

Little White Lies

By Louise Caiola

“All we are saying is give peace a chance.”

The Pairpoint glass vase fell to the floor with a tattletale crash that split it in two. Susan rushed from the kitchen into the living room where her two-year-old grandson waited, wearing a glum and guilty frown.

“Justin, what did you do?” She checked the child. No sign of blood. Her eyes scanned the shelf. The carnage below was too painful to examine. Susan grabbed the little boy under the arms, lifted him into the air, and held him against the pieces of her broken heart.

“What did you do? What did you do?” Though her voice pleaded an answer, she knew there wasn’t any. She rocked the child, assuring him that it was all right, a little white lie for the sake of his tiny tears. The deception brought a lump to the back of her throat, as if she’d swallowed an egg whole and it was caught there. Justin rested a plump cheek on her shoulder; a puff of warm breath tickled her ear.

Susan closed her eyes. Her own son had been that exact spot just twenty minutes ago, yet that was only how it felt inside. In reality it was twenty years, give or take a few, passing quickly, folding over one another like the pages of a magazine left out in the wind.

“Let’s put you down for a nap.”

With the little boy tucked safely out of harms way, Susan knelt beside the remains of the vase. She blinked a tear back behind licorice colored lashes. Another blink and she floated away, further this time, until all at once she was eighteen and it was 1969. A Cold War was being waged on Asian soil and if you weren't fighting in it, chances are you were fighting the very idea of it.

Susan had just gotten her first pair of white patent leather go-go boots to match the mini-dress her father refused to let her wear. She was crazy about a "pack of hippies" her dad despised otherwise known as the Beatles. And she was in love with a young man named Paolo Andretti.

Susan's dad didn't care much for him, either. "What kind of name is that?" Jack Cassidy asked, a perturbed scowl wrinkling his lips.

"He's Italian, Daddy; he came to the U.S. when he was just a baby." To West Virginia, to be precise.

"A foreigner," her old man grumbled. "He needs a haircut."

"His hair is just perfect. *He's* perfect."

"Don't make any plans, Susie. There's a respectable lad working part-time down at the firm, Ed Leonard's nephew. Great kid. Going to law school. He'll make junior partner one day for sure. He'd be a fine prospect for a girl like you. Name is Ralph."

"What kind of name is that?" Susan asked, mimicking her father's disdain.

"He's an American, born and bred. Now go on and get supper ready. It's nearly six."

Her mom had met with an untimely passing when Susan was just twelve years old. Very shortly thereafter she became the woman of the house, riding an odd seesaw,

too old to play with baby dolls yet too young to choose her own wardrobe or more importantly, her own boyfriends.

A late December '69 sun tore through the slats of the bleachers behind the high school track. A group of stragglers, mostly boys, formed a circle, smoking cigarettes and trying to keep warm while looking cool like Elvis or Bob Dylan. Susan checked her watch and her immediate surroundings. He'd be along any minute, her secret lover, holding her hands beneath her poncho, tossing sweet nothings into the back of her neck. It was supposed to be the era of free love, but not if you were the daughter of Jack Cassidy. Love meant dodging daylight for shadows and waiting for chances begged, borrowed, or stolen.

Susan brushed a lock of blue-black curls out of her eyes, which Paolo said were as green as emeralds. She loved when he said things like that to her; how unique he made her feel. At last, he turned the corner. She rushed to him, reaching her arms over his head. At six foot two he was so tall, so worthy of the stretch. They held one another, forgetting the turmoil all around them, both near and far.

“Tell me something wonderful,” she said.

“You and me. WE are wonderful.”

“Let's run away, Paolo. Let's leave here. We could go to Canada or to Italy, to Bari, start a life for ourselves. Get married, even start a family.”

Gently he pulled her in. “I need you, Susana,” he said, calling her by his special name. “But your Pop, he needs you too.”

Susan ran her fingertips over the razor stubble on his chin; only 19, but a full grown man in the making. She held him close once again, breathing in the fresh scent of his tee shirt. *I don't care what my father needs*, she thought, deceiving herself – a little white lie for the sake of her heart.

Twenty-year-old Ralph Leonard had come dressed in his Sunday best on Saturday night, all meant to impress her, Susan knew, but it wasn't working. He was at the house as a guest of Jack's, but there under false pretenses. Susan smelled a set-up when it was standing in front of her reeking from a generous dousing of English Leather cologne.

“My family has a cottage right on Sleepy Creek Lake. It's so relaxing. Do you enjoy fishing, Susan? I'd love to take you there sometime, maybe catch some bass.”

Aware that Ralph was trying to grab her eye and reel her in, Susan stared directly at his pebble grain oxford dress shoes, freshly buffed and spit shined. “I hate fish. Thank you, though.”

Susan's father peered over the top of his tortoise rimmed reading glasses, delivering a sharp, disapproving glare in her direction. He then cleared his throat and looped a friendly forearm around the boy's shoulder.

