

In Summer's Heat

The thermometer hit 107 by two o'clock. Debbie wondered how Scott was doing. His crew started work at daylight so they could finish their shift working on the road before the hottest part of the day, but today had been hot from sunrise. Scott said he liked working in the heat, but Debbie could see the hottest days wore him out.

She left the office at four and eased through traffic going home. Cars crowded her. She tapped the brakes and let cars in ahead of her. Sometimes she talked to the people, "What is everybody's rush? Slow down. You take such terrible risks of messy, horrible wrecks, and you're only going to get there a few seconds sooner than I am."

She kept her turn signal blinking, and eventually, another driver slowed down and let her change lanes. She drove through ten miles of heavy traffic. She drove down the exit ramp, out Green Glade Avenue a mile, into the driveway, and parked beside Scott's dusty pickup.

She opened the bedroom door and looked in. Scott slept on the bed, lean and brown and tall, with only loose shorts he had put on after his shower. Debbie shut the bedroom door quietly, trying not to wake him, but he got up and opened the door again. She turned, and they hugged each other.

He said, "It got hot out there."

"The radio said 107 degrees."

"That's out at the game refuge, with dense vegetation. Where we were, it was rock and dirt and pavement and 118 degrees."

Scott walked back into the bedroom and dressed. Jeanine called and talked to Debbie. She said, "Doug and I and Steve and Sharon are heading for a swimming hole down from highway 32. We've packed enough food for you and Scott, too. Can you go with us?"

When Debbie asked Scott, he looked doubtful, but she said, "Their car is air-conditioned," and he nodded. She told Jeanine, "Sure. We'll be ready by the time you get here."

On the drive up the winding road into the foothills of the Sierras, Debbie looked at Scott and thought he might think the same thing she was thinking. Air conditioning in a car didn't cost all that much. In a summer like this, it changed from being a luxury to being a necessity.

On the other hand, Scott might not agree with that. He wanted to buy their own house, with some land around it for fruit trees and a garden. He wanted to put the luxuries off and save money.

From the winding mountain highway, they drove down a steep, very rough dirt road. High above the stream, Doug drove onto a meadow where grasses bleached yellow in the hot sun. They got out of the air conditioned car, and Debbie thought it was like stepping up close to a roaring fire.

They walked across the edge of the meadow. Flowers, tall red flowers and much shorter yellow flowers and blue flowers whose stems curved so the blossoms hung toward the ground and looked like small bells still bloomed among the grass. The flower's sweet smells mixed with the green smell of grasses drying in hot sunshine. Jeanine, Doug, Sharon, Steve, Scott, and Debbie walked single file down the face of bluffs of black stone. Bushes and grass and flowers grew from the bluff up and out, almost blocking the narrow trail.

Debbie said, "You picked a rough place to get to."

Jeanine said, "If it was easy to get to, there would be lots of people. Watch out for this stuff here. This is poison oak. We can get past it without touching it if we stay high on the trail."

They walked from the steep trail down onto a beach of gravel and sand. The stream ran clear and fast, around and under huge boulders, and pooled deep in several places. Steep rock cliffs rose from both sides of the creek and formed a canyon that ran north and south. The sun, sultry yellow above summer's dense, smoky air, hung close above the canyon's rim.

They had the place to themselves. Debbie asked Jeanine, "How did you find this place?"

"I've been coming here since before I could walk. My parents brought us here when we were kids. I don't tell many people where it is, so don't pass it around, and it might stay private. We always go skinny-dipping, because it is private. If nobody has any objections, that's the way I'm swimming now." She looked at everyone there and received no objection, so she left her clothes on the rocks and walked into the water.

Debbie didn't mind when everyone else took their clothes off and walked or ran or dove into the stream, but she wasn't sure she would be comfortable with her own nakedness. No one paid any attention to her as she stood half-undressed on the beach of sand and rock, momentarily lost in thought. She decided she would be more uncomfortable being the odd one out, the only one prudish enough to wear a swimming suit, than she would being nude, so she finished undressing, left her clothes on the rocks, and ran into the water.

