

NOWHERE LAND: A SUMMER IN AMERICA'S BIGGEST COMMUNE

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ABSTRACT

NOWHERE LAND: A SUMMER IN AMERICA'S LARGEST COMMUNE by Jane Dornemann

Twin Oaks is an Intentional Community (IC) in Louisa, Virginia that has been in full operation since 1967. Hidden away on 450 acres of woodland property, the 100-member population chooses to work and live outside of mainstream culture. Founded on B.F. Skinner's behaviorist theories, Twin Oaks is a communist establishment structured around a labor credit system that eradicates the need for money. In this creative non-fiction novel, the author gives a first-hand account of life at Twin Oaks by immersing herself in the commune's culture. During the visitor period, the author dissects her own psychological, political and sociological approaches by comparing life in the "outside world" to life at Twin Oaks. The author's re-evaluation of American culture, when removed from it, exposes deep flaws and striking similarities between the two worlds.

“But what is to be done if I have taken it into my head that...if one must live one had better live in a mansion. That is my choice, my desire. You will only eradicate it when you have changed my preference. Well, do change it, allure me with something else, give me another ideal...The palace of crystal may be an idle dream, it may be that it is inconsistent with the laws of nature and that I have invented it only through my own stupidity.”

--From *Notes from Underground* by Fyodor Dostoyevsky

CHAPTER 1

Communes have been around for a while-- a long while before the sixties-era hippy-dippy la-la land that might come to mind for most Americans. The concept of a commune might seem archaic to some, yet such communities exist all over the world and have seen a resurgence in the last decade. Whether it's to escape doomsday or the desire to live simply, there are smorgasbords of uniquely themed communes that are thriving in this very day and age.

Take Christiania, for example. Also called "free town", Christiania is a Danish commune that was established in 1971 on an old naval base, of all places, in response to what founders believed to be the growing selfishness of society. The members drew up an elaborate set of rules that, ironically, were meant to foster anarchism. The commune has a school, a health clinic, a radio station, and a concert venue. Cars and the sale of personal property is forbidden. Now at eight-hundred-members, Christiania has developed an intricate state within a state that, until recently, Danish authorities have left alone.

On American soil, communes (and variations on communes) still very much have a presence, the Occupy Wall Street movement being a looser example. As the number of Occupy Wall Street encampments grew, so did small, independent societies. Just before the police raid in the middle of the night that stomped out the lights of Zuccotti Park, the New York City chapter of Occupy Wall Street had developed quite the communal system; everyone had a duty, and that duty was done not for money but for the concern of the organization's common good. Occupants put out a daily newspaper, the Occupy Wall Street Journal. A makeshift library was set up, along with a food distribution center, and there was even a station for drying socks that had been soaked by long protests in the rain. The

idea was that everyone did what they could, because that's what it would take to build the kind world they wanted to live in-- one where everyone would get their fair share.

Interestingly enough, the Occupy movement began as I was in the midst of my stay at Twin Oaks, a commune that claims to be the oldest surviving commune in the U.S. With one hundred people who never go hungry and never want for work, there is no doubt that Twin Oaks was prospering in the face of trying times for the rest of the country. The members seemed untouched by the millions of foreclosures and a volatile stock market. I wondered if they had something figured out, if they'd tapped into something that the rest of us had somehow missed. My curiosity was piqued.

What I'd come away with at the end of stay, first and foremost, was that Twin Oaks was not without problems. It was true that I never had to worry about a 401K or missing a bus, but in exchange I had to fret over spiders in my bed and a dearth of clean clothes. My life at Twin Oaks consisted of swapping one set of disadvantages for another set of disadvantages. It reminded me of my life's locations: I'd grown up in New York City and now lived in Hawai'i, two places which could not be more different from each other. I have always been loath to move back to New York City; I have a million and one complaints about it. The subways are always packed and filthy, the rents are astronomical, and nobody ever smiles. Of course, there were good things too, or else it wouldn't be so commonly referred to as one of the best cities in the world-- the culture is diverse, ambition is rewarded, and there's nothing quite like a picnic in Central Park when spring first breezes in. In the end the cons outweighed the pros, so I set off for greener pastures (and bluer seas). I fell in love with Hawai'i, mostly so with its striking beauty. After I had adapted to the aesthetics of the 50th state, and looking out onto the blue Pacific became commonplace, I realized that Hawai'i wasn't perfect; more importantly, it wasn't better than New York

City. Hawai'i traffic is horrendous; food prices make me cry, and most of the job market revolves around tourism.

People tell me how lucky I am to live in paradise, and I try to tell them it's not. "Well, if Hawai'i isn't perfect," my sister once said, "then nowhere is." What my time at Twin Oaks impressed upon me is that every place is likely to be that way. There were days when I loved it and there were days when I hated it. In the absence of perfection, our life comes down to which reality in which we choose to live. Our choice is ultimately 'which type of imperfect works for me?'

I had searched the world for the imperfection in which I could settle. After finishing college I'd bounced from one life to another, each completely different, in hopes of finding where I belonged. I had gotten bit by the travel bug after I'd studied abroad in Ireland, backpacking my way around Europe conjuring up all the high school French I could muster. After graduation, I worked as a nanny in Italy, then as an English teacher in Thailand. One bad break-up later and I found myself on a soul-searching tour of India. In between all these forays into international waters, I'd had a stint working on Wall Street, changed my mind and went into advertising, then left that to teach. I got bored with teaching and decided to backpack the Middle East by myself, armed with a solid knowledge of ten Arabic vocabulary words. Ten years after college, I'd been to thirty countries on six continents, held every job from waitress to investigative journalist, and still wasn't sure where I'd be happiest.

For some it takes decades to find their kind of perfect imperfection. There is an itch on their backs in a place they can't quite seem to reach, a persistent feeling that something is missing, something just *isn't quite right*. Kat Kinkade, a woman whose name most people will likely never hear in their lifetime, had to scratch that itch.

Kat Kinkade was born into the Great Depression and grew up to be the first in her family to attend college, but that soon ended; after her first year at University she married an army Sergeant, choosing a family over a degree. Things were good for a few years, until they weren't. She was unhappy. So, one day, she took her daughter and moved, of all places, to Mexico City. She taught English there for five years (and I can only imagine the fit her parents must have thrown).

After half a decade abroad and the celebration of her thirtieth birthday, Kat decided to return to the States, where she became a bored secretary in Seattle, her last-ditch attempt to live the life that was expected of her. It didn't work; she was unhappy. She ran off to become a folk dancer, and along with her daughter, performed with a troupe in Los Angeles (surely her parents had given up on her after that, if they hadn't already died of shock).

Then, one night in her bed after a particularly taxing performance, Kat read the book that would change her life.

The book was B.F. Skinner's *Walden Two*, written in 1948, which details a community that combines Thoreau's *Walden* with Skinner's theories on behavioral psychology. "This is what I want!" Kat remembered saying to the night air (Jones). This idea of community, intentionally structured around cooperation, was an entirely new concept to her-- yet she recognized it as the something she had been unconsciously seeking all her life. The book esteemed certain behavioral practices aimed at creating an ideal world, aptly dubbed "behavioral engineering" via self-control, non-attachment, self-sufficiency, the absence of the monetary system, and the implementation of total equality. Its pages described a Utopia of the future, a community of happiness that was the result of conditioned behavior. Kat agreed with Skinner's sentiments about the destructive nature of

America's individualist consumer culture. The continuing message was this: the truth is, none of us can really get by without the efforts of, well, *everybody else*.

The core of society's problems, as Kat would later write after establishing her own *Walden Two*, was that "we have grown up in a culture that puts a premium on selfishness, that applauds the person who successfully exploits his fellow men, and that honors most of all those who receive riches in exchange for doing nothing at all. We are trying to create a miniature society in which every member considers his neighbor's needs equally to his own, where exploitation is unthinkable, and where it is assumed that every member is doing his share of the necessary work (Kinkade, "Journal")." *Assumed* would end up being a critical word in Kat's statement.

Just as suddenly as she had moved to Mexico City or joined a dance troupe, Kat set out to better the lives of future generations. With \$35,000 and seven other volunteers (including a cabdriver from Washington, D.C.), Kat founded the Twin Oaks community in 1967 on a plot of land in Louisa County, Virginia. Paying rent on land that was once a tobacco farm (an irony, as they had all tried to give up smoking) the team began to literally build things from the ground up. Kat recalled that the first day she arrived on the farm she was so excited all she could think to do was grab a rake and start clearing the autumn leaves (Jones). Things were happening, she thought, things were going to change.

The first winter was hard, and they hadn't enough knowledge about living off the land; they had been all dreams and no strategy. Cows froze to death in the pastures, a result of the assumption that nature alone would be capable of satisfying all bovine needs. "Our lives here are so very different from what they were on the outside," Kat wrote in her diary (Kinkade, "Collected Leaves"). To keep things afloat, members took turns traveling to nearby Richmond to get any work they could- odd jobs here and there that put food on the

table. All of them were white-knuckling it until spring came and saved their dream, which was quickly starting to look like castles in the air.

They weren't alone. It was the era of communes, and what kept Twin Oaks from becoming a stereotype of the age is debatable. Communes were popping up everywhere; people were seeking to escape the sociopolitical climate of the sixties. Vietnam was in full swing and a generation was waking up to a slew broken promises that amounted to the American Dream. In defiance, men grew their hair long, students protested; women burned their bras, their efforts extinguished with tear gas and rubber bullets. They were labeled "hippies": longhaired, dope-smoking do-nothings. Eventually, the 1960s became the 1970s and, "The media announced that the sixties were finished, its culture discredited, and the future delivered to the 'Me' Generation" Kat recalled (Kinkade, "Is It").

By 1971 the commune had grown from eight members to thirty-five, though most did not make a home of it; it was one thing to daydream wistfully about a better world, and quite another to actively create it. Most people who came through looking for answers to life's questions couldn't cope with the challenge of living on twenty-five cents a week. Traveling hippies looking for a handout were expected to work, and they didn't hang around. Whether it was societal conditioning or human nature, it came to pass that most people needed more than pure idealism as motivation.

The commune kept a steady membership through the seventies, building houses to accommodate people and livestock alike, and the members felt that "unlike thousands of other communes that succumbed to the perplexities of shared living, they gradually began to flourish despite early hardship" (Twin Oaks.org).

Kat said she felt like she was saving the world.

“These poor people, who would otherwise have to deal with capitalism...I would clap them to my bosom and give them what they all really wanted,” said Kat, “which was community, and equality” (Kuhlmann, “Living”).

To make sure that happened, the members drew up a behavior code to help pave the road to Utopia. The code demanded aversion to gossip, the absence of titles begetting rank, the nonexistence of seniority, and a tireless acceptance of the individual habits of others. “People called me ‘very idealistic,’” Kat remembered, “and it wasn’t always a compliment” (Kinkade, “Is It”).

The more challenges that arose, the more policies were created to resolve them-- and they grew like weeds. Twin Oaks’ policy book expanded from a sheet of paper to two bursting binders full by the 1980’s, addressing everything from barn fire protocol to the dos and don’ts of naked cooking. Policies also emerged as a result of the outside world barging in: during the Reagan administration, Twin Oaks was taken to court by the IRS. The IRS lost. Of course, this led to another chapter on taxes and tax procedure in the policy book.

A member who had served on the Twin Oaks legal team (after leaving law school a few credits shy of graduating) said the case was an example of the government’s anti-communism agenda during the 1980s, adding, “They wanted to prevent the spread of communism in South America, yet they couldn’t stop it a hundred miles from D.C.”

At the same time that Twin Oaks was entering its third decade of life, another commune Kat had started was going through a different development. Five years after she had founded Twin Oaks, she’d started another commune called East Wind. Nestled in the Ozark Mountains in Missouri, Kat wanted East Wind to rectify what she felt had gone wrong at Twin Oaks. She had had small revelations during the first few years of Twin Oaks that deviated from B.F. Skinner’s (and her own) original ideas about human behavior and psychology. Fro example, the concept of working solely for the common good had proved to

be a pipe dream. Since Twin Oaks' structure was already in place, Kat created East Wind as a sort of do-over.

Whereas Twin Oaks' member admission had been more selective (particularly after the arrival and prompt departure of so many undesirables), Kat felt that East Wind should be open to anyone who wanted to join, supposing that sustained enthusiasm would be the sole criteria for admission; after all, it took a certain amount of gumption to get all the way out to East Wind, which lay between nowhere and nothing. But this idea ended up drawing more freeloaders than it did workers with initiative. Even worse, the arrival of so many layabouts drove away the members who had believed (and worked) for utopia at East Wind. As a collective, no one could be "fired" for a poor work ethic. Reflecting back on her hopes that East Wind would yield something more promising, she said, "We had a very hard time finding suitable people. In an effort to survive, [we] had to accept many people of dubious quality, people who, as their numbers increased, made the community unpleasant for the more idealistic and productive members, many of whom left" (Kinkade, "Is It").

At East Wind Kat witnessed the actual (and not imagined) human nature in full force: member after member rolled out of bed at the tail-end of morning, sat around smoking cigarettes, hoping things would get done. One study on communes that came out during East Wind's early years suggested human behavior was the very reason why so many communes dissolved, stating, "Some researchers have...maintained that many of the intentional communities of the 1960's era may have disintegrated for the simple reason that would-be revolutionaries were unable to get somebody to do the dishes" (Kuhlmann, "Illusion" 157).

"Part of my disillusionment came from watching the worst aspects of communism in action," wrote Kat, "I saw a larger part of [the East Wind community] sitting around on the front steps of the dining hall smoking cigarettes and drinking their wake-up coffee at

eleven in the morning, and heard them ridicule ‘workaholics’...the people who made the money and kept the organization together” (Kinkade, “Is It”).

People who had been conditioned by a rewards system found themselves in a place devoid of reward could not adjust to the lifestyle. There were no bosses and thus fear of authority. There was no money, and hence no drive to acquire a paycheck. With the removal of any incentive that would imply a hierarchy or a specialized reward system, people’s original sense of mission melted away, the lack of challenge replaced by what felt like a purely sacrificial lifestyle.

“Most people value small liberties more than they value small equalities,” Kat wrote in reflection, “and therefore society works better if the rules aren’t too rigid. Equality is a means, not an end.” (Kinkade, “Is It”).

The same year she founded East Wind, Kat published her first book, *A Walden Two Experiment*, which detailed the first five years of life at Twin Oaks. It’s an account of how “creating a new society presents many challenges—making a living, inventing a government, sharing the labor, raising children collectively, and reaching agreement about such things as diet, standard of living, and commitment to caring for the environment.”

Kat’s final disillusionment came when she realized that a rigid egalitarian system was destined to fail; it was naive. Human nature would always get in the way. She acknowledged a marked shift in her school of thought, realizing that what she’d been seeking in others was *herself*. Kat has written that her self-examination led her to “discover some unsettling things about [her] equality theory. For one thing, I came to see that my ideological purity...was a hardship on other people, but wasn’t any hardship on me. I had no financial assets when we started...I got rich on satisfaction from my life without feeling any need for spending money... I found out certain people, they just want more and more and more”

“These days people don’t call me idealistic anymore. They call me cynical. But that isn’t true, either. I have learned that personal gain is...not a stronger motivation than the communal good, but a more reliable one. I accept that now. I no longer think it’s evil or disgusting. I think it’s ordinary” (Kinkade, “Is It”).

After decades of communal living, Kat left Twin Oaks in 1998 and re-entered the outside world. The spark that led to her decision remains undocumented, but she once stated that the conflict was largely internal, and took place during a time when she “looked carefully at [her] own willingness to live by a code [she] had [herself] created but no longer fully believed in” (Kinkade, “Is It”).

Twenty-six years after Twin Oaks began, Kat published *Is It Utopia Yet?*, a question that deep down she felt had already been answered by a resounding “no”.

“I think I’m the only one left who remembers it was an experiment” she’d said in an interview with *The Washington Post*, held the year she left Twin Oaks. By this point Kat saw herself as an outsider of the community she had created. She wondered aloud at what had gone wrong and asked “Is a romance less than they hoped, is intimacy less than they assumed, is the community itself less united in its goals and desires? [Twin Oaks] never did love me. It respected me and it feared me, but it never loved me” (Jones).

During her nine years in the outside world, almost nothing was recorded of her activities; all anyone knows is that she lived alone in a small house in Virginia. In 2007, after her hiatus from communes for almost a decade, she did the unthinkable: she returned to Twin Oaks. The reason for that, too, remains officially unknown, but one could speculate that she felt something coming; Kat died just six months later from breast cancer complications. In her last few months living at Twin Oaks she was reclusive, housed on the edge of the grounds, only seen sporadically at community meals, and never spoke much. She made no secret of the fact that she felt trapped amidst a group of people who *wanted to*

be there, that she alone did not believe what they all did: that it could still work, that life in the woods could provide a higher level of satisfaction than living in the outside world. She died on July 3rd, 2008, the last remaining member of the original members still at Twin Oaks, and just a short while after its 41st anniversary.

One of the more common sayings I'd heard from Twin Oakers during my stay was, "All people are equal, it's just that some are more equal than others." The member who had first said this to me passed it off as his own, though anyone may find it in George Orwell's classic novel *Animal Farm*.

It's a complicated statement. It sounded to me like something our founding fathers would have said as a way of explaining why women and African-Americans couldn't vote. No one who said it offered an explanation, but I was told that by the end of my visitor period I would truly understand what it meant. I can't say that I do, but I think of the words often, and they linger in my head. After I'd come home from Twin Oaks, I remember turning on the television and seeing some scary things: a group of people who believe Obama is a space alien in disguise (or worse yet, a *Muslim!*). A popular show about mothers who spray tan their five-year-olds for kiddie pageants and berate them on national television when they don't win had earned a second season. On the evening news I heard a story about a man who killed his children and covered up the murders, claiming them for welfare checks for months before anyone figure out the kids hadn't been in school. The paper headlines announced that BP Chief Tony Hayward opted out of working on a solution for the gulf oil spill so that he could go yachting, instead. I shared the world with some bad people, people I felt I was better than.

Yet, we are all equal-- or are some of us just more equal than others?

