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## No Name Commune

IT TURNED OUT Frances did have a map to the commune, or at least directions, how to pick up our journey again, hitchhike out of Big Sur south, then east. The whole point was still Ned, what happened to him the previous year when he had wandered out west—California then Colorado—those months before his car crash in the mountains that made Frances a widow at 20. Why we'd been on the road those eight days, the reason I got sucked into this trip in the first place: I found out most of Ned's story en route, one bit at a time. Because she needed a companion, that was the thing, me, a friend of a friend, pretty much a stranger at first. And it was spring break, not that that mattered to Frances, who wasn't a student. All the way from Illinois, then San Francisco, Mill Valley, Big Sur. *I have to find out*, she told me in Nebraska but it stayed in my head like a mantra. Now we were headed to this commune in Colorado, the last place on earth Ned had been alive.

Frances said he had a relative there, a guy named Keith, though *relative* was a stretch, really a very distant fourth or fifth cousin and part of the family by way of—I don't know—an aunt who married in about 50 years ago, Aunt *So and So*, even the name lost by now. This Keith had filled Frances in earlier, by phone. I don't recall much about the ride from Big Sur to that arid, sunny place, only that the landscape surprised me once we got near, so desert-like—not *like*, the real thing including sagebrush and cactus and little bits of stray greenery. Colorado. Wasn't it supposed to be nonstop mountains and trees? Maybe that was the northern part of the state.

What I do know is that we left Big Sur early on Thursday that week, and now, when I stare at a map dated 1971, I see a manic spiderweb of roads with mountainy, deserty blanks in it—certainly more than a day's journey. My guess is we went over on 152, picking up Route 5 south to 49, up to 89, then east on 160 unto 163, unto who-knows-where-we-actually-traveled through Nevada again, and Utah, and finally into southern Colorado. Maybe Route 70 got into it too. In any case, I guess it was an advantage, two young women with their thumbs out. Because it seems we got there in a flash though it took many hours, and some standing around between rides. Mainly I was sleeping when I ended up in the backseat so time passed quickly enough. Frances had agreed to taking turns now, chatting up every *other* driver and riding shotgun.

A dark blue Cadillac, massive and ship-like and gleaming, pulled over.

Whoa, said Frances, crossing her fingers. Hey, this might be our last ride too. We're awfully close now.

The front passenger door seemed to open by itself, and slow, which was eerie enough. We hadn't even touched the handle, nor had the driver. We felt a blast of cold, air-conditioned air, a rarity then, the ultimate luxury. Inside: a large, late middle-aged man wearing a business suit. Out here, in freaking nowhere, we'd say to each other later. So early on a Friday too. Definitely peculiar. We'd toy with another idea a little later: maybe he was a UFO guy, or an angel from some cornball movie where we turned up on his must-aid-and-abet list.

Can I help you ladies? He put an equal weight on each word.

Frances told him where we were going, what she knew of the address, the nearest crossroad. I forget the name of the commune, which no longer exists of course. It doesn't even turn up in histories of such places from that time, actually exhaustive studies now, tenure earned because of them probably. And I've lost the nearest town too.

The driver made a small *hop in* sort of gesture. Then said mostly nothing for what distance we had left, even when I, on front seat duty now, jabbered on about things obvious, at hand: the odd color of sky, the darting jack-rabbits, the faraway rim of mountains, and the unusual heat lately, it still being March, at least that's what people had told us. He finally spoke about the commune. Not exactly though, more the motel it once was, which was something, he said. Really something. A grand venture built by a shrewd combination of mining and railroad money in the '20s, two fortunes coming together.

You girls have no idea, he told us. You see, those were more sensible days when families married, not man and wife.

He dropped back into silence. I wondered if he'd known the place as a kid. Or was connected by blood somehow, turned into a self-made sort of guy since he'd been heir to a ruin. There was a certain after-the-fact melancholy about him.

But scads of people, he began again, would make the long trip to the motel, in every season. Properly a resort, believe me. Thousands, year-round. Because the hot springs brought everyone here. They had a pool.

