



Mary Carroll Moore

Qualities of Light

*How many writers have caught that
lighting in a bottle that is young love? The
story, set in lush summer in the Adirondacks,
suffuses the young lovers with the qualities of
light that illuminate the water, the woods, and
the human heart. This is a tender and lovely
coming-of-age tale told with delicate language,
a romance etched in moonlight – the one we all
wish we had had in our seventeenth summer.*

Ann Bannon

Advance praise for *Qualities of Light*

“*Qualities of Light* is a coming-of-age story replete with lyrical and marvelous detail. Mary Carroll Moore succeeds brilliantly at showing how easily the fragile bonds of family can be torn apart—and how they can be restored by honesty and forgiveness. In one momentous summer, Molly Fisher discovers that the world is not black and white, and her struggle makes her a heroine any reader will remember long after the last page is read.”

—Lori L. Lake, author of many novels including the 2007 Golden Crown Literary Society “Goldie” Winner *Snow Moon Rising*

“Mary Carroll Moore’s skill as a painter blends beautifully with her sensitive portrayal of first love in *Qualities of Light*. She successfully layers Molly Fisher’s many struggles—guilt surrounding her brother’s accident, frustration that she and her father don’t understand each other, and confusion over where she fits in a group of lake friends. Shining through these layers are Molly’s vivid voice and her deepening love for a young woman named Zoe. Moore’s skillfully crafted novel both moves and entertains as she follows Molly’s summer journey.”

—Catherine Friend, author of *Hit by a Farm*, *The Crown of Valencia*, and other books

“*Qualities of Light*, by Mary Carroll Moore, isn’t just a beautifully nuanced contemporary lesbian romance, but a sensitive exploration of the cruelty and kindness—the intricate balancing act—that is family love. I couldn’t recommend it more highly.”

—Ellen Hart, author of twenty-one mystery novels, five-time winner of the Lambda Literary Award, two-time Minnesota Book Award winner for Best Crime and Detective Fiction; author of the Jane Lawless Mystery series.

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2009

Author's Note: Although some of the Adirondack towns and communities in this story are loosely based on real places I have lived in and loved, I changed significant details to make them fictional. Any resemblance to real locations or to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

There's a real Daggett Lake water skiing competition each summer. I attended it once in the rain, but it's completely fictionalized for this novel.

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Spinsters Ink
P.O. Box 242
Midway, FL 32343

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Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

First Edition Spinsters Ink 2009

Editor: Katherine V. Forrest
Cover designer: Stephanie Solomon-Lopez

ISBN-10: 1-935226-06-1
ISBN-13: 978-1-935226-06-2

About the Author

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Acknowledgments

A big thank you to skilled editor Katherine V. Forrest and visionary publisher Linda Hill for believing in this story.

Much gratitude to the supportive community of writers, instructors and students at the Loft Literary Center and the Hudson Valley Writers' Center. Thank you to the wise teachers who added to my writing toolbox over the years, especially my advisers in the M.F.A. program at Goddard College—Jan Clausen and Rebecca Brown—where this novel began. I treasure the creative and extraordinary women who came to the Eagle that pivotal August week to share their hearts by the fire and listen to the first story about Molly and Zoe. Thanks also to extraordinary writing instructor Alison McGhee, whose excellent “object” exercise led to the idea of Sammy’s jackknife. Appreciation to Minneapolis’ own Thursday Night Writers, who sat patiently through many early drafts of these chapters; the Saturday writers from Dunn Bros. Coffee in Minneapolis, an unfailingly supportive group (especially Ellen Grady and Mary Sue Lobenstein, who read final drafts); writers Barbara Buckner, Nancy McMillan and Linnie York, who delivered enthusiastic feedback under deadline; and friends and family who kept me going to the finish line.

I couldn’t have done this without Joan and Harold, who taught me why good editing leads to good writing. Or my beloved families, past and present, who believed in me. Or Becca, who always holds my heart and vision in her loving hands.

For my new family, with love

Approach your subject in all humility and reverence—make yourself highly sensitive to its beauty.

