Amorality

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THERE was a man and there was a woman. There was a day, an afternoon. The afternoon was warm. The woman sat on the grass and the man lay beside her. She looked into the quiet water of a pond that had kept the grass green late into the fall. Somewhere down in the cool water fish were swimming. Somewhere overhead a bird was swaying on the slim end of a branch. Between them the woman sat thinking.

She was thinking of warm bricks. It was a day that made her think of warm bricks. She felt rich and free and sure. She felt beautiful and contained. She thought of individual, soft-colored red bricks.

He lay beside her and thought of the solidness of the ground and of the lightness of her hair against the bright sky.

A moment before they had sat down on the grass after a short walk from the road. A moment later he thought of the shape of her neck and reached up and touched it with his fingers. Her head leaned into his touch and cradled itself in the palm of his hand. A moment before, it had been enough to sit on the grass and be oneself. Now, it was enough to share the curve of a neck and the cup of a hand, and be each other.
She felt his rough warmth and gentle touch and thought of a picture of crysanthemums. She saw the bold strokes of the brush, and the fresh autumn colors, and the delicate, blurry tips of the petals. Then she saw the strong blue sky and turned her lips into the deep creases of his hand.

Her lips were cool. Her mouth felt small inside his hand; he could almost hold her whole face inside it. He could encircle her head from ear to ear and spread his hand from one side of her face to the other as easily as if he were holding a fragile, white teacup. Her smallness made him think of his bigness. Her delicacy made him think of his strength. Her being a woman reminded him of his being a man.

He sat up and slipped his arms around her waist and locked them in front of her. Her head leaned against his shoulder and the faint, sweet scent of her hair came to him. He could feel her slow, steady breathing under his locked arms.

They were unhurried. They were a man and a woman together and unseen, but they were unhurried. They had a long, warm afternoon to be together and unseen. And the afternoon was like her breathing—slow, steady, and sure. The pond was unruffled except by a few skimming insects. It remained smooth and shaded and merely hinted of its depth. The air was still and heavy with the warmth of the sun and with the scent of brown weeds and hot pine needles. The sky remained a solid blue and the sun hardly moved. There was no hurry.

The weight of his arms around her waist pressed her firmly against him. She could feel the warmth of his body on her back. She could feel a button on his shirt against her cheek and his breath blew softly on her forehead. She closed her eyes and thought of how easily she could let herself belong to him. There was nothing to keep her from giving herself up to him, nothing to make her want to hold him back. She knew she could let him have her; she thought only how wonderful it was for her to be that free and that sure. It was wonderful because she would never regret doing it. She would never have misgivings. She would have only serenity and peace of mind. She opened her eyes, but there was nothing she wanted to see. She closed them again. In the darkness
she could be aware of the closeness of his body and the weight of his arms as they held her against him.

They sat for a while as still as the water in the pond. They seemed to become part of a motionless, timeless setting, as her eyes closed he stared at the fathomless surface of the pond and allowed his mind to wander. At first he wondered what it would be like to plunge into the pond and rupture its perfect, mirror plane into hundreds of ripples and flashing droplets of water. He saw himself thrashing luxuriously through its cool liquidness; he saw the clean slice of his arm cutting in front through the surface, shining wet and pale against the dark water. Then he thought of her swimming with him in the pond. He saw her skin, white and smooth, glistening with drops of water. He saw her swimming toward him slowly and steadily, her long bare body gliding across the pond without effort. He saw himself reach out to her and embrace her and roll over and over and over in the cool water. For a moment he forgot he was only thinking and that he was still sitting on the grass.

But then he remembered the unbroken surface of the water and the stillness of the air and her stillness as she lay in his arms.

He glanced up at the sky. The sun had moved behind a large tree that arched over the pond. As he watched, a crimson leaf from the tree spiralled slowly down through the air and landed in the middle of the pond. It sent out wide, noiseless ripples to disturb the surface and then began to drift and turn limp with water. He watched the ripples spread and disappear, one by one.

He thought again of swimming with her, out where the leaf was. As he thought of it he leaned down and buried his face against her neck. He brushed her soft skin with his lips and felt her move to lead him down over her shoulder. He unlocked his arms and turned her towards him. He found her mouth with his and held her in a long, gentle kiss. After a moment or two their lips barely touched. The kiss seemed to hang between them in mid-air.

Without really breaking it they fell back on the grass, holding each other loosely. When their lips finally parted
they rested their heads on the grass, very close to each other, and looked deep into each other's eyes.

He began to wonder if they were in love. He wondered if they had crossed over the line, after all, and were beginning to fall in love, instead of merely beginning to make love. But as he watched her he knew they had crossed no line at all. He knew nothing was different. They wanted each other, but they still weren't in love.