“Ralph's out of the draft lottery on student deferment.” Her father made this announcement with more paternal pride than Susan had ever heard before and it irked her.

“Good for you,” she replied, manufacturing a reasonable facsimile of a genuine smile. Susan didn't really dislike this fellow. Actually there wasn't much that was wrong

with him; fairly attractive, goal driven, attentive, polite. Yet he wasn't Paolo, which in and of itself made *everything* all wrong.

Ralph excused himself and headed for the bathroom. Susan knew what was coming next. As if on cue Jack squared his gaze with hers. "You could exhibit a manner or two. I know you possess such a thing."

"I'll do my best," she promised, without a hint of the truth behind her words.

The holidays barged in, the way they do, expected, but always a surprise just the same. Susan's dad invited the Leonards for Christmas Eve. Ralph brought her a gift, the Beatles' newest release, the Abbey Road album. "Your father mentioned you were a fan," he explained.

"I have nothing for you," she said, feeling embarrassed and wishing to give the gift back for so many reasons. However, she kept the album, telling the clatter in her head that it was just a nice gesture, no need for guilt. Susan listened to the record once and then stuffed it away under her bed determined never to play it again.

As a brand new decade began, so did the need for young men to be carted off to Vietnam, turned from boys to soldiers without a say. All around her, male friends and acquaintances were issued numbers, getting physicals and hoping that their luck might keep them home.

Paolo's number was low, which wasn't a good thing. Susan pretended that she didn't love him as much as she did. But with each encounter her feelings swelled, overrunning every bit of emotional control she claimed to have. He gave her a strand of

love beads and she gave him the same in return. She never mentioned the present from Ralph, keeping the details of her father's plans another secret – this one all her own.

They were together every chance they could, and all the while Susan's dad grew more and more impatient with his daughter's infatuation.

"Please Dad, please try and see him the way that I do," she pleaded.

But it was no use. Jack had a one track mind and it led straight to Ralph Leonard.

"That Paolo's a bum, Susan. Can't you see that? What kind of man paints pictures hoping to earn a living as an artist? What kind of man is that? A man with no future to offer a young woman, that's what."

It was the artist in Paolo that first made her take notice, one year earlier when he sat down beside her in art class, all legs and wavy chestnut colored hair, quietly sketching her face. He seemed to know who he was. All the other kids were still clipping phrases and ideas from somebody else, hoping to meld them into their own unique personality. Even Susan had struggled to define herself. Now the struggle was altogether different, worse by a long shot.

Her tears went unseen. Her cries unheard. She'd run to Paolo to find comfort in his touch. He'd calm her, sing to her, kiss her, and hold her until the world became little more than white noise.

On one sultry May morning, she'd traipsed off to see him under a hazy pre-summer sky. A persistent wind wrapped itself around the couple as they walked side by side through the narrow aisles of a local flea market. Paolo's eyes were clouded over, his lids leveled at half-staff. Susan allowed an extra inch or two of space between them, feeling that soon enough there'd be much more.

“That’s pretty isn’t it?” he asked, pausing before a table of odd and ends, the Pairpoint vase standing tall among various styles of ceramic ashtrays and random pieces of assorted flatware.

“My mother had one like that once. I’m not sure what’s become of it now,” she said, scanning the winding rows of vines etched into the glass.

“I want you to have it,” he said, buying it before she could protest.

A parting gift. *Take this to remember me.*

She wanted to throw it to the asphalt, shatter it in a thousand pieces. Instead she held it tightly against her body.

Paolo waited until he could no longer keep the words contained inside where they wouldn’t hurt her. “Susana, I have to go.”

The vase slipped but she didn’t let it fall. She mustered a tight grin and a “we’ll be fine,” a lie to top all those that had come before.

Sleep became nearly impossible. Susan spent the immediate weeks that followed Paolo’s being drafted restless, edgy and drowning sobs into the pillowcase at the close of each long and insignificant day. She bargained with God, making deals that traded her unending religious devotion for Paolo’s safety. Each prayer began the same way, “Just let him be safe and I’ll go to church, be a better person, donate to some charity...” She presumed the silence on the other side was meant as an agreement, a promise from above.

She knew her father could read the pain in her face as he tried to reassure her that she would be okay, but his voice offered no consolation. By early July, while the country celebrated independence with hot dogs and apple pie, Susan refused to eat more than

what she needed to survive. One stuffy evening, Jack crept into her room, where she lay face down on her bed. He knelt down and placed a shaky hand on the small of her back.

“Susan, this boy is not your whole life. You have to pick up the pieces and move on. Now, we’ve been invited to the Leonards’ lake house for the weekend. I’d like us to accept.”

“Go away,” she responded, weakly.

“Susan?”

