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DARING NOT TO FEAR FEAR

by Leslie Pietrzyk

My mother disappeared before I was old enough to notice she'd been there in the first place. No one knew where she went, or if they knew, they didn't tell me. She left behind more than she took; according to my father, the only things missing were two cookbooks, a crystal vase a great-aunt had given as a wedding gift, some clothing, the Bob Dylan record albums. Her wedding ring she mailed back the next week in a business-size envelope, four cents postage-due. Those were the only details given to me.

She left my father me, and she left me a name impossible to live up to. I hated it, but when I complained, I was told she'd insisted: "Candy, no middle name, just Candy. I always wanted a little girl named Candy."

"Why did she go?" I asked when I considered myself old enough for that sort of question.

My father shrugged. "Why?" he said. "Why anything?"

My Aunt Theresa, who lived with us, was less inclined to be philosophic: "Candy, honey, that woman was trouble from the go. I told your father, I told Vern that some people weren't meant for staying in one place—their roots go wide instead of deep, know what I'm saying? But he wouldn't have anything to do with my advice. Went ahead and married her—how we cried that afternoon. I could have written the book on what happened after, I tell you I could. But one thing I'll not deny, your mother was a beauty in the old-fashioned sense of the word. Had a look to her you couldn't fill up on. And charm beyond the legal limit." Then she drilled into me with a long hard stare, as if maybe some

of that charm had spun itself into me. I hoped so because it was obvious none of the beauty had. Maybe I was 11, but I recognized a wide flat face that lacked redemption when I saw it in the mirror. My dishwater hair hung limp as if already weary of the long life ahead. I was noticeably short. My head was too round or too big or too something for my body. When I smiled people flashed dirty looks as if I'd done something a polite person would excuse themselves after. And then to be named Candy. It wasn't the situation I'd have chosen for myself.

I spent a great amount of time detailing these unpleasant features and their ramifications in a little notebook that I kept hidden under my mattress. Years later, my aunt confessed she'd browsed through it regularly. "Why didn't you say something to make me feel better?" I asked. She said, "What could I say; it was all true," and that was exactly my aunt.

My father delivered packages for UPS. My aunt, who worked as head clerk in the UPS front office, finagled him the job when we moved in with her. Before my mother left, before he became a delivery man for UPS, my father was working on a Ph.D. in math. That's what I was told, but I couldn't picture it. He didn't even keep the checkbook, Aunt Theresa did. And if I asked for help with story problem homework, he just pushed away the math book and went in the other room to sit and smoke in the dark.

My father was not typical. He kept reminding me to call him Vern, not Dad, as if he thought of me as an acquaintance or, at best, a little sister—someone over whom he had limited responsibility. If I asked permis-

sion to go somewhere or do something, the first words out of his mouth were, "What do you think?"

"What do I think?" I repeated. "I think yes."

"Then yes it is," he'd say.

As a consequence, I was impatient with other girls and their conventional households. "Wait a minute, I have to ask my mom," was a constant whine, the grinding away of time and interest, the inevitable, "She said no; she said to tell you you better go home before you get me in trouble."

So I didn't have a whole lot of friends; the girls at school and around the neighborhood thought I was stuck-up, and their mothers thought I was mildly dangerous. But "stuck-up" and "dangerous" were preferable to "weird," which was my secret fear, both that I was and that people would think I was.

There was one neighborhood girl, Ellen, I sort of hung around with. The others didn't much like her, maybe because even during summer she had a drippy nose. Or her cut-off jeans weren't cut off quite enough. Or maybe because no one's parents liked her parents. Whatever the reasons, she and I ended up together as if we'd been dealt out in a hand of cards.

Iowa was midway through a long, stupid summer. I didn't have the type of family that would think to take a vacation, to go somewhere nipped by cool breezes, somewhere right around an ocean or even a lake. My father and Aunt Theresa just worked on, plodded forward with the grit and determination of people determined to see the thing through, whether it be summer or life.

Ellen and I spent most of our days moving with the circle of shade under the maple tree in her yard. There was talk that she was going to be sent to camp, but no one would come out and admit it, and she was terrified. She'd never been away from home—she didn't even

much like sleeping overnight at my house, so I'd quit inviting her. Secretly I wished someone would come up with the splendid idea of sending me away to camp, and I plotted out a number of semi-reasonable ways I might go in her place.

