

CAMPING

The tent was packed on top of the car, casting a long shadow onto the road. Richard watched the shadow glide in front of the car to his right, dancing and bending on the dull steel guard rail beside the road. The early morning August sun was already scorching, and it produced a furious sheen on the river in the canyon below the guard rail. The Fraser River at its mouth near Vancouver was every bit as placid as the Rhine or the Mississippi, but here, two hundred miles inland, it battled a tormented, swirling brown course southward through a deep canyon steeply sloped with pale sandy soil and pocketed with the desert green of sagebrush. Reclining in the driver's seat, suspended above the searing asphalt at seventy miles an hour, Richard surveyed his surroundings vacantly, the way he might watch a documentary on television. Cars flashed past in the opposite direction with a wink of reflected sunlight and Louise tried to catch a glimpse of the other travelers. Far more people, she mused, were heading the other way.

To combat the light, Richard scrunched up his face like a cat smelling cigarette smoke, and it made him look old. The heavy morning air, full of evaporating dew and the musky scent of sage and wild mustard, billowed through the rolled-down windows like warm pillow blows, softly pounding their faces and causing Richard's hair to jump in erratic waves about his head. He looked rather tired, Louise thought, and oddly out of place here in the mountain plateau of central British Columbia, far removed from his easy-chair in their suburban townhouse where she often gazed at him while they watched television in the evenings.

"See if you can open up the vent down there," Richard asked his wife.

She ignored him, rummaging for the tenth time through her handbag in search of her sunglasses. She suddenly remembered with annoyance that she had left them at home on the kitchen counter, preoccupied with packing the car while Richard had spent three quarters of an hour looking for his Swiss army knife, which he never did find, although for reasons unknown to her he had decided to bring an old slingshot in its stead. Slightly ridiculous, she thought, as if there would be no store at the campground, and he had planned on knocking the brains out of some poor little squirrel to roast over an open fire. During his boyish search for his camping weapons, she had packed everything else; Richard's sole contribution to the preparations had been to lash the tent on top of the car with a multitude of crisscrossing cords, although there had been plenty of space left in the trunk. Perhaps he needed the extra room to transport slaughtered squirrels back to the suburbs.

"Say, Louise, you think you can open up that vent?" He strained to find the lever under the dashboard, grunting and steering precariously for added emphasis. "It's getting hot as hell in here."

Louise reached under the dash but could not locate the lever.

"There, it's open," she lied, stroking his leg.

The car approached a series of fruit stands fronted by garish, hand-painted signs, all declaring the lowest prices in the area.

"Oh, honey, can we stop?" Louise employed the petulant little-girl voice she usually used when she wanted something, the same voice that Richard had once found so cute and alluring and which now only aroused in him a mild irritation.

He slowed the car and eased onto the gravel in front of one of the long, crouched wooden structures, which resembled a front porch with no house attached. Huge, childish wooden signs were hanging and leaning everywhere. A string of tall birch trees swayed behind the shack, its leaves flashing green and white and tinkling like tiny cymbals. The couple got out of the car and stretched. The heat smothered them like a liquid, slowing their movements. Richard examined the arid landscape beyond the trees; he wondered where all the fruit came from, probably in truckloads from the city. They were the only customers.

“We can roast peaches by the campfire,” she joked as they entered the shade under the fruit hut's plywood canopy. A stout, weather-beaten man was watching the couple from behind a mountain of cherries. He was barely distinguishable, as much a part of the scene as the shining birches or the yellow hills. Richards's eyes caught those of the wizened fruit vendor, who suddenly spoke.

“Things start to change when it gets this hot,” he said in a softly muffled tone, which seemed to hang in the air. He lifted a brown hand, as if to explain.

Richard looked at him, then back to his wife.

“What do you mean?” he asked the vendor.

“It's gettin' hot, that's all I'm sayin,’” the vendor said flatly, summing up with another hoist of his giant brown hand.

“Don't these cherries look wonderful?” Louise said, tugging gently on the waist her husband's shirt.

“They look nice,” Richard said.

“Those are two dollars a kilo,” came the old vendor's grave voice. Richard could hear the tinkling of the birch leaves. “That's a good price,” he added after a moment, a little grin shortening his face, his only sales pitch. Richard gave him the money without looking up while his wife weighed the cherries tenderly in a battered old scale hanging from a chain bolted to an overhead beam.

The car kicked up a swirl of dust as they pulled out and Richard was betting the old vendor would wipe that stupid grin off his face before he wiped the dust off his damn cherries.

“These are so-ooo good,” Louise said, back in the car, back on the road. She was spitting cherry pits out the window. Sometimes they flew back in. Richard grunted, his eyes fixed on the soothing, indomitable yellow center line on the highway.

They reached the campground at dusk. Wells Gray Park sat as large as Luxembourg in the gathering darkness. They soon found a site at the edge of the lake, isolated somewhat from the other campers on a slender spit of land extruding into the misty water. On the other side of the lake, perhaps a mile off, rose the imposing hulk of Azure Mountain, guarded by tall, white, spear-like drowned trees at the water line. She arranged the bedding while he set about building a fire.

His meandering search took him to the shore a short distance from the tent. The lake had looked so blue on the map, but here he stood looking out over a dangerous expanse of grey liquid, contained for who could say what purpose. Here the city-dwellers came, spitting cherry pits out their windows on the way and stamping out their cigarette butts so carefully in the rocky soil. He stood motionless in the still night air, clutching a bundle of sticks to his chest. He shivered and turned but it had grown dark and for a moment he did not remember which way to go back to the campsite.

