

Penelope L. Mace

What You Want

The boy and girl were face to face on the blanket. Around them the deep summer woods carried on, oblivious.

Suddenly she pulled back with a gasp. "No. I'm not doing this again."

His narrow face was moist and surprised. "Why not?" he panted.

"I don't want to," she said as if it were obvious. She sat up and swatted the gnats away then pulled her white blouse on. He watched sadly as she did all the buttons then pulled up her riding pants. Her face too was moist, sticky, caught with bits of leaves.

He reached for her. "Come on," he said, "you did it once before."

"Yeah, that's the point. I did it once and I didn't like it. It hurt." With definitive strokes, she tucked in the blouse and buckled the belt. "And I feel all gritty. All I want's a shower."

He stroked her thigh. "It won't hurt his time. I promise."

She frowned at his hand as if it were an independent and unwanted creature. "You can you promise that?"

"It only hurts the first time."

"You know that. For absolute sure."

He hesitated. This is what she did: never asked a question but jabbed him with statements that he had to counter. "Well--"

"Yeah, exactly. No thanks."

After much coaxing he managed to ease her back down again and they kissed but soon she complained about the heat and the gnats and yanked away. This time he didn't say anything but instead fumbled with himself. When she realized what he was doing she leaped to her feet.

"Oh, not that again," she said. "I am not watching that again. That is the grossest thing a person could ever do."

As she spoke she turned and threw herself across the clearing toward the deepest shade where the black and white horse stood dozing, his head drooping, the reins slack around his neck. Before the boy could react she grabbed a fistful of white mane and swung one long leg up and over. Startled awake, the horse whinnied in protest but she clucked to him and he calmed.

"Hey, hold it," panted the boy.

She yanked the reins and the horse took off at a lope toward the break in the clearing that opened onto a rocky path out of the woods.

Struggling to his feet he pulled at his clothes and ran across the clearing, down the steep path, the smooth soles of his riding boots slipping on the stones so when he caught sight of them she had just eased the horse into a gentle canter. Her long braid had come loose earlier and now her hair was a sandy plume, catching the sun. "Hey," he shouted, "that happens to be my goddamn horse."

Cursing, he stomped back to the clearing and got the blanket. She had left her hunting cap so he snatched that up too and started walking home.

A few hours later he eased his mother's station wagon up her drive way and sat for a moment watching. She was on a glider on the porch, hunched over a notebook, writing furiously. When she didn't look up he was not sure if she'd noticed his arrival so he waited another minute then got out of the car and approached. He'd brought her cap.

The steps creaked and she looked up. "Hi."

"Hi." At least when she saw him she smiled, he thought. Her hair was loose and damp around her shoulders and she'd changed into a tank top and short shorts.

"Here. You left this." She nodded but did not reach for the cap so he put it down on the wicker table.

"Did your Mom tell you how proud she was that you decided to jog home instead of riding?"

"Yeah, nobody jogs in riding boots, Cassie. She knows that. She figured we had a fight. She was all over me about it." He couldn't hide his irritation.

Her smile widened into a grin. "Sorry. It was all I could think of on short notice."

The screen door whined open and her mother stepped outside and smiled at him.

"Mom. This is Mike. I take care of his horse."

"Oh. Right. Which one is yours?" She was a pale echo of Cassie, smaller, thinner, with a spill of faded hair around her face.

"Satin, Mrs. Whittenborne," he said. "I just uh – Cassie left her cap. I figured she might be uh exercising another horse later today."

"How considerate of you. And do call me Sarah. I don't think she is. Are you?" Cassie shook her head. She was staring intently in the distance and tapping her pen. "Would you like some iced tea or something Mike?"

"No thanks."

"Well. I'm in the middle of a sketch. I should get back."

Cassie swiveled around as her mother stepped back inside. "Is it another insect one?"

"No, taking a break from that today," she said vaguely and was gone. The screen door shut with a snap.

"Insects?"

Cassie nodded. "She's doing flying insects right now. But not the usual ones like butterflies. Stuff like dragon flies and moths."

"Yeah? She's an artist?"

She shrugged. "She tries to sell them. Sometimes."

He swiped at his forehead. He was still sweating though it was relatively cool here on the wide open porch. It was an old settled in house surrounded by tall thick trees. "Go on, move over so I can sit down."

"Not here, it's too hot – sit over there."

He sat opposite her in a scratched up wicker chair that groaned and shuddered when he sat down causing him to hold himself. She tossed the pen and drew up her long legs into a wide splay. He couldn't help but look.

Girls didn't sit that way, at least, no where he'd ever been. When he made himself look away his gaze fell on her notebook. It was thick with a bright red cover. He couldn't make out what she'd scrawled all over it. "What are you writing?"