Day after long hot day Ellen and I sprawled out along an old blanket—we'd both affected a distaste for bugs that seemed appropriate for girls of our age—and read magazines we swiped from her father's sock drawer each morning after he left the house. He had a varied selection that ranged from true-life detective stories full of women hitchhikers and drifters, to girly magazines that made us feel scrawny in most places and fat in the rest, to my favorite, the soldier magazines. The world was one I'd never seen in Iowa: rough men slicing out of jungles as helicopters dangled overhead; on the next page, vast deserts coming at you in a swirl of stinging sand—all sorts of adventures waiting for the fearless, for the brave.

We didn't tell anyone this is what we read, which made it more interesting. We scattered Nancy Drew books around the blanket in case anyone thought to check closely, but no one ever did. Because there were no adults at my house on weekdays, Ellen's mother was responsible for me and making sure I ate a healthy lunch. She was paid \$15 a week for this service; I know because once I peeked inside the envelope before I delivered it to her. Probably those lunches were most responsible for my friendship with Ellen—I was always there sitting across the kitchen table from her. We had to come to an understanding; we figured out fast we didn't have any other options.

While we were outside, we didn't talk much; I guess we spent so much time reading because we recognized we didn't have all that much to say to each other. Though she and I were the same age, she was a year

behind in school, which I felt meant something about how smart I was. She disagreed, thinking it meant something about how much her parents loved her—that they didn't rush her off to school and instead chose to keep her at home with them as long as they possibly could. Under the tree, we had the luxury of thinking as we pleased, of forgetting details like no friends, no mother, no jungles.

"Says here this girl likes skinny dipping," Ellen said one afternoon, reading sideways off the centerfold. Her voice startled me; I was helicoptoring out of Borneo with Rolf and his comrades. "You ever go skinny dipping?"

"Oh, sure," I lied. "Plenty of times."

She believed whatever I told her: "What's it like?"

"Water feels colder when you've got your suit off," I said. "That's about the only difference as far as I can tell."

"Let me go with you next time," she said.

I shrugged. "We'll see. I haven't felt like it lately. Anyway, I doubt you could climb the fence to the pool. You'd be scared." It was an easy assumption since Ellen was afraid of everything, and sneaking out of her house to climb a fence to go swimming naked, combined three scary things. So I was safe in remarking, "It's no big deal to me, skinny dipping."

And I thought that was the end of the matter, until she said, "If you can do it, I can do it."

"Yeah, well, I'm not going this week," I said.

"Then when? When are you going?"

"Soon," I said.

"How soon?"

"Very soon."

There was a moment of silence, and I tried to concentrate on my magazine, but I felt her gathering ammunition for her next assault. The thing about Ellen was

that you couldn't shake loose any ideas once they got implanted in her head. "I don't believe you," she said finally. "You've never done it. You're afraid."

I looked at her. I knew she believed me because she always believed me, even when I told her my mother was a famous artist in Paris, she believed me. And I knew she was saying she didn't believe me because she thought she could make me mad. In spite of all this knowing on my part, her plan worked fine. "I've never been afraid of anything in my life!" I said. "A good soldier dares not fear fear." That was directly from the magazine, and I didn't understand it exactly, but it seemed suitable—it had to do with being brave—though I got kind of lost inside the words when I spoke them.

"Prove it," she said.

"Okay," I said. "Tonight we'll ride our bikes to City Park pool and climb over the fence—if you don't chicken out."

"I won't chicken out," she said. "But maybe you will."

"And I'm not helping you over the fence," I said. "I'll leave you behind for the enemy if it means saving my own skin."

"I don't need your help," she said.

I rolled over to the far edge of the blanket.

"What time?" she asked. Her voice had shrunk a little, and maybe she was starting to feel sorry she'd pushed me.

But I was a relentless soldier who'd accepted a mission and would rather die than back down: "Twenty-three hundred hours," I said. "That means 11:00 to a civilian like you. Or is that too far past your bedtime?"

"I'll be there," she said. "But will you?"

I laughed, a beautiful scoffing laugh I'd been practicing for just such a moment as this. "I'll be there."

