The Ugliest Child

Diane Bennett*
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Abstract

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"Pam, your mother's here. Hurry and I'll take you down to see her." There was a small explosion in the cabin as Pam raced around getting dressed and the other campers roused themselves from their eternal games of jacks. Then she stumbled through the door waving her skinny little arms and chattering in her shrill, nasal voice.

"Calm down, dear, or your mother will think we've made a nervous wreck of you." I took her hand, and we started down to the visitor's room. I was almost as excited as she was. I could hardly wait to tell Mrs. Gale that Pam had learned to swim. It was unbelievable! Frail, skin-and-bones Pam had worked her heart out for me every day for two months, and now she swam like a fish—maybe like an emaciated fish, but she swam. She was wonderful. The homeliest, thinnest, most nervous child I'd ever seen, but the kind who climbed right into your heart and stayed there. I gave her tiny hand a squeeze, tucked her blouse in and tied her sneakers before we went in.

Mrs. Gale was standing in the middle of the room talking to Miss MacDough, the camp director. They turned and saw us.

"Mrs. Gale, I'd like to have you meet Martha, Pam's counselor and swimming teacher. And here's Pam!" Miss MacDough beamed as Pam rushed to her mother and threw her arms around her. Mrs. Gale patted Pam's head absently and turned to me.

"How do you do? Miss MacDough was telling me that you've taught my bag of bones to swim. It's hard to believe." Her voice was husky and bored.

"Let's give the credit to Pam, Mrs. Gale. She's worked like a trooper, and we're very proud of her."

"I'm so proud, Pam. I wish I could stay and see you swim, but I have to go back to New York tonight. Tell me about camp."

Pam wasn't being very vocal. Mrs. Gale asked her a few
questions, and she replied with bobs of her head. I marveled at the two of them together. Mrs. Gale was such a contrast to Pam. Her blase’ manner, coarse red hair and look of plump healthiness made me wonder if she could really be Pam’s mother. She drew a cigarette from a jeweled case, and I jumped up with lighter in hand. Her cold blue eyes stared at me impersonally as I lighted her cigarette. Her lips were hard and too red. Her yellow dress made an acid splash in the drab room, and the diamonds on her fingers flashed brittle blue light. Only her hands were soft—pink and limp.

They talked a bit longer. About Pam’s new governess, about Mrs. Gale’s trip to Europe, and about how hot it was in the city. Pam fidgeted and scratched her mosquito bites vigorously. I was a much better listener. The subjects fascinated me. All that wealth! What must it be like to send your children to the most exclusive camps, go for a jaunt in Europe, live in a penthouse, and wear karat-and-a-half diamonds?

Then Mrs. Gale was patting Pam’s head again and saying how long it would seem until she would see her darling daughter again. Miss MacDough left with Pam, and I shook Mrs. Gale’s hand.

“It’s been nice meeting you, Mrs. Gale. I can’t tell you how much I’ve enjoyed Pam. I’ll really hate to see her leave at the end of the season.”

Her eyebrows arched. “Really? If you’re being sincere, I’m amazed. If not, it’s a nice thought anyway. Personally, I dread the day when she’ll come home, and I’ll have to admit again that I’ve mothered the ugliest child in New York City. I hope she doesn’t give you too much trouble and that you’ll see that she gets whatever she needs.” She handed me a ten-dollar tip.

“Thank you, Mrs. Gale. I’ll do my best.” I ran back to the cabin and tucked the covers around the ugliest child. She clasped her scrawny arms around my neck and gave me a very wet good-night kiss. The backs of my eyes burned with tears, but I could only squeeze her tight.

—Diane Bennett, H. Ec. Sr.