

PICNIC AT FISH KILL POND

A WRITING SAMPLE

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I didn't know him very well and when he asked me out, I said "no." In fact, I said, "no" exactly four times- until he asked me out to a picnic.

If Father knew what kind of boy this was, he would have locked me in a room for days. This was a boy who was basically lawless. Inside of school, he was a sullen, non-performer, spending half of the academic year in Mr. Gillingham's office, his feet propped up on his desk when Mr. G. left for even a few moments. Of course, Mr. G, who wasn't afraid of any kid, including Bob Terrier, knocked his feet off the desk, sometimes knocking Bob onto the floor. At that point, Bob knew he just had to wait it out. He had already experienced the County jail for his favorite hobby, which was stealing hubcaps from prominent townspeople.

So, when he drawled at me, "Say, redhead- what you doin' Saturday night?" I naturally looked at him as though he had over-dosed on some kind of prescription drug, which he probably had, anyway.

But, the thing about Bob Terrier, he was persistent in his mischief- and he kept asking.

One day, another boy I was out with, crossed over the line in a parking lot. I got out of the car with my blouse half-ripped off, running aimlessly while this monster-boy chased me over and around old Chevrolets and Buicks in a deserted part of town. He jumped over an old Firebird and nearly pinned me down when the wrath of God descended on his head. It was Bob Terrier who pounded this poor boy into the bloodied asphalt and then got me some ice and paper towels and basically treated me like Florence Nightingale, whom I was enamored with as my teenage icon. The monster-boy wound up, lying in a bloody heap, watching, semi-consciously, while Bob plied his tender mercies on me.

I got up and tried to help the boy, but Bob stopped me.

“He isn’t all that hurt. He needs to figure out that trying to rape young ladies isn’t too good for his health.”

And, the monster-boy lay there. I believe he had some kind of conversion experience right there, on the asphalt- because I never heard those terrible stories about him again, stories which I never believed until that awful night.

It was for this reason I wound up with Bobby at Fish Kill Pond with a big wicker basket of ham and cheese sandwiches, pickles and homemade coleslaw, which I made myself, and about a dozen bottles of Jack’s Custom Root Beer in a red ice chest that Bob bought on the way out. Jack’s was very best root beer anyone has ever tried. You could only get it at Pat’s Drugstore.

Fish Kill Pond was a very saline lake that pushed out mounds of dead fish on a regular basis. It had a kind of brownish colored water and was surrounded by a barren little beach, fringed with dying weeds and fronds of a few palm trees that surrounded the Lake, who were much for the worse for happening to grow there- in that strange, polluted solitude. This was hardly the place for a romantic picnic and I knew it. Fish Kill Pond, which was really officially Harry’s Pond, after one of our town council people who died several years ago, smelled rather bad- but had, as its distinction, the privilege of being the only water body strictly within city limits.

Bobby looked at me, playing with one of his sandwiches. “What’s wrong?” I said, taking a bite out of a sandwich to prove it wasn’t poisoned and that food could be eaten, even here, at Fish Kill Pond.

“I don’t know, Linda,” he said, “I had kind of hoped for more out of this picnic. This place really stinks. Is this what you think of me?”

“You saved my life, Bobby- and my reputation. That’s why I decided to go out with you. What do you think my father would think of me going out with the Hub Cap King?”

Bobby giggled. “I don’t know,” he said in that soft drawl of his, “He’d probably lock you in the garage.”

“No, it would be in my own bedroom, which is about as cramped and plain as a room can be.”

“What do you mean?”

“My parents are against pictures- and they took away my stuffed toys and dolls a long time ago.”

“Why would they do that, Linda? You’re a girl. Girls can keep those things as long as they want.”

“Not in my family, Bobby. In my family, everybody was treated the same. I have three brothers, you know.”

“Really. You must a got your hair tore out when you was younger.”

“Not a chance. My father is a demon from hell, Bobby. My brothers were afraid to touch me. And he basically treated me just like them- except he didn’t teach me to fight. He thought that wasn’t lady like. That’s why I couldn’t defend myself against Crazy Sid Rubinstein. That’s why I needed your help.”

“How did you manage to wind up with him?” Bobby said, beginning to nibble on a pickle.

“He offered me a ride home at school. I was really tired and I didn’t want to walk.”

“Well, how did you wind up in a parking lot?”

“Oh, once we got into town, he asked me to a movie. My house is only a few blocks away from downtown. Well, the truth is, I forgot to do the ironing the night before- and I was afraid to go home and get locked up again. And I was hungry, Bobby. I was hungry and I knew that little monster would feed me, even if it was only popcorn and Coke.”

Bobby patted my hand. “I know you did Linda. And it was all right. Christ, I know what it’s like to be hungry. Maybe that why I’m such a goddamn thief...”

“Don’t say that, Bobby. Don’t say it. You are not, anyway.”

“Yes, I am, Linda. I don’t just steal hubcaps, Linda. I steal everything. I have the largest collections of erasers the world has ever known. I could open a school supply shop tomorrow.”

“Do you do it for money, Bobby?”

“I sell a few things now and then, but basically I do it because I have to.”

“And why is that, Bobby? Why do you have to be a thief?”

He looked at me and began to eat, his mouth too full to answer me. He devoured great two whole sandwiches, his cheeks and face bloated by the ferocity in which he crammed them into his mouth. Specks of ham and crumbs of bread and streaks of mayonnaise began to generously decorate his plaid, flannel shirt. Bobby became a voracious, silent, eating machine. After the sandwiches, he began to boldly stuff his mouth with cole slaw. It was a momentous display of eating power, the exhibition’s finale being the way he consumed three bottles of Jack’s Custom Root Beer - in less than two minutes.

I didn’t know if I should be ashamed of him or give him some kind of eating and drinking award. I didn’t know much about psychology but I guessed that he’d rather eat than deal with his criminal tendencies.

Something about the way Bobby ate and, of course, his muffled response to my earnest question- made me ravenously hungry and I began to cram sandwich meat, bread and cheese into my mouth until Bobby himself stared at me in total silence with a look of inextinguishable awe that I would never forget.

Bobby never answered my question, but once satiated with ham and coleslaw, our bodies filled to the gills with gourmet root beer, we began to make out as passionately as we had eaten- going to a point just a tad below that of no return. Then, we lay by the side of that stagnant pond, laughing and laughing.

A moment or two later, we began to notice something by the pond’s shore. Dozens of tiny little fish we could swear were not there before we were eating- started to appear in tiny clusters, until the lake was surrounded by a ridge of dead fish. We had stopped laughing at this point- and stared at each other. Did we do that? Did we kill those fish?

It was a natural, unanswerable question- and neither of us vocalized it. We just stood staring at either, transfixed by a love that we knew was somehow as close to immortality as we could experience on this earth.

Before we left, Bobby took a piece of paper out of his flannel shirt and handed it to me. It was a draft notice. I shook my head. It didn’t matter. Nothing mattered. I could wait. I would wait. He knew it- and there was, again, almost nothing said in words.

The smell of dead fish grew as we stared at each other, but it didn’t matter. All we felt was transcendent love. I brushed off some of the breadcrumbs on Bobby’s jacket. He smiled and me and we walked to the car. He carried the old picnic basket. It was very light.

We transgressed. We left the bottles on the beach as a chore for the park attendants, who I am quite sure never visited there, anyway. We swore we’d come back, but we never did.

I knew I wanted to marry Bobby that day. And I would have- only he was killed in Viet Nam.

