

TRACE

Glen Pourciau

BRAD WAS in our hotel room taking a nap and I'd parked myself on our terrace, enjoying some time free of the human voice, a book in hand I'd been stuck in the middle of for a week but hadn't had time to open. Gary, our son, was at the pool with Trace, our friends' daughter. The six of us had planned to meet at the hotel restaurant for dinner.

The sliding door to the terrace below opened and I heard our friends come out, stirring into place, saying things I didn't care to overhear. I hoped they'd keep quiet and all I'd hear would be Joyce's magazine pages turning and Rod's habitual throat clearing. I'd asked Brad if he knew what could be stuck in Rod's throat. "Maybe something he's suppressing," he said.

I tried to stay focused on my book, but after a while the tone of Joyce's voice intruded. "I think he's immature for his age. He has no idea how much he's bothering Trace." Rod mumbled something camouflaged by throat clearing, and she replied, "I've told Trace not to say anything to him. We've got to try to enjoy this trip."

Did they think Trace was some little angel? I could tell them a few things about Trace. I shut my book without a sound, no point in trying to calm down, calm was out of the question. Should I knock on their door, tell them what I'd heard and demand an explanation? But I'd get everybody whipped up if I threw a fit and what would it accomplish? Did I want to lose their friendship?

It was hard for me to sit still, but if they heard me move they'd know I'd been listening. I heard Joyce flipping pages, the two of them exchanging comments, and neither seemed on the verge of vacating a seat. Finally Brad slid the door open and almost spoke, but I put my finger to my lips to shush him. He looked at me with surprise, bugging his eyes out, a mannerism of his, and I stood up quietly, waved him back into the room and slowly pushed the door closed.

"They're downstairs," I said.

"So?"

"I overheard them talking about Gary."

He waited.

"You can't say anything," I told him.

"What can't I say?"

I repeated what I'd heard.

"I don't think you should tell them you heard."

"I just told you not to tell."

"But you want to tell them. You shouldn't."

"I'm not going to, but why not?"

"You know why not, why not's not the problem. The problem is you want to tell them."

"Should we let them get away with it?"

"We can't help what they think."

"I won't say anything, but that doesn't end the matter."

"I agree. You won't forget it."

"What's Gary doing that bothers Trace so much?"

"We could go to the pool and watch."

"I don't want to observe Gary. He's a nice kid."

"He is."

"Are we going to dinner with them? I don't know if I can look at her."

"You'll have to control yourself."

The talking cure wasn't working so I decided to go to the terrace again to read, make enough noise that they'd know I was there and maybe say something as if Brad were with me about what a bitch Trace was and how lucky she was not to be in jail. I shifted the chair before I sat down.

Gary walked through the room door then, smiling, toweling his hair.

"Come out here, Gary," I called, and he joined me. "Did you have fun with Trace?"

"She sat by the pool in her sunglasses, never put a foot over the edge and barely spoke."

"Don't take it personally. Trace is sort of a sphinx."

Not a whisper from downstairs, no pages turning. I could see my comment surprised Gary.

"Go get cleaned up for dinner. We're meeting them in less than an hour."

He went inside, and Brad stepped through the doorway, his eyes bugging out. He'd been listening. He didn't speak, but with some difficulty cleared his throat.