We didn't talk for the rest of the afternoon except

when her mother brought out popsicles and we squabbled over who'd get red and who'd get orange. We didn't have a TV at my house because my aunt thought watching them made people go blind. But if I sat on the porch and pretended to be reading under the porch light, I could hear the TV at Ellen's house—that is until her parents started up fighting. Their nasty words draped the whole neighborhood like fireworks that wouldn't sink down into ash. "There they go again," Aunt Theresa said from the kitchen. "They ought to be ashamed, surely they know we can hear every last word and then some. Why don't they pull down their windows and give us all a rest?" But instead of shutting our windows, she hurried out to the porch as quick as she could, leaving the pots to soak till morning. "They should know it's not the way people are out here, spreading out all this unhappiness for the world to review," Aunt Theresa said, and on and on she'd go, until she ran out of words and was left with only her tongue clicking up against the top of her mouth so that it sounded like a typewriter.

The night Ellen and I planned to go skinny dipping, I asked Aunt Theresa, "Why do Ellen's mother and father fight so much?"

"That's how some people are," Aunt Theresa said. "Seems like maybe marriage brings it out." She'd been married once for two weeks when she was sixteen. Then she decided she didn't like it and came back home.

"Don't they love each other? How can they say those horrible things?"

"People say lots of things they don't really mean," she said. "Stop worrying yourself over it. There's no use."

"Did my mother and father fight?" I tried to make the question sound everyday, like I'd once known the answer but had merely forgotten it. I didn't much enjoy

talking about my mother with Aunt Theresa, but she was the only one who might say a thing or two on the subject, if she was in the right mind to come up with something nasty.

"Don't get in the habit of asking questions you don't really want to know the answer to," she said. "Life will be a lot simpler that way, honey."

"Maybe I don't want a simple life," I said. "Maybe I want interesting complications."

"How dare you!" Ellen's mother shrieked.

"That's what's called a 'complication,'" Aunt Theresa said. "No use hoping for something like that. But you'll learn same as your father learned. Takes some people more time. Looks like it takes some people more time than others," and she flipped her hand over towards Ellen's house.

I went inside. There was no point; Aunt Theresa wasn't going to talk about my mother, and I couldn't hear the TV anymore. So I prepared for my upcoming mission. According to the magazine, 98 percent of the success of any mission was due to advance preparation. I'd been reading the magazines all summer, and I still hadn't found out what the other two percent was.

I slipped on my bathing suit—I had the feeling that on the nakedness point if no other Ellen would definitely chicken out—then pulled my nightgown on over it. Pajamas seemed more soldierly, but I didn't own any, only pink-flowered nightgowns. I put out a pair of shorts and a T-shirt to change into later—the nightgown was part of the preparations, in case someone decided to come upstairs to check on me. Then I snuck a towel out of the linen closet, careful not to let the door squeak, and set it on my dresser. "Good-night!" I called down the stairs.

"Good-night," my father and Aunt Theresa called back just as they did every night.

There was nothing else in the way of preparation, just staying awake until 11:00, which I did by playing solitaire so many times in a row that I actually won a game without cheating.

My father was awake, a shadow in the dark living room as I tiptoed out to meet Ellen. "Where are you going?" he asked from his chair. I heard melting ice cubes collapse into his glass.

Caught by the enemy already! "Just over to Ellen's," I said as if it were something I did every night at this exact time, as if they were paying her mother \$15 a week for this too.

"So late?"

"Well," I said, "well," thinking perhaps this moment fell in with that 98 percent of preparation the magazine was so keen on.

Silence stretched out long and thin, and I didn't know who was supposed to snap it. Finally he said, "Don't be too long," and I heard him swirl the ice cubes around his glass. "Be careful," he said.

I don't know what I thought he'd say, but who ever sent off a soldier on a mission with "Don't be gone too long, be careful"? I was embarrassed for my father.

"Okay, Vern," and I left, quietly lifting my bike off the grass in the front and wheeling it next door to where Ellen waited with her arms folded against her chest. I thought she might even then try to back out, but she didn't say anything, just hopped on her bike and sped off, leaving me to follow even though I was supposed to be the leader of this expedition. Then I realized I'd forgotten the towel, so it looked like preparation would do me no good now, and I wished I knew for sure what that other two percent was. Bravery?

I hopped onto my bike to catch up with Ellen.

She didn't speak much as we rode. I chattered until I was breathless from trying to keep up with her pace.

