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The Whittaker Way

by Scott Woods

I was only twelve and still just a girl. I crouched in the shadows behind the second-floor banister and held my breath. There had to be some way to understand this that didn't ruin everything.

There was that man again, the one with the steel-gray eyes. The one who only visited late at night when Father was away and who stayed over in my parents' bedroom instead of the guest room and left before I was supposed to be awake. Mother was standing in the foyer with him, still in her dressing gown.

This morning the man kissed Mother. It wasn't a peck on the cheek, either. He kissed her the way my best friend Katie showed me, where you put your tongue in the other person's mouth even though it was gross. The kind of kiss Katie said you only did when you were in love.

I shrank away from the railing, a thumping in my chest like the rabbit's heart in my third-grade classroom when someone picked her up. Maybe Mother would divorce Father.

My second-best friend Louisa's parents were divorced, and they didn't live together anymore. For a while, she lived with her mother, and for a while, she lived with her father. Her parents had a big fight in court in front of a judge, and her father moved to California. Louisa didn't get to see him very often. Just one weekend a month and two weeks in the summer.

I tiptoed back to my bedroom and slipped into bed. In the dark, you couldn't tell the canopy was even pink. That's when I realized that sometimes the true reality of things could hide from you, and that divorce wasn't the worst part of this. Then it was like riding on a carousel that had sped up out of control with the horses coming alive and threatening to buck you off any second.

Katie's older sister said when a man and woman loved each other the man's seed could turn the woman's egg into a baby, which was why a child was partly like each of her parents.

People always said I was the spitting image of Mother. Except for my eyes—Mother's were brown. I don't have Father's eyes either; his were brown too.

Mother was Martha Cabot Whittaker, Father was Spaulding Holdfast Whittaker, and I was their only child, Roxanne Cabot Whittaker. It had always been that way for as long as I could remember. The worst part about this visit was that Mother might have been in love with this man for a long time, and maybe that explained why I didn't look like Father—maybe I wasn't related to Father by blood at all.

What would I even call him...Spaulding? And my last name...might not really be Whittaker. It was all too important, altogether too many things I didn't know.

My window curtain progressed from hiding in the night to bubblegum pink and then to saffron yellow. It wouldn't be long before I should pretend to be asleep so Mother could wake me to get ready for school, but I wasn't going to pretend. I had to find out if Mother really loved this man and if she had loved him even before I was born.

But, I'd have to come up with some other way than asking her straight out if this man was my real father. I was allowed to ask direct questions, but the topic must never be exactly what I wanted to know. If I did that, she would stiffen and clam up. It wasn't the Whittaker way.

I sat up in bed when Mother came in. Everyone always said she was very pretty, with her lustrous black hair and trim figure. They also said I would be pretty, too, when I grew up. Mother saw I was awake, asked me to get dressed and come down to breakfast, and turned to go back downstairs. It had to be now.

"Who was that man you were saying good-bye to this morning?"

She froze in the doorway, then turned slowly around. Her eyes were narrowed, and they stared at me as if trying to read my mind. It seemed like she wasn't breathing. Then she broke it off, maybe when she could tell I was noticing, and lowered her eyes. "A friend of your father's and mine. I thought you were asleep."

She turned to go again, but I needed to know.

"He only comes here when Father's on a trip."

Mother sighed, came back into the room, and sat on my bed near my feet. She laid her hand on my knee through the covers, and it was a long time before she spoke. A sad smile fixed on her face. "What did you see, Dear?"

"I saw how you kissed him."

She sighed again, and her shoulders slumped a little, the first and only time that ever happened. "I've known Jerry Aberdeen for a long time, since before your father and I were married, so he's probably a better friend of mine than he is of your father's."

She'd known him before I was born, so he could be my real father. The carousel started up again, spinning even faster. But I had to be sure.

"I've never seen you kiss Father like that. Do you let this Jerry Aberdeen put his...thing...in your...you-know?"

"How did you learn about that?"

"From Katie's big sister. So, do you?"

"Yes, Dear."

The earthquake shock wave sent the carousel tumbling, until Mother added, with a great gentleness I would come to recognize only much later, "A woman can't help feeling what she feels."

Even then I understood she was speaking about me as well as about herself, and it soothed me somehow so I could risk another question. “Why didn’t you marry him instead of Father?”

