David

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Abstract

The guests came in groups of thirty or forty each week to stay at the ranch...
great when . . . when my years are more nearly gone and I shall look up on a spring-time afternoon and see a little girl coming down the hill with a black violin case in one hand and the other arm full of music books, her curls tangled up in the sweet fresh wind of another springtime.

— Elinor Holmberg, Sci. Sr.

DAVID

THE GUESTS CAME in groups of thirty or forty each week to stay at the ranch. And we, the “girls,” smiled at them when we served breakfast and listened to stories of their adventures in the Black Hills on the porch at night, and taught them the 7 Step on “dance night.” When the big brown bus with Triangle I painted in yellow on the side pulled into the drive each Sunday afternoon, they were just another bunch of people to feed and run errands for and be pleasant to. But as soon as they got off the hot, dusty bus and came to the porch for icy water they became the widowed Mrs. Argenbright, who talked enough to make up for the rest of the year, when she lived alone; the newlywed Johnsons trying so consciously to appear unconscious of each other, and seventy-year-old Mr. Erman, who had been all over the world, and announced, “You can’t beat these corn-fed girls.” They came from New York and Chicago and points between; some wore “authentic” pink Western hats and boots from Macy’s, and some wore filmy silk dresses, hoping to meet the men of their dreams. Some I can’t forget, though it’s silly to remember.

One such was David Brierton. David was fifteen, six feet tall, with dark curly hair and deep, dark eyes almost hidden by long eyelashes. His face wasn’t a man’s face or a child’s face, but there was none of the gawkishness of adolescence about him. I tried to think of a word to describe his face, and I could only come up with “sensitive.” When I first saw him, my reaction was, “I’ll bet he breaks the hearts of all the fifteen-year-old girls.”
David lived with his mother and stepfather except for the week each summer when he came to the ranch with his father. In this week father and son were to "get to know each other." Mr. Brierton was a quiet small man who barely reached to his son's ear. He smoked a graceful good-smelling pipe, and was always nice to us. He told unobtrusive funny stories, and he joked with people in such a quiet manner that they weren't always sure he was joking. Everyone seemed to like Mr. Brierton, but although he smiled often, I sensed a deep unhappiness within him.

There wasn't anyone else under twenty-five on the tour that week, and we were supposed to entertain David. So the first evening, after we finished the dishes, we advanced five abreast as he sat in the corner of the sun porch listening to the older people talking, and dutifully asked him to play the piano for us (we'd been advised to break the ice that way.) He didn't blush or squirm or trip over any chairs; he just said, "All right," and he went to the piano and sat down. He played a couple of arpeggios, and asked us what kind of music we liked. Each of us answered something different, so he grinned, and broke into a wild version of the Saber Dance. Next it was Harlem Nocturne, and he ended with something of Rachmaninoff's. There was a quiet that is its own applause, the quiet reserved for that which hints at greatness. He played more that night, because no one wanted him to stop, and he didn't mind. When I asked him how long he had studied, he said he'd had five lessons when he was six, but quit because he didn't like to practice scales. And he asked me if I knew any duets. I hastily answered, "Not without the music." "Gee whiz," said David, "it must be great to be able to read music."

The next afternoon we all climbed the steep hill beyond the first bend in the creek, and, at the top, dropped exhausted to the ground. It was a misty, dreary day, and we had reached the top together. We couldn't see the ranch at all, and the knowledge that it would soon rain made a very intimate, little-people-against-nature feeling. It was a day for talking about serious things, and soon we were talking about religion. David was a Catholic, but he said, "I don't know why." No one else in my family is. My mother was,
before she divorced Dad and got married again. Then she was excommunicated. It's funny—Mom and Dad broke up because of religion—Dad isn't anything, and Mom couldn't stand that—and so now she isn't anything either.”

He asked me what my religion was, and when I told him, he looked at me hard and said, “Do you really believe in it?” I had the strange feeling that those young-old eyes were seeing me too clearly, and my “yes” was spoken uncomfortably. “Then that's all right,” David said. “My Dad has no religion. I don't see how you can respect a man with no religion. How can you?”

Somebody recited something about lots of good people not professing a religion, but I could only think, “Poor Mr. Brierton. Poor confused, wistful David. Is it right for that which calls all men brothers to estrange father and son?”

After while, David told us that he had lived with his Mother only for a couple of years. “I lived with my Grandmother for nine years. She was a pretty good egg, but when she started going out of her head it wasn't so good. Finally the priest at the school where I went found out about her, and said she wasn't a fit guardian for me. By then Mom was married again, and she took me.” I made my face stay impassive as the horror struck me, and soon the image of the little boy with the out-of-her-head grandmother receded in favor of the bigger boy, too old and too young for his years, who was lounging against the tree and facing me on top of the steep hill.

