

A Caress for Marie

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(Because of its apparent resemblance to John Steinbeck's novel, *Of Mice and Men*, the following story could not be awarded a prize. But the judges assured the editor that its merits were considered outstanding.)

MOM ALWAYS said I didn't know enough to love anythin'. She always said I didn't know enough to do anythin' at all and I guess she was right about most things, but she was wrong about me not knowin' enough to love anythin'.

I sat in the front room watchin' the fire flickerin' through the cracks around the door of the old wood stove and listenin' to the rain fallin' on the roof and listenin' to Marie doin' the dishes out in the kitchen, and I thought about what Mom had said and about how I loved Marie.

Marie had been here at the farm for nigh on two weeks, ever since Mom took sick with the pneumonia. Marie was only sixteen, same as me, but she was good at doin' things around the house like Mom used to do before she took sick.

Pa had just gone out and hitched old Prince to the buggy and drove off to the hospital in Jenkinsville like he did most every evenin' since they took Mom there for her pneumonia. There was nobody in the house but Marie and me, and I sat there lookin' at the fire in the old wood stove and listenin' to the rain fallin' on the roof and listenin' to Marie out in the kitchen, and I thought about how I loved her until I thought I'd bust, I loved her so much.

I knew now that Mom was wrong about me not knowin' enough to love anythin'. But Mom was smart, though, and pretty near always right. I knew she was smart 'cause when her and Pa would get to spattin' about somethin' it always ended by Pa sayin', "Alright, I guess you're right," and scratchin' the back of his head like he was a little mixed up.

I could hear Marie tinklin' the dishes out in the kitchen and every little while she would hum a little tune. I liked to hear her hum 'cause I knew then that she was happy, and I always wanted Marie to be happy. I guess Marie was the only friend I ever had except for Pa. I always loved Pa even if he wasn't so smart as Mom. He always used to give me a little pat on the head and told me not to fret

whenever things went wrong. And since I loved Pa, I always thought Mom was wrong about me not lovin' anythin'. And I've loved Pa for as long as I can remember.

There was other things I used to love, too, before Marie came to the farm. I could remember that ever since I got big enough to run around the barnlot I loved playin' with the kittens. They were all fluffy and soft and nice and they must have loved me too, 'cause I was the only one that could get near them. I used to sit in the straw on the old barn floor for whole afternoons at a time in the summer, just playin' with the kittens and talkin' to them. I remembered how Mom was always glad when I was out in the barn with the kittens. She used to say I got in the road when I was in the house and she'd say for me to go on out to the barn.

Marie was like a kitten. She always looked so soft, and her hair was light and silky like a kitten's, and I always thought of the kittens out in the barn whenever I looked at her.

I guess I would have been pretty lonely except for Marie and Pa and the kittens. I watched the fire flickerin' and remembered how Mom never used to like to have me makin' friends. She always said for me to go to the barn whenever we had company comin'. I remembered one Sunday afternoon, a long time ago before I started to school. We was expectin' a visit from Mom's folks from town and Mom told me to go out to the barn and play with the kittens. I remembered how I had just got off the back steps when I heard Pa say, "Now, Liz, that ain't no way to treat the boy when you know his grandfolks is comin'."

Then Mom said in a kind of complainin' voice, "Ben, you know Willie ain't quite right in the head."

Then Pa said somethin' about me bein' only six and that I would turn out alright. And I'll never forget how Mom answered. She said, "You know he won't turn out alright. You know Willie's weak-minded. You know he'll be that way forever. You're just afraid to own up to it. And besides I don't want the folks to see Willie. They're always makin' remarks about how slow he is in catchin' on to things. And they're always tellin' how my sister's kids is gettin' on so good. I won't have them seein' Willie any more if I can help it."

Then Pa said that he didn't think it was right, keepin' a boy from seein' his grandfolks, and Mom said real loud that she wouldn't have me around the house when her folks was comin'. So finally Pa said, "Alright, I guess you're right," and I knew he was scratchin' the back of his head like he was a little mixed up, and I knew Mom had outsmarted him again, so I went on down to the barn to play with the kittens.

That was a long time ago, but it had been the same way ever since when we had company comin', and I used to spend a lot of time down at the barn with the kittens.

I heard the rain fallin' harder on the roof and watched the fire flickerin' in the old wood stove and I thought back to when I first saw Marie. I first saw her in school, and I remembered the hard time I always had in school and how I hated goin' to school.

I remembered one day when I was still pretty little and hadn't been off the farm much. I was out in the back yard and I heard Mom and Pa talkin' real loud in the kitchen. I remembered hearin' Mom say that she wouldn't have me embarrassin' her afore the whole town of Jenkinsville, and I didn't know what she meant until Pa said somethin' about the law statin' that all kids is got to go to school when they're six and that there wasn't no way around it. But Mom kept on sayin' that she wouldn't have me embarrassin' her afore the whole town, and I was sure that she was goin' to be right again like she most always was. But finally Pa said somethin' about the truant officer and how he would put the law on us and then Mom didn't say anythin' more. I remembered how, in a little while, I went into the house to supper and nobody said anythin', but every little while Pa would look over at me and smile kinda' sad like, and I knew Pa loved me.

