

appointed hour, usually just before midnight, we would use our shovels to carefully pick the rocks and red-hot coals out of the fire pit and put them aside. Then we placed the stuffed turkey, well wrapped in aluminum foil and wet burlap, atop the few rocks lining the bottom of the pit, covered the bird with hot rocks and coals, and filled in the pit with dirt. The following afternoon we would unearth the bird and feast to our hearts' content.

We had had such an afternoon. Clarke, as ever, had outdone herself. We were full and content. Too content. The fire was burning well; darkness had covered the land; the sound of the surf was lulling us into a collective reverie.

"Wanna go for a walk?" said Ed, cocking his eye my way.

"Sure," said I, trying to disguise a belch.

We roused ourselves, grabbed our walking sticks, bade our wives and kids adieu, and started walking east toward the mountains a few miles away. The moon was bright. The air was warm. There was no wind. The conditions were ideal for a nighttime stroll near the Strait of Hell.

We spoke very little for the first mile or so. We finally crossed the main north-south road and followed a trail continuing east. We were able to walk abreast and listen to the night sounds.

"Jack."

"Ed."

"Do you consider yourself a mystic?"

"Wow. I have to think about that for a minute. Do you?"

"Consider you a mystic? Yes."

"Consider yourself a mystic."

"I asked you first."

We stumbled along the trail for a bit.

"Probably no more than you do," I replied vaguely. "Is there any vestigial Presbyterianism left in you?"

"Oh, maybe a remnant or two left over from my childhood. My mother played the organ in the church back in Home. She still does. I remember when I was a boy, I would lie in bed at night and listen to her play before I went to sleep. I suppose any vestiges of fundamental Christianity come from associations like that. I'm no Christian. Any more than you are. But I was asking you if you were a mystic."

"It's ironic. When I was at college, I was one of the two professed atheists

on the campus. It took me years to realize that my sense of atheism was mostly the result of semantics. I certainly didn't and don't believe in an anthropomorphic god in any biblical sense. It seems that somehow I've intuited the presence of some principle or urge that the English language, at least, isn't prepared to define. I suppose any religious feelings I have stem from the way I feel about the Earth and about consciousness. I've suspected for a long time that the planet is the living organism and that life is the way the planet perceives. We're just a step along the way. Humans, I mean. We're really not all that important when you think about it."

"Yeah. I know what you mean," said Ed. "But what about a sense of purpose? I wonder if we have any purpose in a higher sense. It seems like you spend years trying to absolve yourself from your childhood biases. If you're really interested, that is."

"What about you, Ed? Have you ever had a sense of the mystical?"

"Well, as you know, I've always tried to follow the truth no matter where it leads. And intellectually, I've tried to come to terms with reality by examining the evidence of my own five good bodily senses that I was born with, using my mind to the best of my ability. But there was a time back in Death Valley where I had what I guess was as close to a mystical experience as I've ever had. That was years ago. I was a young man. I've never had anything quite like it since. As close as I've come is after I've been out camping somewhere for at least two weeks. It takes at least that long for me to really get into it and leave all the baggage behind."

"Can you describe what happened back then?" I asked.

"Well, it's not something that's easy to remember intellectually. It was more the way I felt. As I recall, I felt like I wasn't separated from anything else. I was by myself at the time. It was as if I could almost perceive some fundamental activity taking place all around me. Everything was alive. Even the rocks. I was part of it. Not separate from it at all. I wept for joy or something akin to joy that I can't really describe. It was a long time ago. It's not something that can be remembered in the normal way. Or at least normal for me. The only time I can get close to it is out camping. I don't get to do that enough. Not nearly enough."

"Had you taken anything? Acid? Peyote?" I asked.

"No. I took LSD once, but it didn't take me. Not really. I've tried pot a few times. Hell, you've been there most of the times when I've tried to smoke pot."

I can't get it down. It almost always makes me cough. Malcolm gave me some once when we were on the river. I guess I got high. But that was nothing like I was telling you about when I was out in Death Valley. That was on the natch." Ed stopped walking, and so did I. We stood on either side of the trail about halfway between the base of the mountains and our camp. Ed resumed talking, gesticulating, his normal reserve abandoned for the moment. "In a way, that was one of the most important experiences of my life so far. I've tried to get back to it, but I don't know how. You've had experiences that are at least similar. How did you do it?"

We started walking again, toward the mountain.

