

## FULL CIRCLE

Margot Webb

She never could stand children who played in front of her house. Their high pitched voices echoed in her head, much as her footsteps did in the empty house she now occupied. Balls bounced on hard pavement with rhythmic insistence, like the heartbeats of the children themselves.

She locked herself in her great, old house, had even taken on the pallor of her ivory walls. Now Sarah only went out once a day, when she knew her neighbors sat around dinner tables, regurgitating their daily existence, while televisions blasted to the accompanying monotone of the speaker. She wanted no one to see her. She only wanted to walk to the lake.

She'd lived alone in her dark house, since David had left. He couldn't stand her silence, her quiet walk, her shadow self, her lack of hope or faith.

"I have to go, you understand that," he'd pleaded, concerned but anxious to be on his way.

Sarah's brown eyes, too large in a face grown thin, showed confusion, and misery.

"No!" She'd howled like a hurt animal, but only once.

David took her short outburst as permission, and left hastily, tires screeching, down the driveway and turned into the night lit street. Still, Sarah's one cry squeezed his heart, while his heavy breathing gave testimony to his own sense of guilt.

Sarah, had heard the door close, listened as the car started. She strained for the sound of the motor, until it was totally gone. She became enveloped in a sense of unreality which wrapped itself around her like a thick fog.

Why hadn't she been able to speak? Or pray to God? Or cry?

She searched and searched for explanations. Locked in her upstairs room, she'd look at photographs, diaries, and day dream, trying to discover how she had come to this point in her life. She never asked for help, immersing herself in herself.

As a young girl, she had already been apart from the mainstream. She loved to read, listen to music, walk by herself. Oh, she'd been lonely, many times. She just didn't know how to get started, how to make friends with groups of laughing girls in her classes.

"You're so different," they'd taunt.

"Different from what?" she usually countered back, her face reddened with anger. Shame followed. She wasn't enough for the girls... or her mother, as a matter of fact.

She couldn't grasp exactly how to become like the rest of them. How to talk to boys, or chat about clothes, and movies. She wasn't light enough. A heaviness clung to her, which she couldn't shake.

Her mother had been extremely disappointed in her.

"I thought when I had a daughter," she often sighed, "I would have a happy child who'd like to dance, love pretty clothes, enjoy life a little, and eventually become my friend." When she made this remark, she always patted her own perfectly coiffed hair, while looking pointedly at Sarah's long dark curls, which seemed to have a life of their own.

Sarah mostly felt contrite. Before her father had died, he had been her advocate.

"Leave the girl alone," he'd beg. "She is a person in her own right. Just like you are my darling," and he'd hug his wife, nuzzle her neck, while Sarah stood awkwardly by. She stared at the floor, sometimes peeking at them while her mother was being soothed.

"What about me?" she cried with her inside voice and leave the room. Even then she never uttered a word of complaint aloud.

When she left home in San Francisco, to go to an Eastern university, she flowered. Her years of reading had paid off. She made a few friends, who thought she had an amazing mind. In her own way, she felt popular, and wished her mother could see her now. Yet, she knew these friends would never please her family enough. They didn't join the right sororities, and had become a little group of their own. They had heated discussions about politics and poetry, music and whatever else interested them.

One day, in the library, she met David. He sat at a table next to her and moaned from time to time. She turned to him to ask him to be quiet, but when she saw his face, she was completely taken by his wonderful blue eyes, his aquiline nose, and full mouth. Nothing in his face seemed to match, but the total effect made him beautiful. A kind face!

They began to whisper in the library. He apologized for his noisy moans, told her he had trouble with an assignment.

“Let’s have a cup of coffee,” he suggested, after an hour. “I think we’re getting angry stares from the librarian.” They stood up quietly, books in their arms and left. It was autumn, and as they walked, they kicked at the golden leaves, which were still wet from last night’s rain. By the time they reached a coffee shop, they held hands.

From then on they became inseparable. He studied medicine, and knew from boyhood he wanted to become a pediatrician. To Sarah the university had appeared like a smorgasbord of delicious subjects. She tasted so much of it, but had no direction as yet.

David and Sarah easily opened to each other and talked or loved until the early hours of morning. Her self absorption vanished.