I remembered how the next day Mom scrubbed my face harder than usual and got me into my Sunday clothes and Pa hitched the horse to the old buggy and we drove into town to the school. We both went in, and I followed Pa around until he found out where the first grade was and met the teacher. She was a nice lady and she smiled a lot.

Pa told her to take good care of me and then he whispered somethin' to her that I couldn't hear and then I remember her sayin' that she thought that her and me would get along just fine. I liked this nice lady who always smiled at me, and I smiled back and nodded my head. Then I remember I looked at Pa and he smiled at me, and it seemed like his eyes was a little wet. Then Pa patted me on the head and said that he had to get back and for me to come right home after school. He said he wouldn't have time to come in and get me as he had to look after the crops, and I knew it was only two miles and I wouldn't mind the walk.

I remembered how I hated school and how I knew that I never could have stood it if it hadn't been for the teacher and for Marie. I liked lookin' at the books, and the teacher came around to my desk and helped me a lot, but it seemed like I didn't get on too good. I liked the teacher, but I hated the recesses. The other kids, all except Marie, always made fun of me in the playground when I wanted to help them play their games.

They always said, "You're too dumb to play, Willie. Don't you know you're too dumb?"

Then maybe one would say, "What's two and two, Willie?" And they always said it so fast that I couldn't think right away. Then

they would start sayin' "Willie is a dunce," all together and over and over again like it was a song. I never had any fun at the recesses.

Then when the weather was warm and the men sat outside the big store in the afternoons when I was goin' home, I would hear them say, "There goes that weak-minded boy of Ben Gorham's." And maybe one of them would say, "I reckon he'll grow up to be the village idiot." I didn't know what "idiot" meant but I knew they was makin' fun of Pa and I remembered I hated them for it, 'cause I loved Pa.

I got up and put some wood in the stove and the fire crackled up 'til I couldn't hear the rain fallin' on the roof any more, but I could still hear Marie hummin' in the kitchen.

Marie had been the only one at school who talked to me and cheered me up when things went wrong. And it seemed like things was always goin' wrong at school somehow. I remembered how Marie had cheered me up on promotion day when we was still in the first grade. We was both real young then and it was a long time ago, but I remembered it just like it was yesterday. I remembered all the kids bein' happy because it was promotion day and the last day of school, and how they all squealed and giggled. The teacher passed out the report cards, all except mine, and then she gave a little talk on how she had liked havin' us in her class and how she hoped we would get along good in the school years to come.

I didn't understand why I didn't get a report card until everybody was leavin'. Then the teacher stopped me as I was goin' out the door and told me to come over to her desk.

I remembered her sayin' that she had my report card there but she hadn't put down any grade yet. Then she opened the reader to the first story and told me to read it to her. I looked at it hard, and I heard the other kids yelling outside in the playground. I tried hard to remember the words that the letters made up, but all I could remember was how the kids always said "Willie is a dunce," and how they said it all together and over and over again like it was a song. And I could remember the fat old men in front of the big store pointin' at me and sayin', "There goes that weak-minded boy of Ben Gorham's."

Then I cried and got tears on the pages of the teacher's book. And she told me that it wasn't that bad, and she patted me on the head like Pa always did. Then I remembered she said that since we was such good friends she would fix it up so as she would be my teacher again next year. I liked that, but I knew that she felt bad 'cause I couldn't read out of the reader and that made me sad.

I remembered how I went outside into the playground and found Marie and told her what had happened and she laughed. I didn't understand why she laughed at first, but then I figured that she

laughed to show that she was happy and to make me happy so I smiled at her.

I remembered how ever since then I always told Marie my troubles and how she always laughed and made me happy. And now Marie was right here on the farm and she was hummin' out in the kitchen and I was happy again.

I began to wish Marie would get done out in the kitchen and come in and sit with me in the front room. And I began to wish Pa would come home from Jenkinsville so we could all be here together and then maybe Pa could see how I loved Marie. I thought how nice it would be for us just to sit here in the front room and listen to the new wood cracklin' in the stove.

Then I heard wheels grindin' in the gravel on the driveway, and I got up to go to the kitchen 'cause I knew Pa always came in the back way. But before I could get to the kitchen, Marie opened the back door and I heard her say, "That you, Tom?"

I was standin' there where I had stopped in the dark front room about halfway to the door leadin' into the kitchen, and I saw Tom come in the back door and heard him say, "It's me, Sugar. Who else do you think would drive clear out here to the end of nowhere to see you?" Then he laughed and grabbed Marie by the arm and they went over to the far end of the kitchen where I couldn't see them any more.

I stood there and wished it had been Pa who had come instead of Tom, and I wished Tom hadn't grabbed Marie like he did.

Pretty soon I heard Marie laugh kinda' low and then she said, "Don't do that, Tom. Willie's in the front room and he'll hear us." And then she kinda' giggled and said "Now, don't, Tom." And then she giggled some more.

