

An Aquarian Exposition

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She looks down at her muddy bra and panties. It is dark inside the tent, but faint moonlight filters through enough to make out shapes and dim colors. Everything is humid. The canvas of the tent. The skin between her fingers and toes. The air. Her hair, turned from blond to brown by the mud. Each breath is a shallow gasp of moisture. She just has to get out of there. Her stomach quivers as she pulls herself up and crawls out of the tent.

The dry night air makes her breathe in deep as she lets her entire body shiver out the humidity, imagining herself a salmon bursting out of the water as it swims upstream. A hysterical laugh echoes in the distance. Bonfires dot the countryside. Lines of smoke swirl up languidly.

She had hitch-hiked most of the way, leaving her small suburban town just outside of Boston with no more forethought than a peace sign and a smile. She walked along the highway with an upraised thumb, full of clean idealism. Not surprisingly, she had a ride within minutes. She couldn't help but smile as she lifted the hem of her dress and slid into the passenger's seat. The driver was a real revolutionary, fatigue jacket and all. Red star on his forest green baseball cap. A copy of *Steal This Book!* sunburnt on the dash. There was much use of the word "movement." He seemed to really know where he was going.

The cars piled up as they got closer to the venue. Eventually, traffic was at a standstill and she had no choice but to get out and start walking. Her new friend, who had picked her up somewhere off Route 20, was uneasy about leaving his car (probably borrowed from his parents) unattended on the side of the road, so she decided to continue the journey on foot, flashing her automatic peace sign and smile as he stood there stroking his stubble with a sideways grin of farewell.

How long it would actually take her to complete the journey wasn't

of much concern, as long as she got there eventually. The soft tap and swooshing of her moccasins as she passed through the grass provided a warm, steady rhythm that softened her thoughts to a daffodil dream. The wildflowers looked beautiful. She found it hard to imagine that only a year ago she would've dismissed them as weeds as she reached down to pluck out a particularly large, creamy-white flower to slip into her hair, unable to suppress the lively smile which shone across her doll-like face.

Outside the tent, her smile is now gone. The wildflower smushed into the mud. She still has her moccasins on, so at least her feet are clean and warm. She isn't willing to risk someone swiping those from her. The concept of communal sharing can only go so far. Her dress is crumpled on the floor somewhere in that tent, caked with mud and sweat and who knows what else. Maybe her new friend, who had invited her into the tent a few hours ago, is using it as a pillow. He definitely is sleeping. His intoxicated snores had made it impossible for her to get any sleep. Was this new friend the same one from the drive up? She isn't sure. He sure does look like him, but whenever she tried to ask, he would just start giggling, mumble something incoherent, and pass her the joint. It didn't really matter though. Love is meant to be given, and he needs love just like everyone else.

A breeze comes around the hills, over the stage, and across her body, making the tassels on her moccasins flutter. She shivers, tries to rub the goose bumps away, but gives up and sits down in a ball with her arms around her legs and her cold nose resting between her knees. She coughs into her thighs. The air is a strange mix of smoke tinged with the bitterness of vomit and the sweetness of marijuana filtered through the earthiness of the dried mud on her thighs. The vibrations from a few hours ago still linger, like a big, brass bell on the verge of becoming still again.

Someone passes by with long, awkward steps and mumbles something about a cigarette. She isn't sure if the person is talking to her or someone behind her, so she just glances up and quickly shakes her head.

Strange how quiet things can get in the middle of the night. As if the sunlight crackles and distorts sounds. Whispered wisdom carried by the noiseless breezes of the night.

Urgent rumbling from the tent makes her turn, resting a cheek on her outer thigh while stifling a yawn. Her new friend bursts through the flap and wretches horribly on the ground, just missing her moccasins. He turns away and continues roaring out his insides with his back arched like some demon cat. Finally, he stops, bumbles over, and plops down beside her with a squish in the mud. He puts on a lazy smile. His eyes are red and droopy, and he starts to lean over... for a kiss? No, not a kiss. He can't be that stoned or stupid.

"Feel better?" She blurts out in a jump.

"Oh, I feel fine. Just had to clear the pipes out."

She scrunches her lips into a pursed smile. "Wick—groovy concert, huh?"

"You ain't seen nothing yet."

How is she going to ditch this new friend? There are so many other friends out there to meet. New friends that are hopefully a little cleaner and more sober than this one.

“Well, I gotta take a piss.”

“Good,” she thinks. As soon as he is out of vision, she rushes into the tent, feels around for her dress, and crawls back to the flap with it twisted in her fist against the soft ground. She pops her head through the opening, looks around, and starts walking away from the tent. The dress still crumpled in one hand. The mud sucking at her moccasins.

She lifts her head and realizes that she is walking towards the stage, weaving her way through tents, crushed beer cans, and snoring shapes strewn out on the mud and some of the few grassier areas. She keeps her head down to avoid stepping on anybody or anything and almost bumps right into something white. She looks up. It’s a tepee. A real tepee. Wood and hide and canvas and all that. She stands there staring until she hears a voice say, “Come oon in.”

Had she imagined it? As she looks around, a smooth, grinning face pops out of a flap and repeats, “Come on in, friend.” With “friend” dragged out to six, slow syllables.

