Summer Retreat

My siblings and I spent the summers of our youth wading the waters of Quartzville Creek, plucking periwinkles from the smooth, glassy yellow bottom beneath the frigid rippled surface. We would use forked sticks to pry crawdads out from under their cairns, and they would emerge reluctantly with pinchers flailing perilously. The very name of the creek conjured up visions of untold riches, like the gold rumored to be hidden in the black sand along the banks. I’d seen some of the unimpressive, dull, flat flakes in the bottom of a gold pan once, but I preferred the flashy, shiny iron pyrite called “Fool’s Gold” that we could snatch out of the mountainside.

The real gold, though, was found in the crystal clear, crisp waters of the creek. It was fed by snowmelt, and we would enter the creek by degrees. We would begin with our feet, testing the water with our toes, finally immersing them totally. After the initial shock, they would become numb and heavy as barbells with needle sticks radiating up our legs. We would continue this delicious torture, inch by inch, until we could no longer feel our bodies, floating weightlessly, feeling the heavi ness of cold in our limbs.

We were always in search of the perfect swimming hole, and one day, quite by accident, we found it while foraging for huckleberries in the woods. We came out of the underbrush of the forest onto a beach of finely crushed pebbles surrounded by granite walls of skyscraper proportions. A waterfall cascaded over mossy granite and poured into a pool of indigo and aquamarine.

We swam out into the center of the pool, thrilled and mesmerized by the depths that added buoyancy to our bodies. We floated like ethereal sea creatures. Peering down, we could see the light fading from the surface. We swam through bands of aquamarine, down through stratum s of indigo, and descended into inky blackness that became unbearable for seeing eyes. We swam back up through the liquid colors with our heads pounding and lungs screaming. As we gasped for air and breathed in the primeval musk of the forest floor, it was with a new awareness of things beyond our grasp. It was with the hearts of naturalists and the purity of youth that we wanted to preserve and protect this corner of Eden that we had discovered. We imagined that we were the sole inhabitants of this mystical garden, and having been anointed by its wonders, we did not want to share it.

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I came into the full bloom of young womanhood in my fifteenth summer. I returned to the swimming hole that summer with my sister, Meggie, and my best friend, Laurel. We were returning from an arduous hike we had begun earlier that day, and we planned to rejuvenate and quench our bodies in the forgiving waters of our favorite sanctuary.

Meggie ran ahead and was the first one down on the beach. When Laurel and I saw her scrambling up the path, with her face hot and red, we were puzzled.

“I’m n-not g-g-going back down there,” Meggie stammered.

“Why not?” we asked.

“There are people down there,” she answered.

“So what?” I said. “We’ve known for a long time now that other people come to this place too.”

“Yeah, well these people are naked.” She breathed.
“Well, that’s not going to stop me from going down there to swim,” I said with bravado.

I marched resolutely down the path, and as I neared the beach, the toe of my sandal hooked a tree root coiled on the trail. My stomach lurched as I began tumbling and crashing through the underbrush to land, unceremoniously, splayed out, face down on the beach, arms and legs akimbo. Jumping quickly to my feet, I ignored the angry red gashes slashed across my flawless sun-drenched skin. I hoped my haste to right myself would prevent anyone from noticing my graceless entrance. It didn’t. Scantily clad in my hot pink bikini, I felt conspicuously overdressed as more than a dozen of the nude sunbathers rushed over to administer aid to the innovative gatecrasher. The crimson heat in my face continued to rise with the proximity of Eden’s inhabitants, and my eyes searched for safe flesh to rest their gaze upon. I focused on a pair of eyes with the same unbearable intensity of the depths of the pool, and my shame became palpable. I felt a strange impurity shroud me as I stood in the midst of their naturalness.

The bathers were unperturbed with my tumultuous interruption and invited me to join them, but I shyly demurred. I did not linger and began wading down the creek in the opposite direction. Meggie and Laurel followed me. We were all silent until we were out of earshot, and then we fell down convulsed with laughter, gulping in great gulps of crystal, metallic water. We laughed at the nude bathers, and we laughed at our own naïveté and modesty. I laughed until my salty tears mingled with the tinny, rusty water, and I suddenly felt very unworldly in a place that had once bee otherworldly.