I tried to superimpose those gadabouts of the *Gatsby* era out there on the desert, in its heat and cold by turns, its dry air, what-the-hell hardened party types tooling about in their roadsters, women in ultra-chic bucket hats and short skirts and cigarette holders, men in their fedoras and sullen wisecracks. And given the fact of the hot springs, I added long-legged striped bathing suits to the scene as they stepped demurely into those waters.

Then the Depression, he said. Almost did the place in. Terrible. And he shook his head. I mean terrible.

He was speaking completely in starts and stops now, with longer than usual pauses between, a way of talking that forced you to nod at each empty space.

But, he continued. It limped along. Past the War years. Before the trains quit. Before it was city city city where people wanted to go. Then. Well. They chucked the thing. Abandoned. They just. Walked away.

Was any of this true? Sad and heroic and big as history: it all leaked into the guy himself, in what he said and pointedly didn't say, those pauses. He was watching himself tell it, I realized, fully moved by his own eloquence. Through the windshield, I was witness to remarkable stuff *right here, right now*—for starters, a roadrunner, I think, moving quickly beyond my side vision, something right out the cartoons. A visitation, of sorts. But I didn't dare interrupt.

Out here, who can make it really? the driver said. It seemed a question addressed to sky, mountains, that roadrunner equally—and to Frances, to me.

With that, he made a dramatic stop, spinning the car completely around to head back where he came from. He'd gone impossibly out of his way to bring us here.

Ladies, he bowed, his words coming even more slowly, like he was taking a snapshot of each one: the pleasure was all mine.

This time both doors did open, all by themselves.



It was an honest-to-god 1960s commune, how-be-it sprung from someone's dream of luxury in the '20s. Pink, for one thing, and made of stone with all sorts of intricate scrolling worked into the door lintels or wherever there happened to be a column. Or maybe I'm making that up. I saw the standard double row of motel units same as you find now, only each seemed a ghost of itself too. That could have been the whirlpool of dust rising up now and then: atmosphere. The kind they'd pay a lot for, if this were a movie. But the entire place seemed something out of a film—*on location*, like the ghost town in an Easterner's—or any Midwesterner's—notion of the old wild west, the kind where all the buildings creak and sway, each door hanging crooked, one jam intact, where the sun is always going down and there's perennial twilight. But not entirely. It looked semi-loved, and functioning.

So this was the last place Ned had been. That fact was quietly sobering again, like this was some sort of shrine, and we'd be purified, or at least something in Frances' head would click shut—or open. It was midmorning; we'd hitched all day and night, sleeping on and off in various cars to get here. Now no one was underfoot.

Frances, are you sure this is the right commune, the one Ned was at? I said.

We were headed toward what appeared to be the main building, more scrolly stonework on the doorframes and windows, an arched canopy sort of thing built onto it, inviting anyone in.

They're here, don't worry. I called, remember? That guy Keith told me it would be okay to come. Besides, he gave me specific instructions. I swear this is it. Drop it, would you? You're freaking me out.

I don't recall who welcomed us, Keith or someone else, but people *were* there. Frances was right. But only partly so. There'd been a big argument a day before we arrived, so half—more than half—of the commune had gone off in a huff.

As was the custom in those days, I want to say.



Inside the main house where the motel office once was, they showed us the kitchen, the big common room, the array of other, smaller spaces, one a kind of library now, they said—books people on the move had left there, or titles found on the library take-it, it's-free cart or discovered at rummage sales. I almost gave them the novel my boyfriend Jack urged me to bring along; I hadn't cracked a page. I do remember picking up Aldous Huxley's odd little book, *The Art of Seeing*, on altering your vision. Not vision, capital *V*, merely the cornea/iris/pupil kind, clever ways to train yourself out of glasses and into the brave new world of 20/20. It amused me, how practical it was, complete with exhaustive eye exercises. And also the fact that some people might well reach for the book—as I did—thinking *transcendental*, thinking *mind fuck*—and get a sudden optometry lesson instead. That was a lesson in itself. I thought of those long moments in any eye exam, in the twilight of such an office, the guy sliding circles of glass to get to the truest moment of not-blur among so much blurring: is this one better? Or this one? How about this one? Until the difference is so close you almost panic, can't even imagine an accurate answer.

