

Tell you later

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TELL YOU LATER

by Chrysippos

The bell was ringing.

Doggedly I went on drying all the many plates and cups my mother was piling up in the basin. Actually it should have been Annette's turn, but she had made a face and had consequently been permitted to join her six friends at their coffee klatsch. Oh, these teenagers—all dreaming of a handsome boy and being able, like my sister, to talk for hours about him! On account of this unrealized wishdreaming it had fallen to my lot to be victimized by this drudgery, degrading drudgery in my eyes, and with a kitchen apron around me into the bargain. Achilles amongst the women! But one day I would show them what a man I was.

«Didn't you hear?» Ma was asking. «The bell has been ringing.»

With a sigh I went to the door; for defiance's sake I wanted even to wear the apron. Having been sentenced to that kind of labor—the whole world was welcome to see it. There was no assistance to be had from Pops, though otherwise we were the best of friends. But I suddenly realized it might be one of Annette's girl-friends. And to add to their mirth at the coffee table? Never. Therefore I got rid of the symbol of female activity and threw it in suppressed anger into a corner.

«Well, well,» Ma was heard saying. She was a wonderful guy and sparing in her reproofs.

Outside there was none of the silly girls but the postman. A lot of business mail for Pops had arrived. There was also a private letter. Ma dried her hands—she had finished anyway with the washing-up—took the letter and opened it. After a minute her face went red and she uttered a sound of happy surprise.

«Pops!» she cried and rushed into father's den. Standing in the open door she looked back over her shoulder, saying, «Get rid of the towel. You have done your share for today.»

Curious what kind of message had fluttered into the house, I followed her.

Father had made himself comfortable in a big easy chair. He was buried behind his newspaper, his pipe was going well, and he had put up his feet on a chair. In such an hour of relaxation, I knew, he did not like to be bothered. Blue clouds arose from behind his newspaper.

«Imagine,» Ma cried out, once more scanning the letter, pleased as Punch, «Pia has written.»

Father didn't answer. «Pia has written,» Ma repeated slightly more aggressively.

«Ghastly woman,» father mumbled.

«Bruno!» she said reproachfully, «you aren't at all nice. Anyhow, you knew before you married me that I was ghastly,» she added jokingly.

Father lowered the paper and was amused. «Gracious, I was thinking of your friend Pia.» He sighed. «How can such a mighty fine woman like you be friends with such a gossip as this Pia is?»

Ma refused to acknowledge either reproof or compliment. «Her son

is attending the university here in town. She tells me he will be paying us a visit within the next few days.»

Father's forehead was beginning to cloud. «That ill-bred red-headed fool. Remember the time when he threw the whipped cream on our lovely new light blue wallpaper?»

«First of all he isn't a redhead, but a blond,» Ma said, «and then it happened all so long ago that you should have forgiven Thorleif ages ago. After all, in the meantime he has turned into a fine young man.»

«Thorleif,» father was saying disdainfully. «How anyone in his right senses can call a child by that name in our part of the world is beyond me. Probably to remember a journey to Lapland. Even this alone shows you plainly what an utter fool your friend Pia is. But maybe she had a reason to call her boy by that name.»

Ma just gaped. I saw it with wonder and a quiet pleasure because it happened for the very first time. Father, however, didn't give her time to breathe. «I never cared for that Pia or her nasty boy. If and when—this Thor arrives . . .»

«Thorleif,» Ma said indignantly.

»——I'm not at home. My god, that lovely blue wallpaper! Peter can take care of him.»

Now I'd had it. I was mad at Pops. To kill all my plans! How should I be able to go down to the beach, to meet Pony? What concern of mine was that Thorleif of Aunt Pia's who had most certainly in the meantime turned into a snooty student? Furthermore Pia wasn't a real aunt of mine and therefore he wasn't a real cousin either. I couldn't even remember what the ill-bred fool—father's expression!—looked like. So far this Thorleif hadn't interested me in the least, but now I felt a deep aversion towards him—no, I even hated him. For sure he'd blow into the house just when I was going to swim with Pony.

