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Norman Mosalle
YELLOW KITES

Madame Lance was an old woman; she had helped raise Mother; later they had been neighbors in Paris during the war. Mother and Madame Lance remained good friends, writing weekly to one another when our family came to the States and Madame Lance stayed in Paris. In the early Fifties, Henri Lance, Madame Lance's only son, was killed in an automobile accident, and it was necessary that the old woman come to the States so her daughter might care for her. The daughter, Elsie, lived at Cape Cod, not more than a hundred miles from our home; Mother was enormously pleased to have Madame Lance so near her again.

I was ten during the summer of Madame Lance's arrival. Mother telephoned Elsie and found out that the old woman was comfortably settled and that we were welcome at any time for a visit. I kept my objections to myself.

"You will not have to sit and chat with us too long," Mother informed me. "Of course I want Madame Lance to see you. Be nice to her. Be patient for a little time. . . . Why not bring a kite with you? The weather is fine for it."

I had two kites, both yellow. I decided to bring them both, since I was certain to be cheerless with two strange women; two kites would be more comforting than one. I put them in the back of our car and sat on the hood waiting for Mother. She was pretty that afternoon—her large white hat and white pleated dress, her smile. How pretty her anxiety made her; she loved Madame Lance.

As she drove I watched her face and imagined what Mother must have been like during the war years in Paris. A serious girl. Probably slender then.

She turned from her driving and regarded me for a moment. "Madame Lance will be so surprised," she said, smiling. "She has one photograph of you. And that's all. We must take more pictures in the future. . . . How good it is to have a son."

She was quiet for the remainder of the trip; she was recalling Paris, I am sure. I thought of perhaps putting on my bathing suit instead of bothering with the kites.

Mother had not mentioned that either Madame Lance or her daughter was wealthy. Perhaps Mother did not know until we found the address and followed a long driveway through an area which resembled a small park, then turned suddenly around a massive flower bed to discover a huge white house (which at the time could only make me think of George Washington); Madame Lance and her daughter were sitting at a table under a big blue umbrella.

"Oh! There she is," Mother yelled, jerking the car to a halt.

Both she and Madame Lance cried. Elsie, a small, red-haired woman with very nice teeth, bit her lip at me and smiled during the whole time our mothers cried at one another. Elsie was perhaps forty, and I imagined right away that she was quite taken by me.

"How nice to have you with us, Breno," she said. She touched my face, remarking that I looked very much like my mother. But I had never felt this was true; I told Elsie that I looked more like my father who was divorced from my mother and living in South America.

"Oh, here he is," Mother said to Madame Lance. "After all this time, here he is for you." And they both laughed and cried over me, much to any boy's extreme irritation. Madame Lance was so thin as to frighten me; her eyes were enormous and yellow-gray, fluttering violently, disturbingly near to mine. She was in black, a full black dress and a thick black sweater on the sharp angles of her shoulders. I kept thinking she looked like a bat-lady.

"How good to see you!" she squeaked, and she kissed me on the lips. I was horrified, but maintained my composure, at least outwardly, for Mother's benefit. I doubt if I smiled however. Madame Lance removed a handkerchief from her dress and wiped her cheeks without removing her fluttering attention from me. I noticed the top of her head for the first time; Madame Lance was going bald.

"You are very pretty," I said quickly. I was aware then of a terrible silence, as though the three women had been struck dumb by my lie. I looked from Mother to Elsie, then to Madame Lance again. Their faces were almost unhappy and I was genuinely terrified.

"How kind of you," Madame Lance said softly, and she kissed me again on the lips. I kept my eyes closed tight until she was finished. Someone was pouring the lemonade I had seen on the table. Elsie, I guessed.

Mother and Madame Lance began to talk at one another rapidly then, two more chattering women. Elsie sat back after giving me my lemonade. I drank with my eyes on her; she would smile from her mother to mine, then back to me.

"I have a little boy," she said.

I would not swim. It would mean changing, and Elsie would insist on leading me somewhere to change, I imagined. After a while I got up and went for the kites. I felt that the three women were probably watching me walk to the car, remarking on me still. But when I got the kites out and turned around, no one was looking. That was good.

A marvelous place to put up a kite. I thought the property as big as an airport. After bending the sticks and adjusting the string, I stood suddenly self-conscious with the kite in my hand. The three of them were looking at me now; I did not fancy running across the big lawn in front of them and perhaps having the kite go up a bit, then have a catastrophic flip, breaking its nose. I pretended to be occupied again with the string until I saw their attention was off me. I was about to try the kite when I noticed a fountain on the property, a little white fountain with several jets of water rising behind a muscular woman, nude and tall, with her hands in her lap. A fat man in a suit that looked like pajamas was working around the outside wall of the fountain with a brush and soap. He was scrubbing vigorously and smoking a pipe; after some time he walked off and I went to the fountain and sat down.

