

The Best of Friends, vol. 1

ANTHOLOGY OF NEW QUAKER WRITING
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FELLOWSHIP OF QUAKERS IN THE ARTS

An Excerpt From

The Pariahs

A Short Story by

John Miller

It was 7:00 p.m., and Pastor Mary Margaret Wilcox had just finished listening back into sanity a mother of five small boys. The gaunt woman, her hands and arms trembling and grasping a sofa pillow, had shown Mary how she came within a breath of smothering her youngest, because he wouldn't stop crying.

The day before yesterday, Mary had coaxed an elderly church member out of his car after his dog and only companion, General Atwood, had died. When she found him, the ancient patriarch had duct-taped a garden hose to the exhaust pipe and, sitting in the front seat of the car, was holding the other end of the hose in his hands and talking into it, to his wife who had died two years earlier, to General Atwood, to God, as if each of these held the other end of the hose to an understanding ear.

Right now, she drove through dense fog and reflected on these and a dozen other crises of the last ten weeks. She felt pulled in too many different directions while events propelled her into a thick, angry darkness.

The whining screech of truck gears stopped her thoughts, and a massive object congealed out of the white soup from a driveway into the roadway in front of her. She pumped her brakes. The heavy shadow groaned into the opposite lane and then sank back into the mist.

She drew in a deep breath of air and slowly let it ease back out.

Slowed to fifteen miles an hour, she calculated she would still get to the church on time for "the trial." It was a repulsive name for this meeting of the Overseers of Hidden Valley Friends Church, but the voices that had pricked her ear drums the last several days had used the word more than once.

She imagined the wrinkled, alert faces who would join her around the table, who would feel satisfied to be the jury and the judge of this business. She imagined Grace and Jonathan, excluded from this meeting, not even accorded the rights they would be guaranteed in a civil court. She said, "Okay, God, you and I know what this is all about. We've talked about it and talked about it the last five days, but this is a mess you have to get into. I don't know what to do. And it would help me just a little, if you would give me a clue. Just one clue about where we're headed."

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Ten weeks earlier, Grace Baker had insisted on "accidentally" meeting Pastor Mary at The Gap in Rosewood Mall; she hadn't wanted her father, who was Clerk of Overseers in the Church, to suspect she sought the counsel of their Pastor. Each had driven there separately.

They strolled from The Gap to the Food Court. Shorter by three inches than Grace, Mary cocked her left ear slightly upward to hear the hushed words Grace spoke. Mary said, "When your father came into your room, what did he say?" The encompassing rumble of anonymous voices and the drifting waves of strangers brought them a sense of protected communion.

"He said, you know, that sex is important. It's part of life. Like I didn't know it." She began to breathe in little jerks. "He said he wanted me to experience...good sex. Said, it'll help me when I pick a mate. He ran his fingers across my face. Like some guy might try...on a date."

Grace shivered. "He said— God, this is hard— to take off my clothes."

"How did that make you feel?"

"I— I— Scared?"

"Keep in mind his words. What did they feel like? Stay with the words and the feeling until an image comes that pictures what those words did to you."

They sat down at a table on the edge of the food court. Grace closed her eyes, and seemed for a few moments to lose some of the wrinkled tension along the length of her face and neck.

But when she spoke, it was through a sputter of tears. "Like he...plunged a knife...into my heart and I couldn't...pull it out." She pulled another tissue out of the little packet in her hand and patted her eyes and cheeks.

Mary said, "Tell me about the knife."