The water drove the shock of cold bone-deep. She stepped into water over her head, pushed to the surface, stretched out in the flowing stream, and breaststroked just enough to hold her position in the current. She took in and released two deep breaths, and the water felt right, no longer shockingly cold.

The stream buoyed her up in the hot day. Deep tensions she hadn't known were there washed out of her in the clear current that flowed around her and over her and away from her, down the steep-sided canyon toward the ocean.

Jeanine stood shoulder deep in flowing water and watched the shadow of the western cliff climb the eastern stone. Debbie turned to see what Jeanine looked at and then twisted and backed water until she sat on the sandy bottom with the water to her chin while she watched the rising sunlight. Then Steve turned, and Sharon, and Scott and Doug.

Sunlight's edge climbed the dark stone of the cliff east of them. They all stayed quiet, lying in the water, floating, or sitting, or standing on the bottom. Manzanita, poison oak, scrub white oak grew deep in scant soil in cracks in rock. Ceonothus, grasses, and flowers of a dozen kinds fell from the heat of sunlight into sudden shadow. The edge of sunlight stood above the canyon rim, momentarily visible as light in summer's smoky air, then rose upward and disappeared from view. Smell of plants, water, and rocks floated in the air around them.

The six people in the water breathed out air they hadn't known they were holding in and stirred to action, swam, dove, laughed, and splashed.

Dusk settled into the deep canyon where six people played ball in the water and out of the water. The game of catch evolved to keepaway. Scott stood on the sandy part of the beach, close to the water. Doug called, "Scott," and threw the ball.

Jeanine ran out of the shallow water, jumped high, trying to knock the ball from the air, and collided with Scott. Scott stepped backward, picked her up, swung her around, and set her down on her feet. Everything stopped, briefly, while the fact that they had done something unusual registered. The four who watched them also felt the brief pause, as if they all stumbled, caught their balance, hesitated, and then continued with what they had been doing. Jeanine ran in pursuit of the ball, and the game went on.

Dusk washed through the air around them. Doug said, "If we're going to get out of here while there's still enough light to see the trail, we'd better gather up and get gone."

Night flowed rapidly across the world toward them. They dressed, gathered up their goods, and single-filed out of the

canyon. The bright silver quarter moon stood halfway up the darkening sky above them.

Scott said, "You know, this should be heaven for rattlesnakes, with all this rock, brush, and grass."

Jeanine said, "I'm sure it is, but you might not have mentioned it until we got to the car. I can hardly see my feet on the trail, let alone a rattlesnake. My heartbeat picked up about seventy percent."

They got to the car without seeing or hearing snakes and drove down the mountain. They took Scott and Debbie home first.

Scott and Debbie walked into the house, shut the door, and turned the lights on. Scott turned and looked at Debbie. Debbie said, "You are in a load of trouble, Mister."

"Why?"

"You and Jeanine were rubbing your naked bodies together. Deny that, Scott."

"Debbie, we weren't rubbing together. We were in contact briefly, but we weren't rubbing. I swung her by me and put her down, and that's all that happened. I didn't even think about the difference, if she had clothes on or not."

"I know. You were so excited you forgot all about propriety. You probably wouldn't have grabbed her if she had clothes on."

"I would have. We would have fallen down if I hadn't. I was excited, yes, having fun, playing ball, but not sexually excited. Debbie, you have to give me a little breathing space. I had no evil intention. I had no designs on her naked body. I grabbed her to keep from falling down. Reflex action."

"Your reflex action could just as well have been to push her away."

"Just because she didn't have clothes on? I'd rather cooperate and keep us both from falling, but if I had it to do over again, I'd let her fall. I'd run like hell and jump in the river to stay out of trouble."

"So you wouldn't have fallen, if you hadn't grabbed her. Just she would have."

"No. I think I would have fallen, too. We ran smack into each other, and I could have not grabbed her, and maybe we would have fallen together and rubbed our naked bodies together like crazy to get to where we could get back up. It might have been ten times worse."