And the fight that happened before we arrived? Everyone was obsessed with it, though I don't recall, if I ever knew, what the fray had been about. At a general meeting—these happened weekly—someone got pissed, then a surge kicked up, a dark wave, a whole high tide of anger about how things were run at the commune, who got to do—or had to do—this thing or that. I don't know how many people packed up and took off, still pissed. They actually took the bus off the place, the commune's bus, threatening to make it all the way to Mexico.

*Our* bus. It belongs here, god damn it, to every single one of us, said a

large woman to my right, her long hair hidden behind a tightly knotted paisley headscarf. Fuck that noise, she added.

I could imagine such a bus, some old thirdhand school junker lovingly repaired, painted over in Day-Glo with words like *Joy* and *Peace* in large letters on the side, big red and yellow wiggly lines on the roof. Then someone had, no doubt, hand-brushed that black and white symbol, the yin and yang cuddled famously together—a little more yang than yin maybe—above the tailpipe.

Frances and I listened, trying to look sympathetic. We made worried and/or outraged little noises, not even words, designed on the spot to show solidarity. Of course we took their side since they were our hosts and they were stuck with us, as guests.

It was one bad trip, the former Keith-in-waiting said. No shit, man. Bad upon bad.

He shook his head, reliving the argument, I could see that. He was watching them peel out of the motel lot in a cloud of gravel and dust again too, the movie on replay, not one person aboard waving goodbye. He had walked us over to one of those little motel units where we were to stay the night.

You guys can use these digs. They belong to Unicorn, but she's with them. And not coming back any way soon, I guess.

He opened the door and we saw the room done up in what looked like elaborate spiderwebbing, baseboard to ceiling, a mattress with an Indian bedspread on the floor squeezed in under and into all that hanging yarn and wire, center stage. There were hundreds of unlit candles and the overwhelming scent of patchouli. We stood still for a moment, staring.

Well, maybe not, he said. No room to even breathe in here. Not for two of you. I have a better idea.

And he ushered us to another unit, three doors down, one with two twin beds, a couple of old blankets, an overhead light, a wobbly broken table by the window. Clearly, no one had lived there for long, ever.

This one's empty enough, he said.



It's impossible to know what ordinary life on the commune was like when it was in full swing given the exodus of so many of its citizens. When Frances and I loitered about, and caught any of the handful of people remaining, they seemed overwhelmed—too much to do, with so few on board—or listless, like who-gives-a-shit-now-that-those-slackers/know-it-alls/half-asses-are-gone. Still, people were cutting up vegetables for supper in a few hours, others were lugging water to the garden by the bucketful. We heard about their attempt at a windmill, about the start/stop electric

surges that came from it. Know anything about plumbing? someone asked me with a hope that didn't last long. For my part, I had a million questions about Ned—who hadn't been mentioned yet that I could tell—but felt that was Frances's place to ask. Anyway, there was still a lot of anger blocking any conversation; a kind of grief cloud hovered everywhere, given the dramatic departure of their friends.

Bad vibes, said a tall, skinny guy in beaded everything and patches on his patches. He had this wanna-be mohawk too, before I remember there being such a thing outside of the pen-and-ink drawings in history books, though he probably wasn't the first white guy in 20th century America to have one.

We got to go on without them, he said, that's all. And do what we gotta do.

He sounded like a despondent basketball coach who's always talking about *taking care of the basketball* like it was a simple but hopeless matter. Then he noticed me staring at his hair.

I'm into the Sioux. Like, but you're really supposed to call them the Dakotas. That's what they called themselves. *Sioux's* a fucking white man name.

So they had haircuts like that?

This? No, this is Iroquois, man. I studied the stuff. But I like this look. Even though that was one hard-ass tribe. Their clubs and shit. Their knives and spears and that. Bloody. They were into fighting in a big way, and there was always something going on. But I'm for peace, man. You know what I mean? Hey, I marched on Washington last year. A lot of us here did.

