

**The Hidden Cove's
Beautiful Girl**

by

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On our summer vacations, built around lengthy car trips, my family rigorously observed a peculiar custom. My father, usually meticulous in his preparations, never, ever made motel reservations. Thus, every evening could, and sometimes did, become an adventure, with me learning that human beings have a wide latitude in fashioning what passes for overnight accommodations. This particular day, I had taken the lead and was reading through the AAA Tour Guide seeking potential places for tonight's stay. Wanting more than a bed and a shower, I sang out, "The Hidden Cove looks good," and then read its list of activities which included sailing, sunset cruises, tennis, and swimming. My mother, little impressed with my choice, directed me to resume my search for places employing descriptors such as, 'clean' and 'modern.'

As we approached Boothbay Harbor, Maine, my father stopped at three places along Route 1 and discovered, to nobody's surprise, that August was the height of the tourist season. Since we had made good time—it being no later than four in the afternoon—neither of my parents expressed any apprehension. However, my father, that master of travel improvisation, may have had an inkling of potential disaster. He asked me, "What was that motel you mentioned?"

The Hidden Cove consisted of a large Victorian-style house, three detached cabins, a barn, three bucolic acres, several hundred feet of rugged, plunging waterfront, and a dock. I immediately became the place's salesman. Since we had undoubtedly slept in far worse places in our travels, since we had already struck out three times that afternoon, my parents gave in to my pleading.

That evening, before dinner, my family went to the Hidden Cove's nightly cocktail party. Normally, being forced to stand around listening to and answering questions from adults had little appeal. But tonight the situation was different. The Hidden Cove had become *my* Hidden Cove, and I wanted to make sure nothing endangered my selection. Carefully listening, I overheard a young man say, "Marge sleeps in the nude."

Amazed that he would know of such personal, private information, my mind went to work. Soon thereafter, the appearance of the attractive, casually dressed, twenty-something Marge only heightened my curiosity. I watched her closely; wondering if she would publicly announce tonight's sleeping attire. If she was aware of my gawking stare, Marge did not let on. I never did learn what role she played in the Hidden Cove's operation.

The Hidden Cove's proprietor liked cocktail parties. Dressed in a pullover, he moved through the gathering, glad-handing all, forever encouraging everyone to, "have a drink." Such *bonhomie* might have made the Hidden Cove a fortune if the establishment had possessed a liquor license. It did not, so patrons were encouraged to 'feed the kitty,' a large glass jar. With the exception of my father and some of the other older men, the younger types would have ignored the kitty altogether if it had not been for Harold, who tended bar. Neatly dressed in Madras shorts, clean shaven, he

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directed the Hidden Cove's operation.

The only thing of note that I remember about the Hidden Cove's hard-used Victorian house was a well-polished Civil War-era saber hanging over the fireplace.

The second evening, the Hidden Cove suspended its cocktail party so all could attend an evening cruise followed by a cookout. Since my parents, in June of that summer, had enrolled me in a local yacht club's sailing program, all things nautical now had an attraction for me. Thus motivated, I went early to the Hidden Cove's dock to await the arrival of the boat that would take us on the evening's cruise. Subsequently, I assisted the boat's owner, and his nineteen-year-old mate dock their 35-foot powerboat.

Standing amidst the seats at the powerboat's stern, speaking with my parents, I did not see the Beautiful Girl until she, her family, and their friends had already stepped onto the Hidden Cove's dock. Standing slightly apart from the others in her party, she was—to use a nineteen fifties expression—a 'head turner.' With her yellow blonde hair done up in a ponytail that was just cute as cute could be, the Beautiful Girl's blue eyes danced about, projecting a cheerful innocence. The clearness of her modestly tan complexion, the absence of any blemishes, belied her age, which I guessed, was sixteen years. Although she still had the thinness of a young girl, there were hints of changes to come. Already her breasts were forcing her blue short-sleeve shirt away from her chest. Already the girlish skinniness was giving way to the broader hips and narrower waist of a beautiful woman. Already her legs, while still girlishly slender, were changing into what crude men of an earlier age would have characterized as a pair of 'gams.'

