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PICNIC IN THE SPRING

BY JOSEPH ARNOLD

Spring didn't come when we thought it would. In early March it looked as if it was going to clear up; the afternoons became mild and the snow melted everywhere but in the drifts and shadows. On a Thursday night it started to snow and by morning it was all white and gray again. The thermometer went down to twenty degrees and didn't come up until April. Then on another morning I woke up and it was spring.

It was a beautiful week at the college; nobody did much studying and the classrooms became a sort of tedious prison. When the weekend came everyone was ready to forget their books and papers and old yellow theories. It was still too wet to go on outings in the hills that surround the university, but people began to think of such things. The girls dug down in their trunks and dressers for their wardrobes of spring blouses and bermuda shorts. A few went into town to look at new things. The fellows at the fraternity house were out washing their cars, playing ball, or sitting idly on the front porch in chairs from the living room.

I was sitting, still trying to wake up, watching two of the boys play catch. I thought how sore they would be tomorrow. In the chair next to me slouched Bill Jacobson, studying the April issue of *Playboy* magazine with about as much attention as he gave anything. He threw the copy into my lap.

"You can read it. It's a crappy issue."

I started to leaf through it. "What's the matter with it? They've got a story by William Saroyan and the girl here is pretty fine." I pointed out a picture of a clean-looking young thing with bedroom eyes and a teasing amount of clothing on—just enough to be decent—which was funny in itself.

"That's what I mean," he said, "She's sexy, but she's all covered up. You didn't see that in *Playboy* a few years ago. Well, I guess they will go the same way as *Esquire*. Just look what happened to them—no nudes and a lot of crap about culture."

He was probably right, but I didn't want to talk about it. The warm sun and the fresh smell of the rich earth made the slick pages of those magazines seem out of place. The black mud and puddles of water were there before me and pretended to be nothing more or less than what they were; while *Playboy* seemed to be winking at me or laughing at me— or something like that. But that was really not true either. Hell, the whole thing was stupid and I let it go. I got up and went into the house.

One of the guys was coming down from the upstairs at full tilt. He jumped the last four stairs and we both went crashing against the far wall.

"Sorry, Doug. I just couldn't stop."

"Jesus," I said, now fully awake, "I didn't think spring would turn the fraternity into a bunch of supermen. You'll never live until summer."

"Hell, I just feel so damn good, man! No more snow, no more slush, no more heavy coats."

I had just caught a whiff of his after-shave lotion—and at eleven o'clock in the morning! "Now wait a minute! Don't tell me you've got a date—after all these weeks."

"With that blonde from Caxton Hall," he said nonchalantly.

"Man, you know. In the spring a young man's fancy turns to gettin' a little." He ended his recitation with a slap on my already wounded shoulder.

"You should be a poet, you lecherous bastard," I called to him as he dashed out of the door. I went on into the living room thinking that he was probably right and cursing myself for breaking up with Ann Gennings after almost a whole year. She was sort of a nice girl, even though she did talk like a well-brought-up puppy dog and was about to give me the royal brush-off. Well, what's done is done and that's the way it goes.

Three fellows were gathered around a coffee table playing blackjack. I sat down and joined in the game.

"What's going on outside?" I was asked.

"Not much. Cramer is out washing his damn car. Owens is next with the hose. The jocks are out back playing baseball."

"Want another card?"

"I haven't got much to lose, gimme one."

Tom Mitchell was dealing the cards. He was the social chairman for the club, and also my roommate. I went over twenty-one points

and threw my cards in. "Say, Tom, when are we going to have a social function?"

"I suppose you mean a picnic."

"If it isn't imposing on you to ask."

He laughed, "You're the hundredth person to ask me that today." He took a breath, "Next week we're having a supper dance, the weekend after that, we will have a picnic—if the weather's good."

He turned over the last card, "Pay Twenty."

"Oh, my lord, you cheat. You must," said another player as he threw his cards in. "A picnic really sounds great. Women and beer—what a blast."

Outside there was a sudden and intense disorder, a chorus of female screams and male laughter. Bill came in from his chair on the porch to report the scene. "It was Cramer, ya should have seen 'im. He was washing his car and these dollies came by—Jesus, they got soaked to the skin." This drew a hearty exclamation from the group. Just at this time the hero of the episode came staggering into the room with his dirty sweatshirt and bare feet. He was laughing so hard he could hardly walk. "Christ, ya should 'ave seen 'em. I never seen a bunch of chicks so surprised in my life. They never knew what hit 'em."