I could instantly picture that bus filled to the brim, this guy with his after-or-before-its-time mohawk and everyone from the commune hard at work on their picket signs as they pulled into the city, headed toward the reflecting pool. But I suddenly saw everyone else we'd met on this trip, how they'd fit in that scene. A curious hallucination: they'd be in Washington too, or wishing they'd been there—those boys in their wanna-be hippie van outside of Lincoln, going wacko with envy just at the mention of such an event. They'd start sniffing around for details to claim they'd been there all along, on that very bus. And outside, in that city for real, would be a prim, well-dressed Joyce Sunderland—the old disapproving high school friend of Ned's in San Francisco we stayed with—looking out her office window that moment too, or taking her lunch break, walking back down 17th Street in her perfectly matched outfit, tisk tisk tisking the wild hippies from out of town in their stupid bus. Above them, Satamanyu, the guru from Mill Valley, the one Ned had actually met, would be astral-hovering, smiling vacantly in pure joy. And Emil White, the old artist we visited in Big Sur, the one who helped Ned, talking art and giving him one good meal after another, he'd be there, I'm positive, color blind as he claimed he was, doing the whole

hip mangled thing up right, in bright yellow and green and blue, putting himself in somewhere, a tiny presence in the corner, like in those ancient Chinese scrolls.

But where was Ned? What had become of Ned? Sleeping—or stretched out larger than life, at the very bottom of it all, about to enter a most marvelous dream, like my favorite among all of my favorites of Chagall's sick-to-death-no!-turned-complete-love-of-this-world paintings.

I was losing it, letting all the scenes of that long week swim together in some glittering muddy pool. Memory. Even then, it was getting too crowded in there.



So I was napping in our little two-bed unit, probably most of the afternoon. I hoped that would help, a sweet long doze. Then Frances was shaking me, her hand on my shoulder.

Hey. Wake up!

Huh?

Hey listen, this is super cool. We're going swimming! In that hot springs pool they have.

Hot springs? What?

You know, the one the Cadillac guy told us about when this place was an old resort? It's still here!

I was sitting up now, trying to click in again, where I was—check, Colorado—and who she was—Frances, yes—and why I was even here.

Swimming? I said. Like in a swimming pool? Uh, Frances, I don't think I can. I didn't bring my bathing suit.

She looked at me closely. We don't *need* bathing suits. She said it pointedly, like this was blocks for the blind, obvious, a nonissue.

I took this in, trying to figure. Given Esalen, our time at Big Sur and our near-miss in the baths there, I don't know why it would have been such shocking news.

What do you mean? You mean. . .

Yes. You got it. *Bingo!* she said, that's what I mean. You got to chill out.

But I don't even *know* these people.

Hey, no one gives a damn about that. Come on. There's hardly any people here anyway. Considering, I mean. There could have been a ton more out there. But you know, they're in friggin' Mexico now. Anyway, I heard it's *weird* water in that pool. I mean, once you get in, no one can spot a thing. It's murky and hot and not at all see-through or anything.

I don't know. This is a big one for me, Frances. It really is.

Yeah, well. So what!—no offense. Come on. You said you were a *lapsed*

Catholic, right? How lapsed can you get? Anyway, you *have* to come with me. You really do. Right now too, before supper. That's when they said.



It took a few minutes, my mulling and remulling this over, something I never had to do very long at Big Sur where the crowds in those Esalen baths saved me the trouble. Had I a time machine, I might have whizzed off to the future, to our first days in Madison, Wisconsin, years later, when my husband and I would be asked to attend the membership meeting at Netherwood Coop where a certain Mr. Ts'ou was getting grilled, his initial interview in the long process of joining the house and finding a room. Middle-aged, and so happy to be at the University, he had been one of those guys nearly destroyed by the Cultural Revolution. Now he'd been released—a blessed reprieve—sent to the US to study physics. We were just back in the country ourselves after two years of teaching in Taiwan. But it was my husband David they wanted at the meeting, given his grasp of Chinese. He would be handy as a translator, if things got confusing.

Netherwood was famous for its “clothing optional” rule. And in those days, enough dope smoking went on in that place as anywhere else too. The current members needed to make sure this guy from China and so much older, almost 50, knew these things, that he wouldn't be too shocked at the casual nudity there or any random toking up that went on. The house meetings were weekly, but this was a special one. All decisions required full consensus—that was sacred—meaning everyone present had to agree. None of that “majority rule” stuff. Sometimes this took hours, down to the last browbeating of one errant opinion holder though sometimes that person simply wouldn't budge. Then the motion—or whatever the key point of such a long, late-evening discussion—failed and everyone got crabby and went to bed.

