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THE FAIR CHILD

Some little thing can pretty much determine what later happens to you. The thing may be just a pain around your heart, a note someone hands you, an overheard comment, a shout in the street, a shot in the dark, a discovered fact. And because of that little thing, you can become obsessed. You should try to forget it or get over it or rationalize it. But what if you don't or can't? Say that you are sitting in your cozy bedroom and you find the end of a strand of yarn at your feet. You are intrigued. And you start pulling the loose thread toward you, hand over hand, like a boy with a fish on a line. You keep waiting for the end to come. If the yarn is unbroken, you just keep reeling it in. You could stop, or you could get up and try to find the source. But you probably just keep intently on. Finally, a thick tangle at your feet, the end comes. And then if you suddenly remember a wool sweater of that color, you can imagine that you have unwittingly managed to unravel something that you valued.

Now the whole effect is a lot worse if you really are aware of the end and still keep on. What if, for instance, Theseus, after killing the Minotaur in the labyrinth, had sat down and started to reel in the yarn that Ariadne, without her father's knowledge, had given her hero. Picture Theseus sitting there bringing in the yarn that he had carefully strung out behind him on the way in. You can imagine what he would have thought when he reached the end. He probably would have looked at that dead bull and sighed.

Her name was Mary, and it is not just incidental that that reminds me of a song we used to sing. Mary was, I believe, the prettiest girl I have ever known, with the sweetest smile and the fairest skin. Not that I ever really knew her. And I can remember very little of what she ever said. And I am aware that she never thought much of anything. Of course I know that she is now forty-five and that if you were to mention my name, she'd say, "Who?" But she was always very nice to me. And since I haven't seen her since she was nice and lovely, I allow myself the pleasure of forgetting what I know and believing what I wish. My mother used to call this attitude puppy love.

If I had known Mary when I was eighteen, I never would have felt toward her the way I still do. I would have come to her in a different way,

with some experience, and I believe that her attitude toward me would not have been what it was or now is. But when you are fourteen, you can find yourself in really quite odd situations and yet you can accept them as if they are normal and almost, in fact, expected. Your innocence hasn't been violated. You are wide-eyed, and everything is as it seems. The world is very pleasant, so long as the truth hasn't shattered it.

For two months that year I was shut into a private world. I stayed in my bedroom, quarantined by scarlet fever. I was very sick for two weeks in that darkened room, and then I was only exhausted. I wasn't supposed to read, for fear of my eyes. But I remember reading the New York *Daily Mirror*, and I remember playing the horses. I'd pick the names of the winners of all eight races at some track in Florida, write the names down, along with the money I'd bet, if I had had any money. The next day I'd check the *Mirror* to see how well I had done. I didn't really know anything about horses or horseracing, so I'd just pick the names I liked. Names are not a very reliable guide; I usually lost.

I remember a paperweight that used to sit on the bedside table. It was a glass object about the size of a baseball, and it had a flat, bronze base. The object was unexpectedly heavy. The glass was thick and smooth, and the bottom was covered with green felt. The ball itself contained some heavy liquid. I would lie on my side with the paperweight about seven or eight inches from my eyes. I would gaze for hours into that little ball, at the two little evergreen trees and the little red rose between them. Inside the ball there was also a little house with green shutters, and you could imagine all sorts of things.

If you shook the little ball, the inside of the globe suddenly filled with little flakes of snow, and you could watch the snow floating down around the little trees and the rose and the little house. And you could imagine you were like some god that could, by just a shake, upset the little world and cause the little snow to fall.

I had two other ways to pass the time. The first was to hold my breath; I became so good at this that I could go for two and a half minutes without breathing. The second way was to count numbers. I'd just lie there in my bed and count to ten thousand. Then I'd start counting again. When I wasn't doing anything else, I kept dreaming about the immediate past.

Buzz, who at the time was eighteen and was, like Mary, a senior, had been my older brother's friend. He had the kind of pleasant face that would,

as it grew older, become thin and drawn, like a saint in an El Greco painting. One day right after school, in early December of one year, I found myself climbing into his 1926 Essex and going to pick up Mary, his girl friend. The three of us then drove up to Fairchild's Pond, where we spent the thin, cold afternoon skating on new ice. The day was like a day having fun in an empty church. And after that time, all that long winter, two or three afternoons a week, right after school, whenever the weather was good enough and there was no new snow, the three of us would journey up to Fairchild's Pond to spend the afternoon. There was a remarkable, fresh innocence about those hours spent on the ice.

