

# Hidden Paradise

## by Robert Reed

"Can I go outside, Uncle John? Please?"

"Outside, inside," sings the fat man sitting behind the register. "It's your damn vacation. Go where you want, boy!"

"Thanks, Uncle John!"

Vick kicks the door open and leaps, escaping the gloomy, chilled world of the restaurant. The sun blinds and the air is suddenly twenty degrees warmer, suffused with the brutal humidity that would gladly kill some men. But boys who are almost twelve years old are immune to this kind of heat. Vick is skinny and strong, blessed with jittery, almost endless energies. He leaps and leaps again, then settles into a headlong sprint, charging across the mostly empty parking lot, barely giving the road half a glance before darting across. A pickup truck wearing Nixon-Agnew bumper stickers slams on its brakes, its driver throwing out curses. But Vick has already vanished, sliding down one of the steep trails that leads to the stream. Only at the bottom does he finally stop, panting rapidly and happily, one tiny portion of his very busy brain wondering who belongs to the angry voice that keeps shouting at some crazy little son of a bitch.

In Colorado, water such as this wouldn't mean much. But this far from the mountains, any fast and clear and half-way-cold stream is a treasure. Vick watches the rippling current for several moments. He wears nothing but cut-off jeans and ragged tennis shoes and a young tan edging very close to a full burn. His hair is hippie-long and uncombed. His face is bright and engaged, eyes dark and quick and full of a graceful mischief always looking for opportunity. Somebody has stowed a pair of large inner tubes in the brush behind him. Across the stream are a line of shabby little cabins—summer retreats and little rentals—and there's no telling who belongs to these black tubes. It would be difficult to ask for anyone's permission. With that in mind, Vick makes a string of moral calculations, and to keep the math even more agreeable, the boy selects the smaller tube—the less desirable one, he reasons—propping it on a shoulder while telling himself that he'll bring it back in just a few minutes.

The stream lives inside a brief little valley, fed by cold springs and runoff from the occasional windmill. Dozens of cabins line the waterway, most of them upstream from here, while the downstream route winds through woods and wet glades. Vick has caught glimpses of the woods from the access road. He has been living here for three days but still hasn't floated downstream. Which makes it the more interesting voyage. And besides, if he wants to float the upstream route, he has to walk uphill, now and for the next ten or fifteen minutes—an unendurable delay in his quest for satisfaction.

The decision is made; he will start from here.

With a grace born from practice as well as luck, Vick throws the tube into the water, turns and leaps backward, landing butt-first in the moving hole, gouging himself only a little on the sharp metal valve.

Just as he imagined, everything downstream is new. The current shows him fresh turns, and the last of the cabins drop away, replaced by trees on the banks and a funny quiet made quieter by the gentle swishing of water.

This is nothing like wilderness. Instead of rock, the occasional rapids are made from cut-down trees and

slabs of old concrete. An abandoned Buick hugs one embankment—a helmet-shaped behemoth like the one Vick's mom used to drive. Then the stream takes a long turn, and the valley suddenly widens and turns to forest. A wild turkey strolls along the shoreline, and the boy pulls close enough to see its stupid black eyes before it spooks, running off into the shadows. Then something big pushes its way through the brush. A deer, probably. Although it could be a cougar, he tells himself. Then he starts to imagine what else could be lurking among the trees: Dinosaurs, naturally. Every day, Vick thinks about cold-blooded dinosaurs. He pictures giant crocodiles stretched out on the bank, and above, a flock of hungry pterosaurs circling. And grinning to himself, he throws in a couple bullies from school, their bodies torn in half by the assorted monsters, the shreds left in plain sight for him to enjoy.

He keeps daydreaming, and the stream carries him on.

Almost too late, Vick notices the bridge passing overhead—a wooden railroad trestle, black against the bluish white sky. After this, it's several miles to the highway, and that means a long march home. Vick kicks and flails with his arms, working toward the east bank, and then he climbs out, hanging the inner tube on his tired right arm, managing the slow, sloppy climb through the underbrush, up to the steel tracks and then the access road.

The boy can appreciate why nobody floats downstream. It's just too damned hard, what with the walk afterward. By the time he reaches the road, he's ready for a break. A nap or second lunch, or even better, he would accept a ride back to the restaurant. But nobody he knows is going to drive past. After all, he knows only Uncle John and Aunt Katherine, who never leave work, plus the half dozen kids that he's played with over the last couple days. So when he sees a car coming his way, he makes another deep moral calculation. This will be a stranger, he realizes. But what are the odds that a child molester will be at the wheel? And who ever heard of an evil disgusting soul like that cruising around inside a little blue Datsun?

