

Beside the Still Waters

by Leslie DeWitt

The early March sky was overcast, grey and dreary. Clouds illuminated from time to time, the glimmering warmth of a hidden sun attempting to break past the stifling barrier which veiled its countenance. Far below, shivering together by the edge of the creek, stood the three boys. Before them was the fellow and his gun. It was one o'clock in the afternoon.

"Only in the blood of the lamb," he repeated.

Charlie Devoneux had come up with the idea. A 'man test,' he'd called it. Oscar Zoli hadn't been so hip to the plan, though, which consisted of stripping down to nothing but drawers and wading into water not fit for penguins to lounge in. Yet the counter argument had been very persuasive.

'Don't you wanna be a man?' Charlie'd asked.

Oscar did, of course. His brother Mikey was a man, who'd begun growing his very own genuine mustache right there on his upper lip. Oscar wanted that for himself, although when he'd explained that he and Charlie Devoneux planned to jump into a chilled Stalwart Creek whilst clothed only in their skivvies, Mikey had guffawed.

'You think that'll make you a man?' he'd inquired.

'Sure it will,' Oscar had replied. 'What else would?' Mikey had enjoyed that response, ruffling Oscar's hair and quitting the room with no more than an amused grin.

"You. There," said the fellow, pointing his gun like a dead finger. "You believe that water saves the soul, don't you?" Thomas looked to the other boys for an answer, but they didn't know any more than he did.

"Sure you do," answered the fellow for him. "Sure you do." He motioned towards the water with his free hand. "Go out there. Go out there and accept."

"But...but mister," Thomas trembled, his eyes teary. "I can't swim."

Charlie had been slightly annoyed when Oscar invited Thomas Jenkins along. 'Thomas is a sissy,' he'd insisted. 'He ain't good for anything, least of all bein' a man.'

It was true that Thomas was a little scared of the dark, and that he didn't like watching horror flicks with the others, and that he wouldn't say a dirty word, but he was still Oscar's friend and neighbor and Oscar liked him. And if that wasn't good enough reason for him to come along, Oscar had explained, then Charlie could just jump into Stalwart all by his lonesome.

It wasn't long before Thomas stopped thrashing, out there in the middle of the creek where the water ran deep. Charlie was watching; Oscar couldn't. The sound of shredding water was enough for him, and he found himself secretly relieved when it finally ceased.

"Good," said the fellow. He regarded the remaining boys. "Now you two."

"Can we put our clothes back on?" asked Charlie with alarming casualness. Oscar stood silently.

"No," said the fellow after a brief pause. "He takes us as we are. Now go."

It wasn't until just before the plunge when the fellow had appeared, seemingly from out of nowhere. They'd removed all apparel save their briefs, with Thomas's looking brighter and whiter than those of his compatriots.

'Burr!' Charlie had ejected, letting loose an exaggerated shudder as he placed a bare foot upon the creek's surface. 'That water's colder than a witch's titty!'

'Guys,' Thomas had said, appearing a bit pallid. 'I got somethin' to admit...'

But his disclosure wouldn't be heard until later, for then the fellow had made his entrance. He was a scruffy man, that queer fellow, and it was difficult to determine his age. He wore a faded camouflage jacket with the word 'Wendem' stitched onto one breast, 'U.S. Army' onto the other. And in his hand he gripped a solid black firearm.

'Excuse me a moment,' he'd first said. 'Could you boys tell me whether or not we can be delivered from our transgressions?'

Oscar and Charlie clung to each other as their trembling grew violent, their teeth chattering uncontrollably. Thomas had floated away to the side, aided in his voyage by an absent push from Charlie's foot. Oscar was beginning to have trouble keeping his eyes open.

The fellow sat on the rocky bank of the creek, his legs crisscrossed Indian style. He placed the gun in his lap and stared out into the distance, past the boys towards the trees and, most likely, even past that. It was two o'clock in the afternoon.

"There's peace, in the end," he muttered softly. "If we can be saved."