She is hesitant, but steps in lightly as he holds the flap open for her. The inside of the tepee is dimly lit like a cathedral with thick, tall candles dripping wax and leaving trails of soot up the sides to the small hole up top. Fortunately, there are rugs on the floor, so she doesn’t have to sit in mud again. He guides her over to a pillow and she settles in with her legs crossed Indian-style. Her new friend sits across from her, pulling his bare feet behind his knees in the classic meditation pose.

The first thing she notices about him is his immaculate cleanliness. As he guides her to the pillow, she smells something of incense and peppermint. His flowing, white-cotton pants and shirt remind her of that guy on TV that the Beatles visited in India. He smiles softly to her, takes a toke, and offers it to her with raised eyebrows. She reaches out, grabs it, and takes a long, heavy drag. The end of the joint crackles with the sudden intake of air. The smoke is much heavier than anything she had tried before. She coughs spasmodically and passes the joint back.

He just smiles softly again as she struggles to get back her composure.

“Where were you headed?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Just exploring, I guess.”

“Come across anything interesting?”

“Just someone in a tepee who seems to have managed to avoid all the dirt and mud.”

“Well, everyone chooses their own way to groove.”

She gives him a closed-lip smile and cannot help but wonder how even the soles of his feet have remained clean. Looking down at herself, she feels a sudden flash of embarrassment sitting there in her muddy bra and pant-

ies. Her dress rumbled on the floor by the entrance.

“Have you ever seen an eagle catch its prey at sunset?”

She just blinks back. Her eyes red and distracted.

The maharishi smiles patiently. He smiles, but he does not speak. His eyes do not blink. The glazed, creamy whiteness of them look through her forehead for a response. She shifts on the pillow uneasily, fully aware of her itchy scalp and achy joints.

“...”

“...”

“Noooo? Um, no. No, I haven’t.” She starts to second guess herself. Maybe there is some metaphorical meaning that she isn’t able to figure out. Maybe he’s just messing with her.

“Ahh. So you haven’t?”

What is that supposed to mean? Of course not. Who has? Besides maybe a zookeeper or forest ranger. Why is he asking this?

“No. I don’t think so.”

“Would you like to?”

“Yeah. Well, I guess so. But it’s nighttime already, so we would have to wait—”

He pulls up his sleeve to reveal a tattoo. Of an eagle. Catching its prey. At sunset.

“Whaddya think?”

“Does it mean anything?”

“Maybe. I just like how it looks. Beautiful, huh?”

“Yeah.”

She is disappointed. With nothing more than a lift of his sleeve, the mystique of the maharishi is brusquely ripped away, like the husk torn off an ear of corn. Despite the clothes and the tepee, all she can see is a ripe, golden ear of corn plucked out of the Midwest and shipped hundreds of miles to the countryside of a foreign land. A sticker of origin becomes stamped firmly to his forehead. With fading interest, she slips her hair back behind her ear and puts on a lively smile.

“This is a nice tent—uh, tepee you got here.”

“Isn’t it great? We brought the poles and canvas from back home.

There’s a reservation close by. Real nice Indian guy, owned the store I think, showed us how to set it up. It’s nice. More far out than a tent.” The words “far out” clunking off his tongue.

He gets up and makes hand gestures as he describes how to put the tepee together.

She nods her head when she is supposed to, but she isn’t listening. She is somewhere else. Images flash through her mind in playful response to the overwhelming fatigue of her body. Her parents waving. Guitars refracting sunlight. A grunting, muddy mass of hair and mud. Naked children wandering. Rucksacks. Helicopters. Kool-aid. A trampled chain-link fence. Cows chewing their cud. Colors, so many colors. Tomato reds. Grass greens. Mag-

netic purples. Stinging aquas. Corn Yellows. Felt hats. Striped pants. Beads around necks, around ankles, around foreheads.

The corn maharishi changes subjects, going on about the long journey east that he and his friends had taken. "Yeah man, so we were low on gas and the cars weren't moving, so we said, 'Fuck it. Let's just carry this tepee the rest of the way.'"

She nods and holds her heavy eyelids up with raised eyebrows.

"You know, my uncle was childhood friends with David Crosby. Before his hair even reached his ears. I could probably get us backstage if I can somehow get a hold of Davy. That's what my dad called him. Him and my uncle keep in touch, so I think he'll remember me."

She perks up at that. She isn't exactly sure who David Crosby is, but she knows he is a musician. A well-known one. Is he the one that looks like a sheep dog?

"You wanna head down to the stage? See if we can find him?"

She doesn't answer. She just gets up and slips through the flap of the tent. He follows.

The brass bell has finally ceased and she can enjoy the relative silence. A constant murmur of fading voices, crackling campfires, and various bodily sounds fill the air, but she can clearly hear the glip and glosch of their steps as they weave down to where she guesses the stage must be located. The yellow corn maharishi doesn't show any sign of protest, so she assumes either she is going in the right direction or he is just as lost as her.

