

Shading a Line Gone Wrong

Julie Wakeman-Linn

Will edged toward the Airstream's doorway but his mother blocked his escape route. She filled the door, arguing with the trailer park owner. "We're temporary residents. We don't need hurricane cables."

"Your boy could install them for you," The trailer park owner winked at Will.

"This one can't this week. Sunburn." She spat out the word. Worse yet—this one—her hint to Will, reminding him what his absent brother Freddie would have been able to.

Will slunk away from the door. Last night, blisters rose on his shoulders, two inches high. His mother had flipped out at the raw pinkish skin and dragged him to a clinic. His father had mocked him, telling Freddie on the phone, about "second degree burns from sunshine."

His sister Karen snickered behind her Nancy Drew book, with a nasty half laugh like her mother's, sounding a lot older than her eight years. "My brother Freddie could it do, lickety-split. Mister. He's selling Fuller Brushmen in Kansas this summer and he's going bring me presents."

Will didn't know who he liked least in his family, his pushy big brother, his whiny brat sister, or his parents.

"Check your weather forecast, for pete's sake." His mother jabbed a finger at the cloudless sky.

Will leaned against the toilet-shower cubicle door. He had to get out of the one room trailer, chock-block full of fold-down, fold-out everything—table, benches, sofa-bed. Baskets for Karen's Barbie dolls, his mother's books, his father's ties shoved under the sofa.

"We can't exactly depend on the accuracy of the fo-casters." The owner ran his hand down the back of his head, like he was checking for a cowlick. The odor of Aqua Velva polluted the air. "Now, Ma'am. Rules are rules and this is our county rule. You're required to be either bolted to a concrete slab or you have to install the cables. I'll do it for you for \$25."

"We have car insurance to cover this." His mother never backed down about money. They didn't have

enough—ever. Her hands clenched into fists, the way they did when she was about to blow up at somebody.

His sister Karen slammed her Nancy Drew mystery shut, trying to get their mother's attention. She'd met the kids two mobile homes in the main park and wanted to be released to go play.

"I don't believe auto insurance covers hurricanes. I have the materials, the concrete, the buckets, the cables. Your husband's not around much, is he?"

"My husband's a guest lecturer at the University." She spoke slowly to stress the significance. Will wanted to laugh—his father's job was a stop-gap summer appointment, trying to be hired for full time at the bigger college for the fall. His parents rented out their home to summer school grad students and packed up the ridiculous eighteen-foot Airstream to haul to Florida. His father stranded them daily, taking the station wagon, to teach Brit Lit at the college.

"Next week is the latest you can wait, Ma'am. By then your boy can do it. You all have a good day." The owner had already turned away.

His mother slammed the inner metal door. "Southern charm. I don't want to talk to these people."

"Ma—" Will stopped. Even after only three days, he knew she was never going to fit in if his father got the job. The first day, two ladies appeared with a jug of iced tea to welcome them. His mother declared it undrinkable, loaded with sugar. When she'd carped they were half dressed in pedal pusher shorts, Will suspected his mother missed her friends, her sisters, and her mother back in South Dakota. His mother wore her plain colored dresses, always buttoned up, pressed and cinched in at the waist with a matching belt. Except her dresses wrinkled in the heat. "I'm going to—"

"No more hitchhiking to the beach! Promise." She dabbed her forehead with a tissue.

"I'll sit by the pool. I gotta get out of this tin can." Will opened the inner door. A slight breeze carried heavy air through the screen door.

Karen slipped off the sofa, ready to follow.

"I'm not taking her either," he shouted. His mother's mouth bent into a crooked grimace. He ducked his chin to his chest. Yelling never solved anything. "Sorry. I'll take Karen another time, 'kay?"

"I hate you." Karen kicked the fold out table, shaking its legs. "I'll play with my new friends." She tore around him, banging against her mother and out

the door.

His mother squinted, her eyes nearly disappearing. "You. My oldest has fled. My little one has abandoned me. You go, too."

Will stood perfectly still, willing the moment to pass. He didn't know what to say to soothe his mother. The line of connection between them had failed since his voice dropped.

When he was younger, he'd hug her and his chubby arms squeezed her anger away. These past couple of years, he, the cursed middle child, refused to compete with Freddie for grades, in sports, and he'd forgotten how to coax a laugh out of her. But he was nearly seventeen and touching anybody was dangerous territory.

"Dad's gotta be back soon."

"Go find those floozies. Leave me alone with the Israelis and the Arabs." She turned on the portable TV and fiddled with the rabbit ear antennas. Watching the news about another war wouldn't help her mood. Her loneliness sickened him, but his impulse to escape meant he couldn't help her.

