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Beside Still Waters

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The sun had just begun to set as they drove to the side of the highway and stopped. Brad stepped out, went around to the other side of the car and opened the door for Dierdre. Everything was just as he had remembered it. Funny, he thought, how one could hold a mental picture so perfectly for eight years. He wished that he had come here alone, that he had left Dierdre at the motel and had driven out here by himself. However, here she was, dressed like any young woman on a Florida honeymoon; looking and acting like . . . like the car she had talked him into buying; costly, gaudy.
"What is this place to you, anyway, Brad? Why did we just have to come here? I didn’t even have time to fix my makeup.” Her voice grated on his mind like sand. He hated her, hated her because she was here, in this place, and had no right to be.

“Nothing, just a place that I used to frequent on vacations when I was in school. I just wanted to see it again, while I was here. I’ve never had the money to come back, since I landed in New York.” He lied uneasily, hoping that she wouldn’t dig too far. He started to walk toward the ocean. Dierdre followed, complaining all the way.

“Brad, do we have to go any farther? I’ll get sand in my shoes.”

“Oh, for Christ’s sake! Take them off or stay in the car. I’m going down to the water!” His voice was sharp and bitter.

“Don’t shout at me! I’m not your whipping boy.” Dierdre was having a hard time in the deep sand with her spike heels. It gave Brad some perverse pleasure to quicken his stride. What a hell of a way to start a marriage, Brad thought. Jesus, how do I get myself into these things? Why?

Why? This was a question that Brad had asked himself many, many times before. That was the reason that he had come to this place, where he and Clive Thompson had spent their last day together. He stood gazing out across the water, into the sun. The searing redness of it burned into his eyes, and he remembered.

II

“It’s all over, isn’t it?” Clive looked as if someone had just slapped him, for a reason he couldn’t understand. His handsome dark eyes were brimming, glistening in the dim candle-light of the restaurant where he and Brad had eaten every Friday evening since they had met, nearly a year ago. Brad looked at his plate, wishing that the Kid wouldn’t be so damned intense about it. It had been coming for weeks—the Kid should have realized it. This sort of thing never lasted, for very long, anyway. The Kid should have known, but something—or someone—kept saying that the Kid couldn’t have. The Kid was too young, too green, to realize that you couldn’t fight what was, had been and always would be. He hoped now that he could say the right thing, to give the Kid some kind of help. He looked up, afraid to speak, lest he say something that would set the Kid off—he wasn’t too emotionally stable. He had seen just such people fold under the strain of what was coming.

“Kid, it is over. It always ends something like this. I don’t know why—I’d like for it to have gone on. I don’t want it to end, believe me. I’d do anything to stop it, but I can’t. I’ve seen what happens
when people in our circumstances try to hold onto something that isn’t theirs any longer. They wind up hating each other—and hating themselves. After a certain point, it just isn’t any good any longer. It only begins to destroy what good memories are left of the original, the real experience. I didn’t make it that way—I’m not God—I . . .” He stopped and lowered his gaze again. The Kid was sitting across from him, puzzled and deeply hurt. That was his trouble—he had always been too easily hurt. He wasn’t strong—at least not strong enough to play with his mind.

“All right—it’s all gone. Nothing left. So where do we pick up? What do we do with the pieces? I know I’m green, all right! OK, so what the hell, am I supposed to walk out of here tonight, and act like nothing had ever happened? Just walk out and, when I see you tomorrow, smile a friendly smile and say ‘hello,’ and go on and on, pretending? Is that the way out? If it is, I don’t want it. I don’t want any part of that sort of lie. Make it true, or don’t bother. I’ll figure something out by myself.”

Here we go, here we go right to the third ward, Brad shuddered. Keep it up, Kid, and we’ll both end up in strait-jackets. Oh God . . . Jesus! Why do I let myself in for these things? Why do I do it over and over again? Brad struggled with his mind, trying to clear as much as possible of his brain to grasp something, anything, that might help both of them. “Kid, when you hit that dog last summer, just after we bought the car, you remember?” The Kid nodded a suspicious assent. He wasn’t following. “Well, what did you do? You cried, you let off steam. You even swore up and down that you’d never drive again. For a dog! But you did drive again. I made you drive again, because you had to beat the thing that made you feel guilty and hurt. This is something like that, only a hell of a lot bigger, I’ll admit. But you can’t give in. You’ve got to be strong . . . because . . . because a lot of fine people are counting on you to make this thing right. People who aren’t even sure about what’s been going on; like your parents. They think everything’s fine. Don’t you sense any feeling of indebtedness to them? Oh, hell, I know it hurts. I know, because I’ve been through the same damn thing God knows how many times. But I also know that you’ll get over it. I’ve gotten over it, but I’ve had to fight all the way, just as you’re going to have to fight, if you’re going to pull through this thing with your mind in one piece.”

