

MOTHS

by Dennis Hiatt

I didn't care for parties when Jackie was alive and I do not like them now. Deborah, our daughter, in the June of her life, seems afraid that I will spend my October in mourning. Perhaps she sees herself as taking Jackie's place. Perhaps Deb's afraid I'm going to mourn myself to death. You'd (I would anyway) think a daughter would want her father to remain true to her mother's memory.

I tried telling Deb that I wouldn't be happy at a party where I had more wrinkles in the corners of my eyes, than the rest of the guest had between them. Deb ignored me with a mother hen smile, and picked a light weight blue suit from the closet. "Wear this Dad."

I sighed. "Honey, I buried your mother in that suit."

"You didn't wear black Dad?" She said, mildly offended by my lack of morals or her poor memory. "What about..." Deb dug deeper in the closet. "That goofy tourist shirt you bought in Honolulu? The yellow one with the blue parrots"

"Your mother threw it out." I lied as Deb nosed deeper into the dark and found it.

"Per-fect Dad."

I shook my head. "Honey, now all I need is a cigar and two cameras, to play The Ugly American."

Deb nodded a smile to that thought, but said. "It's not a fifties scene Dad."

The scene? A sixties theme party at the best house, on a good block, in a up-scale neighborhood. White plastic belts and go-go boots. Mini skirts and one real bee-hive hair-do. Tie-died tee-shirts. One hundred tiny dime store turtles with candles on their shells and balsa wood glued to their stomachs, swimming aimlessly in an Olympic pool. White

wine and lemon flavored mineral water. Good thick hamburgers sputtering on three barbecues and vegetarian tacos pouring from the chrome kitchen in linen covered, silver warming pans....my first post brie and baguette party, no doubt.

The low-slung dazzling house and it's vast back yard was filled with beautiful kids like my daughter. Her friends from work, her friends from collage and young people that these friends had met at the spa or gallery opening or jogging. I'd seen a few of the faces over the years and could hook up a name with a length of blonde hair and up turned nose or remember the boy with bushy eyebrows and football player shoulders, was John. Deb had dated him one winter and dumped him that spring. From speakers on poles, in the dark corners of the yard, The Beach Boys sang Surf'n U.S.A.

The only other face my age was a writer (or maybe he was an artist) that was holding an animated court next to the pool. Beside him was a girl Deb's age. His black haired student or lover or squeeze in spandex biking pants. I didn't know and didn't care. As we crossed the lawn, he looked my way for a second, petted the girl's otter sleek butt and went back to his dissertation. What a jerk, I thought as Deb aimed me to a leather couch, under a bug lamp, in the smoking section.

I had a brief hope that I would be allowed to vegetate in the yellow light with a hamburger, lemon mineral water and my low tar cigarettes. I would have been more than happy to play my part as a token of the sixties. Frayed ambiance in my dumb Hawaii shirt, sitting quietly next to a bright, new garbage can filled with white sand.

But no. My only child, white wine in one hand, the other holding her dress held by it's flower print hem, trotted back smiling, with friends, a greaser and Indian maiden, that were perhaps all of twenty-two.

"Dad, I want you to meet Walton and Imogene."

"My friends ALL call me Jean, Mr. Aldrich." The young, tawny goddess chirped and extended a very slim bangled wrist.

I stood and shook their hands. "Nice to meet you Walton, Jean." The kids seated themselves in straight back, wooden chairs, across from me. Walton looked like a nice young man, tall and stylishly thin. He seemed to be sweating in his motorcycle jacket or perhaps the yellow light of the bug lamp just made him look hot. Walton had a moody mouth and dark eyes that anger might have come naturally to, but he was handsome. No doubt about it. Imogene, however, was a rare beauty. She was all legs, had a tummy you could do a trampoline act on and breasts that set up high and proud like halved grapefruits. (All wrapped in fringed buckskin as if the sixties, were to her, being a Disney extra.)

"So Mr. Aldrich," Walton sat and, unilluminated eyes smiling, said earnestly. "Deborah tells us that you've lead an interesting life."

I smiled my thanks-for-nothing-kidd-o smile at Deb.

"Dad, Walton's a writer." Deb chirped a little too much like Imogene for my liking.