An exaggeration? Then don't rely on my reaction. I heard several women on that evening's cruise remark on the girl's beauty. Predictably, the younger men studied the Beautiful Girl; their expressions and behaviors leaving no doubt that they were scheming about how they might curry her favor. Undoubtedly knowledgeable as to the effect that her attractiveness had on the younger men, her family, and their friends carefully watched after the Beautiful Girl.

The Beautiful Girl seemed quite content to stay close to her family. She adopted a quiet air and made no attempt to flaunt or use her beauty, as attractive mature women sometimes do, to manipulate or dominate. Instead, the Beautiful Girl relied on her radiant smile and a shy demureness that unerringly charmed all. Occasionally, she would lock her hands behind her back, place her feet close together, and then sway her shoulders. Although I couldn't tell you why, I—and I believe others—found this swaying motion incredibly endearing.

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My reaction: The usual confusion. Assuming the Beautiful Girl had spoken to me, I knew from past experience that I wouldn't have been able to respond beyond some inanity. As she stepped on board, I consciously looked away, feigning a lack of interest. All this for fear that, if I did look at her, my eyes would likely never look away until rebuked for staring.

All around me, at school, on television, in magazines—but not in my home—people were encouraging twelve-year-old boys, like me, to have girlfriends. For what purpose, to satisfy what need—other than possession for possession's sake—I had absolutely no idea. That is not to imply I was unaware of girls. Indeed, they were forcing their way into my consciousness. I enjoyed looking at them, especially the pretty ones. Some of the more mature girls and youngish women I found clever and intriguing. At the time, I had a monster crush on Sophia Loren.

Conversely, younger girls, the ones my age, often came across to me as silly or flighty. Their unpredictable behaviors were, to me, disconcerting and made me feel awkward and uncomfortable. Thus intimidated, I found talking to girls more than difficult. For me, it was an impossibility.

Was there an underlying cause responsible for my communication difficulty?

An obvious candidate: My speech defect occasioned by my congenital cleft lip and cleft palate. Although I run the risk of being accused of 'being in denial,' I would say my extreme reticence was only marginally caused by my facial/speech problems. In a perverse example of mind over reality, except during my lengthy and largely ineffective speech therapy, I was unaware of my speech abnormality. When I spoke, to me, my voice sounded perfectly normal. Conversely, upon hearing a recording of my speech, I could hardly endure having to listen.

Although aware of my deficiencies, I can never remember my attributing any specific problem to my congenital defects. I never, ever said, felt, or thought, "If only I were normal, if only I didn't have this accursed defect, I'd be," whatever.

Which brings me back to: Why was I so reticent around girls?

Just shy of thirteen, I never had an answer. But this didn't unduly trouble me. Other aspects of my life were opening up. I was sailing; I would be playing ice hockey in high school; academics were becoming interesting; I believed a completely new world was awaiting me around the next corner. Girls, with all their apparent complications, were something I was wary of engaging and so they naturally moved to the back of my line.

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That evening, as we cruised amongst the numerous islands of Boothbay Harbor, I grew tired of the adult conversation. Excusing myself from the crowd at the stern, I went forward to where the boat's owner was steering the craft. Soon, the mate—I would guess he was nineteen—came forward with the Beautiful Girl in tow. After acknowledging his instructions, the nineteen-year-old took over the helm from the owner, who then left to attend to his guests at the stern. Now alone and unburdened by any adult's presence, the nineteen-year-old resumed his conversation with the Beautiful Girl.

Well aware of my awkwardness, I knew that I would do well to leave the nineteen-year-old and the Beautiful Girl alone. Best, I concluded, to continue watching the boat navigate its way through Boothbay Harbor's narrow channels. Soon the light of day was nearly gone; only the tops of the tallest trees still had any color, the oncoming night having already blackened the rest.

An accomplished 'smooth talker,' the nineteen-year-old was humoring the Beautiful Girl, who apparently much enjoyed the older boy's attention. Ahead, the channel veered to the left. The marker that alerted mariners to that fact, red colored and cone-topped, was barely visible in the darkness. Without raising my voice, without any alarm, using phraseology common to the sea, I said, "Nun to port."

