

A CASE OF THE GOLDEN RULE

by Lowry Pei

Every time we go there, just the two of us, it rains. We sit in ancient armchairs, rejects dragged to the shed years ago, their upholstery threadbare where hands, backs, and butts have worn it down, the rest bearing vestiges of scratchy pattern, springs lumpy and uneven under us. Nothing can hurt those chairs anymore. There are provisions in the old fridge whose door is held shut by a rusty hook and eye: beer, salami, cheese, stale bread, mustard, one mealy-looking apple. Neither of us wants to eat it. Better to pick one from a tree, if you can find one without too many lumpy growths or wormholes. Lumber stands around in the corners, the back of the long workbench is fringed with cobwebbed sawdust where it meets the shed wall, a giant old table saw encumbers the middle of the space, with a computer sitting on it swaddled in duct-taped plastic to keep it from being ruined by dust. No phone. The only entertainment is a crappy little cassette radio, off brand with a pseudo-British name, made in Singapore, the kind of thing they sold at K-Mart for \$29.95 years ago, that didn't sound good even when it was new but still works. Three or four tapes, Monk, Miles, Erroll Garner, all dusty, seldom played. We always mean to bring some others and listen to them, but never do. Nothing much to listen to on the radio except weather forecasts, which are not needed when it's already raining, and baseball games, but it isn't summer. Birds get in sometimes when both front and back doors are open, but not on days of rain. The windows are dirty and some of them are cracked because the building is settling and the frames are no longer square; one, the farthest from square, has plastic over it because the glass fell out. But except where there's plastic we can still look out toward the horizon of

gray water and gray sky, rain drawing vanishing frills on the surface of the cove as fresh water disappears into salt. It's chilly but not cold enough to light the kerosene heater. We bring water from the house, piss outside in the bushes. Hot plate, instant coffee, tea bags in a jar, sugar hardened into a lump in another. Bottle of Scotch in a dented unused tool box, rusting at the dent. Lineup of old coffee mugs: Irving, Home Hardware, True Temper, Western Auto, none exactly clean or dirty. They get wiped with paper towels, but haven't been washed in a couple of years. We know to check for dead flies before using one. Mice sometimes gnaw paper left on the floor or workbench, leave their little mice turds to say they like it here too, so Top Ramen and Lipton's Instant Chicken Noodle, which we hardly ever eat anyway, must be kept in the door of the fridge.

Now we are gray-haired and getting thick around the waist; dress us up in suits and we look like the picture of middle age in a *New Yorker* cartoon. But we're still the same guys who were sixteen together. Hardly anyone knows them but us. Not my wife, certainly not our kids, and even if our parents were still alive, well, like all teenagers we made an effort to keep them from knowing, back then, about things they'd never understand. Who we really were inside, they weren't ready to hear and didn't know. As for Sharon, to her everything before she met me is just old stories, as if the pre-wife past were just a dinner party entertainment, or when it lasts too long, a bore. Those are more than stories, those are life itself, but how can she know that? No one else can. So we sit and tell some of them over to each other. Remember DiRienzo, Goodstein, remember Wally Lupton, remember Larry the Ace? Names of kids we haven't seen in forty years, and what we remember about them is trivial compared to the fact that we do both remember and so it happened, we did live then, we were real then just as we are now, even though we forget that in the midst of the everyday. Remember Abby Seligman, Lisa Renko? Remember how beautiful? Always yes, I remember, yes. Otherwise that beauty would be no more.

A week every year we go up alone, after Columbus Day, after everyone else on this cove decides it's too chilly and gray to come anymore till next spring. We say it'll be a week, but maybe it's only four days, or even three. Most important days of the year. But no mentioning that out loud, even to each other. That might break the spell.