Grabbing his sketchbook and pen, he latched the outer screen door quietly as he could. The trailer's metal shell echoed any sharp closing. He crunched across the gravel of the empty travel trailers lots, unused in the heat of summer. Mobile homes, huge compared to the Airstream, with lawns and flower gardens, filled the rest of the trailer park.

On the empty pool deck, Will stretched out on the chaise lounge under the palm tree with the biggest canopy. The raw skin on his shoulders stung when the sunlight or his t-shirt touched it. He stripped off his t-shirt and draped it over the back of the chaise. The humid air had made his sketchbook pages spongy. The small pool with its mosaic colored tiles was for horsing around, not lap swimming. The sun beat down, no shade on the shimmering water.

The pool deck provided nothing good to sketch until the club house door swung open and six girls, blondes or bleached blondes, all of them in wild two-piece swimsuits, peeled out. Polka-dots, stark white, lacy baby blue, but so much girl skin. He half closed his eyes to keep from staring like an idiot.

A transistor radio blared, "Last Train to Clarksville," and the girls started dancing around, little half steps, twisting to show off their legs. They pretended to ignore him but they kept glancing his way. He focused on a red spiky flower next to his chaise.

"Why are you wearing jeans?" A girl in the stark

white bikini, arms akimbo, stood at the end of his chaise. She was the only non-blonde.

He shrugged. "Why not?"

"It's hot and how you gonna swim in jeans?" Her brown hair fell around her face, her lips thin but pink, her breasts doing that perfect mounding out of her bikini top. Nobody in South Dakota wore bikinis like hers.

"I don't swim."

"Do you dance?" she asked.

In her heart shaped face, her green eyes were popped. Not bug-eyed but big wide eyes, the shade of emerald-green he liked.

"Not to that crap." Will sat motionless against the chaise, playing cool, playing smart.

Her hips swayed with the "oh no, no, no" chorus. "Who do you like?"

A trick question—he hardly knew music, but the Monkees were a fake made up band of actors. What to answer? "Miles Davis." He'd read about jazz in a magazine in the public library, but that never heard it.

"Can't dance to jazz." She spun away. Her girlfriends circled around her, like blonde she-wolves after the alpha had returned, smelling of a kill. So many of them, the odds should have been in his favor but they closed him off. If he was here, Freddie would be dancing with them.

He twirled the red flower and laid it on his thigh. Short strokes created the shape of outer pedals. It was only a matter of time until their boyfriends showed up.

Their laughter became louder and closer, combined with the clanging of the metal against concrete as the girls dragged their chaises into a circle around him.

"What are you doing?" the polka dot girl said.

"Sketching." Will glided his pen, layering strokes to form the shading of the inner pedals.

"You must be drawing us. Stop it." A bleached blonde in the blue bikini taunted. "Let's show him."

The girls posed in their variations of Twiggy or Cher or some famous female, hips thrust to one side, much flipping of hair, pouting mouths.

"I don't sketch figures." He added a stem to his flower sketch, using a light rhythm of curling lines. He lied—his hippie art teacher praised his figure drawings. The motion of his hand over the page felt good and let him fake confidence.

The green-eyed girl in her white bikini picked up his blossom and tapped his knee with it. She wore

silver rings on all her fingers of her left hand, each one different with swirls, engraving, smooth and one with a tiny blue stone. "When did you move here?"

"Three days ago." He liked looking at all of them, their legs, their breasts, their flashing smiles, but he was glad when they started to lather sunscreen on each other, ignoring him again, so he could talk to her alone.

"That explains your sunburn, doesn't it?" She pushed his feet over and sat next to his sandals.

Last night, when the blisters popped, his mother lathered him with Lidocaine and gently trimmed the dead skin. Evenings when the Airstream cooled down were easier for her.

"You're in the travel trailer, aren't you?" The blue bikini girl, standing taller than the others, hit his sore spot.

Around the corner, in the Airstream, his mom, holed up with a dinky table fan, watched the Israeli army fight everybody on the Golan Heights. These girls' homes all had separate bedrooms and kitchens and probably multiple bathrooms, while in the Airstream, he slept on the pull-out sofa and Karen slept on an air mattress squeezed on the floor in between the stove and the refrigerator. Nobody could get to the toilet door. Freddie had lined up his job in Kansas to avoid this trip to avoid sharing the sofa bed. After the second night, Will gave up the sofa to Karen and slept in the station wagon.

He sucked in a slow breath and said, "For a 'lil while. It's right cozy." His mocking the 'bless your heart' crap he'd heard all the way across the South shut down the blue bikini's sass. He'd hitch-hike out of this joint every day once the sunburn healed.

