

WE UNDERSTAND

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A Story That Finds Women of Good Sense Still Quite Foolish at Times

Marcia lay on the lush spring grass, its fresh smell cleansing her nostrils, clearing her mind. The luxuriant green mat fitted itself subtly to the delicate contours of the girl's young body. Completely supine, she was only half-visible to the youth beside her.

Through the sibilant patchwork of oak leaves above, she caught glimpses of cloud-lace trailing languidly past turquoise windows. The oak drew deep sighs all the while, its leaves whispering to one another. The girl breathed deeply, exultantly. Her breasts, rising and falling, rhythmically revealed and obscured the lake and the sun-fire glinting from the white-caps. When exhaling she could barely descry the fern of the huisache and the fringed willows on the opposite shore-line. The warm white linen of her dress felt pleasantly damp beneath her. She murmured happily and wordlessly to herself.

"Did you say something, darling?" Vincent rested on his right elbow, crumbling a bit of oak bark in his hand. Across Marcia's body he could see the lake.

She smiled—not at the boy, but to herself. "No. . . . I was only thinking. Thinking how quietly wonderful it is with you here—like this. How delightfully placid Vinny! It's that beautiful, obscure peace that used to come when Mother tucked me in bed in cold winter nights when I was a little girl. The blankets smelled so fresh, and I felt so clean, tingling all over from my bath."

The boy stirred. "It's useless I suppose to hope that feeling will ever grow into one of love for me. . . . Isn't it Marcia?" He said it resignedly, sorrowfully.

"Dear Vinny! I wish I could love you that way." She was sincere. "But, (she slipped her left hand into his) somehow I can't picture you as my lover, old friend. You see, you are part of this scene—like the lake, this old oak, and the swaying of the huisache out there. We've been here so many times together, Vinny, that if you were to suddenly leave I should feel part of the beauty of this place going with you. I know this peace would lose its sweetness. But (her eyes made offer for the joy to look deeply), I wouldn't feel that my love had gone. . . . can you understand, Vinny dear?"

Vincent laid her hand softly on the grass and nodded his answer. His eyes held a pained, hopeless look. He thumbed a piece of bark toward the lake. It wasn't hard to understand what Marcia meant—he understood. . . . all too clearly!

She took his hand again. "Vinny, dear, when you were a little boy, dreaming of yourself as the minister you are today, of people calling you Brother Orrison, I had my dreams too. I used to sit in the hackberry tree in our back yard, and dream of the millions of things I planned to do when I grew up. I had visions of becoming a great woman doctor—even went so far, when I was a little older, as to plan to be an obstetrician. I thought of, and in my imagination was happy over, the countless mothers I knew I could help because I was a woman, capable of understanding things no man ever could."

The boy flicked another piece of bark. Marcia brushed a grasshopper from her skirt.

"And in the wonderful privacy of that hackberry tree, I dreamed of my Prince Charming, who came down from the clouds, and carried me away on his white horse. He carried me

from Mother's too frequent calls, pestering little boys like you used to be. "She laughed," and the awfulness of Sunday School."

"I went with him to a land of blossomed gardens, courts, and princes. The people powdered their hair, and the ladies curtsied and wore beautiful silk gowns like my great-great-grandmother's ball dress, that we've got stored away in the attic. There were fountains, long marble corridors, and urns of alabaster."

Above and in front of Vincent's eyes a young spider began his gossamer from an oak twig. Down on his own silk he dropped to a leaf on another branch, and fastened there the first rib of his fairyland.

"As I grew older, along with you and Jack and Penelope, I began to realize that my dream palace was any big city—my ladies and princes its lively, animated people. And, with that realization, Vinny dear, my dream became an obsession. There would be college, I thought. . . . medical school. . . . hospital. . . . long rows of white coats and my heels clicking on tile. Then. . . . recognition. . . . people whispering my name with respect and awe. My Prince Charming would be along then, too, I knew. And he would be a surgeon—like me. Life, I thought, would unfold beautifully for us both.

"There would be work to share, and play to share. We could attend concerts, operas, plays, and visit art galleries! There would be long voyages. . . . vacations in Bermuda. To have lived that richly, and, at the same time, have been great surgeons would have been hard, I know; but, we could have done it—my Prince Charming and I."

Lots of the little silvery ribs now attached to four different twigs. Before long the web would be a diaphragm of lace, pulsing in the same breeze that made the white-caps. . . . the ribs only trembled now, mutely.

"But Dad died, you know, and so it was business school instead of college. I had to find a way of making bread and butter, before Mother's funds ran out. While you, and Jack, and Penelope were away at the University, I was learning surgery in an insurance office, and venting my devotion to the women of the world by taking care of my own mother." (Vincent saw a flying leaf break one of the gossamer strands.)

"I knew you would come back to this little town after college—knew you'd want your congregation here. But I was happy in the thought that Penelope and Jack would do big things. Jack has three well-received books already—but Penelope was so disappointing! Why, Vinny, she told me she would've much rather stayed at home than gone to college. Oh! if I could only have traded places with her. Now, she's learning how to cook again, keeping the Weirs' baby when they go out at night, and hardly ever touching the piano any more. It's such a shame for her to go through life with gossip and the Sewing Club providing all her recreation. Oh, I would die from another year of it! I'm glad I'm going—even if I do have to leave you, Vinny."

"Where are you going, Marcia?"

"To Jack." It was only a quiet murmur, spilled with all the rich tenderness of the girl's soul.

Neither one spoke for a long time—interminable to Vincent. He was numb to the core. He ceased thinking of the girl beside