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At Night We Play Hearts

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AT NIGHT WE PLAY HEARTS

I had a good buzz going by the time I was dropped off in Gardiner, Montana by Wayne, a ranch hand who'd fished cans of Pearl from a Coleman cooler strapped into the bed of his pickup as he drove the twenty miles from Miner at breakneck speed. Before that I'd smoked a bowl with two French-Canadian seminarians who'd played "Dinah-Moe-Humm" over and over on a boombox inside their VW van, such that when they dropped me off at the turnoff for Pray and the head of a trail they were going to hike into the Absaroka Range, Frank Zappa's funk-inspired classic satire about a sexual dare gone wrong (or right, depending on how you looked at it) was grinding in my head and would be for days.

Inside Red's Blue Goose Saloon I ordered another Pearl. It was too early to hitchhike to the Boiling River Hot Spring, and I didn't relish the prospect of baking on Yellowstone's North Entrance Road. From where I sat, Roosevelt Arch, two stone pillars supporting voussoir and spandrel, wavered in the distance like a mirage into which a person might vanish. Better to arrive at the hot spring at twilight, I told myself, as I had the previous summer when I'd stumbled onto an orgy and found myself naked in a natural bath with more than a dozen naked strangers, three-quarters of them female and all of them drunk or stoned or tripping.

That summer I'd worked for the Hamilton Stores Corporation selling fishing tackle, light groceries, and camping supplies to tourists staying at the Lake Campground and wouldn't have known about the spring at all—it wasn't officially designated on any map—if a hippie couple a few years older than me hadn't come into the store needing duct tape to mend a rip in the floor of their tent. The woman was slender and gorgeous with straight dark hair that fell to breasts covered by blue threadbare crepe and pupils contracted to the size of periods. The man looked both young and wizened, his eyes sparkling as if through his sun-bleached curls they saw what ordinary mortals could not. As I waited on them, he told me they had wintered in Big Bend National Park, where at night they'd waded across the Rio Grande to the Mexican village of Boquias, purchased peyote buttons for six pesos a piece, and brought them back to the campground where they sold them at a

small profit to other desert-worshipping longhairs who were either too timid or lazy to procure the contraband themselves.

"It was a trip, man," he kept saying, "a real trip," and each time the woman smiled at him with such deference, such total devotion, I couldn't help thinking of my girlfriend Johanna back in her dorm room at the University of Minnesota, setting up her electric hot plate, kettle, and assortment of teas in preparation for the fall semester. What this couple had was what I wanted for us, and if she could've only seen them for herself, I thought, she would've wanted it, too. But whenever we talked long distance on the phone, she seemed more interested in anabolism and catabolism than she did in us, more interested in the mysteries of the carbon cycle than in those of the self in relation to others.

"Got any more you want to sell?" I asked.

"More what?"

"Buttons," I whispered, aware of my boss, Big John, manning the counter where I'd left a rental fishing reel I was cleaning in parts on the glass. "You know, peyote."

132 "Oh man," said the dude, "we ate the last ones ourselves two nights ago. You should've been there."

"It was mind-altering," the woman agreed. "Mind-fucking-altering. The whole experience. Everybody naked and loving one another." She turned to her man, beaming.

"We have to go back there."

"We will, darling, we will," he replied, and that's when they told me about the hot spring, even drew an X on the map taped to the display case to identify precisely where I would find it.

And find it I did, on my next day off.

If "orgy" was, in retrospect, overstating it, two couples were fucking in plain view of the rest of us, the men lying on their backs with their heads on rocks as the women they were with undulated on top of them, radiating waves that crested against our necks and chins. Nobody paid them any mind, so I didn't either, though it occurred to me that a woman could get pregnant from just sitting in such water. To my right and left, young people chatted about what an asshole somebody's foreman was, how rude a majority of tourists were, how hard it was to make any real money when vacationers to the park were such lousy tippers, and I gathered that nobody in the spring was remotely

like the hippie couple that had directed me there; they were all like me, college kids on summer break, earning minimum wage cleaning guest cottages, waiting tables, ringing up postcards, snacks, and souvenirs. None of them had eked out livings transporting peyote buttons by moonlight across the Rio Grande, none of them.