The blue bikini turned her back on him and said to the girls, "I'm hot." Their pack mentality taking over again, the girls turned away, and dove or slipped or jumped into the pool, except the green-eyed girl.

"Do you need someone to rub your shoulders with sunscreen?"

"Sure, but I don't have any." He wished he could conjure up a tube so she'd touch him. "I got burned yesterday when I hitch-hiked to Boca Raton Beach. You ever been?" He'd sketched how the surf crashed against Boca Raton rock formations. He'd thought the ocean spray kept him cool enough. It hadn't.

"Boca—lots of times. I like to go when it rains. I've got some cream." She pivoted on her round bottom and unzipped the pink bag and dug out her Coppertone. She squeezed out a palm-full. "Move up."

What a gas—she went to the closest beach in bad weather. He put his feet on the pool deck. She pushed him further forward and tucked in behind him, her knees brushing against his back. In her fingertips on his skin, the coconut scented cream felt hot and sticky.

"What's your sport with all these shoulder muscles? Did you letter in tennis? Don't say football—I hate it."

"Sure, tennis." He certainly wasn't going to tell her the truth—shoveling manure for his uncle and snow for his grandma, trying to earn enough for a car. If only he had the Chevy now, his independence, he'd drive them to Boca. Her mistake was almost groovy, thinking he was a varsity athlete, except he hated those jocks, all of them cocky like Freddie. "What's your name?"

"You should guess it." Her breath on his burned shoulders, her voice was like a secret.

"Adriana-celestina-justina-avemaria." He'd play her games.

"Nice try, wise guy. I'm Janice. I graduated from hell hole high school last month. What's your name?" She slid from behind him and stuck out her hand in a fakey grownup handshake.

"I'm Will." He grabbed her hand and mock-kissed one of her rings. He jumped up and aligned another chaise next to his—his crotch might explode, if she stayed on his chaise.

She was the same age as his brother Freddie, named for the favored maternal grandfather. He was named for his father's father, the alcoholic dead these five years. He imagined his mother expected her sons' fates to play out in their names. Freddie a winner; him a loser.

"This is my summer of discontent, made glorious by the sun of Florida," Janice said. "I either get a job by fall or get shipped off to college. Not high on my to-do list."

He worried he'd sound stupid if he asked which she'd read—Steinbeck or Shakespeare. Freddie had a faculty brat scholarship for the fall lined up, but Will didn't want to be trapped in more classrooms after senior year, except to avoid the whole ratshit draft. "What do you want to do?"

"Chill out by this pool every single day." She settled on the pulled-up chaise, pointed her toes, painted pink to match her lips. "Hand me my beach bag, please."

"That'd be cool." He offered the bag with both hands. She dug out her sunglasses and her paperback,

Cannery Row. He picked up his pen and began to sketch her hand holding the book. A line went wrong and he tore out the page, ready to shred it.

"Let me see." She tugged the page away from him.

Will went cold, even in the heat. So what if his hippie teacher liked his work? His father thought his art was a total waste of time.

Janice studied it, tracing the lines. "Nice. I like how you included my rings."

"Why do you wear so many?"

"I'm unclaimed. I claim myself. Can I have the sketch you're finished?" She handed it back.

"Cool." He could fix it if he added her wrist. He shaded the line gone wrong and began again.

Karen raced through the pool gates and shouted, "Willie, it's dinner time. Who are you?" She bleated at Janice.

"Hello, I'm your brother's friend. How old are you? My little brother is ten." Janice tucked a finger in her book to mark her place.

"Eight and I don't like boys. Do you?" Karen smelled like little kid sweat, her hairline damp, her t-shirt stained with red Kool-Aid, her hands swinging. "You gotta come. Dad's home, dinner's ready."

"Karen, Jesus, say hello to my friend Janice." Karen's brat behavior irritated him. Will tried again, "She's a reader like you."

"kay, nice to meet you. Come on, Will, I'm hungry. Mom won't feed me 'til she feeds you." Karen rolled out her lower lip and her eyeballs, trying to act teenaged.

"My mother is all about her sons." Will closed his sketchbook and carefully brushed his fingers over Janice's thigh. "Next I'm gonna sketch your profile, -kay?"

"Mothers' expectations, I understand that trap. See you tomorrow for my profile. So nice to meet you, little sister." Janice was already back into her book.

For a week of perfect days, they'd lain by the pool, him sketching her, her reading cheap paperback editions of Steinbeck. His sunburn faded away but his shoulders remained untanned under the big tree. No nagging from his father, no whining from his sister. His mother stayed glued to the blurry portable TV, watching the news from Golan Heights analyzing the six-day war, ignoring everything else. Perfect alone together – the other girls gave up trying to get him to swim or her to dance with them.