Sharon initially entertained jealous fantasies that somehow blonde bimbos would materialize out of the fog and plop themselves down in our laps as we sat up here on these few days, unguarded and unobserved, off the spousal reservation. But it was so implausible an

idea that it became a joke between us. I tell her I'm going to go pick up girls again. The truth is, we never see anyone except when we buy groceries, most women who live in these parts year-round look like potatoes, and what Sharon is nice enough not to mention is that I am no prize anymore and if attractive and available women were to wander by on some unlikely errand, they wouldn't pick my lap to sit on.

So it rains and we talk. Now and then we smoke a forbidden cigarette or take a drink we shouldn't have. No one else knows that the bottle of Scotch lives in the old tool box under the workbench. The truth is, one bottle can last a year. The idea of it is what counts.

The truth is, the truth is. The truth is I wish all that were the case right now, but it's not. These are the days when we would have been at the cove, but I'm not capable of sitting there alone and it is, in fact, the middle of the night, I am at home, Sharon is asleep upstairs and I am not. The one thing that's the same is that it's raining. I have given up on sleep for the night. Tomorrow at work I will be a wreck, but people will hardly notice because they too will be exhausted and troubled for their own reasons and it will be another day of what is now the way of life.

The truth is I don't care if he slept with my wife. I know I'm supposed to get all outraged about it, make a huge scene, set vibrating a web of dreadful midnight phone calls, tears, resolutions, decisions . . . but frankly all that seems tiresome and obligatory. Something we would all have had to go through with in our thirties or forties – but today? Aren't we old enough to just live? If it gave her pleasure, that's great; I probably haven't given her enough for a good while now. If he gave Sharon something she needed, something that was missing in her life, even just something she thought she wanted and later realized wasn't such a big deal after all – that's their business. She had her reasons, and why should I stand in the way of what I'm sure she hoped would be happiness? It's a clear-cut case of the Golden Rule, not that I have been unfaithful to her, but I know how I would like her to act if I were. We're married and that shows no signs of changing. I don't want to split up with her, or with my oldest friend for that matter. I seem to have, but it wasn't my idea, it was his attack of conscience that leaves me sitting here in the middle of the night alone. If you ask me, who fucked whom is a lot less significant than who shared your past. And besides, now she is part of it in a whole different way. The circle is complete.

Couldn't he get over being all guilty and shamefaced about it? I mean really. Should and shouldn't is weak tea compared to life itself,

and we don't have all that much left. In about four or five blinks we'll be sixty, and in another ten minutes after that we'll be seventy, and it's obvious how it goes after that. This is life and death, amigo, that's all there is.

Besides, I have an old story I want to tell.

Once upon a time, my oldest of friends, you and I were young, as you recall. So young we could stay up till five a.m., so young we were still skinny and constantly horny, so young we thought our experiences were unprecedented. You remember all that, you remember our torments and despairs, our parents' peculiarities, our lusts and dreams, but you don't remember this because I never told you.

You and I were seventeen – no, let's think about that – you were eighteen, because it was August, and I was about to turn eighteen, and we were about to go off to college. And if I was seventeen, that means that Allie was fourteen. You remember that, don't you? That was the summer my little sister, whom we had been trying to ignore for years, was in love with you. She had this crush on you that wouldn't quit. She tried to hide it but it was impossible; whenever you came over, if she was in the house, she had to think of an excuse to be in the same room with us. She could not stay away. And then, when she got there, she couldn't say anything, after a couple of strangled efforts. Fourteen-year-olds can't make small talk at the best of times, let alone when they're hopelessly in love and facing the object of their passion. So she'd come into wherever we were, transparently play-acting whatever her excuse was, and when she laid eyes on you she'd turn pink and her feet would knock against each other. I don't think it occurred to you for quite a while what was going on, because we never had paid much attention to her and why start now?

She had little breasts that had just started to show, and she had started having her period. She'd rather have died than mention that to me, but we used the same bathroom, after all, so of course I knew. I remember teasing her by going into her room pretending I was smoking a Tampax, and she turned flaming red and screamed at me I was never allowed to come in her room again. Later my mom gave me a lecture about how a girl feels about such things at that age and made me apologize and the truth was, I really did feel guilty about it.