Vick lifts his right arm and the warm black inner tube.

He can't see the driver. For a moment, it seems as if nobody is inside the car, as if a face and attached body don't quite exist behind the glare on the windshield. Then a shape emerges, and the brakes squeak as if in pain, and the little car fights its own momentum. Squinting, Vick makes out a dark face and a little nest of hair passing by. For a moment, he believes that a boy must be driving the car—a black kid, which is more than a little incredible, considering where they are in the world. Then the Datsun skids ahead and stops, and Vick notices the Illinois license plate. That helps. What he sees begins to make a little sense. Then somebody opens the passenger door, and a strange voice drifts into the warm, wet air. "Hello," the voice calls out. "May I help you, little man?"

It is a woman's voice, young and wearing a rich accent.

Vick's heart kicks into high gear.

"Where are you going, little man?"

To that open door, if his legs don't give out first. Vick takes a few weak-kneed steps and leans against the door, looking inside. The girl is pretty, yes. But she's smaller than he had imagined, in stature and in every other way. She isn't a whole lot taller than him, really. To that young woman, with a dry, weak voice, he says, "Hidden Paradise ... I'm going to ..."

"Ah, that is my destination, too. Shall I give you a ride?"

He has never ridden in any Jap car. And maybe he won't today. The girl's passenger seat is jammed forward, the back end filled with suitcases and boxes and two big stereo speakers. There isn't enough room for both him and the inner tube.

"Let the gas go free," she advises with a grin.

Well, duh! Pressing his thumbnail against the valve, Vick bleeds out the cold air until he can stuff the tube behind the seat. Then he climbs in beside her and looks at the pretty young face, blurting out the first question that bubbles up into his mouth.

"Are you the stripper?"

She laughs as if nothing in her life has been half so funny.

"Where are you from?" he asks.

She shoves the knob into second gear, letting up on the clutch, and as they roll downhill, she says, "Jamaica," with a Caribbean music in her voice.

"You're from Jamaica?"

"Hardly at all, little man. That is my name. Sally Ann Jamaica, from points unknown."

###

Uncle John is not a man given to quick motions. Vick's mom says that her big brother suffers from diabetes and bad knees and a kind of laziness that runs among the men of her family. She used to tell Vick that he was the exception, and that he was very much his father's child. Which made the boy happy to hear. But lately, Mom has been fighting a lot with Dad. And Vick is driving her mad, she claims, what with his antics and everything. That's why his parents are having their vacation this summer without him. According to Mom, she and Dad are trying to rekindle whatever it was that made them get married in the first place, or at least catch up on their sleep.

Uncle John hasn't moved in the last forty minutes. He remains behind the counter, on a high, padded stool, positioned so that the air-conditioning will blow across his face and chest. The red eyes stare at a tiny black-and-white television. A prosperous-looking man is attempting to sell gold coins. "In these troubled times," the man begins, and then Uncle John looks up to see Vick rushing inside, followed by a willowy little woman dressed in jeans and a loose gray T-shirt.

"Gold is a solid investment for anyone worried about tomorrow," says the television.

"A dubious claim, at best," says Sally Ann.

Uncle John stares at the newcomer. Even puzzlement requires too much energy to do easily or quickly. The tired red eyes narrow, and with a deep breath, he tries to clear his head. "Who are you?" he inquires.

"She's our stripper," Vick blurts out.

Sally Ann laughs lightly and hands over a business card.

Uncle John stares at the words for a moment, plainly confused. Then he starts to say, "You aren't quite what I ..."

His voice trails away.

"I'm not what you ordered," Sally Ann says for him.

"You're not," the old man agrees. "I talked to your boss, I guess he was ... is ... and he told me you were blond—"

She explodes into laughter. "I need a word with dear Burt, if that's what he believes I am." Then she raps a little fist on the glass countertop. "No, seriously ... that blond girl is named Dora, and she had some last-minute catastrophe that kept her home. Don't worry, just a little catastrophe. But I am her replacement, for tonight and tomorrow night, too."

With a careful eye, Uncle John examines her willowy body. Then he glances at the stack of handouts beside the cash register. "Exotic Dancer," they say, with dates and times and a very tame picture of the promised girl. This is Friday afternoon, and within a few hours, dozens of local men will arrive, expecting to see the leggy blonde that has been promised.