“GO AWAY. What’s wrong with you? Don’t you get it? I *love* him, Daddy. I don’t want to go to any stupid lake. I don’t want to spend time with anyone but him. Haven’t you had your entire world ripped apart, ever? Haven’t you?”

Jack Cassidy rose to his feet. “Have you forgotten your mother? Because I haven’t. And I never will.”

Susan dried her tears. Perhaps her father was right. She vowed to stay strong and put on her bravest front while she passed the time marking big red X’s through the calendar, waiting for the return of the other half of her heart. Six months tumbled by and another six before she received the notification. Paolo had lost his life on a dusty dark evening when the stars were nowhere to be found. On that very night Susan lifted her chin toward the sky and pushed two words off her trembling lips. “You lied.”

Justin called out for a bottle, jarring Susan back from her past. She brought him a cup of milk with a lid.

“This is what big boys use,” she said, helping him sit up so that he could quench his thirst. “Now close your eyes and when you wake up Mommy will be here to get you.”

Susan watched as her grandchild settled himself down. He was a snapshot of his father – her son – from the tips of his long fingers to the crescent shaped dimple carved in his chin.

“Susan?”

She’d nearly forgotten that her husband was due home for lunch as he called out to her from down the hall.

“Shhh, Justin’s down for a nap,” she said, meeting the man halfway where he held the broken pieces of glass in his hands.

“What happened here?”

Susan shook her head. “A little accident. Will you stay with him for a few minutes? I need some air.”

He nodded as she lifted her sweater from the peg on the wall and hung it over her shoulders. Outside the tall, dry grass, overgrown and tanned, slapped at her ankles as she strode toward the edge of the land, her arms folded across her waist. Reaching the dock she leaned back into a large wooden chair facing the water. Memories don’t break. They keep forever, don’t they? Susan had worked so hard at first, years ago, to remember everything about Paolo, to preserve that part of him that would live on in her mind and soul. How he loved peaches cut up and swimming in apple cider. How he called her Susana. How he wrote song lyrics on the palm of his hand so he wouldn’t forget his favorite lines.

“Imagine all the people, living life in peace...”

As one year became two and then three, Susan had begun to realize she'd simply have to let go. Paolo was gone. It was a horrible undeniable truth. In a ridiculous gesture of supposed acceptance, she had tossed the love beads he gave her into Sleepy Creek Lake, regretting that decision immediately afterward.

Susan ran her hand across her brow suddenly aware that her daughter-in-law Wendy was walking toward her with a short wave.

"Mom? Are you all right?"

Susan nodded. "Yes, yes. I'm fine."

Wendy sat in the chair next to Susan's. She wore a weary smile.

"Dad said I could find you here."

Susan patted the top of Wendy's knee. "How are you holding up?"

The young woman, only 22 years old, lowered her head. "I miss him so much. I'm afraid that Justin's going to forget him."

"No, he won't. Memories keep. And besides, he'll be home in five weeks."

Wendy shrugged. "I know, but he's so far away. Iraq might as well be in another universe, on another planet."

Susan gave her son's wife an empathetic hug. She knew what it was to love a soldier. It meant having blind faith and discarding fear. For Susan, her only son's choice to become a marine had brought it all back to her; the helpless terror, the nightmares, the silent ache. She'd begged him to do anything else, anything at all. But he was headstrong, just like she'd always been. He answered a country's calling, of his own accord. This time there were no numbers involved, good or bad.

"Try not to worry. I know he'll be okay. Focus on Justin."

Wendy, in her shorts and blonde pony tail, looked like a child herself. “Can I tell you a secret? At night when it’s quiet and I’m all alone, I make deals with Jesus. I’ll owe him quite a bit when Paul comes back to me.”

Susan smiled. “I understand. More than you know.”

The door from the house swung open and Susan’s husband, Ralph, stood in the frame. “Guess who’s up and looking for his mamma?”

“We’ll be right there,” Susan called out. As the women rose, Susan turned to Wendy. “I have a secret to share with you, too.”

“You do?”

“When Ralph and I got married I opened my heart to him completely. Yet he wasn’t the first man to be there. A few years after that when Paul was born, I told Ralph that I wanted to name him after Paul McCartney. But that was a little white lie.”

Wendy held her gaze. “Then who?”

“A boy I loved who went off to fight a war he didn’t win.” The confession brought a sweet freedom to her mind. “Let that be between us.” Susan was fairly certain that Ralph may have known anyway, though he was careful not to say.

The two women walked hand in hand away from lake. Inside the cottage, Wendy took her small son in her arms. Susan entered the living room where the Pairpoint vase had been placed on the shelf on its side, glued back together again.

Ralph touched his wife on the cheek, sweeping away the tear that was waiting there. A short verse ran through Susan’s mind. It was one she liked best.

“Though I know I’ll never lose affection for people and things that went before. I know I’ll often stop and think about them. In my life, I love you more.”

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