As I stretched out my arms on boulders, a girl with wavy brown hair and a tan that started at her fingertips and ended just above her elbows backed into my shoulder and chest and treated them as her personal backrest. I wasn't complaining, and for a time we stayed like that. Then she spun in the water to face me and her nipples brushed against my thigh. "Hello there," she said. "Who are you?"

"Who are you?" I asked.

"I asked you first," she said, so I told her my name and Pauline told me hers, shaking my hand under the water. From Great Neck, New York, she was studying forestry at the University of Maine–Orono, and working with the National Park Service as a Youth Conservation Corps volunteer, clearing trails and manning fire lookouts. Though the work wasn't as exciting as she'd hoped, it was all part of her plan to become a park ranger in Yellowstone. "I mean," she said and stood up on our rock ledge in nothing but a choker of cowrie shells, "look around us. Who would want to be anywhere else?"

133

It was sunset, and as Pauline, to her knees in the pool, lifted her arms as if supplicating herself before a benevolent God, reds, pinks, and violets high-lighted her hair. Rivulets, too, caught the last light as they coursed along the small of her back and backs of her thighs. Even the couples fucking paused to register their approval.

"Not me!" cried one of the men.

"Preach to us, Pauline!" cried one of the women. "Give us your sermon on the mount!"

"All of us gathered here today," Pauline proclaimed, "are the most blessed people on Earth."

"Amen, sister. Amen."

"God has seen fit," she said, "to bless us with one another in a landscape fully imbued with His holiness, mystery, and grace." Someone handed her a pint of Canadian Club, and as she tipped it to her lips, whiskey dribbled down her chin. Beyond the Gardiner River, a herd of bison lowed and stirred, an oil stain spreading on black velour.

"It's a sin not to appreciate His majesty and splendor."

"It's a sin not to appreciate yours," someone replied.

"Freddy," she said, "that you see God's handiwork in so lowly a creature as me is pitiful if gratifying."

As people clapped and whistled, Pauline slipped back into the pool, took another slug, and passed the bottle to me. "Put your arm around me," she said. When I did, she said, "Now hold me like you mean it." When I complied with this request as well, she kissed my neck, my ear, my hair as if starved for human touch. Our mouths met, and I had to push her gently away. "Don't tell me you have a girlfriend back home," she said.

What could I say? I did. But I didn't anymore. Johanna had broken up with me over the winter, citing "our irreconcilable visions of the future," and to show her I didn't need her or her obsession with biochemistry, I'd dropped out of college and lit out for I didn't know where. But as I ordered up Pearl after Pearl at Red's Blue Goose Saloon, I imagined meeting up with Pauline at the hot spring a full year after meeting her there the first time. I'd slip into the water and take up residency beside her, and by my actions she would know that nothing stood between us now. I wouldn't have to hold her *like* I meant it, I *would* mean it, and if she meant for me to make love to her there in the spring in front of a dozen of her friends, I would.

My inhibitions sent adrift on a river of lager, I paid my bar tab, bought a pint of Canadian Club at the off-sale window and stuffed the bottle into a side pocket of my backpack. In a restroom I brushed my teeth and gargled with Listerine. For two and half days I'd been gassed with fossil fuel exhaust, and when I emerged from the spring, I would be newly baptized, Johanna and her love of organic molecular compounds no more a part of me than the grease lifted from my skin in a rainbow-colored slick and carried away by the river.

No sooner had I stuck out my thumb than I was picked up on the North Entrance Road by retirees Jake and Mildred. They were driving a camper with Kansas plates, Jake in the driver's seat in a tan windbreaker and navy blue 45th Airborne Division cap, Mildred in a red button-down sweater and pink nylon scarf. Though it was still in the mid-nineties as the sun brushed the summit of Sepulcher Mountain five miles to the west, the cab was refrigerated to a temperature that would keep meat from spoiling.

"Welcome aboard," Jake said, as I fell into the seat vacated by Mildred and wedged my backpack between my knees and the dash.

"You can put your pack in the back with me," Mildred said, crouched like a gnome between her husband and me, "if you think you'd be more comfortable."