"Well, you got up against her big, bare breasts. How was that?"

"Do I have to go through this with you? I didn't mean to cause you any pain. It happened so quickly, I didn't think of

possible consequences. I just acted. Would you want me to be so hung up about physical contact, I just froze up, stepped aside, and let Jeanine smash on the ground?"

"No, I wouldn't. But I don't want you naked against her either, and I think you're a liar when you say you didn't feel anything sexual from it. I think Jeanine looks at you with interest, and I think you look at her with interest."

"You've got me to where I'm confused about my own intentions. I never thought I felt a sexual attraction to Jeanine, nor her to me, but you are a very sensitive person; you understand a lot about people, so maybe you see something about me that's there, but I just haven't realized it yet."

"Scott, you think this is funny, don't you?"

"Some of it. Right now, this part is funny. But I love you. That's all. Do you know that? I love you. And I am going to tell you something, the truth, and if the truth blows you away, remember that I wanted to avoid digging into this. But you have to promise to listen all the way through, without interrupting, without calling in lawyers, until I'm through."

"Scott, I don't like this."

"You're the one who keeps hounding me. Let it die."

"With as much as you've already said, there's no way in the world I could leave it alone now. You know that. Do you still love me, Scott?"

"Yes, I do."

"Do you want to stay married?"

"Yes, I do."

"You'd better tell me."

"I did feel a momentary sexual feeling. I didn't plan to have it. We collided. I grabbed her and swung her by me and put her down, and that moment, when we were against each other, I felt a sexual feeling, very briefly, and then it was gone. I didn't want to make love to her; I was just intensely aware of her femaleness and my maleness for a moment. I will never go skinny dipping or play ball in a mixed group again."

"Oh Scott, you will too. Just next time, tell me the truth from the beginning, and I won't have to dig to see what you're trying to hide. You wanted me to believe you weren't human. You wanted me to believe you were blind to everyone's naked gender, blind to the sexual possibilities, and I didn't believe it. Now I believe what you're telling me, I think."

In a few days, the experiences wove themselves into the fabric of their lives.

Debbie felt almost certain she was pregnant. She hadn't told Scott yet. He would want tests. "Let's find out for sure." She didn't want tests. She didn't want strangers to invade this very

private feeling beginning to grow deep inside of her. When she had some time to really relax, when it was time to know, she would know, and then she would tell him.

Jeanine and Doug came for dinner. After dinner, the four of them went to the concert. At dinner and on the way to the concert, Debbie watched Scott and Jeanine. They both seemed relaxed. She wondered, perhaps there was something freeing about having come full-body and nude up against a barrier to many male-female relationships, "How do we deal with sexual attraction that might rise from our feeling open with each other, close to each other, attuned to each other?" and dealt with it. The social network is there, even if our clothes are in heaps on the riverbank. Maybe, if no eyes were upon them, it still would have been, "Oh, very nice, but I'm married and so are you."

Debbie thought many people might be more deeply rooted in solid values than she had realized. That so many people around her as she was growing up dissolved to insubstantiality and fell into every pit of temptation that opened up before them didn't have to mean the entire world was without substance or predictability. Her father was lured by every temptation, sexual and otherwise, that passed in front of him. Eventually, Debbie's Mother's willingness to forgive wore out, and she no longer wanted Debbie's father to be part of her life and drove him away.

Now, Debbie tried more and more to see her father didn't necessarily represent the ways of all men, just as her mother, indirect, vulnerable, and more and more isolated where she had retreated inside herself, did not represent all women. What she had seen and loved in Scott from the beginning hadn't dissolved with the passage of time and the presentation of many temptations, but had become more solid.

The evening was hot. Hot air lay heavy in the valley. It was hot in the auditorium, with hundreds of people crowded close together. Debbie thought it would be worth the heat. She was glad they were there.

The warm-up band started unevenly but then developed good, steady music. Debbie saw the short young woman standing tiptoe behind them, and she caught her shoulder and pulled her and then stepped back, until the young woman stood in front of them, where she could see. The woman who had been standing beside the short woman said, "What the hell is this? Why should she get a place in front?"