For the present I was dismissed. The sun was burning down from a cloudless sky, and I quickly snatched my swimming trunks and rushed off.

Ma was calling after me through the garden. «Peter, your towel!» As though I was interested in my towel. «That boy has been quite mad these last few days,» I heard her saying, «so harum-scarum. And forgetting everything.» I heard father's voice. «Maybe he has another touch of sun stroke.» Oh, how could they know that the sun was burning far less hotly than my heart. All my thoughts centered around Pony. But I thought it wiser, after all, to return and fetch my towel because the door of father's den was standing open. To get an 'off-limits' for the beach from my old man on account of being 'hard of hearing' wouldn't have suited me at all.

Everybody was at the beach. The friends played ball and jumped around like fleas. As soon as I arrived, I noticed that the sand was burningly hot. I had to hop around like everyone else, just for selfpreservation's sake. Then they all formed a circle and received me with a loud shout of greeting—tall Fritz for whom I did not care much on account of his sniffing nose; Bubi, the youngest one amongst us; Walter, breaking girl's hearts over and under water; Serge with his out-sticking bat's ears; the awfully soft Fredy, always mouthing his «t» in such a wet way

—and last but not least: Pony. He was the most handsome one of them all in his panther's swimming trunks—deeply brown from the sun, masculine, springy, and supple in all his movements.

«Hello.» He called to me and lifted his hand carelessly. «Here is finally our dear Mr. 'Tell you later', thirty-five minutes late.» And with a marked allusion to this favorite expression of mine, «Late he is but better late than never. Anything wrong with the old man?»

Why couldn't Pony stop that damned irony of his?!

«Tell you later,» I returned. Shouts of laughter were the answer to that. I did not even realize any longer how frequently I used that silly expression. No, I wouldn't tell him that—like a servant girl dressed in a kitchen apron—I had been drying dishes. And suddenly an idea came to me about how I could make use of Pony to get even with my sister. It had been her fault alone that I had been half an hour late.

We rushed into the water and swam like mad. Pony was first to every spot, and mightily proud of him I was. Did the others envy me this friend? Pony was friendly to all of them as well, but towards me he sometimes behaved condescendingly, yes, even roughly. I tried to convince myself that he didn't mean it that way and though I shed quite a few tears secretly, I loved him like mad. Nights I slept badly and then I started dreaming the most awful things—that he forced me to walk stark naked across the street and similar horrifying things—but it ended usually with my lying in his arms. During these weeks I had changed completely. Pops and Ma looked with surprise at me without being able to find a reason for this change. I always met Pony at the beach, day after day, where we had met for the first time. Was this still chance? Pony had become my «daily bread.» I believe Monika and Lotti had given him his nickname and because everyone called him by it, I did too. He was very often frolicsome like a young foal, and of untamed strength. Maybe he had been given his nickname on account of his eyes. They were large and round, shadowed by long lashes and full of expression—they reminded me of the eyes of a good-natured steed.

«Listen, Pony,» I said, «I'd like to give my sister Annette an object lesson.»

«Why?»

«Just so. Brotherly love. Tell you later. She hasn't got a boy friend but would love to have one to show off with. I'll tease her with that, and therefore I'd like for you to write me a flaming love letter to her.»

«That isn't very nice,» Pony said with a frown. «And how do you suppose this is going to develop?»

«Let's wait and see.»

After a good deal of persuasion, Pony agreed it would be a lot of fun to make fools of the girls.

«All right,» he said, «after all it's us men who ought to stick together. It's quite enough to have an elder sister to hold one down. If in addition she's also conceited, it's best to teach her a lesson.»

And then he wrote her a flaming epistle, paid compliments and compliments to Miss Annette (whose name he'd found out only after a great many difficulties) on account of her fine figure, especially her legs (my god, if only Pony could have seen them), and asked humbly whether she

might not be willing to fulfil the burning dream of a quite passable young man by enabling him to meet her personally. The answer he was longing to receive should most graciously be sent to «Eros 23», General Delivery. To avoid any danger of being snubbed by her when giving his own name, and yet full of hope, he'd sign this letter as her most sincere «Eros».