Walton waved her chirp off. "I sell men's suits Mr. Aldrich. I write on the side." A very earnest young man. He was hard not to like.

I shrugged and Imogene brighten and squeezed Walton's arm. "Well Sir," The boy looked almost embarrassed. "I was wondering if you'd mind talking about Vietnam?"

I blinked at Deb The Mouth, sipped my mineral water and looked up at the moths fluttering around the bug lamp. "Why, Walton? It seems to me more than enough has been said about it."

"Well Sir..."

"Dad, I see some friends. Be back in a bit."

I nodded and Walton leaned forward and tried a smile.

Before he could speak, I tossed the ball back into his court, "Been out of college long?", and lit a cigarette.

Walton backed away from the smoke and said. "Yes Sir. I graduated last year."

I smiled aimlessly at the moths in their holding pattern over head. Maybe the kids would go away. Imogene recrossed her arms and and legs and chirped. "Walton's dad gave him a GREAT little BMW for being on the honor roll."

Walton coughed. "Sorry Sir. I'm allergic to tobacco."

I grinned at the trendy pup. "You know guys, it's very kind of you to baby sit Deb's old man but....."

Bangs fluttering, her long legs the color of rare honey, recrossing, Imogene popped forward. "Mr. Aldrich we've been looking forward ALL week to seeing YOU." She then smiled at me in a majorly cute way by squeezing her eyebrows together and showing me all of her straight, fine teeth.

"Oh?" Did she think her smile would charm me into putting out the cigarette? "Why Jean?"

"Well," Handsome, earnest Walton leaned toward me again. "Mr. Aldrich, Deborah tells us that you were in Vietnam and work for Dow Chemical."

"Yes," I blew a smoke ring. Imogene looked like she needed to frown but recrossed her long legs instead. "But being a chemical engineer is no more noteworthy than any other form of middle management." A fat moth flew by the glowing tip of my cigarette and Walton and I stared at each other through the smoke and the years.

"Well...Sir, times change but people don't. A writer picks details that are apt and leaves out those which are beside the point." He smiled like do-you-understand?

I nodded and Walton leaned a hair closer. "What I mean Sir is that if you could tell me one story, about your life, what would that story be."

I sighed. Time is a one way street, and the gulf between me and this young couple would have been great if we'd been from the same generation, but I could try. "Deb's mother and I were married my junior year. No abortions back

then. I went to work at a hamburger stand thirty-five hours a week and with the GI bill and a little help from our folks, we scraped by."

Walton's guarded face, in the yellow light, seemed to say he wanted to hear something altogether different. Something that made good copy. Did he think I'd tell him about throwing the first hand full of dirt on my Jackie's coffin?

I took a deep drag, exhaled and went on. "Deb cried most of my senior year. Babes do that. My GPA dropped from a 3.6 to a 2.4 but I graduated on time...."

"Sir?" Walton moody mouth kissed a small, tight smile. "I'm sorry but I've gone to college and I was hoping that....perhaps you could tell me about something I've never experienced?"

"Something that you've never experienced?"

"And won't Sir." His left hand made a soft fist and kneaded his knee slowly.

"Okay." I grinned and tried build another span across that gulf. "Last year at our company picnic, I met a junior Vice President, Jack Stevenson. When he'd had a few drinks and found out that we'd both gone to the same college, he just had to be my buddy."

I leaned forward and ground out my cigarette in the white sand. I wondered if the sand was imported. "I want to tell you Walton that I was thankful that a Vice President had taken an interest in me. I've worked long and hard for Dow and to be fair Dow's been good to me but...anyway Jack graduated four years before me because he could afford go to college out of high school. The high point of his collage years was going to Woodstock...."

"Yes Sir, but...." Walton swatted at a moth. He nailed it to but before he could finish his thought the writer (artist?) hovered into view. He was dressed in a tie-died tee-shirt and bell bottomed jeans. I'd bet his love beads

were the real thing. Up close I had to admit that he was a fairly good looking guy about my age. His "friend" stood next to me looking down at the cigarette I was lighting. My eyes were level with the pubic crease in her Spandex and in the blue flame of the Ronson, her lovely cleft was as fat as Cupid's cheeks.

