

Sketch

Volume 30, Number 1

1963

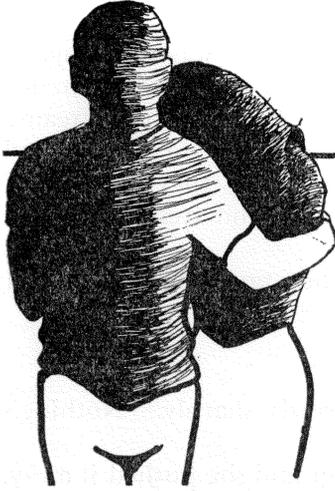
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The Bond

Ralph Matthiesen*

*Iowa State University

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The Bond

by Ralph Matthiesen

THEY were quiet as lovers are when their energy is expended, and building again toward the frenetic emotion that culminates and sends them spinning back into the satiated blackness they were now in. The night was soft and close and warm as a spring night always seems. And sitting there on the blanket on the cool sand with the river not far away they were happy, or at least he was as he smoked, and his eyes reflected two points of orange from the glow of the cigarette.

She had her head on her knees, her face turned sideways—pained almost—only partially softened by the experience of love. He reached out and touched her. “You’re shaking,” he said.

All she could see was his voice. “Yes.”

“I love you.” He took his hand away and leaned back against the blanket. He was silent for a long time, thinking, blowing smoke he couldn’t see into the air. “It’s funny,” he said, “Afterwards I feel so content. Just going no place.” He paused. “But I think of all the things I want to do, the places I want to see.”

“What good will it do you,” she said. “What good is it. . .” Her voice was harsh, harsh but soft in the night air.

“It’s nice not knowing where I’m going.”

“It’s stupid,” she said slowly and she was quiet again, thinking something in that occasional mood that puzzled him—when she was unresponsive to his ideas and dreams. They always talked about what they would do and be, and how much they were alike and the things they enjoyed together. Everything took on a lightness and freshness in the aftermath, but now she was silent.

“What’s wrong?” He looked at her, not seeing, but rather aware of her presence.

“Nothing.”

“Sure?”

“Nothing.” She bit off her words sharply. “Nothing’s wrong, so forget it.”

He put his hand on her shoulder and she pushed it away. He ground out the cigarette beside the blanket. “Something’s bothering you.”

“No.”

“Something is.”

“There’s nothing wrong, not a damn thing.” She stood up and moved away from him. “I just look at people and wonder if I’m different.”

“You are.”

“They’ve all done the same things,” she said, “They’ve all had parents and gone to school, church like me.”

He heard her walking in the darkness and saw her silhouette against the river. She stopped and threw something she had stepped on into the water and it made a small splash far out. “I guess I’m the only one,” she said. “Different, singled out.”

He lit another cigarette.

“No,” she said, “I’m not the only one.”

“I don’t get it.”

“God, I feel trapped,” she said from the water’s edge. “Can I have a cigarette?” She came over to him and he handed it to her and lit it, and in the flame of his match he looked into her eyes. She seemed very worried.

"I wish you'd tell me," he said hugging his knees after she had stood up. "Tell me and you'll feel better."

"No."

"Is it about us?"

"Yes."

"What is it?" The glow from the cigarette moved as she walked around him.

"I don't know how to tell you." Her voice was hesitant, halting.

He thought for a moment and knew. "You're pregnant."

"Yes." It was a breath more than a word.

They were both quiet for a long time then, and she came and sat beside him and he threw away his cigarette and watched it burn out near the water, a dying pinpoint of light that couldn't quite be focused.

The night no longer was warm and soft—it had become strange and unfamiliar and she touched his face. "I am," she said, "I'm sure."

"Christ," was all he could think to say. "Jesus Christ."

"I'm sorry," she said, "I'm sorry, but I know I am."

He thought about what she had said and his hands shook as he pressed them together. "Sorry," he said finally, reaching for her hand. "For Christ's sake don't be sorry. It isn't your fault."

"Yes it is."

He tightened his grip. "No. We did it together."

"It's here, inside *me*, not you."

"I put it there." He let go of her wrist and dropped back on the blanket, looking at the sky, the clouds moving with the wind, the billions of stars wavering above him.

"It happened." Her voice was firm. "It happened and we have to live with it."

"Do we?" he said. "There are ways, we've talked about them before."

"An operation?"

"We talked about it. Remember?"

"We talked about it, that's right." She sounded very small.

"We both agreed." He pulled her down beside him and she lay there, breathing softly, her head on his shoulder, and

he could smell the spring dampness of the ground in her hair.

“No,” she said. “We can’t.”

“I have a friend that knows a doctor.”

“We can’t,” she said into his face. “I couldn’t.”

“Yes we could. We’re both sensible, mature.”

“No.” She moved away from him slightly. “It’s wrong, I couldn’t do it.”

“Why? You know what’ll happen to us.”

“It was all right to talk, I guess, but it’s me that has to do it, not you.” He moved his hand over her hair. “It’s in me; we can’t have it taken away.” There was moisture on her face. “I wasn’t brought up that way.”

“Neither was I.”

“I’m a woman.” She stopped for a second. “We weren’t wrong, doing it I mean. It’d be wrong to kill what’s there, wouldn’t it?”

He sat up and he saw himself sitting there in a strange objective way, almost as if he were standing far above himself looking down, able to see through the evening, seeing the two of them on the blanket, bound together and unable to move away, bound to themselves. Two pieces of driftwood washed there by the wind, moving back and forth on the wash, higher and higher to bleach in the sun.

“I remember,” she said behind him, “I remember that first night after the first time.”

“So do I,” he said.

“I wanted to cry.” She moved her hand along his back. “I wanted to cry, but I couldn’t. I just couldn’t. All mixed up.”

“There’s no way to get out,” he said. “We can’t get away from what we are.”

“I was a woman. I couldn’t cry. I wanted to, and I didn’t.”

He didn’t answer.

“I’m a person,” she said quietly. “Nothing else.” They stayed on the blanket, not talking, for a long time.