"No thanks," I said and told them I'd be getting out a mile or two past the north entrance gate.

"Just give me the word," Jake said, "and I'll pull over."

"He loves to pull over. It's why it takes us so long to get here from Wichita every year."

"Mildred's right," Jake replied. "I like to feel the earth under my feet."

"Also Jake's bladder isn't what it once was," Mildred said.

"So you come to Yellowstone every summer?" I asked.

"Every summer," Jake replied.

"This will be our eighteenth," Mildred said.

"We love it," Jake said.

"We've made a lot of friends over the years," Mildred said.

"Got that right," Jake said.

"Nowadays we play a lot of cards. We don't explore the natural wonders like we used to."

"Speak for yourself, Mildred."

"Jake explores. I mainly visit with friends and catch up on gossip."

"And at night we play hearts," Jake said.

Once through the entrance gate, I kept an eye out for the unmarked parking lot and trail through the brush to the flat basalt boulders that concealed the spring from passing motorists. "That's my stop up ahead," I said. A camper like Jake and Mildred's was parked on the gravel.

"I'll be," Jake said as he pulled up alongside the other vehicle. "That's Bill and Sandy's. Mildred, take a look."

"Yep," Mildred confirmed. "I'd recognize it anywhere."

Jake blared the car horn, but no one emerged from the shell. "Knowing them, they're probably out clodhopping." He turned to me. "You sure this is where you want to be let out? There doesn't appear to be much out here."

If I told them about the spring, they might ask to come along. "I'm going to pitch a tent beside the Gardiner River," I said, "and meditate like Siddhartha."

"Well, if you run into Bill and Sandy," Mildred said, "don't let them talk your ear off."

"They're talkers, those two," Jake said.

As I followed the trail through bull grass to the spring, Frank Zappa's "Dinah-Moe-Humm" played in my head, confirming my belief that I was on my way to a bacchanal despite the camper abandoned where cars, jeeps, and motorcycles had once been parked hubcap-to-hubcap. The same herd of bison floated between river and butte, and the musky smells of pine and dung served to vaporize the year that had elapsed between my visits, such that when the trail descended between boulders and paralleled the flats, and I glimpsed the outcropping of stones surrounding the pool, I wondered where all the lovely hedonists had fled, the couples fucking, Pauline and her drunken cohorts Colleen and Rachel who, when told I had a girlfriend back home, delighted in jiggling their breasts and taunting me with all that I was missing by remaining faithful.

Bathing in their place were Bill and Sandy, though neither said a word as I set my backpack in the dirt, dropped my drawers, and slid naked into the spring with them.

"Goddamn, it feels good to scrub off the sheep shit," I said. "Name's Wayne."

136

Probably they were as unhappy to see me as I was to see them, for in time Bill harrumphed and climbed from the water in his yellow swimming trunks, then helped Sandy out in her frilly turquoise one-piece. They had as much right to the palliative waters as anybody, and for that I resented them.

In thirty years I've married, divorced, and married again, and in truth I barely recognize the "me" I was, a cipher, I suspect, even to myself back then. What I remember about waking up beside the hot spring to which I'd returned a year after going there the first time, was that in the slanting light of dawn everything—the butte, the river, the rock on which I lay, my face mashed into a pillow fashioned out of an Icelandic wool sweater Johanna had given me for Christmas—seemed connected, interdependent. Maybe it was the times, but I believed that if a single blade of bull grass were erased—not plucked, shredded, smoked, or otherwise reconstituted, but separated from its existence atoms and all—earth and sky would fold into each other and become like cake batter, swirling and glutinous, no part recognizable from another.

My breath crystallized above me and dispersed. Across the river steam rose from the nostrils of bison and dispersed above the herd. From my backpack I withdrew my collapsible, ultralight fly-fishing rod, removed the sections of graphite from their wrapping of cloth, and assembled them into

a pole. To the cork handle I attached my reel, then threaded tapered leader and line through the eyelets. To the end I tied a tiny, brown caddis fly and cast it onto the roiling flats. On tiny filaments of bird feather it rafted among twigs and dandelion spores over haystacks of whitewater and vanished in the foam. I set the hook, my rod arcing over my shoulder like a honing antenna, directing sight to the middle of the river where a trout splashed back into the blue-black stream. As it raced against the current, my reel whined, and when it leapt from the river a second time, I watched its entire flight from takeoff to landing. I reeled it in, a beautiful eleven-inch rainbow, and let it go without exposing its gills to the air or soiling the delicate chemistry of its skin.

