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Baltimore Oriole flying by. One will not catch the oriole, and one will have lost the gentle ovenbird who wanted to nestle one warm under his wings.

Indeed, as a result of the extreme nervousness of movement in this forest, one hesitates to guess what percentage of successful mating encounters here. On a buggy evening one could assume this speed is prompted by a desire not to have tender arms and ankles nipped by nasty mosquitoes, but the same tempo maintains on bugless nights as well. Did the forest not prove helpful to some, it would not be so persistently populated, and yet, all the same, one often emerges later onto the parkside and comes upon the identical faces lining the benches and the wall, or cruising past them.

The costumes worn in the forest are apt to be rather primitive. One can occasionally see a *rara avis* there in a complete suit (usually some belle who will not speak to one while in the nude at the «Y» pool) or perhaps a college type with a sweater tossed jauntily over his shoulder, but in the main the Ivy League wardrobe is not much seen here. A T shirt, or a plain shirt, and a simple pair of slacks or jeans represent the approved costume. The colors are almost never spectacular, but nearly always muted, as if the figures felt compelled to try and lose themselves in the setting by assuming the protective camouflage of earth colours.

Negroes do sometimes flaunt red and orange, especially when it is quite dark, but many of them attire themselves so sombrelly it is impossible to discern anything about them except the fact that they are Negroes.

Figures with dogs can be seen in the enchanted forest, but as a rule they only approach each other. If their two dogs intermingle, it is possible for a conversation to begin on the logical basis of an inquiry about the sex of the other boy's dog. But, except with other dog-walker's, a dog is not usually helpful as a conversational gambit. It would seem as if the dog makes the boys uncertain as to the true purpose of his master's presence in the woods.

It should be noted, in coming to a conclusion, that this forest is not known by so romantic a name to the police. They call it The Ramble, and at least one newspaper has referred to it as a «notorious rendezvous for homosexuals».

Ah! but now, by using so brutal a word, we have shattered the mood which pervades the Enchanted Forest. This mood is not a gay mood, not a giddy mood, not a congenial mood; but neither is it a blunt and basic mood. It is rather the mood of some dimly lit ballet by Antony Tudor, where figures graze in the night and elude each other constantly. Here even the most masculine of damsels are blown about like fragile autumn leaves, dancing a rigadon of quiet despair.

«Well... so long»

by Hartsell Young

The music, liquid with saxes and clarinets, flowed out to them from the juke box inside the drive-in. Joe started to sing the lyrics as the second chorus began, his light baritone edged with a warm vibrato at the ends of phrases. At the release Ralph came in with him, his voice just a bit heavier and very straight. The girls hummed along with them. No one finished at quite the same time, and they all laughed at the ragged ending.

«You sound just alike,» Bunny said, her voice high and a little nervous after the laughter. «Didn't they, Sue?»

«Mm-hmm,» answered Sue from the front seat. «Quite a lot.»

Bunny wriggled sideways on the back seat and studied the two boys a while, her brown curls bouncing as she turned from Joe, beside her, to Ralph in the front seat with Sue. When she had finished her malted, she spoke again.

«It's true. You two are just about the most alike guys I've ever known.»

Ralph turned and grinned at Joe, who answered in the same way.

«We're really brothers, you know,» Ralph whispered. «When we were just babies the gypsies left us on doorsteps, Joe on the Carpenter's and me on the Thatchers'. Actually we're sons of Lord Whiffenpoof. Illegitimate, of course. We just found out this thing the other day when, by chance, we happened on a page of Burke's Peerage containing the whole story.» He went on to spin it into an elaborate tale, but Joe could tell by the crinkling at the corners of Ralph's eyes that he was pleased at the comparison. Joe felt pleasure too, but it seemed to have a cold edge that hurt across the heart.

«Oh, honestly!» Bunny bubbled on. «I mean really. You are terribly alike. You're both the same height —».

«Six—even,» Ralph put in.

«And the same build —».

