"I Am the Truth..."

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Abstract

PAT watched the girl in the mirror before her—a reflection of tanned shoulders melting into the yellow-gold of her evening dress. Her eyes followed the carefree young hands, etching a smooth red line on untroubled lips, and she thought, ”Those hands are steady and quick and sure...
PAT watched the girl in the mirror before her—a reflection of tanned shoulders melting into the yellow-gold of her evening dress. Her eyes followed the carefree young hands, etching a smooth red line on untroubled lips, and she thought, “Those hands are steady and quick and sure. How can they possibly be mine—when I’m really so lost inside? They must know some of the indecision, too; or maybe it’s only my mind that remembers last night—”

Last night-------

She had lived a thousand lives of emptiness and fulfillment since she and Tim had sat on the porch glider in the dim borrowed light from the street, and she had heard his words push softly against the thin night-fragrance.

“I want to marry you, Pat.” His solid earnestness had kept the sounds suspended in the shadows, demanding, wanting to linger there in the summer stillness until the breath of acceptance was blown into them.

The shape of things that would let him say the words had been gathering clearness, bit by bit, since that icy night when he had taken her home from a party until last night when it had reached a twin depth within them.

The eyes of the girl in the mirror darkened as Pat remembered how she had fought the coming of that moment. And her face now echoed the misery she had known when she had answered, “Tim—I’m sorry—it just won’t work.” She had longed to reach out for the hard strength of his hand, to give him the comfort of her own unhappiness, but she had known that it would only be harder for both of them if she did.

“You DO understand, don’t you, Tim?” she had whispered, hoping that he would, because she had been all feeling then, and there had been nothing in her of the cold reason that told her their lives would never match—that religion WAS important.

Tim had moved a little, shifting the glider slowly through patches of light that caught on the top of his lowered head.
“Because I call myself an atheist—” he had used the word consciously, cleanly—laying bare the element of truth that separated them. “Because I don’t have the same belief in God that you do,”— acknowledging her right to her faith, but leaving room for his own.

Pat had nodded, hating herself. “I know that you feel inside of yourself that you’re right, Tim, and I respect that,” she had said, remembering the softness of his voice when he had spoken to her of his home—his father’s earthly vitality—his mother’s quick understanding.

“And you know that I respect your belief in God, Pat,” Tim had answered. “That respect is important—.”

Pat had pushed on, “But would that respect last for the rest of our lives; would it be strong enough to avoid destroying something that is an important part of each of us?”

Tim’s face had been a dim blur as he spoke slowly, “I think it would, Pat, because of the other things we have—the good times—the rightness of just being together. There would have to be adjustments, sure, but I want to try, darling—if YOU will.”

He had paused then, waiting for her reply; and Pat had turned her head away, seeking a sureness that was not in the darkness there on the porch.

Then Tim had jerked out, in final desperation, “Pat, how will we ever know—unless we give ourselves a chance?”

And she had thought, “Can it be that we have a chance? What kind of a chance is it that seems doomed before it has ever lived?”

Downstairs, the sound of a muffled tread on the tile of the vestibule bit into Pat’s reverie, and she squared her shoulders to face the girl in the mirror—watched the lips settle into an unhappy line of purpose and decision. Tonight could be so beautiful—a formal at the “Beach-Walk”, where they’d gone on their first date, but the beauty of the present was what made the future loom gray and unending.

The reflection faded and was gone as Pat’s arm stretched to flick out the dressing-table lamp. As Mother and Dad were out of town, she left the light in the upper hall on for her younger brother, Bob, and walked lightly, expectantly, to the head of the steps.

