

"I don't know, I don't know, just let me sleep!"

I kept saying that, but they wouldn't listen to me. They won't stop asking all those questions. Where are Micky and Kip? Was it a dream, or did it really happen? It started out as just innocent fun. My God, what happened?

It was a beautiful night. One of those nights where the universe is peeking through the black sky and the Milky Way is weaving a glittering trail of stars. The wind was stroking the leaves and the fresh lake air filled my lungs, rejuvenating my inert body. Kip and Micky were lying in the fragrant grass staring up at the sky.

"Hey you guys, what do you wanna do?"

"Aw, can't we just sit around and do nothin'? You've had us doing stuff all day; first it was fishing, then skiing. I'm so beat I can't move."

"Do you guys know what I could use right now? A big succulent apple. Doesn't that sound good!"

"That does sound good, what do ya think Micky?"

"Sounds good to me, but where ya going to get these nice big succulent apples? You find them and I'll eat 'em."

So we sat around for awhile, all thinking of some place to find some apples. It was getting lighter as the full moon rose, its ghostly beam making objects seem obscure.

"I know. Remember that old beat up farm house with the apple orchard on one side? That's where we'll get them."

"Come on, Kip, you know the stories about that dude who lives there. They say he's really weird. Besides, that dumb old grave yard is right there, and I don't feel like tripping over some long forgotten soul to get some stupid apples."

"Oh, let's do it! The grave yard will be fun at night! Besides it will add spice to our escapade. All those in favor, sorry Mick, majority rules."

"Okay I'll go, but won't you be afraid Karen?"

"With you two strong, handsome men to protect me? Never!"

"Yah, okay, I'll go! Just remember it was your bright idea."

The moon was our light as we paraded down a dusty dirt road, and it seemed a long time before we caught a glimpse of the cemetery. Head stones glowed white, their shadows casting an eerie darkness beyond. Trees sucked at the air, letting out small gasps. As we drew closer, the wrought iron fence stood forebodingly; the only obstacle guarding our goal. I felt the grip tighten on each arm as we walked around, taking in every detail of our surroundings.

"What's that?"

"What . . . what's what?"

The voice had a slight edge, catching in mid-sentence. Then Kip pointed to what appeared to be a large cone standing about seven feet high and four feet wide. It encompassed one section of the sky.

"Let's go see what it is. I bet you it's only a big pile of leaves or something."

"You wanna know what it is, you go investigate it. Kip and I are staying right here, right Kip?"

"Right, Micky."

"Okay chickens."

Walking towards the sinister cone, gnarled trees issued a warning and the writing on the chalky stones transformed to smiles on white faces. Nearer, the cone looked huge. I faltered a moment and turned to see if they were still there. Standing huddled together, they watched. Only a few more feet to go. Reaching for the blackness, it surrendered under my touch, as the leaves glided to the ground. I started laughing. I laughed so hard I felt tears on my cheeks.

"What's so funny, Karen? Are you okay? What is it?"

The urgency in his voice subdued my spell.

"It's alright you guys. It's only a big pile of leaves like I said."

"Aw, we knew what it was all the time, we were just testing you, huh Micky."

"Sure, right Kip. Come on, let's get those apples and split."

Running to the fence to meet them, I lost my breath so I just watched as they looked for an entrance into the orchard.

"Hey, Kip, here's a way to get in. Look."

The entrance to paradise was a bar bent about two feet wide, just enough to squeeze through without getting dirty.

"Good, that's perfect. All we have to do is slide in. It's good for a fast escape too. You go in first Kip, then Karen. Scout around for the good trees."

After we were all through the opening, we searched for the best tree. Laughing, tripping in the tangly grass, and after eating from one tree then another, we finally found the perfect tree. The dull red fruit seemed to say: "I'm here, eat me." All the trees were planted in neat rows and the grass was knee deep with a path down each row, a path made by tires. I had noticed it before but ignored the feeling of uneasiness gnawing at the back of my mind.

"There's the one I want. The one near the top. I'll be right down."

Like an expert Micky fought his way through the branches to reach his prize. His arms extended, the hand clutched at the fruit, and when he bit into it the juice trickled down his chin. His munching was so loud. A sudden noise smothered the sound of the apple. Paralyzed, we listened as the sound grew louder, the two white eyes cast their light down the aisle. Realizing what it was, Micky motioned us up in the tree.

Squatting there, so close, I could hear the heart-beats next to mine. The lights were nearing as a python would slink through the grass ready to pounce on its prey. Almost beneath us now, we saw the dark green truck, but the gleam from the black metallic barrel protruding out the window captured our complete attention. The sight itself made us merge together becoming part of the tree.

It felt hours had passed before we dared to venture out of the refuge we had sought. My body had been asleep for some time, causing a prickly pain when I finally climbed down.

"God you guys, I can hardly walk."

"I don't care! We're getting the hell out of here even if I have to carry you! Kip, look around and see if you can see where that truck is."

"Can't see a thing, he must have gone back to the house. I don't see any lights."

