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# PAT'S FRIEND NORM

## RUTH GELLER

Pat had known Norm since they were children and he moved into the neighborhood where she ruled a small gang. She was thirteen and a tyrant in her world. Norm was ten and looking for a hero and dazzled by Pat's vast knowledge. Years later it shocked him to learn that what he thought was knowledge was actually her ability to act confident in front of others, thereby making her spur-of-the-moment answers seem like they were written in an ancient Book of Truth. The fact of Pat's sex did not occur to Norm until his older brother began to ridicule him for following around a "girr-ull;" but he also noticed that when in Pat's vicinity, his brother walked quickly and would not meet her eyes.

Pat was quick to take advantage of Norm's worship, and put him to work delivering the newspapers on her route. For his labor and loyalty she made him her lieutenant, conspiring with him to keep the neighborhood mildly terrorized. The victims were mainly adults; those who wouldn't tip at Christmastime, or those who hollered at the kids for playing in front of their houses on summer nights. One prank was to wrap dog droppings in newspaper, place it on the victim's front porch, set it aflame, ring the doorbell and run. Norm collected and wrapped the materials but disliked danger and stayed behind while Pat did the flaming, ringing and running. At a safe distance he would wait for her, anticipating their gleeful laughter at the victim's facial expression as he stamped out the fire.

In the years that followed, Pat and Norm remained friends. They were partners in their experiments with liquor, petty larceny and sex. They had crushes on the same girls.

When Pat graduated from high school she had a succession of jobs, flirted with marriage to a financially well-off man fifteen years her senior, and gravitated toward romantic and volatile relationships with women. Norm graduated from high school in 1966 and within six months was drafted. Pat argued that they should run away together, change their names and bum around the country until they found a town that suited them. Norm agreed with all her plans but in the end was assigned to a transportation company in Vietnam. There he drove trucks in convoy from the coastal city of Quinhon up Highway 19 through the central highlands to the inland city of Pleiku.

Pat, meanwhile, got involved with a rough crowd, engaged in a few bar fights, and finally fell in love with a married woman, a friend of her family's with whom she carried on a secret, passionate, and doomed

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two-year affair. Though she often thought of Norm she was not a letter-writer, and he, serving an uneventfully dull tour of duty, wrote her annoyed letters admonishing her lack of communication. He was about to punish her by writing a final letter dissolving their friendship when he received a package from her, a dozen chocolate chip cookies.

The married woman, after two years of promises, had decided that she couldn't face the consequences of leaving her husband for a life with Pat; and heart-broken, Pat went on a drunk, in the midst of which she thought sentimentally of Norm and their long friendship, remembering his childhood passion for chocolate chip cookies.

On top of the package of store-bought cookies Norm found a note that said: "Friends for Life, Pat." The cookies were packed so badly that they arrived in crumbs, but he forgave her immediately and ate the stale crumbs with milk, like cereal.

When he returned from Vietnam he eventually found a job in a paint factory and married a girl he'd known in high school. Though Norm's wife Joanie and Pat's friend Adelle got along, the two couples spent little time together, for Pat and Norm had by then formed new friendships. They had both changed, and though occasionally Norm stopped by to "touch base," as he said, they spent less time talking about their present lives and more gossiping about people they'd known: who was working where, who married and who divorced, who was in jail, and who was dead. The more violent the death, the more they discussed whether or not it could have been predicted based on an individual's behavior.

Both Pat and Adelle enjoyed Norm's unexpected visits. He never had to be entertained, but fit into whatever was happening. If they were sitting around relaxing, he would relax with them. As Pat said, he was like family.

Several years passed.

One November evening, Norm came to visit just as the two women were finishing supper. He stood by the kitchen counter drinking a mug of coffee. The kitchen was warm from the cooking and he removed his plaid wool shirt; underneath he wore a white t-shirt, and on the shoulder were a number of light brown hairs, the strands lying as though they'd fallen out together. Knowing her friend's obsessive neatness, Pat meant to tease him but forgot upon being informed that it was her turn to wash the dishes.

She smiled ruefully at Norm. "How the mighty have fallen," she said, and started clearing the table.

Adelle stood in the kitchen doorway reading the *TV Guide*, mumbling: "Garbage, garbage, garbage... Listen to what's on the 11:30 movie. *Arizona* with Jean Arthur and William Holden: 'A frontier hellcat, who hopes to own the biggest ranch in Arizona, finds that being as tough as the man she wants is no way to land him.'"

"Uh-oh," Norm said, "women's lib, watch out."

Adelle gave him what passed for a withering glare. "Shit, if you men weren't so fucked up, we wouldn't need women's lib."

Norm carried his mug to the sink. "yeah, well..."

"Yeah well what?" Adelle challenged.

"Yeah well, I guess I'll go in and watch some TV," he answered, and they all laughed.

"Yeah, well I guess I'll join you," Adelle said. She walked down the hallway to the living room; Norm started to follow, but happened to glance at the hallway mirror and see the hair. "Uh...I'm gonna use your john," he said, and went into the bathroom. A few moments later he emerged, the shirt clean. In the living room he sat on the edge of the easy chair and stared at the floor.

