What are Friends For?

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WHAT ARE FRIENDS FOR?

People said that Jessica and I were the ideal college roommates. Our personalities were so different they complemented each other, and taken together we made one fantastic individual. I was strong in facing life's more common problems, and I handled the irate profs, late papers, and the scraping up of cigarette money for both of us. Jessica, on the other hand, immersed herself in the more mysterious aspects of existing. We were both interested in the arts, but she was involved in the 'fine' arts while I leaned toward the crafts. Jessica occasionally worked in my media, but with the air of an outstanding architect involving himself in the good, healthy manual labor of building a dog coop.

I suppose that was natural, it was the era of the pseudo-intellectual. The painters curled their noses up at the jewelers, the sculptors at the ceramicists, and we jewelers and ceramicists curled ours up at the commercial artists, who were the only ones who could support themselves. But that was the order of things.

Any bad feelings between us rose from the fact that while she took for granted the favors I did for her as something that anyone could do if they wanted to waste the time; she was, however, extremely patronizing whenever I needed help in writing poetry or coming up with a design. I felt like a plowhorse harnessed with a skittish, beautiful thoroughbred. I hated myself for resenting her. But we were very close in all other ways, so I tried to accept and forget it.

Now we sat silently in her livingroom, years later, as if pondering some heavy problem. With some feeling of deceitful irreverence I swept my eyes around, absorbing our surroundings. The whole place had the look of a sensitive shell gone sour. Her handmade ashtrays were overflowing with tense stubs, their ashes carelessly ground into the carpet. The softly-formed basket she had spent weeks weaving was full of beer cans others were scattered around the room like members of some mutant clone.

She herself reminded me of a shell. Not one plucked from the sea's bottom, its creature still alive, but one long dead in the salt, tumbled about and cast up on the beach, bleach-white dead. In one hand she held a can of beer. She
was dressed (at two in the afternoon) in the robe I had given her one Christmas. For some decency's sake, she was holding it closed where some vital buttons were missing. I remembered having heard that her husband had become the Jean Dixon of self-fulfilling prophecies. He had once called her a frigid alcoholic bitch at a party. Already at this time, I could see she was well on her way to a numbing buzz.

"Well," I began, "you obviously didn't call me over here to return my socks. What is it?"

She smiled, "No, I need your advice." She paused, twirling a lock of hair, "or at least your reaction."

She looked at me carefully. "You really don't like being here, do you?"

"Well, frankly, when I make a two-hour drive in response to a hysterical phone call and nobody's dying, I tend to feel a little put out. Really, what is this all about?"

She leaned forward, "Do you remember those notebooks full of our mind's horrors?" We used to tell each other the more impressive dreams after dark, as children tell ghost stories. We each terrified the other with the hideous things in our minds rather than bogey-men and snakes-under-the-bed. I threw mine out after my psych course revealed what my recurring 'snake in the toilet' nightmare was really about. It had horrified me to keep such a blatant record of my own warpedness. Jessica had taken a course in bookbinding and had made hers into a regular leather-bound volume, complete with gold leaf lettering.

She sank back in her chair and began, "Peter's car is in the garage this week, so I pick him up at twelve for lunch. I set the alarm for 11:30, just in case I don't wake up myself to get him. I decided to take Saunter's road this morning because it's such a beautiful day, and I haven't seen much of the countryside this fall."

I could easily understand this. Saunter's road is a hilly little gravel track through the farms and fields. I had taken part of it myself that morning to get to her house, though the highway would have been faster and more easily navigated. It was one of those nice, crisp fall days that make you feel like you're the epitome of apple-crunching, rosey-cheeked health. I had cast myself as a Polish milkmaid as I followed the road and puffed on my cigarettes.

Insane.

She continued more slowly. "The man in the window and I was singing with the radio, in a town that simply has never been there before, never been lost around here, at least not my directions. And yet I left the house, but I was past reserve there. I honked my horn, it was getting late. I yelled, no, he hissed at me 'You drunk, go back!' All of them laughing... they turned their back on things about me." Jessica began picking at her robe, "I locked the car up against the engine died, I must have been out of gas. I looked again, so I locked it up and left. I wanted to call Pete. There was a phone booth, I was there. I called the factory number... it was still in that's what it said."

"Jessica," I broke in, "are you sure it's the right number?"

"Yes," she replied, certainly, "I wrote it in my billfold. I know I'm not very good at stuff like that. And I know I dialed it right."