Awakened to his duty, the nineteen-year-old spun the wheel. Responding to her rudder, the powerboat abruptly changed course, swung hard left, and headed back to the safety of the marked channel from which it had wandered.

The boat's owner soon came forward and asked, "What happened?"

The nineteen-year-old explained, "The current took me out of the channel."

The owner probably looked at the Beautiful Girl and figured out what had truly happened. Perhaps saving his disciplinary lecture for a more private occasion, perhaps a man of few words, the owner delivered his rebuke, "Pay attention," and then went aft, leaving the three of us.

The nineteen-year-old said, "Thanks," to me.

I had absolutely no idea how to respond. Tongue-tied, I could not utter a sound. The nineteen-year-old then began explaining how the water was deep right up to the shore of the islands that bordered the channel. He then informed me that he had been seeking a course with less current to fight. Again, completely at a loss as to what constituted an appropriate response to the nineteen-year-old's dissembling, I might have made a grunt, but I probably said nothing.

The Beautiful Girl watched all but did not speak.

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Next afternoon, with my parents miles away touring Boothbay Harbor, Donald, the Hidden Cove's twenty-something sailing master, let me skipper the Hidden Cove's thirty-foot sloop for much of the sail. Along with giving me a chance to practice my newly-learned sailing skills, my steering permitted Donald and his college friend, Carl, to spend the afternoon draining a fair percentage of the numerous cans of beer that they had stocked in the sloop's ice chest.

Donald told me, "I'll take her in."

I went forward and sat on the yacht's starboard side, my feet dangling over the coaming that protected the sloop from shipping spray into the cockpit. Inside the cockpit sat the Beautiful Girl surrounded by her family and their friends. In silence, I listened to a balding man in his fifties discuss terminal moraines and the glacial formation of Boothbay Harbor. I wanted to join the conversation—I had studied glaciers in my eighth-grade science class—but dared not, lest I say something incorrect and make obvious to the Beautiful Girl that I was an idiot.

Illuminated by a brilliant sun, above us, floated puffy cumulus clouds against a backdrop of deep blue sky. Below us, roiled by a building sea breeze, crowned with numerous whitecaps, dark blue-green waves rolled toward the sloop's stern.

Heading for the Hidden Cove's dock, the sloop was sailing dead before the wind on the port tack, her boom extended far out over the sloop's starboard side. Because the Hidden Cove's dock lay off the starboard bow, I knew Donald would eventually have to jibe, a maneuver, while not normally dangerous, could be, if not done properly.

Many experienced sailors would agree that the vang is essential to safe jibing in strong breezes. When rigged, the vang, a seemingly overly complex block and tackle arrangement, connects the bottom or foot of the mast to the boom. The vang's purpose: prevent the boom from rising as it moves across the boat during a jibe.

I looked astern. Carl was standing with his feet straddling the permanent backstay, a wire that ran from the stern to the top of the mast. With his left hand wrapped around the backstay and his right hand holding a can of beer, Carl was happily jesting with Donald.

Donald matter-of-factly announced, "We have to jibe." I called out, "Do you want me to rig the vang?"

"No, it's not necessary," replied Donald.

I knew this to be a bad decision; one that would likely—because we were sailing in a fifteen-knot breeze—cause the mainsail to foul and might even result in the uncontrolled boom striking

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and severing the permanent backstay. Without a backstay, the strong breeze would instantly carry away the unsupported mast.

However, I, a twelve-year-old, knew I didn't have the status to question an adult's decision.

As I slid into the cockpit, I did, however, warn all, "Keep your heads down."

Donald began his turn to starboard and, almost immediately, we were 'sailing by the lee.' Instead of the boom swinging across the boat, the wind lifted it up and up until the boom was nearly parallel to the mast. This threw much slack into the mainsail and, for a moment, we were a picture of how not to jibe. Eventually, the wind got behind the sail and, lucky for the mast, the boom passed forward of the permanent backstay as it slammed across the boat.

Our clumsy jibe completed, I looked up at the mast. What I had feared might happen, had indeed happened. I called out, "Goosewing jibe."