I don't know why I was included, why I was asked to go along, but after that first time, my being along was the accepted thing. I never asked to go. I never considered not being wanted and I never didn't want to go. We'd get out of school at one-thirty, and at about two o'clock Buzz would pick me up, and we'd go to pick up Mary. Usually only a few other skaters went to the pond during the week. You felt as if you could be skating on some huge stage or on the moon. You reached the top of the steep hill, and, unexpectedly, Fairchild's Pond would spread before you like a platform of translucent glass. The road circled around the pond and continued up the hill. Evergreen trees formed a green wall around the ice pond, and you felt that it was a private place, a place that people had not yet ruined.

Sometimes Buzz and Mary would skate expertly together, and sometimes I would skate with Mary, holding both her hands and gliding along with her. Sometimes Buzz would swoop, spin, and leap on the ice, or he would weave figure eights, his hands behind his back. Sometimes Buzz and I would find ourselves standing like trees in the center of the frozen pond, and Mary would skilfully encircle us, effortlessly pushing off on each skate as she made a large graceful ring around us, the dark-green trees a background to her red skill. Buzz and I would slowly turn so that we could watch as, her legs precisely scissoring, she cut an enormous figure on the ice, encompassing us, closing us in.

My ankles were weak, and except when Mary and I skated together and I could depend upon her, I was terrible. And sometimes I would try to skate backwards alone, and Mary would stand in front of me in a curious knock-kneed way and she'd call to me: "Stephen". And I would clumsily put the unyielding ice between us, and she would clap her hands, and when I fell, she would come, happily giggling, to my aid. Then we thought the ice would never break and that those winter afternoons would never cease.

There was a one-time-white shack at the edge of the pond where you could buy hot chocolate, and we'd go in there in the drab, late afternoons, with our skates still on, the floor filthy, the squat stove throwing its feeble heat. And the fresh, cold air would issue from our clothes, and our now-gloveless hands would feel thick and awkward, and in our hands the chipped mugs would be pleasantly hot, and the chocolate would sweetly burn our mouths, and with our feet on clumsy skates, we would wobble around, like happy cripples. Mary's cheeks would glow, and her eyes would sparkle, and her teeth would gleam, and we'd laugh at nothing. She would turn from one of us to the other. And then we'd exchange little smiles.

Buzz and Mary never acted like kids in love. Except while skating together, they never held hands or used little acts of violence in order to express affection. They seemed like decorous friends. And I liked them. I never felt shut out by them. I always tried to buy the hot chocolate, and when Buzz wouldn't let me, I'd buy cookies or crackers or something. Every time we went to Fairchild's Pond, I always managed to spend every penny I had. It wasn't that they were together and that I was along. We were all three together, like very good friends or members of a secure, happy family. After skating, we'd drive in the early dark from the pond, and sometimes we'd sing all the way down the mountain. And Buzz would drop me at my house and then he'd take Mary home.

We'd never go skating on weekends when other kids would go. I'm not sure why we never went on Sundays when everyone was undirected and uneasy and dissatisfied. But on Fridays after school and on Saturdays Buzz couldn't go. He spent that time working in his uncle's barber shop. If you went in and a chair was vacant, Buzz would fasten the large white sheet around your neck, and he'd comb your hair, and after the haircut, he'd take off the sheet. If you were someone important, he'd then help you on with your coat and brush off your suit. From time to time he'd sweep the hair off the floor and straighten the magazines on the table. Sometimes he'd put the lather on the back of your neck and around your ears. And, rarely, he'd be allowed to shave the back of your neck and around your ears. And he could trim your eyebrows and the hair in your nostrils. Usually, however, Buzz would just stand around like some supernumerary and smoke. The barber shop wasn't a very tough place, but you could find dirty pictures in a drawer near the sink.