What happens when our definition of equality is in constant flux? Who are the winners and who are the losers? Has this practice of malleable equality been the reason why Twin Oaks has outlived all other communes born of the sixties and seventies? And is it the commune's members who deserve to fall under the perceived standard of the "more equals"?

Today, the statistics of Twin Oaks have changed since Kat first swept leaves from the barn. The average Twin Oaker is white, from an upper-middle class family, between the ages of thirty-five and forty, and holds a college degree. In essence, they are a microcosm of America's privileged class. What was once an annual turnover in the sixties is now an average stay of eight years, though each generation sees one semi-exodus or another (usually do to a disagreement on an issue that deeply divides the community). At the time of my visit Twin Oaks was at its population cap of one hundred, with accepted applicants languishing on a waiting list for months. The ideal new member is young and has the intention of staying for a long time (if not forever), and they are the hope for the future of Twin Oaks.

Yet, an overwhelming majority of the new members with whom I had spoken confided in me that they had no intention of staying longer than a year or two, until their inevitable boredom set in or their social bridges were burned, and they would move on to the next chapter of their lives. I hadn't met anyone under twenty-five who had been there for more than a year or two. They all knew they would eventually want to see the world and resisted making a permanent home at Twin Oaks. Regardless, the spots filled quickly.

Twin Oaks' members defined their community as a feminist eco-village, absent of gender roles. They have a presence on the Internet, where I had found them, and have built

a website full of photos and alluring descriptions of everything there is to do there. The webpage makes Twin Oaks sound more like a promotion for Club Med rather than a farm that runs on hard labor. They boast prime hiking in the nearby Shenandoah Mountains, with a chance to canoe down the river. The infrastructure is described as one of never-ending diversity and intellectual stimulation, with card games, “serious scrabble”, an anarchist discussion group and a library. If none of that appealed, there was always a movie showing in the Degania building or time to fritter away in the sauna.

The website is one of the biggest tools used to attract prospective members, though some find Twin Oaks by word-of-mouth (the amount of hippie nomads that have serial monogamous relationships with Intentional Communities, staying at each one for a while before they fly on, is a big one).

That was the website, by (my) experience was different. What I found were the less glamorous versions of the website’s truths. For example, the Degania building that had a home theatre. There was a small movie library, but the DVD selection had been carefully vetted by members to bar content that would “brainwash” members into thinking our modern American consumerist culture was acceptable (which left room for nothing more than documentaries and the like). The sauna was doused in cobwebs; there had not been much frittering there. Everything about Twin Oaks revealed a genuine effort but also a contradiction, and that is what constantly jarred my frame of reference, forcing me to question my definitions of ‘normal’ and ‘not normal’. Twin Oaks members had redefined “normal”, but at times I wasn’t sure if they fully believed it. They’d been openly praised by the media outlet *Russia Today* for being a communist organization, yet the commune had for a long time sold the hammocks they made to Pier 1, a large corporation. Despite the self-applied label of “eco-village”, they cut down several towering trees to make room for the expansion of their tofu-making business, which used huge amounts of water every day. To

boot, they had dipped into funds set aside to care for aging residents in order to see the growth of the tofu business. Lastly, the concrete foundation for the addition was laid by migrant workers whom members had picked up from outside Home Depot.

Long-time members had left, (a move that reminded me of couples who get divorced after thirty years of marriage, something that was baffling but suggested a good reason)-- yet most of these ex-members remained in Louisa County or in Charlottesville for the express purpose of maintaining ties with the community. Members were encouraged to do away with personal possessions and live on as little as possible- a limit of \$2.50 a day (roughly \$500 a year after taxes), to be exact, yet a sizeable number of them used what little they had to purchase luxuries like iPods. While gardening tools were rusted at the edges and more mugs were missing their handles than not, the reserves of the commune are by no means meager; the farm has over a million dollars in the bank.

As far as its relationship to the outside world, that is another complicated (and at times contradictory) aspect of Twin Oaks. The bylaws of the commune reflect the perceived harms of mainstream influence, avoiding the “mesmerizing glow of TV”, though it was begrudgingly accepted that some of the younger members downloaded videos and sitcom episodes to their laptops.

Twin Oaks’ tag line is “not Utopia yet” which is often followed by “if it’s not here, then where else?” The community believes in the pursuit of their utopia so much that if a member chooses to leave they are entitled a \$2,500 loan to help the departing person transition out of the commune. The loan is expected to be repaid on the recipient’s honor. That graciousness would never be found in the outside world without a decent credit history.

On my first day I was warned, had I any dreams of an actual Utopia, to abandon them. In a visitor’s guide booklet, one of the first pages read, “We don’t pretend that this is

paradise, and if that's what you really want you will have to look elsewhere...but if you do find it please send us a postcard and we might move."

My stint as a visitor at Twin Oaks was part of a three-week visitor orientation, a program used mainly to recruit new members. I was one of eight visitors (two of them were women, myself included), two of whom already had ties to the community and six who were considering membership. Two were foreign—one man visiting from England, and another man who had long ago emigrated from Russia. Half of the visitors were unemployed, a few of them middle-aged. Despite the variety in background, all of them would let out deep sighs when they thought about the long-gone idea (the pursuit of the American Dream) that had left them in the dust. The others visitors were young enough that they were new at being adults, listening to the warnings of their slightly older comrades who had told them the world was not anything like what they had been promised. "Out there" was *not* their oyster. All of them, regardless of age, occupation or origin, wanted to break a flawed cycle that they could not see definitively but only sense.

I was the odd one out. I was not unemployed or seeking to join, and while I was unhappy with the current state of the Union, I counted myself luckier than most. In my initial inquiry, I had made clear to the members that I was researching the commune in order to write my thesis. That aside, I was also just a newlywed spending my summer checking out a place I'd heard about to satisfy my curiosity, which was better to me than wading in sadness at home while my husband was deployed. His tour would last for two months, and then he'd leave the Navy. This would change our world; we'd eventually both be shackled to full-time jobs, paying off student loans, and starting a family of our own. In a lot of ways I saw my trip to Twin Oaks as possibly my last leap into the unknown, a chance to continue to question what I thought I knew about life and the world without a baby in

one hand and a diaper bag in the other. When all was said and done, for all the far-off places I'd been to in the world, a commune seemed just as exotic.

I had imagined a commune to be an open, friendly and liberated group of people who would open my eyes to a bigger truth or revive my waning faith in humanity. That was my imagination, the same image that laced Kat Kinkade's vision. After a while I got the impression that visitor groups were seen as a necessary evil; their financial donations and labor contributions were the only reason most members still opened their doors to outsiders. Visitors were looked upon cautiously; Kat had long ago confirmed that communes attract "those less equal". The program tended to draw travelers and emotionally unattached people who could not identify with society. One member described the trial visits as a choice between "loners, losers and drifters" (Jones). Who else could manage to walk away from their lives for a month and live in a commune? The unemployed, the restless, the independently wealthy, the forever-in-betweeners or the elderly. Despite the aversion to new faces, and in particular, change, the visitor program is tolerated because they need young blood. The oldest generation of Twin Oakers is in the twilight of their lives. Quite a few spots will open in the next five to ten years when the baby boomers start to die off, and as Kat knew, the commune can't run on dreams alone.

Whether people stay at the community into old age because they believe in it or because it was the only thing they felt they could do was never expressed out loud. Those who have lived at Twin Oaks had lived below the poverty level for so long that they didn't want for much; they knew that their \$2.50 a day would not take them as far in the outside world, where they were likely to have no support system. At the age of seventy, Kat Kinkade had found herself with no savings, no health insurance, no social security, and a lump in her breast. Perhaps that's why she had returned after so many years in the outside world; a lifetime of not paying into the system made it impossible for her to survive

in mainstream society. Where was one to go after twenty-five years of living on a tucked away farm, and no resume to speak of?

Sure, there were contradictions and suspicious hypotheticals left and right, satisfaction along with deep dissatisfaction, but Twin Oaks' engine was still chugging. East Wind was still running, even thriving, maintaining a steady average of fifty members who run a booming organic peanut butter business. There was one last commune Kat had thrown together a last ditch effort at Utopia in 1993, a few years before she left Twin Oaks for (almost) good. She'd dubbed the Intentional Community "Acorn", located down the road from Twin Oaks. Acorn members were taken from Twin Oaks' waiting list, which at the time was quite long. Acorn, too, is still up and running; it holds twenty or so members who run a seed business.

It was interesting, then, that Kat been so adamant when she'd said it had "all turned out to be bullshit—all of it—and that it would only be good while it lasted" (Kuhlmann, "Living"). Twin Oaks was still around after forty-five years-- that's a pretty solid record for bullshit. When I asked a fellow visitor at the end of my stay whether or not they thought this way of life was an answer to the world's problems or if it was bullshit, he said that while he admired it, it certainly was not the answer.

I had to admit, I had been disappointed by the morose undertones of the members I had tried to get to know. It was as if everyone was aware they were not living a Utopian life, just a life that was a lesser of two evils. What had once been a young, revolutionary passion to seek something better had effectively become a settlement for the good-enough and will-have-to-do-for-now. In a lot of ways, Twin Oaks was the outside world I knew, but in a sort of forest-colored camouflage. Kat Kinkade's daughter would agree with me. Now a grown woman who works as a doctor in Louisa County, Josie Kinkade repeated her

mother's sentiments when she said, "[Twin Oaks] was just a really nice place for some middle-class people to live." She even used the word "disappointed" (Jones).

"I don't get it," I remember saying to the visitor to whom I had asked the question, "Is this the answer?" "They seem to be rational people. It works on a surface level, but feels broken underneath. Why do they continue to believe this works?"

After taking a moment to reflect, the visitor said, "Sometimes very sensible people can believe very silly things", and he was right; we're all guilty of it, one way or another. We are all equally at odds with ourselves. I guess some are just more equally at odds than others.

“Following the light of the sun, we left the Old World.”

--From the diaries of Christopher Columbus

CHAPTER 2

Last night I woke up every hour on the hour, each time forgetting where I was in the darkness. When I realized I was six thousand miles from home, I rolled over and tried to go back to sleep. By 9 a.m. the sun refused to be tamed by the curtains, and so I rose. I played back yesterday in my mind.

I had left my home in Hawai'i days ago, though it felt like weeks. I'd arrived in Virginia the afternoon before, only after a long and tumultuous trip of layovers and babies in coach who seemed to have a never-ending reserve of scream.

A thunderstorm had been going for days and had wiped out power around the city. My connecting flight from Chicago had almost been cancelled as a result. In the purgatory of gate seventeen, I had been surrounded by herds of people, all waiting to get on a flight. In the melee I befriended an elderly couple who'd been waiting for a flight for over a day. The day before, the airline (whose name may or may not rhyme with Shamerican Shmairlines) kept pushing back departure until they cancelled the flight entirely, only after puddles of commuters had accumulated in tense expectation. I knew that if my flight was cancelled I would miss my ride to Twin Oaks the next morning, and then I'd be out of luck. It meant I'd find myself in a small Southern town with nowhere to go and nothing to do, my dreams of infiltrating the secret world of communes dashed to pieces.

At the time the flight was supposed to have taken off, there was still no one at the gate's counter, and no announcement had been made. This is the new airline service: *nothing*. I reminisced with the old couple about how we used to get meals on planes for free, didn't have to pay \$50 for baggage. The aged wife said she knew air travel was going downhill when airlines started taking olives out of the salads in first class.

“You’re probably too young to remember this, but back in 1987 American Airlines was the one olive out of the first class salads, saved themselves \$70,000. It was big news” she said, slowly nodding her head up and down, lips pursed, eyes widened.

Her husband patted her hand and said “Okay now Dora, calm down.”

But Dora would not calm down.

“Used to be three black olives in a salad. Then they brought it down to two olives a salad. Next month it’ll be one olive! You can keep your olive is what I say.”

When we’d finally boarded the plane I’d noticed the reading material that had been strategically placed in the pocket of the seat in front of me: *SkyMall*, right next to the barf bags. While airline service continues to lower the bar as if there were a prize for the surliest staff and oldest jet, the distribution of the infamous *SkyMall* magazine remains despite the sour economy. It sells the most useless junk one could imagine. My favorite was a Big Foot statue for \$115, marked “A *SkyMall* classic!” The description read, “You will have your guests doing a double-take as they admire your garden style!” Perusing the fine print I had noticed the statue was only a foot tall. Not a very convincing big foot, but either way completely useless. Other wares hawked by *SkyMall* included a \$30 armadillo cup holder, an \$80 grill brand to initials one’s steaks, a \$200 R2-D2 replica that lit up and motored around in circles (that’s it), a \$35 glorified surgical mask in the residual panic of H1N1, a mascara that lasted twenty-eight days, sparkle hair extensions, and a wide array of girdles. I couldn’t quite imagine someone opening the catalogue and saying, “I *need* this, NOW!” I’d asked the flight attendant if anyone actually bought this crap, and she’d said she didn’t know. I imagined some guy getting smashed in first class and ordering a \$115 Big Foot statue on a whim, maybe a surgical mask for his wife. The whole magazine screamed *what recession?* If ever there was a time to pay attention to superfluous consumerism, this was it.

Flight after flight had been unbearable. I'd been crammed into a middle seat the whole way, feeling too guilty to wake the human slices of bread to the me-sandwich and ask them to move so that I could use the restroom (again). The toilets were usually occupied, I imagined, by other middle-seat passengers who were seeking escape for what was, in comparison, a spacious seat. When I'd tried to use the first-class bathroom the attendant stopped me like a barroom bouncer, and reminded me that coach riders used coach bathrooms.

I'd noticed in my decade of extensive travel that the buffer of business class was disappearing. It happened in correlation with America's growing socio-economic woes; the middle class was dwindling and going...where? Where were they going? I could only examine the evidence: the first class cabin has remained the same size while many airlines crammed more seats into economy. This instilled in me a sense of class warfare. I'd always found it difficult to stop myself from shooting dirty looks at people in first class as the economy galley slaves walked past. It was cathartic.

I am the daughter of two lawyers who always provided a house, meals and clothing, but rarely love; I'd become very confused about money and all the things it supplied (and didn't), and all the ways in which my family had both emphasized and ignored it. From the age of fourteen I had worked even when I didn't have to, until my parents lost all their money, and then I worked because I had to. Either way I had always worked. My upbringing in a stately New York brownstone house that was falling apart on the inside (not many of the rooms had doors, and our skylight was wrapped in cellophane) left me forever at odds with the circumstances of wealth and poverty, and all else in between.

After I'd transitioned into a life in which I provided for myself, the complications of social economics started as a passive observance and at times developed into an over-analytical campaign on my part. When I'd landed in Charlottesville airport, everything had

immediately struck me as different; I'd been surprised to see there was only one tiny baggage claim, something one might associate with a town not frequented by high rollers, or really *anyone at all*. While I waited for my bag, I scanned the digital advertisements scrolling the walls that touted expensive boarding schools from the 1800s and retirement homes with portraits of suspiciously overzealous seniors wearing nice polo shirts. It had seemed like there was money in Charlottesville. Many of the manors that had been built, the agricultural businesses that had grown over generations, came from old Southern money-- the kind of money that had been made on the backs of slaves.

I had waited for a cab at the taxi stand outside when an old man stepped out of a car labeled "Executive Taxi" and helped me load my pack into the trunk. He was no younger than seventy, half-black and half-white, and the skin on his hands revealed a life of hard work. He wore a button-up shirt and a pair of decent slacks. They were the kind of clothes one wears when trying to dress with dignity and self-respect, but the cheapness of the tailoring betrays them in the end.

We'd driven in silence because I wasn't sure if I should say anything. On principle whenever I was in a new place I never revealed that I was not from there; one might as well say, "Take me the long, way, sir, and don't forget to overcharge!"

The beauty of the place had struck me; the Shenandoah Mountains were a backdrop to the lush green fields lined with plantation-style estate and towering evergreens. It was hard to believe that just beyond this decadence there was the hippie commune at where I'd be living for the summer. I'd caught myself with my mouth open; if I'd shocked by the scale of a baggage claim or a house with Doric columns, how would I handle nudists making tofu, hand-made hammocks and penises swinging in the wind?

The driver must have seen the look of a first-timer on my face because he started going on about Sally Hemmings and Thomas Jefferson in a heavy Southern accent. I hadn't

expected to hear such a twang until the Alabama mark. My idea of the South had been painted for me in pieces by the media: the high-maintenance Scarlett O'Hara, the bible-beating tele-preachers, the American history books of my grade school years that outlined all the things the Confederate army did to prevent us all from hugging it out. It occurred to me that I knew very little, if anything at all, about the South, and that it is indeed the winners who write history.

He had continued to applaud "TJ"'s work with agricultural experiments for a moment, and then returned to Sally Hemmings, saying, "You know, they was property. Slaves was jes' like animals to them." "Them", of course, being white people. The half-black children of Thomas Jefferson had been bestowed with the "better" position of house slave, a coveted rank that exempted them from picking cotton. While this may have been the best gesture he could have managed at the time, few people know that Jefferson had left his family almost completely destitute and in debt after his death, the result of a life of living beyond his means.

"Myself, my name is Thomas, as well, though not after TJ," the cabbie had added, stretching his neck to see me out of his rearview mirror.

As Thomas had gone on about Jefferson's affair with his wife's half-sister, I'd figured he was taking the long way; I'd been told by the guesthouse staff the trip would be no more than \$20 dollars. It had crept up to \$35, and I'd had no idea how far away we were from my hostel. At the fifty-dollar mark I'd strategically sighed aloud, at which point he'd suddenly known exactly where my hostel was.

The Alexander House was a little cluster of one-story buildings off Monticello Road, a dirt path up the street from a place called "Beer Run". Thomas said he'd suddenly remembered that he'd dropped a guy off there earlier that day who also had a giant pack, said he was from "the United K", and had been travelling for sixty hours.

“I thought maybe he was hittin’ the Appalachian Trail, but I din’ ax.” Thomas paused. “Thatta be fifty dollahs, ma’am.”

Counting my crumpled bills, I couldn’t decide which had stung more- that I was out fifty dollars or that I’d just been called “ma’am”.

