

# The Crystal Pool

By John D. Vollmer

The evening light shifted imperceptibly from dark blue to cobalt to impenetrable purple. Shuffling along, watching living room lights come on one by one, he glanced sideways into cheerful-drab rooms with the inevitable blue glow of TV's and the ritual of TV dinners pretending family, faking closeness, mimicking camaraderie.

His uncle's house was no different, but Tony was in town so there was an air of festivity about the place; the noises were not muted--loud laughter and the occasional shriek of some old woman pinched. Tony was cooking spaghetti, the smell wafted far down the street, an Italian huckster amid the stolid German hausfraus. He got a glance or two of recognition when he walked in, but then Tony saw him.

"Boy! Hey Boy! Where You Been!?" Tony seemed to talk always in capitals. He gave him a grand hug and took him by the shoulders to steer him into the kitchen. Tony being the impresario. "Here's Your Boy, Mama Frieda! Come To The Feast At Last!" He was embarrassed but at the same time deeply impressed with a sudden feeling of belonging, of being welcome. His mother, showing slightly a glass or two of chianti, swept up to him in mock Italian warmth and gave him a big kiss. He grinned sheepishly and backed into a corner.

There had been at least ten people in the living room and it seemed like a dozen more in the overheated, crowded kitchen. It took him a few minutes, perched on a stool, a glass of wine shoved into his hand, to take it all in. A huge pot of spaghetti sauce bubbled pungently on the stove, showering the room with basil, oregano, and garlic. There were huge laughs at trivialities and a constant stream of relatives coming and going. He didn't even know them all. Over at the table sat a lone figure. . . Who was this?

She sat by herself, about his age, and there was that of the wild child about her. She was eating spaghetti noisily, sloppily, the only one in the room eating, and the others were "surreptitiously" making fun of her rude manners. She had disheveled, black hair, and a smudged face. She ate like a small child, with abandon, uncaring. They laughed at her. And then . . . she caught his eye. He caught himself staring at her and at last she looked at him. A light shone in her eyes--he caught on! There was a deep intelligence, a gentle humor--she was laughing at them! No, no laughing. Enjoying them, letting them laugh at her! He understood, and the recognition for each of them was deep, penetrating.

Very soon they slipped away together. Like magic, out the back door the sun shone brightly, much too brightly. They stepped over a barbed wire fence and walked out into a dusty, derelict wheat field and kept walking. Looking into her eyes, something overwhelming came over him. It was unlike anything he could even have dreamt of. There was something deeply troubling here . . . more than the love that came flooding over him like a bout of uncontrollable crying.

How long they walked he had no idea. At last they came to an enormous grove of trees and she led him in as if knowing exactly where they were. They came to a waterfall--and the pool. He stopped and she watched him closely as he sat on a rock to take it in. Such a pool! The waterfall danced light in iridescent fantasies across its broad face. Finally, he peered into the water's depths, clear, pure, pristine water, not knowing what he saw. Then he could make it out--the pool was lined with bright, glistening crystals, each tiny but huge. Transparent water! The light from the sun, from the waterfall, filled the pool and all the space around it with sparkling splashes of brilliant color. The crystalline pool.

There was a cave that she led him to, up above the falls, and there they made their home. For a long time he thought that there was simply nothing to say, but then he realized that she was mute, and they communicated solely by glances and odd, punctuated gestures. Very soon he came to dread speech, as an intrusion too gross to bear. But who was she? What was all this? A deeper kind of fear clutched at him now. By degrees, she explained who she was. Even then, he could not quite take it in.

She was not, truly, of this Earth. What she was doing here or how or why she came, he never could understand. But she was not of this Earth. An alien group, somehow, he thought, allied to them, had brought her here, their daughter. And she was for him and he was for her. And that was all he really could know. He trusted her, though, for the wisdom of eons suffused her being, her eyes contained life and intelligence and understanding beyond all his fears, and the beauty of her simple love could never be questioned; he sank into a happiness greater than he had ever dared to believe could be his.

They soon left their clothes behind and in time, one by one, their children's voices filled the grotto. From the time they were small babes they slithered out onto the slick, steep ramp that he had made for them; they tumbled them into the waters of the pool, as alive and at home there as otters. He never could feel as utterly free and at home as they; and she, also so obviously at home in the pool. Up top, above the cliff, he tended the huge garden that never seemed to lack for food and never seemed to need more than an hour or two's work a day. The children shrieked and cried and laughed--but they never talked. They didn't need to. A glance, a hint of feeling, and they knew all that was needed to know. He was never entirely with them in this, but they had a boundless kindness that instinctively never let him feel left out. They lived thus for 14 years, and her all-embracing love opened a world to him that no man has ever witnessed or felt before, for it had nothing to do with anything but kindness, and love, and generosity, and understanding. And he had never known before that that was all lacking.

And then, one dark, unforgiving black morning, she died. He was grief inconsolate, unbearable, filling the slumbering grotto with cries of inexpressible pain and loss. His shouts, pain, rang thru the trees and the rocks like the cries of a wolf in deep anguish. The children hovered, uncertain, unsure. They knew, understood, and knew that he did not. He howled his all-consuming grief. She was gone.

The days passed, nonetheless, and he had no idea what to do, what he was doing there or his children with him. They seemed quite unconcerned, tho they visited her grave with flowers and song--strange song, not human, not anything he knew. They cared for him now, and tried to pull the grief out of his eyes into theirs. He was the child now, somehow he knew.

The days passed and in the endless stream of endless summer, his third boy, "charcoal" as he called him, for the color of his eyes, came to him and stood silently. He was trying to convey, yet his father always took a long time to catch on. He was trying to convey that he must leave, go out into the broad world beyond. At last, his father saw and was alarmed. NO, his eyes pleaded, No! Not Yet! Charcoal, with all the gentleness he had, conveyed that he must. But you are only a boy of twelve, his father's eyes pleaded. I must go, said Charcoal.

The others gathered silently, neither sending him on his way nor interfering. They glanced at their father, whose fear permeated the pool like the shadow of a cloud. He gathered himself together and went after Charcoal, who stopped and turned and with a glance, warned him "no." This was his journey, his time. The others came and gently drew him back. Charcoal left.

For two days and nights, he wandered the garden and the grotto, fear filling him--why should he not go? Was this his own prison now, a prison of the mind and soul? What was happening, how had he come here? Where WAS she???

And then, Charcoal came back, shaken, afraid, no longer the sure, silent boy. His brothers and sisters took him in like the warm embrace of a mother's arms. His glances told them all, but now, he too could talk. It was a dark world beyond, with people that they did not know; people like wolves, like dogs in the night. He was afraid; but he had brought them the knowledge that they needed. Soon, one day, they would all go, together, and in groups. They would leave to bravely face the evil. The time was near at hand.

They gathered around their father, in his lap, leaning softly on his shoulders, letting him know he would never be alone, here in the crystal grotto, by the crystal pool. And soon, she would finally return to him, and he to her.

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