Mother drew herself up and seemed to choose her words carefully. “His appeal lies in a certain volatility in his character, in a hypnotic physicality that may be hard for you to understand until you’re a bit older. But—and it’s crucial that you understand this, Roxanne—Jerry Aberdeen issues from no family. His people starved the whole century they’ve lasted in this country; they starved in Ireland before they immigrated here and in Scotland before that. No, my agreeing to wed Jerry Aberdeen was never even the consideration of a moment. I was a Cabot. Marrying into the Whittakers provided for my future, and the future of my family. I knew that I must do what must be done.”

She patted me on the knee again, and a long shudder drove right through me. The shudder pulled along behind it a flash of memories—my first Easter dress with its bonnet and long ribbons—clinging to Mother’s thigh on the first morning of kindergarten—my seventh birthday party when I realized my friend Eleanor was jealous of my family’s position—Father’s speeding ticket and its astonishing lesson that he was capable of a mistake—Mother’s lecture last month about menstrual periods and how I must always carry a purse with a napkin in it until I was fifty.

The shudder passed and I asked her my last question. I knew the answer, but I needed to ask anyway so she wouldn’t worry. “I shouldn’t tell Father, should I?”

I went to Trent Day School that morning as usual, but I couldn’t think about much besides Mother and Father and how Jerry Aberdeen had ruined everything. It felt like Father was already living in California.

“No, child,” Mother had replied. “You mustn’t tell your father. He would be very hurt. He might even feel honor-bound to divorce me, and then we wouldn’t all be able to live together.”

She pursed her lips. “A woman has to learn to manage men carefully, Dear. That short Y chromosome the poor darlings are so proud of is nothing more than a mutant X chromosome, and it’s missing essential human genetic material. Men have a tendency to place abstractions, like honor, above things that are real. People get hurt as a result, sometimes even die, all in the name of some dubious principle. Never forget that all the world’s wars were fought by men.”

That day at school, Rory Bradford asked me again if he could carry my books out to where the drivers picked us up. I would never let Stanton Lowell do it, even though the girls all called him a dreamboat, but today I’d said “Yes” to Rory despite his ears being too big and his glasses slipping down his nose.

My driver wasn’t taking me home. Father was returning from his trip, and we were all to meet at The Roses, then occupied by Uncle Pinch. Uncle Pinch—

my father's older brother Pynchon Winslow Whittaker—lived there all alone, except for the servants, of course, now that his wife had filed for divorce. Mother said he was drinking more than ever. She also said Aunt Jerilyn was trying to get half of everything, but that she wouldn't get The Roses, no matter what. It had been in the family three hundred years.

What Mother said about the Y chromosome made it seem like Father's divorcing Mother was inevitable. While I was at school, a fear had grown inside me like a balloon blown up nearly past bursting that Father didn't love me anymore. Why should he, if I wasn't his daughter?

I needed to talk to Father, just the two of us, today.

Of course I wouldn't tell him what I saw. I'd promised Mother, and I knew better anyway. I didn't know what I would say, but Father was a psychiatrist. A good one, too—Mother said he'd soon be chairman of Psychiatry at Trent University School of Medicine. He'd know if I was feeling bad.

Neither Mother nor Father had arrived yet, so I tracked down Uncle Pinch on the little terrace he liked off the billiard room. Sometimes he was a more reliable

source of information than either of my parents, although, with Uncle Pinch, the meaning immediately apparent wasn't always the only intended one.

The terrace was only big enough for two chairs with a small round table between and offered the same view as the patio. The house was built on the highest ground of a peninsula, about two hundred yards to the water in three directions, so you beheld a wide arc of ocean but not the

point or its little bay that were blocked by the horizon formed by the bluff.

"Hello, Roxanne. How's my favorite niece today?"

This was our standard joke—I was Uncle Pinch's only niece. I pointed to a pitcher sitting half-full on the table. "Is that iced tea?"

"Long Island Iced Tea. Want a taste?"

I nodded, and he passed me his glass. "Just a sip, now." It tasted like regular iced tea.

"Good, no? Not a drop of tea in it. Packs quite the punch. Just invented down at the Oak Beach Inn by my favorite bartender, the unfortunately-christened



Robert Butt. Oak Beach on Long Island, not in our own Oak Grove, more's the pity. If Long Island Iced Tea doesn't provide the most splendid way of appearing to try to hide your drinking, I don't know what does. How was school?"

"Okay, I guess. We learned about the triangle trade."

"The triangle trade? Where New Englanders sailed rum to Africa, bartered it for slaves, sold the slaves in the Caribbean to work on sugar plantations, bought molasses made from the sugar, and distilled the molasses into rum back home?"

"Yes," I said, sitting on my hands so Uncle Pinch wouldn't notice me twisting my fingers.

