

Jacques

Lucia Walton

HENRY hastily swallowed the last bite of his apple. "Howdy, Jim, you back to catch cold a'ready?" He tossed the core at an overflowing soap carton in the corner.

"Bad a shot as ever, Henry," observed the tanned man who had just entered the store, as the core rolled across the linoleum. "Yeah—I've got to get the place cleaned up before the season starts. Got any blue enamel?"

"Sure, in the back," Henry replied, scratching his thin hairless head. "End of that aisle Mary's in." He nodded at a plump elderly woman busy at picking over oranges.

"Hey, Mary," Jim called, stamping over to her in his heavy snow boots, "you can pick those outta your back yard where I've been."

"Well, Jim Vanderwall!" She turned in pleased surprise. "The resort season starting early this year, is it?" Her voice, low-pitched and definite, contrasted sharply with her placidly rotund appearance.

"No, I got some paintin' to do." He glanced down at her basket. "You gone and got a new husband? That looks like more food than you'll eat in a week."

"Lord, no! My niece is with me."

"Fine, fine! Company's good for you. Bring her over for a game of parcheesi some time."

Mary sighed. "Thanks, Jim, but she doesn't feel like going out much." She picked up another orange, squeezed it gently, and dropped it into the basket.

"Been sick, has she?" His bulbous nose wrinkled in sympathy as he unzipped his red-and-black squared lumberjacket.

"No—well, in a way. Her parents were killed in a wreck right before Christmas, and she can't seem to get over it."

"Too bad, too bad. You oughtta be able to fix her up, though, Mary, the way you cook."

"I hope so," she answered as he went on down the aisle, and wished it were that simple.

The child was thin as a piling. Night after night Mary stared at the ceiling in the dark, trying to think how to help Carol, and waiting to hear the screams that called her to the girl's room almost nightly. Four months had passed, but the nightmares were still there—the wild drive home from a basketball game, the oncoming lights, the shrieks and the crash and her parents' bodies in the gully. Carol never talked about it with anyone. She hardly talked about anything at all. No one had seemed able to help her; finally Mary got on a plane, for the first time in her sixty-six years, and fetched the girl home with her, hoping the isolation of a winter-bound Michigan village would provide the rest Carol needed. So far it hadn't done much good. Now the thaw had started, and Mary was putting

her hopes in the peace of the cool vast lake and sun-beaten beach. The more she thought about that, as she paid for her groceries and walked through the dripping woods, the better it sounded.

There was still a bit of winter left, however, until the cold Michigan spring. Mary went on chattering to silence, playing gin rummy with half a partner, outdoing herself at the stove. Carol never seemed moody or sulky; she never complained of anything, and she was fine help if Mary told her just what to do. During the day, she was so detached that she almost seemed not to be there at all. Often she'd stop in the middle of whatever she was doing, pick up one of the French books she had brought with her, and read for a while as though her life depended on it. This, Mary had learned, apparently relaxed her; and aside from the nightmare it was the only obvious sign of tension the child showed. The nights had become routine. Mary would hear her screaming and go to her; Carol would clutch at her, sobbing wildly as Mary rubbed her back and sang nursery songs in her deep soft voice. After about an hour, the exhausted girl would fall asleep. She never talked, but only shook with great wrenching sobs; and neither of them ever mentioned the episodes afterward.

Snow fell and the thaw ran again in March; finally, near the end of May, Mary decided spring had come. After lunch one day she brought out a thick blanket and told Carol to go to the beach. She didn't ask her if she wanted to go; any need for decision, however minor, sent Carol to desperate translation. The girl took the blanket, put on a sweatshirt, and set off down the road with a vacant face.