“But why? Why must it end? What did we do wrong? I’d do what you say, only I’m not convinced that it has to be this way. Why can’t things be different, just this time?” The Kid was fighting now, but in
the wrong direction. He should have been fighting away from the thing, not toward it. This sort of behavior could only make things worse. This was going to take time, patience. It wasn’t going to be at all like the last time, when things had gone so smoothly that there had hardly been an interruption in Brad’s life. This was going to be agony.

“Look, Kid, don’t get all in a huff. I’ve had my little say for now. I’ve tried to warn you about what’s to come, at least as far as my experience can direct me. If you want to keep on trying, I can’t do much but go along. But, Kid, I’m telling you, it’d be much easier if you did it my way.”

“I’m not begging for the easy way out! I’m willing to fight, but for what we have, not against it!”

“OK, Kid. If that’s the way you want it . . . let’s ditch this place before they throw us out for loitering.” Brad picked up the check, looked at it, then put several small bills on the tray. They headed toward the door. Once inside the car, Brad felt a little assurance coming back. Maybe the thing wasn’t over. Maybe this one was going to last. He had heard of such things, but experience had taught him differently. He didn’t want to go back to the apartment.

“Do you have classes tomorrow, Kid?”

“How are you doing in there?”

“I think I’ve just about got it aced. I’ve had three tests of ninety-five, or better.”

“I just thought that we might take a run down to the Keys. We could be there by dawn, if we drove all night. We need to get away from that damned apartment for a while. You’ve been working too hard, too. Maybe if we get away, you know, change of scenery, this thing will clear itself up. We can buy shirts and summer slacks when we get there. No sense in wasting a lot of time in packing. We’ll slum it.” Clive laughed a little, and Brad was glad to hear it. Things wouldn’t look half so bad, once they had relaxed a little.

The sun was just beginning to color the eastern skies when they reached the Docks, where Brad had planned to breakfast. Clive had slept nearly all the way, but it had not been a peaceful sleep. The Kid had whined and whimpered all night, and it had not made it any easier for Brad to think of what he was to have to do eventually. He parked the car in front of a respectable-looking restaurant that they had never patronized before. He turned to the Kid, who was still sleeping in the back seat. “Come on, Kid. It’s time we had a little
chow.” The Kid started, then sat up, rubbing his eyes in a bewildered manner, as if he didn’t quite know where he was or why he was there.

“Gosh, Brad, are we here already? Why didn’t you wake me up? I wanted to drive a little, to help you out.”

“I couldn’t have, without stopping. You were sleeping too soundly. Besides, you need the sleep. That’s what we’re here for, so you can get a little rest before you swing into exams. Does this place look all right to you?”

“Sure, any place that’s clean. We’re slumming it, remember?” The touch of light-heartedness in Clive’s voice sounded as natural as anything he had said in the past two weeks.

After breakfast they looked for a haberdashery in the little town. It was several degrees warmer than when they had left the University at Athens, and they were anxious to shed the suits they had been wearing. They had a great time puttering around, and it was almost noon when they finally reached a lonely stretch of beach where they thought they could swim and lounge about undisturbed. Stripping down to the suits they had thoughtfully put on under their new clothes, they threw blankets on the sand. Clive was ecstatically excited. “Race you in!” He started off in the direction of the water.

“What the hell are you trying to do, drown?” Brad’s impatient voice rang out after him, stopping him as if he had been shot. “We’ve never used this beach before. You don’t know how deep the water is, or how cold. Take it easy, Kid, before they send you home in a basket!” The anger was gone from his voice before he had fallen into stride with Clive.