Even when we pumped uphill, I heard her wheel spokes flash tick-tick-tick through the playing card she'd clothes-pinned onto her bicycle. I thought that custom was babyish, so I'd thrown away my card when summer started, but the clicks spread out across the night more effectively than my stupid words could, so eventually I shut up and just concentrated on following the sounds of Ellen racing towards the pool like she'd never been afraid of anything in her life.

The streets stretched empty. Only one car passed us, an open convertible that was a wild smear of music and laughter, girls being rushed home to make their curfews. Would that be me and Ellen one day, flying through the night in a convertible, a boy's arm around our shoulders, the two of us granting wet kisses like a seal of approval? It was how my mother and father started, how Ellen's mother and father started. As I was thinking this, Ellen finally spoke:

"I hate them," she said, slowing down. "I really truly hate them." She was on the shaky edge of tears.

I caught up to her. "What's wrong with you anyway?" I asked. "Why're you going so fast? Who do you hate?"

"My parents," she said, and then she did something I'd never seen her do before, she spat onto the sidewalk. "I'm tired of them always fighting, always screaming at each other. Why are they like that?"

"They don't mean anything," I said.

"What do you know about it?" and I didn't want to tell her I knew quite a bit, that in fact the whole neighborhood knew quite a bit, so I just said what I thought an adult would say:

"Everything will be okay, Ellen." I even made my voice sound like an adult's.

"Nothing is okay anymore," she said. "You don't understand. You don't know anything. Now my father

says he's going back to New York. My mother says she's moving to Chicago." She skidded her bike to a stop even though we weren't at the pool yet. Without the tick-tick of the bicycle spokes, silence piled up too quickly.

"Well, what about you?" I asked. "Where are you going?" It was the kind of thing my father would tell me I should decide by myself, but Ellen's parents would shepherd her along into the right decision. That's the way they were, always right behind her.

"No one's said." She started riding again, slowly turning into the parking lot where Ellen's mother parked whenever she brought us to the pool, and she stopped under a buzzing fluorescent light. I stopped too. Hundreds of moths swarmed around the light, dodging in and out of each other's circles. I watched them for a while, hoping she'd say something so I wouldn't have to. But she didn't.

"Don't be afraid," I said. "They'll take care of you, they have to because they're your parents."

"Like your parents take care of you," she said. "Your mother isn't even here. And all your father does is sit around the house drinking and smoking and reading the newspaper. No one takes care of you; my mother says it's shameful. You're all alone; you don't even have a family, and now that's the way I'm going to be!"

"That's not true," I said. "I have a family. Take it back."

"I won't. What family? My mother makes you lunch every day."

I wanted to slap her or kick her or grind her face into the gravel underneath us, and that's what a true soldier would have done. Instead I said, "Yeah, well, she's a terrible cook. Who needs someone like that? She makes lousy lunches!" Which wasn't true, which Ellen knew wasn't true. The lunches were fine, and if I didn't

have those, I wouldn't have anything.

I rode my bike across the parking lot to the pool, not caring whether Ellen followed. I dumped my bike on the ground, not bothering to lock it, and I was so angry that climbing the chain link fence was easier than I expected, the clink and clank sounded like Ellen's parents yammering across the night at each other. I didn't bother to stop at the top, just swung over and clamored down, jumping from part way, landing hard so my ribs seemed to jiggle up against each other.

I'd been swimming at night before, but only during regular pool hours, when lights shone into the corners and bright blue wavered along the water's surface like leftover pieces of the afternoon. Now the water was black and endless, something to suck you under and hold you down until you gave in.

I heard Ellen's voice: "You're afraid." I couldn't see her. She must have been standing outside the fence. She sure didn't sound like she was about to climb over to join me, and her fear made me feel a little braver.

"Am not," I said. But who would think water could get so black! It certainly wasn't black when it came out of the faucet at home.

"You've never done this before," Ellen said. "You're afraid to dive in."

"I'm not afraid of anything," I said, "not like you, scaredy-cat," and I walked to the edge of the pool, kicked off my sandals, and swished my foot in the water to prove I wasn't afraid. I was surprised that the water felt warm like a bathtub. I splashed with my foot and thought about how I wasn't a good soldier because of all the things that secretly scared me: Big spiders. Lighting the gas stove. And something wrapped around me bigger than this swimming pool, twice as dark, twice as deep.