In the pool, the others had lots of camel fights,

girls on girls' shoulders, splashing, dunking, and half-heartedly trying to unseat each other. They shrieked with giggles if somebody got ahold of somebody else's bikini top. Boys drifted in, leaping to swipe the top of the pool house's door frame and dangling from the diving board, cannonballing to splash as many girls as possible.

Janice explained, "They're the 'little boys, eighth graders and freshmen. All the boys our age had summer jobs at golf courses or the beach."

After a triple-boy cannonball wave hit them, he hopped up and wiped off her legs with a beach towel. When he sat, she held his hand, her soft fingers wrapped around his. No interfering girls, no angry mother, no future either – only this moment.

Late one afternoon, with the sun slanting through the western palm trees, a familiar and unwelcome figure appeared. His brother Freddie – his Boy Scout backpack hanging by one shoulder strap came through the pool's gate.

"Thank god I found you first." Freddie dropped the backpack, now scuffed and torn, from his shoulder. His brother looked shorter, his head hanging low over his chest. "Mom's gonna be so mad."

"What in hell?" Will asked. His brother, yes, but stooped, sweaty, and out of breath was not his usual brother.

"Welcome to Fort Lauderdale, you must be Will's brother." Janice seemed to be withholding judgement, pending more information. She'd launched opinions on her books, the music on the radio, the temperature of the air and water all the time, but never about people – not the younger boys, not the other girls, not his mother or sister.

Will closed his sketchpad, praying she wouldn't ditch him for Freddie. The girls at home always did.

Freddie straightened as he confronted the situation of his little brother with a sexy girl. He gazed from her breasts up to her face and down her body to her painted toenails. "Thanks, I just got here. Obviously."

"Knock it off. Tell me what's going on." Will interrupted to stop his brother's ogling, embarrassed at the raw male vibes coming off Freddie. Janice stared at Freddie, a smirk flirting with her mouth.

Freddie flinched and he hoisted his backpack to another chaise.

"Are you all right?" Will asked. Something was wrong with Freddie, always fast with the comeback jab.

Freddie snapped his fingers. “Nope, completely out of it. I got totally screwed. More later for you, little brother.” He stood at the end of Janice’s chaise. “What’s your name?”

Will’s concern about Freddie’s status was wrong; his usual asshole-self returned, as he mounted another attempt at Janice’s attention.

“Fred, why don’t you just dry up and blow away?” This time – Will wouldn’t let Freddie cut him off with a girl, especially not this girl.

“Introduce us properly.” Janice laid her hand on Will’s thigh, suggesting more action than had happened between them, channeling a lie to Freddie. Inside his jeans, under her hand, his skin sizzled.

Will watched for his brother’s reaction to her. “Meet my brother Frederick Colin Byrd. Lately of Kansas City where he pursues his fame and fortune.”

“Call me Freddie.” He pulled up a chair next to Janice. Freddie seemed to ignore her gesture or more likely he didn’t believe what she was suggesting. “You’re pretty lovely to hang out with my baby brother.”

Janice didn’t move her hand from his thigh, choosing him over Freddie.

“Shut up.” Will got up to hide his hard-on from Janice and to keep from bashing Freddie’s smug face.

“So – what happened in Kansas?” Janice asked.

Will loved her so much in her comeback – his bullshit crap didn’t deter her. “Yeah, how’d you screw up?” He resisted adding “you blowhard fake.”

“Will, later, huh.” Freddie glanced over his shoulder toward the gate, almost like he was afraid their parents would come marching in. “You’ll help me keep this from the folks.”

“Okay boys, I get it. You have manly stuff to talk about. I’ll see you later,” she half-whispered, her voice low and sexier than ever.

“Usual place?” Will would play along. Who knew? She might venture out to the station wagon and find him at midnight.

She picked up her bag, stood over him, those beautiful breasts so close. She leaned over to kiss him. “Usual place.”

Will kissed her back, ignoring Freddie, coughing to object. A flicker of her tongue against his teeth. Every muscle felt alive, Will watched as she walked away. Perfection had claimed him in front of

Freddie.

“You’ve been busy. Lucky little shit.” Freddie had dropped his head into his hands.

“What the hell happened to you?” Will wanted to savor the heat of her mouth on his, but his brother sat in front of him, totally messed up. “Sell Kansas dry?”

“I blew it. I couldn’t make quota. I got drunk one night and pissed in the sample case. I tried cleaning it up but they docked me for damage. I lost my stake hold. Hell, I owe them over \$200 dollars.” Freddie’s rush petered out. “The folks are gonna kill me.”