It was getting cool; the hair on his arms stood up to fight the invading cold. The air was still thick, however, and it seemed to Richard that noises, shapes and odors were somehow being suppressed and flattened under a faded grey watercolor wash. He became suddenly and overwhelmingly aware of his body and its fragility, that one day it would be gone, while this lake, that ugly blue mountain, would remain. Or would they? No, not only his own body, but everything: lakes, cherries, God, space and time were all doomed from the moment they surface from whatever black hole of non-entity they had been non-existing in.

He shuddered violently. In that moment, the certainty of his death and the death of all else stormed into his consciousness and scratched a notch on his soul, and the experience was more somber than frightening. He tried to move, but found his legs no longer under the command of his mind. He felt faint, hung over, anticipating something unknown and unknowable. The void commanded his attention like a drill sergeant from beyond the sensory realm; he stood, his bundle of fuel as much a part of him as his feet or his spine. He felt the moments pass, no, he was the moments passing, and his angst smeared itself into an awareness.

A trout jumped nearby, whacking the silence on its slimy side and shattering the void with drops of uncontaminated instance. Of course there could be no end, for there was never a beginning. Beginning from what, where, how? No, there was no end, not to his scratched soul, for that would imply a beginning which could never be comprehended, thus existent. He chuckled oddly, aware of his voice and the sticks and the splashing trout, unsure of his victory over temporal anarchy, one more mind in the perilous domain of indefinable meaning.

The fire was crackling in the still air, sending sparks high into the night. The young couple sat in webbed lawn chairs, picking meat from their teeth. Between the dark shapes of the tent and the car at the edges of obscurity, they watched the tall flames.

"It's so peaceful here, isn't it, honey?" she said. "I'm so glad we came."

"It sure gets dark out here," he said.

A hundred years before, the brazen newcomers to this unkempt land had come in search of gold and furs and timber. They had ventured into some of the wildest territory on the continent, eventually coming to rest in little houses with pictures of European cities on their walls and foreign flowers in their gardens. Soon orderly cities obliterated the forests, providing a new, predictable environment of concrete and confusion.

"I wonder what time the store closes," Richard said.

"The store? What do we need from the store?"

"Nothing, I was just wondering, in case we need something." He wanted a newspaper, a pack of gum, batteries, anything straight, smooth and deliberate. "Let's put some more wood on the fire."

"Don't make it too big, honey. It'll burn all night."

"It's all right," he said. "I know what I'm doing."

But he didn't. He just didn't know what the hell they were doing, why they had come or how he could cut short their stay. They didn't belong here. Nobody belonged out here, not the prospectors or the trappers or the loggers, not even the moody Indians before them. Even the trout were trying to jump out of the lake and into the sky. Here was nothing but apprehension and fear, and it was both arrogant and insanely foolish to think it would be all right if you packed a flashlight and extra-thick socks. Richard looked up to the neon moon in its glowing halo.

"We should go for a swim first thing in the morning," she said.

He winced at the thought of climbing into the lake, recalling the *National Geographic* specials that would report with detachment such horrors as crocodiles suffering under the grip of electric eels. The bottoms of lakes were a sordid world of decay and blight; people were much better off swimming in bright, chlorinated pools manned by lifeguards and equipped with first-aid stations and concession stands.

"We'll see," he offered in response.

The heat continued through the night. Richard did not sleep. He rolled and tangled himself in his sleeping bag, trying hard to hold himself still, listening as the occasional twig ignited itself in the coals in the fire pit, which sent obscene dancing shadows on to the sloped walls of the tent. He thought he must be annoying her with his movements, and he was unreasonably annoyed himself that she should be sleeping at all. Eventually, he crawled silently to the front of the tent and slowly unzipped the flap.

He stood naked in the gloom, sweating and adjusting his numbed eyes to the light of the stars. The air was still, and he could hear his wife breathing. Wary of his mental misadventure by the lake earlier that evening, he tried to keep thinking of real things, like his job, his public relations office in Vancouver as he padded forward like an old man in search of an discreet spot to urinate. Nature has no need for public relations, he thought. You make shift, or you die. No scams, no psychology, no greasing of the peevisish facts of life with the convoluted lubricant of social identity. Louise sighed inside the tent as Richard's ears received a noise somewhere to his left. His mind ceased its chatter momentarily and he stood listening this time and he heard a second swish-crack filtering through the black woods. At once an unknown energy pulsed

through him as his chest heaved and his throat seized. Wetness welled in his eyes and his knees went rubbery. Without thinking, he lowered himself slowly to the ground and scooped up handfuls of gritty stones. There he perched, muscles tensed and nerves tingling. He waited.

Suddenly, he heard a hushed thrashing somewhere close and he hurled his ammunition towards it.

“Richard, is that you? Richard!”

“There's something out here,” he said, observing his voice closely.

“What do you mean, there's something out there?” Her tone carried more drowsiness than dread. “Honey, come back to bed.”

Richard remained motionless for several minutes longer. He stood up, his eyes still useless in the darkness, his arms hanging wide at his sides. The silence roared on. As he climbed back into the tent he could feel the cool stroke of the night on his lower back where his pants separated from his shirt. Inside, he lay cowering in his synthetic comforter.

The next day, they began their drive home in the early evening. By midnight they were back home, just in time to catch the *The Ed Garley Show* on TV. Richard was soon enveloped in the soothing cloak of blue light, but for all the magnetism of Ed Garley and his parade of celebrity guests, Richard could not shake loose a persistent image of all of them rotting at the bottom of a lake.