I jumped onto the water, making the splash big and



brave-sounding. The water swallowed me, and my hair drifted all loose and easy, rolled like a wave as I tilted my head underwater. I curved my hands into an arc and cut through the darkness, listening to the steady swoosh that rose out of my movements.

I didn't care if Ellen joined me; I sort of hoped she'd just disappear and I'd never have to see her again, that I'd never have to face someone who knew about the thing that most scared me. And if I was going to be alone, I had to get used to it, had to get used to a world where there was nothing but me.

I rose to the surface and flipped onto my back, leaving my ears underwater so I could hear the silence, and I kept my body perfectly still, my eyes closed, floating, floating, floating, I could float on my back forever, it was the only part of swimming I was good at, the only part I enjoyed, drifting on top of the water.

So many question marks curved around my mother that I'd never live long enough to see them all answered. Maybe that's why my father stayed silent all these years, he was afraid of answers.

I stayed in the pool long enough that when I finally climbed the ladder out, my fingers and toes were pruney and Ellen didn't answer when I called her. Since my towel was on my dresser at home, I just stood on the cement deck letting water drip off. The pool was still and silent now; all I heard was the scratch of water stuck

so deep in my ear I couldn't shake it out.

Water tickled down my legs and collected in a puddle that would evaporate and no one would know I'd been here, being brave by swimming alone in the dark. Just Ellen, but she'd be gone soon, her parents were going to take her somewhere exciting, New York or Chicago, and that meant there'd be no one to make my lunch during the rest of summer.

When my mother went away, did she know what she left behind her? My father, sitting alone while the room darkened around him, letting himself get tugged along with whatever current pulled strongest. Me, swimming alone at night to prove I wasn't afraid of anything. Was that what she intended to leave?

"Candy?" My father called to me from the other side of the fence, about where Ellen had stood.

"Candy?"

I thought about not saying anything; Ellen must have ratted on me, and it was one more reason not to see her again, the traitor. If I kept quiet my father wouldn't find me, the night was that dark around us.

"Here I am, Vern," I said, surprised at how natural-sounding my voice came out. "I decided to go swimming."

The fence rattled, and then he was there, standing right next to me, and he said: "Do you do this often?"

"First time," I said. So far he didn't sound mad, but

I guess I'd never heard
him sound mad. "Did Ellen tell you
where I was?"

Maybe he nodded and I couldn't see; anyway, instead of answering my question, he said, "How's the water? Too cold?"

"Fine," I said.

"Ellen didn't tell me," he said. "I saw your bike out front."

"Well, why—" and he interrupted me:

"Did I ever tell you. . . ." he said, walking from me to sit on the edge of the pool; I heard his feet plunk into the water one after the other, like two stones dropping deep. "Did I ever tell you that your mother and I would swim together at midnight under every full moon of the summer? Her hair turned silver in the moonlight. I thought that was something I'd be doing the rest of my life, swimming under full moons, watching your mother's silver hair."

He stopped talking, but I hung on to the words as if they were about to go away.

"What happened?" I whispered, half-hoping he wouldn't tell me so everything could go on the way it always had—because that was all I knew.

He started to cry, a soft sound you'd make to comfort yourself in the dark. What was I supposed to do; I was a kid, what did I know? I ran to him and wrapped my arms as far around him as they'd go, felt the worn

softness of his T-shirt against my cheek. "Daddy, I'm afraid," I said. "She left me, and I don't have a mother, and I'm so afraid. Everyday I'm afraid."

"Me too, honey," and he held me tight, and in his arms I saw that 98 percent preparation was fine, that being brave was fine, that swimming alone in the dark was fine, but what was finest of all was to huddle close to someone and admit your fear, to admit that you didn't have all the answers and maybe you never would.

Shortly, he said, "You know, your hair's just like hers. Probably no one's told you," and he stroked his hand against the damp clumps so that I felt maybe my hair was like hers, flowing soft and silver around my head like a dream you won't let end. "I always forget," he said. "There's more than one kind of running away. Just as there's more than one way to act brave."

Though there was no moon that night, and I suspected that my hair really did not look silver and never could, my father and I swam together in the big, dark pool, and when we were done, before we climbed the fence to go home, we dried our faces with our T-shirts and tied them around the base of one of the lifeguard chairs to be sure someone would know we'd been here together, and then I rode my bike home while my father followed right behind in the car, keeping a careful watch over me as he drove. ☼