«Ralph's at least two inches broader across the shoulders than I am,» said Joe.

«And you've got the same type of face, kind of broad and cheek-boney with short noses, straight and nice. And blue eyes the same light shade. And the same kind of hair. Except that Joe's gets curlier when it gets long.»

«And a little whiter in the summer,» Ralph added.

«Well, maybe. But that's not the amazing thing. You even talk alike. You say everything in the same way. Don't you think so, Sue?»

«What? Oh, yes,» Sue replied, her voice a little dreamy and distant. Her soft hazel eyes had hardly left Ralph for an instant since they had stopped. Her full, cyclamen lips touched the rim of the coke glass just very lightly, as if they were unwilling to accept so cool a substitute.

«You sure dance alike,» Bunny started again, recalling the grange affair they had just left. «Did you learn at the same place?»

She was answered by two husky giggles.

«We taught each other,» Joe said hesitantly after a period of silence.

«No kidding!»

«Yeah.»

«Well, you were always like that — never apart for five minutes as long as I can remember.»

The conversation shifted to the beginning of remembrance, and it was fixed at the day Sue and Bunny had come to the high school from one of the grade schools across town. More reminiscence followed. The ninth grade party. The semester Joe won the county competition in drawing. The spring Ralph went to the state track meet. Bunny's part in the senior play. The summer, this last summer when the four of them had been together so much. By the time the present was touched, a vague melancholy had weighted the subject and it sank slowly away as there seemed to be less to talk about.

Over, thought Joe. It was lasting forever, but now it's over. Such a long, wonderful time to seem so short now.

Bunny sighed. «I wish we hadn't left the dance so soon. It wasn't nearly over.»

«Well, we're working men and women now,» Ralph said immediately. «Except Joe. And you know why he has to be back early.»

«Yes. I'd almost forgotten. What time do you leave, Joe?»

«Seven-thirty.»

«Oh. College. Gee, I wish I were going.» Bunny's voice had softened to the point of being barely audible, and she toyed listlessly with her straws.

«Better roll — huh, Ralph?» Joe put in at once. He didn't want the talk to get back on that track.

«Yep.»

The boys split the tab and Ralph expertly swung his car in a short arc back onto the highway. It was a silent ride into town.

At the rutted little road that led down into the gravel pit, Ralph slowed down and glanced at Sue. She smiled and he grinned, but then he speeded up again. Joe looked away. They stopped at Bunny's house first, and Joe walked with her to the front porch.

«I wish so that I were going.» Her tone was the same as when she had said it before.

«Yeah. Well, it may not be such a much.»

«That's not what I mean exactly. I mean just going. I keep feeling that I'm stuck now and I'll never go anywhere.» She looked up at him, her dark eyes large in the moonlight.

«No you won't. I mean you'll get to where you want to go someday.» That was wrong too somehow, but he couldn't sort out his words right when the subject came up.

«You will write to me, won't you? I promise to write right back and tell you everything that's going on. Not that there will be much,» she finished bitterly.

«Sure. And I'll be glad to hear. Honest, Bunny.»

They were on the porch, and her skin was white, even in the shadow. She came close to him suddenly, and, standing on tiptoe, she met his lips lightly with hers. He held her very gently, his hands on her shoulder blades. Then he let her go.—

«Would you like to come in a while? Sue and Ralph wouldn't care.»

«I can't. Thanks, but I can't.» It was bald, but he could think of nothing but the truth to say.

«Oh, yes. Your train in the morning. Goodby, then.»

«Goodby.»

He waited until she had opened the door and started to walk inside. Her round little figure was slumped a bit now and her steps were slow. He was halfway down the walk before he heard the click of the latch.

Sue and Ralph were in a tight embrace as he approached the car. As he opened the back door, they slipped apart slowly and Ralph started the car. It was only a couple of blocks to Sue's house, and there they stopped again.

