

COVER PAGE

Skipping Stones

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~ 3079 words

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I met Duane at the ranch. He'd worked there for several years. He seemed a pleasant enough fellow, quiet, tall, muscular, with long auburn hair and a shy smile. It wasn't with suspicion exactly that he regarded me at first; it was more like guarded curiosity. Who was I? What did I want? Would my presence upset the orderly operation of his life?

The "ranch" wasn't a ranch, really. It was more of an estate house, flanked by outbuildings, with a large filbert orchard carved out of a quarter-section of wild land that lay along half a mile of the Mackinaw River. A logging equipment dealer from the city had purchased it back in the '30s as a summer retreat. In time, his family had moved there, and in time he'd died there. Now his daughter and son, Jeannie and Phil, lived there like rural royalty, barely a presence in the huge house, wealthy as need be, in an idyllic Eden where they had to do nothing to survive, although, from a sense of *noblesse oblige* I thought, they did venture each summer to harvest the nuts that fell by the ton from the laden trees. It was such a nearly perfect life.

Duane was the youngest of three or four handymen who lived on the ranch to do odd chores: fix machinery, prune the trees, gather and package the harvest, work around the house. He was perhaps twenty-two. Word was he'd grown up on a real ranch in the eastern part of the state. Nobody knew much about him. Like most cowboys, he spoke softly and seldom, and he kept to himself most of the time.

I came to the ranch to relax, on the weekends mostly. With Jeannie. She was a small, shapely, vivacious woman with a ready smile and mischievous aquamarine eyes. We loved each other. In different ways. We shared, among other things, a passion for sex. And we liked to explore unusual experiences of mind, particularly of the kind occasioned by peyote. It was the seventies and we were young. Anything went, and we helped it all along. The Carlos Castaneda books were popular then, their mysterious

familiars having supplanted the Hobbits as cultural pop icons. Jeannie and I were conjoined in spirit, and sometimes even in flesh, with Mescalito, the patron saint of peyote eaters, a kindred spirit to Prometheus and Loki and Coyote. On sunny mornings we'd awake and make love for a while and then we'd run naked down into the icy river to splash and play and goose the ghosts who lived in the world around us. After a while we'd have breakfast and take a leisurely walk outside, gazing with rapt intensity at the flowers, the mountains, the trees, and always – always – the river. We absorbed everything, seeing, touching, smelling, hearing the magnificent perfusion of life that cradled us there in its timeless bosom.

Every so often on one of these mornings, when the moon and the planets were in the mood, Jeannie and I would juice up 40 or 50 peyote buttons in the industrial-strength vegematic blender, split the green proceeds into two huge milkshake glasses, and make ourselves swallow mouthful after mouthful of the thick, bitter liquor. A little more than a pint of juice took twenty minutes or so to drink, so awful did it taste. A half hour later, though, we'd be in a sumptuous garden of the gods, where everything was bright and limpid and alive, where the water was purer and cleaner and colder and more wonderful-tasting, where the flowers were more numerous, more varied, more fragrant, more silken, more intensely colored, more intricately designed, more graceful in their dance with the breeze, where even the clouds in the sky were a fascinating kaleidoscopic presence. And when a storm gathered, as it often did in these mountains on a summer afternoon, we would lie on our backs and watch the looming black clouds drift ponderously across the pewter gray sky, their dark bottoms only a few hundred yards above us, seething and churning and eventually filling the vault of heaven, and we'd listen to the long rolling kettledrum thunder as it echoed through the nearby valleys and reverberated through our own little meadow like an earthquake. We'd marvel together at the almost unbearable beauty within this wildness, rejoice in the fact that we were part of life's majestic panorama, and fantasize about Mescalito and the

whole welter of spirits that have walked the earth before us and will walk it still long after we are gone. And sometimes we'd make love for hours in the pouring rain, laughing like the children, commingling our souls in long silent glances that left us feeling at once empty and overflowing, exhausted and exhilarated.

Actually, this is what I was doing. What she was doing, what she was feeling or thinking, I never knew for sure. Well, you never do.

Jeannie and I had been doing this for a year or so, spending an occasional evening at my place and frequent long weekends at the ranch. My business was going well and I was able sometimes to take three or four days off just to drift along the endless frontiers of time with her. Like a pair of balletic butterflies we flew, easily wafted onto any new course by some zephyr that came curling around the rocks or fingering its way through the trees. If only it had a sprightly step or a dark mysterious melody, we would follow it. We discovered some wonderful worlds in this way.

One especially gorgeous summer's afternoon, after a string of days that had been agreeably hot and lazy, we were sitting by a little creek that flowed through the woods to the river, watching swift rivulets of silver water wink in the sun and then duck suddenly into the cool shade, slip over slimy black pebbles and patches of iridescent jade-green moss, plunge down dark and deep and then burst again into the light, sparkling like shards of ice, striking a hidden rock and shattering into bubbly foam, white like crushed glass, rippling through a sluice of twisting ribbons then suddenly smooth again, and so clear you could see every pebble as if in a magnifying glass, a foot or two beneath the surface, small shimmering stillnesses on a long journey to the sea that had begun ten thousand years before and would not end for thousands more.