But he knew that didn't matter. Whatever it was that made them want each other was enough. Whatever it was, it justified their relationship completely, and as long as they both realized its limits they could take advantage of it to suit themselves, without disillusionment.

But what it was he didn't know. It eluded him. He was never sure that it wasn't the beginning of love, the transition from friendship to romance. Until the line was crossed he wouldn't know that they had crossed it. He had been in love before, so he knew what to look for. Yet he suspected that this was not love but something else. He suspected that their love-making depended on something else—not love itself. But not on lust, either. They were never violent or lewd. Sometimes they were hardly physical at all, but something else, something neither physical nor spiritual but somewhere in-between.

He watched her face, as if he might see a clue. But her eyes were serene and unmysterious, as if there was nothing important that should be known about her. He felt he could almost read her thoughts on her face. He knew she was thinking of him. He gave up searching for a clue and allowed himself to slip back into their private, oblivious world.

He moved his hand slowly from her waist and began unbuttoning her sweater. She smiled a faint, half-smile and began to open his shirt. They undid each button slowly, almost casually, as if each were undressing himself, instead, and thinking of something entirely different in the meantime. They moved as if they had all the time in the world. They watched each other's eyes with almost serious concentration. When they lay bared to the waist in the grass, they touched each other here and there with both hands, as if they were exploring for the first time. Then they lost their seriousness. The pleasure of touching and holding each other made them smile and then laugh. They laughed the warm,
pleasant, infectious laugh of lovers, a laugh that rippled in
the still air like the leaf's ripples on the still water, spreading
out and disappearing, one by one.

When the ripples were gone, the lovers fell silent. He
began looking at her, glancing down at her bareness and
then, almost furtively, at her eyes again. She moved her eyes
with his and watched his face intently. He could read only a
faint anticipation in her gaze, but he could sense the liberty
she was giving him. His only limits were his willfulness and
his desire, and their mutual, vague respect for each other.
He'd never found these limits confining. He probably never
would.

He touched her skirt. They turned slowly on the grass
as he caught her in his arms and entered her. It was as always.
There was still magic in it. He still wanted her and she still
wanted him. He could still become deeply involved—fasci­
nated and entangled. He could still almost fall in love with
her. She seemed to become his, totally, and that made him
want to love her. She held nothing away from him. He did
anything he wanted to, and she was always with him. It was
a kind of freedom—lovers' freedom.

After a long, long while, he left her. He searched her face
again. Had they crossed the line; he wondered? No, he knew
they hadn't. They weren't in love. But he wanted them to
be. Why? Because, he told himself, they gave so freely to each
other.

It occurred to him then what was holding them together,
what was still magic about their love-making, what came so
close to love, and went so far beyond casual attraction. It had
been too obvious for him to notice until he made himself
look for it, too obvious and simple. But he found that know­
ing what it was didn't change anything. The reason for their
love-making was clear to him, and he could look at their re­
lationship from a distance and understand it, but that didn't
make him love her; at best, it perhaps made him want to
respect her little more, and even to want to be loyal to her
up to a point. But that wasn't love. It was merely grateful­
ness.

He lay back and looked at her as she gazed dreamily into
the strong blue sky. His eyes traveled her full length, resting
here and there, returning again and again to her serene, un­
mysterious face. He understood the face now, as surely as he
knew the body. Like the body, the face held nothing back. They were both bared for him. The face, the body, the woman were his. That was what made their love-making more than casual attraction.

Then he realized that she was the key to everything. It would still be just a casual attraction if she had held herself back. That was the difference. No matter how free he could be himself, it was her freedom that held them together. In the beginning it had been up to her, not him. Nothing would have been possible without her letting it be possible, without her wanting it to be.

He felt more grateful than ever now, because he realized for the first time how much had depended on her and how much she had been able to give to him. He wanted to feel more than just grateful, but he couldn't. They had to cross the line first. Perhaps someday they would. And perhaps they wouldn't.

He put an end to his thinking on the matter. He had reached an impasse. Reason and intuition could take him no further. He cleared his mind and focused his attention on her again.

She was still looking up at the sky and obviously thinking of something pleasant. He watched her for a moment, allowing his eyes to travel again, down across her smooth, bare skin. Then he remembered thinking of her bareness in the water, white and clean against the dark shadows. He remembered her rolling over and over with him in the water.

He touched the curve of her neck where it rested against the grass. She turned and met his lips coming to hers.

When the sun was slanting sharply through the trees, the pond was filled with deep, wide ripples and the air stirred with pleasant laughter, and there was an end of a day and an afternoon.