

A DISCOVERY IN THE WOODS

Outside the moon hovered just below the verandah roof as though spying on our trespass within. We'd traded in the barely visible trees and brush for the near impenetrable darkness of this abandoned house. Now the black woods and moon had to await our departure before they could resume their menace.

Stepping away from where I'd been hiding against the back wall, I said, "It's like me and you are the only ones in class with any balls."

The silhouette of a crewcut moonlit head rose turned toward me. The head (my friend Tony) said, "Without me you'd still be outside."

"I'm here, ain't I?" I said. "Who else from class would come inside this place? Most of them aren't even allowed in the woods."

"Driscoll, Oates," Tony insisted, "if they weren't at practice. Bet they'd come in here. In a second."

"I doubt it," I mumbled because they weren't around to hear me. Those guys liked to pound heads if they disagreed with your opinion. Even though they were sixth graders like us, they often called themselves the real men in class.

I pulled at my shorts. I couldn't see if the nicks on my leg were bleeding. I could barely make out my legs. "My Mom's already going to punish me but if it gets any later . . ."

"Look what I found," Tony flashed something in my face. "Tony baby strikes again!"

The Eveready flashlight did not illuminate the whole one storey house but it did reveal glimpses of bare rafters and bricks and falling down latticework and some left-behind things on the floor.

Tony suddenly exclaimed, "What have we here?!"

He slid this shoeshine box toward him and searched inside it. The flashlight studied each item hopefully - a can of Gillette shaving cream, a safety razor, a pack of double edged razor blades, an old barber style razor. Only the barber razor avoided being shoved back inside the box, though after Tony opened and closed the thing a few times it too got discarded. As he climbed off the floor the flashlight bounced off the wall and ceiling.

I hadn't said anything earlier when it was getting too dark for us to make it back to the road. I needed Tony to hang around with, especially since we'd

both recently been cut from the Pop Warner football team. All those football guys considered Tony pretty tough but were not so convinced about me. It was a mystery that they couldn't see that me and Tony were cut from the same cloth. But I needn't prove that point this second, so I said “. . . There's nothing in here. It would be different if some bats were flying around . . .”

Atop an open dusty old secretary desk, the flashlight beam landed on a calendar. It was not open to our month - September - nor our year - 1966. But we flipped through the months as if it were beckoning us to purchase a lifetime subscription. Photos of women, struggling to hide their naked bodies behind towels or blankets or folded arms, paraded before our eyes.

“Now this is something,” Tony nodded unconvincingly, as though this discovery was a little outside his field of expertise.

“Yeah,” I said weakly. The calendar could probably get you excommunicated from ten churches.

Tony tried to roll the stiff calendar into a baton that he could stuff in the back of his shorts. “Bet Oates and the guys will jump out of their skins tomorrow when I show them this at school!”

“When WE show them,” I wanted to impress those big shots too. Last Sunday when the team had their first Pop Warner game I never left the house for fear I’d hear cars honking in celebration or see one of the guys peddling home with shoulder pads on their handle bars like a warrior returning from battle .

Two raps came on a window pane. Tony stared for a moment before he thought to turn off the flashlight. It did not matter as they were already coming through the back opening.

“Trespassers!” the first boy entering said gleefully. His pompadour flipped to the sound of his boots once he stepped onto the old floorboards; two partners followed him inside but remained by the backdoor. These guys were bigger than us though not nearly as big as some kids I’d seen on the field at high school football games. The two by the back entrance appeared like shades as their chewing and spitting were the only things keeping them from disappearing into the dark.

“We were just going,” I volunteered, like we were graciously surrendering the rest of our allotted haunted house time.

“Did I tell anyone to open their mouth?” the pompadour guy said, accepting the flashlight out of Tony’s hands with a tug even though Tony held it forward so as to hand it to him. He turned the flashlight on us then pointed the beam down onto the floor where Tony had tossed the now unfurled calendar.

“Stealing property?” the pompadour guy asked.

“We aren’t allowed to steal,” I said. “We go to Catholic school.”

“You ain’t allowed in here either,” the pompadour guy said, looking back at his two sidekicks. “Didn’t stop you from nosing around, did it?”

“The door wasn’t locked,” Tony said hesitantly, glancing toward the black woods outside the door-less back entrance.

The two door boys asked their leader if he was going to take that.

“Shut up!” the pompadour guy warned his buddies. His flashlight beam jumped to them; they covered their eyes like surprised criminals. This cylinder of double D batteries was making us captive to its single eye spectral view .

The pompadour guy moved to the side to study us further. He said, “Why you sneaking around our place in the dark?!”

Outside, katydids still droned in the woods like they didn’t have the sense to change their call. The moon knew better. It had retreated from peeking in the window and had circled further up in the sky, its ghostly light now illuminating a grove of oaks and maples as if whatever purpose it had served the house, good or bad, had been accomplished. Inside the muggy September darkness seemed like it would swallow us all if it weren’t for the flashlight beam awaiting an uncertain outcome.

“We won’t tell anyone,” I said to the floor, anxiously shuffling my Keds’ sneakers. “I swear.”

“Tell anyone what?” asked the pompadour guy uneasily. He reached in his top shirt pocket and pulled out something that he stuck in his mouth.

I was going to say ‘about the house’ but Tony jumped in and said, “That you keep a stinking dirty calendar. ”

The flashlight clicked off. Within seconds my nose was scraping varnish dust off the floorboards. Beside me on the floor Tony flopped his legs like a captured bullfrog. But he stopped when the pompadour guy announced that he'd found the razor.

"Well, kiddos," the Pompadour guy proclaimed, "We only allow men in here. So we'll need to fix that . . ."

Despite my screaming that I had never wanted to come inside this house, the barber razor carved the same marks on my cheek as Tony's. I didn't go to my sixth grade classes the next day, even though the cuts on my face made me look tough. My mother accepted my half-lie that we'd gotten lost in the woods and that I'd cut my cheek climbing over a fence and that I needed off from school because the event had made me dehydrated and nauseous. I tried to distract myself at home with cartoons and comic books, but there was this foreboding that I couldn't return to who I was; that I had been exposed as a fraud and that I now harbored, or had become aware that I harbored, an unrepentant sin.

That Saturday I entered the confessional booth with Father Harvey. I was about to tell him of my shame; yet I could only admit that I'd beaten up some protestant greasers and had cursed and gloated while doing so.

END

