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Autor: R.Y.
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On the Lake

To K.

From the arbour'd walk, the two young men waved to Charles and Conrad, who stood together on the small lawn in front of the house. Then they disappeared through the massive archway which formed part of the gardenwall. Peter, the young German, and Pierre, the young Swiss, started to walk down the steep hill. The silence enveloping them on their way down the steps was not unfriendly, yet it contained a questioning element as though each was trying to read the other's thoughts. Without being aware of it their thoughts ran on parallel lines. How could it have come about that they, who had met only two days previously, were alone on their way for the morning's rowing and swimming whilst Charles and Conrad had remained behind? Yesterday morning had seen all four of them on the lake, and the two young men had taken it for granted that it would be the same to-day. But unexpectedly Conrad had said to Peter at breakfast, 'I hope you don't mind, my boy, if I ask you to go alone with Pierre to the lake. You know, we're only staying here for a few days and I still must settle a lot of things with Charles.' Peter had been surprised for a moment. But knowing Conrad well enough not to worry about an unexpected change of plans from him he would not have given the matter a second thought but for the quick questioning look Pierre had shot at Charles. And Charles had certainly been slightly embarrassed when he seconded Conrad's plan. Something was wrong here, Peter reflected, as he walked beside his silent companion now, who by some coincidence bore the same Christian name as he did. As it happened Pierre's thoughts were the same as Peter's. He had always shared these early morning hours on the lake with Charles. True, he would have sometimes preferred one of his girl-friends for company, but now when Charles had let him go by himself and above all in the company of one who was practically a stranger, Pierre felt disappointed.

They crossed the narrow road by the shore of the lake. In the little harbour they slipped off their shirts and shorts. Clad only in swimming trunks they unfastened their boat and reached the lake with a few quick strokes of their oars.

Speech did not come easily to them. Only when they had rowed well out into the lake Pierre seemed to make up his mind and said, 'Do you mind if we call each other by our Christian names? I suppose we're roughly the same age.'

'That's o.k. by me,' Peter answered, 'I'm twenty-eight.'

'So you're three years older than I am.'

Conversation now flowed easily between them. As they had done in a foursome yesterday they dived into the water. They frisked and gambolled like puppies and kept pushing the boat ever further. Finally they climbed back into it. Their bodies soon dried in the slight morning breeze. When they landed on the other side of the lake they both felt ready for a second breakfast. Rowing and swimming together had eased matters between them a lot, though Peter evaded talking about Conrad, and Pierre scarcely referred to Charles.

Nevertheless the absent friends filled their thoughts. Or perhaps not so much the friends, as their individual relation to them. Each had realized the day before how similar were the relationships. Yet they hesitated to mention it though Pierre felt it might be to his advantage to make good use of the hours he spent in Peter's company. There were so many things he had never talked about with anyone. In his friendship with Conrad Peter seemed to be much more relaxed than he, Pierre, was in his own relationship with Charles.

After breakfast they rowed back part of the way and had another long swim. Then they took in the oars and drifted. Pierre was sitting in the stern, his strong body evenly tanned. At the other end Peter was stretching his long muscular legs, the deep tan of his body broken at the narrow hips. It was then that Pierre summoned courage to talk about some of the things disturbing his peace of mind. Breaking the comfortable silence he said, 'How much older is Conrad than you?'

'Exactly twenty years.'

'Then he is as old as Charles. And how long have you known each other?' Pierre went on.

'For ten years. We met at the end of the war.'

'And have you been friends all that time?'

'Yes. Conrad is my only friend.'

'Same here. I have no other friend but Charles.'

Questions and answers followed each other quickly. Neither had given particular emphasis to the word 'friend'. Pierre seemed to want to go on talking but seemed uncertain how to begin. So Peter helped him along. 'Anything else you'd like to know?'

'Yes,' Pierre said slowly. 'Only it's so damned awkward putting questions I feel I have no right to ask.'

'For heaven's sake fire away.'

'I mean — are you — you are as normal as I am, aren't you?'