The PeaceMobile, described to me only as a minivan painted to look like one giant acid trip, was scheduled to pick me up between one and three p.m. the day after I’d arrive. I figured there would be plenty to keep me busy since I had never been to Charlottesville before. I was not afraid to navigate the public transportation system in any foreign city. On the plane, I imagined myself hopping from bus to bus, visiting museums or wasting hours at Starbucks, watching the good people of Virginia doing whatever it is Virginians do.

But there was no public transportation, and there was *certainly* no Starbucks. Starbucks, the sunny side of capitalism! For the love of God, there are Starbucks in Romania and Bahrain. There is a Starbucks on the Isle of Man, a place most people don’t even know *exists*. I began to panic. When I woke up on my last morning in town, none of the hostel’s three-person staff was around, and my stomach was crying for breakfast. A guest told me there were some stores straight down Monticello Road, and if I walked a bit, I’d be sure to come upon something to appease my appetite.

Let me preface the experience of my walk to scrounge for food with the fact that I understand I am a child of New York City, and that I only know the urban, move-or-get-moved lifestyle I have always lived. I thought the ruthlessness of New York City would have prepared me for anything, but really I was not prepared for what appeared to me to be the Deep South. This was not even the tip of the iceberg of the South. For one, no one seemed to be at home anywhere and there were hardly any cars on the road. The sound of

crickets filled the air. After the first several blocks I became paranoid; wasn't this how some horror movies began, the big-city girl too big for her britches stumbling upon some Satanic ritual in a seemingly-deserted Southern town? Where *was* everyone? Were they peeking out at me from behind the lace curtains I saw in every window? I imagined getting lost, eventually being in need of assistance, only to wake up and find a scar on my body where my kidney used to be, screaming for help in a shed in the middle of nowhere, some inbred psycho laughing with a toothless cackle over my limbless body. Overgrown weeds and country flowers broke through cracks in the sidewalk, and they were as silent as everything else. Except the crickets.

By the tenth block I passed an old man on his front porch, sitting in a rocking chair with his hound dog at his side, and I tried not to chuckle at the stereotype. He smiled and nodded, and I returned the gesture. He continued with his rocking. The air smelled like death, that musty smell so familiar in a graveyard. I tried to act as if I knew where I was going as I felt him watch me walk away. I walked faster, trying to escape my own conspicuousness.

I walked past small storefronts that must have gone out of business years ago: Hal's Garage (which had sold sundries and VHS tapes), Irma's Salon, and a boarded-up schoolhouse collecting dust, no sign of debutantes anywhere. A mile down the road was a corner store (*Bagby's Groceries*, est. 1977) in the middle of an entirely residential neighborhood. It was out of place, as if it had opened in a once-bustling town just before everyone had moved away. There were farm-fresh eggs at the counter in a wicker basket, and the cashier spoke slowly and deliberately about the weather. He wore overalls and chewed on a toothpick, and I felt as if someone was playing a joke on me. I bought a Gatorade and a granola bar, and the man at the counter said "Yer rul healthy, huh?" The

few people who strolled by on later blocks smiled and nodded, and I wondered what they wanted. I suppose I can never beat the Brooklyn out of me.

It wasn't until I had walked three miles that I came across an outdoor mall with brick-laid streets and colonial-esque storefronts.

I bought a slice of pizza, seeking comfort in the culinary icon of my youth. I sat on a ledge in a corner bordered by a bed of peonies. I felt as if I were hiding, eating my slice of pizza in a burrow and watching people who couldn't watch me back. They were all white, corn-fed and well-dressed. On my way from the airport Thomas the non-Jefferson had driven me through a seedier part of Charlottesville. I noticed a clear strategy of space between the races and the classes, something I was not used to in New York City. Pockets of Charlottesville were primarily African-American and clearly low-income, the streets decorated with pawnshops and liquor stores. Meanwhile, in the nice part of town-- the center, of course-- I saw only Caucasians who appeared to buzz from boutique to boutique like bees pollinating flowers; coifed housewives ate leisurely lunches in overpriced restaurants, oblivious (or thankful for) the separation of race and class.

Interestingly enough, there is a historical explanation for such phenomena. Slavery had not been behind us for many generations. If one is born to parents who have no skills, no education, and no property, the chances of achieving upward mobility is highly diminished, especially in a culture that was slow to see blacks as equals. In the book *Urban Renewal and the End of Black Culture in Charlottesville, Virginia* it's noted that Sociologist Andrew Billingsly said, "Slavery [is] the cause for the generally lower economic status of the black race in contemporary times," and that "White oppression is a disadvantage that has yet to be overcome." One hundred and thirty five years since abolition, "blacks have yet to gain economic parity." A federal study on poverty noted "In Charlottesville...Racial disparity means African Americans are more likely to be poor" (Fitzgerald, "Infant").

Charlottesville's pride is the University of Virginia, the embodiment of money and race politics, the dirty history of the South now an honorable legacy in the present. There are many honorable things about the University—it provides a quality education, strives to meet equal graduation rates for minority students and white students alike, and it brings money into the community. The history, though, has less glamorous aspects. The school was founded in the early 1800s (by none other than the Virginian rock star Thomas Jefferson) with the intent of ensuring that America's democracy was not solely controlled by the wealthy. Ironically, those are exactly the class of people that formed the institution and are the kind of students who attend today: the average student's family earns a median income of six figures (I looked this up after seeing a gaggle of students dressed head-to-toe in Abercrombie & Fitch). Of notable presence (and power) on the campus is the secretive fraternity, "Seven". Seven chooses you-- you don't choose Seven. It's only open to men, in particular men from well-to-do backgrounds.

Plainly stated, the University would not what it is today without the free labor of slaves from 1819 to 1865-- and it took the University one hundred and forty years to apologize publicly for the use of slaves. Though UVA is a public University, it receives more funding from private donors than it does from the state, thus giving it more autonomy over its policies and affairs. While there is always the historical context to consider (at the time, it sounded like a great idea!), it seems easy to forget the sufferings that have allowed the elite to stay that way. I look around at Charlottesville today and I wonder if the lesson has truly been learned.

In Honolulu I was used to living in a sort of pan-Asian environment. As a white person in Hawai'i, I was the minority to the Japanese, the Chinese, the Thais, the Vietnamese, the Filipinos, the Samoans, the Tongans and Micronesians. Hawai'i hadn't been my first multicultural rodeo. Growing up in New York City I was accustomed to

million-dollar homes on one street and housing projects on the next. During middle school I went to classes side by side with Muslims and Jews, Hispanics and Africans. All of my elementary school's announcements that were sent home were in English, Creole, Spanish and Chinese. In the countries I had traveled, like Cambodia and India, it was the poor who flooded the streets and the rich who were kept out of sight. It was a culture shock to see a town that kept the poor out and gave the rich the chance to forget.

Eating my pizza, all I could think was *I don't belong here*. It wasn't fun, it was uncomfortable. What was wrong with me? This was supposed to be an adventure, and the better part of me wanted to cut and run. I wanted to go back to the guesthouse, grab my backpack, and take the fifty-dollar cab ride back to the airport. I wanted to live the last twenty-four hours in rewind. It struck me: I was about to go live in a commune. A hippie *commune*. What had changed in me, after all those years of traipsing the globe? How could I once have traveled to the Middle East alone, giddy as my plane flew over the Sahara, but found myself hyperventilating over something like Irma's abandoned salon? I once picked up and moved to Italy without knowing the language or anyone there, and after that I had moved to Thailand without knowing the language or anyone there. I had been romantic and daring and full of dreams and potential. Yet, as I sat in a corner in Charlottesville, a state in my own country, I felt timid and full of regret. I missed my husband. I missed my dog. I missed knowing where I was at all times and having the upper hand over tourists looking desperately for the mall. It seemed to me that as I got older, I became more averse to leaving my comfort zone. I saw this as a negative aspect of my personality developing with fervor. I wanted to fight it, to fight myself, to fight the stranger I was becoming.

I threw away the crust of my pizza and began the three-mile walk back to the guesthouse. I tried to figure myself out, tried to summon the courage that had come so easily years before. Maybe a certain degree of courage was meant to dissolve with the

wisdom I procured about the ways of the world. I had seen the rough and tumble way of life, the way jumping into the unknown, blindfolded, could end in something so glorious yet equally unforgiving. I remembered the sacrifices of such a life as well as I remembered the gains. I was constantly broke and everything I owned could fit into one suitcase. My friends drifted away, got married and held jobs and eventually stopped trying to figure out how to dial a number in Asia or keep up with the changing time zones. On the winning end, I had managed to see the Taj Mahal, the Eiffel Tower, the Pyramids, and Angkor Wat, just to name a few of the wonders that had danced before my eyes. All my past leaps into the unknown had been worth it, and I had to believe this expedition would be the same.

Perhaps it was only that things had inevitably changed since I was twenty. Maybe, for the first time, I was genuinely happy with my life. I was married to a wonderful man, we lived in a small apartment that had a lanai overlooking paradise, and I was enrolled in a Master's Program that would bring me closer to what I wanted professionally. In all the other lives that I have lived, the times I backpacked India traveling third class the whole way or ate things I couldn't pronounce, I think I was running away from boredom and commitment (the two things synonymous in my young mind). I had been trying to find my place in the world. I had been running and seeking, and after having found contentment I felt as if I was hiding, though I knew that not to be true. The boredom of my early twenties had been replaced with late-night conversations with my husband about when we'd have a baby and all the things we would do in our life, together. My individual dreams had melted away and become *our* dreams. I had to accept that I was not the girl I once was; I mourned it, silently, on my walk back to the hostel, a bitter and quiet sense of loss, redeemed by the promises that a different way of life offered.

People had asked me why I did this, why I felt I had to live in a commune, of all places. I had numerous answers. I could say that I had exhausted what was out there, that

there were not many places left in the world I wanted to see that I hadn't already. There was also the way communes had been portrayed in films, as interesting groups of people who knew the true meaning of freedom and therefore found it easier to practice a sort of loving-kindness.

Mostly, though, despite my happy marriage, I was disenchanted with *the way things were*. For as long as I could remember, I had been told that if I went to college and I worked hard things would fall into place. They didn't, and I felt lied to. Something was happening in this country but I couldn't quite place it. I had pieces of information that painted a grey picture: I knew I paid taxes that funded wars I didn't agree with. I knew that more people were greedy than not, and that that greed came at the expense everyone else. I knew that I had been working two part-time jobs, both of which kept me under full-time hours so that my employers wouldn't have to give me health insurance, something I needed since I was asthmatic.

The low wages for I earned barely cleared my monthly student loan debt, another aspect of America's infrastructure that was starting to make people feel as if they had been set up. The average college graduate in the U.S. is over \$25,000 in debt for student loans (Lewin A20). Some have said the problem is that students shouldn't attend a school they can't afford, but there are holes in that argument. In a country where a college degree is becoming more of an obligation than an option, students often feel they should attend the best college that accepts them, a reasonable notion in an ever-competitive job market. An employer doesn't have to think too long and hard when choosing between a Yale graduate and a Detroit Community College alum. Besides, the suggestion that low-income students should limit themselves (fewer resources, fewer lofty connections to the Old Boys' Club) to community colleges is one way to keep the poor down and the wealthy at a competitive advantage. This is not a new theory.

My dissatisfaction with *the way things were* extended beyond my country of residence. Everything I bought said, “Made in China” (Hackett); companies were dumping hard workers who had devoted their lives to a company, watching as their jobs were outsourced to Mexico. When I turned to Google to find out the how and the why of this process, the first thing that came up was a link for an outsourcing business, with the tagline, “Thinking of outsourcing? Hire virtual Employees in India!”

I didn’t know how to fix the things that were broken. Why did some people have so much, and others have so little? Too many times banks had screwed me, too many employers had made me feel ashamed of using my vacation days; I had seen too many children raised by babysitters and televisions as their parents lived at the office to make ends meet. I lost count of how many times I had seriously considered living off the grid, escaping the dangerous allure of iPods and low-interest loans, the bad breath of big business constantly hunched over my every move. I wanted to see the people who had turned that thought into action, who had left the rat race for the slow life, who did what they wanted when they wanted, owed nobody and nothing. All I knew is that it took courage to do that, and if I could only borrow that courage for a summer, then I would.

As I turned up Monticello Road and neared Alexander House, I once again passed the old man on the porch with his dog. This time he spoke, leaning forward, saying in a slow Southern drawl, “Well...you jes’ passed here about n’hour ago.”

He leaned back into his rocking chair, his hound unmoved, and I saw in him a fellow soul who had become content to stay where he was, with the things he knew best.

I didn’t know what to say to him, so I just smiled and nodded and walked quicker than anyone he’d probably seen in this neck of the woods. I couldn’t help it, and that was okay, because for all the parts of me that had gone, there were parts of me that would never fade away-- for one, I would *always* be a New Yorker.

At 2:30 a knock on the door made me leap from the couch. When I opened it, there stood a skinny, older man with grey and white curly hair. He was bedecked in a blue tie-dye shirt and raggedy denim shorts.

“I’m Wizard,” he said, “and you must be Jane.”

“I guess that was easy enough to figure out,” I joked. We stood there while he looked at me, and I silently wondered what would happen next. Part of me couldn’t move—I was entering the point of no return.

He grabbed my pack and loaded it into the PeaceMobile, a white van decorated in acrylic rainbows with “Twin Oaks” spray-painted across the sliding doors. The car was loaded with sacks of potatoes and sugar, and he piled my pack on top of them.

“Most people call me Wizard. My real name is Kenrick, but people would always say it with a ‘d’, like *Kendrick*, so I just switched to Wizard.”

He stopped and faced me. “Can I give you a hug?” he said. He came at me. Awkwardly, I moved forward with semi-open arms, not knowing what kind of hug to expect. He patted me on the back before he released me. “You have good energy,” he said, smiling.

“We gotta pick up Arlo at the library before we head back home,” Wizard said as he got into the car and started the ignition, looking at me in the rearview mirror.

We drove into the center of Charlottesville and pulled up to the steps of a small library, where a teenage boy was sitting with a backpack. He looked like an ordinary eighteen-year-old, wearing sneakers, camouflage shorts, and a white t-shirt. He had that painfully awkward facial hair of someone who was a boy becoming a man. In short, he did not look like a kid that was waiting to get picked up to go home to his...commune.

As he got in the van he nodded his head at me, thanked Wizard, and shut the door. He said almost nothing the whole way home. I wondered what his life had been like, if he felt isolated from others his age because he had grown up in a commune. How did he feel when he passed other teenagers hanging out in town? Did he recognize them as his own kind? I imagined it to be the way the Amish are received when they come into town for supplies, people poking at their horses and taking pictures, the Amish just wanting to get their things and go. Wizard broke the silence and told me that Arlo was planning to join the community instead of go off into the world.

“Isn’t that right, Arlo?” Wizard continued, trying to spark a conversation of any combination of the three of us. It didn’t work, but Wizard continued.

“I went to two Best Buys today to try and find you an iPod,” Wizard said to Arlo, “but they were \$600. Your mom said she could do \$300 and so maybe we can put the rest on her credit card.” To this Arlo nodded without reaction. An iPod? From Best Buy? Credit Cards? What kind of commune was this?

I felt bad that Wizard was doing all the work, so I asked him about himself—where he was from originally, how he’d learned about Twin Oaks.

“I’ve been at Twin Oaks forever! Fourteen years. But I’ve been around. I stayed at a commune in Washington called the Divine Light for a few years, and then I went on to another commune. After Hurricane Katrina I went down there to help feed hundreds of school kids.”

“How’d you manage that, I mean, financially?” I asked.

“No, no. I met some rich guy from Algiers on the train who had a plan, you know, about how he wanted to help the Katrina victims. So he financed the whole thing. I stayed with him. We had a barter system going. He gave me a place to live and I gave him hand jobs.”

I almost choked on my own saliva, and looked over at Arlo who was unphased, staring out the window.

“But I’ve been all around the U.S., practically been to every state twice.”

“Wow,” I said, regaining control of myself, “You seem like a pretty happy-go-lucky guy to have made it around to so many places.

“I just find the right people at the right time. Plus I do a lot of bartering. I can landscape, and I cook well, and people tend to need those things, so I give that in exchange for something else.”

“Still,” I offered “it’s gotta be luck when you always happen to find someone who wants something you have.”

“We all got something,” he said, and then the conversation turned a corner. “I’m a recovering alcoholic. I used to do crack. I did every drug out there except heroin. Plus I had sex with hundreds of men, probably more people than you can imagine, then add a hundred more. But I don’t have HIV. No HIV and all that gay sex in the 80s! That’s how I figured I’m a wizard. That’s how I got my name.” Yes, Wizard was indeed a lucky guy.

We were twenty minutes into the trip to Twin Oaks, which would take about an hour from town. I loved how honest and straightforward Wizard was. He laid everything on the table, and there was something to be said for that. I used to be the same way, but I’d learned my lesson about telling too much too soon to people I didn’t know. I was nostalgic for the way I used to be, before the ways in which reality had taught me lessons I could not un-learn. I couldn’t tell if Wizard was too trusting or that he didn’t care what he told to whom; reality was not on his radar. I asked him more about what had led him to Twin Oaks, and this launched him into what is, to this day, the most interesting monologue I’ve ever heard in my life.

“I grew up in the south, in a community of the Church of Christ, the first Christian church. You want to talk about luck, well I was totally out of the closet and still alive. I had a charmed childhood; my parents accepted I was gay, not like I could hide it. I was flamboyant. There were other gay men in my hometown, and one of them was black and as gay as I am. Anyway when I was eighteen I moved to Wellsville, Ohio, after I graduated high school. I went to Kent State. I was there two years. After those years I started having a lot of dreams. I’m a double Pisces with Leo rising-- I have no earth in my chart at all-- so I’m predisposed to lucid dreams. I dreamed of Jesus twice; in the first dream, I was in a tent in the desert and Jesus kissed my feet. In the next dream I was laying in a wheat field and God spoke to me from the clouds. I was more dramatic back then.