We were one, that trout and I. I was one with the bison, the red-tailed hawk. I was one with the dirt in my boot treads, the sulfuric gasses bubbling from the hot spring, the cloudless sky. As I hitchhiked through Yellowstone, I was one with the vehicles in which I rode, one with their spark plugs and motor mounts, their fan belts, alternators, carburetors, and valves, as well as the vehicles that passed me by. I was one with the drivers and their passengers, and they, whether they knew it or not, were one with me. If everything was one with everything else, then none of us were stuck with who we were; like carbon atoms, which combined with other elements more readily than any other on the periodic table, we could be anyone or anything we wished. And as I concocted stories about myself and passed them off as the truth, I thought myself profound.

137

It was while backpacking a day later along the Bechler River in the southwestern corner of the park that I met Carla and Ron, recently married geneticists doing postdoctoral work at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. The first day of what would amount to a three-day hike, they passed me as I lunched on handfuls of gorp, then I passed them as they snacked on Ritz crackers and brie, then they passed me as I soaked in a thermal bath, and I passed them as they were setting up their tent. By then we were on a first-name basis, and Ron asked me if I wanted to set up my tent next to theirs at the backcountry campsite they had reserved.

“There’s plenty of room,” he said, squatting on his haunches before a tent peg. “And we’d appreciate the company.”

Carla, on all fours straightening their sleeping bags, peered out from the triangular entrance, her caramel-colored hair in braids that fell to narrow,

angular wrists. "What Ron means," she said, "is we're bored shitless by each other and could use the company."

She laughed, and I laughed, too, though Ron's full beard couldn't hide his set jaw or pained scowl. "I think I'll press on," I said. "But thanks anyway."

As I tipped my cap, Carla called, "See you tomorrow?"

"Not if I see you first," I called back.

Though Pauline hadn't been waiting for me at the Boiling River Hot Spring, I nonetheless entertained the ridiculous notion that as darkness fell she would miraculously appear at my campsite. She would have a quarter mile left to hike, and I would make the same offer to her that Ron and Carla had made to me, and as she unpacked her tent I would tell her not to bother, there was plenty of room in mine. But, of course, she didn't appear—nobody did—and when Ron and Carla passed by my campsite the next morning I was cooking three small cutthroat in papillotes of aluminum foil. Two I'd landed the night before and strung in the stream on an aspen bough, the other I'd caught and cleaned before sunrise.

When I invited them to join me for breakfast, they glanced at each other, and Ron said, "Whatever you're making smells delicious."

"Trout," I said.

As they took off their backpacks, Carla said, "I'm sure it'll beat Ron's oatmeal."

"The oatmeal wasn't that bad," Ron said. "Carla's exaggerating."

"You're right," Carla said. "I'm exaggerating. I must've hallucinated the hole you dug with a spade as well as the lumps of oatmeal lying in it."

"I made more than we could eat," Ron said apologetically.

"Which explains why I'm so famished how?" Carla replied.

I asked them if they had their own cups, plates, and utensils, and Ron produced two sets from his backpack. As we sat on the trunks of fallen trees sipping Sanka, they asked me where I was going and where I'd been, and I told them I was on my way to Bozeman to meet up with my traveling companion Pauline, whose grandfather had passed away suddenly in Columbus, Ohio while we were hitchhiking from Big Bend National Park, where we'd spent the winter with other desert-worshipping longhairs like ourselves.

"Pauline and her granddad were very close," I said, embellishing a story told to me the summer before with details from stories told to me by drivers who'd picked me up on the plains of Minnesota and North Dakota. "Apparently they smoked a lot of weed together when she was a kid. I guess

he was pretty cool for an old fart. Attending his funeral was very important to her. I couldn't talk her out of it. So we parted ways in Amarillo on our way here."