"What the hell were they wearing?"

"That's half the story," he answered. "They were all dressed up." Henry Cramer went into a new convulsion of laughter so severe that he had to stop. "They . . . they had on their nice crap, stockings and all that jazz . . . funniest thing I've seen in a week."

This brought even more laughter from most of the group. They talked a while longer about the hapless girls, lamenting the fact that they weren't better looking, which would have made the whole affair that much more delightful. The topic switched to how really ugly the girls were, then to how good the dance would be next weekend, and finally how great a blast the picnic would be on the following weekend. Everybody likes picnics in the spring. The conversation broke up and Tom and I were alone at the coffee table. He began to play solitaire, then he stopped and looked at me. "Why do you suppose Henry Cramer is such a God-damn slob?"

"I don't know, he's been that way ever since I knew him freshman year. I thought maybe he'd get run over or kill himself in that convertible, but every year he shows up again, just as disgusting as ever."

Tom was looking through his pockets for a cigarette. "When he got pinned to Connie Roth I went out and got drunk. That's right,

we both went—you had just broken up with Ann."

"You know, I felt worse about Cramer getting pinned than I did about my getting unpinned." (Which was a lie at the time, but now it was more or less true.)

Tom continued, "How such a gross bastard as that could have such a wonderful girl as Connie for a pinmate is just beyond me."

"I'm convinced that the grubbier the guy is, the better the girl he gets." I lit up a Lucky Strike and watched him play solitaire.

"You just cheated."

"Yah, I know—lem'me have a cigarette. I always cheat. It's the only way to beat the game."

"I know, I do it too. I try to follow all the rules, but it's just too damn much trouble. It's a lot easier to cheat. And ya never lose." I took a drag on my dead cigarette and watched Tom cheat at solitaire. After a few minutes he gave up altogether, pushing the cards into a disorganized muddle in the center of the table.

He rolled back on the couch. "That game is too complicated. It's more fun to do nothing. Wouldn't it be fine if you could do nothing all the time?"

The talk was getting too profound for a Saturday morning. We sat for some time in delicious contemplation of this useless thought. Out the front window, I could see a couple of girls talking to Guy Owens, who was washing his car. He was obviously trying to get them to help with the job. Guy was a good-looking fellow—from Iowa, I think—kind of a hick before he came to college. They helped him. "What ever happened to what's-her-name, that girl from Thomas Hall—the Tri-Delt? You still dating her?"

Tom rolled over on the couch and a quick smile of remembrance came into his face and passed as quickly as it had come. "We stopped dating." Silence. "Well, more accurately, she stopped dating me." He gave a funny little laugh.

"How'd ya screw up?"

"I didn't, that's just the way things went. You know how it is with those things."

"Oh, come on, ya must have done something wrong. You got drunk and passed out on a date."

"No."

"You were your usual crude self."

"Go to hell." He said it in an ordinary way, but he shot a glance at me that said I had better stop.

"All I know is that something's wrong. You're a good guy. Girls

naturally dig you and you've got a smooth line. I just don't understand it."

"I don't either. Let's forget about girls."

"O.K.", I gathered the cards up and shuffled them—setting them back down in a neat pile, "Who ya going to take to the picnic?"

"Nobody!" He ground his cigarette out on the table leg. "I'm just gonna tend bar—you wanna do it too?"

"Sure, what the hell, we'll both get tight!"

I could see from Tom's eyes that a girl had just come into the room and the next instant I heard Connie Roth behind me say, "Hi Tom. Is Henry here?"

"Just a second, Connie. I'll call him." He got up and went to find Cramer. I turned around in my chair.

"Oh, hello, Doug. How are you?"

"Fine. You want to sit down?" I motioned to the couch. I couldn't help watching her as she came around the table to the couch folding one leg under her as she sat down. Her hair was a soft brown. She wore it back and tied with a small ribbon. Connie looked like the kind of girl you'd want to keep in a spacious house by a far sea shore, just so nobody else would see anything so sweet and womanly. There were not a few men who balanced dangerously on the brink of something resembling love for this girl. Looking at her this morning I could have tumbled over with the slightest breath of a push except for the thought of Henry Cramer. His leering face chained me to the edge of the cliff and drew a maddening veil over the form of Connie Roth.

"Doug?"

"Hmm? I'm sorry, Connie, what?"

"I hope you won't take this wrong, but I am sorry you and Ann broke up. I know her pretty well from the sorority and—well, I never thought she was quite the girl for you. But I shouldn't say anything anyway."