What can he do?

The conundrum is too much. Uncle John shakes his head, no sound coming from his open mouth. Then another voice intrudes on the confused silence—a sharp, smart voice that says, "You can't be our dancer."

"But I am, ma'am," says Sally Ann.

"My name is Katherine," says a tall, big-boned woman. She offers a hand and what might be confused for a smile. "I hope you don't take this the wrong way. But you aren't at all what we envisioned."

The girl takes the hand, replying, "What dream is ever true?"

Vick has never seen his aunt at a loss for words. But it happens now, for a wondrous instant. The big, tough-minded woman seems to forget where she is and what they are doing. Reclaiming her hand, she runs the long fingers through her steel-colored hair, and then she turns to her little nephew, saying, "Go somewhere else, Vick."

"Why?" Vick asks, using his most reasonable voice.

"Because," says Aunt Katherine. Then she turns to the girl again, saying, "I need to call your service. Obviously, a mistake has been made."

Sally Ann has an indestructible smile. With the mildest possible voice, she says, "The men will start arriving. Very soon."

"I know full well—"

"And they'll expect some kind of show," she maintains.

Aunt Katherine breathes through her mouth, eyes staring angrily off into space.

"Perhaps," Sally Ann begins.

"Yes, dear? What?"

"I could steal away one of your waitresses. Fit her into my costumes and teach her a few basic moves."

"God, no," Uncle John exclaims.

"These are local girls," Aunt Katherine replies. "Don't take offense, please. But if I even thought of involving them—"

"Who'd pay to watch them," Uncle John interrupts, sitting up straight on his stool. "We're talking about fat gals, for the most part. Pretty enough, in a kind of milk-maid way, I guess —!"

Aunt Katherine stares at her husband, puzzled by this sudden burst of energy.

"Ah," he says, "this girl's going to be fine. Trust me, Kath!"

"But think of the men who will be here," his wife mutters. "And now look at how she looks, Johnny. Don't you see our problem?"

But the old man won't be dissuaded. He laughs and waves off the doubts, saying, "I've got a feeling. There's something about this Miss Jamaica. It's all going to work out."

Aunt Katherine tries to find any other course, and can't. So finally, she turns back to their guest and says, "Don't take offense, miss. Please. But for the duration of your stay—tonight and tomorrow night both—you will stay in our guest cottage. Under no circumstances will you enter the living quarters at the back of this establishment. And because this is my nephew, and because I promised his parents to keep him away from the wrong influences . . . you will not spend another moment with this boy, unless I am present."

Sally Ann is a very pretty creature. Feminine, with a fine, slender body and her hair cut short. But only when she smiles does she look all-girl, and she isn't smiling just then. To Vick, her face looks tight and strong, wearing not one sex or the other. But she speaks with a calm, almost pleasant voice, saying, "I understand, madam. I understand fully."

To escape the tension, Uncle John returns to the little television. The commercials have finished, and the nightly news has come on. To nobody in particular, the old man grumbles, "Goddamn Russians."

Sally Ann reacquires her smile, showing it to Vick.

He smiles back at her, feeling warm inside.

"Go somewhere else," says Aunt Katherine.

"Like where?" the boy inquires.

"The world's a big place," the old woman assures him.

Vick glances at their guest again.

Then Sally Ann Jamaica gives him a little wink, and with the strangest tone, she says, "The world isn't big at all. Your aunt is wrong."

Then to Uncle John, she says, "And about the Red menace . . . I wouldn't worry too much. I know I don't."

###

Vick can only watch from a distance while Sally Ann unloads the equipment from the back seat and trunk, carrying each box and speaker and coiled-up length of cable into the big room on the south end of the restaurant—the room normally reserved for wedding receptions and high school graduation parties. He watches from across the street, from the yards of various cabins. Other kids play beside him, but he feels uninvolved in their little made-up dramas. He stares and stares, and then a boy two years older rides by on his Stingray. With a worldly scorn, the newcomer says, "So that's our new stripper?"

For some reason, Vick doesn't like his tone. But he's been using the same words, hasn't he? Straightening his back, he says, "Yeah." Sally Ann is yanking some odd little box from the back corner of the trunk. "That's her."

"Kind of small-looking," the thirteen year-old complains, leaning back in his bike seat, expertly lifting the front wheel off the ground. "And kind of dark. Did you notice? That she's a little black girl?"

Vick says nothing.

