cath."

Cathy twitch-bottomed up the sidewalk, the slap of her thongs echoing off the school buses, and turned to wave to her mother. A girl named Miranda followed her up the sidewalk. Steven knew Miranda from school; she was a petite girl, with freckles and light brown hair. The third girl was someone Steven didn't know, but she looked a lot like the brunette who had been driving the silver Chevy.

"Hi-ya, Miranda," Steve said.

"Hey, Steve."

"This is my cousin—Roberta," Cathy said. "Roberta—Richard, Steve."

"Pretty hot out," Steven said to Roberta.

"Ain't it, though?" Robert said.

The five of them flip-flopped up the sidewalk to the pool entrance. Three minutes to ten. Steven sat on the railing next to the entrance.

"I wish they'd open the goddammed thing early," Rich said.

Steven said nothing. He sat on the railing and watched Roberta. The way she moved was different than the other girls. Something about her—something about the way she carried herself—was different than Miranda and Cathy. She possessed an ease of motion he'd rarely seen in girls his own age. Whenever she brushed the hair away from her face, or turned her head, or swatted absently at a gnat, he felt his entire body go rigid with attention. It was like watching a ballerina. Everything about her—the delicacy of her hands, the suddenness of her smile—suggested worlds of tenderness and grace of which Steven could only dream. He wanted to reach out and touch her; he wanted to extend his hand and feel her skin, the smoothness of it, the brownness of it. He wanted to—

"One more minute," Richard said disgustedly.

He wanted to know her somehow, to know something in her that he didn't know in himself, and by knowing that part of her, he felt, he would know once and for all what up to that point had only been imagined. He exhaled. He felt the trickle of sweat wend its slow path down his backbone, felt it increase its flow and soak the back of his shirt. The sun was hot on his back. He smelled the grass beneath him, pungent and newly-cut, the clipped dandelion stems lying haphazardly about the lawn like the candles of a birthday cake, their yellow flowers scattered about like flame. He looked up and saw Roberta toss her long brown hair over

her shoulder, followed the curve of her neck and breasts and abdomen, until his eyes came to rest on the pale ivory of her inner thigh. It was lovely there. His eyes rested on the paleness, the whiteness, until Roberta swung her head around, quite by accident, and caught his eyes suddenly in her own, caught them and held them. Steven felt helpless, powerless. White-hot shame flashed through him and his knees started to shake. Roberta held his gaze, would not let it go. He smelled the dewy grass beneath him, and the dandelion stems, stronger now, more pungent, their fragrance rising, catching his nostrils, mingling now with the talcum softness of Roberta's colonge; and his face burned. Finally she released him, letting him go like a kestrel from a tether, but not before she smiled mischievously and tossed her head back ever so gently, her hair flowing down behind her like the freed tethers of a kestrel. And not before Steven looked once and caught the mirth and favor in her eyes.

The gate opened and everyone except Roberta showed their season passes to the girl in the booth; Roberta had to pay separately. They walked around to the deep end of the pool, setting their things on the deck near the diving boards. Everyone stripped and immediately dove in.

The afternoon passed quickly. They alternated their time between swimming and sunning. Richard put his arms around Cathy once and kissed her on the ear. Steven kept half an eye on Roberta. Miranda was alone.

About four o'clock Steven and Roberta were swimming together by themselves in the deep end of the pool; everyone else was on the deck sunning themselves. The two of them paddled over to the side and rested their heads against the deck, their bodies underwater. It was the first time they had been alone all day.

"Water's kind of chilly," Steven said, shivering.

"Not so bad," Roberta said.

"Your lips are blue," Steven said.

"Yours are pink," Roberta said, laughing, "like flowers." She leaned toward him, stroking his chin with her hand, and kissed him tenderly. "I like flowers."

Steven felt his body go all rigid on him. He put his arm around Roberta's waist, and pulled her toward him.

"My!" she said, "you *must* be a flower—you're blossoming all over!"

"Am I?"

"Yes," she said. "All over. Petal by petal." With that she giggled, broke free of him, and dove off into the deep end. She surfaced a few seconds later and dog paddled back to him, stopping just out of arm's reach. "I want you to know," she said, "that I saw what you were looking at this morning—and I liked it." She laughed, blew him a chlorine kiss, and dove off again.

Later, at day's end, as the girls were loading their things into the blue Fairlane, Roberta gave Steven her phone number, and the directions, by bicycle, to her parents' house. She told him to come soon. She said she knew a place where they could go and tell secrets to one another. No one ever went there, she said.

Steven thrilled to hear it! But then he had to hold his towel in front of him to hide the small lump in his trousers.

He did not sleep well that night. He tossed and turned on his upper bunk, and finally, after three hours of fitful slumber, awoke, and could not get back to sleep. He climbed out of bed and padded into the living room. For a while he sat on the sofa and ran his fingers through his hair, then stood and walked over to the picture window and looked outside. It was three in the morning. Everything was quiet. Nothing, not even a leaf, stirred. There was a full moon. Steven's house, his street, his hand as he rested it on the windowsill—all of them paled under the blanched light of the moon. He watched a squirrel scurry across his front lawn: it, too, was whitened with moonlight. It occurred to him then that the paleness of the moon was the same color as the inside of Roberta's thigh, and that everything he had ever known or loved—his neighborhood, his home, his heart and even his hands—had taken on that same colorless tint of white, not actually the negation of all color, but

the absence of all colors except one. The whiteness surrounded him. His breathing concentrated itself and his entire body tightened. Something swelled in him, something wanted to burst, but it was a moment or two before Steven realized that it was Desire swelling in him, it was Desire wanting to burst, and not the sort of desire he had been accustomed to as a boy. This desire was different—stronger, more powerful, containing in it the anger of oceans and the howl of the wind. There was something in this desire which could not be denied. He felt a warmth flow through him, a warmth as continual as blood and seasons, and suddenly he didn't feel so awkward; suddenly he felt almost handsome. His hands began to tremble, his face began to glow. Everything had turned white.

He looked out into the street and tried to remember what Roberta had said. What had she said? That he was a flower. Yes, a flower. But what kind of flower? There were so many. What kind of flower?

Maybe he would never know. Maybe she would take him to the secret place, and they would tell their secrets to one another, and after it was over—maybe even then he wouldn't know. But he had to find out, he had to know. For he knew this much already: something stirred in him, something that made the flowers themselves stir, that made bees and wasps stir, and which nudged all of nature.

What kind of flower? He wished Roberta was there so he could ask her. But she was not, so he turned slowly from the window, seeing the whiteness of the room and his world, and felt himself blossoming.