We had a week of very bad weather in early March and the streets were almost deserted. Since we couldn't skate, the three of us went one eve-

ning to the movies. It was one of those musical spectacles that were so popular during the Depression. It was one of those wish-fulfilling movies in which all the girls seem nineteen and beautiful, all the boys seem twenty and handsome, and all the problems seem momentous. The screen glowed with huge faces, smiling through tears. The hero always wins the heroine in the last scene, and their end is assured. Success is sacrificed to love. I remember watching the production numbers, and toward the end of the movie, I acted as if I knew the song sung by the hero, faking my way through the simple-minded tune, as if I were all alone there, softly singing for my own amusement a song I knew. And Mary turned to Buzz, who was sitting on her other side, and said, "Isn't Stephen just wonderful, Buzz?" And she reached over and patted my head, as if I were the chosen one. I felt guiltily happy.

And then the lovers on the screen faded. THE END. And the lights went up. And in front of us was only a huge, dirty-white screen, and the seats were old and patched, and the oiled floor was covered with popcorn and with candy wrappers. An apple core was at my feet. And I felt empty and cheated, as if the spectacle had no right to end so soon. And we rose and stretched in a place that was now more like a barn than a place for dreams. It had been Bank Night at the movies, and about fifty bland, ordinary people rose too and filed slowly up the aisles, as if they too were reluctant to enter the flinty night.

And then I got scarlet fever. At first I felt only very hot, but then I developed an ugly rash. I collapsed in school. I was taken home and put upstairs in one of the bedrooms. A nurse was hired to take care of me. And the room was kept dark, and almost no one came upstairs: everyone was afraid I would die. I remember feeling very hot and weak and worn out. The hours buzzed on, and I kept falling in and out of impossible dreams. And then my fever was gone, and my skin was smooth and clear, and I was better. I felt thin and fragile, like David Copperfield's mother. The nurse left the house, and the room was no longer dark, and my brothers and sisters came and stood in the doorway and said hello.

I played the horses and gazed at the paperweight world and held my breath and counted numbers. And I was always dreaming about Mary, her lovely face. I would remember skating with her on Fairchild's Pond and how she would laugh. And I'd remember her fresh skin and her rosy cheeks and her bright smile. I'd remember that she said I was wonderful. Then I'd calculate the difference in our ages, and I'd decide that when I got out of college I'd be only twenty-one (if they'd pass me that year) and she'd be only

twenty-five. And maybe I could grow a beard or something, and if I was always nice and kind and showed her that I really loved only her, she'd perhaps be willing to marry me. I didn't think that Buzz wanted to get married yet, and maybe they'd be content to be just friends. But then I'd think how beautiful Mary was, and I would feel hopeless. I felt like dying with pure desire for her.

In the mornings I would feel unpleasant, having slept but not rested. I remember having to roll from one side of the bed to the other while my stepmother, who was now my nurse, changed the bottom sheet. Then she would change the top sheet, and I'd get a new pillowcase and new pajamas, and my stepmother would washcloth my face with warm water and Ivory soap and comb my hair. I would submit like a good child to her tender care. And both windows would be flung open for a short time, and the blinds would be drawn. And then I'd find myself between the very clean, very white, very starchy sheets, and my face would be damp and cool. And I'd be aware of purity. Through the window I could see the kind, rising sun and the golden-tinted grass and the heavy limbs of the horsechestnut tree and the new, budding leaves. And I could hear a catbird meowing, and I felt good and fresh and new. Though my stepmother didn't say anything, I was aware that I had almost died. I was glad to be safe among the living.

Now I spent a lot of time looking at spring out the window, at the beautiful world. I couldn't imagine myself simply walking down the street. I envied the everyday lives of everyday people. The doctor was afraid of the aftereffects of the illness; he was afraid that my heart would be affected. But one day he told me that I could get out of bed for a few minutes each day. And I began to catch up on all of the homework I had missed; I could then believe that I would soon be back to normal. I didn't go downstairs till the end of April. On May 1, I went outside for the first time. I felt like Rip Van Winkle. The gentle breeze seemed to blow just for me, and the smell of the awakened earth was so strong that my chest hurt every time I breathed.

I hadn't heard anything from Buzz or Mary. In school on Monday I looked for Mary in the study hall, but her assigned seat was empty. I waited outside the shorthand room before the fourth hour, but she didn't show up for class. I was late for my biology class. During the lunch period, I found Buzz smoking in the lavatory. He acted as if he hadn't seen me for about three days. Neither one of us mentioned Mary, though I waited for him to mention her. I asked him if he was going to go to the fair, and he said that,

yeh, he guessed so. He said he'd pick me up. I hoped he'd remember to bring Mary along.