"Then again," the older boy continues, "she looks sweeter than the last stripper they brought up here."

This is news to Vick. Uncle John and Aunt Katherine have done this sort of thing before?

"Oh, that one was an old broad," the boy offers. "Nearly forty years old, from what my dad says. Kind of fat. With these big, saggy tits."

How old is Sally Ann? The question seems simple, but Vick can't decide.

"Yeah, I bet my dad won't even bother with the show tonight," says the bike rider, in conclusion. "Most of his buddies won't either, I bet. Even if they didn't know she looks like that . . . after the old-bag stripper, I bet guys won't want to waste the time or the gas."

###

Yet there are men who are curious enough or desperate enough, and they begin arriving even as dinner is being served. Judging by the county numbers on the license plates, they have come from as far as seventy miles away—solitary men driving large pickups that might have started the day clean but since have acquired a smooth gray veneer of stubborn dust and oil. Each man is dressed in his best jeans and boots, and there are big cowboy-style hats that have to be worn at carefully considered angles, and heavy leather belts, and simple shirts that are pressed, and probably in most cases the visitors have clipped and cleaned their fingernails. They are a polite, generally quiet gathering that sit in the bar, drinking in little groups or alone. The waitresses make jokes about wolves on patrol and all the lewd talk, but Vick neither hears nor sees anything of the sort. Aunt Kath makes a few pointed comments about the slow dinner crowd, but most of the tables are taken. Families have come up for the weekend or for the week, and there are always a few travelers lured off the highway by the Hidden Paradise signs: HOME

## COOKING IN A PLEASANT ATMOSPHERE.

The atmosphere is wondrous and thrilling, the anticipation real enough to see and to taste. Vick sucks in all he can. And then dinner is done, and Uncle John—following strict orders from his wife—shuffles up to him and says, "Time for bed."

Which it isn't.

But before Vick can respond, his uncle sweetens the pot. "You can watch the color TV tonight. Whatever shows you want to watch."

But Vick can do that at home. Dropping his gaze, he pushes out his lower lip. Then, with a mournful, self-possessed voice honed by years of practice, the boy claims, "This isn't fair."

"Fair?" the old man replies.

Then his uncle laughs, honestly laughs, maybe for the first time since Vick has come to stay. "You think fair has anything to do with anything, my boy? Do you?"

###

Vick watches Johnny Carson with the sound down, the bulk of his senses focused on the deep, throbbing bass line that pushes from the party room into the apartment at the back of the restaurant. Sometimes there is only the music, and sometimes, either when the song ends or at least pauses, he can make out the hooting of living men and a thin but intense rain of applause.

Vick tries to imagine what Sally Ann is doing at each moment, and what she is wearing, conjuring up an assortment of colorful, vivid scenes.

Does a stripper strip everything off?

But there is supposed to be a G-string left on. Isn't there? He has assembled that bit of half-knowledge by listening to older, louder boys. The string covers her privates, which seems critically important all of a sudden. Vick can see Sally Ann dancing in some fashion, and disrobing to some embarrassing point, and when he hears the hollering and the boots stomping, he can even accept the fact that she's doing what she does in front of a few dozen strange men whom she will never see again.

Unless they come back again tomorrow night, of course.

Then after midnight, as Vick slips away into a deep sleep, he comes to accept the idea that maybe even the G-string is removed. And he doesn't care if a thousand men are watching Sally Ann Jamaica dance before them, utterly naked. Just as long as Vick is one of the men ...

###

At breakfast, Aunt Katherine is grinning happily.

It is a strange sight, her visible pleasure, and Vick finds himself staring at her face until she notices him. But instead of a bristly anger, she merely laughs out loud, asking, "Would you like to earn an easy five dollars?"

Always.

"Then get a trash sack and pick up the parking lot, would you? Bottles, cans. Just don't touch anything you shouldn't touch."

He promises "I won't" without being sure what that might be.

The sun has barely lifted over the east hills, but it is already hot and sticky outdoors. Vick wears the same jeans as yesterday, but he has put on a clean shirt—one of his last—and he works as fast as he can, but carefully. Thoroughly. He knows how particular his aunt can be, regardless of her temporary happiness. He picks up beer cans and beer bottles and empty packs of cigarettes, and he uses his sandals to bury a few piles of cigarette butts, and he does the same with a pair of condoms that look as if they have laid all year on the graveled terrain.

The boy on the bike arrives as Vick finishes his work.

"It was something," the kid announces.

"What was?"

