

Come with Me

Boldt and Hollister started running.

“Until you drop,” Hollister said. Boldt laughed.

Boldt did not run. He glided.

Sara looked bored. “This year’s greatest team ever,” she said.

“Yes, there’s that,” Andy replied. “And there’s survival. Wildebeest running away from lions.”

“I’m glad we don’t have to worry about that.”

“Sara, there is so much more. The gods, art, glory. Racing involves the human spirit, the beauty of the swift and graceful.” Andy was smiling, amused by himself though he believed what he was saying. “The need to worship, a need for temples, pantheons. We race to create someone to worship.”

Sara laughed. “Boldt in a temple, a marble statue.”

“We’re in a race to the moon.”

“I’m not.”

“The moon. A man on the moon. Doesn’t that excite you?”

“It would if I were going.”

“It feels like we’re all going. Even my mother is excited. She grew up on a farm with no electricity. They had a horse, a buckboard wagon.”

Everyone in Andy’s neighborhood had gone outside to watch Echo 1 go over, an event that was announced in the newspaper. A satellite, a spaceship, a bright shining globe. It rose in the west, at the exact time *The Falkirk Post* had said it would. The spectators were silent. Pride, awe. Spirits soaring with the climbing light.

“I appreciate progress,” Sara said. “Cars are more comfortable than horses. Houses are more comfortable than caves. It wasn’t that long ago that no one had a TV. We were the last in our neighborhood to get one.”

“My grandmother believed television was wicked, and she didn’t like telephones. They had nothing on the farm. It was a sin to have something. She had five children. She didn’t like children. She didn’t like her grandchildren. We were wicked. Be silent, or else. Speak only when you’re spoken to.”

“I don’t ever want to be old.”

“My father didn’t like it when my grandmother came to visit. He was on her long list of what was wicked. I don’t think there was anything she approved of.”

“Your grandmother sounds like my father. My father thinks television is a tool of the devil,” Sara said. “Ed Sullivan, Leave It to Beaver. The devil in our living room.”

“My father watches newsreels. The war. Bombers going down in flames. The screen turns white when an atomic bomb goes off.”

“Maybe the devil is real.”

“Progress might take us to the moon or annihilate us,” Andy said. “Television might be a tool of anyone. The truth is often a secret. The bomb was a secret. The race for the bomb was part of the war to defeat Hitler.”

“People who lie to us want to control us.”

“Science is a search for truth. And it’s a pantheon of gods. Those who discover are gods. We believe truth a form of divinity, a source of power.”

In his tenth-grade biology class Andy learned about Watson and Crick as he learned about genes, chromosomes, and DNA. Watson and Crick had developed a model for the DNA molecule. Their model elevated them to the pantheon.

Copernicus, Newton, Darwin, Einstein. Had they been conscious of competing with others to get somewhere first, or were they driven by nothing but a need to know?

Darwin did not appear to be someone who was racing. His voyage of investigation had lasted nearly five years, and he had been reluctant to publish his theory of the origin of species because he knew the outrage it would cause.

And Copernicus had known that his theory of the revolution of planets around the sun might cost him his life. The truth was dictated by the Pope and kings.

“The astronauts are brave,” Sara said. “They sit on top of a rocket that might blow up. You are right. They do get us to believe we’re really going somewhere.”

A hundred miles above the Earth. How much nearer was that to a star a thousand light years away? It didn’t matter. The apes had come down from the trees. And the apes had leapt. Leapt out of the blue atmosphere.

Echo, the shining globe, soaring, Telstar a new age.

Illusions? Andy wanted answers. He believed in an answer.

Kings and queens deified themselves. They were frauds. For most there were the limitations, the tyrannies of civilization. Or the imprisonment of bad homes, the nightmare of disturbed individuals. Science had limits. Gravity might be measured as acceleration, but what was it? Mystery was why the pantheon included poets.

Hollister despised poets, mocked the idea that anyone could be free.

A gust of wind stirred trees.

“The one who discovers is the one remembered.”

“I don’t need to be remembered,” Sara replied. “I want to find beauty, live in it.”