By winter they were engaged. Sarah’s mother was overjoyed. How on earth had her daughter pulled it off? She had never really noticed Sarah’s beauty, her large brown eyes, abundant hair, tiny frame, and her sharp, intellectual mind. She gave Sarah advice how to hold on to David. Sarah, listening to her mother, wondered how she had ever grown into adulthood with any sanity.

After they finished their studies, David suggested to Sarah they might live in a small town in the Northern part of the country, adjoining Canada.

“My parents left me a house, and the town needs a good doctor, especially a pediatrician.” Sarah agreed. She was in love and it didn’t matter where they’d settle. To live with David as his wife and his companion was all she wanted. She was accepted, at last. She kept only one thought to herself. She didn’t really like his devout religious rituals every morning and evening. She refused to tell him

about her atheism, so as not to hurt him... more afraid it might end their otherwise perfect relationship.

She had not prepared herself for the huge old Victorian house, which gave an air of gloom. It reminded her of her darkest self, yet she seldom did anything to change furniture or wall hangings. She left it as it was.

Her life only centered around him. She read and read, and tried to find something of interest to talk about in the evenings. She turned his favorite music on the moment she heard his car drive up. Sarah always cooked wonderful meals, with accompanying wines. She was constantly ready for David.

Often he asked her if she'd made any new friends in town.

"I don't have time," her repetitive reply annoyed him.

David shook his head in slight disapproval and began to invite people from time to time. Sarah always gracious, made these times special, but he could see that she heaved a sigh of relief when they left. She never talked with David about their guests. She simply had no interest in them.

No matter how late it was, she heard his evening prayers before coming to bed. Of course, she never joined him. Her secret atheism made sharing his religious beliefs impossible. Her excellent meals, her talks about books might not have been what he needed.

Now, as Sarah looked back, now that she lived alone, she wondered, if the guests in their house had been a threat. In her uncertainty she'd become a recluse without being conscious of it.

Why hadn't she been able to hold him? She couldn't blame it on her lack of religion. The lake, the terrible lake in the woods just outside town had destroyed her life. She had nothing to do with it.

"Nothing?" a nasty voice at the bottom of her soul, smirked. "Nothing, Sarah?"

Sarah sat very still, unable to move, paralyzed. Everyone in town knew. Sarah tried to push it out of her mind, but it stayed in her heart, and tore at her every minute of her existence.

After the accident and before he left her, his friends and their neighbors came nightly, for Shiva. He loved his town's integrated community.

"Would you like bourbon, gin, a glass of wine?" he'd offer after the solemn prayers finished. He'd point people to delicate platters of food made by Sarah.

Sarah hid upstairs and listened to their voices, the clink of glasses. Condolences were always the first sound. Then prayers reverberated throughout the house. Afterwards David made the guests smile with little reminiscences of Leah, although he couldn't hide his pain. It showed in his eyes.

After a while, Sarah realized their downstairs had become separate from the rest of the house. She had the distinct feeling she didn't belong there.

The child's death superseded all!

Always, at the door, while shaking hands with one or another of their friends, David covered for Sarah, "She's taking it hard. Please forgive her for not coming downstairs." Heads nodded with understanding.

After these visits David sat in the armchair facing their enormous fireplace. He'd stare at the fire into his private hell. At these times, Sarah padded downstairs, and took her place on the floor next to his chair. He'd pat her head absent-mindedly. An occasional sigh from him told Sarah that he had not forgiven her, nor would he ever. After a few moments, she'd get up without a word and return to her upstairs hideaway.

At other times he faced Sarah and tried to converse with her.

"How about dinner and a movie tonight?" he'd ask.

Her great eyes stared accusingly at him.

"How could I go?" she whispered.

She prepared sparse dinners now. She sent the maid, hired by David, after the accident, to the market on a daily basis, so she could be alone even longer.

When he returned from rounds at the hospital, she could hear David greet the children who played in the front of their house.

He kissed her, sometimes too passionately as though to bring a spark of life into her still, motionless body. Sarah liked being held. It felt safe, but his kisses disturbed her. He wanted something from her she could not give, not now.

David often called his patients at the hospital from home. They were very sick children who had learned too early about pain. He teased and cajoled them, while Sarah admired his strength and compassion. He was a devoted pediatrician, whose love for children became evident in the way he spoke to them.

She recalled one day at the lake when David had pulled her down on a log, long before the accident.