"Last night was." The boy wears a knowing sneer, explaining, "My dad has never seen better. And he knows a lot about strip clubs."

"Your dad wasn't going, I thought."

"Well, he did. Later." The boy shrugs his shoulders. "Some buddies came and got him during her break, and he went running up here and caught the last half hour of her show."

Vick feels a thousand emotions. Each pulls its own way, leaving him without any emotions. No feelings whatsoever. He finds himself staring into the half-filled plastic sack, trying not to imagine anything at all.

"You sneak a look?" the boy asks.

For a moment, Vick considers lying. He tries to decide how to say "Yes" with the proper tone. But he needs to do it in a believable fashion, with just enough certainty that the older kid won't doubt him, and all of that consideration takes too much time. The boy interrupts the silence with a loud laugh, and then says "Thought not" as he turns and scornfully rides away.

###

The guest cottage is a two-room shack with curtains. Squeezed into a tiny back window is a third-hand air conditioner that shakes the entire structure when it works; but despite the morning's heat, nobody has turned the unit on. Is Sally Ann even inside? The question poses itself to Vick, and he nearly panics. The idea that she could have left for any reason . . . well, it makes him crazy for a few seconds. But her little Datsun is parked in the shade of the cottage, which means that she has to be somewhere close. Then he notices that one of the front windows has been opened two or three inches, letting the air move. And of course there is the inescapable fact that she is from elsewhere—Jamaica, perhaps, or some other tropical realm—and maybe she doesn't believe in or even require luxuries like air-conditioning.

These thoughts are all crowding into his head when the cottage door opens and Sally Ann steps out into the day.



Vick drops his trash sack in surprise.

She laughs, but somehow not at him. Her manner and dark smooth face make him feel as if the morning is terribly humorous, and maybe the sun has just told a wonderful joke.

There is no trash to pick up here, but Vick reclaims his sack and begins scanning the bare ground between them. "Did you sleep okay?" he mutters.

Then even softer, he says, "Ma'am."

She is wearing clothes similar to what she wore yesterday, but not identical. And her feet are bare, tiny and very narrow and moving something like a dancer's feet would move—at least what Vick imagines when he thinks of dancer's feet. He is astonished to see those lovely feet carry her closer, walking on the long toes and stopping just a step or two short of him. Then with that deep accented voice, she admits, "I had to put the air-conditioning to sleep. It was just so earnest and loud in its work."

That wipes away one little mystery. Vick nods and looks up at her face, and then, because he can't help himself, he looks lower. He stares at her T-shirt and the modest breasts that unfortunately seem to be wearing a bra.

More than anything, Vick wants to say a few perfect words.

None occur to him.

Sally Ann looks at his sack and says, "Entropy."

What did she just say? The boy looks up at her face again, puzzled but intrigued. He recognizes that word, but he knows nothing about it. "What do you do?" he asks, trying to steer the subject. "When you're not dancing, I mean. What do you do with yourself?"

"You mean, am I student somewhere?"

Maybe he does mean that. Yes.

"A college student, perhaps. With a passion for the high sciences."

"Are you?"

"Or the arts," she continues. "Music and dance might be the center of my life."

"Okay ..."

"Or physical education. For all you know, I could be a talented gymnast applying her skills to a low trade."

Exasperated, Vick puts down his sack of trash again, and again he tries to come up with a series of perfect words, explaining his soul while entertaining this very strange creature to the best of his ability.

"What are you doing here, Vick?"

Aunt Katherine has walked up behind him, unnoticed. Sally Ann seems untroubled by her presence, while Vick is concentrating too hard on his next words to care about his aunt like he should. The only person who acts flustered is the old woman. She drags a hand through her steel hair and tries to smile, the expression falling short of its goal, and then because somebody needs to say something, she tells Vick, "I think you've done enough work. Why don't you go back to the restaurant? Tell your uncle to give you five ones."

But he doesn't want to leave now. If he has to, that only proves that the world is deeply unfair.

"Vick," purrs Aunt Katherine.

He picks up sack, pretending it weighs tons.

Momentarily satisfied, the old woman turns to Sally Ann, and with a soft voice that sounds halfway nervous, she says, "Congratulations."

The girl gives the oddest little curtsy.

"From what I saw last night," Aunt Katherine continues, "that program of yours, that show, was a wonderful success."

"It was fun, I think."