«And now give me her address,» Pony said.

We couldn't find an envelope and I was slightly glad about that, because I did not like to give away my sister as completely as all that. She would have recognized her full name and address.

«I'll write that at home,» I said.

«In your handwriting?» said Pony disapprovingly. «Then she'll realize that something is wrong.»

«I'll take father's typewriter,» I answered. So Pony handed over his fiery elaborate efforts and added disdainfully this had been the first love letter he'd ever written in his life. And not an honest one, at that. However, he did know to whom he could address a sincere one. I attached my deepest hopes to these words, but he did not look at me when he said them.

I waited for my opportunity at home, typed the envelope secretly, and threw Pony's vows of love into the next mailbox. The next day I waited tensely. Right amongst father's business mail there was a letter for my sister. Father gave it to her at breakfast. Unconsciously I put marmelade on my roll and chewed with equal unconcern, while out of the corner of my eye I saw with enjoyable malice how Annette's face turned a deep red when she had gone through the sentences. Confusedly she read the letter again, went to the window, and came back to the table. Not knowing what to do with this holiest of holies she put the letter into the opening of her blouse.

Afterwards, the girl, usually so quiet and placid, could barely be recognised again. One wouldn't have thought it possible how much the anticipation of a bit of love could change everything. I heard her trill in her room, and in the whole house there was a twittering and chirping as though a hundred canaries had taken over.

I could barely wait for the afternoon to tell my accomplice at the beach of all the effect our mutual plan had created. «But if she sends me an answer and wants me to meet her?» Pony was asking. My god, this idea had never entered my head. And all of a sudden I was horrified when thinking of losing Pony to my sister.

«Of course you won't meet her,» I said quickly.

«That would be very bad-mannered,» Pony replied coolly. At that moment I wished Annette would not deign to honor the writer of this burning letter with an answer.

But things happened differently. At night my sister, in the most glorious mood she had been in in ages, took out her light overcoat.

«You're going out?» Pops was asking.

«Only to mail a letter,» Annette answered. «I'll be back presently.»

Now I'd had it. Now misfortune was on its way. Could I really trust Pony? Or wouldn't it be better to go to the post office myself and have Annette's letter handed over to me? I knew, after all, the address. But the idea of a young chap like me asking at the counter for mail sent to

«Eros 23» made me squirm slightly. Anyhow I should not be able to go to the post office until noon tomorrow, and therefore a decision about all this could rest until then.

But unexpectedly Ma nailed me down once more in the kitchen at noon, because Annette had been able to give quite new reasons—apparently sufficient to free her from kitchen duty. I was in a fever to leave the house and was just on the point of rushing off when—all bad things come in twosomes—father had something for me to do in town and took me along in the car. Late in the afternoon all my hopes had gone downstream: there was no longer any use in inquiring after letters for «Eros 23»—because I knew that in the meantime Annette's answer was in Pony's hands.

Next day at the beach I went into full battle straightaway. «My sister has written to you?»

«Did you expect anything else?»

«And? Get it off your chest!»

«Naturally she wants to meet me.»

I felt my heart constricting. «And you?»

Pony laughed, quickly got to his feet and shook himself. «Tell you later,» he said happily, «get into the water, Peter, let's see who reaches the buoy first.»

Nothing was to be got out of Pony. When I felt the eyes of my sister rest upon me in the evening—quietly, sure of herself, superior as never before—I became completely confused, withdrew early into my room, and started thinking about the mischief I had started. I had a feeling nothing good was coming out of it for myself.

In the days that followed the sky and my frame of mind darkened likewise: thick gray clouds hung inside and outside. It started to rain ceaselessly, and the misfortune not to be able to see Pony in the next few days nearly drove me frantic. Ma was upset about my health because I did not eat properly and showed all the signs of nervous irascibility. In contrast Annette looked all the more in flower; she was constantly humming to herself and went frequently out, even when the sky was full of thunder and lightning—it all gave food to my misery. I groped around like a sleepwalker, saved only by chance from a fall into the depths. But this terrible fall happened anyway, when I opened the door of the living room one evening.