Pushing her hair back she shot the notebook a hard look as if worried that it might wander off. "Stuff."

"Stuff about me?"

"No. Poetry and stuff."

"Can I see it?"

"No," she said firmly.

"Just don't leave it lying around, Cassie. Ok?"

"I don't," she snapped, "and anyway, my parents would never do that. They don't spy on me like your mom does on you."

"My mom doesn't spy on me."

"Oh. Well then. I guess she spies on me. Seems like every time I'm there in the barn with you she finds some reason to be there."

"She doesn't mean it that way, she just-"he couldn't say, she thinks you need more supervision, she thinks you're allowed to run wild, so instead he said, "Hey, I've got the car all day. Let's go for a ride."

She played with her hair, lifting it all up with both hands, then letting it drop again, fluffing it, smoothing it down. He remembered how it smelled, how silky it felt when he buried his face in it. She seemed to consider his suggestion. "Nah. It's too hot to go anywhere."

"Ok, I'll take you to that ice cream place. I think it's air conditioned."

"The new one on the highway? My mom reported them for some labor thing. I can't go in there."

"Well, how about a movie? The Warner, in town. It's so air conditioned in there you practically freeze to death. And they're showing that new thing with Debbie Reynolds."

She swept the notebook away and it fell to the floor with a smack. Then she stretched out on her back causing the glider to pitch and creak. "I'm not sitting inside a movie theater in the middle of the day. I'd feel like a weirdo."

He looked down her long body. She was just about his height and his mother said at her age she might still be growing. His mother also said she was pretty but had terrible manners. If that girl doesn't watch herself, she told him, she'll end up with a bad reputation and she said this as if it would cause him to avoid her. Of course he knew what his mother did not: any bad reputation material she might have, he had provided. Yet his mother had brought her around, hired her to exercise Satin so he could work more hours. She took care of thoroughbred show jumpers and came recommended, his mother said. No doubt she had hired her without ever seeing her.

"How about we go into town? We can get a soda or a sandwich or whatever you want. I have money."

She sprang up and stretched wildly, arms in the air, her tank top rising, allowing him a glimmer, then headed toward the side of the porch where the steps led down to a vegetable garden. "I can't get comfortable there," she declared over her shoulder. He stood up. Her speed and agility always shocked him. And she was strong. Once, before he'd kissed her, they were playing around in the barn, half wrestling, and she shoved him with both hands, nearly knocking him on his ass. Mike knew he was no he-man but he wasn't a weakling either. It was the instant he realized how attracted he was.

He followed her through neat rows of tomato and pepper plants, pale green shoots of lettuce and thick clumps of parsley, all marked off with borders of small well matched stones. His dad was a gardener and he had been forced all his life to help so he appreciated how much work had gone into this. He wondered who the

gardener was – her foggy headed mom or her do gooder dad who was always off somewhere helping colored people get the vote or get something. Neither seemed likely candidates. At the far end of the garden was a sagging screened in gazebo whose frame sorely needed painting. She had to yank the door to make it open and then to close it she kicked it so hard with her bare foot that he winced.

Falling back onto a small ripped couch, she breathed, “Better. Breezier out here. And fewer bugs.”

The gazebo floor was littered with crumpled potato chip bags, library books, empty Coke bottles, candy wrappers. To the one side was a neat pile of red notebooks like the one she had been writing in. He settled himself tentatively onto a small lumpy armchair that smelled of cigarettes. “Is this where you write most of your uh, stuff?”

“In the summer.” She saw him eyeing the pile of notebooks and said, “Forget it. I don’t show my diary to anyone.”

“You said it was poetry.”

“It’s both.”

He nodded. “So what about it then?”

She twisted all her hair up behind her head then let it flow over the back of the chair like a curtain. It was drying into unkempt spirals. All the girls he knew from the Episcopal Church or the girl’s academy had poofed out hair dos that, helmet like, remained absolutely stationary when they moved their heads. This one: he wondered if she ever combed her hair.

“What about what? Poetry? I like Emily Dickenson. And Walt Whitman. And my dad just sent me a book of new Negro poetry. It’s amazing.”

“Yeah? Negro poetry? Where is your dad?”

“Mississippi. But the poetry is from all over.”

“Mm.” He was thinking she had better not mention something like that around his mother. “What I meant was, what about going into town? I’ll buy you a cheeseburger.”

“How can you eat stuff like that in this weather? Thought of it makes me sick. I just survive on iced tea and watermelon all summer.”

Exasperated, he tossed his hands in the air and leaned back with a sigh but the little chair quivered so he sat back up. “Why are you like this?”