But it wasn’t Tim waiting down there. It was Bob who had come in; he was standing with his back to her, the usually
straight line of his shoulders a dejected curve. There wasn’t a
trace of the defiant, fifteen-year-old maturity that he had found
in the responsibility of his job at Higgins’ Grocery. Pat was his
big sister again, and he was “Bobby”.
“What’s up, Bob—tougher Saturday than usual?” she asked,
descending the stairs to where he stood.
At the sound of her voice, Bob wheeled jerkily, and she caught
the strained seriousness of his eyes—knew that only the grip of
strong control was holding back his tears.
He just stood there, looking at her, his lips working on the
verge of a tremble. Finally he blurted, “When are Mom and
Dad coming back? Pat—oh, Pat—I’ve just got to talk to Mom and
Dad!” Then he was looking down at his feet, sliding one of
them back and forth on the green carpet.
“Bob, you know they’ll be gone ’til late tomorrow,” Pat
answered. “Tell me about it, can’t you?”
She looked up then. Tim was standing in the doorway. For
a moment she forgot everything else as she felt the warmth of
his nearness, the warmth that always meant that it was right
to be together again.
“Hi-ya, Butch! ‘Lo, Bob!” He smiled his greeting. The smile
dimmed and then disappeared as he looked at Pat and then at
Bob. “Say—what’s the matter, fella?”
Bob swallowed, said nothing.
“I don’t know what it’s all about, either, Tim,” Pat said,
looking up at him. “Mother and Dad have left for Rock Island,
you know.”
Tim threw a long arm across Bob’s shoulders, and they moved
together into the living-room. Tim motioned Bob to a seat
beside him on the davenport.
“Okay, old man, let’s have it,” Tim urged. “Maybe Pat and
I can help.” He lighted a cigarette and stretched to toss the
match into an ash tray on the table.
“Gosh, Tim,” Bob breathed. “I—I can’t tell you!” His fingers
nervously twisted the bottom button of his suede jacket.
Tim frowned. “Must be pretty serious, huh?” He straightened
to face Bob fully. “Look, as one fellow to another, I’ve been in
some kinda tough ones, myself, and it wasn’t so long ago, either.
Everyone of ’em came out all right, too—though I didn’t see
how they could at first.” He smiled a little, reassuringly. “This
one can’t be so much worse.”
The first sign of relieved strain showed in Bob's face. His dark brows eased into a smoother line, and he made a small noise, high up in his throat.

“But—gee, Tim—it's about some money.” He rubbed the ball of his clenched fist against the sofa nap, his eyes lowered, his arm muscles taut. “I've just gotta get twenty dollars some way—before Mr. Higgins finds out.”

Sensing their unasked questions, he went on, “He gave me a twenty dollar bill—told me to take it up and put it in the cash register. I was going to do it right away. I took it right up to the front, but Mrs. Mason wanted me to carry some stuff out to her car, so I put it on the counter—over by some sacks so nobody else would see it.”

His voice was racing now, hurrying to get it all out, so that they could see the whole picture. “And—and—when I went back, there was a long line of people. I had to put a couple of bags of coffee through the grinder, and I took some more packages out. I guess I just forgot about it—and—well—when I did remember—I looked—and it was gone. I kept looking and looking—every chance I got—but it was gone.”

He looked at Tim—shrinking—waiting for the words of condemnation.

“You didn't say anything to Mr. Higgins, Bob—you didn’t tell him about it?” Tim asked.

Bob shook his head and looked away. “I was afraid to. He gave it to me—and I lost it.” His eyes swung back again. “Maybe he won't even find out—I could earn the money and put it back—and maybe he'd never know.”

Tim placed his hand on Bob's knee and said, “Think it over for a minute, fella. Have you really thought about it?” His tone was soft—confidentially questioning.

“Gee, Tim—I can't think about anything else.” Bob's voice hopped abruptly from bass to tenor and back again.

Tim spoke urgently, forcing an answer. “Well—do you really think that's the best way to handle it, then?”

Bob stood up and walked slowly to the window—stared out, although he could see nothing in the blackness. He pushed his hands deep into his pockets.

Tim's long frame had hunched forward; his head was up, his eyes resting on Bob's back, patiently, thoughtfully.

Then Bob turned to face them. “What d'ya mean, Tim? D'ya
think I should tell Mr. Higgins about the money?” The words were forced from between tight-set lips.

Tim was silent a moment, and then he said, “This is your problem, Bob. You’ll feel better about it if you solve it your own way.”

Bob began, “Well—I guess—.” He stopped to clear his throat, and then went on. “I guess I really oughta tell him about it. I guess that would be the right thing to do.”

“Okay, fella,” Tim said, his voice glad. “Don’t the Higgineses live in that little white house over on Thayer? I’ll drive you over there now—if you’d like to—”

Bob’s blond head moved slowly up and down, and his voice was shaky as he answered, “Sure—that’d be swell, Tim. Will ya? I might as well get it over with right away.”

Tim and Pat got up, and they all went to the door. The two boys walked on down the path to the driveway as she tested the lock and pulled the door shut.