"Well," said I, "I used to eat peyote a fair amount. I'd go up to Pyramid Lake, up at the north end. There was a cave up there where a bunch of us used to go beginning around 1960. We used to eat peyote together after the manner of the Native American Church. But it worked better for me when there weren't other people around except my first wife, Jean. We'd fast for a few days. Then in the morning we'd eat some peyote or drink peyote tea and throughout the day, we'd watch the Earth through peyote eyes. I can't describe it except to say that it was as though the Earth was totally alive and we were a part of it. As though our molecules were the same and that there was communication or some kind of interaction that always left me with the profound impression that any sense of purpose, human purpose at least, was to tend and nurture the Earth any way we can. Am I making any sense?"

"Yeah. That's a lot the way I remember what happened to me in Death Valley. But have you ever had anything like that happen to you when you weren't high on something?"

Ed and I had talked about this before many times. But in my memory, he had never been as intense as he was that night hiking near the Strait of Hell.

"Well," I pondered. "I used to get pretty deeply into it on the fire lookout. You never saw my old lookout. There was no tower. Just the top of a rock. After four or five months camped on top of that rock, watching birds and talking to wildcats and snakes or lying on the bare rock at night, feeling the warmth left over from the sun and staring straight up into that part of the universe, I felt pretty close to God. Although I've never believed in an anthropomorphic god. It was more like I belonged to the spirit of it all."

"Yeah. I know that feeling. But I never feel that way unless I'm camping.

And it takes a while. It's getting more important to me all the time. I don't know how much time I have left. Not much, I think. I haven't really felt right since that night I got sick at your house and you and Clarke took me to the hospital. You know that." Ed pointed to his upper abdomen. "I've wondered if they put me back together right when I had the laparotomy. But that's not the point. I guess it just gets harder to feel that spirit, as you call it, as I get older. I've gotten too involved in a world of inconsequential things to be able to be free enough to move out into the goddamn desert and just become a hermit."

"Your family's not inconsequential," I said.

"No. Of course not. I love them very much. And I feel responsible for them. I'm trying to do a better job with Becky. Poor little kid. Drawing me for a father. And I love Clarke, and I'm also very fond of her. But I feel like I'm missing some fundamental point. What the hell is the purpose of being alive, of being human? Is there any purpose? Or is it just some accident that you and I are walking here talking to each other at this moment in time? Whaddya think?"

"I think the whole thing is pretty random," I said. "I don't know if there is any conscious design to existence. I know that there have been times, a lot of times, when it felt like there was—that there was some spirit that pervades it all. When I'm in that mood or whatever you call it, there's a part of me that knows there is a spirit pervading it all. But I can only get into that mood when I've been camping out for a while. Just like you. When I'm involved in day-to-day existence and I'm not camping, I don't feel it. Meditation helps when I'm at home or on the road. But I have to admit that meditation isn't the same. It's good for me. Hell, it's great for me. But somehow I don't think that meditation is my path, at least, to the big answer."

"What's it good for, then?" asked Ed.

"Well, basically, anymore all I do is meditate on detachment. It's good for clearing my mind and making me feel good. I get into someplace where I seem, at least, to be totally empty. Like my mind has shut down."

"Brain-dead, eh?" said Ed with a wicked grin. "You can't afford to let your mind shut down too much. There isn't enough of it there to start it back up again."

"Asshole."

"Seriously, Jack. Could you teach me to meditate?"

“It ain’t really all that hard. First, I get into a comfortable position, either sitting with my legs crossed and my back straight or lying flat on my back with my arms and legs extended and so that my skin isn’t touching anywhere. I even try to put space between my fingers. I focus my attention above the bridge of my nose. Then I use a breathing exercise. On my exhalation I think of a word like *detachment* or *emptiness*. When I inhale, I think of *peace* or *serenity*. I do that a few times, letting my body relax, and pretty soon I get into a state of mind that’s relaxed but focused. When I come out of it, I have a sense of well-being. That’s about it.”

“Did you ever study yoga with any teacher?” asked Ed.

“Not really. I’ve read a few books. One that affected me early on was Huxley’s *Doors to Perception*. I’ll get you a copy. In the long run, though, I think that one has to be one’s own teacher when it comes to things like that. Maybe in everything. There was a time when I considered myself a student of Oriental philosophy. But that was all book learning. Did you ever study it?”

“Oh, I read a few of the basic works back when I was a student at UNM. Most of it seemed like bullshit. I enjoyed reading Lao-Tzu. They had me half-way convinced that he was the earliest anarchist. I think I even mentioned him in my master’s thesis. I can’t remember now. One of my professors actually studied Chinese philosophy. Wrote about it some.”