The budding woods were still wet with the thaw and the sand was cold as Carol climbed the hill and then the dune; she stopped for a moment on the crest, bracing herself against the steady biting wind the deep gray lake sent, then made her way carefully down to the beach. Spreading the blanket at double thickness, she lay on her stomach to watch the tireless waves, letting the wind pull off her scarf and toss her straight light hair. After a time she pillowed her head on the scarf and began to draw thin fingers through the white cold sand to the rhythm of the waves. Its coolness was somehow comforting; she wriggled it into the shape of her body beneath the blanket and watched the shadowy outline of an ore-boat snail its way across the horizon. The faint sun grew warm between her shoulder-blades, and soon she slept.

After that, Carol walked to the beach every afternoon, to watch the lake and to sleep. One day she was venturing to speak to a gull who had landed a few feet from her when she saw a boy coming down the dune. Not looking up, she watched his steps tensely. He trod the sand expertly, and when he stood beside her she saw that the skin of his feet was tough and smooth, like a rock worn by the backwash. He had no shoes with him and, though the wind was cold, wore only a white t-shirt rent at one shoulder and a pair of washed-out dungarees rolled above the knee. His legs were long,

and taut with long muscles; his shadow was long on the sand, and Carol judged that he was quite tall, much taller than she.

"You come here every day," he said in a quiet voice that sounded as though it were seldom used.

"How did you know?" Carol was surprised that she could speak to him so easily.

"I see your outline in the sand."

The boy sat down beside her, and she looked at his face curiously. It was long, deeply tanned and weathered, covered with faint blond stubble. His nose and ears came to gentle points, and his eyes were blue as hers, but with the farseeing wintry look of an old New England sea captain's eyes.

She gestured toward the bird picking its way down the beach. "He wouldn't talk to me."

"He's shy," said the boy, and began to make a weird clucking-mewing sound. Turning, the gull flew to his shoulder.

Carol watched silently until the boy said, "Go find your supper." The bird flew away, and she said, "Could I learn to do that?"

"I don't think so," he answered. "Not for a long time, anyway." His eyes scanned the water and the sky above it. "You won't come tomorrow, it's going to rain."

The sky looked clear to Carol, but she accepted his statement as she accepted his presence and his familiarity with the gull.

"Have you a name?" asked the boy, leaning back on his rough elbows.

"It's Carol."

"Carol, Carol, Carol." He drew it out slowly. "It sounds like the waves."

"What's yours?" She felt almost rude to be asking.

He smiled. "Whatever you want to call me," he answered easily.

She looked at him thoughtfully for a moment, then said "Jacques. Yes, Jacques. You're like French."

"You haven't had your nap, Carol." He rose, unfolding loosely. "Come back when the rain stops."

"I will," she promised, her eyes following him along the water's edge until he disappeared far away around the pine-covered point.

It rained for two days. Carol played gin rummy with her aunt, saying nothing of the boy. On the third day, when she returned to the beach, Jacques came once more and stayed a little longer.

The sun grew hot as summer strengthened; Carol took to wearing her green bathing suit, but Jacques always appeared in his t-shirt and dungarees, even when they swam. He taught her a great deal about the lake, taught her to appreciate its moods, and how to tell the kinds of fish that lived in it and boats that sailed it, and what weather the varied cloud formations betokened. They never talked of themselves, but always of the lake. In the blazing heat they took long swims, straight out into the sparkling blue coldness and back; they walked up and down the beach while he told her of the lake;

and, if ambitious summer-people happened onto their stretch of sand, they flung themselves down on it and pretended to sleep.

Like all people who live near a large body of water, Aunt Mary believed in the lake's powers implicitly, and gave it full credit for the gradual change coming over her niece. That Carol grew plump and more alert, that the nightmares came at increasingly longer intervals was due entirely to the lake and the wind and the sun sinking into her bones and her blood, infusing their vast cradling peace into her soul. Occasionally Aunt Mary walked to the beach with Carol; on those days Jacques failed to come, and the grateful aunt watched her niece build castles in the sand and jump the waves with pleased relief. And, though she sometimes thought that Carol should fix herself up and go to parties over at the Inn, she contented herself, as she told people at the town, with "letting the lake take its time."