'I don't quite know what you mean by 'normal' but if you'd like to know whether I like sleeping with girls, the answer is a definite 'yes'.

'Only — I thought —.'

'What did you think?'

'I wasn't so sure last night.'

'Why?'

'There were two things —.'

'What things?'

'You know we went after dinner to the library to listen to some records. I couldn't believe my eyes when you sat on the arms of Conrad's chair and put your arms around his shoulders.'

'Heavens — did that upset you?'

'Well — what I mean — it's usually not done amongst men.'

'It depends how you look at it. I like to touch Conrad when listening to good music.' As Pierre hesitated, Peter went on, 'I'll tell you myself about the second small event last night that upset you. As you remember you and I went to bed earlier. I clearly noticed your look of surprise when I bent down and kissed Conrad good night.'

'Yes,' Pierre said, 'you're right. That kiss did upset me.'

'Why?'

'One doesn't kiss men, at least not with other people present.'

'What do you mean by 'one' and whom do you mean by 'other people?' Peter asked. He sat up and looked for a long time at Pierre. Suddenly he realized why Conrad had insisted this morning on staying behind with Charles. A slight smile transfigured his serious expression. 'I'm slowly beginning to see, Pierre, what it is you really want to ask me.'

Pierre looked questioningly at him.

'You want to ask me whether I love Conrad?'

'Yes.'

'And how — being normal myself — I can love him?'

'Yes.'

'And whether this love doesn't make me abnormal?'

'Yes.'

Oh, Conrad, dear, Peter was thinking to himself, for the sake of those questions I had to go to the lake with Pierre this morning. You knew you could trust me to give answers which might perhaps in some way help to disentangle the web between Pierre and Charles. The smile on his young face deepened. Now he, Peter, of all people, whom Conrad half jokingly and half seriously kept on calling abysmally normal, was expected to make clear to another youth of his own age that there was love possible between two people of the same sex and no harm in it either. He still smiled but when he remembered how much Charles might gain or lose from the outcome of this conversation — Charles whom he had learned to admire so deeply — he became serious again. He realized — with Pierre anxiously waiting for him to go on — how closely linked his own life with Conrad was. Here, facing him, was a boy of his own age who in four years had not succeeded in adjusting his own normal existence to his friend's disposition. Choosing his words with great care he continued, 'I love Conrad. I love him though I'm normal. But this love, deep and sincere as it is, cannot and does not make me abnormal. This is it, what you wanted to know, Pierre, isn't it?'

'Yes,' Pierre said. 'But how did it happen? How are you able to love him?'

'I ought to ask you first what you yourself mean by 'love'?''

'Well,' it was said hesitatingly, 'both.'

'Alright — I'll tell you about both.' The one would be easy, Peter reflected, the other more difficult. But as with him the other had been the result of the one, his words might perhaps open doors for Pierre through which he could pass and so become united with Charles without losing his self-respect.

'Look here, Pierre, Conrad only began loving me when we had known each other for years. But all else, what happened in the course of these first years, was the decisive factor. I'm not much talking about material things. During those difficult post-war years Conrad has cared for me in a way only as a really selfless man could. But you know that already. I believe Charles did pretty much the same for you, perhaps even more. But whereas you two lived in Switzerland we both of us lived in hunger-stricken Germany, so it meant a great deal more.'

'I'll own up — Charles has always been more than helpful to me,' said Pierre.

'And yet — aren't these the unimportant details? Though of course we should never forget our gratitude. But what do they mean compared to all that Conrad gave me in other ways?'

'What do you mean?'

'There I was — a young student, with a rather narrow outlook on life. I worked hard, I enjoyed sports and slept with girls when I had a chance. And to-day? Do I really have to tell you how different my life has become by knowing Conrad? Music and books and paintings and architecture — all I know and enjoy about them I owe to Conrad. And all the people I'd never have met but for him. Charles is only the last one but I hope you don't mind my telling you, one of the best. I have seen the world with Conrad, after I escaped from behind the Iron Curtain. The sea and the mountains. Well, no need to tell you really. —'

'Yes, I see what you mean. But surely all this is no reason to love him?'