Anyway, I'm not going to go over it all again, but every time that August comes up you know one of us has to talk about The Night. With Meg and Danielle. How we snuck bottles of wine out of your parents'

house and drank them in my back yard, and it was late and all the lights were out in the houses, and anyway there were lots of trees surrounding us, and we had a crummy above-ground swimming pool and you said let's go for a swim. And by what I still think was a miracle, everyone said yes, knowing we didn't have bathing suits, knowing we'd be naked in front of each other, but nobody mentioning that, as if we were all so cool and sophisticated that it was something we could just do. So we undressed and climbed into the warm chest-high water with the leaves floating on it, keeping a distance, and you and I saw the two girls and they saw us, but let me not go on and on because no one could ever forget that night and we have been over it a hundred times, how I was uncool enough to chase Meg around the pool and she always got away, of course, because women always do. You laughed at me, and Danielle, who was the truly cool one among us, just watched what happened without saying a word. Besides, she had seen you naked before and you had seen her. For me and Meg it was different. The reason Meg said yes to skinny-dipping, I think, was because Danielle did. Meg was the last to agree. But you know all this.

I finally realized I was being an ass and stopped chasing Meg around, and of course then she could stop running away. So we were all quiet, but tinglingly aware of each other's bodily presence, no longer quite as far apart. Sometimes pulling up our feet and treading water for a moment, mostly leaning against the side, the girls staying low, concealing their breasts. Yet as time went on you and Danielle were inching closer together, and so were Meg and I. The night insects were shrilling away and we weren't really drunk but we weren't sober either. It's hard to remember this, but once it wasn't a game, a chase, I felt a tiny bit uncomfortable about the thought of touching Meg when both of us were naked. Not that I didn't want to, God knows, but we never had. I never had been naked with a girl before, and now you were there, and Danielle. Of course you had other things to think about.

Anyway, finally I grasped Meg's hand and she held on. We were still at arm's length but I was almost sure that if I did not pull she would let herself come closer, the way Danielle was next to you in the silent shadows. The water rippled with the slightest movement anyone made.

Then the back door opened and we all heard it, and Allie's voice: "What's going on out here?"

"Oh no," Meg said, and jerked her hand away, as quick as a reflex. She ducked low in the water, trying to hide behind the edge of the pool.

"Allie," I said in a stage whisper. "What are you doing here?"

“No, what are *you* doing?”

“Swimming.”

She stepped down off the back porch and despite my willing her to go away, she came closer. She had to have seen the clothes draped over the old aluminum lawn chairs.

“Just wait’ll Mom hears about this,” she said.

“You’re not gonna tell her.”

“You can’t stop me.”

I knew that was true. But I heard something in her voice that said differently; she was my sister, after all. “We’re not bothering anybody out here. It’s none of your business anyway.”

“You’re really gonna get in trouble this time.”

“Cool your jets, Allie. What’s the matter? You mad we didn’t tell you? You could join us.”

“Gross,” she said. Then you stood up straighter in the pool, and she saw you were looking at her and she couldn’t talk. “Hey Allie,” you said. “Come on. Go for a swim.”

Her eyes darted to me, to Meg, to Danielle who was, I think, pretending to ignore the whole problem, back to you, helplessly, as if we had caught her instead of the other way around. “Oh sure,” she said. “Yeah, sure, just . . .”

You turned to face her fully, watching her to see how she’d react. “Come on, it’s great, you’ll like it.” She didn’t dare look straight at you and she couldn’t look away. “It’s okay, you’ve met everybody here.”

“I think I’ve gotta go home,” Meg said, sliding away into the darkness, taking herself away from me, when I had been so close to having her naked in my arms.

“Wait.”

“No, I . . . I really think we should go.” “We” meant her and Danielle.

“Wait, why? Why should you? Why now?”

“It’s late.”

“So?”