"You didn't want to accompany her to the funeral?" Carla asked.

"Of course I did," I replied. "After all the peyote buttons we ate and vision quests we went on, I would've accompanied her to hell and back. But she felt the funeral was something she had to do on her own, and ultimately I had to respect her wishes, upsetting to me as they were."

"You poor thing," Carla said.

"I miss her," I said, "but we'll be together again soon enough."

"How cool is that?" Ron said. "You two are hippies, aren't you? Real honest-to-goodness hippies."

I scratched my beard, ran my fingers through my sun-streaked locks, and in spite of the closeness of the woods pretended to ponder a distant horizon no one else could see. "I don't know about that," I said.

"No, you are," Ron exclaimed. "You're a real hippie. Know how I know?"

Carla sighed. "Oh dear God."

"How?" I asked.

"Real hippies don't know they're hippies. If you'd told me, 'Yeah, man, I'm a hippie,' I'd know you weren't. But you said you didn't know, which means you are."

"Honey," Carla said. "It's 1982. There are no hippies left. They went the way of the *Tyrannosaurus rex*."

"Be that as it may, 'hippie' is a term," Ron said, "coined by the Establishment. As a consequence, no self-respecting hippie would ever identify as one. To do so would constitute selling out."

"You'll have to excuse my husband," Carla said. "Until today I had no idea he was a closet sociologist."

"Breakfast's ready," I said and pulled the foil envelopes from the fire with pliers, setting one on each plate.

"Wow," Ron said.

While we ate they stopped their bickering, but when nothing was left of the trout but heads, tails, bones, and skin, they began anew. I felt sorry for Ron. His wife was a good six inches taller than him, and I wondered if her height advantage fed her sense of entitlement. In terms of sheer physical attractiveness, they were a mismatch, and as we hiked I pictured her playing beach volleyball in a string bikini while he watched from the sidelines

fanning his brow with a scorecard. Though he laughed at jokes she made at his expense and took pride in telling me of her research accomplishments in the hybridization of rot-resistant corn, you could tell by the way he clinched his teeth that he'd grown weary of her barbs. As the trail meandered across meadows of wildflowers, then through stands of ponderosa pine, I basked in their reverence, inexplicable as it was.

Back at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign were colleagues upon whose sexual lives Ron and Carla speculated tirelessly, and while at first I was shocked that they would speak so frankly in front of me, a person they barely knew, I was also titillated by their conversation and liked imagining the small, incestuous clique of which they were a part. There were Marnie and Doug, Cassandra and Howard, Al and Violet, couples that might well be reconfigured or no longer configured at all by the time Ron and Carla returned from their vacation. Each person, I was given to understand, had slept at one time or another with every other person, and who knew what might happen were Doug to make a pass at Violet who had the hots for Cassandra who, in turn, had gotten over her breakup with Al but not with Marnie. That Cassandra and Howard were on the verge of breaking up themselves seemed to thrill both Ron and Carla, for Howard had taken full credit for research Ron had collaborated with him on and Cassandra, according to Carla, had said horrid things about her to Doug, who supervised the lab and could, if he wished, replace the entire team with Graduate Assistants.

140

"A person would need a PhD to truly comprehend all the intricacies," Carla said.

"It's boring," Ron replied. "*We're* boring."

"No, you aren't," I said.

"That's sweet," Carla replied, "but married people are boring by nature, and Ron and I are no exception."

"We know how to succeed at school," Ron said, "but little else."

Carla batted her eyes in a way I thought fetching. "Ron thinks if he'd gone to Vietnam instead of getting college deferments until he was too old to be drafted, his life would be better."

"That's not true," he replied.

"Or if he'd protested the war," she said, "or supported it, taken some sort of stand, for or against—"

"Enough, Carla," he said.

“The truth is,” she said, “he’s jealous of you for having been born too late to have had to worry about shit like that at all.”

“Really?” I said.

“Christ,” she whispered, “he’s jealous of me for being a woman.”