Carl immediately recognized our predicament. He thought that the mainsail's wrapping itself around the uppermost starboard spreader to be a most hilarious event. Hanging off the stern of the boat, he began heckling Donald.

Brought out of his alcohol-induced complacency by the poorly executed jibe, Donald reacted slowly. Either Carl or I or maybe the both of us suggested the need to tack the boat and, thus, free the mainsail, currently entangled on the mast's spreader, before the sail tore itself to shreds.

Regaining his composure, Donald said, "We'll have to tack."

Knowing this was the correct way to free the ensnared mainsail, which might soon rip, I, unbidden, managed the jib sail. We headed up; made our tack, which released the mainsail—apparently undamaged—from the spreader; and then headed off. This successful maneuver put us back on port tack, exactly where we had been prior to the goosewing jibe.

This time, without asking permission, I rigged the vang and told the Beautiful Girl, her family, and their friends, "Keep your heads down; you don't want to get hit by the boom when it swings across." Now prepared, I called out, "Ready to jibe."

As Donald began his turn to starboard, I, large and strong for my age, pulled hard on the vang. As soon as the sloop was sailing by the lee, the boom yielded and swung across the cockpit with a quick, violent motion followed by a loud clap.

After the properly executed and successful jibe, for the remainder of the sail, I cannot remember anyone speaking. Maybe I've forgotten their words or maybe I didn't hear what they said, but I do believe all the adults and the Beautiful Girl were quiet.

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After the sail, I folded the mainsail. This gave me a chance to inspect for damage.

Fortuitously, there was none.

Donald thanked me for my assistance.

Next day, while my mother spent the day at the Hidden Cove's pool reading and conversing with the other guests, my father and I went fishing on an open party boat. Catching only sand sharks, pejoratively known as 'dogfish,' we got skunked, which was rare for my father, who was an avid and usually successful saltwater fisherman.

That evening my mother and I were talking about nothing in particular when she told me, "The mother of the pretty, blonde girl spoke to me while you were out fishing."

Curious about the Beautiful Girl, curious about what someone who knew her might say, not wishing to admit my abundant curiosity, feigning no interest, I looked up from what I was doing.

Matching my nonchalance, my mother explained, "The girl, it seems, has asked her mother to inquire of me if you would like to go out on a date," and then paused.

Caught completely by surprise, rendered speechless, I tried to fathom what to me was unfathomable. What would possess the Beautiful Girl to make such an obviously ridiculous request? Clearly, she could instantly avail herself of any number of 'cool' guys and their attentions.

Finally, I asked, "What did you tell the woman, Mother?" "I said you weren't interested in girls."

Stunned, I nodded; retreating behind what I hoped was a noncommittal stare.

The day after my mother had told me of her conversation with the Beautiful Girl's mother, my parents and I toured Boothbay Harbor. As we explored, I thought hard about what the Beautiful Girl and I might have done, if we actually had had a date. Not knowing anything about Boothbay Harbor was a significant impediment. In our travels, I didn't see any movie theaters or bowling alleys. The things that interested my parents, the shops and the eating establishments, to my way of thinking, wouldn't have appealed to the Beautiful Girl.

Then there was me. With any girl, let alone the Beautiful Girl, I was the antithesis of the proverbial 'smooth talker.' In fact, I was the ultimate non-talker. Why? Because anything I said to a girl always sounded so terribly dumb to my ears. So what kind of date would I have had with the

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Beautiful Girl? Without a miracle, I concluded, an unmitigated disaster. Within an hour, if not sooner, the Beautiful Girl, if she possessed any merciful tendencies, would terminate our date, thus saving me from further self-humiliation.

Regrettably, I came to the conclusion that my mother's reply had saved hopeless me from disaster.

That evening, after dinner, my father and I went to the Hidden Cove's barn, which had a table tennis setup. Neither of us knew how to play, so, rather than compete, we tried to keep the ball in play.

About the time we were becoming somewhat proficient at keeping the ball bouncing between us, a sudden outburst caused both my father and me to stop and listen. Nearby, someone had shouted, "Stop, come back."