Mr. Ts'ou sat rigidly at the edge of a chair in his white buttoned-to-the-top shirt and black pants, his hands placed on his knees like he was about to be shot from a cannon. They were trying to explain Netherwood's place in the proud history of Madison Coops, how it was different, how it had real style, how it was the best and definitely the hippest. It was all those things, no question, set wonderfully right on Lake Mendota, a three-story, gorgeous 1920s rococo house with surprising austere touches—heavy little-paned medieval windows that opened out to the lake, serious woodwork that edged the tall ceiling where it met each wall. A classy joint. It was partly the water thing too, just the thought of being close to any kind of shore. It upped the ante. And most everyone in that house went by some new name—not *Linda* but *Moon Blue*, not *Jerry* but *Wilde Man*—each rechristening a giant step into a new self, another hip aspect of living there, such

swift transformations possible. They'd already started calling Mr. Ts'ou *Joe* though that was more a question of their refusal to hear his surname correctly, or accept it as such. Easier to slurry it into a plain given name, 100% American, as if he were right off the bowling team.

Now, Joe, here's the thing, Seeker was saying as he threw back his blond dreadlocks in a great sweep. We have this *other* house policy. See, we sometimes smoke dope here. No biggie. Is that okay with you?

Mr. Ts'ou turned to us with a quizzical look. And David translated Seeker's remarks into something close enough. Later, he told me he hadn't known the Chinese word for "marijuana"; he had to substitute with *people here enjoy opium-like substances*.

Mr. Ts'ou bent his head to the side. Ah, he said, with a little intake of breath.

And one more thing, Joe, said the beautiful Nancy-turned-Starfish in an airy sort of way. Some of us, well, a few of us walk around naked in the house sometimes. When it strikes us, you know. We just go with it. That cool with you?

He turned again to us for a clue. This one had been easier, David told me. The Chinese he managed now was simple: *some of these people do not wear clothes*. But that intelligence took a minute to settle. Mr. Ts'ou stared out the big window of that room, out to the lake where it emphatically continued to be late summer, where sailboats cut through a hazy blue expanse. Finally he turned back to us.

It is all right, he said slowly and distinctly in English. I have studied American culture.



Of course, this dropping trou thing wasn't any *regular* in-your-face walk-around habit I knew of in the country, not in the Midwest or out West either, not even at Esalen where it was traced back, in theory at least, to simple bathing, once the only spot on that desolate stretch of coast to manage such a thing. And although taking off one's clothes was the whole point at *nudist* colonies, that was hardly the general scheme of things in America, even in the '60s, though all those books now about hippies and free love would have you believe otherwise. Mostly, people are private, and certainly then as awkward and self-conscious as they are now about such things.

There was that bad-boy, throw-it-all-to-the-wind impulse—that must have been part of the kick at Netherwood. Slipping out of one's clothes was more common near water, I suppose, what kids might try on the sly in a sleepy Norman Rockwell sort of river, or how drunken teenagers took a dare at midnight in some abandoned quarry, never letting on to their mothers. Swinging out of trees on ropes could be involved, and serious, thrill-a-minute

shrieking, in either vignette. And it was routine then, I'm told, that troops of Boy Scouts rarely bothered with bathing suits in secluded places, once a habit at most YMCAs too, in their all-guy swimming pools. A name had evolved to cover some of that. What is it about language? It helped, as usual, to have a category—a tidy, seemingly harmless box to put it in. That's all we'd be doing, I told myself: *skinny-dipping*. Sort of.

It's your decision. But I'm going to the john now, said Frances, abruptly laying down the gauntlet like a schoolmarm. When I come out, I hope you'll be walking over there with me.



When we got to the main building, which opened into a kind of roofed plaza where the swimming pool had been set in the ground long ago, three or four people were already stripped down and either going into the water, or had just emerged. The sun well on its way out, lanterns were ready to rip and candles had been left on various tables. It was late, already near twilight.