"No, that's O. K., you're right, as a matter of fact." I leaned back in the chair. "As a matter of fact, you hit the nail right on the head; she bored me to death and I wasn't showing her the kind of time she wanted. It was undoubtedly good all the way 'round, but I wouldn't say that to anyone except you or maybe Tom."

She looked down when I told her that. She spoke while she was looking at the floor, "I really do mean it, though, that I am sorry; I know how hard it is, when you've been going with someone for a long time and seeing them every day, to stop all of a sudden."

"It's funny how you feel so bad when you break up with someone even if you don't really give a darn about them. You just feel sort of let down when the thing finally comes to an end and you know it's actually over."

She looked back up again as a thought came into her mind. "That's it," she said, "That's really true. Remember last year when I was in that terrible play? Even though it killed my grades and was nothing but work, I cried when it ended; I cried just because it was all over and I'd never go to another awful rehearsal." She was lost in thought again. "And in the spring I can't stand to see the school year end, and in the fall I hate to come back."

Tom and Henry came back into the room. Connie got up and went over to them, giving Henry a little smile. Henry came up and took her arm. "Sorry, honey, I was in the john. Did ya dig the car on the way in?"

"Yes," she replied, "I saw it. It looks very nice. I was going to help you, but I had to work at the sorority house. I'm sorry."

"Sure, I know, anything to get out of a little work. Well, I'll forgive ya, let's drag out." He spun her towards the door and propelled her with a slap on the butt.

"Don't," she said, looking back and laughing. They chased out the front door and into his convertible. The rear end of the car sat down on the axle as it took off.

Tom and I looked at each other and didn't say anything—it had all been said a hundred times since last week. I went upstairs to do some work. I thought I would read some history, but by the time I got into my room and saw my books and notes on the table—and then my nice soft bed—I decided to study later when I was fresh, maybe Monday or next winter.

II

The spring came on at full gallop. Each day brought a perceptible change in the countryside. The brown and scrubby grasses turned green and when the weekend of the picnic arrived you could hear the small rustle of the new leaves in the spring wind. Studies faded with cold snow; now they were both gone.

There was still a film of dew on the ground as the caravan of autos pulled out from the university. They soon raised a wake of dust along the dirt roads that work in and out of the hills. All was prepared for the day; the beer was cold, the food was abundant, and the spirits of the male and female passengers were towering.

I felt good as I bounced my car along the Spring Creek road. Tom gave me a paper cup full of gin and orange juice (which we both preferred to beer) and we pushed the no-draft windows all the way around so that the fresh air rushed in on our faces. We gulped our drinks between bumps and watched the pastel landscape roll by. After two drinks and a cigarette we arrived at Abraham's Hollow, shortened to "Ham Hollow" by the generations of college students that had used the place. It was perfect spot for a picnic on this spring day. The slopes that formed the sides of the hollow were a lush green, dotted here and there with lighter bushes and early flowers. The sky was a china blue, so deep that I remarked to Tom about it. In fact the whole panorama gave the appearance of a brightly painted china bowl—so sharp and glazed it was unreal to eyes accustomed to the achromatic winter world.

I pulled the car up by a stone pavilion (gift of the class of 1948—they were mostly veterans. The university asked only that they not put their name on such an unacademic structure.) We set the food out on a long table directly under the large commemorative plaque. We also had the responsibility of tapping the kegs of beer, which we were forced to do almost as soon as we were out of the car. There was a primitive scramble to the flowing spigot and soon, amid animal shouts and good-natured cursing, the mugs of the picnickers were brimming with white foam.

Cramer and Connie had just filled their mugs and were now walking directly toward us. Henry slapped me on the shoulder.

"Now this is what I call a damn good function, man; this is going to be a real drunk." He suddenly looked perplexed. "Say, what the hell! Haven't you guys got dates?"

"No," I said, "I couldn't find anybody as cute as Tommy." I gave "Tommy" a pinch in the butt.

"Oh, yes," said Tom, "we've been living in sin for some time now, right down the hall from you." He put his arm affectionately around my waist and I guessed the gin was getting to him too. Henry laughed loudly and I could see that Connie enjoyed our stupid humor also. Henry swilled his beer down and wiped the remainder from his face and chin.

"Jesus, you guys are turning queer! Get a date." They started off and Cramer called back, "Get it while it's hot!" He laughed again.

I poured another drink for Tom and myself. Cramer seemed to have a talent for enraging me. Why didn't I have a date? Why didn't

Tom have a date with that girl from Thomas Hall? Why was Cramer pinned to Connie Roth? What was the difference between Tom and me and Cramer? Why was it him instead of me? The whole thing was too revolting.