Boldt and Hollister raced into miles of nothing but pine, sand, and water, Lake Michigan under a blue sky, no other person in sight. Boldt slowed, gave Hollister a shove when he tried passing him. Hollister fell. Boldt ran. Hollister got up.

“Thoreau found joy in simply being somewhere,” Andy said.

Sara laughed. “*Walden*, by Jon Boldt.”

“Boldt will be a good man, like his father.” Boldt’s father was a building contractor. “Mr. Boldt told us our goal should be to do well whatever we do.”

“Andy, who doesn’t tell us that? My father is a preacher and preachers are bores.”

“Jon has great parents. Mr. Boldt managed our Little League baseball team, taught us the game. I’ve learned a lot from him. We built an ice shanty and helped him put a new roof on his garage. That was interesting, using tools, learning how shingles work to keep rain from leaking in. He showed us how to defend ourselves, told us that those who are strong never look for trouble.”

“I must not be strong. I look for trouble. I complain. My father says it’s okay if I want to be a teacher like my mom. As if I need his permission. Why doesn’t anyone show me how to build something?”

“I don’t know why, and I don’t believe everything has to be a certain way. I worked on Hollister’s uncle’s farm last summer. I drove a tractor, baled hay. Hollister’s aunt and his cousin Heidi milked cows, worked in the kitchen. Does it have to be that way? No, it doesn’t. But it is. The bales weighed forty pounds. They were bulky. Hollister and I threw them, stacked them. We shoveled manure. No one wants to do that.”

“I’d play a game if someone showed me how. Playing basketball or baseball would be fun. There are no leagues for girls.”

“The girls in my neighborhood are never around when we play baseball, basketball, or football. They aren’t interested. They live in their own world. Some guys are in a rage when they play. The games are intense. You get locked in. For a while you forget everything else. People who’ve never played don’t understand the intensity.”

“People used to kill each other for sport. I’m not that intense.”

“Gladiators were slaves. Emperors ordered them to kill. People still die because of tyrants. My uncle Leo was killed in the Battle of the Bulge. Mr. Boldt was wounded on Iwo Jima.”

“My dad was in the war. He thinks he survived because he’s good. He’s always talking about God and Jesus. He says God is just, the good will be saved. Problem is you have to wait until you’re dead or the world ends to get justice. That’s a long time to wait, I told him.”

“Be patient, have faith,” Andy said. “It’s one of the oldest lies. Accept and obey. You will be rewarded.”

“Justice. My father thinks justice is picking at everyone about every little thing. With some people, whatever you do, it’s wrong, or not quite right. That’s what it’s like when I’m at home. I like it here. I wouldn’t want to be here alone like Thoreau by his pond. I like Andy Vincent, even if he is a philosopher.”

They were in a state forest, skidding foam from the larger waves washing their feet, the water, cold even in August, a deceptive tropical blue near shore, dark blue farther out. Gulls scavenging the shore hopped away, lifted themselves into lazy flight at the approach of Boldt and Hollister, returned to the sand after the runners passed.

“All this space,” Sara said. “It feels like we are the whole world.”

August, 1964. Let there be emptiness. Beach Boys so fresh, fast cars, surf. Beatles in matching suits. Bob Dylan, the Rolling Stones.

Jon Boldt, at a Nicolet Park pavilion dance earlier that summer, had met Sara Roberts. Though there were no bad neighborhoods in Falkirk, Wisconsin, the houses in Sara’s north side neighborhood were newer, a little larger and more expensive than the houses on Andy’s street.

Andy, Mark Hollister, and Jon Boldt lived on the south side of the river, downtown a walk across a bridge. Their childhood range included downtown, the river, a ravine, a woods and fields. Most of the mills were on the river. Most millworkers lived in neighborhoods south of the river. They earned good union wages. Their homes were modest, well-maintained.

The postwar families big, each neighborhood had its pack of boys. Their rivalries and

scuffles limited by scorn for cheating and an unwillingness to do harm, their respect based on ancient codes, they were noisy but chivalrous. Running up behind someone and hitting them in the back of the head or punching them in the face as they turned around was despicable cowardice that was unheard of and would not have been tolerated. Anyone who beat the elderly would have gotten a beating in retribution. No one could remember the last time there was a homicide in the Fox River Valley.

