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Still Waters

James Calvin Schaap

"He leads me beside still waters"

I was 32 years old when someone at Bread Loaf Writers Conference called to tell me that my application for a scholarship had been accepted and they were offering me a position as a waiter. I had no idea what that meant, but I understood clearly from the conversation that the offer was a good, good thing.

The house where we lived at that time is long gone, as is the tiny kitchen where I stood, phone in hand, listening. The call had come in the middle of the day, in the middle of a meal. Our two little kids were sitting beside us.

It's now a quarter century later, but I will never forget receiving that call because I had the distinct feeling that my being chosen for a waiter's scholarship to the granddaddy of all writers conferences, Bread Loaf, was a signal that fame and fortune lay just down the road before me. I had just published a book, my first, with a tiny, local press; now, Bread Loaf beckoned. *The New York Times Book Review* was a year away.

When I flew into Burlington, Vermont, for the Conference—early, because I was a waiter—I met a beautiful woman, my age, married with two children, who said she was an aspiring poet. She'd also be a waiter. Someone from the Conference picked us up, but we took the hour-long drive together into Vermont's Green Mountains.

Ten days later, when we boarded a plane to leave, she and I stood on the stairway to a small jet, waiting to enter the cabin. She looked at me and shook her head. "I hope this plane crashes," she said, and she meant it.

She'd been wooed by a celebrity poet, and she'd

fallen. On the dance floor at night, the two of them looked like smarmy high school lovers, which might have seemed embarrassing if it hadn't happened to so many others. Another waiter—also married with kids, two of them—told me it was important for him to have an affair because, after all, as an artist he needed to experience everything in order to write with authority.

I am thankful to God for sending me to Bread Loaf, but it wasn't an easy place to be, for a waiter or anyone else, I'd guess. I'd lived most of my life in small, conservative communities who prided themselves on their church-going. Adultery was real, but something of a scandal; it wasn't commonplace.

The atmosphere in that mountaintop retreat was electric. Aspiring writers like me flirted daily with National Book Award winners, editors, agents, and publishers. Life—dawn 'till dawn—was always on stage.

I am thankful to God for sending me to Bread Loaf because I learned a great deal about writing, but much more about life itself and my place in it. In the middle of that frenetic atmosphere, on a Sunday morning, I walked, alone, out into a meadow, away from people, where I found a green Adirondack chair and sat for an hour, meditating. I tried to imagine what the soft arm of my little boy would feel like in my fingers; at the same time I recited, over and over again, these very words. The 23rd psalm.

I remember a beautiful mountain stream, but there were no still waters at Bread Loaf Writers Conference the summer of 1980. If there were, I didn't see them. But that Sabbath's very personal worship, right there in the middle of the madness, brought me—body and soul—to the very place David has in mind in verse two.

Honestly, I know still waters. He led me there.