"And you're asking if we Whittakers were involved with that?"

I nodded. "Kids whisper about it, loud enough for me to hear."

"The answer to your question, Roxanne dear, a question by the way most un-Whittaker-like in its directness, is 'Yes, of course.' It seems barbarous now, and it doesn't do to speak of it, but two hundred years ago trading in slaves was both very profitable and in line with prevailing mores. Why else would the Constitution be essentially silent upon the matter?" He added, "I think it was Obadiah Marplethwaite Whittaker who first got us into the business."

I wasn't always sure whether Uncle Pinch was putting me on with some of the family names he came up with, and I didn't know what to say next.

He peered at me keenly. "But that particular piece of dirty family laundry isn't your primary concern."

I couldn't risk telling him about Mother's visitor, so I asked if he and Aunt Jerilyn were really getting divorced.

Uncle Pinch poured himself another glass from the pitcher. "Your Aunt Jerilyn," as he made a little toasting gesture, "is nothing more and nothing less than a gold-digger. We're all well shut of her." He swirled the glass in his hand, drummed his fingers on the table for what seemed like a full minute, and then winced.

"My brother believes I drink because of your grandfather. I let him believe that." He tossed it back. "Your grandfather was a homosexual."

Uncle Pinch looked to see if I understood, his face tilting down a little and both eyebrows raised, as if he were staring out over the top rims of eyeglasses, except Uncle Pinch didn't wear them. His eyes were blue as ocean sky on a clear day, startlingly true but also with the color bled out a little. Mine were steel-gray.

I nodded and pretended that I did understand.

"My brother has this unshakeable conviction that I've never recovered from learning this scandalous news." He sighed. "Another of my brother's many unshakeable convictions is that it isn't right for him to be the family patriarch, as I'm the firstborn. I have no head for business, never have—if it's left to me we'll have to sell off some land soon. Not that it would be the first time: Whittakers used to own the entirety of Oak Grove. Even so, it's clearly best for

the family, so he really needs to man up.”

Uncle Pinch drained the pitcher into his glass and looked out at the horizon. “What my brother doesn’t understand is that there’s more than one way to be a Whittaker.” Then he gave me another penetrating over-the-spectacles glance. “We’re so unlike, he and I, for brothers.”

He didn’t seem wholly pleased with what he saw in my expression. “But, as I always say, if you can’t lie to your family, then who can you lie to?”

After the conversation with Uncle Pinch I was no less worried than I’d been before and twice as confused. If anything I needed to talk with Father even more. He’d arrived while I was with Uncle Pinch and was out on the patio reading *Forbes*. Mother was going over dinner plans with Cook.

I said, “Welcome back. How was your trip?”

He put the magazine down, reached out arms-crossed to clasp my hands, and gave me a pirouette. “It was okay, but I missed my girl. How is she?”

There were so many things I wanted to say, but the only one that came out was about school. “Okay, I guess. There was a boy today who asked to carry my books.”

I had Father’s full attention. “Not Stanton Lowell?”

“No. Rory Bradford.”

He probably noticed that I was having trouble swallowing, but he didn’t let on. “And what might not be okay about that? The Bradford family is eminently respectable.”

I said I didn’t know. He didn’t prompt me, and after five heartbeats I continued, “I let him, but I don’t know if I should have. Father, how do you tell if love is real?”

I lost track of the heartbeats this time as he stared right into me, his eyes suddenly moist and his lower lip pushing his mouth from a half-smile to an inverted horseshoe. He took a deep breath. “Let’s go for a walk, Roxanne.”

He led me to where the curving knife-edge I knew as Smuggler’s Point jutted out from the bluff and formed Smuggler’s Cove in its lee. Neither of us said anything until we sat on the bench bolted into the rock there, and my father was silent even then.

I said, “Louisa’s parents are divorced like Uncle Pinch and Aunt Jerilyn are going to be. Louisa doesn’t get to see her father hardly ever.”

He let out a long sigh and inclined his head toward mine. “Despite your uncle’s circumstances, it’s important for you to understand that divorce is not the Whittaker way. Whittakers aspire to do what’s right for the family, and what’s right for the family means what is profitable and consistent with social position. Divorce meets neither of those criteria.”

He leaned forward, and I followed his gaze. He pointed to a seal out past the breakers who seemed to be looking straight at us. "The first Whittaker to land on these shores, Jeremiah Whittaker, did what was right for his family. His prospects in England weren't the brightest, and he pulled up roots and bought this property and all of what is now the town of Oak Grove from the Indians for ten woolen blankets and a handful of beads. It has turned out to be an excellent investment, and he improved the family's social position immeasurably."