On the western side of the property was a long expanse of high trees; off in that direction I could hear the water. I again reconsidered swimming. I was out of sight of the three women, but every few minutes I would catch Madame Lance's scarey laugh—shrill and breaking. I got up and walked toward the trees.

It was dark inside, the only pleasant event of the day. There were no paths. Off in the sunlight I could see the big white house and the three women under the blue umbrella. Ahead, the trees appeared

much lower. I walked on, passing out of the woods in a surprisingly short time, into a field of high, yellow grass. Alone in the field was a single two-storey house where the curtains were blowing out of the top windows.

I hesitated at the end of the woods. I would have such a house some day, I thought. No one would be coming near my house. I would live there alone.

I went on, through the yellow grass, pulling up wildflowers, then tearing them apart. The house was collapsing; no one cared. If the house were vacant, I would go through every room of it.

At the porch the door was lying flat. I could see down the hallway into a room which might have been the kitchen. For an instant I thought of returning quickly to the blue umbrella. But I forced myself inside and began to look around. At the foot of the stairs I paused, watching the moving curtain down the hall on the second floor. The curtain drifted back out the window; someone was standing where the curtain had been. At once I raced out of the house, taking off through the high grass. Halfway across the field I stopped, without glancing back.

Had I seen a man or a woman? I wasn't sure. But how frightening! A face like a mannequin. A terrible white face. A girl . . . yes . . . more like a girl. Obviously she was watching me now from the upstairs window—if she had not chased after me! I looked back; no one was coming at me through the grass.

I watched *that* window for a long time. Then I returned to the ladies under the blue umbrella. I had caught up the kites on the way, and I sat now with them in my lap; I was silent, my eyes on my hands and the kites.

"Where did you go to fly your kite?" Elsie asked me. I pretended not to hear. Mother and Madame Lance stopped their chattering and waited; after an uncomfortable interval, Elsie poured me a glass of lemonade and Mother and Madame Lance began speaking at the same instant. I drank with my attention on the glass. Again, the silence. I glanced up and saw that everyone's attention was directed at something behind me. I stiffened, not having forgotten the house so quickly. Elsie stood up and walked behind me.

"Here is my Paul," she announced.

I turned to a tall dark boy with terror in his face. I forced myself to look at Mother; she reached and took Paul's white hand. Elsie poured him some lemonade, regarding the two of us with a severe frown.

"Is something the matter, Paul?"

He continued to stare at me as he drank his lemonade. He was perhaps eleven; and I thought at once that I did not like this Paul.

"Breno has two kites," Elsie mentioned, still frowning. "He brought them with him. . . . Would you like to help Breno put up a kite?"

Paul got up with his glass and started quickly across the lawn; after a few yards, he stopped and looked back at me. Mother's glance told me to join Paul. I was furious, with her and with all of them.

"Don't tell them," Paul said, his face still drawn with fright.

"Tell them what?" I asked. We walked over to the fountain and sat down. The stocky man in the pajama suit was picking roses nearby.

"You didn't tell them anything?" Paul whispered.

"You mean Mother—and your mother?"

"Yes."

I was thinking of the house out there in the field. I looked in that direction, then back at Paul.

"I didn't mean to scare you," he said.

"You mean . . . at the house?"

He nodded. "I have some of my mother's old . . . things. And a couple of masks too and . . . I like to go out to my—the house and play there by myself There's nobody ever around here, you know I want to act someday."

"Oh."

"You won't say anything, I know. . . . My father wouldn't like it at all, Breno."

"I won't tell."

He had scared me; I still disliked Paul. He smiled at me, but I could not smile back.

"Are you staying long?" he asked timidly. I had never seen such enormous eyes—like his grandmother's. He was still frightened. . . . Or was he always frightened—always like that?

"We'll only be here today," I said.

He was unhappy. I watched him walk a few steps away, examining his fingers. "That's too bad. . . . I wish I could just go up to your mother and tell her to let you stay longer—maybe a week or something."

"But I don't want to say any longer than today," I said maliciously.

"Oh." He pretended to watch the man pick roses, but I caught him glancing back at me every few moments. "I guess I'll go back out to my house," he whispered. "Would you like to come with me, Breno?"