Debbie said, "What difference does it make? She couldn't see, and now she can see, and it isn't costing you anything."

She turned back toward the stage, and Wham! the woman behind her hit her full in the side of the head with her fist, all

her weight into the blow to the ear and back of the jaw, slammed her head forward. Before she had time to understand what had happened, Debbie turned from falling away from the blow directly into her assailant, chopped her once, across, at the base of her skull, and faster than vision, chopped hard where her shoulder joined her neck, and drove her down to her knees. Debbie was moving in with a blow that would kill, when Scott pinned her arms to her sides from behind and lifted her off the floor. "Whoa, honey. She believes you now."

It was a mess for a few minutes, to get everything settled, to keep from being thrown out of the concert, to get the woman who had hit Debbie settled down and believing she was safe from further attack. Scott stood close to Debbie, solid and unshakable. Doug and Jeanine stayed close and stood both sides of Debbie and Scott.

Debbie thought Doug and Jeanine could have slipped away from any involvement, since they had nothing to do with the attack or counterattack, but they helped the woman none of them knew get up, and they helped calm her and reassure her at the same time they stood with Debbie and Scott. "You're safe as long as you control your own aggression," Jeanine told the woman. "Next time you're tempted to haul off and slug somebody, stop and think about what happened here."

After the concert, on the long drive home, north up the flat valley floor, with the car rolling across hot pavement, the night still hot and heavy in the valley, quiet inside the car, with cool air flowing from the air conditioning vents, Scott asked, "Does your jaw still hurt?"

"A little. I'm okay."

Scott chuckled, and Debbie said, "What's funny, honey?"

"Every once in a while, that woman looks around and says, 'Whoops. I sure did slug the wrong skinny little 97 pound weakling.'"

"Scott, I don't think it's funny. It really scares me. I was going to kill her, and I didn't even know I was doing it. When I took Karate, I learned it really well, and that training took over faster than I could think. But the training about not hurting anyone seemed to be gone."

Jeanine spoke from the front seat. "You're conscious of it now. That happened before you were even aware it could happen. Now you know it can happen, you can be prepared for it, right?"

"I don't know. I'm not confident about that. Maybe I need to take more classes and see if I can learn how to keep my thoughts ahead of my actions. I didn't mind hitting her twice, but if Scott hadn't grabbed me, her brain might have become

bloody mush.”

Doug and Jeanine left them at their place. In the bathroom, getting ready for bed, Debbie wouldn't look at herself in the mirror. She wasn't ready yet. She needed to think. She needed to breathe deeply. She was okay. Then she was scared.

In bed, she said, “Scott, hold me please. I'm really scared.”

He entwined her with his arms and legs and said, “Of what?”

“Everything. The whole world. People who can slug you for trying to help someone. People who can kill faster than they can think. All the changes that can happen, and I can't do anything about them. Is this any kind of world to bring a child into?”

“It's the only one we have.”

“Scott.”

“Isn't it? Isn't it the only one? What if we give up on love? What if we give up on life? Besides that, I know you. You already know you're pregnant. You are pregnant, aren't you?” He laughed loudly. “You're pregnant.”

“Scott, you don't have to shout about it so all the neighbors can hear. I don't want anyone to know about it yet but the three of us.”

He didn't say anything more. He held her close. She started to feel too tightly restricted and pushed at him, and he loosened his hold so she could move away if she wanted to. She encircled him with her arms and pulled him close to her.

With their closeness, Debbie's fear diminished. It wasn't completely gone. She had so much to think about, so much to do, to be ready, not just to have a baby, to become three when they had been two, but to continue living in this sometimes very scary world. She thought about it for a long time after Scott fell asleep, curled up close against her, his hand resting on her abdomen, as if he could feel the child growing there.

The bright, full moon moved across the sky until she saw it through the window. Light from the huge, golden moon shone through the bedroom window on Scott, asleep, and Debbie, awake and watching, and filled the room with soft golden light.