A fair or a carnival was going to be put on by all the hose companies a week from that Monday, and my father, who was in business in town, had turned over to me all the raffle tickets he had had to buy. When I was sick in bed, he used to come in to me and give me new tickets and tell me that I would have to get well so that I could go to the fair and win my prize. "Now you just get better." With a week still to go, I already had more than three hundred tickets. I had spent much of the last three weeks planning what I would do if I won the new Dodge that was the grand prize. I had just about decided that I'd turn it over to Buzz until I was old enough to drive. And then all through the summer the three of us could ride in style up to Fairchild's Pond and go swimming.

"Who're you waitin for?"

"What?" I was standing outside the shorthand room. I asked the girl if she had seen Mary. And the girl said that, no, she hadn't seen Mary, not since they had kicked her out of school. Wasn't Mary going to graduate? I was told not to be silly. On Friday I sat in Mary's empty seat in the study hall. In a little while a note was handed down the rows of cast steel to me. The note said that I was a fool to be carrying a torch for a tramp who was old enough to be my mother. It was signed "a friend."

I dawdled near my locker after school, waiting for the kids to leave and get home. Outside, I stopped in a little grocery store and bought a pomegranate. It was the only store in town that carried pomegranates, and I hadn't had one for a year. No, I didn't need a bag; I could carry it in my hand. I'd go home and get a knife and go upstairs and cut the pomegranate in quarters. I walked along examining the pale-red ball in my hand, feeling its dull smoothness, looking forward to the lush fruit embedded in the network of white inside.

And then an Essex was chugging down the road. Oh. I felt faintly embarrassed, as if, after discovering a hole in the seat of my pants, I had been called to the front of the room. I felt sure it was Buzz, and if so, Mary was probably with him. It was Buzz all right, but the girl wasn't Mary. They both waved, and Buzz honked the horn but didn't slow down. I watched the car going up the road, and I felt quick anger. I just slammed down the desired pomegranate to the sidewalk as hard as I could, smashing the ball, turning the sidewalk red. I walked for a long time before I went home.

On Monday evening Buzz picked me up in his Essex. I had arranged

the raffle tickets in order according to number. I now held the package of tickets on my lap, a rubber band around them. As we went up Market Street to Church Street, Buzz said that I ought to win something. One block of Church Street had been taken over by the hose companies. A large pyramidal tent shut off one end of the street. Both sides of the street were lined with tawdry canvas booths, as if the street was now a cheap movie version of an oasis. You could try your luck at various games, on numerous wheels, by tossing pennies or throwing baseballs. The prizes weren't much.

It was like Saturday night downtown. The townspeople had turned themselves out; the heart of the town was now a fair, a sad imitation of some Eastern spectacle. Peering over the canvas booths were the faces of stark houses, their upper windows like blind eyes caught in the glare of the strung lightbulbs. If you tried to see the clear sky, the harsh strung lights blinded you. Of course you could be sure, without seeing, that the pleasant stars were beyond. The huge tent at the end of the street was the place where the burlesque show was to be put on at midnight. Many single men drifted up and down the crowded fair. The air was so heavy with the smell of human beings that you could have choked. I thinly breathed.

Buzz and I stood near the platform where at ten o'clock the raffle was to be held. And then the space around the platform was packed with a milling, expectant mob. I thought I would suffocate. I pushed my way out of the crowd, and Buzz followed me. At first some hams were raffled and then a turkey and then some fishing tackle. Then one of my numbers was called, and Buzz, like a happy father, shouted that we had it. We got the winning ticket. And Buzz took the ticket from me and pushed his way through the crowd to the platform and received the prize. He brought back a twenty-two rifle and two boxes of short cartridges. "It's a single shot," he said.

Long before we reached the grand prize, I knew that I wasn't going to win anything else. I no longer cared. Who needs a rifle? When the mayor won the Dodge, I just dropped my enormous pile of useless tickets. I was tired and slightly dizzy. The intense crowd became just a bunch of aimless people. Little kids were darting around the little booths. Girls and women began to drift home. Buzz and I found ourselves walking up and down a dismal, ending fair that tomorrow would again be an ordinary block of Church Street, the same old place. The front pockets of my pants bulged; I was weighed down with bullets. Buzz carried the rifle, muzzle down, like a hunter returning home.