The day skipped along and keg after keg was emptied. Lunch was devoured and everybody sat around for a while digesting their food and getting drunk again. It was a very successful picnic. And it should have been; the winter was long. We were all glad to be able to get out into the country and raise some hell and get drunk and make love to some girl.

Everyone likes picnics in the spring.

I was more sorry than ever that I didn't have a date. Tom had been petulant for some time, and now he spoke. "Doug, just look at everybody! They're like a bunch of ants." He took another drink and added, "only ants know what they're doing."

"Oh, you're just mad 'cause you don't have a date, and that's your own damn fault."

"No," he retorted, "that's not it at all. Now, really, look at these people. You can't tell em apart—you know, the boys from the girls. They all have bermuda shorts and tennis shoes."

"Oh, come on now." I looked at the girl nearest to me. "I can tell the difference. You just have to look a little below the surface." Tom gave me a half smile, then looked serious again.

"No, you don't get what I mean." He was getting irritated with my lack of interest. "Even underneath they are the same as the guys, a bunch of drunken slobs who haven't grown up and can afford not to. I'll bet that if a lot of these girls didn't go to college they'd be whores, and the guys would be bums."

It bothered me to hear Tom talk like that, maybe because I believed part of it. "Shut up, you're drunk. These people are just trying to have a good time. Getting drunk is no great sin." He thought about this for a moment. I continued, "What the hell, you and I aren't exactly sober and neither of us is exactly a virgin. How ya gonna scream about people when you're no different yourself? Nobody is perfect—you or me, or—or anybody."

He closed his eyes and pushed the question away. "O. K., O. K., you win." He brightened up, "Let's go over and watch the beer-baseball game."

We went over to the ball diamond where the game was getting started. Everybody played on one of the two teams. Whenever you pitched the ball, hit it, caught it, or did anything at all, you took a

drink of beer. The first girl up at bat managed to trickle the ball down the first base line where she tripped over it and spilled her whole mug full of beer on her shirt and pants. Most of the players, in an effort to take a quick gulp, slobbered the stuff down the front of their shirts. There was also the usual number of arguments. Henry almost got in a fight with Guy Owens over a play at third base. The conflict drew a sizable crowd, spurring both contestants on. The whole affair ended in a maudlin reconciliation, both fellows drinking innumerable toasts to their friendship and good-naturedly rubbing white foam into each other's hair. This ended when Henry had to join the ranks of those who went off into the woods to vomit, a particular hazard of beer-baseball. Some unlucky men and women didn't make it to the woods and were a constant source of ridicule. I was not feeling especially well myself, and I lay down.

The sky was a strange color; it was blue, yet it wasn't actually blue either. The air was changed too. It had grown a good deal more heavy and still. The shouts of the picnickers now carried across the hollow with a far-off metallic sound.

Cramer was back now and he was eager to resume the game that had gone on without him. As he took up a bat, he yelled out to the pitcher, "All right, get the lead out and throw that damn ball up here!" The first pitch came in and he missed it by a foot. He yelled some new obscenity and took a more determined stance at the plate. He connected with the second pitch, but it was low on the ball and it went high into the air. Every eye followed its almost sluggish ascent.

When it fell, it fell forgotten. Even Henry kept looking at the sky. I can't really describe how it looked; I can only say that in the flick of an eye it was like dusk, only the sun was still high and it was three o'clock in the afternoon. But more than that, a wind was now blowing. It was a cold west wind and it swept into the hollow with startling force.

I nudged Tom, "Hey, look over there, is that a hill?" As soon as I started to speak I knew I was wrong. The hill was a cloud so dark that it looked like part of the horizon. Finally the ball was found and thrown in. Play was resumed, but in a less eager fashion.

"Oh crap! Of all days to rain," stormed Tom.

It was disappointing to have such a wonderful function ruined by a storm. Everyone likes picnics in the spring. So we pretended that perhaps it would blow over if we paid no attention to it. All the picnickers fell into the play with a new tenacity, but it was not much fun in the chilling wind. Yet the game went on. The sky grew darker

with each play and the players became almost desperate in an attempt to blot out the impending storm. No one wanted to leave the field and the beautiful hollow to the rain, not on the first spring outing.