“Archie Bahm?” I asked.

“Yeah. Wonder what happened to old Archie. Wonder if he’s still alive.”

We hiked on for a while, still headed east. The mountains were near. Ed broke the easy silence between us.

“I guess my own sense of it is that we really are part of a whole. I think of myself as an egalitarian. An absolute egalitarian. Everyone really is equal in some basic way. It’s true that we’re each different, one from the other. I’m smarter. You’re dumber. I’m handsomer. You’re uglier. But we’re equal anyway under the eyes of God, whoever she is. I think that by virtue of being alive, we’re all equal. And we should be able to extend that sense of equality to all living things. We should be able to sympathize or empathize with all living creatures—the birds, the beasts—because we all share the fundamental state of being alive. And we should be able to go beyond that and extend our sympathy to those mountains, to the sea, to the air, because it’s all part of a whole. We’re simply a part of a whole, a part of this planet, which is itself a part

of the solar system, which is in turn part of the galaxy, part of the universe, and so on. We should be able to extend our sympathy to the whole of existence.”

“Sure sounds like you have a pretty profound vision of the universe. That could have come from any number of treatises that originated in the Orient or India—some Hindu mystical vision,” I said.

“That’s what I sensed or came to understand, somehow, that time in Death Valley. Now I can intellectualize it, understand it rationally. Back then I felt it on some level that affected me very deeply. I’d like to get back to that by camping for an extended period.”

“Same here,” I said. “I need to be out in it more than I am. Sometimes I feel like I’m fading. Not intellectually but spiritually.”

We were approaching the base of the mountains, and our trail was gradually ascending.

“You know, Ed. Sometimes I think about the second law of thermodynamics. You know, entropy. Where everything runs out, gives out, comes to the end of the road. Then I think about life. The urge to life. And I wonder if that urge isn’t some attempt to balance entropy. Turn it around. I don’t mean an individual life, yours or mine. But life in general. Biologically speaking, life seems to favor the complex. Evolution. Life is a form of energy that seems to be expanding or growing rather than running down. Of course, the evidence indicates that life needs inorganic material to work out in, and if entropy has its way, there won’t be anything for life to cling to. Unless life or consciousness or whatever can extend beyond the need for matter as we understand it, to continue to exist. Intellectually, that doesn’t hold water. But intuitively, it does. Or at least it has.”

“Interesting. Could be, I suppose. What do you think about an after-death state?” asked Ed.

“Right this minute, I’d say that the odds favor that consciousness utterly ceases when the body dies. That’s what my intellect tells me. But when I’ve eaten peyote, that hasn’t seemed the case at all. It was perfectly obvious that some intrinsic part of myself would continue. What do you think?” I asked.

“Well, I’ve imagined that maybe at the moment of death, the mind experiences the glory of eternity in that very instant. In that flash between life and death. And then everything shuts off but doesn’t know that it shuts off because the last conscious perception was the realization of eternity. Then the body

decays and its elements meld with other forms of matter.”

“As the bumper sticker says, ‘Old musicians never die. They just decompose,’” I responded.

We both laughed.

“Yeah. Something like that,” said Ed.

We stopped and looked back to the west. The sea was far away, miles away. The night was absolutely still. We stood there for a while, enjoying the stillness. The only lights visible were the moon, the stars, and the eerie illumination cast by the moon on the sparse desert landscape. The mountains were in shadow, not quite sinister in their darkened proximity.

“We probably better start back,” I said.

“Whatsa matter? Scared?” said Ed.

“Naw. We’re a long way from camp, and I’m a worrywart.”

“So’m I,” said Ed.

We started back toward camp.

“You know, Jack, one of the big reasons I love the desert, any desert, is because there’s enough space to let my mind go free. I have little desire to leave the deserts of the Southwest, especially since I had that experience in Death Valley. I always imagine that I could be a hermit and ponder the imponderable for the rest of my life. Someday when Clarke kicks me out, I’m gonna be a hermit. Why don’t you join me when Kath kicks you out?”

“Then you wouldn’t be a hermit anymore,” I said, laughing.

“We could do what we always talked about,” said Ed. “Although instead of buying land, we could get a couple of Airstream trailers, put in wood-burning stoves, and camp on public land. Once or twice a week we could visit each other and go for our hikes. When the fucking bureaucrats kicked us off, we could move on to another campsite. Neither one of us needs to live anywhere in particular to earn a living. Whaddya say?”