“It’s not the same. You know.” I wanted to kill Allie at that moment. She had ruined it for all of us. But if that had been her goal, she didn’t seem to know how to savor victory; she stood there looking stricken. “Allie?” Meg said.

“Yeah?” she replied in a muffled voice.

“Could you hand me that towel?” she said, pointing to one on a chair.

“Oh. Okay.” Allie managed to get close enough to hand Meg the towel without looking at anyone but her. Especially me; she knew how mad I was.

“Excuse me,” Meg said properly to me. I was between her and the ladder. I stepped back to let her pass, to let her slip through the space where we should have been side by side, as close as I had dreamed. With one extended arm she held the towel over the side so it would stay dry. She climbed up the ladder, awkwardly because of the need to keep the towel out of the water, revealing her beautiful wholeness for an instant before she perched on the side and wrapped the towel around herself. Then she climbed down and went straight for her clothes, with her head down. Right then I knew nothing else like this would ever happen between us. Somehow she contrived to get dressed in a way that showed nothing, without ever being anything but dressed even as she was putting her clothes on. I could not stop watching, the way you watch someone leaving for good. By the time Meg was dressed Allie was gone.

“Dani?” Meg said. “Let’s go.” They had come in Danielle’s car, but Meg’s voice said something about loyalty when the chips were down, something between them that permitted no refusal.

I saw Danielle look up at you and whisper something. You murmured some reply. “Okay,” she said to Meg aloud. Then she climbed out, with nothing to hide, knowing we were both watching her. She even said “Goodnight” to me as all of her was palely glowing in the open air above us.

It took far too short a time for her to get dressed. I did not dare get out as she was doing so, though more than anything I wanted to speak to Meg just one more time with no one else to hear, to tell her I loved her, or maybe that she loved me, but I was naked and I couldn’t approach her that way.

“Thank you for such an interesting evening,” Danielle said, in a mockery of manners.

“I wish – “ I began. But it was no use.

“Goodnight,” you said, and your voice gave no hint of frustration. How did you do that?

“Well, bye,” Danielle said, and Meg too said “Bye.”

“Bye, Meg,” I said, and I thought she looked me in the eye for a moment, but in the shadows I could not make out her expression.

“See you later,” she said, turning away. I knew already that when she did see me it would be with some careful display of indifference, that there would be a fence around her, that this would never have

happened after all. Because nice girls like Meg didn't do that kind of thing.

Of course really it was just a question of our age. Later on, when we were both out of college, and both visiting around the holidays, Meg and I got drunk one night and ended up in bed together. And then after that we both knew that if we were in town at the same time, we could have sex together, and we did, several different times, but we never fell back in love. If that was what it was.

That, however, is not the story I set out to tell. I did go on and on after all, the way we always do about that night. It's irresistible. But here's the rest of it, and this is what you don't know I know.

Allie never did tell our parents what she saw in the back yard. But I know she couldn't get it out of her mind, and after all, if you had been fourteen and seen us skinny-dipping out there, if you had looked out the window and seen us undress, as I suspect she did, would you ever forget it? No. And Allie didn't either. She was very quiet the day after. She looked like she had swallowed something big and was waiting to see how it would go down. And when you came over the next day, as of course you did, because we had to talk about what had happened, she looked like the sight of you scared her, but she couldn't look away. She was like something defenseless – a rabbit, say – frozen in the presence of a much bigger, fiercer animal, its last faint hope of protection not to move at all. You knew, after the night before, exactly what was going on with her.

You seemed to play with her after that – when you saw her, you'd ask her if she wanted to go for a swim, to see her turn red. You'd go in the pool and then come into the house and sit around in your bathing suit, or lie on the couch and take a nap in your bathing suit, which no one minded or even thought twice about, except Allie. I mean, you had been around our house practically my whole life. But you made sure she saw you. You eventually did go in the pool when she was there. So was I, but I left to go to the bathroom. The pool wasn't all that refreshing anyway. It was hot as hell, late August, and the water was far from cool. I went in the house without drying off, the way my mom always told me not to, left wet footprints on the floor all the way upstairs to the bathroom where I took a whiz and got dried off, then came back down to the kitchen, opened the fridge and felt the cold air pouring on me wastefully but deliciously, got a glass full of ice cubes and ran water in it. I drank half of it at a gulp. Then I looked out the kitchen window, at you and Allie in the pool.