I stared at the pool—a small, crumbly rectangle. I don't recall all that much more except Frances was right, the water did look strange. Viscous. Like I'm told everything gels at the back of an eye, grayish or bluish in there—and the threat? That all could go rigid and break away. But when someone eased into the pool, it rocked and waved as any self-respecting seasick-making element might. Frances was looking around for a place to take off her clothes.

Well, okay then, she said. And in a second, slipped out of her T-shirt, her jeans, and stood for a couple of breaths, almost as thin as Twiggy, that anorexic icon of beauty in our adolescence. Then Frances lowered herself off the side, into that drink.

The warmest drink imaginable, it turns out. I was even quicker, out of my clothes in a half-second to her second and into the pool. I was standing up *and* floating. It sure wasn't ordinary water, so warm and thick you sank and buoyed up, sank and steadied, turned over and over by its soft billows as you rose up again and again, suspended. I radiated with it, the heat coming through me, impossible slur of yes and more yes.

Again, hadn't Frances been right? Who cared what anyone looked like? Who the hell was looking? O my god, I said out loud to no one. She was bounding under and over her own delicious warm wave. This place was something—still! I might have insisted to our driver, the guy in his big Cadillac who had lamented its fate. Fate: meaning it long ago disappeared. But wasn't this water the very heart and soul of the place *right now*? Here we were, sucked down into its jaws, unbelievably soothed. It swallowed us. Comfort: all trouble back to one instant of losing then finding some other marvelous way out of, or back into.

After a while, someone spoke to me. I swear there were words, distant then closer. Then it was so quiet. Then more than one of them shouting—what? I couldn't hear. Were they saying come out? Oh sweet never ever, no way! This was wonderful. O my god. I was *never* getting out, thank you. Thank you very much. Very much. So very much.

I caught Frances' voice. *You have to come out! You've got to!*

But did I owe her? Or anyone? Oh, this was lovely. I was adrift and it was dark and it was . . .

Someone had my arm, and there were other hands on my right leg. They were pulling me from the water, telling me I had to, I did, it was dangerous to be in there that long. All the life sucked out of me or was it you or was it me again, collapsing.

I tried to stand on the concrete, the stone, the patio. How could I stand? I wanted back to those warm waves, that embrace and how endless. But the awful weight of everything now—the air a thousand pounds on me, me—melted to nothing, crawling naked, with nothing on, nothing. I couldn't care less except I was cold, I was caving in, barely making it to the table, this hand and then this other hand, this knee, right, then left. Someone was wrapping me in a towel, maybe a sheet. *Oh moment of history*, be specific and huge, remember this gesture, whatever shimmering word. Someone was telling me to breathe slowly and deep and giving me water. Someone was saying *lay down, you have to*. Someone was saying *drink more of this, nice and cool*. Please.



When I came to, came *back* to myself from wherever I'd been, I felt a pillow under my head and a blanket around me. I looked up into the lantern-lit dark and people were eating. They were shiny in that light. They were laughing and talking. I raised up on one arm and—my clothes? Where were my clothes? I had everything once; I had a t-shirt. Then Frances was at my ear and telling me. And I was putting on that shirt. I was slipping back into my jeans.

You still need to stay here—pretty much flat, I mean—for a while, she said. You got dehydrated or something. It's heavy shit, what happened to you. That's what they said. You really freaked us out, you know that?

Okay, I said, and leaned back again. Through the cracks in the overhang, I saw a few stars but it was cloudy.

Here, I think you can try this. The mohawk guy had joined us, a plate in his hand. Man, that was bad. But you're probably hungry, right?

What are those? I said. I saw homemade bread cut into squares with a greenish something-or-other smeared all over them, a few with a tomato slice, most going solo.

Avocado sandwiches, he said. Made 'em myself, man. Here, take one. They're good-eating.

I had noticed avocados, of course, green and all sizes in the postcards I'd seen when we entered California. Surreal, that they actually grew on trees, shiny and the color of leaves. Leathery, I thought later, finding them in various markets, in their post-orchard afterlife, like something you'd take into a shoe repair place in some last-ditch effort, though this delicate green stuff must be what lay *inside* that crinkled black hide of the thing. But to *eat* one. . . Still, I reached for the plate. And took one. And another, and another—a little bland. But not bad, I liked the texture.