Andy and his friends admired Jon Boldt, who was unrefined, honorable, and at age sixteen six feet three, two hundred ten pounds. A gifted athlete, in junior high and high school Boldt was in his glory, though pained by a premonition that life would not always be so good.

A warm day in Falkirk, here at the shore, with the wind off the lake, it was cool. They had not had to walk far from the beach parking area to be by themselves.

Sara wore a white bikini under a blue jersey. When she pulled the jersey off Boldt had moaned and looked to the sky as if begging for release from the torments of civilization. Sara, combing her hair, had ignored him. Her hair was fine, thick, blond, cut to lines that held her face.

After moaning Boldt had pulled off his T-shirt and sprinted to the water. Hollister had watched stonily Boldt's agony and Sara's indifference. He disapproved of theatrics, tolerated Boldt's performances as sincere if overdone, liked Sara because he believed her genuine.

Boldt dove into a wave, came up on the back side like a leaping dolphin, yelling, "I'm moving to Hawaii!"

Hollister dove, came up near Boldt. "You go swimming to get warm?"

"Warm! Let's stand here! The one who freezes to death first loses!"

Andy sat on his towel, Sara on a blanket rubbing lotion on her legs.

"I like you, Andy, because you're not an idiot."

Boldt ran back to Sara, jumped to a stop almost on top of her and shook his head, water flying from his gold hair.

"Just like Helen," Sara said.

"Do you love me as much as you love Helen?"

"No." Helen was Sara's golden retriever.

Boldt flopped on the blanket beside her.

"I'm going for a walk," Sara said, rolling away as Boldt threw an arm over her.

And so they had started walking, the sand damp, firm, cool by the water's edge. They walked south, sandpipers running from them, the beach rising to sandy banks on which Scotch pine, red pine, and jack pine grew. Boldt chased a sandpiper, Hollister followed, and the race began.

"Look at them," Sara said, Boldt and Hollister far enough away to appear neither coming nor going, their motion a barely perceptible wobble. "Jon tells me you're crazy too, but I don't see it. Am I missing something?"

"You can't ask me if I'm crazy. I'd be the last to know."

Andy's parents were crazy. He lived in their chaos. He felt coarse beside Sara, did not want to talk about being crazy.

"Hollister scares me," Sara said. "You're not like him."

"Boldt and Hollister, whatever they are, they won't try to be something just for you."

Though he would never try being something to impress another, Andy knew that he might be influenced, perhaps transformed by another. His parents, who imagined themselves grand in their domestic war, had had a powerful influence on Andy. They had filled him with dread that he might become what they were.

Some were born blessed, others doomed, most somewhere in between. Andy believed that Sara, blessed by beauty, was grateful for her good fortune. She was aware that she might cause pain while Andy's parents were oblivious to the consequences of their behavior.

A little above middle height, hair lighter brown than his father's, eyes with a tint of green around a hazel center, Andy saw both his parents in himself. He had the heavier jaw of his father, the smaller nose and brow of his mother, the muscular arms and legs of his father. What he did not have was his father's resignation to fate.

Sara, more child than woman in appearance, stood as high as Andy's chin. She stepped in front of him, placed her hands on his chest, stopped him.

"Does he think I belong to him?"

"Ownership is a burden. Boldt prefers to avoid burden."

"Andy the scientist. So logical. You don't know that logic has nothing to do with anything. I know what I want. That's what matters."

Sara gazed at him, her eyes moving from his mouth to his neck. Taking Andy's hands in hers, she walked backwards, towing him, toward the water, into cold waves, then back to the

damp sand. Letting go of his hands she said, “These weird birds, what are they doing? Eating something, or just having fun running away from waves?”

“Birds know how to enjoy themselves. They spend part of each day singing. For them, even looking for food is fun.”

“We’re the only ones who work harder than we have to.”

“My grandfather Vincent is an anarchist. He says we work to make someone else rich.”

“An anarchist. How exciting. Does he blow up buildings?”

“No. He listens to operas. He studied painting in Venice.”

