

Chapter 15

Head Trip

TC cleaned a trout and set the smoker up behind the stable, on a half-finished patio of concrete blocks. His long-sleeved shirt, damp with perspiration, clung to his back and chest. Sweat dripped from his forehead, soaking the fabric of his beret where it touched his skin.

The beret had become part of him, an appendage as familiar and necessary to functioning as his hand or foot. He'd begun wearing it a year before he'd started painting. In fact, the hat had led him to painting. He believed with absolute certainty that the beret had inspired his vision.

With the smoker under control, he stuffed supplies for the afternoon into the backpack and gathered his easel and canvas. The aroma of the fish oils mingling with the mesquite charcoal smelled so enticing that he considered staying close to home today rather than making a painting excursion, but finally he set out in the direction of the hill with Shadow paralleling him.

Painting had become like a daily prayer. He had been neglectful of a spiritual practice for too long, had strayed from the path he'd once taken with conviction, when he had entered the Jesuit seminary. Painting had opened up once again his conversation with God.

Below the hill, where the stream flowed through an abandoned beaver dam and over a scattering of stones, there was a spot. At mid-day, there would be the mix of light and shadow he envisioned for the picture. He had not yet documented this stream and wondered if he was up to the challenge. It did not have the deep pools of Otter Creek nor any waterfalls worth a mention. In places it narrowed until it nearly disappeared and in others became so shallow a person could cross it wetting only the soles of his shoes. It was barely a stream at all some summers, and this summer promised to be as dry as any he'd seen in the years he'd lived in the area. There was a good chance this painting would end up looking like just a bunch of rocks, and that wasn't what he was after.

How satisfying the act of painting is, he thought. The work is done alone and, though someone might criticize the final canvas, no one could criticize your intent. Politics were different. He'd led environmental crusades, had been called "a wise and compassionate visionary" by many, but lambasted by politicians and press for his views—too radical, impractical. Most of his ideas hadn't been fulfilled.

It was true, the windmill proposition had been overly idealistic, but to this day he remained convinced it could have worked, that it still could work. He didn't relish the image of windmills populating the hilltops, but the solution made far more sense to him than building a nuclear reactor on a fault line. He'd protested the building of the reactor along with hundreds of other protestors. They'd succeeded in shutting the plant down once; but now, here it had come around again. Yesterday in the paper had been another mention of nuclear as a viable energy alternative.

"Hellfire, they've already damned all the rivers!" His shout split the silence and burned his throat. He'd fought the building of those dams, from within the system and as

a protester. Once, he'd chained himself to a tree in a valley that was to be flooded, and was cut loose and dragged away face down by four uniformed men whose salaries he paid with his taxes. He squinted into the sun and felt the tug below his right eye, the knotted scar from his cheek having been scraped to the bone.

At one time he would have been more than infuriated at the things going on in the county now. He would have rallied people for action, called meetings, led protests. He would have driven to Sacramento and sat in the Governor's office until he listened to reason. That approach hadn't always succeeded, and he had no intention of making the trip now.

He opposed pesticide spraying and conversion to corporate farming as much as any of them. Truth be told, he was tired of it all. It was all mania. Grapemania here, now. In times past, in other places, tulipmania, mulberrymania, you-name-it mania. What would be next? More sucking at the teat of a speculative monoculture.

If he had his way, he'd bud-nip it. Put a moratorium on new vineyards and buy only from those with sustainable practices. Get people to scale down, use less fuel and power, get more backyard gardens growing. It had been done before, victory gardens during World War II. His mother had one, and that effort had helped win the war. Small steps, but it all added up. He saw how it could all work, a delicate balance perhaps, but something to aspire to, as opposed to having-it-all mania. He believed that most people wouldn't want to live as simply as he did or take the time to grow their own food. He didn't have much of a green thumb himself and was grateful that Willa did, and he craved the occasional fast food as much as the next guy. But there was plenty of room in between his way and Brewster's.

At least he knew where Brewster stood, unlike that ambidexter Crawford. He'd once trusted Crawford, but no more, not since the man had become a county supervisor. Crawford played both sides, trying to keep the vote up so he could climb to the next rung, more than likely to become governor someday. The guy had been a comrade in the early days, but he'd sold out. TC's stomach churned to think about it.