Actually, we'd been discussing throwing up. Whether it was spiritually indign, on my part, that I never threw up. Certainly one had a good excuse for throwing up after eating—or in our case, drinking—peyote. The stuff tastes intensely bitter, no doubt about it. And the little fuzzy hairs on top of the button contain strychnine, a powerful

and potentially lethal poison. Although one does a careful job of scrubbing, these can't really be completely removed. So if one's body is especially sensitive to strychnine, or if one isn't careful enough, one's stomach might justifiably reject the offering.

But Jeannie had a more metaphorical perspective. She wondered if perhaps my not throwing up was a kind of anal-retentive thing, suggesting I didn't want to expel my dark evils and thus reveal my radiant truths. Perhaps it meant I didn't want to pay proper homage to Mescalito, I didn't want to lose control of myself and give myself over to the rapture. She thought I was not embracing the whole experience.

I adored the experience—it was better even than Huxley had suggested. I have always had great affection and respect for the gods of many cultures, and I could expel evils and reveal truths from now until doomsday without breaching my most private and sacrosanct reserves of both. It was just that I personally preferred not to throw up. I recalled a time more than a decade earlier, in a carriage-house apartment above a six-car garage, when I'd been part of a group of about a dozen people who had waited for an hour for a friend of the host's to show up with what we'd been told would be the mind-altering experience of the century. Finally, this worthy had arrived with a black leather case that unfolded elaborately out along the coffee table into six sections lined in crimson velvet, each with its own neat little assortment of vials, packets, syringes, natural-rubber tubing and medical instruments of various sorts.

"This stuff," he'd said at long last, holding up a glass pyxis of white powder after everyone had ooh-ed and ahh-ed over his display, "will totally blow your brains out."

"What is it?" someone asked.

"I'm not sure," he replied.

This cautionary information seemed only to pique people's interest in the mystery substance. Once it'd been prepared, everyone present save only myself had lined up to be injected with a dose of the stuff. I had established one inviolate rule where drugs were concerned: no needles. If I felt inclined, I'd smoke it, eat it, or sniff it. Sniffing stuff

even seemed a trifle risky, because it's up your nose and into your bloodstream, and then into your brain, almost instantly. Nitrous oxide, cocaine, and even a little crack went up my nose eventually. I never cared for any of them, although a "nose hit" of pot smoke from Jeannie was almost as mind-popping as a crack hit. Ah, but I digress.

About fifteen minutes after their injections all these guys – maybe there were a few girls there, too, I don't recall – went over to the only window, at the end of the attic room, and puked onto the hydrangeas below. Afterward each puker would turn around smiling and say, more or less, "Ahhhh, God, that was good!"

Then they all sat down and stared at the floor as if they'd been struck dumb, like zombies. Soon afterward, I had to leave. It was like being the only sober person at a drunken orgy: there's simply no way to participate.

So I'd had a kind of negative introduction to ritual vomiting. It just didn't appeal to me. I'm not squeamish; I'm just not attracted to it.

Anyway, on this afternoon I think I'd at last persuaded Jeannie that, irrespective of my disinterest in chucking up, I was indeed overwhelmingly engaged, wholly open to Mescalito and peacefully gliding in gossamer harmony on the universal river of life.

And it was just about then that Jim Greenleaf, Jeannie's uncle, who lived nearby and shared in the management of the filbert orchard, called out to her from the main house a half mile away.

"I'll go see what it is," she said.

I decided to stay there with the creek and the trees, the ferns and the breezes, the sunshine and the shade of the little glen, the flaming and subtle colors, the rich odors of the now long-shadowed summer afternoon. I'd learned as a child that people who call you from the house while you're out enjoying the solitude and natural grandeur of the woods are almost never planning to improve the experience for you.

After a long while – not long enough in retrospect – Jeannie returned. "We have to go to town," she said. "Duane's in jail."

For several years prior to this day, in the little town that passes here for a city, occasional newspaper articles had appeared recounting the exploits of one Ferret Creeks, a tall, charismatic black man with an evident penchant for stringy hollow-eyed Caucasian women. Ferret's activities occasionally rose above the background humdrum of our provincially foursquare community, usually when one of his soulfood restaurants went broke in spectacular fashion or some feud among his female followers erupted into the public eye. Although widely understood as a modern-day version of a gang of hillbilly moonshiners, Ferret's family were politically confrontative, did poorly in business, and eventually found themselves unwelcome around town.

About a week before this particular day, and of course unbeknownst to Jeannie and me, Ferret and his pale clique of wraiths and their numerous offspring had slipped out of town and encamped themselves in a remote corner of public land about ten miles downstream from our magical nut ranch of paradise. And on this very afternoon, while Jeannie and I were discussing nausea, communing with Mescalito and basking in the glow of languid summer passion, on this very afternoon, in the sinuous shadows of a forest not so far away, one of Ferret's wives, in a swirling drug-driven maelstrom of fear and madness and misunderstanding, had shot and killed a popular and easygoing sheriff's detective who had come to visit their makeshift camp to inquire about the health and welfare of the children, some of whom were only infants.