"Yes, yes." The steel hair needs another adjustment. Then the woman says what she came to say. "I was thinking ... we were ... because of the enthusiasm ... far more than I ever hoped for, I'll tell you ... John and I wondered if you'd be willing to stay for a third night, with all the usual arrangements for pay, of course ..."

"No."

Aunt Katherine straightens.

"Thank you, but I cannot," says the delicious voice.

"If it's a question of money—"

"I have to leave tomorrow morning," the young woman proclaims. And the way she says that one word—"leave"—means everything.

"Back to Chicago?" asks Aunt Katherine.

Sally Ann shakes her head sadly. "I am expected elsewhere. I am sorry, but that is what is."

And suddenly Vick feels awful, sick and too weak to lift the massive sack of trash. Yet even as his heart shatters, he continues to stare at those sweet brown dancer's feet.

###

It is barely three in the afternoon—six long hours before the show begins—yet the first trucks already start to pull into the graveled lot. The drivers seem unaware of the hour or how silly they look. Some of the vehicles seem familiar; they were probably here last night. While others come from counties that might

be two or three hours removed from this place, a few even hailing from neighboring states. How do they know to come? Vick wonders. Do cowboys call one another on the phone, or do they talk face to face in the pastures and on the back roads? Unless of course this is an event that each can feel for himself, like a change in the weather. For a long while, the first men sit alone in their cabs with their windows down, a few smoking and most of the rest chewing tobacco, using empty cans held between their legs to catch their foul black spit. Back bumpers wear little emblems—hints about politics and philosophies. AMERICA-LOVE IT OR LEAVE IT, Vick reads again and again. They uniformly despise Communism in all of its forms. They support Nixon, even though he isn't President anymore. They love firearms and the NRA, which isn't much of a surprise, considering how many gun racks hang in the back windows. There also are several Confederate flags, which seems important. And one tobacco-chewing man has covered his bumper with variations on the same theme: AMERICA, BUILT AND PAID FOR BY HARD WORKING WHITE MALES.

Vick gives that man a stare. Oddly, the face behind the steering wheel doesn't look much older than him. Sixteen years old, he guesses. But the voice attached to that face seems even younger, cracking a little when it says, "What are you looking at, kid? Leave me the hell alone."

After four-thirty, the parking lot is entirely full, and cowboys as well as men dressed like cowboys begin to wander into the restaurant and, in particular, into the bar. Aunt Katherine has called in all of the waitresses, including girls who don't seem to know their job, and she has rounded up every last body in the county that can cook an edible meal. But the crowd remains orderly and mostly polite, drinking as many soft drinks as beers, eating the entire inventory of pretzels and potato chips before six o'clock.

As supper begins, even Uncle John is given jobs and responsibilities.

"I'm suppose to watch over you," he reports to Vick. "With both eyes, all the time."

For a moment, the boy doesn't understand. Then he realizes what the adults are afraid of, and in the same breath he discovers that he is thinking along the same lines. But how he can ever fool anybody with anything if his head is this transparent and his motives are so obvious ...?

"Help me at the counter," says his uncle.

"Doing what?" Vick asks.

"I don't know. I haven't thought ahead that far ahead."

So Vick just sits, watching the black-and-white television as the picture rolls, watching the local news turn to the Wheel of Fortune. The first men start to pay for their meals, and Uncle John makes change for twenties and fifties and even a couple hundred-dollar bills, handing back piles of cash until the register is just about exhausted.

"I need change," he tells Vick. "Feel like carrying a couple thousand dollars in your hands?"

"Sure," the boy mutters.

"Take this to Katherine," the old man says. "She's in the office, right down the hall there—"

"I know where it is," Vick complains.

"I'm just saying," reports his uncle. "I can see you all the way, and I'll be watching for you. Got it?"

Vick has no intention to do anything but what he has been told to do. Carrying the enormous bills in both hands, Vick feels lucky and trusted, and he can't think of himself as being anything but trustworthy. How much money is this? He stops for a moment, letting his fingers try to count these pieces of fancy paper. But there are too many of them, and time is precious, and he breaks into a little trot, knocking twice on the office door before stepping inside.

Aunt Katherine sits behind her desk, seemingly waiting for him. She is wearing a good modest dress and a broad smile directed at the money before anything else.

"Quite a night," is her opinion.

"Uncle John wants—"

"Ones and fives, and probably some tens, too. Yes, I know."

The safe is black steel, enormous and older than any person here, and possibly older than the restaurant itself. She opens it with a few deft twists of the hand and wrist and quickly counts what Vick has brought her and matches it with taller stacks of smaller bills. Handing him a matching fortune, she says again, "Quite a night."