Adelle squatted in front of the television, turning the channel selector. "How 'bout *60 Minutes*?" she asked.

"Sure, I guess so. I never watched it."

"It's political stuff, you know, like about the Shah and Kissinger, the Love Canal, stuff like that."

He grimaced faintly. "I live with that shit every day of my life. I sure as hell don't need to see it on TV."

Adelle looked up, surprised at his bitter tone. "Okay, I don't care. I'll leave this on."

She sat on the couch and rolled a joint, and when Pat was done with the dishes she joined them. Norm said that he was planning to go deer hunting and tried to persuade Pat to go along. As he spoke he reached up and touched his head. His fingertips skimmed lightly across the hair, after which he felt at his nape for loose strands.

They passed around the joint, and Norm told Pat how to make roast venison with mushroom gravy. She listened intently, and laughed. "It all sounds so good, every year I think I'll go with you... and then I remember that you have to kill the sucker, and gut it..."

"Yeah, I can just see you gutting a deer," Adelle said to her, passing the joint to Norm. "I mean babe, you forget what you're like, you've always got such great plans. I can see you bringing home this big deer, right? It'll be laying out on the porch, and you'll be inside watching TV and you'll be going, 'Oh, don't worry. I'll do it tomorrow,' and three months later I'll still be tripping over it." Pat laughed in protest, and Adelle said, "It's true, you know it is..."

Pat re-lit the joint, handed it to Norm and said to him: "Remember the time a couple, three years ago we bagged that woodchuck?"

"I remember," Adelle said. "You idiots were sitting there chewing and chewing and chewing... and trying to convince *me* how delicious it was... yuch!"

"Yeah, I thought I'd puke my guts out skinning that thing..."

"And later you left the skin in the spare room, you wanted to make it into a goddamned fur jacket or something." She looked at Norm to include him in the conversation, for he was unusually quiet.

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"A jacket," he said, "forget it. It wouldn't even be big enough for a hat."

"Every time the cat went into the spare room, he freaked out..."

"Yeah," Pat agreed, "maybe I'd better not go deer hunting..."

"You're missing a good time," Norm said, scratching his scalp. Suddenly he stopped and carefully withdrew his hand. He looked at his fingers, amongst which were entwined several strands of hair.

Pat saw him and smiled. "What do you expect, something to crawl out?" He flushed, and she stopped smiling. "What's the matter with you?"

"I'm not sure." He leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "The company doctor says I'm going bald, but I think it's more than that."

"The company doctor?"

He nodded, spreading his fingers and touching the tips together lightly, drawing them apart, touching again, all the while watching his hands. Pat and Adelle watched his face. "Joanie noticed it a couple weeks ago... and a guy at work, he mentioned the same thing was happening to him. So I went to the company doctor and he said it was nothing to worry about. I was just losing my hair."

"Did he take a blood test?" Adelle said.

Norm shook his head.

"If he's as old as *our* company doctor," Pat joked, "they started doing *that* after he graduated from med school. The guy is two days older than water."

Norm did not smile. "No, our doctor isn't old. He just works for the company. They're paying his salary is all, he sure as hell isn't going to turn around and say it's their fault we've got arsenic poisoning."

"You've got what?" Pat said.

He didn't answer.

"So the company doctor said you're just going bald?" Adelle prompted.

"Yeah. So I said, 'On my face?'" He held his chin up to the light and they saw a stubble-free spot about the size of a quarter, the skin red and scaly.

"It looks like you have a rash," Pat said.

"That's the other thing. You should see my scalp."

"Did you ever think... it might be that stuff, what's it called, the stuff they sprayed in Vietnam?"

"Agent Orange. Yeah, I already thought about that. They sprayed that crap all over Nam and they didn't give two shits *who* got doused."

Pat stared at him. "It's unbelievable."

"Yeah, that's what *I* thought at first." He shook his head. "I'm thirty-one years old, man. I got a wife and a kid, and another one on the way. I just bought a goddamned house. I *did* my time in Nam. I been

working steady at that plant for eight years. If it's some shit I been breathing, who knows what'll happen to me next."

Pat seemed unable to grasp what he was saying. In the silence that followed his words, the television spewed out a false cheer that hung in the air like a lie. Finally, Pat murmured, "You could be poisoned..."

"That's about it," Norm said. "When I got back from Nam in one piece, I thought, man, I lucked out. But now I'm not so sure."

He left before the eleven o'clock news. At the door he stopped and faced Pat. "Hey. Remember when you sent me those cookies in Nam?" He knew she remembered, and didn't wait for her to respond. "I was in the store the other day and my kid comes up to me with a package of cereal that's supposed to taste like chocolate chip cookies. I bought some and tried it... Didn't hold a candle to *your* chocolate chip cereal."

She frowned, and he realized he'd never told her about the condition of the cookies on arrival. "You remember the cookies," he said.

"Yeah, I remember..."

"They came in crumbs. Not a whole one among 'em."

He said good-bye and left. As he walked down the street to his car he passed his hand over his head, and looked at his palm to see what he would find.