That night, after a potluck of freeze-dried beef Stroganoff, canned pork and beans, and three more cutthroat I’d landed to Ron and Carla’s amazement and awe, I found the pint of Canadian Club I’d bought in Gardiner three nights before and made us Irish coffees. “Pauline’s a very lucky woman,” Carla said after one sip of my concoction. By then the three of us had christened our friendship with a naked soak and were enjoying the innocent camaraderie of people brought together by happenstance who wound up, against all odds, liking one another. The next day they would hitchhike the forty miles to West Yellowstone where they’d left their car, and the day after that they’d be on their way back to the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. I, on the other hand, had nowhere I was going. Johanna didn’t want me, nor did my parents, who were still furious with me for dropping out of college, a luxury for which I might’ve paid dearly ten years before.

141

“So are you, Carla,” I said, “and, Ron, you’re a very lucky man.”

“We’re going to miss you,” Carla said.

“You’ve brought us closer together,” Ron said, and Carla didn’t disagree.

That night we sipped whiskey and told stories around the campfire, theirs told by them both with one supplying what the other omitted and in corroborating each other eliminating any doubt as to their stories’ veracity. Though mine were entirely fictitious and tried credibility at every turn, neither Ron nor Carla issued a word of protest. Indeed, as I told them about the encampment beside the Rio Grande and the orgy Pauline and I had participated in, they were as rapt as children of Hamelin.

“It was on the night of the vernal equinox,” I said. “And while Pauline and I were making our weekly run into Boquias for peyote and mescal, the others were applying clay to their faces and weaving elaborate masks from creosote bush and thistle, such that when we returned after midnight tripping and drunk, more than a hundred naked revelers were conjoined on the ground, squirming and groaning, their bodies shimmering like ivory in the moonlight.”

“Why the masks and clay?” Ron asked.

“An orgy,” Carla said as if speaking to a child, “isn’t about who you are or how you look. It isn’t about identity or personality. In an orgy everyone’s equal, isn’t that right?”

“That’s right,” I said. “A face only matters in so far as it contains a mouth to suck with and a tongue to lick with.”

“In an orgy everyone’s just a body,” Carla said, “and that’s what’s so great about them. The self, or ego, is squashed, obliterated.”

“Sent to Kingdom Come,” I said, which made Carla laugh. Though I could see Ron didn’t abide the direction the conversation had taken, and of the two of them I liked him more, having begun my story I couldn’t stop it, caught as I was between allures: a vision of epic carnality as vivid as anything I’d ever actually experienced and an attractive listener aroused by what I was painting in her mind with words. “Bodies lay strewn over a hundred square yards,” I said, “and from this quivering, moaning carpet of humanity rose picnic tables, tents, and cottonwood trees. It looked like a massive battlefield of limbs and torsos, genitals and breasts, fingers, toes, and buttocks, to pleasure or be pleased each body part’s only purpose.”

142

“So what did you do?” Carla asked as Ron grew ever more contemplative and tense. “I presume you and Pauline joined in the festivities.”

“We did,” I said, “but once we shed what little we were wearing and smeared clay across each other’s cheeks and foreheads, a strange thing happened. We were tripping, right?”

“Uh-huh,” Carla said.

“Well, no sooner had we applied the clay than we became two-dimensional.”

“Weird,” Carla said.

“When Pauline turned to the side, she vanished. And when I turned to the side, I became invisible to her. ‘If we go in there,’ I said to Pauline, ‘we might never find each other again.’”

“But she wanted to anyway, right?”

“She did,” I replied, “and I did, too. But we were as frightened as little children.”

“What did you do?”

“Facing each other, we knelt beside the orgy, and as the orgy lapped against the backs of our calves and the soles of our feet, I said, ‘On the count of three, we’re going to fully immerse ourselves. Are you ready?’ Pauline

nodded. 'OK,' I said, and when I'd counted to three, we turned to the orgy and entered it."

"What was it like?" Carla asked. "Was it everything you thought it would be?"

I scratched my head. "It was as if I had fallen into the sea," I said, "and was being carried away by currents and, at the same time, as if I were soaring through space and all around me were planets and stars."

"Jesus," Carla said.

"It was a trip," I said, "a real trip."