«But Pops,» I heard Ma just say, «why not let her enjoy herself? Annette has reached the age in which young girls want to have a romantic interest. I saw him the other day: her friend is really a most charming young man.» If I had not shut the door secretly from the outside my dismay would have become apparent. I suppressed an outcry, rushed up into my room, threw myself upon my bed and cried like mad—about Pony. Recovering slowly, I made up my mind no longer to go down to the beach—never again. He had turned traitor, slighted my holiest feelings, rushed my heart. But what nearly drove me mad was the realization that it had been myself who had started all this fatal business. But I did not want to see the traitor ever again.

In my bad mood and depression of heart I was surprised next morning by Ma with the news that Thorleif had written a note, telling us when he

had arrived in town, and saying that he would like to call on us this afternoon to bring his mother's love. Now of all things this Thorleif was added to my grief. Father was right as usual—how could anyone have such an utterly foolish name? My mother reminded me with maternal dignity not to go to the beach today because like me she had realized that after last night's rain the early morning promised a beautiful day. «Father will be busy in the office,» she said with decision, «therefore I do expect you to be in sufficiently early to receive Thorleif the right way.»

I responded to this order by a stubborn silence and made myself scarce—of course encountering Annette on my way who looked as though love had gone to her head. She had used lipstick for the first time, and had powdered her cheeks. All for Pony! My god, I felt like pulp. Where in heaven's name should I find the 'charm' to receive this bumptious pseudo-cousin, this silly Thorleif student the right way?

Furiously I made up my mind to let Ma and Annette be burdened with this Thorleif; went into town and into various ice-cream parlors and yet could not finally help myself: I simply had to go to the beach and look for Pony—even if it should break my heart. Since I had been the one to start it all, it wasn't more than justice that I was the one to suffer by it. Of our friends only snuffling Fritz and little Bubi were present, as also Monika and Lotti, but the girls did not really count with me. Of Pony there was nothing to be seen anywhere. In a kind of lustful pain I registered the fact that this disappointment went very well with my present frame of mind. Suddenly deep resignation overcame me. The church clock was striking six suddenly, and I felt that an immediate return home was necessary if I did not want to face the most beautiful wrath of my old people after the guest had departed.

Stealthily I opened the front door and listened in the foyer. From the room happy laughter could be heard. I heard Annette twitter, and mother break in. Then there was an unknown voice—by the devil, that was this Thorleif—and, yes, there was father too. Well, I hadn't counted on his return before I'd be in. He, too, was traitor, traitor to all his good intentions. Great god! He had wanted to be conspicuous by his absence and had expected me to take his place. Well, here I was. This Thorleif would have a chance to get acquainted with me. I rushed into the bathroom, washed and combed my hair, got into a fresh shirt and my best suit, and opened, much too ceremoniously, the door into the living room. Father had placed the guest into the high-backed chair, the back of which was turned towards the door, thus preventing me from seeing who sat in it. Only the top of a head could be seen. Apparently the conversation had been highly enjoyable because father came up to me cheerfully and, putting his hand jovially on my shoulder, said, «My dear Thorleif, I would like you to meet my son Peter who used to be your childhood companion.»

The guest rose from the chair and turned towards me. For a second I thought I'd turned into a pillar of salt—this Thorleif I knew only too well.

«Pony!» I cried.

«Peter!»

And then we were in each other's arms, pummeling each other's shoulders. Pops and Ma were speechless by surprise. «How come Pony?» Ma was saying, «this is Thorleif, Aunt Pia's son.»

Pony was the first to collect his wits and to explain the situation with a few words: that neither of us had known about the other because we had never exchanged names or addresses. Father laughed heartily; he overlooked the fact that Thorleif had called pretty late, after all. It was only then that I noticed how wonderful Pony looked; he was wearing a dream of a suit with a snow-white shirt and a tie with dots. I had never seen him like that before. My heart was beating thirteen to the dozen with bliss—until I happened to gaze at Annette keeping herself rather in the background. At the very same moment a drop of gall came into my brimful cup of bliss. Why had this Thorleif-Pony been given back to me when all his love was for my sister Annette?