“So I decided to join the seminary. There were eight other gay men there and I outed them all before I left; I knew it wasn’t for me after a time. I’d only stayed for a quarter. Well just then, my grandma died and I moved to Atlanta. I was twenty. I ended up staying there for seventeen years waiting tables, bartending, landscaping, and I made *a lot* of money. I had a lot of unusual experiences. Like this one time, I was waiting for the subway and guy walked up to me and said, ‘You are not of this evolution’, and he waved his hand slowly over my face. I said ‘Excuse me?’ He held up his hand again and said, ‘You’re not from here’”. I said, well none of us are really *from* here! Another time I was at a Laundromat, and this guy drew a picture of me, said I seemed like I was from another place. I had experiences like that a lot, people coming out of the woodwork and seeing hidden things about me. That’s when I really started to acknowledge my wizard side. It was on Valentine’s Day in 1981 that I changed my name. My mother disowned me because of it. Sure, she’ll deal with a gay son in the deep Christian south but changing my name to Wizard was it for her. That very same day, on the way home from the courts after changing my name, I was in a cab. I took cabs a lot; if the drivers appealed to me I got their numbers, I’d charm them and have

them take me places. Anyway this one guy came into my apartment and told me that my old name, Kenrick, meant *bearer of light*. He said ‘You are bearing light to the world, and my how you shine.’

“The next day I called the cab company looking for the driver and they’d never heard of the guy! They said they had no such cab with that license plate. The man was completely gone. He never existed, and the cab never existed either. I was like, is this a figment of my imagination? Is someone trying to give me a clue? I knew then that my astral guides would jump into people’s bodies and that’s how they started to talk to me.

“I got into alcohol-- that was the gay scene in Atlanta. I was a waiter so I got free liquor. I knew practically all the bartenders in Atlanta. I hung out with mostly straight people...they were so much more fun. I had tired of the gay scene. Plus, straight men are a hot! I’d try to pick them up at bars, and their male buddies would try to push me away and I’d just say, ‘What are you, his girlfriend?’ Straight men are weird. They say they’re straight but then they’ll have sex with men. They would make up excuses like, ‘My wife won’t suck my dick, blah blah blah.’ I was so young I believed them. This one straight guy had sex with me for the whole nine months his wife was pregnant. I meet lots of guys like that, and I believed them. Sometimes I still do.

“I left Atlanta after all those years, by way of Seattle I made it to Philadelphia, and my alcoholism was in full bloom. I stayed there for a year making hoards of money waiting tables. Not fancy restaurants, but I’d make two hundred for a five hour shift. The waiters were drunks too; we’d drink before, we’d drink after. I went to the men’s bars, where I did shots and downed beers and somehow I’d find my way home at the end of the night. The manager of the restaurant I was working for asked me to come live with him, free of charge, maybe a little bartering involved. In this empty room I slept on a thin sheet of foam rubber

and put a sheet over it, just slept on that. I made a lot of money and I could spend it all in one night, and I did, on booze.

“What really got me was the time I tried crack with a Puerto Rican I met on the street. I didn’t do it again after that. I moved out to the Poconos where there are lots of resorts, and all the business men from Long Island would come out with their kids and their wives, saying if we treat their kids right they’d tip us big. They did! I was making fifteen-hundred a week. There was nothing to do other than work and drink and sleep. The waitresses there loved me, they thought I was hilarious. We’d go to bars, bars, bars. They’d bitch to me about their boyfriends.

“I did that for a year and tired of it, and then moved to Key West. I waited on this one person who didn’t tip me like she was supposed to. The manager had given me her table and said, ‘Good luck’. I told her about tipping and she threatened to sue the hotel for defamation of character, she was a big lawyer in New York. She was black. So the hotel told me to ‘take a week off’. Usually they’d fire people after that ‘week off’, but I was done anyway. I only had a couple of thousand saved up. I rode the bus down to Key West, where I met a lot of cute boys on the ride down. It was a shame they didn’t have video cameras back then, because I got so shitfaced. Someone said they once saw me crawling across the crosswalk. I decided to get sober. My astral guides came back, when this guy I was doing landscaping for asked me to go with him to an AA meeting. He knew I was sick, cause I’d tell him my crazy stories.

“Crack came after I’d been sober a year. I met this cute, *cute* Brazilian guy named Sergio and he wanted to take me to his world. He didn’t work, I supported him, and he’d just go out and buy things. With *my* money. I took care of him like a sugar daddy does. I figured, there are much wealthier gay men in Key West than me, so I took it as a compliment.

“I finally got sober in ‘94. I was forty-two. Something clicked inside and I started thinking about community. I’d heard about Twin Oaks in the seventies but I never would have done such a thing back then. There were no gay men there, for starters. I went to New Mexico cause I read about this other community. It was on top of a mountain. It was an ecumenical community that studied all the religions, but mostly it was a community of Sufi mystics. I spent a year and a half there. There was a giant fire, and all the buildings were gone, everyone’s stuff got burned. It was hard being there. Everyone was grieving, having nightmares, screaming. By the winter there were only ten people. We meditated twice daily. There was an Ashram down the mountain from us, and they had the best pot in the area and really good desserts. But I wasn’t smoking pot because I was sober.

“After the fire they were having donations sent in, and made me chief financial officer. Let me tell you, hundreds and thousands of dollars, and it was all in my hands! I did write a check to myself for half a million dollars. I thought I could just fly to Brazil with my feet up. But I didn’t. After all, they’d made the CFO because they’d trusted me.

“I was getting tired of the place when I heard Asheville was the place to be. It was this spiritual mecca all of a sudden. I went there to a commune called Earth Haven. It cost money to be there; members had to buy a plot. They let me camp out there for four months.

“When the year 2000 was coming I knew I wanted to go some place that wasn’t going to be so hard hit, so Earth Haven officially took me in, and I got a small room with a little DVD player someone had left behind. I worked seventy hours a week making hammocks and chairs. I did that for four years before I got cranky. I burned out. I just was juggling too much. So I went to Sunrise Ranch in Colorado, another community, just forty miles south of the Wyoming border. It was beautiful all around. I did a lot of hiking in Rocky mountain national park and saw some elk, it was gorgeous. They liked me there too; I cooked breakfast at 5:30 in the morning. The population there was about 100. They were aging,

they'd been around since the 1940s. They had channeled God and were speaking to him. Around that time some of the leaders started dying, and the whole community fell into disrepair. People started leaving. They thought I was somebody special; the people liked me. We had to take a lot of classes about being sons and daughters of God, taught by the emissaries of the Divine Light. The classes were three weeks each, and they cost a thousand dollars. I complained so they gave me a bit of a discount.

“At this time thoughts and ideas were coming through me that weren't really mine, they came from some place outside of me. Even now, sometimes when I'm talking it's me, but it's not. People like that. After the classes I'd minister to people-- not about being Christian but about inner divinity. They wanted me to minister to the world. They said, 'Wizard, just go out and talk to people about what it's like to be in a conversation with God. I was happy to. I like to shine my light wherever I go. Being who I am, as gay and flamboyant and outspoken as I am, I seem to bring something into people's lives. I'm a catalyst, I make people change. It happens a lot at Twin Oaks. Sunrise Ranch helped me see that I could be an individual but I could share what was coming through me at the time. I had a lot of those experiences in life! I'd talk to people about where I was from and where I'd been to, and people would start gathering to listen to me. It was like, I was talking and then all of a sudden forty people are standing there. I gave lectures about an inner God, and people thought for sure they'd seen me on the TV. I made up that I was an archangel, and that I was lost on earth and I was here to bring all the angels home. I couldn't remember which angel I was, but I was here to try all the vices I could try and be a bad angel so I could always be in the eyes and ears of God. All that stuff before Twin Oaks, drunk in the streets and never getting harmed, never robbed, never beat up. I was pretty well protected by God.

“I don’t know what it is that I bring. I don’t feel human most of the time, I feel like I’m different from people. I’ve been thinking about that a lot the last couple of years...like part of me is not from this planet, or this life. I don’t know what or where the planet I’m from *is*, but I believe that on that planet we would go even deeper into our emotions than humans do here on earth. We were telepathic, more peaceful. This planet is all about aggression. It’s easy to step into.

“I’m on this quest to see where it all ends up. I think that’s why they put a lot of *us* here, to move us into a new consciousness, to change humanity.

“When Katrina happened, that’s when I took the train to New Orleans to go console the people. Before I met that other man, I stayed with this older woman who was also volunteering down there. Her daughter was in her early twenties, and she was having problems of her own. I lent her a stone-- I carry a lot of medicinal stones. The stone I gave her was moldovite, and it comes from space. When you carry them, they make your body very warm and give you good guidance. I told her it would take her different places in her head. She lost it! Now, I don’t put value on things, but I said to her, if you really want to pay me back it was sixty dollars. She paid me back in installments.

“I do believe that in another lifetime I had been a Wizard, and all my life I’ve been channeling that part of me. In New Orleans I called myself dragon-wolf-wizard; my totem animal is a wolf and my Chinese sign is a dragon. Once at the gym in the hallway I heard a voice say, *running wolf*. I turned around and no one was there. It was my animal totem calling me. You see, the wolf is the teacher *and* the leader-- I learned that from a Native American I once met in New Mexico who was a medicine man in one of the tribes out there. And you know what else I learned? We as white people are looking for something that we can’t find. These other cultures are serving us, you know we go to India for a guru or we go to Asia for alternative medicine. Or we go to Native Americans and think we can

learn from them, but we are just white people looking for our place in the world. We originated in Atlantis and sunk to the bottom of the ocean, so we lost our connection with where we belong. We don't know who we are. That's why I think community is the answer. Visitors ask me why Twin Oaks is full of white people. I say, look at the other cultures, they have close knit families. We don't have that. All our parents are divorced; solid family structures are hard to come by with us white people.

“What I like about communities like Twin Oaks is we step out of our programming. Everything's a lie, you've been lied to your whole life. Christianity is a big lie. It's a terrorist organization. I'm here to help people realize that there's more if you step out of your beliefs and follow your own inner guidance.

“Anyway, I've talked long enough. We're about five minutes away.”

“I have the choice of being constantly active and happy or introspectively passive and sad.
Or I can go mad by ricocheting in between.”

— Sylvia Plath, *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*

Chapter 3

Ten days after I'd arrived I still hadn't gotten used to the new alarm clock: not one cock crowing in the morning, but eight, each of them screeching sun salutations in altos and sopranos and all ranges in between. The air outside is heavy with dew and heat but our wood cabin is cool enough that I still have the blanket draped over my legs, an old nubby quilt that meets my skin like the scruff of five o'clock shadow. The bed is hard; if I wake up on my back, then it is my back that aches. If I wake up on my side, then it is my side that aches. My body is trying to punish me because it thinks I am punishing it. My mind and my heart would say *you don't know the half of it*.

I look over and see the quilted lump that is Jaime. I can tell she woke up with my alarm but she is not moving in her cotton burrow, pretending herself back into sleep. She wants me to get up and go to my shift, wherever it is, so she can sleep through hers without a witness.

"You going to work?" I ask, knowing she probably wouldn't, wishing I could have her indifference, and wanting to live vicariously through her endless naps.

She murmurs, pauses, and then turns to me, her eyelids opening just enough to carry a conversation. "I dunno." She looks at her watch, sighs, and lets her wrist fall back on the mattress.

"What do you have this morning?" I ask, half-naked as I change into my clothes for the day. Both of us have tried to ignore the intimacy that's been forced between us in the last week and a half. We don't fight it but we silently acknowledge that our mutual and occasional nakedness lies somewhere along the wide spectrum of gym shower room and sisters who share a bedroom.

“*Fucking* ornamentals with Tigger.” She turns back to face the wall, pulling the blanket up over her head. “I *hate* ornamentals.”

One of the first things Jaime did when she arrived at Twin Oaks was ask for the ornamentals shift, something that Tigger preferred to do on his own. Tigger oversaw the ornamentals garden, a decent plot of land where the farm grew sunflowers, lavender, roses, and other decorative flowers, which they’d sell in the town market each week. Her enthusiasm for flowers led Tigger to make an exception. Jaime got something other than the girl-in-a-French-countryside picture she’d imagined. Last week a bee had found its way into Tigger’s gardening galoshes, and as he fumbled to remove his boot it stung him three times from his toe to his ankle. Jaime stood horrified as she watched this middle-aged man named after a cartoon scream and hop around the daffodils in furious pain, cursing in Scottish (though to his credit, later that night Tigger had pulled the dinner shift and was hobbling around the kitchen with great effort, and still produced the well put together meals that he was known for).

“Ornamentals is boring. All we did was water the flowers. We picked a few, but that’s it” Jaime says. “He moved dirt around.”

“What did you think was going to happen, that the flowers would start telling jokes? I thought you wanted to learn about that stuff.”

“I learned all right. I learned that it’s boring and that I don’t want to do ornamentals. I’d rather sleep. I bet I can get labor credits for that. Tell them I’m ill. Tell them I have a rash-- a big one.”

I want Jaime to get up. Not because I have to go to work whether she sleeps or not, but because I want her to stay. I know she’s thinking about leaving Twin Oaks. She’s the only other female at Aurora house. She’s ruminated about taking off, out loud but in short bursts, giving me just enough hope that she might see the whole month through. When she

speaks like this I shrink into myself, hold my breath, and hope she won't abandon me in this upside down world with seven other men in a cabin.

"But...you've only done ornamentals once, and you said you really wanted to do it," I cajole. "You mentioned it no less than ten times the first few days, remember? I think you even said something like 'I can't wait to do ornamentals' while you were on the toilet yesterday. You were thinking about it on the toilet. Out loud."

"I was probably being sarcastic," she mumbles into her pillow.

And with that I know, somehow, in the way sisters who share a bedroom communicate practically telepathically, that this was Jaime's last day at Twin Oaks.

On the first day I walked into Aurora house, where all the visitors were boarded, I was one of the last to arrive. I walked into a room full of men. After I was told there'd be two to a room, it took me about three seconds to realize I might be rooming with a male, which probably would have gone over poorly with my husband. It must have shown on my face because the Twin Oaks' greeter said, "Oh, don't worry. The other female is on her way. Sunshine had to go pick her up at the airport."

When the other woman finally arrived, everyone took a moment to absorb her.

"Hi, I'm Jaime everyone" she said, and then smiled, rolled her eyes and added, "well my last name isn't 'everyone'. I mean I'm Jaime....everyone. Hi."

She was six feet tall with pale skin and long curly hair, and a kitchen knife tattooed from shoulder to elbow. I'd later learn that was her first (and only) tattoo. The knife was the first clue that when Jaime did things, she did them big. Which is why she was at Twin Oaks in the first place.

Like everyone else in the visitor group, she was looking for something. Unlike everyone else, she was new to this search. The rest of us had been meandering in ennui for some time now. But she was only twenty-three, and had been forced to re-evaluate her life because it had been taken from her, she'd follow that up elusively with, *I'll tell you later*. She told us a bit about herself at the first go-round of introductions: after high school she'd gone to culinary school and fell in love with cooking (which explained the kitchen knife tattoo, as well as the glorious desserts she'd put forth during meal shifts). Getting out of her house was a main priority; she'd just quit her job at a restaurant near her parents' house, where she had been living with her parents and five other adult sisters in rural Maryland. From her voice I could tell she was on this mission full-speed-ahead, ready to suck all the positive experiences she could out of it before she returned to a house full of sisters and more sisters. So, she was different: a six-foot female chef who could clearly out-banter all her co-workers in a male-dominated field, and she possessed an unarguable prettiness to boot.

Being the only two females in the house, we were assigned a shared room. It's a dubious thing to live in close proximity to someone unknown, to fall asleep and let one's guard down in the presence of a total stranger. But Jaime was laid back and unassuming, and so we fell into a quick comfort with each other while we unpacked and asked one another about our perceived places in the Universe.

She asked me who I was, and what was I doing at Twin Oaks. She watched as I unpacked my shampoo, conditioner, anti-aging face lotion, blowdryer, and a whole other list of ridiculous things that one would not need at a commune in the middle of the woods. I'd never considered myself high-maintenance until I emptied my backpack, the weight of which could have been cut in half had I not been so silly. When I put them on the bed they landed against the stiff mattress with a *thunk*; oh, I sighed, we're in for some hard nights.

“Don’t worry,” Jaime said, unloading the same kind of crap, “I brought the same stupid shit.” We laughed, and then she steered the conversation back to personal interrogations.

“So...what’s your story?” She asked. “What do you do for a living? Where are you from?”

“Me? I’m really just visiting. No intentions of joining. Plus my husband is in the Navy and he’s scheduled to deploy this month, so I figured I could give this a go instead of being at home, where everything reminds me of him.” My heart sunk. I have been trying to do one of two things since I left my husband sad-eyed at the security checkpoint at the airport: either push out of my mind the thoughts of what I left behind, or force myself to accept them. I was doing a terrible job of both.

“Gee, that sucks. To Iraq? Afghanistan?” She didn’t ask with excitement or sympathy, the way people usually did at the start of the wars after 9/11, when it was new and nineteen-year-old soldiers had just started dropping like flies. War was a way of life now- not one, but two- and it was no less a fact of life than the sun that rises and sets. It wasn’t impressive or shocking, but instead ordinary, like meeting someone who had had a wisdom tooth out.

“No, he’s on submarines. He doesn’t see combat...but then again, I don’t see him. Or hear him. Nothing. If he’s on mission, we have to go two months or more without any communication-- no emails, nothing. It’s like he’s dead.” I heard the crack in my voice and knew I was getting too upset to talk about it. It was always that way after a few sentences on the subject.

“Man. That’s hard. I kinda sorta just started dating this guy and it sucked to leave him behind too,” she said. “I mean it’s not like we’re married or anything, but you know, still. Like we just got really into each other and it’s all new, and then I had to leave. He

begged me not to go, but I knew I had to do this, for me.” She threw hairspray on the bed. I felt better that I had not gone as far as hairspray.

“Hey, love is love. You don’t have to be married to have a hard time leaving someone behind. Good thing you came, otherwise I’d be the only woman. It might have been weird.”