One afternoon in August, at the peak of the heat, Mary felt unable to go to the store. It was with misgivings that she asked Carol to do her errands, but the girl agreed almost readily. She went to her room and came down half an hour later with her sun-whitened hair bound back, her lips reddened, and a leaf-printed white dress billowing about her long browned legs. The old lady gave her directions sharply and blew her nose when Carol had left the house.

Instead of taking the path to the main road, Carol hurried through the woods, took off her sandals to climb the dune, and ran down to the beach. The lake was still, the sun unrelenting. Jacques came out of the water as she ran toward it.

"I'm going to the store," she called.

He looked at her sadly.

"You don't like me this way." She felt an unaccountable hurt.

"You're beautiful," he replied in a strange sorrowful voice. He had never complimented her before; in the long months he had never complimented anything about her but her name. She hadn't expected it, hadn't missed it; nor had she ever thought it strange that, in the course of the long lazy days they had passed in perfect accord, he had never so much as brushed her hand with his as they walked.

"I must go," she said. "I'll be back."

Walking away and up the burning dune, she felt his eyes on her. At the crest she turned to wave.

"Goodbye, beautiful Carol," he called, and left her to watch him diving through the whitecaps.

Nearing the main road, she longed for a moment to run back to Jacques. He and Aunt Mary were the only persons she had spoken with for months; she was afraid, but somehow she knew it would be all right. Jacques' eyes had told her so, and she knew him to be a source of truth as great as the lake. She began to sing softly as she walked — "Frère Jacques, frère Jacques, Dormez-vous, dormez-vous?" She passed a ramshackle house on whose porch three grubby children were playing, and found herself waving to them.

The cool dim mustiness of the cluttered grocery store made her

blink as she entered. A thin bald man took an apple out of his mouth and gazed at her happily from behind the old-fashioned cash register.

"You're new here," he observed. "Summer?"

"You must be Henry." She smiled tentatively, then thoroughly. "I'm Mrs. Ter Haar's niece."

"Well, I'll be—thought you were a frail little thing! 'Say, Mary's not sick, is she?"

"No, thank you," Carol answered, choosing a basket. "She just didn't feel up to the heat." She was concentrating, fighting, but she felt that she would win.

When she returned to the counter to check out her purchases, Henry was talking with a summer-looking person.

"So it was you bought the Holmes place," he was saying. "Nobody's been there in five years—they never came back after their boy died, and everybody wondered if they'd ever put it on the market."

"Vanderwall told me about the boy." The summer-person, cigared and overflowing a Hawaiian shirt, nodded sadly.

"Awful shame," said Henry. "Never saw a finer boy—always helpin' somebody. Died that way. A neighbor's boat got loose and drifted down the channel in a storm—Jim—that was his name—saw it goin' out and swam after it. Went down just before he caught it, they said."

The plump man kept on nodding. "Too bad, too bad. It's a fine house. Well, I'll be seeing you, Henry."

"Fine boy, Jim Holmes," Henry muttered as he rang up Carol's groceries. "Bout the age you are now. Smart as a whip, and always helpin' people."

She walked home slowly, tired from the effort of contact with Henry and thinking hard. After putting the groceries away, she changed to her bathing suit, unbound her hair, wiped off her lipstick, and ran to the lake. It was clear and blue, frothing at the edges with tiny whitecaps; the wind was growing new and fresh, the sun heavy-hot as happens in Michigan's mid-August. Carol flopped down on her striped towel to scan the endless water. For an hour or more she seemed to search it, her accustomed eyes unflinching as the sun lowered itself opposite. Distant voices jabbed at her consciousness; a pair of sunburnt, flabby summer-ladies were walking toward her. They appeared surprised as she sat up and turned toward them; gathering herself to speak, she was suddenly aware of quiet tears sliding down her face.

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