“He’s a painter?”

“In his basement studio he is. He lives with his daughter’s family in Chicago. After coming to America he worked in an iron ore mine, did some work as a painter, took whatever jobs he could get. He painted a church, worked in a store and at gas stations that his wife’s brothers owned.”

Andy was surprised by how disappointed Sara looked.

“It’s so depressing, Andy. Even anarchists are drudges.”

“After my grandfather painted the church, the priest told him, ‘You have done this work for God.’ The priest did not want to pay him. My grandfather said, ‘God won’t feed my children.’ My father is like Hollister. He says if we want to eat, we need farmers, not revolutionaries. We cannot overthrow our need to eat. We all know that. My father is missing the point. Hunger, famine, injustice cause rebellion, revolution. I think when my grandfather calls himself an anarchist he means he’s guided by his conscience. He believes governments are evil and stupid.”

“Maybe I’m an anarchist. I want to dream my own world. And live in it.”

They walked slowly. Sara stopped, caught Andy by the arms, turned him.

“Look at me.”

Her stare was so intense he looked away. Far out on dark blue water he saw a white sail. So far out it appeared motionless, a detail in a painting. He heard the waves as a steady flow. Sara’s hands were on his arms.

“Look at me,” she repeated.

Her eyes were lighter blue than the lake at the horizon, larger than his mother’s green eyes that too often bored into him as if he were the cause of all her unhappiness.

Sara leaned into him, her current more than electric, her face as blank as Hollister’s. The

contact lasted a moment. She stepped back, her hands sliding down his arms as she let go of him. As they started walking again Sara put an arm around his waist. Andy wrapped an arm around her shoulders. A wave broke. The footprints of Hollister and Boldt were being washed away.

Hollister and Boldt were spots on sand. As he and Sara got nearer them, Andy could see they had stopped, one of them standing, the other lying on the sand.

Sara let go of him. "I think the tortoise won," she said, then laughed at herself. "A boring parable. Andy, I'm sorry."

"I'm not bored."

By the time they got to where the race had ended Boldt and Hollister were in the water, far enough out that the tops of waves hit their necks. Boldt turned, moved toward them, bounding as he reached hip-deep water. He gathered Sara up and carried her into the lake, she yelling at him to put her down. Boldt responded by raising her over his head as if she were as light as a doll. He threw her into a wave.

Andy ran into the lake, dove, swam under water toward Sara. The shock of the cold was not bracing. It was painful, a warning pain. The water was too cold.

As Andy surfaced he heard Sara yell, "Put them on!"

Hollister stood in chest-deep water not far from her waving his swimming trunks like a red flag above his head. In response to her command he pulled the trunks down over his head, pulled until his head popped through a leg. Boldt roared with laughter.

Sara swam to Andy. Boldt, waving his trunks, moved toward them. Sara swam then ran toward shore. Andy followed, joined her on the beach.

She grabbed him, yanked him, and gripping his arm started walking in the direction of the parking lot. She was fifteen, a year younger than Andy, Hollister, and Boldt. Andy wondered if she wanted him to feel like a knight who was protecting her. He didn't think so. He believed she was angry and scared.

She walked as fast as she could, pulling Andy. Boldt called, "It's you she loves, Vincent, but they never love you for long."

Andy looked back. Sara did too. Boldt and Hollister were standing on the beach naked.

Sara let go of Andy, began to run. They were more than a mile from anyone else.

Andy believed if he were not special he could never have a girl like Sara. But he did not

want to be special. He was like Boldt's father, or his own father, in that regard. During the coming school year Andy would break two school weightlifting records. He lifted the weights because it was required of him, like running the mile or a sprint. He did not want to defeat anyone.

"I can't figure you out, Vincent," Coach Keller told him after the record lifts. "You never seem to try. You're one of the lazy ones I've got to keep after. It's like you don't care. I know you're a good student, but there's something missing."

"Mr. Keller, I believe I do care. I know I care."

Sara stopped running but kept moving at a brisk pace. Andy caught up to her.

"Why are they being creeps?" she asked.