She smiled. “Yeah. It’s weird. I don’t have a lot of girl friends, but I don’t think I’d like to be the only one here bitching about my period,” and she chuckled as she unpacked a box of tampons. I sensed she was like me; too laid back or crude to be friends with most women, or women who liked to compete with other women. We were females who had shed the skin of our tomboy childhoods, but could still only half-fall into our expected roles of femininity, or the expectations as we understood them. We didn’t understand most women, and in turn they did not understand us. Our friendships were largely with men, with whom we better identified, and part of us felt as if we were betraying our own kind. At the same time, we wouldn’t want it any other way.

“So then, why a commune?” she asked. “You could have like, stayed with your family for the summer, right?”

My heart sunk again. I wasn’t going to tell her all those things, all the ways in which my family had self-imploded over the last two decades. I didn’t want to start with the drinking, the violence, the lack of interest, the lack of everything. I gave her the other real reasons.

“Well, I’ve always been kind of interested in communes. They’ve always had some kind of allure. You ever see that movie, *The Beach*? The one where Leonardo DiCaprio lives in a commune on this hidden island in Thailand? Like that.”

“Yeah but this is like, *Virginia*.” She lightly laughed.

“I know, I know, but I did my research. This place is legit. I wasn’t going to go really hardcore into some unknown cult and disappear.” I unpacked my backup conditioner, and

at first scolded myself for being so excessive, but felt better when I realized that really, it is *so* difficult to comb my hair without it. Hardly my fault. Besides, this wasn't boot camp. It was a commune.

"Cults are for the weak-minded. Are you weak-minded?" She smiled and looked at me, genuinely unsure of how I would answer, as if I might say 'yes' and mean it.

"Well, I guess I'm about to find out, aren't I?"

That evening all the visitors gathered on the porch for lack of something to do, and each of us found a corner on the porch, creating a personal space but not wanting to be alone or seem unfriendly. The day had been so long that I was too numbed by its length to remember it would end, as if my last twenty-four hours had been like a streaming realm of film, glossy and uncut.

There'd ended up being nine of us, just enough people so we could remember everyone's name on the first go. As the sun set, we took in the long day of orientation, or what the commune members had dubbed *oreos*. It was as if we were a family that had been hastily slapped together, all of us sitting there in the twilight with no TV, no computer, no phone, no radio. Everywhere around us were tall fir trees and leaves that crackled when something alive walked over them.

Some of the guys were playing a card game called *durach*, a Russian game of luck and wits where it was okay to cheat as long as you didn't get caught. The man leading the game was a Soviet-era Russian named Mischa, a thirty-five-year-old ex-ballet dancer with carrot-red hair, scarecrow blue eyes, a strong accent and cheekbones that could slice a mirror. A knee injury had forced him into retirement. He'd introduced himself by saying he

was unemployed and when we asked “from what job?” he casually looked away and answered “The Russian ballet theatre.” We all just kind of sat there, being silently impressed. He was missing a canine tooth that looked as if the spot had been merely blacked out when he smiled. At present, Mischa taught ballet classes to housewives and little kids, and openly resented that he had been reduced to teaching silly, bored people a “very serious thing”. It caused him great dissatisfaction and dishonor, as if he were leading a circus, leaping around the room and expecting them to follow with the same grace. He was thinking of quitting it all together, explaining “why would I teach something that has caused me so much suffering?”

He had been trained from a young age, selected from a crowd of boys for one reason or another by a top ballet teacher, who said he was going to make Mischa a star. And make him a star he did, but “all stars have a shelf life”, Mischa said dejectedly. At times he would break out with a story about a huge dance sequence in *Swan Lake* or the stories of competitive pressures and double-crossing in the world of toe shoes. His first wife had been a ballet dancer, but he cheated on her. Now he was married to a girl from the southern U.S. and claimed her parents were hicks who threw their old refrigerators out in the ditches of their front yard. He had heard of communes and wanted to see if Twin Oaks was a place his wife and he could live and be satisfied. Something was missing these days, he said, and it was too late to have the children they had never really wanted anyway (he had gotten mumps as a child, an epidemic that spread through Russia during his childhood; it sterilized men).

Mischa felt that things were falling apart in the world, and that it was time to start learning how to be self-sustaining, grow one’s own food and live with only what one needed— soon, that would be all that was left anyway, if we were lucky. His anger about the world’s injustices was fervent enough that it seemed to me he had only just become

aware of some terrible truths, now that he was removed from the insular world of ballet. With all his free time spent not dancing, he had ordered streams of documentaries through Netflix, educating himself on every conspiracy theory, every secret political war, every way in which the world's richest controlled the world's poorest. During our later conversations, he would laugh at me for believing the Americans had actually gone to the moon, and was sure that a cure for AIDS had been found decades ago. "We all suckers," he said in American slang but with a thick Russian accent, "nothing but suckers."

"Funny I never been to a commune," Mischa said, "I come from communists!" and smiled his blacked-out smile, raising his flame red eyebrows in a funny realization.

"Where in Russia are you from?" I asked, then remembered I knew very little about Russia and its places, and so his answer would make no difference to me.

"Nowhere. Nowhere land," he said, getting into the hammock between the two trees on the edge of the deck. "My country doesn't exist anymore."

Jaime had joined some of the commune members out in the cow fields a while ago, after we'd visited the mulberry tree by a pond where the fruit hung low, and I realized I'd never seen a mulberry tree in my life. It was easy to tell who had just eaten off the mulberry tree around the farm; the juice stained our hands like ink, like we'd been caught. We had to restrain ourselves; the commune had a strict rule of six berries per person. The all-powerful six berry limit existed so that every member could have a fair taste and not deplete the tree's fruit.

"This is what people need," said Dennis, a five-foot-tall twenty-two-year-old who was struggling to reach some berries. He was from Mississippi and lived with his parents, all three of them unemployed and doing nothing. Dennis said he spent a lot of time on computers, and I guessed he was probably as thin as he was because he'd never want to leave the screen to eat much. He said he wasn't thinking about going back to work since

unemployment was pretty damn good. His benefits had long run out but the government had kept sending checks. He boasted that he didn't read books. Dennis had an endless number of political conspiracy theories, but probably couldn't name the three branches of government. His accent was so thickly southern it immediately brought to mind roadside diners and barn dances. In the midst of all his hell-yeah-America sentiments, he would only mention once that he had been adopted from Romania. He was the result of Nicolae Ceausescu's reign, the result of a ban on abortions that resulted in crowded, penniless state orphanages with high mortality rates. Babies came cheap from Romania then, all the white babies an American couple could want, and Dennis had been one of them. He was born prematurely, which explained his smallness, and left him constantly battling to establish his presence. In his effort to do so, he would inject normal, rational conversations with ignorant or insane claims, as if he had long had access to secret files that the rest of us didn't even know about.

"This is what people need, y'all. Organic fresh food. People getting' cancer, then putting more poison in their body. Just fresh, natural, organic food. That could cure cancer right there." He said this with so much conviction that I knew he would dismiss any other explanation.

"So, you're saying that if a doctor said 'Dennis, you have cancer', you wouldn't have chemo or radiation, but you'd beat it with fresh fruits and vegetables? Seriously?" I asked.

"Damn right" he said, cocking his very large head down and bringing it back up in an exaggerated nod. He had thin teeth. Everything he mentioned about his lifestyle thus far echoed someone who lived off Twinkies and microwave dinners.

"People eat too much crap, that's why we all getting cancer in the first place," Mischa piped in. "If we stop putting chemicals on our produce like it is salad dressing than maybe we wouldn't see so much sickness."

We had all fallen victim to the dangerous and seductive world of political documentaries. These documentaries ranged from Michael Moore's dry sarcasm (with a wit that I couldn't help but love) to pulsing exposés of the food industry, oil barons, government corruption, or rigged political systems. The movies made viewers feel as if they were having their eyes opened for the first time. A rush would come with seeing these films-- anger at being duped by the very establishment we supported, anger that unfair things were allowed to happen on such grand scales. After came the need to get up and do something, to spread the word, to see all establishments as farce and believe a nuclear winter was not far off. In the end, the energy would dissipate, and at best we would recommend these documentaries to other people.

Despite the degrees to which each of us felt it was all going to shit, the general underlying idea was true: this world was headed in the wrong direction. Even Republican cynics were starting to talk about global warming. The wars were taking place so far from us that we never had to see blood on the news for more than a five minute story on any major network. These wars were happening somewhere else, and not *to us*. Until, that is, too many bodies started coming home, until news clips were elongated to include Afghani women screaming with grief outside their houses that had been reduced to rubble, the legs of their families sticking out from underneath, motionless. A lot of the people I'd spoken with hadn't even known that the gold standard had ceased to exist a long time ago, and that we were busting our tails for tiny green *pieces of paper*. Houses went underwater, workers across the board were getting cut so that Fortune 500 companies could maintain the same level of profit, and on some other plane of the world Paris Hilton was flashing her crotch at a Christian Dior soiree (a story that came on just before updates on Iraq). These days, people had to decide whether to pay for health insurance or go to school, all the while thinking, hadn't there once been a world where one could do both?

“2012 is gonna be the end of the world,” Dennis said. “I bet aliens are gonna come down. They’re the ones makin’ all those freaky designs in the crops” Dennis laughed like a donkey, “I hope they got hot women.” He looked around at the other guys, hoping for an impromptu high-five, but was also trying to figure out if he honestly believed what he just said or not.

Now full with mulberries, the card game on the porch was fading out when another visitor, Jayson, came out onto the porch and said, “Hey guys, have you taken a look at this?” He held a small white booklet that had been distributed to each of us when we’d arrived, but in the hustle and bustle I’d put it aside. It was titled “A Visitor’s Guide”.

“It was going to be my bed time reading,” said Mischa, shuffling the cards clumsily. “By the way,” Mischa said to another visitor who he’d been playing with, “I cheated like a million times in that game and you didn’t even notice. Wake up.” And he snapped his fingers in front of the man’s face.

“There’s a page called ‘the typical visitor period: a roller coaster of emotions,’” Jayson read in his monotone voice, which would be a constant through the next month. He licked his thumb and turned the page.

Jayson’s demeanor could be defined in two words: peacefully strange. He was tall and thin, stood hunched just enough so that his belly became concave and his lanky arms hung off his frame like ropes. He had dark, tousled hair and dark circles around his eyes which blended into his olive skin. He was from Nebraska, had half-way finished college, and was starting a career as a freelance photographer. He was good at it, without having had any formal training. He liked loud, curdling world music from the 1930’s and 40’s but himself was quiet, and he took a moment to think about what he was going to say before he said it. He’d just gotten out of a long relationship that’d gone stale, and while he acted like he didn’t care, had undergone a major life overhaul. After the split he’d sold everything he

owned in a giant garage sale, and with the few thousand dollars he'd made, filled up his tank and drove across the country to get to Twin Oaks. He wasn't looking for anything, just going places. He was experiencing things without any expectation. He told me he'd packed only his essentials: a few shirts from Good Will, a coffee press, weed, and a flask of bathtub liquor he'd purchased when he'd crossed into West Virginia. He was stoned most of the time, and if ever I turned around and he had disappeared, chances were he was lighting up a joint somewhere nearby.

Jayson was a loner, someone who walked around the farm without shoes, his jean pants rolled up to his ankles, hands in his pockets and staring blankly ahead. He said after Twin Oaks he planned to go to East Wind, one of Kat Kinkade's other communes, and after that he'd shave his head and spend time in a Buddhist temple out in Oregon. But he had no real plans, and that's how he preferred to operate. He was separate from the world, like part of him lived in another dimension, every action subtle but strange.

That's exactly why I didn't think the visitor's "rollercoaster of emotions" would apply to Jayson. He took everything as it came without resistance; he shrugged his shoulders when life sucked and cracked a smile when it was good.

I, on the other hand, had had a lifelong battle with controlling my own mind and moderating my emotions (I had once tried to meditate and ended up with a complete grocery list). I listened to Jayson as he read the expected dips and rises of the visitor period the way someone listens to their horoscope. The sun was starting to set, and it cast a honeyed light over all of us, our shadows long and warm. We listened.

Welcome to Twin Oaks, a world with a complex culture that will most likely be quite foreign to you. Below is an outline of what visitors typically go through while visiting at

Twin Oaks. Because of the volatile nature of the visitor experience, we ask those who are interested in applying to stay for the entire visitor period so that they can experience all the positive and negative aspects of life at the commune to make the most informed decision about whether or not they wish to apply.

Week one: *Elation. Your thoughts may be, 'This place is great! Look at all the possibilities and great things here. I really want to live here, it is nearly paradise.'*

Alternatively, confusion. Feelings of 'you're not in Kansas anymore, Dorothy'. You'll probably wonder what all these crazy rules and norms and sheets and abbreviations mean. You'll say 'I will never figure out this strange place!'"

Week Two: *Disappointment. This is not what I was expecting at all; perhaps I have made a terrible mistake in coming. There is so much potential here, but they are just not making it happen.*

Week Three: *Sad to leave. Actually, there are some pretty great people here, and I have finally figured out their system, I am getting pretty good at making hammocks and the other systems now, just as I have to leave. Damn.*

Of all the visitors, Jaime and I became fast friends, not out of necessity and security but because we genuinely got along. We had no work shifts together (she wanted to work harvesting seeds and I wanted to weave hammocks, jobs located on opposite ends of the farm) but we spent a lot of our free time in our room, away from the boisterous conversations the other (male) visitors had on the porch outside Aurora. It wasn't that we were intimidated; it was it was that we found solace in our cubby of a room where we could write in our journals without feeling like we had to talk to each other to fill in the silences. Some evenings the boys knocked furiously on our door, asking us if we were alive, what

kind of love affair we were having, and didn't we want to drink beers and play cards and talk politics with them out on the porch? We were in our room almost every night, the whole night, without having realized it- half out of exhaustion from the day, and half out of our indifference towards making new friends.

Jaime was more interested than I was in befriending Twin Oakers. I could see how she could live here. She was young and her own person, open-minded and in the bud of our generation's rising dissatisfaction with the ways things were. She was old enough to make her own decisions but young enough to taste a smorgasbord of different lifestyles without regretting one or the other for too long.

"I really want to move here. I think I'm going to apply!" Jaime said with an exuberant smile, the kind people wear when they think their life is finally beginning.

I couldn't share that with her. I was thirty, married and spoken for. I was in graduate school for the next year, which I had wanted and something I would never dream of not finishing, not just for me but for us. Always the collective *us*. That's the thing about being married- some advice I passed down to her- once you get married, any decision you make is now any decision you make *together*. Compromise is the name of the game. Good thing, she said, that you practically backpacked the whole world on your own before you met him. This made me feel better about my current immobility, the fact that I had once exploited my independent youth for all its benefits.

Jaime and I had gotten a hold of some pot, and we occasionally smoked a joint out our bedroom window located in the back of the house, hoping 'the boys' didn't smell it and come asking for a drag. It was true that women like us forged strong bonds with the few select women we warmed up to, and that was not often, so we reveled in it because we knew it would end. Often she spoke about coming out to Hawai'i for a visit, or me coming to eat at the restaurant where she worked when I moved back East, but maybe it would never

happen, because time and distance can be just as damaging as they can be healing. It is hard to find each other when you are simply trying to find yourself.

It was a few nights into our visit, after Jaime had finished her nightly account of why she wanted to be at Twin Oaks, that she told me what had prompted her to seek something else. It wasn't just her boredom with the kitchen, the idea that she was scalding herself with hot oil for fifteen bucks an hour forever. It was Fernandez.

"I was practically engaged a few months before this," her voice suddenly low and cautious. It carried foreboding, and so I didn't ask, but listened, waiting for it all to come in its own time.

"I'd been with Fernandez for five years, since my senior year of high school. He was a couple of years older than me, but we went to the same high school. I live in a small town, people all know each other. My family knew I'd had a huge crush on him when I was a freshman. Hell, the whole *school* probably knew. Anyway, I moved out of my house after four years with Fernandez. We got a place together in D.C. We started talking about marriage. We felt pretty much married already."

"What was he doing for work?" I asked.

"Oh, he had odd jobs. He was in computers for a while there but then when we moved to D.C. and he started picking up construction shifts, stuff like that. But I was the steady income. I didn't mind, we were happy."

"Okay," I said, waiting for the piano to fall. It fell hard.

"Then I found out a few months ago that Fernandez had been fucking my sister. And my best friend."

I swallowed hard. I heard the pain in her voice that she had learned to suppress, laden with the millions of times she must have replayed this in her head.

“It gets better. My sister is engaged to be married. She’s getting married in two months. On top of that, my other sisters knew she was fucking Fernandez. In fact, so did my mother. No one ever told me.”

“Why?!” I protested. *How could they do such a thing?* The same way, I knew, that many people could do many things: they just did.

“I don’t know, because they didn’t want to mess up their perfect little family? What, have my sister’s engagement fall to pieces, have my father know that his daughter would do such a thing to her own blood? Or maybe they just couldn’t bear to tell me. Maybe my naivety, my trust in them, was just too much to shatter.”

“In any scenario, that’s the most selfish thing I’ve ever heard,” I said, sitting up in bed, “I hope you never speak to them again.”

“What’s worse is that after I confronted my sister, she lied about it. After I confronted her, I later heard she called Fernandez to give him the heads up, told him to lie about it. He was actually the one who told me the truth. Or at least *some* truth. He swore it only happened once. I called my sister and she broke down crying, saying she was so, so sorry and that it had only happened a few times. They were both lying. They’d been having sex on a regular basis for the past two years. In my apartment.”

“So wait,” I said, my head spinning, my heart aching for her, “now you’re living at home? With your mother and sisters who let this happen to you for *two years?*”

She smiled as if it were some cruel joke, and put her head down. “Oh, after I moved out of our apartment I had to move back home. I couldn’t afford to pay the rent by myself. Before I left for Twin Oaks I got fitted for my sister’s bridesmaid dress. I’m in her wedding party. Yeah. I lost my best friend, and my sisters won’t look at me. And my dad is in ignorant bliss. And after five years of being in love, I haven’t seen Fernandez since the day it all came out.”

I couldn't believe it. Here was this strong individual woman who, in my mind, was letting people walk all over her. "You have got to be kidding me. You need to get out of there, Jaime. You need some time. You need some space, more than this commune. Don't live here because of that. There are other things, don't come here because you feel it's the only way."