I guess none of the neighbors were around; and my parents weren't home; and anyway our pool wasn't that visible from anyone

else's house; and you didn't care. You must have forgotten about me, too, or maybe you didn't. I can almost imagine the same thing happening if I had been there. Almost, but not quite. There were you and Allie, on different quadrants of the circular pool, and you were between her and the ladder. You said something; I couldn't hear it, of course. But Allie responded by turning her head as if she didn't want to admit she heard it, either. Then you did something under the water, and stood up again, and your hand came out and laid your swimming suit on the edge of the pool. You spoke to her again, and I knew it was, more or less, "Now it's your turn."

Poor Allie. I had an idea what her romantic dreams about you must have been, and this was probably not unlike one of them, but it was coming out all wrong, not in the safety of night but in the middle of the glaring afternoon when anyone might catch the two of you doing what wasn't allowed, and instead of romance it was a teasing dare.

I could have come out right then, the way she had, and said "What's going on out here?" But I didn't. I thought about how furious I had been at Allie when she came and broke the spell of our magical night, and how wrong it was for anyone to do that when it was nobody's business but our own, and how she had taken from me the one opportunity there would ever be for what had almost occurred but now never would, and how I had sworn to myself at the time that I would never do that to someone else. I told myself Allie could take care of herself, and if you teased her maybe she deserved it. I thought maybe, even, you really liked her but you were too embarrassed to say it any other way than this. And so I stayed inside, watching.

Allie didn't say anything; she just looked at you. You started to move slowly closer to her, and she turned and put her hands on the edge of the pool, lifted her small quick body up and onto it, and in the same motion she was over the edge and landing lightly on the grass, walking away dignified and hurt. As if she had never been the smaller animal frozen in place. No, it was you who looked frozen now. Whatever you wanted, you didn't get it, and it looked like you didn't even know what that had been. Paralyzed with humiliation. I wished I hadn't seen. Was that what we were, we boys, blunderers and fools who stupidly thought we were in charge?

I didn't want to know that.

Allie never wavered. For the couple of weeks that remained before I went to college, you were in and out of the house as always, but now you were the one trying to get her to notice you. She barely acknowledged your existence. The day before you left for school, just a couple of days before I did, my parents were saying goodbye to you and

my mom called upstairs to Allie and asked her if she didn't want to say goodbye too. Allie came to the top of the stairs with what I was sure were reluctant footsteps and looked down at you, and without saying a word she raised her hand up from the wrist and waved, back and forth, twice, and then lowered her hand again. So solemnly. And you tried to smile as if she had made a kind of joke. It didn't work, nobody was fooled. You waved back. Allie turned away and left the top of the stairs empty. There was a puzzled, awkward moment, and then the momentum of your departure covered it over.

Twenty years later, when you and Allie got together, I pretended to be surprised, but I wasn't really. To me it appeared that option had been open to her all along, and she finally decided to choose it. I suppose because she felt it was time for her to start a family. She's had the upper hand ever since that day in the back yard, and I know she still does, though we'll never talk about that. You need to get away for those days alone on the cove, more than I do.

So don't worry, I'm not going to tell her that you and Sharon had an affair. All I ask is that when we get together you talk to me the way we used to. That you stop acting so goddamn uncomfortable. We're a family, for God's sake, we have our summer places on the same cove, we get together on holidays, our children have grown up together, all that is never going to stop. All that is what matters. I don't even give a damn if you forgive yourself. I'm telling you this right now: you have to let me forgive you, whether you like it or not. Because once you thought you would always get what you wanted, and I was there and I thought you would, too, and no one can remember that now but you and me.