Pat ran through the dark freshness to the car and climbed into the front seat beside Bob. A tenseness lay around them still as Tim backed the car and pointed it toward their destination. They drove in silence for a long moment, the night air angling to them from the little front window, blowing Pat’s hair back.

“What d’ya think I ought to say, Tim?” Bob’s voice was mock courage.

Tim kept his eyes straight ahead, watching the headlights push into the blackness. “Just tell him the whole thing; tell him just how it happened.”

Bob opened his mouth as if to say something more, then changed his mind, as he watched Tim’s arm swing to turn a corner. “It’s the second house—right hand side—there’s a light on—that’s the one.”

The car glided smoothly to the curb, and Tim shut off the motor. He opened the door and stepped out. “Okay, Bob—it’s your show. Just tell him the story. He’ll understand, I know.”

Bob slid across the seat, was out, and on his way up the walk. Tim settled back against the cushion, one foot still on the runningboard. He peered down at Pat from the shadows, and said, “It’s going to be all right, Pat—I know it is.” Then she saw Bob and Mr. Higgins standing, dimly outlined, on the porch.

The old man was intently still, nodding once or twice as he listened to Bob. They saw Bob smile broadly as he started to
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speak, and then heard him cry, "Gosh, Mr. Higgins—really? Oh—
gosh!" In a brief moment they were shaking hands vigorously,
and Pat and Tim heard Bob's "Goodbye—and thanks a lot, Mr.
Higgins!" as he took the steps two at a time and bounded to
the car.

"Pat! Tim! Everything's okay!" he shouted, happily. He
jerked the door open and piled in beside Pat. "Mr. Higgins found
the money this afternoon before I remembered about it, and he
put it back. He didn't say anything about it—said he hoped I'd
tell him myself."

He paused, gasping for breath, and then looked at Tim. "Gosh,
Tim—I'm so glad I DID tell him. I was so scared—and now
everything's okay." He drew a long breath and pushed his feet
flat against the floor-board as they started to move again.

"That's great, Bob," Tim said, smiling.

Bob's answering smile was radiant. "Gee, Tim—you sure
were right! Thanks a lot for telling me what to do."

"I didn't have to tell you, though—that's the important thing.
You just have to sit down and think these things through before
you know the right way to tackle them."

Bob nodded intently—feeling the weight of every one of the
words. "Gosh—you sure are right, Tim." He spoke hesitantly,
on the high peak of discovery, "And I guess it's always best to tell
the truth, too, isn't it?"

"That's it," Tim answered. "That's the important thing to
remember. There just isn't any substitute for the truth." He
was looking at Bob still, but speaking quietly, listening to the
sound of his own words. "No matter what it is—no matter what
you're facing—the best way to get over the hump is to look at
the thing and at yourself honestly."

Silence was heavy about them as they reached the house
again—and Bob was out, closing the door behind him.

"Have a good time at the dance," he said. He ducked to peer
in through the window at them; his voice was soft gratitude.
"And thanks again—you're a swell guy, Tim."

Tim laughed. "Forget it, pal!" he answered. His leg moved
out to the ignition pedal, and as the car slid away from the
curb, Pat could see Bob, still standing there at solemn attention.

She leaned back in her corner—watching the dashboard light
catch Tim's forehead and nose and chin in slim, straight lines
of silver.
She reached out her hand to touch him and he turned his head and looked down at her. Solid rays of strength tingled in her fingers as they met the hardness of his shoulder—and she knew from his eyes as they met hers that the hardness and the strength went beyond—stemmed outward from the very core of him—leaving no room for softness or weakness.

Pat wanted to say the right words, to say them so perfectly that he would know that she could have faith, too. But all she could say was, "Tim—darling—I'll never be able to say all of the words." She placed one hand against the wall of her heart. "They're here—inside—but somehow I can't get them out."

Tim was silent, the hope in his eyes moving to her in great waves.

Pat went on, listening to the wondering whisper of her words. "I am the Truth and the Light. I am the Truth—you've always known that that was it, haven't you, Tim?" Her voice was soft, fusing with the darkness, becoming a part of the stillness.

"I am the Truth. There's nothing more in God—in ANY faith—than that—is there?" It was a question, but not a question, and Tim and Pat smiled together in silent knowledge of its answer, an answer that was a circle of gold enclosing all of the years of their future.