“I’ll tell ya, Ed, the older I get, the better that idea sounds. Christ, we could live almost anywhere in the whole Southwest. Have you ever spent any time up in the Black Rock Desert?”

“Nope. We should go up there this summer. I can see it now. Just a couple of old geriatric nomads sneaking around, avoiding the law.” Ed warmed to this subject. “We could take our guns and live off the land. Live off the rich. Christ, we could pull off a train robbery. We could hold up one of the narrow-gauge

"S'pose we'll make it?" I asked.

"Who knows? Hard to say," Ed replied. "You've been here since I have."

"We might make it," I said optimistically.

"Or then we might not," said Ed, just as optimistically.

We climbed back in and started onward. We passed Chicotál Mountain and stopped at Glenn Springs for a hike, both of us fascinated with the place but for different reasons. Ed rummaged through the debris that marked the encampment from which had sallied forth the first motorized brigade in the history of warfare, or so I told Ed. I had read it in the cited *The Tin Lizzie Troop*. I searched the ground for peyote, the cactus sacred to many Indians for its hallucinogenic qualities. It was said to have been found in this vicinity. I didn't find any. I have always thought that if everyone partook of that sacred cactus, everyone would know beyond doubt that the planet is a sacred, living entity and that thereafter she would not be desecrated by strip miners, dam builders, land developers, and other criminals of similar ilk. That's probably why peyote (and marijuana, for that matter) is deemed an illegal substance. Those who govern don't want the masses to get any ideas that might jeopardize the conversion of the biotic community into money. Bad for the economy.

Ed and I cruised the road a few miles farther until we rounded a bend and came to the edge of the Rio Grande. Much of the bank was obscured by a stand of tamarisk. We could see the river beyond the tamarisk, its water rich with silt and biotic detritus, its allure almost overwhelming to two hot and dusty desert rats lodged in the sunlight of a Chihuahuan midafternoon. The road climbed a grade and bore to the right. We were above the river, scheming on finding an access so we could go swimming. We dropped into an arroyo and shot up the other side and screeched to a halt in front of a wooden roadblock. We got out of the truck and walked around the roadblock to examine the possibilities. The river had seriously undercut the bank directly beneath the road.

"Whaddya think?"

"Might make it. Might not."

"Well, we can't go back."

"True enough."

"Let's do it," I said, starting to move the barricade.

"Let's go swimming first," said Ed.

"Why? We're here now. The motor's running. Let's do it."

By autumn Abbey would return to Pennsylvania, but not before he went to Venice, Florida, campaigning for Wallace. Then he descended into hell. He went to work in the General Electric plant in Erie, Pennsylvania, and earned modest wages for menial, mindless work. A GE supervisor recalled that Abbey was just an average employee who took excessive time off. When he quit, he gave as his reason, "I'm leaving town."

He returned to New Mexico in time to begin the summer session at the University of New Mexico. He moved in with his friend Dick Volpe and "listened to Christopher Salmon in the morning, swam in the afternoon, and chased girls at night." He played his flute, a practice that gave him enormous pleasure throughout his life.

At one point he and a few friends decided to drive to Los Angeles, where he had never been. They stopped to peer into the Grand Canyon, and Abbey couldn't resist hiking down into its bowels into a branch called Havasu Canyon. He didn't climb out again for five weeks. He lived there by himself, acquiring a bare minimum of supplies from the friendly Havasupai Indians. He kept his own company, ranging the fascinating, mysterious side canyons, swimming in the sacred waters of Havasu Creek, or paddling in the *tinajas*, natural basins filled with water. He very nearly met his end when he clambered down a canyon only to discover that he could go no farther and came within a hair's breadth of not being able to climb back out. This was for him a metamorphosis, where his spirit melded with the sense of place, where Abbey's soul adhered, once and for all, to the desert dust, the red rock, the piñon-juniper wood bark, the clear air, the wildness of the American Southwest. Years later he would publish a provocative account of this strange, almost eerie adventure in his great classic *Desert Solitaire*. The sojourn in Havasu Canyon was the beginning of his endless oscillation between solitude and society, and he was rarely totally happy in either set of circumstances. Always longing, forever turbulent, never at peace.

When he returned to UNM, he reveled in what he called his playboy days. He found women irresistible and fell in love repeatedly. Ed once told me that he had never made love to a woman he didn't love "at least a little bit." He spent time with his friend Bud Adams, went "charging into town every morning at 70 mph in a black Lincoln Continental," rode horses, and courted women. When Adams got married, he moved back in with "Volpe & Co."