All of us broke into a run towards the entrance we'd found. Kip was running ahead of Micky and me. Long grass twined around my ankle causing my collapse to the ground, Micky jerked me up and we streaked off again. Only when my lungs were gasping for air did I stop for a rest. That's when I heard the soft rumble of an engine and I turned around to see lights creeping slowly in our direction. I ran to catch up with Micky to point out the ever moving lights, but when I reached him they weren't there.

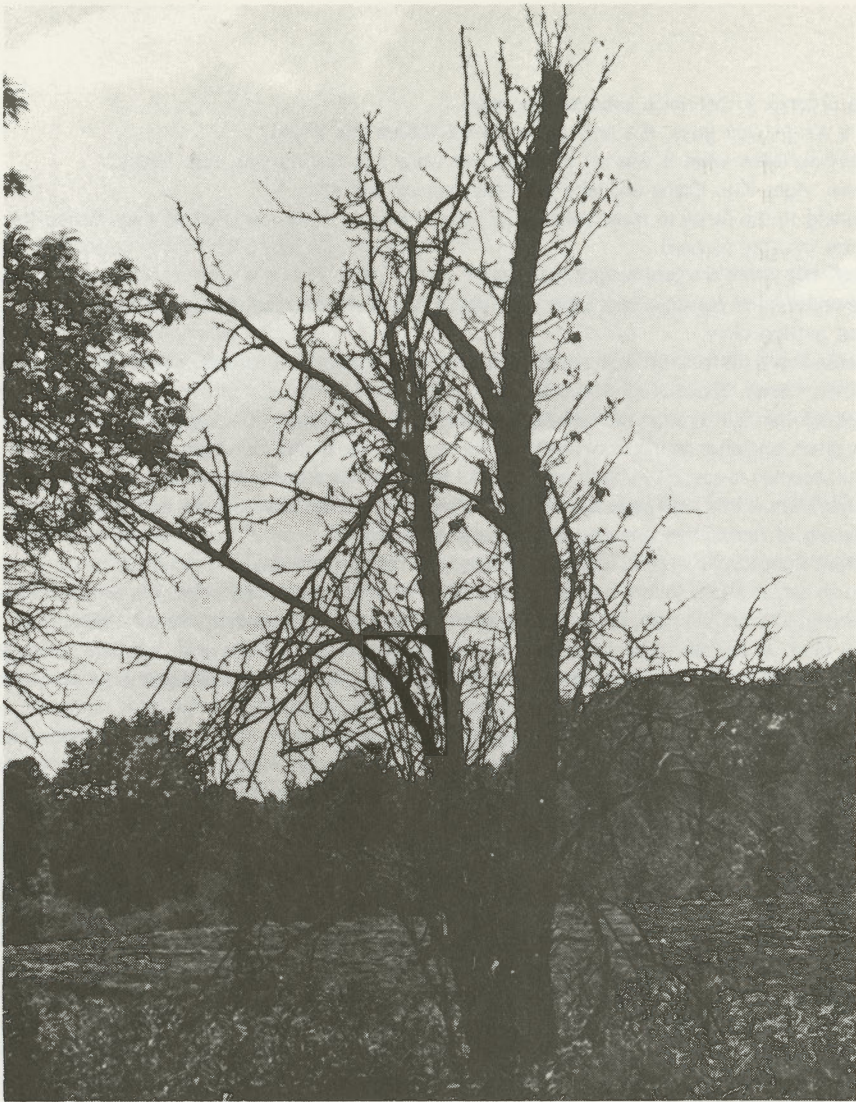
"Karen, the fence isn't that far away, maybe four hundred yards, I think we can make it before . . ."

The explosion ripped through the night's solitude. As we dove for the protection of the grass we saw the small figure of Kip leap into the air, then fall to the ground. Crawling now, I could feel the cold wet mud soak into my shirt, but I kept crawling until I came upon Kip's limp body. His face shone white, exaggerating his contorted features and when I started to pick him up my hand felt the stickiness of his saturated clothes.

"Micky! Micky, he shot him! I think he's dead! My God Micky what are we going to do? Micky? Where are you?"

In a stupor I looked up in time to see he had made it to the fence and was climbing through when the shot caught him mid-air. As he fell I stifled the scream rising in my throat and just sat there, not moving. My mind kept saying: run for it, run for it, but my legs were rooted in one spot. What is





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happening? This can't be real! All at once I heard the door of the truck slam shut, then the engine started. Knowing this was when I had to move I crawled about fifteen feet then jumped into a full run. I ran and ran, not even aware of which direction to go. The bullet hit my shoulder before the retort sounded. The pain pulsating through my shoulder couldn't even stop me from reaching that fence. A wave of exhaustion hit me as I saw the other side through the narrow hole, but I had to pass Micky before I'd be safe. When I looked down at him my tears dropped on his stained shirt.

"Oh Jesus help me. Micky, Micky?"

Putting my head to his chest I heard the beat of life so I clutched his arms and dragged him through. How I managed to carry him so far is beyond me. My shoulder hurt, it hurt so bad that I wasn't aware of anything except screaming and sobbing until my voice disappeared.

"Help me somebody! God, Won't anyone Help me?"

Then the load of Micky's body was taken away. Now I'm here . . . I saw the needle pierce my skin and welcomed the oblivion that conquered my brain.