He sighed again. "Whittakers sometimes can fall short of expectations for proper comportment, as your uncle has done, but that doesn't change the expectations." We watched the ferry heading out for Provincetown.

When it became a featureless dot, Father broke the quiet. "It's time you learned about your grandfather, Winslow Colefax Whittaker, and how he died. Your mother hasn't told you, has she?"

"She said he died in a fall."

He considered that. "Yes, a fall is what your mother would say. The full story is that he fell right here, right from this spot, and it wasn't an accident—it was suicide. We rarely speak of it, because, as you might imagine, it was not behavior proper for a Whittaker.

"The reason he committed suicide," Father continued, "was that he was being blackmailed, and he was being blackmailed because he was a homosexual. Do you know what that means?"

"A boy at school gets picked on for being one, but the other boys use a different word for it," I said. "I don't know if he really is one."

He nodded gravely. "Your grandfather's suicide upset me for a long time, but I finally came, if not to accept it, to understand. It wasn't paying out the money, I shouldn't think, or even the gossip and slander that was sure to follow any revelation. No, I think it was your grandfather truly loved the man. He couldn't live with the betrayal."

Father turned away from the sea to look directly at me for just a moment and then turned back. "The answer to your question, Roxanne, is that love is real if you are willing to do what must be done to sustain it."

It had turned out the question that just seemed to pop out of my head hadn't been about Stanton Lowell and Rory Bradford at all. This friend of Grandfather's, though, didn't sound worth the sacrifice. "After your father died," I asked, "why didn't the man try to get more money from you?"

"Oh, he did. I told him to go ahead and tell everyone if he wanted to. The Whittaker family has survived scandals before. I never heard from him again."

He sniffed once, as if he agreed with my unspoken assessment, and then went on, in a more measured tone. "I finally made peace with the suicide, and I had this bench put here when I did, but poor Pynchon never got over thinking of himself as the son of a homosexual. He has a psychiatrist for a brother, and still

he's drinking himself to death, and there's nothing you or I or anyone else can do about it."

This sounded a little different from Uncle Pinch's version.

"I'm having to take over as de facto head of the family. Your uncle will never leave any descendants to whom I could turn things over, so it's not merely a temporary stewardship. Eventually you and your mother and I will come to live here at The Roses."

Father shifted his attention from the ocean to the knife-edge and its little bay scoured deep by the action of the tides. "We let people believe the legend that Blackbeard used to hide out in the cove, but the truth is that people called it Smuggler's Cove before the pirate Edward Teach was born and that Whittakers owned this land then too."

He was telling me that Whittakers had been smugglers before the Revolution when that profession was both profitable and socially acceptable. Probably patriotic, too, back in the day.

"The original names were, of course, Whittaker Point and Whittaker Cove, but over time the locals consistently preferred the more...colorful...nomenclature."

A little breeze had picked up, bringing with it the salty smell of history as Father continued, "The Blackbeard legend was planted by Temperance Endicott Whittaker, Jeremiah's great-granddaughter. What Whittakers cannot change, Whittakers co-opt."

He looked right at me again for another long moment, and his face held a smile that twisted into wistfulness. "You're an intelligent girl, Roxanne, and observant." Then he broke off the direct gaze, and we both stared out at the sea again. The tide was mostly out, and the two rocks called the Buck and the Faun were plainly visible. That's when he spoke the words I've remembered every day since. "Whatever happens, I want you to know I couldn't be prouder of you."

After dinner that evening, I followed the path to the bench on the bluff and sat alone listening to the surf crash against the rocks in the dark.

Father knew.

Father knew about Mother and Jerry Aberdeen. He knew, and he didn't want people to know he knew.

I sat on the bench and turned all the way to the right to where the sun was just setting. Then I rotated back very slowly and catalogued everything in view: the Tudor manor house with its reflecting pool and twelve bedrooms, the thousand acres of grounds, the stables where I loved to ride, the rose gardens tended so scrupulously by generations of Whittaker women, the swimming pool and tennis court, the deep blue waters of Whittaker Cove where the family docked their boats, the finger of cliff curving out to Whittaker Point, and the ocean

Woods  The Whittaker Way

beyond that stretched away to Europe. Farther to the left lay the beach that was perfect for sunbathing and clambakes, the game fields, the garages, and the groundskeeper's cottage. The glow of the sunset spread all the way around the horizon.