I offered her the pack. She shook her head and smiled as aimlessly at the cigarettes as I had at the moths. Her grey haired "friend" crossed his arms and pronounced. "SO Walton I've read your poem on the Oppressed Masses Of Africa...in our almanac's paper." He sipped his drink like a sly drunk. "GANG RAPE OF THE THIRD WORLD. Great title." He shook his head with a certain wistful, wise happiness, and seemed to quote. "WOULD you RAPE your MOTHER...(dramatic pause) FOR A MERCEDES." He tried to take a drink and giggled, blowing bubbles. "A Renault might be worth a fast feel....Heady...Liberating...Stuff."

"Thank you Sir." Walton seem both embarrassed and pleased. Imogene eyed Ms Bicycle Pants like she was the snake in the garden of Eden. Ms Bicycle Pants, her lips as red and glossy-moist as that apple's skin, smiled teeth and gums at Walton and said. "How's the Vietnam thingie coming, Babe?"

I smiled at Walton and he seemed to blush. The wind was blowing from the left and I didn't need a weather man to tell me, it was blowing cold and for me, ill. The boy was right about one thing; times change but the people don't. The sixties were full of middle class kids that never realized that they needed more than the rap and the beret to be Che Guevara. Jackie'd been a kid like that when I'd met her. Me the 'Nam vet with nightmares, her a revolutionary with clean, white underpants.

"OH WOW!" A girl screeched from across the yard. "The little turtles are dying!"

Imogene leaped to her feet and Ms Bicycle Pants and her

ran like young deer to the pool. The writer/artist asshole, hosted his drink in a salute, mutter cheerfully, "Chemicals not found in nature.", and ambled back to the pool.

Walton stood and I looked the little bastard in the eye and said. "Sit down son and you'll get your story."

He hesitated and I grinned, almost coy because after all, I was just a plump, middle age man in a dumb Hawaiian shirt. "I won't tell it in front of the ladies."

Walton sat. "Sir?"

"Shut up and listen friend. I was a LURP for the First Air Cavalry. That's Long Range Reconnaissance. Our job...my job was to spent three weeks or more out in the field following the Bad Guys around. Now that's three to five men tracking main line VC and NVA units for weeks and a lot of us didn't come back. This story is to me, what your BMW and your honor roll and your poems in the school paper, are to you. And it's a story I am sure you can use."

Walton nodded warily and moth flew into my mineral water. I pushed it underwater and let it drown. Lights, brighter than the mid-day sun, kicked on around the swimming pool. The boy and I glanced at the pool and the beautiful children milling at it's edges. The water shimmer like blue flame. Walton looked back at me and I smiled again, but less kind.

"I'd been a Lurp for about six months when this happened." The moth in my water wiggled. I stuck my finger on it and it stilled. "I was taking a shower, getting ready to go out and play death tag with the Bad Guys when a Lurp from another team came in and hopped under shower head next to me. His name was Dove. Sergeant Dove and he'd been out in the field for about a month. He was grinning and chewing on something to beat the band."

I grinned and made chewing. "I said. 'Hey Sarge, what ya chewing?'" I acted like I was taking two little things out of my mouth and showing them to Walton. "'Gook ears.'

Dove said and sure enough that was what he was chewing."

Deb and Imogene breezed in to the yellow light. "Daddy it's just so sick. ALL the baby turtles are dying."

I took her hand. "Your friends must have used super glue."

Walton, his face unreadable, stood and took Imogene's hand. The motorcycle jacket was too big for him. "I see your point Sir."

"I don't think you do son." Deb gave me her "Now Dad Look", and pinched my hand.

"Would you care to elaborate Sir?" Walton's voice was as soft as the moth's wings fluttering over head.

"Simply this. That whatever was right or wrong with the world when I was your age, giants walked the earth and I walked among them and son...even if you weren't allergic to tobacco, you will never do that."

Deb laughed deep and sweet, just like her mother. "Oh Dad! Yes-yes-yes, and now all you ol' dinosaurs are washing up on the shores of Prince William's sound."

I laughed, and as Walton and Imogene made their way, hand in hand, to the flaming pool, said. "You're right Honey." and downed the mineral water, moth and all.