Charles W. Hawthorne
Hawthorne on Painting

There are moments in our lives, there are moments in a day, when we seem to see beyond the usual. Such are the moments of our greatest happiness. Such are the moments of our greatest wisdom. If one could but recall his vision by some sign. It was in this hope that the arts were invented. Sign-posts on the way to what may be.

Robert Henri
The Art Spirit

Prologue

Weeks before my little brother Sammy got lost, his voice took on the clarity of a boy soprano. He was six that summer, and he liked to lie in the dirt under our Adirondack cabin, singing. Sound rang through the wide plank floors, eerie and angelic, stirring the heated air.

I lay on my bed in the hot afternoon, reading the same sentence of *Anna Karenina* five times before I went downstairs to quiet Sammy, knowing he'd start again as soon as I went away. He sang at night too, a high hum from his bed across the room. I fell asleep to my brother's music and the clink of my mother making ice in the kitchen.

Down the hill from our cabin, Cloud Lake made its own music. It lapped the rocks and shimmered—dark at night, blue and sharp in the still heat of day. It waited for clouds to pass, to reflect themselves in its flat surface. Although I didn't know it then, that summer I too waited for any impression, my heart as expectant as unmoving water.

Three months from sixteen, I was only beginning to sense

where I was located inside my life. But I always knew where Sammy was.

I couldn't imagine not hearing him.

Chapter 1

My brother lay surrounded by white, the steel-railed hospital bed too big for his small body. The edge of his ear, his cheek, were flushed, like a little kid got after dreaming. My inhale from the doorway hurt my throat. I waited for him to turn toward me and sit up. But Sammy was quiet, one foot exposed, one shoulder, thin and bony in Superman pajamas, barely lifting the sheet.

My mother sat slumped to half her height in a plastic chair. Her feet were the only thing moving, little jerks like she wanted to run. When she saw me in the doorway, a tremor ran through her, shaking the chair to a sudden squeak. She stood up to hug me, her face wet. My dad didn't move. He was by the window, studying the black parking lot, still wearing the sweats he'd slept in.

Aunt Anna nudged me. I walked over, my weighted feet a few seconds behind my body. Sam's chest went up and down, the monitors beeped, his long eyelashes flickered on his cheeks. From outside the window came the muffled traffic of Plattsburgh, the shriek and fade of an ambulance siren. Someone ran fast down

the hall. I moved to cover Sam's toes with the blanket.

"Sam's heart is beating normally," the ICU doctor had told us last night, after ten hours. "His vital signs are excellent. We got him off oxygen. But we expected him to wake up by now."

My mother's voice had been irritated. "He's sleeping. What's wrong with that?" She sat up taller, shrugged off my father's hand, her long braid of white-blond hair stark and fluorescent down her back.

"We're wondering if he hit his head on something," said the doctor. He towered above us, stifling a yawn. "Maybe the side of the boat?" My dad's eyes slid toward me.

"My brother. . ." I began.

"Is just sleeping," my mother interrupted. "Sleeping is normal for a six-year-old. Seven, today." Gentle fingers touched my arm as she turned to smile at me, celebrating Sam's birthday.

I closed my eyes. I wanted to shake my brother, tell him to stop fooling around.

In another life, Sam and I were still on Cloud Lake. Before I tried to show off, before the moment when I swerved the motorboat, cut through the sparkling waves.

The doctor went out to a vending machine in the hall. The machine slosed, and the smell of coffee filled the air. When he came back in, sipping, his erect posture had fallen into an apologetic slump.

After my Aunt Anna brought me home from the hospital Tuesday morning, I stood alone on the cabin's wraparound porch, listening to crows call warnings from the pines overhead, studying my still life.

It was a small painting, of a single pear lying on its side against an old lilac sweater of my mother's, tilted as if it would tumble. I had started it Sunday, the day before everything happened. The unsteadiness of the pear, the suppressed movement, the colors glowing in the morning light had drawn me, but now it was as jumbled as my mind.

Still lifes are a painter's scales. My dad had taught me this

early, his big hand guiding my small one as soon as I was able to firmly grasp a stick of pastel. His delight in my early attempts and his belief in me buoyed my life, and without complaint I'd painted a solitary apple twelve times until I saw enough nuances of line and form to please him. I thought it right that only then was I allowed a landscape.