"Yes, ma'am."

"And barely begun yet," she adds, coming close to a giggle.

The cash fills his hands. Vick steps back into the hallway, hearing the buzz of men talking, some close and most distant. He stands still for a moment, thinking of nothing. He lets his eyes look down the hallway at his uncle, watching him dealing with the young cowboy who looks too young to have built anything in his life. The kid is showing Uncle John his driver's license, or somebody else's license. Vick can see the young mouth saying, "But I am nineteen," even though he looks and stands like he is fourteen, if that.

One of the new waitresses passes by. She feels harried, too many tables needing her attention and adrenaline making her shaky. With an abrupt voice, Vick says to her, "Here."

"What's this?" she complains.

"Money," he explains. Then he points and says, "Take it down to my uncle, would you? Tell him I went to the bathroom."

"Who are you?" she says, honestly unsure what this boy is doing here.

But then he isn't there anymore. On quick feet, he has sprinted back through the restaurant and into the apartment behind the kitchen, using the private door to slip outside before anybody can think of stopping him.

###

It is evening, hot and damp but growing more pleasant by the moment. Vick pauses in front of the guest cottage, knowing exactly what he wants to do. But it isn't often that he feels too shy or too insecure to do anything. Suddenly his legs lock up, and with a cold terror clamping down on his throat, he does nothing at all.

"Is it a respectable crowd?" asks a voice.

Sally Ann is inside, calling out to him through the slightly open window. Vick jumps at the sound of her voice and then laughs at himself, and with a glance at the crowded parking lot, he reports, "It's a huge crowd."

"Wonderful!"

"And it's only seven-thirty," he adds. "There's no telling how many more are coming."

Silence.

"Are you getting ready?" he asks.

"I am ready," she answers.

Vick feels close to melting. He feels wonderful and sick with nerves, particularly when the door comes open. Then she steps out. Except for the plastic sandals, she is dressed exactly as she was this morning, in jeans and a big T-shirt.

He was expecting different clothes. Or no clothes, maybe. He stares at her, thinking that he really knows nothing at all about the habits of strippers.

"I feel hot," she reports.

After a day of cloudless sun, it must be miserably hot inside the cottage.

"When I first saw you," she reports, "you were riding an inner tube down that little stream."

"I wasn't," he says. "I was walking along the road."

She smiles, teeth bright and even. "You are correct. My mistake."

Vick watches her face.

"Anyway," she continues. "I'd like to take a float trip, too."

"Huh?"

She winks at him, asking, "Can you find me two inner tubes, Vick. Please?"

"Two tubes? Why two?"

Which is a very funny thing to ask, it seems. That leads to a light touch with a hand that should be damp with perspiration, yet isn't, and very quietly, Sally Ann Jamaica asks, "Do you think I would wish to make this journey alone?"

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The young cowboy sits in his pickup, nursing a can of Coke while considering the grave injustices of this

world. At first, he acts indifferent to the two strangers walking past. Then a switch trips inside his head, and he jumps down, stunned and perplexed, and then absolutely furious. "Hey you!" he cries out. "Where are you taking her? Hey!"

Vick starts to run, Sally Ann at his side.

"Hey, kid!"

Yesterday's inner tube has been pumped full of air again, the larger tube waiting beside it, as before. The stream runs past their feet, looking swift and deep in the gathering dusk.

"You'll get wet," Vick warns.

But Sally Ann doesn't hesitate, grabbing up the big tube and flinging it upstream. The tube hits the water with a rubbery, faintly musical *thunk*. And then she turns and leaps backward—a graceful, long, and utterly blind leap that drops her into the center of the spinning black circle.

Other men are shouting, harsh voices cursing as they come closer.

Vick presses his tube against his chest and jumps forward, the cool water soaking the front of his shirt and his exposed legs. Then he rolls over and sits up and kicks, pushing clear of the concrete riprap that lines the bank where the stream quickens, making ready to dive into the first sharp bend.

Sally Ann says, "Neat."

As if racing, she kicks and paddles, pushing out into the current, gaining a long lead.

Vick tries to keep up, but he cannot.

When he passes the rusted Buick, he feels as if nobody else is on the water. The mystery woman has vanished, not just up ahead somewhere but completely. Forever. Mourning takes the boy, and he actually sobs for a moment, coming around the next long bend, the shadows of the trees reaching to the far bank, leaving the stream in a deep gray gloom.