It was getting too dark to see the ball. The clouds were a brownish gray and all boiling in a cauldron of wind whipped sky. A few people left to put up windows and tops on the cars. The rain first fell in a few giant drops and then the swirling mass of clouds was dashed by a stroke of lightning and pounded into the earth with a reverberating clap of thunder. Every bit of earth, every tree, every flower, and every living thing in that hollow was drenched in the torrent of cold rain.

I could see only a few feet in front of me. It was dark as a winter night even when the rain let up. For an instant I could see the sides of the hills in the blue electrical flash of the lightning, and then the darkness was slammed down with a thunder crash that rolled over and over in the seething heavens.

The only shelter from the scathing fury of the storm was the stone pavilion. When Tom and I got there most of the people had already arrived and were standing in small groups looking out to where they had been a few minutes before. I saw Connie standing alone and went up to her.

"Have you seen Henry?" she asked. "I went to put the top up on the car, and get away from that terrible game, but then it started to rain and . . ." Her last words were drowned out by the thunder.

"No, I didn't notice, but he isn't so tight that he won't come in out of the rain. Even Henry isn't that dumb!" The last words slipped out before I could stop them. At that instant a bolt of lightning crashed down into the woods across the hollow where the ball diamond was. We could hear the splitting of a tree before the thunder drowned out everything. I turned to look at Connie; her face was pale and drawn and she continued to stare out towards the meadow and woods beyond. "Did that scare you?" I asked.

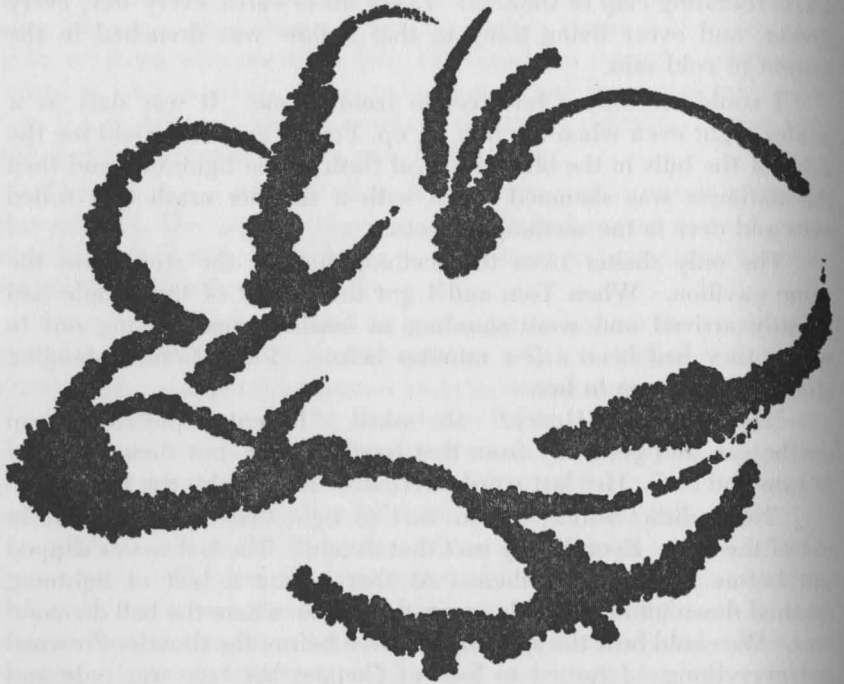
She didn't look at me, she just kept looking outwards. "He's out there, I saw him."

"What?" I said, "you couldn't have—out there by the woods? No, I know he wasn't that tight."

Tom nudged me. "I think she's right, I thought I saw somebody running out of the woods as the lightning struck." We all strained our eyes trying to see through the curtains of rain and darkness. Another ganglion of sparks leaped across the sky and came down over the hill. In the flashing luminescence I clearly saw the form of Henry Cramer

running across the open field towards the road. For a second I could see him running with his arms outstretched, like a man with a beast at his heels.

Before the thunder had died away and I could say another word to Connie, she was gone. At the sight of him she had dropped her coat and run out to him. I picked it up ready to run after her. Her white tennis shoes splashed across the field as she ran. Then I could see them together, out in the meadow; she was helping him up. At



that instant everything became unearthly still. The wind, the trees, the rain, and the two figures in the open meadow were like a frieze. Then a white hot blade slashed down.

There was a scream.

I am sure that none of the forty or fifty people in that hollow will ever forget that sound—male or female. It was the scream of the rat as the trap-spring snaps its back.

“God!” The word rushed past my ear.

And I believed it.

Then the thunder exploded into the hollow and the rain burst into the pavilion. There was no place to hide.