Laughing, she arched her back, her full breasts straining against the tank top. She was not wearing a bra. Without a trace of shame she had told him that she never wore a bra unless her mother forced her to. And then, she added, soon as I get somewhere, I take it off. “Why am I like what?”

“Such a grouch.”

“I’m not. You came here on your own. I didn’t invite you.”

“You know, most girls your age would be real happy to have a guy my age asking them to go out somewhere.”

She stared at him. “Really? Yeah. I guess you’re right. But I don’t want to. How come you didn’t work today?”

“Have to work the weekend so I have off today.” Mike’s father had got him a summer job at the hospital where he practiced. Mike thought probably he hoped it would inspire him to study medicine but so far the very smell of the place made him queasy and he wasn’t even around the patients yet. Without planning to, he rose from the rickety armchair and pushed himself down beside her on the little couch. She stayed and their hips and thighs touched, her warmth finding him, a hint of her muscles and softness. She smelled of shampoo. A wave of dizziness washed over him and he peered toward the house before turning to her. “You’re a very pretty girl Cassie.”

She grimaced but did not resist as he put his arms around her. “Stop saying stuff like that,” she whispered into his neck.

Girls he knew loved it when you said stuff like that. Girls he knew wore dresses and jewelry. She had told him she lost jewelry and dresses made her itch.

He held her harder and kissed her a little. “What do you want me to say then?” he whispered.

“Tell me about the college you’re going to in the fall.”

“Penn State,” he said simply. “You’ve heard of it, right?” She nodded and did not resist as he slipped his hand under her tank top. Hers were the only unfettered breasts he’d ever touched. The way they seemed to radiate heat shocked him every time. “Mm, uh, my dad went there. For undergrad. Come on.”

They kissed more deeply. She tasted of tea. Before him she had never necked, she told him. He could tell. She didn’t know how but he couldn’t think of a way to tell her. He still did not understand why she had let him have her the other week but he was not about to question it. He told himself – what do you care - but part of him wanted her to let him because she liked him, because she wanted him as much as he wanted her.

“No more,” she declared and pulled away wiping her mouth with the back of her hand.

“Fine, I’m going..” He stood up. The damn door would not open. She stood behind him telling him exactly where to kick it until finally it opened and he took off in long strides down the path between the budding and fragrant green plants. He sensed her behind him, keeping up easily, something about her breathing suggesting that maybe for once she wasn’t so sure of herself. At his car he turned and saw her hovering on the edge of the grass, her hands gripping her upper arms. She was not looking at him.

“Wanna know something, Cassie? Do you?”

Her big eyes found him. “What?”

He glanced toward the house and stepped closer. “You start in high school this year, right? 9th grade?” She nodded. “Wanna know the one thing that high school guys hate about a girl? Do you?” Her gray eyes widened. He could see that he finally had her attention and he did not want to relinquish the moment. “Do you?” he repeated. She nodded. “The one thing they hate is – is - not a fat girl or a stupid girl or even an ugly girl, but – are you listening?” She stood still. “Are you?”

“Yes, yes,” she said and not sarcastically.

“A tease. Guys hate a girl who is a tease. If that gets around, you will not have a date for the rest of your life. You will be everybody’s favorite baby sitter because all your weekends will be free forever. You hear me?”

Frowning, she looked away across the long slope of grass heavily punctuated with dandelions and butter and eggs. He thought maybe she was about to respond but when she didn’t his pride dictated that he leave. He yanked the car door but she said his name.

It was the first time she had done that, called to him, and it made his heart skip though he called himself pathetic. He aimed for a righteous but disinterested tone. “Yeah?”

“Maybe. Tomorrow night. Want to come over? My mom is going out. To a meeting. Usually she makes me go with her but I told her I don’t want to go and I think she’ll let me stay home.”

“What time?”

She made an expressive shrug. “7 or something? I don’t know.”

Her big eyes were on him and her lips were so delicate and plush that he wished he hadn’t made such a show about leaving. “All right. Why don’t you call me? When she leaves?” She nodded. He half closed the car door. “And. Cassie? I’m uh, sorry, if I-“

Her hands went up in front of herself. “Look. If you do come over. I don’t know. I don’t know.”

“I know. It’s ok. Call me.”

“Bye. Oh, wait a minute.”

He had the key in his hand. “What?”

“Know what? If you hate that job. Don’t do it.”

He stared. “My dad wants me to –“

She took a step toward him. “But what do you want?”

The urgency in her voice stopped him. They looked at each other for a few moments and then he got in the car and started it up. As he pulled away she gave an exaggerated fluttery wave with both hands, a gesture so unlike her that it made him smile. He waved back and she smiled and took off for the back, her long hair swinging.

How had she come to know things? And why wasn’t she afraid? He hoped she’d call him.