We all sat down at the table. Coffee and cake were plentiful, and I noticed that father looked with benevolence at Pony. All his prejudices seemed to have 'gone with the wind', and that was all right with me. Because Pony (as I realized with a pleasant surprise) had excellent manners and was an agreeable companion. But with the corrosive pungency of mistrust I watched Annette and him, as soon as she addressed him herself. Did they enact a comedy? They behaved most politely, nearly finicky about it, and at the same time in a way as though they had never met before in their lives. After all, Pops and Ma were in the know—was this kind consideration shown for my sake? I noticed also that Annette kept looking at her watch and was barely able to suppress her unrest. When the bell rang she got up excitedly and rushed out to open the door. She returned nervously. «It was only the evening mail,» she said. Finally father noticed too that something was wrong with his daughter.

«What's the matter with you, Annette,» he asked her kindly.

But Ma came quickly to the rescue. «But father,» she said, «Annette wants us to have a little surprise. But she gave me strict orders . . .»

At that moment the bell was ringing again. Annette, like being electrified, cried, «That'll be him!» and rushed out.

And sure enough—the door opened and she came back into the room, radiant in the beauty of her surprise. For the second time that day I gaped. Because, at her side, with a huge bunch of flowers for Ma, in his Sunday best appeared no one else but—Walter, the one who used to break girl's hearts over and under the water. While Annette introduced her friend to the family I turned round to Thorleif. «Pony—won't you explain all this to me?»

He just grinned and waved it away—«Tell you later»—when Annette made ready to introduce the two chaps to each other. Thorleif and Walter winked at each other slyly and shook hands as if they had never met before. A new cup was put on the table for Walter—Annette had it ready on the sideboard with Ma knowing all about it and agreeing not to spill the beans in advance.

It may not have been the right moment when I sidled up to Walter who just then was pushing a huge piece of cherry tart into his mouth and was chewing on both sides. «You sonofabitch,» I said quietly, «how do you happen to know Annette?»

He winked at me and whispered back, «Tell you later.»

Apparently the great love had had a favorable influence on Annette's tummy. With a sound appetite she joined her hungry friend once more for coffee and cake. You could plainly see how divinely happy she was.

Shortly before dinner was served I managed to draw Pony aside while Pops and Ma accompanied the young couple into the garden to show Walter the wonderful fruit trees. I knew he wasn't interested in them at all. At that moment I had managed to manoeuvre Pony into my room, shutting the door and swearing to myself not to open it again until he'd given me the necessary explanations.

Pony grinned. «All was very simple. Your sister's answer I just passed along to Walter. She insisted on meeting Mr. Eros by all means and as you can see for yourself she managed it—bliss on both sides. That the three of us have to keep our mouths shut about the small correction, especially towards Annette, goes without saying.»

A heavy stone fell from my heart. I went to Pony and looked out of the window with him. Annette and Walter were standing hand in hand under the apple tree: he seemed to have discovered a love for gardening. Pops and Ma had preceded them, giving all their attention to the rose hedge.

«Why did you always treat me so dirty at the beach, Pony?» I asked. «You were often ironical and sometimes quite nasty to me.» Thorleif's mouth was moving as though a smile wanted to come up but his eyes remained serious, and it looked a tiny bit as though a reflection of sincere apology were in them. «Was I?» he said quietly. Below father was cutting two lovely roses, keeping them carefully in his hand: full of feeling as he was, he certainly intended for the roses to add a discreet hint to our dinner table. And at the very same moment we became witnesses to another charming scene—Walter and Annette kissing each other under the apple tree.

Pony drew me away from the window. «Should they all have noticed things at the beach right away, Peter?» he asked, and his mouth came so near to my lips that I could shiveringly feel his breath.

«Notice what?» I stammered.

Then he took my face into both of his hands and came nearer to me than ever before. Roses—I kept thinking while he embraced me—apple tree—Pony . . .

(This story won first prize in the German short story contest of the Circle in 1960)

Translated by Ph. Y.

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