"No, no, I don't feel it's the only way. I know there are lots of things I could do. Restaurants always need cooks. I could probably get a job in any state in the U.S. I *do* like it here. Plus, I like living with people. It's like working and living with your college buddies, all your friends around, you know?" I could tell she meant it, that she wasn't going to settle for the easiest option available, but still I believed her to have endured an emotional trauma that might cloud her decisions.

"I can't believe you're still in your sister's wedding. You should out them," I asserted. "You should tell them all to go fuck themselves, or do something. *Anything.*"

"Yeah but, they're my family, you know? Family is thick, it's forever, it's unbreakable. I have to let this go. *Family*, ultimate ties, you know?"

No, I wanted to say to Jaime, my heart now aching for myself. I don't know.

Despite my love for hair and skin products (something I had never fully realized until that first day when I unpacked), no one I knew would label me as a materialistic person. I didn't have any credit cards, I didn't have a computer, and owned nothing of any real monetary value. My husband was the one who told me that perhaps I should start shopping at places other than Salvation Army, and that it wasn't a crime to buy something new. For these reasons I thought Twin Oaks would be an easy transition. There were lots of things both big and small which were abundant in the outside world but were in deafening

absence at Twin Oaks: television, nail salons, irons (who cared about wrinkled shirts in the woods?), pharmacies, carpeting, newspaper stands, the internet. All of these things I could easily live without. Television was all junk anyway; I *never* got my nails done, and happily took a break from feeling obliged to iron.

I celebrated the lack of readily available Internet (and spotty cell reception) with a huge sigh of relief. Before I left for Virginia, I had just finished my first year of graduate school in addition to writing for a local newspaper. This meant the never-ending need for email, texts, phone calls, blogs, computers, more texts and more phone calls. I was sick of living in a society where everyone could be reached at all times, their every move and location documented on Facebook (so-and-so checked into this restaurant or that department store). Tweets kept everyone updated on every mundane thought made special only because it had been posted on the web. I just saw the Internet as a huge, gaping opportunity to say something that could get me in a lot of trouble. The more I became irritated by constant digital over-communication, the more I became aware of how our everyday social interactions were built around the cult of iProducts and social media. Perfect example: I had agreed to meet my friend for a happy hour drink the day before I left for the commune. As I waited at the bar, I saw a couple sitting at a private table, face to face. Each one of them was glued to their phones, texting or surfing the Internet, unaware that they were there with each other. How many times had I gone out to dinner and someone would whip out their phones to show me its new bells and whistles, holding on to their device like a security blanket? Too many times.

For all the things I could do without, there were things I “couldn’t” live without, the creature comforts I was having a very hard time letting go of. Foremost of these sacrifices was soda. I have been an avid drinker of Coca-Cola, so avid in fact that I wondered if I had been nursed on it. A story my father likes to recount is the day of my First Communion.

Since I had to wear the traditional white dress, my father told the bartender at the reception (unbeknownst to me) not to let me have Coke-- it would stain my dress. Naturally the first thing I did when we entered the reception hall was approach the bar for a coke, *no ice* (I'd get more soda in volume that way!). The bartender apologized, a pimply young man who could clearly remember the pain of being denied a soda, and told me that he was under strict orders to only let me have Sprite, club soda, or water-- all clear. The fury was unleashed. I sulked for hours in my white dress out in the back yard, sitting on the steps with my arms crossed and a sour look on my face. I thought of all the ways I could make it right; when it came time for my sisters to have THEIR first Communion, I would smuggle a change of clothes into the reception for them, whispering, "Now you can have a Coke!" In college there wasn't a morning that didn't start with a soda, and ten years later that is still more often the case than not.

Going off Coca-Cola for me, then, might as well have been going cold turkey off heroin. It was as much a physical battle as it was mental. The first few days I was irritable, sleepy, and dry-mouthed. My thoughts revolved around soda, to the point where it was too weird to even have a good laugh about. *What I wouldn't do for a Coke right now*, my body and mind said no less than fifty times a day. My housemates told me to shut up already about it, stop bellyaching about soda, get into this lifestyle. Detox yourself. That stuff is poison, chemicals. It'll pass.

They were right, it did pass with the second week. That initial hump was hard, and while I kicked myself for having become so dependent on that heavenly mix of sugar and caffeine, I still appreciated all the happiness the drink had given me. Yes, happiness. My creature comfort, the one little thing, however guilty I should feel, that gave me a sense of contentment. Twin Oaks had forced me to move on to something better but not better-- my concoction of water with lemon juice and sugar, or as some would call it, lemonade. I

downed it in massive quantities, and one day on the line for food I overheard a member say to another, “you know ever since this visitor group arrived the sugar bowl has depleted considerably.”

Of course everyone (not just the visitors) bitched about the little comforts they had so enjoyed on the outside but have given up by default when they chose to live at Twin Oaks, as if we were some kind of wartime prisoners. Some sent the town trippers to supermarkets once a week, giving a portion of their meager allowances to buy things they felt they couldn't live without: Mini-Wheats cereal, M&Ms, gum, beer. The requested, coveted items were delivered into people's mail cubbies in a brown paper bag so that other members didn't have to see (and hence covet) another's property. That was one of the foundations of Skinner's behaviorism: the absence of envy. Remove personal petty property, make sure everyone has the same amount, and there will be no envy (and fewer problems). Yet every time any of us saw a brown paper bag in someone's cubby we knew it was filled with something wonderful, and that was enough to send other members flocking around the recipients, asking what they got from town and would they share it?

It wasn't soda Jaime missed, but her new quasi-boyfriend, Scott. The new and exciting love interest she'd left behind, the beacon of hope for her heart which had been crushed under the heels of Fernandez and her sisters. Her cell phone reception was not as spotty, and she and Scott stayed up nights texting each other back and forth. After we'd turn the lights out, I'd see the faint glow of her cell phone screen under the blankets, and hear the muffled and rapid tapping of the keypad.

“It's two in the morning, what are you guys even talking about?” I asked, knowing full well that when you are beginning to fall in love you can talk about anything and everything with that person at two in the morning.

“Scott wants me to come home,” she said with an impish smile, feeling daring at the thought of leaving mid-visitor period and escaping with her lover. “I’m thinking about it.”

Of course she’d been thinking about it. What had been the first five or so days of Jaime’s total enchantment with Twin Oaks had morphed into her absolute frustration with it. *I miss sex*, she’d say, *and everyone here is gross*.

She had begun to miss other things, and like me, was learning more about who she was (and was not) by how strongly she felt the absence of certain luxuries. All of the women in the commune had impressive amounts of leg hair; none of them shaved their legs. Some grew their leg hair out of laziness, not seeing the point in shaving their legs on a farm in the middle of the forest. Others were feminists who resented the social expectation put upon women to go against their natural bodies; the red-headed women in particular did a good job of showing off their bushy legs. Jaime did not see the dearth of scented, lotion-infused razors as an opportunity to grow, for lack of a better term. I tried to make the best out of it for both of us, and she agreed to my idea of having a leg-hair-growing contest. I was not too happy to have won.

The bugs were another deterrent to an easy adjustment. At first more for me than for her, but it seemed my fear was contagious. Each night before bed I’d scan the walls and ceiling, smashing anything that moved or even looked like it could move. After the lights went out I’d listen so hard for pacing insects that I imagined them.

“You know the average person swallows nine spiders a year?” she said, breaking the silence that I imagined to be full of waiting, squirming thoraxes.

“Shut up. Just...shut up,” I’d sigh.

Despite the heat I slept with my sheet over my face, sweating in the mugginess of my own body trapped beneath a thin layer of cotton (whoever said cotton breathes?). I envisioned the horrors that would come my way should I sleep outside of the sheet: spider

after spider dropping into my open mouth while I slept, ants crawling into my ears and eating my brain from the inside out. It was crazy, I knew, but it was hard to fight thirty years of the comfort of cement sidewalks and insulated housing. I had no control over these bugs; I was outnumbered, they knew the turf better than I did. I couldn't reason with them.

One day during the first week, having not slept well because I had trapped myself in circular thoughts of death-by-creepy-crawly, a member took us off the beaten path and on a "nature walk" into the undeveloped grounds of Twin Oaks.

"The Brown Recluses are what you really want to be careful of," said the member. "They are one of those most poisonous spiders there is. Course, they're hard to spot, what with lots of things out here bein' brown also. Wood, leaves, you know."

Good god, I thought, isn't the nearest hospital an hour away?

"OH! And be careful of Copperheads. We got plenty of those too. Pretty damn poisonous. Course the adults ain't so bad, they usually warn before they strike. It's them babies. The babies do that venom dump. They get rid of all their venom in one bite cause they ain't learned how to do it right yet." He chuckled, for some reason finding that endearing, while I stood there in the middle of the roadless forest, not wanting to move another inch and to remain five feet away from anything brown, which at current survey was not an option.

"Do you have any anti-venom stored here, then?" I asked with a hint of concern.

"Huh? No. I mean, the chances you're gonna get bit ain't that high," he said. He looked at me as if I'd asked for Kryptonite.

"But if someone gets bit, say, on the ankle, that person will probably die before they reach the hospital? That's not enough of a chance for you?"

"Well maybe not, maybe just get that leg amputated."

Oh, okay, I thought. Just an amputation, no big deal. I saw that we were not speaking the same language, so I left the conversation at that. Expectations change from place to place, that much I'd learned from all my travels. It was like the time I visited Cambodia, where a young man told me he considered himself very lucky because he had all his limbs, never having stepped on a mine. That put things into perspective. But I didn't understand tempting luck. Why not just have anti-venom if it could so easily be acquired? Why not take advantage of the ways in which modern medicine could save us? But then I remembered where I was, and that idea was not high on their list of priorities.

It was only later that day on the road from Aurora to Zhankoye (the main dining hall) that I saw something moving in the middle of the road, something small but not too small. It was a very large spider dragging the corpse of an equally large wasp along on the road. I cocked my head forward, but not my body, to get a better look. My amazement eventually lost out to utter disgust, and I shivered, thinking that wasp could be me, in my bed, while I slept.

While nobody lost a leg on the nature walk, it did clue us in to the massive tick population of Louisa County. The visitors practically made a game out of how many ticks we discovered on ourselves. We'd hear yelps in the shower, and those of us in the living room would look at each other and say "tick."

Being the city girl that I was, I didn't know that ticks don't drown. After I had plucked one from my shoulder, I flicked it down the sink drain and ran the tap for a few seconds. *Ha*, I thought, *take that. This is a tick-eat-tick world and you just lost, buddy.* I began to brush my teeth and to my horror a minute or so later, the tick comes walking out of the drain. I congratulated it on its willfulness but felt no remorse as I flicked it back down the drain, this time running steaming hot tap water for about a minute. Still, the tick returned minutes later, crawling out of the sink as confidently as it had the first time. I did

discover that while ticks cannot drown, they also cannot re-inflate themselves after being smashed by a hammer.

“How can you do that, Jane?” Mischa said as he saw me hunched over the bathroom floor with the rusty old hammer I found in the Aurora closet.

“Do what? Kill this tick?”

“Yes, kill that tick! It’s a living thing!” Mischa exclaimed.

“Well what if this tick had Lyme disease? It’s okay for the tick to kill me, but I can’t kill it?”

“It’s just trying to live!” he said.

“Well, so was the cow whose hide made your shoes,” and I turned my back on him, seeing why it was so easy for Mischa to ignore the hypocrisies that characterized this commune’s way of life.

I had found a tick in my hair (which slipped out thanks to my trusty conditioner!), one hiding out in my belly button, and another on my butt. There is nothing that brings such a sense of vulnerability as finding a tick on one’s butt. It’s a reminder that these parasites will do whatever it takes to live, and if that means leaving an unsightly mark on your behind, so be it. How had they gotten there? I’d worn several layers and watched my every step. There was no hiding from nature. Those spiders I hunted down every night-- were they in my home, or was I in theirs?

Either way the presence of ticks was so prevalent that we made it into a game. It became a contest amongst all of us for which there was no prize but a claim to bravery and chutzpah. Mischa, the Russian ex-ballet dancer who everyday vehemently declared his love for the countryside’s fresh air, bragged that he had found and disposed of seven ticks on himself while at Twin Oaks. I had found five, which was five too many. Jaime had four. Dennis, a pathological liar, had said he’d found thirty on him, and when we said we didn’t

believe him, he sat back in his chair, folded his arms behind his head and said “Well, that just makes me wish I’d saved ‘em all to show ya.”

Like everything we had to live without, we had to learn to live with the circumstances forced upon us. I pushed soda out of my mind, I hammered ticks into the ground, I learned how to soap my body and keep one good eye on the Daddy Long Legs in the shower. I stuck my hand into thickets of weeds, not knowing what insects would hop a ride on my wrist or work their way into my shirt, because I’d signed up for this and I was going to do it all the way.

But Jaime didn’t want to do it all the way. She had just left a miserable job and didn’t want to spend her “vacation” pulling carrots for hours on end. She didn’t want to get up at seven in the morning to box hundreds of packets of tofu. She wanted to go on a road trip, somewhere, anywhere, with Scott at the wheel. She had to use this in-between time to think about her next move in life, and the commune was suffocating her.

“I can’t stand that there are always Daddy Long Legs on the shower ceiling,” said the six-foot-tall Jaime, whose head was much closer to the spiders than mine was. “I feel like I have to stare at them the whole time I’m showering, afraid they’ll jump on me or something.”

We both knew Daddy Long Legs were completely harmless, but it didn’t matter. What we wanted was a tiled shower without company.

“I just don’t know what to do with my life. I’m a cook but I don’t know how I feel about it anymore. I just feel like if I stay here, I won’t be able to figure out what I want. I need to be free. I need to be out in the world, ask it what I should do, and see what it says back.”

Any ideas Jaime had had of joining Twin Oaks lessened in proportion to her increasing desire to be around Scott, to sleep in late, her body flung over her giant pillow.

She wanted to shave her legs when she felt like it, to not be around Dennis all the time. The creature comforts that those at Twin Oaks had learned to live without were too much to give up for Jaime.

“Come with me. Come with us,” she said. “It will be fun. We can all go to Scott’s parents’ lake house and just hang out there for the rest of your visitor period, then you could take a train back to Virginia to catch your flight.”

She had just endured a major disillusionment that is typical of many a youth’s rite of passage into further adulthood, and she didn’t have the energy to commit to an ideal with fervor.

“I once heard this quote, it went ‘quitting while you’re ahead is not the same as quitting,’” she said. She wasn’t quitting, she was leaving something that wasn’t for her and actively trying to find what was. If I had left, I would have been quitting. I envied her for that.

“You and Scott are going to be all over each other,” I said. “You want me to hang out while you two practically feel like you’re on honeymoon? Talk about being the third wheel. I appreciate it, but no thanks. I think that would be awkward.”

She knew what I said was true, but she was too kind to leave without offering me a way out as well.

The night before she left, halfway through the second week, Jaime told me of her impending departure the next morning. She told me not to tell anyone, not the other visitors, no one. My heart sank. I started to panic. My buddy, my confidante, would be gone! I’d be the only one left in the visitor house at odds with everyone else, all of whom were thinking about applying for membership at one point or the other. I knew the remaining time at Twin Oaks would be isolating, and while I wanted Jaime to stay, I knew it was selfish to try and convince her to do so. I knew, also, that it would be useless.

Scott was coming to get her at 8 am. He had gotten directions off the internet and was going to wait down the road from the commune for Jaime to come running out with her hastily packed bag.

“I told Scott to bring something for you,” she said, as we lay feet-to-feet on the giant hammock in the courtyard the evening before.

“What’s that, enough morphine so that I can kill myself if it gets too hard?” I joked.

“No...a Coke!” she smiled widely, knowing that once she tempted me with the bubbly, liquid sugar I had lived without, I would soon learn again that I couldn’t live without it.

I was ecstatic. This set a very bad ball rolling again. That night the only thing that assuaged my sadness at Jaime’s departure (and not being able to talk to anyone about it) was that I would be rewarded with a glorious Coke.

When I woke up she had already gone. I couldn’t believe I had slept through it. On my dresser was a bunch of dried lavender flowers that she had saved since her ornamentals shift with Tigger. They smelled like the fancy scented soaps available in high-end stores. No note, nothing, just the lavender.

It was nine a.m. I looked around the room. Nothing. So I went out behind the house with my phone and texted her, “Did you hide the Coke?”

A few minutes later I received, “Sorry! He forgot. Don’t kill me.”

By then I knew she was halfway to Maryland, sticking her head out of the window and smiling, her curls blowing in the wind.

By working faithfully eight hours a day you may eventually get to be boss and work twelve hours a day.

--Robert Frost

Chapter 4

“Twin Oakers are free to structure their days however they decide. Some people prefer no scheduled work, and choose jobs that can be done at any time of the day. Some sleep until noon and work through the night, and others stick to the old familiar 9-5. So, if you’re not a morning person, that’s OK. Just request a late start on your work schedule and we can figure something out.”

Was I the only one whose jaw dropped at his announcement? Kellig held up the labor sheets, one for each visitor. We wrote the things we were good at—cooking, building, office skills (which landed me one hour of sweeping the office floor and sitting at a telephone that never rang). We had gotten a briefing from the main office that afternoon, after the lady at the desk asked everyone for the “suggested” donation, which was very much a designated donation.

“Everybody? Did I get from everybody? Did everybody give?” she said loudly as if speaking to a much bigger crowd. She stood on her tiptoes to look at every face in the visitor group, trying to scout out a lurker.

“Give what you can afford but remember to be thankful for the service we are providing you.” Mildred spoke like an old school marm, deliberate and impatient, herself grey and retired from the world. She was already tallying the booty in front of us, mouthing numbers and punching the calculator. I paid a hundred and fifty dollars, money I’d earned writing articles for the school paper all year. There wasn’t anyone among us who didn’t give something.

Kellig handed out our labor assignments for the week, assuring us he’d process our stated skills and desires as a model for the following week’s labor assignments. He’d lightened up the situation by telling us about the last visitor group, which included a

middle-aged woman who had flown in from Germany thinking that Twin Oaks had been some kind of resort. After she put her bags down at Aurora house and saying how quaint it was, she ordered a strawberry margarita. She was very upset after they'd explained to her that Twin Oaks was no Club Med or role-playing vacation spot—it was the real deal.