Uh, Frances, I said after a few minutes. Listen, I don't feel so hot right now.

And no, I definitely did not. It all came back up, right there, in front of everyone. I'd never feel sicker—or more embarrassed.

How many years before I'd eat another avocado? Too many to count.



I was really sleeping it off then. All night, and into the next morning. I woke alone in that little room. It looked like Frances hadn't used the other bed at all. I felt way better. I washed up and changed into my last clean clothes—underwear, T-shirt. Now I really *was* hungry.

Should I be worrying about her? Earlier, the day before, having been given this room, we were settling in, Frances lying back on one of the beds. Thin, like Twiggy—I mentioned that before—but she was telling me how much she liked her hipbones protruding that way, the skin cool and taut there, so all-together, how glad she was for them.

It's great when you're balling, you know? she said. I love how my bones fit with his bones then, whoever it is, just the feel of that.

It would have shocked me, such private talk, if she wasn't so offhand, so pleased. Maybe it was her joy that jolted me because something was changing.

Now she was elsewhere. And probably with—maybe Keith, the cousin so distant he wasn't even a cousin, or maybe someone else. *That* startled me, as fixed as I was on Ned, on finding out *about* Ned, the single-minded purity of that mission. But Frances. . . He must have become more and more a ghost to her, this handful of days adding endlessly to the count of how long he'd been gone, giving reason and substance. *Gone*, a euphemism of the first order. We were following a track of bread crumbs.

I have to face it, you know? she told me on one of those ramps in southern Nevada. I mean sooner or later. No matter what I find out about Ned, I'm still a fucking widow, right? I'll be that forever! He's not here. And won't be coming back. He just won't. Never. Never. Never.

Yeah, I said. What to tell her then? What to even *imagine* telling her?  
*Ned's not fucking here anymore!* She yelled once, then about three or four times into that sweep of rock and sunset, of hot wind and echoey eerie world upon world out there.



I found Frances sipping tea in the main building, finishing the oats Keith had cooked for her, and for anyone who wanted a bowl, I guess.

Like some? he asked. I did. I really did. It occurred me to say something about last night, my terrible upchuck, spilling my guts—or *tossing my cookies* as we called it when I was a kid. How sorry I was, all that. But no one seemed concerned. They shrugged, then someone changed the subject. I wondered who had cleaned it up and felt shame come back, red and warm, all over again.

Too bad you have to leave today, Keith said, his eyes fixed on Frances. He leaned over to touch her cheek and she leaned into his hand, sweetly, with the slightest tilt to her head.

I was getting my nerve up—why not? It was none of my business, but this was my last chance.

Keith, I said. Ned was here, right? He stayed here—for how long? Before the...

Crack up? he said. Before that, you mean?

He looked at Frances again, and she gave him some sign like *what the hell, you can tell her*. I knew then they had talked all night about it, had pulled all the thorny bits about Ned through a knothole as they slept, or didn't sleep.

Yeah, sure. Of course before that, I said. Because this was where he stayed last, right? And his car—wasn't that *your* car? From this place?

Keith glanced around the table then, at the four or five people there. They all took on a serious-weather look, like a tornado had been mentioned, an earthquake in some distant sad place or a flood there with hundreds missing.

Yes to all of that, Keith said. And yeah, he was 100% fucked up when he got here.

I looked over at Frances, but she was nodding.

Fucked up in a very big way, he added—and more alive than I'd ever seen him.

I figured the *alive* part was mainly due to Emil White, that old artist, since Ned had just come from Big Sur. I could picture him cooking for Ned just the way he'd managed for Frances and me. And Emil would have seen that Ned had a good hot soaking down at Esalen too, their talk cryptic and soothing by turns, about women and whether to keep the buildings in a painting upright or not, and Emil's favorite bird, the red-tailed hawk. But the fucked-up part—who knows?

Keith speaks the truth, man, said an older guy at the table in his ponytail and black bushy beard. I'm here to tell you: that stuff Ned was saying, it fucking blew our heads off.