There are some lights in the distance, so she keeps going in that direction. As they get closer, she realizes that the lights are much too close to the ground to be stage lights. In fact, they look more like headlights, at least five pairs of them. They get closer and see a circle of vans and buses. It reminds her of some old Western where the covered wagons were set in a circle while the frontiersmen fought off attacks from the Indians, except these wagons are anything but white. Blues, purples, yellows, greens wrap around each other in swirls and dots that glow in the dark.

She starts to detour around the wagon train when a hand grabs her from behind. She turns quickly to see the Midwestern maize maharishi looking at her.

"I think I know these guys. They had some good stuff before. Let's see if they've got any left."

She nods and allows herself to be tugged along. She winces as they approach a headlight.

There is a group of people in the middle of all the buses and vans. Drums and some type of wind instrument are droning softly as the two dozen or so people hum. They are arranged in a circle inside the circle of headlights, facing each other with their legs crossed meditation-style. There are two people in the middle, flat on the ground. That's kinda strange. From the sky it would look like an eye, with a colorful, metallic lid of buses and VWs and the swaying mass of bodies as a rippling iris and pupil. As they get closer, she peers

at the two in the middle. She can hear—just barely over the steady, hypnotic music—grunting and the rustling of grass.

They are having sex.

Right there. In the middle of all those people. How?

She is transfixed on them, intertwined, twisting, gyrating, to the same rhythm as the drums. A man's ass and leg hair. A nipple being sucked.

The man, the stranger, makes eye contact with her. She can't pull herself away. Then groaning with deep resonant finality, he smiles a slow, lazy smile. His smile contorts itself and fades away.

Her face flashes cold. Then, it burns. She turns on her heel and quickly walks back to where they had come from. She can hear her companion following, but she is too embarrassed to look back. Despite herself, she can't get that image out of her head. She blows air from her nostrils and walks faster.

"What's a matter, babe?"

She keeps walking, not worried about stepping on anyone or anything. She just has to keep moving, to keep that fresh air moving across her flushed face.

Then she stops. Breathing hard and staring into the distance. Alone. Standing there with her moccasins, her muddy bra and panties, her filthy dress clenched in front of her. She doesn't feel the cold anymore. She doesn't feel her face. She feels wet. She feels exposed. She feels like God looking down upon everything, frowning, condemning. Free love is a beautiful concept, but that? That bestial display. That bacchic orgy. That hedonist exhibitionism. Is that free love?

He gently touches her arm. His hand cold, reptilian. "What's a matter, babe?"

The question bothers her because she doesn't know the answer.

What is the matter. Sex, making love, is natural. There should be nothing to hide, nothing to get uptight about. She tries to convince herself that it was just her upbringing, all the social norms that have constrained people for too long, but she can't believe it. At least, she can't convince herself of it. Something is telling her that that is wrong. That is not how it should be.

His waxy hand, holding hers gently, is still there.

"No," she thinks and pulls herself loose. His nails scraping against her smooth skin.

"Hey, babe, why are you being so uptight? They were just grooving to some higher power. Can't you dig it?"

No. She could not dig it. She couldn't bury it, burrow it, or drill it either. It seemed to have dug her though. Pierced and gouged and dug up something. She couldn't figure out what. Not in the state of mind that she is in. Not with Mr. Eagle at Sunset standing right there. Not with a crazy circus of sex going on just a football field away.

She shoots him an electric glare, eyes tinged a tomato red. He gulps and looks down at her muddy bra. Then, her panties. Finally, settling on the

tips of her moccasins.

“I just wanted to take you backstage. Show you a good time.” He mumbles, still staring down.

Leave. That’s the only thought that comes clearly. The only thing that seems to make sense. She strides away. Up. Away from the lights and the murmurs and the grunts. Away from all her new friends cackling in the distance. Away from those lazy smiles. Away from the possibility of tomorrow’s festivities. Away from it all.

The mud splish-splashes and she raises her knees high, holding her dress up out of the way. She can feel her face again. It isn’t hot anymore. The cold has returned and she shivers slightly as she strides away.

Eventually, she is out of the mud and walking through high grass. It feels fine to walk normally again and let the grass tickle her knees. There is true silence. No mass of humanity. No ringing brass. No smoke. No headlights. Just the sound of her movements and the light wind.

She hears the deep clunk-clunk of cast iron. Strange. She peers around and sees the big, dull eyes of a black and white milk cow. She chuckles to herself.

“Hey there, Walden.”

She doesn’t think that is a girl’s name, but it sounds appropriate enough. She walks a few more steps, looking away from the cow and comes across a large oak tree next to a small pond, which reflects the moon exactly, in mirrored perfection. She keeps walking towards the pond in steady, confident steps.

She sits down, slides off her moccasins, lets the dress fall, snaps off her muddy bra, pulls down her panties and slips into the still pond, sending ripples about the surface. Slowly, she dunks her head under the water and comes back up. Slowly, she rubs her body and cleans off all the caked mud.

As she sits along the bank waiting for her clothes to dry, she reflects on her evening. A breeze comes around the hills, over the oak tree, and across her body, making the tassels on the top of her moccasins flutter. She sighs, feeling the wisps of air move across her knees and arms, through her clean, blond hair.

Lovely, she thinks with a halcyon smile.