"Well, anyway, when I left the phone booth, all of these people around, pushing at me... I saw some of them from the gas station... pushing and tripping me... I ran back... my. She was starting to get hysterical. She didn't know what to do... I started walking. I was so furious at me! There was the house all fixed up... "The Hen's Nest"... I saw a woman in the window. A bell rang. She was sitting in a bay window in the next room, at me. There was a scream right by me... the door right by my head! Hands reached arms and legs. There was a man screaming. I was in the gas station. Was there..."
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She continued more nervously. "The sun was streaming in the windows and I was singing with the radio when I came into a town that simply has never been there before. You know, I've never been lost around here, at least not without knowing I'd messed up directions or something. I had enough gas when I left the house, but I was past reserve, so I stopped at a gas station to fill up and get directions."

"There were people there, staring at me...just staring. I honked my horn...it was getting late. A man came out and yelled, no, he hissed at me 'You drunk, get out of here'! All of them laughing...they turned their backs...whispering things about me." Jessica began picking at the buttons on her robe, "I locked the car up against those people...the engine died, I must have been out of gas. It wouldn't start up again, so I locked it up and left. It was late, I had to call Pete. There was a phone booth, I saw it down the road. I called the factory number...it was my only dime, it didn't come back. A voice laughing and laughing... "I'm sorry, the number you have dialed does not exist."...

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"Jessica," I broke in, "are you sure you even had the right number?"

"Yes," she replied, certainly, "I wrote it down and put it in my billfold. I know I'm not very good at remembering stuff like that. And I know I dialed it right, too!"

"Well, anyway, when I left the phone booth there were all of these people around, pushing at me and laughing. I saw some of them from the gas station...that man. They were pushing and tripping me...I ran back...my car was gone!" She was starting to get hysterical. She was crying. "I didn't know what to do... I started walking home... Pete's going to be so furious at me! There was a store, a farm house all fixed up... "The Hen's Nest'...craft supplies. I saw a woman in the window. A bell rang when I went in. She was sitting in a bay window in the next room....smiling at me. There was a scream right by me...a bat crashed into the door right by my head! Hands reached at me...grabbed my arms and legs. There was a man screaming at me... 'Run!'

The man from the gas station was there. That smiling lady
"We warned you!... they put a black bag over the man's head... they kicked him, and hit him with that bat!

He was all covered in that bag... the lady stabbed at it with a knitting needle... over and over and over. I didn't move any more. They were laughing. They kicked it and hit it... I was screaming. I could hear myself screaming. They were coming at me with another bag!"

She was shaking and sobbing. I've never seen anyone so terrified. Her hands busily worked at crushing each other.

"Jessica, you were talking about those nightmare diaries. Was this a nightmare? You could have told me that over the phone instead of having me chase all the way down here to hold your hand over some stupid dream! I think this is pretty damn self-centered of you!"

"No! Please!" she cried, her hands frantically working on my coat as I rose to leave. "That isn't all of it!"

I slowly sat down again.

"I woke up, it was all black. I didn't dare move... I hurt all over. Nothing happened. I worked myself out of the bag. I was here! In my own backyard! I was so happy I was crying. The pigs were squealing... I walked over to them... there were scraps of meat and blood... a black rag, and they were fighting over it! I ran back to the house, I couldn't I couldn't stop vomiting. I locked the door. I must have fainted."

"After a while I got up... washed myself off. I had a beer to calm myself down. I thought it was a nightmare. I finally dragged myself back to bed... I was exhausted."

"I woke up when the alarm went off. Eleven-thirty. It had only been a dream! I felt absolutely drained and overjoyed at the same time. I threw on my jeans and coat, and started out to get Pete... all so normal and beautiful. I was singing... waved at cows... and I was lost at that place again! The gas-station sign... all these people with their backs toward me! They were laughing again! I turned around, and I don't remember anything else until I called you!"

After a long silence I started slowly. "Did you find anything, I mean did you look out there to see if there really was something?" I was thinking of the black bag in the pig pen.
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"There isn't anything out there," she said dully.
"What do you want me do do?"
"I don't know," she sighed, "just talk to me. You're
the only real, solid thing I could think of. I have to hang
on to something."
"I can't stay with you forever."
"I know, please, I know, but just until I have these
ieces in my mind pulled back together." She pleaded with
me, "sometimes I'm sure I'm losing my mind!"
I looked at her carefully, analytically, and smiled.
She echoed my smile with one that was faint, yet hopeful.
I laughed, startling her.
"I'm sure you are too." I replied softly as I turned
and walked away. It had come to me that I have always
hated her.

/Melanie Yff/