"Hello, little man," she says.

Sally Ann is sitting beside a snag of driftwood, clinging to a bare limb with three fingers.

"I thought you were gone," Vick admits.

A wise little smile breaks out. "Not yet, no," she sings, letting go of her handhold, kicking a couple times to push out beside him.

The cabins are behind them. The woods are falling into darkness, and the sounds of water mix with the wild chittery voices of insects and a last few cries from snoozing birds. For a minute or two, drifting is enough. They float where the stream takes them, and sometimes the tubes bump against each other with their own soft music. Then Vick begins to hear engines running, and where the trees thin, he sees a line of trucks moving fast along the high access road.

But nobody can catch them, he knows.

When they pass beneath the railroad trestle, he feels free—happy and lucky, perplexed and wonderstruck.

"Who are you?" he finally asks.

She says nothing for a little while, and then says, "Life," and nothing else.

"What are you?" Vick wonders aloud.

"You do not know," she begins. Then their tubes touch, and she places her hand on his tube, strong fingers wrapped around the metal air valve. "You cannot know . . . just how common life is . . ."

He asks, "Where?"

"Everywhere."

He looks at fireflies calling to each other in the woods, and he asks, "Are you talking about the stars?"

"One common abode. Stars, yes."

Vick says nothing, feeling a tremendous weight against his chest and throbbing heart.

"Earlier than you know, stars fed little worlds that made life that learned how to think. What you call the universe was settled before this world had form, much less its own thoughtful minds."

He stares at her, and waits.

"And life is everywhere else, too."

"Between the stars?" he asks.

"And beyond them," she replies. "In places you cannot imagine, Vick."

He loves to hear his name in her mouth.

"But whenever something is common, Vick, it is also extraordinarily cheap." Her voice changes its tone. The pleasure is replaced with a graveness that unsettles him, just a little. "By definition, what is cheap is replaceable, and with every moment, something is lost. With a wrong step, or a right step done improperly, an entire world dies. Or one long arm of a galaxy is scrubbed clean of everything you would consider to be remotely alive."

The stream turns one way and back again. A pair of mule deer stands on the bank, one drinking and then the other, neither noticing the tubes and bodies drifting within ten feet of them.

"What are you saying?" Vick whispers.

"Too much, probably."

Again, one last time, the boy wants to know, "What are you?"

"If I could explain, I would," she promises. "But in clear honest terms, I cannot make much of this

comprehensible."

"Okay. But why are you here?"

She looks at him, the lovely face shining as she smiles.

Then Vick says, "I know why. I do."

"Tell me."

He takes a deep breath, and another. Then with deep conviction, he says, "You've come to Earth to help us. You're here to teach us and show us ... I don't know what exactly ... but something that's going to help us survive, I think ..."

That wins a long, long silence.

The stream continues to wind its way down the little valley, new springs feeding its flow, making it noticeably wider and a little deeper. Then, after a last long turn, the highway comes into view. By then, the night is in full force, save for on top of the concrete bridge that spans the stream. Dozens of pickup trucks and cars have parked on the shoulders and in the traffic lanes, and the crisscrossed headlights and occasional spotlight push back the darkness with cones and columns of yellowish light.

"I would like very much to help your world, yes I would," she sings. "If I believed I was doing good, I would feel happier than I do now."

Vick risks placing his hand on top of hers, and she lets him leave it there.

Her flesh is warmer than any fever.

"But your central assumption is wrong, Vick. I am sorry." The voice sounds sorry and very distant. "I was speaking about myself. When I told you that worlds die with a single misstep, I was talking about my particular home and my particular form of life. They are dead now, and in every sense, it is because of my own little misstep."

Vick starts to cry.

"No one survives but me," she admits. "So I wander alone, and I linger in those little places that interest me. And when it seems like fun, I dance, in one fashion or another."

They have almost reached the bridge. At least twenty men stand in the current, cold water up around their hips, arms linked to block the way. Yet nothing about them is menacing or foul. They only wish to catch the object of their deep infatuation. While Aunt Katherine and Uncle John wait above on the bare clay bank, holding hands as well, watching hard for both of them.

"I don't want this to end," Vick begs.

"I suppose you don't," says Sally Ann Jamaica. Then she leans close and kisses him softly on the ear, adding, "Worlds or boys, it's always the same way. Did you know that? Each passes, and each is replaced by something else ... and all you can hope is that what comes next is something as good, if not better ..."



The End

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