"How is Mary?" I had been dying to ask and now I quickly did ask Buzz.

He shrugged his shoulders, not looking at me.

"I haven't even seen her," I said. All at once my heart ached.

"Well, she's hitched, if that's what you mean."

"Married! Oh. Oh, no. Is she married?"

And then without emotion, in a low, flat voice, as if he were telling me the plot of some corny B movie, as if he were just reciting from memory a lesson he had learned, the tawdry facts tumbled forth. He told the shabby story. Three weeks before, Mary's old man found out that she was pregnant. He screamed at her and even beat her. Then he locked her in her room. That's what Buzz had heard anyway. Afterward the old man must have bullied the names of the boys out of Mary. Then the old man called the cops and had those three wise guys picked up. He'd teach them.

One night the three boys were herded into a room where they were confronted by the Justice of the Peace, the old man and Mary. And Mary was told that it was up to her to pick the boy who was the real father. And the three boys just stood there in a line, like fools, not knowing what to do or say. Without looking up, Mary had pointed to Joe, the carpenter's assistant, and then the two of them were hustled off to Maryland to get married. And that was the end.

"Didn't you even say anything?"

"I didn't want to make it any worse than it was."

"There must be some mistake."

"You understand, I'm not saying it couldn't have been me. I mean, it wasn't like—"

The sloppy owner-operator of the closed Punch and Judy show was standing in front of his booth, his back to us, putting his three puppets in an old wooden box.

"If I had been there," I said, "I'd have offered to take that Joe's place. I'd have gladly said, 'I'll marry you, Mary.'"

Buzz stood there, now humming to himself, as if he couldn't have cared less.

"Well," I said, "I'd have wanted to marry her anyway."

"She's all right."

The dapper man on the little platform in front of the burlesque tent was saying to the gathering crowd that it was the chance of a lifetime. You should get your tickets while they lasted. See the Egyptian belly dancer. I

could tell that Buzz really wanted to go inside that tent and watch that performance.

And then I found myself outside the fair, on Market Street. I had left Buzz when he started to brag about his new girl friend. I just grabbed my rifle from him and left him there. He called after me, but I didn't even turn around. To hell with him. Now I stood in the darkened street. The human noise from the fair disrupted the pleasant place, like a violation. The first constructive thing I did was to let the air out of all four of the tires on the Essex. Then I began to walk.

I went up tree-darkened streets beneath a feeble moon. The houses were mostly asleep, and the breeze was light and soft, caressing. I could have cried. At each corner the street lamp threw its pale circle of light, a cone of brightness. As I crossed each corner, my shadow would leap in front of me, then lengthen abruptly, the enlarging shadow of a boy with a rifle, like a pastoral crook, cradled in his arm. I felt aimless, following my shadow, as if my life were shattered. But I did not allow myself to believe that Mary was gone forever. If Ralph Waldo Emerson could have seen me, he would not have said that history is the lengthened shadow of a man.

I was dissatisfied. Now the main sound was that of my shoes tapping the sidewalk, like somebody at some forgotten door. My pants were weighed down by the boxes of bullets. My heart was furiously pounding. And then I reached the culm bank at the end of town; beyond me, somewhere in the darkness, several miles away, was Fairchild's Pond. I had been climbing steadily from the fair. I wearily turned now, and beneath me the lights of the darkened town were like stars. A cluster in the distance marked the fair; I imagined that the street lights charted the various, devious routes that led to, or away from, the lighted fair, I could feel the morning dew on my face, and then I started down.

On the way down I used all of my skill and cunning. I was intent upon shooting out street lights, holding my breath as I squeezed off each shot. Usually there would be a blue leaping flame before the corner was plunged into darkness. Sometimes the light would vanish as the glass tinkled. I worked my way up and down streets, hiding from an occasional car, creeping from corner to corner, from light to light. Bang and tinkle. I moved on, downward, very excited. I imagined that I was driving the authorities mad. Behind me, on the hill, the streets were dark, although now and then a yellow light would brighten the window of a house. I managed to extinguish thirty-three lights before the authorities picked me up. I sighed.