It was worth learning still life first, my father said. Painters faked landscapes all the time, but skill was immediately seen in a still life.

The crows crowded the feeder hung from the eaves of the porch and I waved them away. They rose cawing into the cedar-scented heat of the June morning, circling toward the lakeshore where the water pounded rough against the rocks.

I pushed my glasses up on my nose, trying to see better. That was something else I'd lost yesterday. They lay somewhere at the bottom of Cloud Lake, covered in silt. This spare pair was way too small, perched like an old lady's spectacles. I adjusted the earpieces for a few minutes, then I took them off.

Blurry was easier.

I'd just finished a second piece of toast and another fifteen minutes of discouraged staring at my still life, when I heard footsteps on the cabin path.

My aunt had brought my cousin, who carried groceries from Price Chopper in Plattsburgh. Sarah dumped two bags, settled in the most comfortable chair, and pulled nail polish and *Jane* out of her bag like she lived here. I said hi and went to help Anna with groceries. Anna didn't say anything but gave me a hard hug, took one bag to the kitchen.

"Hey, I'm sorry about Sammy," Sarah said. She did look sorry, for a few seconds. "Hey," she said again, "you remember Chad Anderson?"

Anna and I looked quickly at each other; I looked away first.

"Yup," I said. "I remember Chad."

"He's back on the lake and he's playing at the Boat House Friday night," Sarah said. "I'm doing sound. You should come."

"I may be needed here."

“Why?”

“Sarah!” Anna shook her head.

“I don’t know,” I said.

“I’ll pick you up,” Sarah said, like she was doing me a favor.

“You don’t drive.”

Sarah grinned. “I do, actually. I got my license yesterday. While you were at the hospital. Get this, I almost drove over this cop’s foot!” She lifted one tiny black sandal. “They wanted me to wear real shoes. I told them these were from Milan, and it was in Italy, so that made them real shoes.”

“Heaven help us,” my aunt said, but she wasn’t smiling.

“So you should come Friday,” Sarah said. “I need practice with real passengers.”

I sank into a chair and put my feet on the table, staring at my father’s blue coffee mug, unwashed from the day before. It communicated a shivery image of driving with Sarah and talking to Chad Anderson, who knew about everything that had happened.

“You could dance,” Sarah said. “I bet Chad would ask you.”

No, he wouldn’t. I rocked my chair on its back legs, the motion soothing the even worse image of the crowded room of the Boat House—having to smile for hours at one of the booths, sitting alone at the bar, trying to make a Coke last all evening.

“Friday may not work,” I told Sarah. “I’ve got stuff to do.”

My bare foot was trying to dance on the table’s edge, balance my chair, and find warmth in a moving patch of sunlight. Almost without thinking, I let it contact my dad’s favorite mug, feeling the glazed surface.

My cousin tapped long nails on the counter. “You always make life so complicated, Molly Fisher. A person could drive to Albany and back in the time it takes you to make a simple decision.”

I nudged the cup to the floor. Blue chips flew. We all looked down at coffee pooling on weathered wood. My aunt bent with paper towels, her eyes understanding.

“Go, Molly,” she said. “It’ll do you good to get out.”

“It’ll be fun,” Sarah said.

The broken cup made me feel better. Friday was three days

away. Sam would be awake by then. And I didn't have to dance. "Okay," I said. I could sit. Just for an hour.

Sarah stood up, thumping her magazine against her leg. "I'll pick you up at seven. Bring twenty bucks."

"Maybe I should stay home," I said, suddenly afraid. "Dad might need me."

Anna was bundling a wad of brown-stained paper towels toward the trash. She glanced up at me and slowly shook her head. Of course my father didn't want me around.

That afternoon, I crept under the cabin. Behind the woodpile I found the flattened dirt where my brother liked to hide, the small metal box I had given him for his birthday treasures. The latch was rusted and dirty, but I pried it open with a thumbnail.

The box was empty.

I had imagined finding something precious, something I could return to its rightful place. The cache by the lakeside boulder was empty too. I realized my brother had moved on to new hiding places.

I would have to search harder.

*We hope you enjoyed this
Bella Appetizer.*