Joe found that his eyes were straining through the leafy shadow of the front yard toward the porch. It was difficult to see them — patches of silver from the moon moved in between — but he could make out Ralph's light jacket and Sue's white blouse as they merged and stayed that way. After a long while they parted slightly.

Joe got out of the car and then back into the front seat. The light shapes merged again. He looked away. The faint sound of whispers came to him whenever the leaves stopped rustling for a moment. Then Ralph was back in the car.

A light came on in the living room of the house. Joe saw Sue sit in a big chair by the window. There was something coolly serene about her face, and she folded her hands calmly in her lap.

Ralph put the car hastily in gear and started across town. The blocks went by fast. It was too soon again for Joe. Time fell away so suddenly it almost took his breath. He couldn't let it end yet. Just before their corner he found voice enough to say it.

«Ralph, it's really not late. Let's drive around and talk some.»

«Well. I don't know.» A frown was between Ralph's brows. Then he broke it and smiled, as if remembering, and swung the car in the opposite direction from their neighborhood. In a few minutes they were out on the Greenville road, dipping and swaying with the rolling country. The effortless ride soothed Joe and he was quiet.

Ralph laughed and clapped him on the knee. «Say something, then, you strong, silent old man you.»

Joe grinned momentarily, but the sober expression quickly came back. «I don't want to go, Ralph.»

«What do you mean? Sure you do.»

«No, I don't. I thought I did until just lately, but now I don't.»

«Don't be a nut. You've talked about going to college to be an architect ever since we were sticking pennies in piggy banks. It's really what you want most and these last minute jitters don't fool me any. Sure, you're going.» There was a slightly acid twist to the last words.

«Come with me.» The words seemed to come out by themselves, but the continuing honesty of everything he was saying tonight had stopped shocking him. «You could. You could sell the car and get a part-time job and go to school too. We could live together. Real cheap. You could go into engineering. I know you've always wanted to.» The words were so hard and bare and cold without the magic of the recurring daydream from which they sprang that Joe was dismayed. But he followed them up quickly and filled in details, tried desperately to make it all rosy.

Ralph finally cut across with, «Stop it! You know its no go. Christ, Joe! Hell, we've been over this and over it. You know my folks haven't got the money to help me out since Mom got sick. And my Dad's older now and needs me at the store. I just can't waltz off and leave him since that new chain outfit has come in to give him such stiff competition. You're different. Your folks can send you and not worry.»

«But you can't just stop now. You don't want to just work in a hardware store for the rest of your life — even if it is going to be yours someday. Do you?»

Ralph could only snort in answer. Then, after another silence, he said, «You're going on and I'm stopping. That's the way it is, and that's the end of it. There's nothing more to say.»

And there's Sue, Joe thought. He doesn't want to say it, but there's Sue. Joe forced the thought away and tried to take on another tone. «What's the matter, Ralph? We never used to talk like this and end up almost in a fight. Is it

just that I'm going away and you're staying here? It can't be just that. Why can't we talk like we used to, be like we used to?»

Ralph sighed. «How was it? How did it used to be? I'm forgetting already.»

«Well, it was like dreaming. Dreaming out loud. And in harmony.»

«Was it? Well, the dream's over now.»

Ralph turned the car into a dirt road that would take them across to another highway, one that led back into town. Something about the next hill clicked a response in Joe's memory.

«Stop just the other side of this next rise.»

When they reached it, they saw their old pond to the right of the road. Its ripples were catching the moonlight. The deserted, ramshackle barn was black beside it. The beeches that rose from the far end of the swale were just a long, irregular silhouette.

«Remember?» Joe asked softly.

«Yeah.»

«Saturday afternoons when it was hot and taking our bikes out here and the cool, green water. It was great.»

«Yes. Yes, it really was.»

Joe's next words slipped out slowly, but his tone gathered strength as the memory swam over him out of the past. «'Member one afternoon — how old were we — fourteen maybe — when we went back in the barn after we'd dried in the sun and —».

«Yeah».