“I have to tell you a story,” he said. For a long time he stared at the deep black lake, surrounded by old pine trees, whose dark shadows reached like fingers into the water’s reflection.

“When I was ten or eleven years old,” David began, “two friends and I decided to swim in this lake. Our parents had told us never to go in, because the water is icy cold all year round. Oh, we’d go canoeing with our father, life jackets securely fastened, or have picnics on the shore, but we never went swimming. We’d dip our hands into the water from the canoe and splash each other, shrieking at the cold. We never went in.” David repeated.

Sarah had instinctively put her arms around her husband. He wasn’t about to tell her a simple childhood adventure.

“Go on,” she’d encouraged.

“The day seemed so hot,” David continued, and nervously played with a piece of her long, dark hair, “We weren’t bad kids, just full of energy and high spirits.”

He paused again, though briefly. He took a pipe out of his pocket, filled it with aromatic tobacco and continued.

”I jumped in first. My teeth chattered. I tried to call to the others not to come in. The water’s iciness hurt my jaw and my screams became mini squeaks. Both Jimmy and Greg dove in after me, but immediately began to flail about.

I don’t know if it was a sixth sense parents sometimes have, or whatever propelled my father to run through the small wood toward the lake, at that particular moment.

David puffed on his pipe, while Sarah began to shiver in anticipated fear. She stared at the black lake, whose gentle ripples gave no evidence of any struggle.

“My father jumped in,” David went on, “just took off his shoes and jumped in! Within seconds his arm wrapped around my waist as he kicked, struggled and finally threw me onto shore. Then he went after Jimmy and Greg who had drifted further away from land and from each other. As I sat on the rocks, shaking with cold, I watched my father reach for Greg, almost touching him, but not soon enough. Greg disappeared into the icy black water. My father was losing strength as he swam toward Jimmy. He grabbed his shoulder, but Jimmy struggled hysterically, until neither my father nor my friend had any way of going on. They sank like stones, while I sat on the edge, safely rescued. I watched three people die that day. It had been my fault, I was sure. My idea to go swimming! I lost my father and my two best friends. “David took a deep breath. Sarah held his face against her breast.

They never spoke of the incident again, but a deeper closeness held them tightly to each other. It all seemed so long ago. He’d expressed his lifelong guilt to her, and she’d responded.

A few months later Sarah became pregnant. She was ecstatic, filled the old house with flowers, painted the nursery, put up happy children’s pictures. David bought teddy bears by the dozen, or so it seemed to Sarah. Laughter and spontaneous excited chatter changed the atmosphere of their old Victorian home.

They walked often to the lake, as though to taunt its dark smooth surface. They were going to have a child, and David hoped his friends and father would be avenged, at least to some extent.

When Leah was born on a brilliant June day, she looked like an angel to her parents. Tufts of blonde hair, already gave promise of curls to come.

Sarah and David delighted in Leah as she grew into a pretty, calm child. People in town often mentioned her cherubic face, while Sarah began to soften toward her neighbors.

One afternoon, she packed a picnic lunch to take Leah to the lake. She had pulled an old canoe from the garage wall, cleaned it, and placed it on top of her station wagon.

They munched sandwiches and fruit at a nearby wooden table, contentedly enjoying the sun's warmth.

Three year old Leah after taking her last bite, stood up and said, "Mommy, let's get the canoe now."

Sarah slowly put the remains of their picnic away, lifted the small canoe from the top of her car and pulled it toward the lake.

She carried her child into the boat, and before she jumped in admired her daughter's blonde curls as sunlight struck them. Leah's big blue eyes danced with excitement and her tiny sturdy legs, still reminiscent of her former baby self, were planted firmly in the canoe.

They began to paddle lazily around the lake. The air, clean and crisp, helped make their day magical.

Leah caught her reflection in the lake.

"Look, look Mommy. I can see myself," the child screamed as she bent closer and closer to the water.

Eerie silence followed seconds later, as Leah slipped into the murderous black depth.

Sarah, alone in the tiny canoe opened her mouth to scream, "God," but no sound came from it. She sat frozen in time and space.

Late that night, a search crew headed by David found her still sitting in the canoe, paddles making tiny swishing noises.

From far away, she heard David's agonized cry, "No life jacket!" She felt herself being pulled to shore. Flashlights danced like ghosts, on the water.

Fog rose and held her in a vice, from which there would never be any escape.