“Once again, let us know the things you enjoy doing, that way we can place you in a job that you'll have fun in,” Kellig reassured for the last time. “And remember, one hour equals one labor credit, and you need forty-two credits.” This, I thought, wasn't a different world—it was a different *dimension*.

I'd been working since I was fourteen, working summer jobs every year for pocket change. Those summers disappeared when I graduated college and entered the professional world. I'd started out by getting on a plane to work a stint as an au pair in Italy, a job that required me to be both a nanny and an English teacher to a ten-year-old girl. When I moved back to New York I realized my friends had already been working their way up the corporate ladder. I felt left out, and I panicked, as if I were supposed to be doing something else all along that didn't involve traipsing around the streets of Florence, learning how to say *fuck* in perfect Italian.

I'd taken a position at an advertising agency. It was not a nine-to-five job, but an eight-to-seven job, and in the busy season (which lasted eight months out of the year), an eight-to-ten job. I was told this was the new normal. I was told to be grateful, and that there was any number of young, professional wannabes lined up around the corner for my spot if I didn't want it. Just when it seemed as if New Yorkers couldn't work any harder, it turned out they could.

I stuck with it—albeit miserably—because this was what I *had* to do. I never asked myself from where this sense of obligation came; I only knew it had been engrained in me somewhere along the way. Pay your dues, start from the bottom, and stay there for a while.

For what end goal I was to do this, I was not sure. After the first few weeks in the business world, I had grown accustomed to eating my breakfast, lunch and dinner in front of my computer screen while the janitor turned off every light but the one in the south wing, ready to go home to his family. None of us in the south wing had families. There was just no time for that sort of thing.

My supervisor decided to leave the cutthroat business world when she had her baby, but was holding on to the job for the health insurance. There was no leniency. If I came into the office two minutes late, I was on the receiving end of a long lecture from my cranky, pregnant boss, who never stopped bitching about the fact that women only get two weeks of maternity leave. While I hated her complaining, I couldn't blame her. For most companies in the U.S., women get two weeks paid time off after having a child, three if they undergo a C-section. In France, women get four months paid maternity leave while the Philippines offers sixty, even in the case of a miscarriage. In Sweden, women get a year and four months of paid maternity leave so that they don't have to plunk their child in daycare at infancy. Even Djibouti and Chad are more generous, offering fourteen weeks of paid leave-- but this was the United States of America, and most of us didn't even use our paid vacation days.

I had to live that way in order to know, for certain, that it was not for me. It took a lot for me to wake up and leave it all for good: the ever-unsatisfied client, the passive-aggressive co-worker, the boss who made everything into a life-or-death competition, and then of course, the meager pay. All of it was a house of cards that tumbled down when I couldn't honestly say I was happy.

The three grey walls of my cubicle appeared to move inward with each month until I could no longer breathe. I told myself to stop being spoiled and that everyone had to do this, just like dying. Nobody was supposed to actually *like* work. At Christmas, the department

head announced that there would be no bonuses -- times were simply too tough (except for the higher ups, who received their bonuses in the form of an all-expenses paid ski trip to Colorado). I comforted myself by saying: oh Jane, you don't even know *how* to ski.

The next morning, I wake up to a crowing rooster, the one that ruled the roost down the road. I'd dubbed him 'Paris Hilton' for his long blonde feathers that drooped down from his head. It didn't matter that he was a boy-- the likeness was too undeniable. It was six a.m. and I decide not to shower; I have a long day of fieldwork ahead of me and bathing would be been pointless. I'd only done light gardening before, but felt confident I could figure it out as I went along. I put on my floppy gardening hat and tie it under my chin, my fingers doing it absentmindedly while my brain wakes up.

Groggy, I trudge up the road to Zhankoye, the common food hall, where I brew lychee tea and eat bagels that have been recovered from a garbage dump in Charlottesville. The cinnamon-raisin and everything bagels were the fruits of "dumpster diving": members had waited outside of bakeries and other food stores for perfectly good fare to be thrown away, at which point they'd dive into the dumpster to retrieve it. I'd never done it but the concept was not foreign to me; it had been popular practice in Brooklyn, where young, underpaid professionals didn't want to waste money on groceries they could get for free. At first I tried not to think about it, my inherent love for bagels overpowering an imagined garbage-like odor. I'd learned quickly that if I toasted anything enough, it would pass.

I make the ten-minute commute through dusty paths, past the dairy barn where the cows stop and stare at me, watching as I make my way down the road, looking as if I had interrupted their private conversation. I turn back a few times and they're still staring blankly. It feels like they see everything here. Ahead of me I see the bodies of the morning

laborers gathered in a circle, listening to Pam delegate who would do what that morning. The sun hadn't been up long, the earth was not yet scalding. The cool morning air would soon morph into heavy, hot and buttery oxygen; the June heat was oppressive. I take my place in the huddle. In the coming weeks, I'd stop short of the group each day to check out the row of corn I planted (my own perfectionism had nearly driven me crazy making sure the seeds had been three inches apart *exactly*). Their green fingers would start to break ground, and I found myself coaxing them out of the dirt with my mind as if they were babies who didn't want to be born so quickly, wanted to enjoy the warm womb of the earth. I was two minutes late, just as I had managed at the advertising company. The members of the group look at me, and then away, in a vague annoyance that loses out to indifference. I adjust my hat and clear my throat, trying to shake off the tension. *I am only here for a summer*, I remind myself.

Even though there was an alleged absence of hierarchy at Twin Oaks, the presence of it was understood. Pam was head of gardening operations, and as often happens at Twin Oaks, was by default the one to allocate and direct everything because she knew all the ropes. Pam knew the ins and outs of what to do when a crop failed or deer took off with the broccoli. Somewhere in her late sixties, she had run the commune's garden for close to a decade, which meant she'd cornered the market on agricultural knowledge and made herself so indispensable that democracy did not apply to decisions concerning the garden: it was Pam's way or the highway, and *nobody* wanted the highway. She was blunt, to-the-point and no-nonsense, with enough energy for afternoon tea. She drove a tractor like a rustic farmhand, but we listened to Pam because, as she put it, "If we don't grow, we don't eat."

Pam had recently struck a book deal with a small publisher, the tome titled *How to Grow for 100 People*, an instructional account of all she had learned and practiced at Twin

Oaks. She wouldn't see a dime from it-- any income or profit generated from a member's outside work was forfeited to the commune's pooled funds. This was meant to deter individual accumulation of wealth, something Skinner had identified as the ruin of society.

"I don't care," Pam said, and meant it, shrugging her shoulders. I had asked her if she felt cheated; after all, it was she and she alone who had spent all those years working on the book. "What would I do with the extra money, anyway?" she offered up as an explanation.

My gardening experience (which really meant I'd watered my dad's roses on occasion) did not take me very far in the commune. I felt useless, but I was doing my best and I was doing it for free. I tried to get on Pam's good side. I knew I wouldn't get anything out of it, but something about her frustration with everybody led me to want to make her happy.

I had already been scolded once for playing with a dog in the watermelon patch. The farm had a working dog named Roger who slept during the day and chased away deer at night. We were strongly advised not to pet or feed Roger, lest he forget his role. During sleepless nights on my cot in the cabin I'd hear him howling away in the rows of vegetables-- poor, lonely, devoted Roger. I hadn't known it was Roger I was frolicking with (or that I was stomping on watermelon roots, which I had mistaken for weeds).

"Stop playing with the damn dog and garden!" Pam yelled in her shrill voice.

"What's a spade?" I asked the first week, having only ever known it as a suit in playing cards. The members couldn't fathom that I'd never had any experience with "the land", laughing in disbelief when I couldn't identify the vegetables in the field by their leaves alone.

"You should see my resume, though," I'd retort.

I could tell what mood Pam was in from the tone of her voice as she tallied the morning shift, and most days it reeked of getting down to business.

“Alright then, Marigold and Biscuit, you will uproot the beets in row F5, and Sunshine and Jane, you will pull weeds from the watermelon patch,” Pam said, “*Weeds*, Jane, not roots. Take care to tell the difference. Make sure you examine what you’re going to pull before you pull it, because they look quite similar,” Pam said. She dictated in her thick British accent, and it made her bossiness sound classically refined.

Bitter about having been assigned garden duty, partners did not smile at each other, glad they had been paired up with a friend, but instead dragged themselves to the shed to get the corresponding equipment: shears, hoes, rakes, buckets and gloves. Most of the tools were rusted or had off-track hinges, making the work that much more taxing.

What Kellig had said was only half-true. While Twin Oakers could mostly choose the jobs they wanted to work (of which there were many), most of them opted out of garden duty. For one, it was actual work. Nobody wanted to toil in the hot sun, mingling with bugs and sweat and braving heat stroke. Growing food for a hundred people year-round meant the endless ripping of stubborn weeds thick as bananas out of the ground and trying not to make the wasps angry when they came around. On my first day I found it exhilarating for the first twenty minutes, breathing in deep and saying “So this is what it’s like in the country!” but it became unbearable for the remaining three hours and forty minutes. If I got overly ambitious in the face of stubborn flora or forgot to drink enough water, I found myself retching my breakfast into a corner, my body shaking from the shock of the elements. My fingers blistered and my back ached into the evening.

In short, nobody wanted to do this if they didn’t have to. Eventually a policy was created that mandated *some* garden duty, the result of a dangerous food shortage in 2008 that showed the community what would happen if members weren’t forced to garden. So

few members had agreed to work in the garden that there hadn't been enough crops to feed everyone. They ended up having to make food runs into town, spending money on gas and groceries instead of a new silo.

I wonder if things would have been different had the commune had stuck with B.F. Skinner's original practice of 'variable' labor credits. Skinner had implemented a system that gave more credits for certain tasks than others. Undesirable jobs were worth more labor credits than "easier" jobs, and this was meant to encourage members to take on some of the less popular jobs. Twin Oaks revised this to 'standardized' credits; each job in the community became of equal value, each hour worth the same as any other no matter what work was done (or how well it was done).

What was going on with Twin Oak's garden was a mirror image of what was happening with farms across the country. In 2010 the Farm Workers Union created the "Take Our Jobs" campaign in response to tougher immigration reform and harsher consequences for those who hired illegal farm workers, largely from Mexico. The Union called on any American citizen to come take their jobs, and as CNN reported of the mere dozen applicants, all "quickly [lost] interest once the reality [sank] in that these are back-breaking jobs in triple-digit temperatures that pay minimum wage, usually without benefits...Some small farms are not required to pay minimum wage and in 15 states farms aren't required to offer workers' compensation. Despite the dismal job market in the U.S., where the unemployment rate is 9.5% and 14.6 million people are out of work, there have been few takers" (Smith).

What Skinner's variable credits had tried to accommodate was the notion that some jobs deserved more credit than others. He did this in a way that, I feel, exposed the strange sense of value we place on different jobs in the mainstream world. Often it is the unpleasant jobs that see the lowest pay (particularly in the absence of a union): the hotel

maid usually works off minimum wage and tips, while home care aides, who clean up shit, puke and blood on a daily basis, just to make just enough to live above the poverty level.

The variable credits didn't work for Twin Oaks because the bigger the community got the more complicated that concept became. Different people enjoyed different jobs, or some found a task easier while others found that same task more challenging. Resentment (inevitably) infiltrated. The switch from Skinner's credit system may have been the reason why everyone stopped signing up for fieldwork, or explains why only a few brave souls will empty the compost toilets.

With every hour of work counted as equal, the floodgates opened for things like fudged labor hours, slower paces, and ridiculous claims for labor credits. Things like reading the policy books or time spent in jail as a result of public protesting could be claimed for labor credits (recent bailouts included protests against overcrowded prisons and nuclear energy). Policies were then put in place to curtail B.S. claims for things like doing laundry all day long. That particular policy declared that no member could claim more than five hours a week of doing communal laundry; some members would sit around reading a book while the machines did the work, racking up the hours, while others were breaking their backs planting lettuce. If there was a way to work the system, people surely found it (the visitors all made jokes about this, reminding others to claim credit for doing things like going to the bathroom or fetching a band-aid in the closet). Those who half-assed meal shifts relied on reheating the leftovers from other meals rather than cooking fresh ones; at times others preferred the hammock shop so that they could spend leisurely hours chatting, listening to Radiohead CDs while tying a few knots here and there on a hammock. When they did work, they tried to make it feel as close to hanging out as possible.

It was this socializing that made the bulk of assignments bearable. The members' views on life deviated from the "norm" of the outside world, but all the same they were

intelligent people. Many of them read books about anything and everything and had attended universities. A lot of the people who had come to Twin Oaks had been raised to use their intellect to contribute to societal innovation. For that reason, they eventually stopped finding stimulation in all the monotonous, manual labor. It was as if they were ignoring a need within themselves to do something “more” in order to make their idea of a better society work. With some weeks demanding upwards of forty-two hours quota, no one had time to do much else when it came to working for a better world. Deep down I think many of them needed jobs that challenged their minds, and there was none of that for them at Twin Oaks. Trimming the hairs off of pounds of garlic or labeling tofu shipment boxes numbed their brains after the hundredth hour. Paired with extreme physical demand and exhaustion, it was a formula for disillusionment. I sensed that eventually, everyone who came to live there went through a realization that every day in the foreseeable future would be like this, and a sort of general malaise set in.

I certainly waded through mental boredom when I was assigned eight hours of garlic trimming and onion-weighing each week, and I could only assume that it was an undesirable job. All the visitors had been scheduled into long hours at the Emporium, the name of the stilted warehouse that had walls of onion and garlic hanging to dry. It wasn't hard to learn, and almost impossible to mess up. It was a picturesque structure, a pastoral portrait: red paint peeling off the dark wood, a rickety ladder leading up to the triangle-shaped work space, where taller people had to hunch down when they moved around. On the grass in front were wooden barrels filled for kitchen delivery. Our jobs were to measure each root, and then store them accordingly. Bulbs of a certain size would go to seeding for the next year while others went to the kitchen, and a small group went to the compost if they had bruises and holes. For hours we'd sit in the dark, musty barn, pulling down

bouquets of onion and garlic, dried red dirt flying everywhere. The orange sun broke through the window, capturing all the floating dust, making the air look like honey.

The six or seven workers per shift worked in silence, holding plant bulbs up to small plastic rulers, followed by the thud of onions being tossed into a plastic bucket. When the hours dragged, we talked. Most of our talks took on a pattern. We'd latch on to a subject and then each took turns telling a related story. One particularly entertaining day we told our crazy travel stories- everyone seemed to have one. Charlotte said she and several other women had gotten shot at on a midnight pagan march to the Nazca lines in South America. The gunmen had just been some drunk locals harassing tourists. Hambone had tried hitching all the way from Maine to Arkansas, and a string of unlucky events had landed him in a trailer park full of crack addicts, where he stayed the night. He never did make it to his destination. I recalled the time I'd been dumped by the side of the road in Cambodia with fifty other backpackers in the middle of the night by our tour bus. The drivers had refused to finish the trip to Siem Reap because the road was too bumpy. We had ended up smashed into (and piled upon) a few four-by-four trucks that came by hours of bewilderment later, and we endured an eternity of spine-cracking potholes and swallowing the cold air of the witching hours to get to Siem Reap.

Listening to the stories was like traveling itself; all of us were lost in our imaginations as we pictured what the storyteller was describing. This is what must it have been like back in the thirties and forties, I thought, when families gathered around the radio. I realized I hadn't watched television in over a week. The stories not only allowed us to use our brains, they passed the time and offered a slight opening into who we all were, what we'd seen and how it made us who we were.

The Emporium's shifts were often scheduled until four p.m., but by 3:15 we started closing up, the joints and skin on our hands aching from hours of mashing dull scissors

against tough garlic necks. We all agreed we'd only claim until 3:30, and not lie about the extra half hour- but that was followed by a chuckle that meant, really, we'd claim the whole hour. *It's just thirty minutes, what's the big deal?* They'd finally say out loud. One could only hope that another would not report this (it'd happened before, I was told). You didn't know if it would be your friend or neighbor; it felt like Castro's Cuba.

Had I any intention of joining the community I would have never lied about hours; visitors were under the microscope. Labor hours were a big part of the membership process. The visitor period was obligatory for anyone who wanted to apply for a spot at Twin Oaks; if the visitor did not complete the work quota each week, then he or she could not apply for membership-- they'd have to go through the visitor period again another time. When I noticed that the visitors' work schedules did not fulfill the forty plus hours, I was told that it was up to us to find work. That meant we had to go around the grounds, poke our heads in, and ask if anyone needed help. If that failed, we could volunteer for something we knew always had openings-- like gardening or emptying the compost toilets.

While there was a fear of angering peers, most people fudged their hours because they could. A hundred people is a lot to keep track of when there isn't supposed to be any kind of boss or supervisor to whom people are accountable. Those who didn't make quota owed hours to the commune, which was tacked on to the next week. It was easy for members who fell behind to find themselves so deep in a "labor hole" that there was no hope of getting out. When this happened, their membership was reconsidered. The office only had time to tally everyone's hours for the dispersal of allowance, so there was no investigation or system to validate claims.

With the end of each week, members received an allowance, which was what was left over after deducting hours worked to cover food, housing, and medical, among other things. The allowance was twenty dollar a week, and if not saved was used to buy small luxuries

one couldn't find in the commune, like sugary cereals or magazines. The weekly quota was the same for everyone, save children and the elderly, and it was on one's honor to complete it.

The website emphasized the importance of meeting quota, and warned that, "All members are expected to work their fair share of labor. Trusting one another to do a fair share is VERY IMPORTANT to us, and failure to complete your fair share endangers membership. Keep in mind the forty hours plus includes domestic labor, which is normally not compensated for in the mainstream; therefore, we generally work less than those maintaining individual households. In addition, members get three weeks of labor credit on the anniversary of their joining."

Without those anniversary weeks, taking a vacation from Twin Oaks seemed difficult to accomplish. Normally, if a member wanted to take vacations, they'd have to work for hours outside of their quota and accumulate a surplus of credit. That meant having to work fifty hours a week or more for a long period of time to get a few weeks off, and even then, there wasn't much money to go anywhere special. For this reason a lot of people felt trapped.