The roughness of Ralph's tone stopped Joe's words, but the memory kept on. The softer warmth of the barn after the brassy sun outside. The smell of dust and old hay and the lingering odor of horses. The lines and flecks of light that found their way through the roof and walls. The feel on their skins.

«Lets walk down there,» Joe blurted.

«What for? Scene of the crime idea?»

«I don't think of it that way.»

«I do. When I think of it at all. And I don't much.»

«It wasn't that really. It was just kind of an experiment. Sort of.»

«Yeah? Well, maybe. Anyway, it's all in the past. Kid stuff.»

«I suppose so. But that's where part of the dreaming was. That's where we dreamed out loud for each other.»

Ralph started the car again and they said the little that was nothing while they came back the other highway into town.

The high school came into view, its panes holding the moonlight for a second. They were mirrors in that instant, reflecting back four years at them. Ralph brought the car to a sudden halt.

«I'll be darned,» he exclaimed, «the hurdles are still out on the track!»

Six of them were spaced out on the straight stretch in front of the bleachers. Ralph got out and Joe followed.

«I wonder if I can still take 'em,» Ralph speculated in a low murmur that was hardly more than thinking out loud. «Think I'll try.»

He dropped his jacket on the ground and loped onto the track. He crouched for a moment in the runners position and then sprang forward in a good start. The hurdles were not set quite straight on the track, but he still cleared them all, striding easily between and sailing over each with what looked like no effort at all.

When he had cleared the last one, Joe applauded, but the single claps echoed too hollowly in the night. Ralph trotted over and picked up his jacket.

«Not bad,» he said. «And not even winded either.»

«Good boy,» Joe said and slapped him on the back. Ralph stepped away toward the car at once.

«Better make it for home now, huh?» Ralph asked when they were back in the seat.

«I suppose.»

As he started the car, Ralph said very casually, «I promised Sue I'd come back for a while after I took you home. She must really be wondering what became of me.»

«She might have gone to bed by now.» The words were difficult because Joe knew they weren't true.

«No, I don't think so.»

«Don't her folks mind? About you being there late at night, I mean?»

«No. They know we're going steady and they think it's ok.»

Joe felt that Ralph was about to say more, so he got a grip on his questions and held them back. When they had stopped in front of Joe's house, the rest came out.

«Sue and I are just about engaged.»

«Just about?»

«Yeah. I think we really will be soon.»

«Oh. No other plans? Plans ahead, I mean.»

«No, not yet. But soon, probably. What do you think about it, Joe?»

«Swell. She's a fine girl.» Five words from way off somewhere. The sound wasn't his voice at all.

«Yeah. Thanks. I knew you liked her. Well, this is the last one, kid. But I'll be seeing you vacations, of course.»

«Yes. Well . . . goodbye, Ralph.»

They shook hands.

«Well . . . so long,» Ralph said, his voice too relaxed and flat. The door closed and Ralph started the car and drove off toward Sue.

Without looking back, Joe walked straight into the house and then up to his room. From his window he could look across the block to Ralph's house. Ralph's bedroom, like Joe's, was in the back. He remembered how they used to wave a goodnight to each other.

Joe undressed slowly and hung up his clothes. Then, in his pajamas, he pulled a chair before the window and sat down. It was a long wait. Ralph's window stayed dark a long time.

Then it was an oblong of light suddenly. Ralph appeared in it for a moment. Joe sprang to his feet. His arm was tense and ready to wave.

Ralph lowered the shade. His shadow crossed and re-crossed in front of the shade. Then the shade went up part way again and Joe could see Ralph in the topless pajamas that he always wore. Then he disappeared and the light went out. He hadn't even looked across.

Joe turned out the light in his own room and wearily crawled into bed. The quilt was a weight of defeat over him. He pressed his face into the pillow. As sleep welled within him, the words came back. «. . . so long.» «How long?» he murmured. And, though he knew his own mind was thinking it, the voice seemed to be Ralph's when it answered, «From now on.»