Ego could chew a man up inside. TC knew his own appetite for reputation nearly had done him in. His name and face in the newspaper, on TV, the adulation of environmental groupies. TC Watt: the man who fought for clean rivers and old growth forests, against urban sprawl. The attention had been a tonic for lost love, and he'd consumed it with an unquenchable thirst, but he'd come away, after years of battling for cause after cause, with a bitter taste, and now he wanted only to be left alone, to paint while the landscape was still there to see, while he was still here to see it.

He'd seen too much slip away. The gravel bar where he'd once built a steam sauna for a group of friends on a raft trip now sat fifty feet under water, sacrificed for a power dam. The night of the sauna had been magical, one of the last evenings he and his wife had spent together. He said her name to the air. Lucy. Even after all these years, the sound splayed his gut. Ever since she left him he'd been lovesick. He was convinced that the illness began in him then.

TC had traipsed partway up the Hill, preferring this more scenic route to reach the stream, but he stopped now and looked down, considering how much less strenuous it would be to skirt the base. He shifted the pack's weight and rested a minute, then continued walking, his attention now diverted from politics to the strenuous climb of the hill and the beauty—the reward for his efforts—before him. When he reached the crest,

he could see the valley stretching west to its far boundaries of rolling hills, the convulsed remains of ancient quakes, now rounded as breasts. Voluptuous.

Lucy had been Rubenesque, soft pillows and deep folds of flesh. He'd loved her beyond imagining, beyond God. In the months after they'd met, when her mysteries had tested all he'd believed, and the early years together, after he'd left the seminary, he'd funneled all his passion into her. If there was a heaven, and he wanted to believe now more than ever that there was, he wondered if it could match the ecstasy of his young marriage. The remembering of that time still caused an echo of desire in waking dreams and at moments like this, the hills teasing him. That night at the river twenty years ago, he'd been connected to something greater than himself in a way never before or since.

To make the sauna, he had built a tent with oars and tarps and in the center of the sandbar floor had dug a pit and placed into it stones heated from the dinner campfire. Everyone had entered with towels or blankets wrapped around them and TC, unclothed, had thrown a bucket of water laced with vanilla onto the stones. The seductive aroma was still strong in his memory.

As the steam had filled the tent, the towels had dropped away, and the ethereal bodies glistened with sweat, skin catching the moonlight seeping through the translucent tarps. Lucy had been so ravishing and openly aroused that he'd had an erection the duration of the sauna, and it had lasted while he ran with her from the tent into the icy river. They had made love on a blanket under the stars, and he'd sworn he was the happiest man alive.

After they returned home, she told him she wasn't content in their marriage, and that she wanted them to live apart. A few weeks later she moved in with the cardiologist

that had been on the trip. TC hadn't seen it coming, had little recollection of the man, but had wondered often if Lucy's heightened arousal during that night under the stars had been due to her fantasies prompted by the heart doctor.

“Watt! You've let cupidity do you in!” he muttered as he maneuvered down the Hill, stepping around rocks and over fissures in the earth, his face flush with effort, breathing labored, sweat soaking his clothes. With relief, he entered the riparian forest and shivered as he cooled. Shadow slipped through the trees.

The woods were a miracle, an environment known to him, yet at the same time mysterious. A man could make a lifetime's work studying a square yard of this place, not to mention saving it from vineyard expansion. When Brewster had first bought the property, TC had walked with him in these woods, trying to educate him on reforestation, soil erosion, and stream sedimentation—all the key issues of conversion. Brewster had seemed interested in the history of the place and had given his verbal consent to an archaeology study, but then had sent the consulting fee with a cordial note saying he didn't want the study, and had proceeded to cut timber and level the hill, and pressure the neighbors to asphalt the road. TC had heard the chainsaws and seen the men working. Joy had come to him for help with a plan; the women were setting a trap. He chuckled at the idea. He had to hand it to them for their cleverness, but he believed it was merely a stall, and a weak one at that.

Brewster was hell bent on planting as much of the property along the lane that he could get his hands on, and TC had a hunch the Bennetts were about to capitulate. In their letter, they'd used the line again about “what was best for Jack,” a phrase which had

always led to what was best for them. They'd have less guilt about leaving Jack if he was in boarding school, and they could fund the schooling and years of travel or ashram living with what Brewster was undoubtedly willing to pay, which was a heck of a lot more than the Land Trust could afford.