Her smile flickered in the glow of our campfire, and though I could see that I'd succeeded in touching something deep within her, I didn't want it to be at Ron's expense. So when he yawned and told us he was turning in, in effect leaving his wife to me, I said I would do the same and for this kindness received nary a wink of gratitude.

Carla remained seated before the campfire, and through the mosquito netting of my tent I watched her. Was she waiting for me? And if I joined her what exactly would we consummate?

In time she picked her way over twigs to the tent she shared with her husband, and soon they were fucking, and a little after that Ron called out, "You still up?"

"Who? Me?" I called back.

"Yeah you," he replied.

"Yeah, I'm still up," I called back.

"You want to join us?"

"Really?" I said.

"Uh-huh," he said.

Twigs snapped under my feet as I crept nude across the campsite to their tent. In the dim light of our campfire, it looked like a jack-o'-lantern whose candle had died, its cut-out mouth and eyes darkened. "I'm here," I said, and the mosquito netting unzipped and fell back into the opening like gauze, and there they lay side by side on top of their sleeping bags, Ron's penis resting on his wife's thigh like a thing detached. As I slipped in beside her, he reached across both of us and zipped the mosquito netting shut.

"You want to fuck her? Be my guest." When I looked to Ron for confirmation that he'd actually meant what he'd just said, he nodded. "Don't worry. Everything's cool."

“You’re sure?” I said for Carla’s lids were closed and she looked as if she might be sleeping.

“You’d be doing us a favor,” Ron said. “Bringing us closer together.”

When I climbed on top of her, Carla parted her legs, and no sooner had I put myself inside her than she thrust her pelvis into mine and began to moan. “That means she wants to be fucked hard,” Ron said, coaching me, his palm moist against the small of my back. “When she moans like that you have to fuck her hard.” I thrust into her as hard as I thought reasonable and looked to Ron for approval. “Harder, man. You have to fuck her like you hate her, like you really hate her.” As I thrust into her harder and harder, Ron kept saying, “Harder, man. You have to fuck her like you hate her, like you really hate her,” but I couldn’t, and finally Ron said, “Get off of her and I’ll show you.”

So I rolled off of her, and as I lay beside her Ron thrust into her so hard I thought the wall would rip from the floor as the pegs pulled from the earth, and soon poles and nylon would collapse upon us. But they didn’t. “You see? Like this,” he said above Carla’s moaning. “You like it like this, don’t you, baby? Don’t you? You see? This is how she likes it, don’t you, baby? Watch, watch and learn, my friend.”

144

I sympathized with Ron. He was doing this for her, and as he spoke to us both in turn his expression oscillated from hatred to its opposite, such that once he was lying on top of her and pumping her straight into the ground, he turned to me, and in the silvered darkness I saw heartache etched into his brow, and I kissed him. I didn’t think about it, I just did it, such that the whiskers of our beards entwined and when he jerked away it felt as if a bandage had been torn from my lips.

“Oh God,” he said. “Oh God, oh God, oh God.” Cowering in a corner of the tent, he cupped his genitals as if they were blighted. “I should kill you for doing that,” he said. “I should kill you.”

“Hey, what’s going on?” Carla asked, sitting upright in the center of the tent, her breasts weighted as if by stones.

“What *he* just did to me,” Ron said, “was so awful, so awful—” He held his face in his hands and rebuffed her efforts to console him. “Don’t touch me,” he said. “I don’t want to be touched until he, if that’s even what he is, until that *thing*, that piece of detritus, that walking, talking fungal infection, that—”

It was no use springing on him my theory of the carbon atom, something I was sure he understood far better than I. “I’m leaving,” I said, unzipping the mosquito netting and crawling out onto the dirt. The fact was, I was not yet twenty and didn’t know myself well enough to know if what I’d done meant anything, everything, or nothing at all.

“If you’re here in the morning, I’ll kill you,” Ron said. “Indeed, I might have to kill you both.”

By then our campfire was glowing embers, and as I thought about the part of my story I’d intentionally left out, the morning after the orgy when I’d arisen at dawn and searched among the bodies for my love, I couldn’t decide which I felt sorrier for, the “me” I’d made up or the “me” I was.