"No," I said sharply.

He entered the woods, but I saw him watching me from behind a tree. He was scratching his ear with a twig, his eyes still big, one white hand flat against the black of the tree.

Dinner was served outdoors that evening under a huge apple tree. The stocky man had changed from his pajama suit into a black coat and tie; he and a blonde girl laid the table with fresh fruits, hot bread and crackers, and assorted fish with a bright pink sauce. I did not touch the sauce, although Paul, who seemed to be enjoying it enormously, attempted to pass it to me on several occasions. I ignored him, barely glancing at him, never responding to his comments. I could see Mother was missing none of it. But I maintained an innocent concentration on my fish; I was having a game of it with Paul. The poor boy was terribly upset.

Once he made a little wave at me from across the table. "You're still not mad at me, are you?" he whispered.

I pulled back my lips and clenched my teeth for him. He dropped his fork and excused himself from the table. The three women watched him race back toward the house, then they silently regarded me. But I went on about my fish, now helping myself to the pink sauce which Paul apparently liked so much.

"I do wonder what it is," Elsie muttered.

"Perhaps he is excited about having a guest," Madame Lance remarked, her eyes fluttering, then narrowing down to curious, dark slits on me.

"Perhaps," Elsie said, pouring herself more wine and beginning a chat with Mother concerning children.

When Paul came back out, I went off to try my kite. I wanted him to watch me. I went around the side of the house again, near the fountain, and began to run, the kite lifting behind me in the pleasant evening wind. Paul sat down in the grass, well out of my way. I ran all the faster, cutting close to Paul. A terrible Smack! The kite flipped, caught on a bush and ripped. I cursed at the kite, then at Paul. I gave him the ugliest look I could make. He stared.

The kite was ruined. To show Paul that I could be quite a violent person, I hastily broke the sticks into small pieces, cursing all the while. Then I proceeded to break the pieces further. Finally I threw them off toward the woods. I began to assemble the second kite, watching Paul from the corner of my eye. He had crept closer.

"It isn't so good . . . flying a kite here now. . . . Can I help you, Breno?"

I ignored him, finished the kite, and fixed the string to it; I ran, the kite dragging through the grass behind me. Paul did a funny step as he leaped out of the way and I laughed back.

"I didn't mean to scare you," he called.

The kite lifted; I was surprised to see it go up so easily. In a few minutes it was as high as the trees bounding the property. I gave Paul another nasty look. The wind failed. The kite settled its smiling moon face in the trees. Gently. Again I began to curse, much louder than before. "Damn! Damn!"

Paul was thoroughly startled. "I will get it for you," he sputtered; at once he ran off toward the trees. I followed, amused with Paul.

He could not climb well at all; he lost his balance and slipped to the ground after making it to the lowest branch. "I'll get it for you, don't worry." His trousers were jerked up to his knees and his calves were scratched; he went on trying, much to my pleasure. But he was frightened. After considerable trouble he arrived at the lowest branch again. He balanced on it, staring down at me. "I will get it for you, Breno. Okay?"

I peered up at the sun coming through my yellow kite; I didn't say a word.

After a while he started up the big tree.

"I'll bring it down for you, Breno. . . . You won't be mad anymore."

The wind was pleasant, scented with roses and nasturtiums. Such a funny boy. I would be visiting Madame Lance again. What times I would have with this funny person.

"Breno!"


A great, a horrible crashing! Paul! Falling through the big tree! Paul—suddenly!—at my feet, the yellow paper, the broken sticks in his hands, his head turning up from the left—his white face seeking me. Motionless.

I screamed after a long moment. I screamed until I roused the women from beneath the blue umbrella.

We did not go back home for three days. We stayed for Paul's funeral where there were many, many wealthy people—Paul's mother's friends. They regarded me with curiosity and told me how sorry they were that I had to see my *little friend* die like that. Madame Lance was carried to her room and did not come out again while I was there. Elsie fainted three times—twice on the day that Paul died; Paul was her only child; her husband was dead.

I did not cry until I was home, until I was alone in my room and I looked out the window at the trees in our yard, a much smaller yard. In my mind the girl at the house in the field had not been Paul . . . she changed. She became lovely. She was real and still lived out there in the field with the high yellow grass . . . lovely. I tried very hard to make myself believe there had never been a Paul. Only that girl who lived alone. . . .

I thought much later that I might visit her some day. But it would not be with Mother that I would be going. Madame Lance and Elsie did not write to Mother again; nor did she ever again see them. Mother never mentioned Paul. Apparently she forgot him.

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