I almost said *like what stuff?* but realized Frances had probably heard all about it the night before. Anyway, it would be a broken record, a repeat of what we'd heard over and over before, what those guys in Mill Valley had said: Ned as mystic, as soothsayer, as witness to the genuine important matters in this life.

Frances, look, I need to show you something, Keith said, now that it's daylight. It might explain a lot, I don't know. He paused, then turned toward me.

You. You come too, if you want.



They had this cool old truck on that commune, circa 1958 or so. A Ford, with those wide ripped up seats, duct tape holding them together, and a spider-like stick shift, wobbly, straight up from the floor. We walked out and climbed in, the three of us. Keith and Frances and me.

I have to warn you, Keith said. Like I told you, Frances, Ned had been here for a few days, talking nonstop through his brilliant-ass craziness. We didn't quite know what to do with him after a while, how to help him figure it all. To tell you the truth, he was scaring us, Frances, even the hard-core trippers here who know that shit, inside out.

The truck was grinding and coughing. Keith had to keep shifting down, then up again, hammering the clutch. He was practically shouting over it.

Just in time I remembered what Ned always liked best, he was saying. It turns out we had these old buckets of paint in one of the outbuildings. Almost a hundred, I think. Who knows what colors—they came with the place, and dated from when? the early '60s? the '50s? Before that even. The ones that haven't dried out to the bone, just stir those suckers, I told him. Just get a stick in and see what colors they turn into. Whatever you want to do, man. You're the boss.

I bet he loved that, Frances said softly.

We were bumping over ruts you wouldn't believe. Her whispers were half-shouts but still came across as quiet, barely out there for us to hear. More like she was talking to herself, and maybe she was. And we had overheard.

Like, we have a decent ladder, tall enough. And I gave him a couple of brushes I had, Keith went on loudly. One big one, he said, one smaller too but nothing tiny like a real artist would use on a canvas or anything. They were brushes a housepainter would pull out of his box of stuff and soak later, in a bucket of turpentine.

We were rounding a corner then, a big barn-like building. Clearly there

was more to this place than a pleasure dome from the old days. Real work had gone on at some point—serious farming, and the fixing of small and large annoyingly breakable machines. Maybe there had been animals to tend. Now these guys had similar plans.

Well, here's what I mean, Keith said. Here's what you have to see, Frances. He pulled up, shifting down until the engine went dead.



We sat in the truck a few minutes, the three of us on that wide seat. No one made a sound.

The side of the barn was covered in all manner of paint, high and low, left to right. For starters, your standard mandala, your yin/yang symbol, even a little peace sign at the right lower edge. But the other images: faces, all sizes of faces, caught in horror or ecstasy, sorrow or joy but mostly it was pain in those eyes, and every one looking straight out and into us. To be fair, there were bright, Emil-like attempts at landscape or seascape: *amber waves of grain*, and foamy breakers crashing on whatever shore you might imagine, high mountains with winding roads traced into their woods, cactus spotting a desert.

But all was cut and overlaid with cubist body parts—arms, legs, awful eyes and ears and mouths floating by themselves. A cornucopia of styles, layer upon layer, that never seemed to quit. Tiny cars wove in and out, cartoonish but not cute, the driver always Ned hunched over the wheel, his eyes closed half the time, that red hair flying up and out and behind. In one of those cars, the hair kept going, out the window and into a long somehow dire swirling that circled the faces and crept under the seasick waves and up the brown-black rock wall of the canyons. That *swirl* business was a stock visual gesture of the period, usually cheerful enough. But not here.

I would like to say a comforting little house stood in the corner to ground it and, as in one of Emil White's pictures from *Big Sur*, an upright figure happily painted there, that through a window you could see the easel and the can of brushes, that artist himself emphatically midstroke. No luck. Instead large animals roamed the side of that barn, invented from various mismatched parts—random wings and hooves, yellowed teeth and claws, front legs and back legs, the many-eyed antennae eyes of insects that would freeze you instantly if blown up and close. But they were that big; you couldn't look away. Unthinkable, unnerving creatures, misaligned and wounded, sometimes bloody.

Keith and I understood this much: Frances would have to be the first to speak. So we waited. But she bolted over me, out the passenger door. And began to run.

Let her go, Keith said to me.