'Can the feeling I have for him be called by any other name but love?'

'In your own way you're right. But love has also another side to it, hasn't it?' Pierre said slowly.

'I'm coming to that. I wasn't hedging.' The first hurdle had been taken, Peter was thinking. He wondered whether he had succeeded in making clear to Pierre that there were obligations no honest man could avoid. 'You see, Pierre,' he went on, 'it took years for Conrad to realize that he loved me also in the other way. He didn't talk to me about it for a long time. He fought against it for years.'

'But are you able to give to Conrad what Charles always wants me to give to him and which I've never been able to give?'

'Why not?'

'But isn't it unnatural?'

'It's so damned little, the thought doesn't even enter my head.'

'But even this damned little —'

'It is what Conrad needs. I repeat myself — it's little enough as it is. But what little he needs is as necessary to him as what you and I need from girls. Only you and I need far more.'

'But doesn't it embarrass you?'

'It's been embarrassing me for a long time. For Conrad's sake and for my own. Had Conrad forced the issue in the beginning I should have felt degraded. But I slowly came to learn that not only did Conrad love me, but that I loved him as well.'

'I love Charles in my own way too.'

'No — you only think you love him. There wouldn't have been any need for our talk if you really loved him. In true love there are no half-measures!'

'But I'm normal —.'

'And so am I. But I have learned that I'm able to give Conrad the little he wants me to give him, without damaging my normality. After all, neither you nor I are small boys any more. And —' he broke off.

'Yes?'

'You see — it didn't come easy to me. But once I saw how incredibly happy I was able to make Conrad — since the day I learned that his life is fulfilled by that which I'm able to give him — we've both become free again. If we stood not free of each other and yet united as never before, do you really think I could have kissed him in your presence as I did last night?'

'But once you get married?'

'Than won't alter a thing. One little part of me will always belong to Conrad alone. But that I grew up under his care will mean a great gain for my marriage in the end.'

Peter broke off. No need to tell Pierre of his forthcoming engagement, of which Conrad approved. He offered his cigarettes to Pierre. The two young men smoked in silence. All had been said, Peter thought, for the sake of which Conrad had sent him off with Pierre.

The sun warmed their tall, bronzed bodies.

'I'm glad we met,' Pierre said after a long silence.

The shore was drawing nearer. They rowed back to the small harbour, got out, dressed and crossed the narrow road. They started to climb up the steps into the hills. Once more there was silence between them as earlier that morning, but it was a different, clear and bright silence which enveloped them this time.

They crossed the arbour'd walk. Charles heard them arriving. He waited for them at the top of the small stone staircase leading up to the house. In two strides Pierre had mounted the steps. The very next moment he had roughly taken Charles into his arms — in a single movement they had become one. For a moment Peter remained at the foot of the steps. Whatever was happening here did not bear a witness. He moved to the balustrade and looked down to the lake.

'You can turn round now', he heard Pierre say some minutes later. Slowly he mounted the steps to where Charles and Pierre stood. Pierre's smile was happy and carefree, but in Charles' there were still traces of incredulity. For a moment Peter put his hand on the hands of the other two, then he nodded without words and went on his way to the garden.

Where was Conrad?

As usual he had drawn his deck-chair into the shadows of a huge tree. His face lit up when he became aware of Peter who had crept up noiselessly to him.

'Well —,' was all Conrad said when he looked up.

'You old rascal,' Peter said with a light laugh. 'But everything seems to be alright.' He bent down. 'A good thing I realized your intrigue in time.' They looked at each other, they were perfectly attuned. Peter turned his head and whispered into Conrad's ear, 'Though you're a damned old schemer — I love you.'

A slight metallic sound made them look up. It was only the front-door of the house closing on its hinges. Peter drew another deck-chair close to Conrad's. With a deep sigh he let his long body fall into it. His young strong hands closed in a firm grasp around Conrad's.

Only the peace of noon stood silently like a protecting wall around the house and the garden.

R. Y.