He walked the stream, dismayed at how sediment had built up in places and compromised the stream's course. When the rains came, things would get worse. It was happening all over the county—too much topsoil and God-knew-what washing away. He would restore this stream next chance he had; he knew Brewster wouldn't know how and Willa, though determined, wasn't strong enough to lift the boulders needed to fix the meanders.

Further along, TC found the spot he'd had in mind. Overhead, leafy branches moved in the breeze and specks of sunlight and shadow danced on the rocks in the water. He quickly set up his easel, securing the tripod in spongy moss at the stream's edge. He adjusted his beret, squeezed paint from the tubes onto the wooden palette, and selected a long-handled brush with resilient bristles. The first marks proved the hardest and the most thrilling, the initial commitment to the void of the canvas, the promise of becoming something magical. After that, it came easily. He wasn't saying he was a great painter, some might say he wasn't that good at all, but it was a calling, of that he was sure, even though he'd come to it this late in life.

When he painted, he thought about God in ways he'd never thought about Him during those years in the seminary. He marveled at the fine hand that had colored the world, so magnificent in its diverse animal and vegetable life. He wondered if God's plan included systematic destruction of the environment, or if God had made man and woman

and set them loose in paradise without knowing how it would all turn out, and if He was up there now trying to figure out a way to turn things around.

People had once pegged him as a creationist, but that was far from the truth. He'd been educated in science and, despite opinions to the contrary, was too practical to believe the world had been created in a week. He knew how long it took to make something look good, to bring it to life on the canvas, much less in three dimensions. A single ladybug required hours, an entire woods eons. Too bad it didn't take as long to destroy as it did to create. He'd thought that about his marriage, too. If it hadn't been so easy to get the divorce, if he hadn't let her just walk away with everything, they might have worked it out in time. He respected God for the care with which the world had been made, and didn't blame Him for the carelessness of people. He was sure God was as baffled as he was.

Soon enough, he thought, he'd be seeing Him face to face and he'd ask those lingering questions. He'd ask Him what the secret was to living with the consequences of love, when bitterness replaced passion, when once-strong belief became as fragile as a butterfly wing. He'd ask whether this illness was a punishment for the sins of ego and betrayal of faith, for his failure to let go of love-lost sorrow, or whether God only wanted him home early to prepare him for returning to the world, maybe after time to rest up and shed his cynicism, after time to heal with the angels. He'd ask forgiveness. He'd want to know how he could have done better here on earth. He'd ask to know joy again.

He wondered what it would be like—a tunneling into darkness, a bursting into panoramas, a view of earth from space and then the angels? Would he see God's presence or feel him, or would there be only a Oneness, no conversation, yet an understanding,

nothing to see, yet seeing it all. He wanted to believe that the end would be its own beginning and there would be only a pinpoint of light, and he would be in it and of it and know exquisitely all that it could be.

With each brush stroke, he became more immersed in the image he was painting and less aware of his surroundings, other than the streambed. He dabbed the canvas. Bits of paint transformed the flat surface into dimensions of light and shadow. Shapes became rocks and leaves. Space became water and earth. He painted steadily, unaware until he stopped that his legs and shoulder ached. He laid the brush down and said, “I think you did it this time, Watt!”

He rubbed his neck and calves, repacked, and started the climb back up Hill to the Sky. He thought now of the food stashed in the backpack—salami and cheese sandwich, dill pickles—and the pillow that would cushion his head while he napped on the hill.

He trudged up the slope, past rock stacks that he’d arranged, thinking how oddly things were working out. He’d lived a fast-paced life once, been a public servant, had been paid well for his knowledge of forests and watersheds, and could have had more to fall back on now had he continued in that line of work, but he’d given up being an expert, the one people called. If he hadn’t been such a dang-wallet and overspent during the years of his marriage and then given Lucy so much, he’d have a bigger bank account, but he didn’t see how it would matter now anyway. No, he’d made the right move, getting out of the environmental battle when he did. Joy and Willa were pressuring him to reenter the fray, but he didn’t see how he could bring himself to do it.

He sat on the crest of Hill to the Sky and squinted at the horizon. Shadow came and lay beside him on the grass. The sun hung lower than he’d expected and clouds

bunched over the distant hills, moving his way. That streambed had absorbed several hours. He'd have a quick bite, take a nap, and paint the view, if the clouds cooperated. Life was short, but these July days were long. The sun was his clock, paint his companion, and the world around him shimmered in the late afternoon light.