After that afternoon, David was around all the time, in the kitchen helping us with the dishes, and appearing from somewhere whenever we were through work. Sometimes we sat around the kitchen table after dinner dishes were done, and played “twenty questions” or asked logic riddles. It was obvious that David had a quick, good mind; he enjoyed catching the college girls up, and succeeded often enough to embarrass. One night he taught us to play “Knuckles.” He showed us a simple version “because you girls wouldn't catch on,” but whoever won each hand (it was a game for two) got to take the entire deck of cards and slice with the edge at the loser's clenched fist, to make his knuckles bleed. He showed us a technique for making it hurt, and he
showed us the scars on his own knuckles. I told him I'd play him a game, and he finally agreed. He won the first hand, so I dutifully placed my fist on the table before him, my instinct for self-preservation losing out to my curiosity. He held the deck of cards poised above my knuckles, and then exploded, "For the luvva Pete! You can't play a game like this with a darn girl!" When we asked him why he played such a gruesome game, he said, offhandedly, "Oh, everybody does. You'd get laughed out of a place if you wanted to play something else."

That week it was my turn to go on the scheduled tour through the North Hills and take care of the picnic lunches at noon. David had gone on that trip several other summers, and he gave me a private commentary in faultless tour-guide style all through the day. He showed me the almost hidden path to the bottom of Bridal Veil Falls. And he gallantly took my hand when we crossed the creek on the stepping-stones.

We had some time to spend in Spearfish before we all ate dinner at the cafe there, so we walked down the street to a little book store. I found a pocket-sized anthology of English and American poems, and David looked at it as I leafed through. "That's a good one," he said, "it has some of the very best ones. You should buy it; I wouldn't mind having one myself."

"Why don't you get one?" I said. "They don't cost much."

"Nah! What would I do with a book of poetry? It does have a lot of good ones, though."

When we got back to the cafe, everyone was there ready to eat but Mr. Brierton and one of the more sprightly elderly men of the group. David said, "I know where to look," and walked rapidly down the street half a block to the most conspicuous bar. A minute later the three of them came out, and though the old gentleman was talking too loudly, I thought with relief that Mr. Brierton seemed all right. David walked down the street looking straight ahead, as if he were by himself, until they got back to the cafe. Then he said to his father, "I'm getting a little short, Dad." Mr. Brierton handed him a ten-dollar bill, smiling — just smil-
ing. A little later, I said to David, “Your father certainly is
generous with you.”

David said, with something that was just close enough to a
sneer to make me feel a little sick, “Nah! Get a few drinks
in him, and he’s good for anything.”

That night riding home in the dusty, jouncing bus, we
talked about a lot of things, and David started talking about
his future. He said there were “a heck of a lot of things
to worry about.” He asked me questions about college, and
said he had a girl at home, a “good kid, but not much sense.”
And he didn’t think he’d ever want to be married, and I
said of course he would some day when he found the right
person. “Anyway, I have a lot to do first,” he said, and
neither of us talked any more. Soon he was asleep with his
head bumping against the window. Sometimes the cars we
met made just enough light for me to see his face, and
he looked young and fine and troubled as the jolting bus
bounced his head against the window. I thought, in an
almost-whisper, “David, if only I could take your hand and
lead you as you led me across the stepping-stones this after­
noon.” But I only folded up his jacket and put it behind
his head.

Saturday was the day the tours left, and we were always
busy cleaning the rooms for the next tour. But we stopped
just before they left to say good-bye and thank them for
their tips and wish them a good trip home. It was part of
our job, but sometimes we were sorry to see them go.

David was looking solemn as he got ready to get into the
bus, and I said, “We’ll miss you, David.” He didn’t say
anything, but he took a piece of paper and pen out of his
pocket, and, using the side of the bus, he wrote his name and
address on the paper. The writing was full of strange curls
and turns, and I could hardly read it, but it looked dis­
tinguished. “If you’re ever in Chicago, you give me a ring,”
he said, “and I’ll show you the town.” I took the slip of
paper and said, “I certainly will, David. That would be
fun.” He turned quickly and got into the bus; I was glad
because I was afraid he’d notice Joanie snickering behind his
back.

We stood lined up, smiling and waving as the bus drove
away; and when they were gone, Joanie said, still snickering, “You know, I think David had a crush on you.”

“Oh, you’re all wrong,” I flipped back, “it was I who had the mad crush on him. After all, when six feet of good-looking male shows up in this wilderness, you can’t afford to be stuffy about age.” And then, very quickly, I said, “Come on, let’s get busy; there’ll be another bunch just like ’em tomorrow.” Just like ’em? As I leaned over to pick up a bundle of dirty sheets, the slip of white paper in my blouse pocket crinkled. No, not quite.

—Ruth Frantz, H. Ec. Sr.

Warm Valley

In the middle,
the end is endless:
Beginnings are obscure, forgotten.

* * *

I was alone;
and did not know it.
Life was barren, unfulfilled and empty,
saturated with doing and going, eating and sleeping:
A surfeit of activity
floating on a hollow drop of nothing.
Day followed day in an unending procession —
    happy, carefree, laughing days,
    bitter, fruitless, aching days —
all the same.
Waiting, waiting;
searching, searching, for an unknown goal:
Hidden truth and beauty.

How long I waited I do not know;
I only know I have waited all my life —
an eternity of meaningless minutes and hours —
waiting for you, Warm Valley.