The water, it turned out, was deep enough for good swimming, and cold enough to bite into them and make them appreciate the hot sun as they ran back across the beach to their blankets. The chicken they had bought for luncheon at the restaurant that morning was excellent. After they had finished eating, they stretched out in the sun and slept. It was nearly four o’clock when Clive awoke. He sat up and lit a cigarette. The sea was very calm, readying itself for its rushing trip inward to the high-water posts that lined the beach near the highway. Clive nudged Brad with his foot. “It’s four. I’m going in again, OK?” Brad rolled lazily toward him, then looked out to sea. It seemed calm enough. No need to go in with him; the Kid was probably the better swimmer of the two.

“OK, but be careful, and don’t go out beyond your depth.” The words were hardly out before the Kid was off across the beach. Brad grimaced after him. Twenty years old, and he acted like twelve at
times. What the hell, though, he was having fun. Lazily Brad turned over and slept.

It was dark again before Brad awoke. It was cold, and a stiff wind blew from the water. The water itself was beginning to roll toward the highway, and the breakers were already over Brad’s head. The Kid! Where was the Kid? Brad’s mind raced over the afternoon, and with sickening premonition he remembered that the Kid had gone back into the water. He bolted up, running toward the sea. In seconds his calls turned to screams as he ran insanely up and down the beach, stumbling and falling in the deep, soft sand. There was no answer to his cries but that of the waves, crashing inward, preparing for the storm which was just beginning.

III

The rest of the night and weeks followed like a nightmare, confused and unreal. The drive back into town, the searching, the newspapers, Clive’s stricken parents all blended into a thick and binding horror that still caused Brad to wake up in the night, raving. All of it seemed now to rush back like the waves on that night eight years ago.

Clive’s body had never been found—the storm had taken care of that. All that had been left were his things in the apartment and his parents. God, Brad thought now, what had been more difficult; packing the Kid’s things or talking to his parents for the last time? Mr. Thompson had been quiet, stunned by the tragedy that had left him childless. Clive’s mother had been hideously accusing, pointing out that Clive had had a heart ailment and that Brad should have known it. Brad hadn’t known it—Clive had never mentioned it—but Mrs. Thompson had gone on and on, until her suffering husband had at last said goodbye and left the apartment. His wife had hesitated, giving Brad one last long look of purest hate, and had followed.

Brad had gone to hell in the awful, accusing months that had followed. He had left Athens, just before exams, gone as far west as he could and worked, for a time, as a two-bit copywriter for a dying cinema company. He had drunk himself into insensibility, out of his job and inheritance. His father had died during this time, and Brad had not had the money to go back to Massachusetts. Later, when he had come back east, his mother had refused to see him.

He had ended up in the Village, trying to work the unspeakable thoughts out of his mind by writing. He had seen couch-doctors and clergymen alike, until he had given up in despair and had started on what his acquaintances had wagered would be his last binge.
The binge had ended suddenly one morning when he had awakened to find Dierdre in his tiny kitchen, fixing a breakfast for the both of them. She had stayed on, cooking for him, sleeping with him, pushing him away from the bottle and back to the typewriter, until he had finished his book.

After the book was finished, he had felt a period of satisfaction and tranquillity that he had almost forgotten how to enjoy. The book, however, spurred Dierdre on to new heights of ambition. The book was good, the book would sell, the book must be submitted. It had gone from publisher to publisher, until one had accepted it for paperback edition. Dierdre had been elated, but Brad had felt like he had prostituted, somehow, something that wasn’t really his.

Dierdre had then insisted upon marriage. God only knew why—she had been perfectly content (or, at least, had seemed that way) to continue on in their consensual relationship until after the book had sold. Then she had changed, and the result was that they had been married, bought that goddamn Lincoln with the majority of the conditional royalties and had started off for Florida. All the way down she had harped on how they would buy a house with the money from his next book. Next book—that was a laugh! The thought of starting in on something else had sickened him. He had tried to tell her, but she had insisted that it was only a negative reaction caused by his working so hard on the first.

IV

The sun had finally set, leaving them standing in the dusk and cool evening breeze. Dierdre’s voice broke into his thoughts:

“Brad, let’s go. I’m getting cold. Brad . . . Brad! You’re not even listening to me. You’d think that you were waiting for someone, the way you stare out at the water. Let’s go. This place gives me the creeps. I’m hungry, and I want to have time to put on a new face before we go to dinner.” Brad turned back toward the car, his whole body shaking with hate for this woman who stood so insistently beside him.

“Shut up and leave me alone, Dierdre! Can’t you see I’m lonely?”