“The prodigal son – you never thought you’d be him.” Will had always dreamed he’d crow over Freddie’s first huge failure but he didn’t. His mother’s face swam up in his brain. Their mother wouldn’t be mad but hopelessly disappointed.

“I’m going to enlist. I think I get a bonus from the Army.” His words fell out flat in humid air.

Will hated his brother’s cocky tone, but he wished it would shoot out of his mouth again. “That’s stupid. You’ll –” He couldn’t say it. Already a dozen boys from their hometown had come back from Vietnam in coffins. “Let me think.”

“You – the dreamy artsy screw-up – you’re gonna think.” Freddie’s voice cracked. “I got nothing.”

“We’ll hitchhike home and draw out my money. You can’t go to ‘Nam over a stupid bonehead mistake.”

“You’d do that – give up your car money? Why?” Freddie asked.

“Money? Who cares?” Will wished Janice was here to hear him. He’d worked so hard for the green 1955 Chevy Belair which wasn’t going to be his after all. “We gotta protect Ma.”

“I know how to spin this. I’ll tell them business is so good, I’m taking you with me to Kansas City. Dad will never need to know. We’ll be home with good luck by Friday.” Freddie’s spunk came roaring back. He ranged around the pool, spouting all kinds of nutso ideas, about bunking at his girlfriend’s house, drinking with his buddies.

The sun nearly set, the tree frogs began their chirrupy chorus, and the mosquito buzzing arose from the red spike flowers.

“Shut up, will’ya.” At least, he’d get out of the tin can if he took the fall for Freddie. His summer of perfection and all he had was some sketches of a beautiful hand and one decent profile.

"Oh, hell, get ready." Freddie said, pointing ahead.

Janice led their mother toward the pool, rounding the corner from the travel trailer's lot. Janice's white bikini glowed in the twilight. His mother grumbled. Will couldn't hear her, but he could tell by her fists swinging with each step.

"Mom," Freddie called out.

His mother ran the last steps. "Why are you here? I thought this girl was, ly —, um, mistaken."

Freddie wrapped an arm around his mother's waist and pecked her cheek. "Will and I have huge plans."

His mother stepped away, almost shaking Freddie off. "Pray tell."

"How are you doing? Loving the Florida sunshine? You look tanned, Mom. I'll bet Karen's loving the sunshine, too." Freddie talked faster when he started to con somebody.

Janice circled to Will and slid her hand down his arm to interlock their fingers. Will felt their breath, in and out, fall in sync. His mother glared at him, her eyes narrowed and fierce. He could only guess at what she'd said to Janice. He knew she disapproved of the size of Janice's bikini.

Freddie launched his Kansas City fabrication of extraordinary sales, throwing around numbers and names. "You wouldn't believe it, Mom."

"Yeah, so I'll go with him to KC." Will replied at Freddie's cue.

Janice squeezed his fingers hard. "An adventure then."

Will could tell Janice didn't believe any of it, Freddie's exaggerations or his compliance.

"Why did you come here, if sales were so great?" His mother punctured his story with one swoop of adult logic.

Freddie opened his mouth wide and laughed, loud and overly long. "I need Willie-boy's help to open another territory."

Will struggled to keep from sliding into sarcasm. "You know — money for college for me, too."

"What in the name of all that is holy is really going on with you two!" His mother's words roared over the empty road.

Janice slid a half step, so her hip touched his, as if asking for honesty.

Will stared at Freddie, pleading for him to tell the truth, but he knew he wouldn't. "No, Ma, it's —"

Janice squeezed his hand again. His truth-telling

perfect girl. His mother's face reddening. Both women knew he and Freddie were lying but Janice wouldn't accept it and his mother couldn't.

"Why is your backpack ripped up?" His mother grabbed and unzipped it. Brushes tumbled out, falling to the asphalt.

Will caught of whiff of urine but it was probably his imagination. "Actually, Ma, we gotta go home and raise some cash."

Freddie's head hung so low, Will thought it might snap off his neck. His cocky voice now a whisper, he told the truth.

His mother was shaking. "You'll need money, damn Greyhound bus money, won't you?"

"I wish I could come with you," Janice said.

"You see," his mother spoke directly to Janice, "they always let you down."

"No, Ma, not true." Will rubbed Janice's blue stone ring and released her hand. He stepped between his mother and Freddie. "We'll fix this, Freddie and I. No money needed. Just make us some sandwiches."

He found the courage to draw his mother to his chest, arms around her shoulders, trying to remind her of his younger self when he could soothe her.