I went back to the chair by the stove and sat there and remembered how I had hated Tom when I was in school, and how he had always made fun of me and how he always said I was too dumb to help play the games in the playground. I sat there and wondered how Marie could stay out there in the kitchen and laugh and be happy with Tom when I hated Tom and loved Marie so much.

I could hear the rain still fallin' on the roof and the fire still cracklin' in the stove, and every little while I could hear Marie tellin' Tom to stop, and gigglin' a little, and I sat there and felt like the insides had all gone out of me somehow.

It seemed like a long time later when I heard Tom say he had better get goin' before Mr. Gorham came back and found him there. I heard him go out and drive away and pretty soon Marie came into the front room with the lamp and put it down on the table over by the window. She sat down and the light fell across her face and through her hair, and I thought about the kittens out in the barn, and I thought about how nice it would be to touch her like I used to do the kittens

and like Tom had touched her out in the kitchen. Tom had done it just like it was nothin'. He had grabbed her by the arm and pulled her across the kitchen to where I couldn't see them and then he must have touched her some more. I wished I could touch her, just touch her arm or her dress and let her know how much I loved her and how I knew I loved her better than Tom did.

She said, "I thought you would be asleep by this time, Willie." And then she smiled at me and said, "Tom was here. Did you hear him when he was here, Willie?"

I nodded and wished she wouldn't talk about Tom.

Then she said, "Tom thinks I'm pretty. Do you think I'm pretty, Willie?"

I wanted to tell her that I thought she was as pretty as the kittens out in the barn, even prettier, but I couldn't think of the words.

She got up from the chair and walked around in back of me where I couldn't see her any more and then she said, "Tom thinks I'm pretty, and he's always trying to kiss me. All the boys in Jenkinsville are always trying to kiss me when we have parties."

I sat there and thought about all the boys in Jenkinsville tryin' to kiss Marie, and thought about how I loved Marie, and wished I could turn around and look at her and tell her how much I loved her.

Then I felt her hands on my head and she ran her hands back along my hair, and I felt like I was tinglin' all over 'til I thought I'd bust, I loved her so much. Then she said in a low voice and real close to my ear so I knew she was bendin' over the back of the chair, "Wouldn't you like to kiss me, Willie?"

I got up fast and walked around to the other side of the stove and stood there and looked at her and felt my legs shake like they did when I ran a long ways. I wanted to kiss her. I wanted just to touch her on the arm or touch her dress, but I was afraid. I don't know why I was afraid, but I was, so I just stood there and felt my legs shake.

Then Marie said, "Now, don't be bashful, Willie, I won't bite." Then she came over close and turned her face up and said, "Wouldn't you like to kiss me, Willie?"

I knew I had to touch her. I had to touch her with my hands, so I reached out and touched the front of her dress and it was all soft underneath just like a kitten. She turned away when I touched her and I knew I had to touch her some more. I knew I had to, so I grabbed her and felt how she was soft and warm all over.

She yelled at me, "Don't Willie!" And she squirmed away and ran to the other side of the room. She looked mad and she said, "You're dumb, Willie. That's no way to treat a girl. You're dumb just like the kids in school used to say."

I knew she was mad at me, and I knew I had to tell her how much I loved her, and I knew I had to touch her some more. I knew she had been listenin' to the kids who used to make fun of me at

school and to the fat old men who used to point at me from the front of the big store, and I knew that she must have heard Mom say that I didn't know enough to love anythin'.

I started across the room toward her to tell her that she was wrong believin' what all those folks said, and she looked scared and started for the door. I couldn't let her get away because I had to tell her, so I caught her before she got to the door and held her fast.

She screamed and hit me across the face 'til I got hold of her arms and held them tight. Then she looked up at me and said real loud, "You're dumb, Willie! I always knew you were dumb!" And she said it just like Mom used to say it only she said it harder just as if she hated me worse than she hated anythin'. Then she wiggled around and tried to get away, and I threw her down on the floor, 'cause I had to tell her not to believe all those folks that said I was dumb, and I had to tell her how much I loved her.

I saw how white and nice her neck was, and I knew I had to touch it. And I felt how soft it was when I put my hands on it and how I could feel the blood beatin' under the white skin.

I thought about how wrong Mom had been when she said I didn't know enough to love anythin', and how wrong the kids at school had been when they kept sayin', "Willie is a dunce," all together and over and over again like it was a song, and how wrong the fat old men in front of the big store had been when they pointed at me and said, "There goes that weak-minded boy of Ben Gorham's."

I thought about all these things and when I got through thinkin' about them I felt my hands hurtin'. I looked at my hands and saw that Marie had dug deep scratches in them with her fingernails, and I saw how the blood from my hands had run down across her neck and onto the floor. I saw how Marie's eyes were real wide open, wider than I had ever seen them, and how her face was the wrong color.

I took my hands away from her neck and got up off the floor. Then I bent over and picked Marie up and felt how soft she was and how limp, just like a sleepy kitten, and I put her down on the old couch over by the wall. Then I sat down beside her and put my hand on her dress where I had first touched her and sat there and waited for Pa to come home from Jenkinsville so that he could see me touchin' Marie, and so he would know that I loved her, and so he would know that Mom was wrong when she said I didn't know enough to love anythin'.