Two figures ran between the barn and the Hidden Cove's Victorian house headed for the parking area. A third figure, pursuing the first two, was yelling out, "Stop, stop."

Illuminated by a flood light mounted on the eaves of the Victorian House, a fourth figure emerged in front of the two who were running from the third. Cutting off their escape path, the fourth figure pointed at the first two in an odd way. Not with his right arm, but with something that extended from his right hand. That object, which reflected the rays emanating from the Hidden Cove's flood light, shone brightly. It was the shiny, menacing blade of the Civil War saber. Taken from its place of honor on the living room wall of the Hidden Cove's Victorian House, the saber once again was finding purpose as an intimidating, threatening deadly weapon.

Waving the saber, the fourth figure yelled, "Back to the Hidden Cove," Instantly, I knew it was the proprietor's voice.

The four stood in a knot of two versus two and confronted one another. Voices raised, they pleaded their cases. Not fully hearing, definitely not fathoming the logic of their arguments, I only grasped the vehemence of the emotions expressed. This, from my own confrontations with my peers, I plainly comprehended: A wrong committed must be recognized and then corrected. Like my schoolyard altercations, whom the parties in dispute were appealing to, who would do the recognizing and the correcting, was ethereal, at least initially.

Amazed by these proceedings, my father and I watched from the doorway of the Hidden Cove's barn. He explained, "Two of the guests were attempting to leave without paying."

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Maybe for ten minutes, the heated verbal arguing continued unabated, punctuated by real and threatening saber rattling by the Hidden Cove's proprietor. Then a jeep arrived, and a man got out of the vehicle. After some more conversation, in which somebody loudly used the word 'sheriff' in reference to the newcomer, my father said we should go to our cabin. There, we told my mother what we had witnessed. Eventually, all the participants left. We never did learn more details about or the outcome of the incident.

Next morning, my mother told me we were leaving for our home in Connecticut. She didn't give an explicit reason, but it did not take much to figure out that the previous evening's incident had convinced my parents that we should go.

Over the years, my view of my mother's response to the Beautiful Girl's mother has evolved. Initially, I quite predictably thought that my mother's lack of understanding of her son had cost me a great opportunity. But when I thought about that assessment, in fairly short order, I rejected that view. I realized I lacked the necessary self-confidence and social skills needed to date a girl three years my senior.

For years, the Beautiful Girl and the potential date entered into my lexicon of self-deprecatory tales. Whenever I recounted my story, my underlying message was; I was young and inept then. Now, however, I'm mature and self-confident; self-confident enough to poke fun at myself; self-confident enough to handle myself around any and all beautiful women.

Lately, I have come to think of my brief stay at the Hidden Cove as both a learning and a confirming experience. On the drive from Maine back to Connecticut, I sat in the front seat *sans* a seat belt. I will always remember with great fondness my front-seat, father-son conversations in which he aided me to grasp the ways of the world. Now, I appreciate my good fortune at not being marooned in the barrenness of a television-enabled backseat.

That pre-Interstate day, during what was then and, even today, is still a long haul, my father and I discussed the Hidden Cove and the saber rattling incident. At one point, my father answered one of my queries with, "The owner drinks too much, and that will be the end of his good fortune." Later, when I asked about the 'kitty,' my father expressed his annoyance with men who took advantage. This was standard stuff from that most responsible of adults and would cause me, as I matured, to adopt a dim view of 'cool' guys and their cleverness.

My parents, primarily by example, but also through some blunt counseling, had given me a good understanding of what constituted appropriate behavior. At the Hidden Cove, beyond the range of parental supervision, I had a chance to put that understanding to the test. On the powerboat, on the Hidden Cove's sloop, I had managed to do the right thing in spite of the overwhelming distraction of the Beautiful Girl.

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The Beautiful Girl?

She has disappeared into the mists of my memories. Did she become a motherly figure with four grandchildren? Did she become a feminist writer of note? Did she OD on hard drugs in the sixties?

Did she, does she, ever think back to the Hidden Cove and wonder about an awkward boy who wasn't ready in so many ways to date a Beautiful Girl?

Sometimes I wonder.