Hollister's thatch of straw-colored hair seemed carved from his lean soldier's head. His eyes, though smaller and more distant, were as blue as Sara's. Of middle height he was thickly built, a solid block, more grimly determined than Boldt or Andy.

"They do what they want, make it up as they go."

"Very creative. Hollister seems to be an inspiration to Boldt."

They had come to the lake in Hollister's father's red and white '57 Plymouth Belvedere, the red not bright but rich, a burgundy red.

On the way to the lake Sara had sat in the back seat with Boldt. For the ride home she sat in front, next to Andy, leaving Boldt in back by himself.

"She's ignoring us, Hollister."

"And you thought the water was cold."

They caught up to a dump truck on Highway 10, a dense cloud of grit and dust blowing from its load like a curtain of fog draping both lanes of the highway, nothing visible through the curtain.

Hollister hit the accelerator. The motor roared. Face blank, grit blasting the car, he swerved into the lane of oncoming traffic to pass the truck. Pass it blind. In the cloud.

"No!" Sara screamed. Hollister said something, a few words, like a mumbled incantation. Andy felt nothing, felt as empty as Hollister's face.

When the Plymouth, motor delirious, burst through the cloud of dust to a road that was open, Sara sobbed. Andy looked into a blue sky that was nothing but there.

Boldt laughed quietly. "Me, a bug on the grill of a Kenworth."

“Dying! Is that funny!” Sara yelled.

“That was Russian roulette with one chamber empty,” Boldt said.

Sara said nothing more during the ride to Falkirk, nothing to anyone as she got out of the car in front of her house.

The next time Andy saw her, several weeks later at school in September, the first thing she said was, “Andy, we could have been killed, I thought we were going to die.”

Andy was surprised by her distress, the intensity of it. He had not given the dump truck another thought.

“Boldt laughed,” she said, “and Hollister, he’s horrible. What he said, it was like he was not the one who said it. It was like something else was in the car, or in him. I don’t want to be anywhere near him again. And you, it was nothing to you, like you didn’t care if we lived or died.”

Hollister’s words, accelerating into the cloud, had been little more than a whisper.

“Come with me.”

“Did you care, Andy? Do you care?”

“I knew everything would be okay. I knew we weren’t going to die.”

“Weren’t going to die? That’s crazy! That’s worse than not caring!”

They were on the second floor of Falkirk High School, in a crowded corridor by a stairway, between classes, people going up and down, flowing around them like they were an island.

Sara grabbed his arms. “Look at me,” she said, as she had by the lake.

Andy remembered the white sail near the horizon.

“You were in shock,” she said. “You aren’t like them.”

She had forgiven him, though Andy had no idea what he’d done wrong.

A Glorious Day

“I need to get out of the house.”

It was Irma Vincent who needed to get out of the house. Harry Vincent, seated across the table from her, said, “Near or far, wherever you want to go, we will go.”

Sunday morning. Breakfast. Mrs. Vincent stared at her husband.

“Would you like another cup of coffee, Mommy?” Debra asked.

Her mother blinked. Andy poured freshly squeezed orange juice into his glass. His parents were smoking, his father a Lucky Strike, his mother a Salem. There were butts everywhere, butts in saucers, butts in jar lids, holes burned in sofas, carpet, chairs, the smoke a medium, a raw constant.

Andy had opened the window by the kitchen table. To blue sky, a mild breeze, lilac branches outside the window. After squeezing oranges for juice his mother had put the rinds on the stove, set the electric ring on low. She liked the tangy smell of the singed rinds.

“A picnic would be nice,” Mrs. Vincent said. Suspicious. Everyone so agreeable, Debra solicitous, waiting on her.

“Splendid idea, my dear.”

“I’m glad you think so.”

“Then we’re both satisfied.”

Debra took her cereal bowl to the sink, rinsed it.

“Telulah Park?” Mrs. Vincent said.

“Red Bird Cliff would be nicer, don’t you think?”

“Red Bird Cliff? Will your car make it that far?”

“No one knows the future, my dear, but odds are in our favor when it’s a question of a car making it twelve miles.”

“I’m not talking about a car in general, Vincent. I’m talking about your car.”