I've always loved to drive. Had I had any money when I was a young man, I'd gladly have paid people to let me drive their cars. Fortunately, opportunities were plentiful and I drove often, anywhere, anytime, at any speed, the faster the better.

Anyway, on this day, with Duane in jail for drunken disorderliness and Mescalito having chosen us to bail him out, I thought nothing much, stoned as I was, of careering thirty-odd miles over twisting, roller-coaster country roads in the gathering darkness. After all, we were going to rescue someone we considered a friend, for in those innocent days everyone that one knew, with rare exceptions, was regarded as a friend. And I

knew the road well, so it wasn't a problem at all.

But as we walked up to the front door of the police station a half-hour later, it hit me—I was still in the thrall of a psychotropic state. I felt fine, yes. I could drive, obviously. I was perfectly rational and the world seemed entirely as it should be, considering I was about to enter a lair of armed men with suspicious eyes. I had full control of myself, just as I do while I smoke cigarettes or drink coffee, both which I do almost continuously. I was chemically altered but nonetheless, for all the purposes that mattered, apparently intact.

So I swung open the door and let Jeannie go ahead of me into the police station. As we stepped inside I became suddenly, shockingly aware that the large anteroom, and the several rooms and hallways opening onto it, were aswarm and abuzz with hard-jawed lawmen—like frenetic bees busying about their hive—clad in camouflage fatigues and blue nylon jumpsuits, some wearing jungle-style warpaint, many carrying M-16s or black pump shotguns, most with .45s on their hips, a few with gas masks and all with radios. State troopers, sheriff's deputies, and local cops from several jurisdictions were all represented. They wore expressions of grim resolve as they hurriedly organized themselves for something obviously really big. We had no idea what the hell was going on. The whole scene was far more bizarre than anything Mescalito had ever conjured up for us.

My world view has always been surrealistic—the most ordinary things have extraordinary aspects for me—but for the most part I've adapted to it. This agitated menagerie of armed men, however, scurrying through the pale stucco police station hallways in a quiet small town on a hot summer's evening, was wholly outside the ordinary parameters of weirdness, even in a nightmare. It felt more ominous than anything I'd witnessed in the Army. It was like the phantasmagoric hallucinations men experience as they lie in wait for the coming of an overpowering enemy. I felt as Alice might've if she'd met Pancho Villa at the bottom of the rabbit hole.

Once the initial shock passed – and it took a few moments – we did our best to ignore this momentous hubbub while we paid Duane’s bail plus an extra assessment for his destruction of police equipment, a wooden chair with which he claimed they were trying to hit him. It wasn’t until we were all in the car and safely away from the curb that Duane told us what was going on with the paramilitary force coalescing inside: they were going upriver to get the Ferrets. I’m happy to tell you the responsible parties were eventually taken into custody without further injury to anyone. Such unsatisfactory justice as could be wrought from their witless violence was subsequently done.

Sometimes, try as you might, you just can’t save people from themselves, their destiny. It’s the whole premise of tragedy, that each of us harbors a flaw – a grain of sand around which the lovely pearls of our lives are accreted, a speck or a bubble that began a diamond’s crystallization. Sometimes in the stillness of night this primordial seed erupts and speaks, and when it does there can be no denying its presence or its power. If the wrong thing happens to you, in the wrong place, at the wrong time, that tiny flaw can burst forth like hell’s vast black abyss and instantly swallow you whole like the rage of obsession swallowed Ahab and the Pequod.

So it was, anyway, that a couple of years after this particular and sadly unpleasant day, and long after I’d stopped going to the ranch, I heard from someone that Duane had been convicted of choking a young girl to death in the back of his van. I don’t know how it happened. Probably it was booze, and drugs, and some shrill secret rage. Killing someone with your bare hands is no mean feat, no matter how bereft of sanity you are. Maybe she laughed at his weenie. Maybe he liked beating up girls. All I knew was that this soft-spoken guy, for whose liberty I had once walked through an army of angry cops with Mescalito’s shadow dancing in the firelight of my eyes, went out one night not too long afterward and murdered somebody.

My relationships with Mescalito, and then with Jeannie, seemed to taper off after that day. Mescalito was not to be trifled with, and I had other interests to attend to,

alluring as the mind's enchanted gardens may be. Jeannie was not to be trifled with either, but sooner or later I trifled with her.

Ferret took his passel of women and children to an island far away. I doubt anyone missed them. I never saw Duane again, and many years have passed since last I visited the ranch.

I suppose in late summer the leaden-gray thunderheads still climb in the silver sky above the green straw and rock-strewn meadows that cradle the glittering river, and little round nuts still carpet the orchard beside the old house. I suppose it's still intensely beautiful. But the ethereal paradise of Mescalito, of being young and in love, is gone now, carried away in the dark currents of death, and betrayal, and time.