The idea behind Twin Oaks' labor system is that it could (and did) replace the monetary system entirely, and members never had to even see money at the commune if they didn't want to. Labor replaced currency. If a member's band played a show for the community, and those who attended donated an hour or so of labor credit towards the band instead of paying cash for a ticket. This, too, was on one's honor. I didn't see so much as a penny when I was there, and really there was no reason to- Twin Oaks' system provided everything anyone needed to live.

While the labor requirement at first seemed reasonable to someone like me, a child of the forty-hour workweek, it might be easy to ignore that this time is not spent parked at

a desk in front of a computer. Forty hours a week of hard labor could translate to eighty desk hours in the outside world. It was ironic; the members had come to the commune to escape the jobs that had consumed their lives, but that was exactly where they ended up despite their efforts. This made the loss of TV, Internet, cell phones and soft beds much easier. I found the silence of the commune outside of average working hours eerie, and later realized that most of the members spent their free time napping or zoning out in one of the countless hammocks scattered throughout the grounds.

I had come to Twin Oaks in reasonably good shape, but found myself struggling to keep up with the physical demands day after day. It felt like boot camp. As a visitor I was assigned as many garden shifts as they could humanely give me, trying to make the most of the free labor the visitors offered. Days blended together; days of the week didn't matter anymore. Every morning was the expansive, vast garden, and after a few hours the sun reached its zenith and I'd get dizzy and red-faced. My shirt soaked through with sweat, which later dried into circles of stiff white salt. By noon I'd encountered at least ten species of bugs I had never seen before, and which were so bizarre that I was almost inclined to believe in a God. My body screamed, every inch of me caked with dirt, and when I stood up the world spun. Eventually I would be ten minutes late instead of two minutes late, buying every second of relief that I could. On my more dramatic days I'd call home and say, "It's like Pol Pot's Year Zero rice paddies- if you don't work, you don't eat!"

At lunch everyone lay down their tools and headed, silent and tired, to Zhankoye. On my walk to the dining hall I dreamed of lemonade and tall glasses of ice water; every shade of Gatorade danced before my eyes.

Everyone showed up at lunchtime, the first meal of the day that was cooked by shift workers (breakfast was usually toast, if anything at all). I'd scan the picnic tables for a place to sit. It was like reliving the horrors of junior high all over again, just in the middle of a

forest filled with hippies. There were cliques, and cliques within those cliques. No matter how much I convinced myself that I could ingratiate myself to a table, I always ended up sitting with the other equally disheartened visitors at the designated visitor table.

We ate without talking those first few days, our bodies and minds in shock, too tired to do anything but eat. What had we been expecting? As I walked back to the kitchen to return my empty plate to the dining hall, I didn't pass a single table that wasn't discussing labor, dragging it out like a bad joke. They wanted to know: Who had shown up to work late? Who hadn't shown up at all? Who worked less hard than everyone else? Who took the most bathroom breaks? Who ratted out those who cut corners? Who complained? Who had it the hardest? I never heard anyone say, "I had a really great time pulling on utters all day." Had I envisioned the propaganda-esque portraits of happy workers toiling in the fields? I couldn't help but feel that nobody was truly happy here. Maybe it was because they were all holding on to what they had imagined this life to be, and not what it actually was. They had abandoned the way of punch cards and board meetings, the ways work had ruled their prior lives, only to mount a horse of a different color at Twin Oaks. By the time they realized it, they were already too deep in it. I had only come to visit; these people had sold their belongings, closed their banks accounts, and made peace with their families. There was a finality to it, and it festered.

It was more than the labor. It was labor and all the weight that it carried. There was no bigger word, no hotter word at Twin Oaks than *labor*. It was the currency (both social and economic) upon which the commune stood; it was each person's reputation, the source of many disagreements, and the reason for a few triumphs. It made up their dreams and nightmares and, most importantly, earned them a reason to live there.

When I put my dish in the sink (someone else would wash it for credit), I overheard two members recalling a woman named Delancey. She had lived in the commune years ago.

Young and attractive, a magnet for both men and women, she ruffled feathers. A few months after her arrival she had fallen into a depression, which led to constant absences from her work shifts. Fudging hours was one thing, but no one could be a no-show for long and stay.

There were grumblings about her irresponsibility, and she was slowly excommunicated, socially, from everyone else. Why did *she* get to eat the food and sleep in a warm bed while everyone else had to work for it? Eventually the community learned that she had lied in her intake interview, and had failed to mention the years of sexual abuse she had suffered at the hands of her father (potential members are asked to be forthright about any skeletons in their closet, as mental illness has been a recurring issue at Twin Oaks). Feeling sympathetic, members tried to rouse Delancey from her “funk”, taking turns coaxing her out of bed in the morning or looking the other way if she worked at a sluggish pace. A year passed and nothing had changed with Delancey, so in a decision that was one vote short of redemption, the community asked her to leave.

“We coulda dealt with it better if we’d known,” said one woman.

“I know...this isn’t rehab,” said the other.

One of the women taking part in the conversation was on her way to clean the barn, and so I asked the other if voting people out for not working enough was a common practice.

“It used to be,” she said matter-of-factly, “but not anymore.”

“What’s different?” I asked.

She responded as if she had said this many times before. “If we think someone is dealing with depression or addiction or another kind of mental illness, we get them help before we decide to kick them out.”

She began to walk away when I asked one more question:

“Why’s that?” I asked, wanting to know the reasoning behind it. Was it out of genuine concern, or was it a tactic to get the bad egg off the farm?

She stopped and turned to face me, and said, “Because after we voted her out, Delancey drove one of our trucks out to cow pasture and shot herself.”

There was only one gun on the premises, and it was used to put a suffering animal out of its misery if the occasion ever arose. It was put in a lockbox, to which only two members knew the code.

I walked back to Aurora house and taped up my blisters, caked in dirt from gardening, so that I could work in the hammock shop next without writhing in pain. My muscles were sore from crouching in the fields, and I collapsed on to my bed, which I was convinced was just a stone slab with old sheets (six out of the eight visitors discovered pubic hairs on their sheets that they felt confident were not their own). This was life at a commune: you have everything you need, but nothing you want. That made some people crazy.

Looking up at the ceiling, thinking of Delancey, I realized that no matter where one labors-- whether it was at corporate headquarters or knee-deep in pig shit, there are things that human nature cannot escape. Primarily, we cannot escape ourselves, our humanness. I remember, from my time in Thailand, there was a popular phrases of description that went “same same, but different.” It was the same working here as it was in that corporate cubicle that I had so hated. At that moment I couldn’t have been farther away from the towering glass and concrete of Lexington Avenue, the rush hours and tense board meetings, but I was ambushed by the same issues-- they were just in disguise. I groaned at the idea of going to work. What was it that I wanted? Hadn’t I signed up for this? Even here, in the middle of the middle of nowhere, there was the ever-unsatisfied client, the passive-aggressive co-worker, the boss who made everything into life-or-death, and of course, the meager pay.

There was the fact that no matter how much people wanted to fight it, we can never fully understand one another (or ourselves), no matter how many stories we'd hear, no matter how many tales we'd tell.

I believe in everything until it's disproved. So I believe in fairies, the myths, dragons. It all exists, even if it's in your mind. Who's to say that dreams and nightmares aren't as real as the here and now?

--John Lennon

CHAPTER 5

I looked at my schedule for tomorrow: eight hours of work. Four in the garden starting at seven a.m. followed by two hours of digging ditches around the sewage tanks to prevent flooding, and then two hours boxing tofu shipments for the delivery truck. The day had started out badly; a few of the visitors had asked Wizard to get them a twelve pack of beer, which they'd stored in the commie fridge at Zhankoye. It was gone the next morning, even though they hadn't even had a chance to open it.

"If you don't label it, someone is going to take it," Wizard reminded them after they'd stated their case.

"But whoever took the beer knew it wasn't theirs," Mischa retorted, "They knew they didn't buy it. Why would putting my name on it prevent a thief from being a thief?" Mischa mumbled that any idiot would know better than to take alcohol away from a Russian. He snarled enough so that the dark spot where his canine used to be peeked through, making him look rabid.

They were standing outside Wizard's bedroom. He was on a weeklong leave for mental health issues; none of us asked the details. We knew he'd been going to a clinic in town.

"Well, it wasn't me," was all Wizard could say. "I've been sober for longer than I care to remember."

Dennis, who'd chipped in for the beer, was more disappointed than angry. "I don't see why we should follow the rules if no one else is going to follow them. Maybe I just won't go to work today."

“We don’t say ‘rules’ here. That’s a bad word, a negative word. We say ‘norms’. And anyhow, do as you like, I don’t care. I’m off.” Wizard continued filing his nails and waited for the upset visitors to leave the house.

During our orientation the first day, when Valerie first handed out our work schedules, she gave us advice that was recited as she had probably recited it to thousands of visitors before us: “Follow our norms as much as you can. Follow the schedule. If you follow the schedule, then you live as closely to how we live as possible, and that’s when you can make the best decision about whether or not you want to join our community.” After all, that’s what the visitor period was about: at least for the visitor.

The apathy of Valerie’s deadpan monologue was contagious, and even though I hadn’t ever considered applying for membership, I had tried to maintain some modicum of enthusiasm. Two weeks after arrival my reserves of excitement were low. It was hard to be enthusiastic when all the Twin Oakers treated the visitors with such annoyance. I felt like an intern begrudgingly taken under the wing of an employee who didn’t want me, who would turn to me and say, “Try to make yourself as invisible as possible. I’ve got stuff to do.” They were on the cusp on not being able to tolerate the monthly influx of new faces, most of whom were people they didn’t care for (whether it was earned or predetermined), and they had no more patience for playing the friendly, open hosts. Their curiosity about outsiders had long faded. Now we were only a reminder of what they had left behind, and for some that meant jealousy, as if we reminded them of everything they had given up but still wanted. Like beer.

I’d been quarantined from the start, but at the same time told I should do everything I could to get to know the members. It would be the members, after all, who would vote whether or not I could join. For the visitors who did want to join, I watched them struggle with the hurdle of visitor-member separation. The visitors were expected to eat at our own

picnic table at meal times, and only after some of us had been shown any kind of friendliness by some members were we invited to sit with their different cliques. The social castaways of the visitor's group- like Dennis and Brian (ironically the only two members who truly wanted to join as soon as possible) imposed themselves at other tables, unknowingly breaking up families by sitting between children and their parents, the members begrudgingly tolerating the presence of the uninvited but making sure never to engage in a direct dialogue. I watched all of this unfold from the visitor table, where I was happy to remain. My reason for being at Twin Oaks excused me from the responsibility of having to find my own place in the mix, to convince people they would like to live and work with me every day. I made myself inconspicuous, and that is how the members preferred it. I was like that kid in high school who nobody hated yet nobody ever invited to parties; for many, that's about as good as high school would ever get (and Twin Oaks could be very high school).

It was painful to watch, these awkward members who obliged their conversations with others at every meal. Dennis didn't fit in with the visitors, so I could only imagine the depths of his outcast-ness among the members. Having talked with him every day for the last few weeks, I could, without guilt, classify Dennis as a pathological liar and a paranoid conspiracy theorist (the last element being his best bet for social alignment within the commune). He peppered these mealtime discussions with comments but never questions, knowing that no one would take the time to acknowledge he had asked a question, and then bother to answer it.

Brian also sat himself down uninvited at members' tables, but took a different approach at worming his way into the social fabric. He accepted his lot, and sat silently during each meal, dividing the time between looking down at his plate and actively listening to what others were saying, a look of deep consideration plastered on his face. He

seemed like a little boy who just wanted to be loved, and was too afraid that by being himself he would be dismissed from their potential approval, and so he maintained his speechlessness in the hopes that nobody would mind his presence at the table (and maybe even eventually becomes accustomed to it). His most encouraging thought was likely “at least I am not Dennis.”

Dennis had already vocalized (to anyone who would listen) why he wanted to live at Twin Oaks. For one, it would be a great place to be when the apocalypse came. The members grew their own food and had plenty in storage, and they knew the woods better than any intruder. It was far enough away from any city that would be “worth bombing”, and distant enough from any large bodies of water. “And if there were zombies, we could just put some trip wire ‘round the cow pasture and pick ‘em off with our rifles, like, two hundred feet away or more. Good deal,” he said during one breakfast, confirming the thought with a heaping spoonful of granola into his mouth. Zombies were real to Dennis, I think, out of a combination of ignorance and an intense desire to live in a world that was magical.

Brian’s reasons for wanting to join had more layers, but they made sense when you saw him-- I mean really *saw* who he was. In his late thirties, single, overweight and balding, Brian lived with his mother and his slightly older, also unemployed, brother, Dale. He wore rimless glasses and maintained a styled goatee in an attempt to diminish his growing second chin. He had a love for karaoke-- even had his own machine at home-- and expressed one day, to everyone’s awkwardness, that he hoped to put on a one-man concert for us. He tried to hide his elation when he found out there was an aging karaoke machine in Zhankoye, and said that Bon Jovi was his specialty, and lucky for us, his songs were in great supply in the machine’s available music files. Even so, he noted, he had brought several of Bon Jovi’s CDs with him-- just in case.

For the last decade or so he had worked forklifts at warehouses in some nowhere town in Pennsylvania. He had been laid off in the last year and was trying to find a spot in the world for himself, a dispiriting thing to have to do after a certain age, after some might feel they'd had things all figured out. After being let go he turned to hiking, doing pieces of the Appalachian Trail and looking up various communes on the East Coast. On one of the first days on the farm he told me that he was a swinger, and for no reason I could discern. Maybe he was trying to win cool points or show that he was not the average Joe everyone might mistake him for, but I never understood why he might have felt I was the right person for whom to create a certain image of himself. He told me about a woman back home who was giving him the run-around, who would occasionally meet him at these swinger clubs and whisper sweet words now and then but never deliver any real affection.

“She’s going through a divorce, so I guess it’s making her crazy,” Brian said, shrugging his shoulders and making circles with his pointer finger around his temple. He took a sip of his fifty-cent beer and followed up with, “but I’ve had enough of her shit. I’m starting over. Right here.”

And there it was: there was nowhere else and nothing else in the world for Brian. He had bet his happiness on dubious things-- a stable fork lifting job and romantic possibilities with a divorcee whom he'd met at a swingers' club. This was a sentiment that he exuded, and so naturally it became the adopted belief for everyone he encountered. *Somewhere* has to take him, we all thought in a chorus led by Brian himself. He didn't want to live with his mother and brother anymore, the two of them driving him into a bottomless pit of depression with a capital D, and he had no hobbies in which to find solace or escape. Twin Oak (or communes in general) was what he felt to be his last resort. He wasn't totally in love with the commune's way of life, but he could manage it, and that was all he needed. “Enough” was where the bar rested with Brian. He was all right with Twin Oaks, and he

figured, as did we, that that was about as good as it was going to get for such an Eeyore. He didn't want to hustle in the real world, or try to sell himself elsewhere; he had no college degree, no personal motivation to do anything outside of his comfort zone of manual labor. He was strange and quiet, and frankly, part of him wanted to be taken care of. He wanted a family that he would likely never have if only because he couldn't muster the energy to make one on his own. In this way, the idea of communes worked for him. It was an insta-family.

Behind that reason, there was something more that was pushing Brian towards communal living. It was the idea that, like many others in today's America, he felt cheated. He had given the better part of his life to a company that discarded him without a second thought; he had worked so that a faceless boss who didn't know his name could make more money. Brian's decades of loyal forklifting had left him...where? Collecting unemployment and ignoring aches and pains for fear of having to deal with his miserable government-subsidized healthcare program. All those years of showing up to work on time, of working honestly for an only-OK paycheck, and at almost forty years old, not much to show for it--and not brought on by any fault of his own. He had come to realize that this was not a country in which the relationship between employer and employee was "I'll scratch your back if you scratch mine", and that in fact only one back was being scratched (and it wasn't his).

In all my years of waitressing (and working other socially perceived low-level jobs), I'd never seen such employee loyalty as I did amongst blue-collar workers and manual laborers. When I moved into the corporate world, all the white-collar workers bellyached about what they felt entitled to, and how much they had had to spend on a college degree just to take some boss's crap, and how they couldn't wait to be a boss so they could give other people crap. Brian was exactly the kind of worker I had gotten to know so well in my

time at minimum wage jobs: accepting, almost selflessly so, because these were the cards he had been dealt. Not until it was taken away from him did he start to question the structure of things, the *Who*, or the *Why*.

Brian knew that he wanted Twin Oaks more than they wanted him. He was no fool when it came to observation; this is the gift his tacit way had given him. What was it that the current members didn't like about Brian? Was it because they expected one type of person upon meeting him, from his boring demeanor to his harmless mediocrity, but got another type of person? Was it because he was hardly scratching the surface of the middle class, a low-income warehouse worker who drank Pabst Blue Ribbon and had a beer gut to show for it, his few dollars going towards his karaoke music collection and not towards college credits? In this I saw all the ways in which Twin Oakers were different from outsiders, but similar to each other. Sure, some of the male members wore dresses (one woman even piled her hair high upon her head to house her pet rat)-- but their hidden sentiments were the same: their utopia did not include the poorly educated, the unrefined, those who were not well read. Perhaps one of the reasons for their slight discomfort with themselves was because they resented each other (and themselves) for being unable to fight those deep-set prejudices about the 'right kind of person'. They had escaped the power cliques of the outside world to create a power clique in their own world. How many of them had had the education and worldliness they did because of the opportunities into which they were born? *All of them*. None of these people had worked their way from the projects to Yale. They must have known the truth; they didn't want to take the world and make it better. They wanted to create their own, better world, as if it were only prejudice if it had been someone else calling the shots. Why else had they abandoned the outside? Instead of taking to the streets, organizing grassroots activism, or working for change in D.C., they'd realized they didn't want a better version, just their *own* version, a world where they could

pick and choose the kind of people that lived in it, and cultivate and manipulate humanity into their sense of what was ideal. Their visitor program was an invitation to the outside, but with only a degree of actual openness, as if to say, “Here, you can look, but you can’t touch.”

I continued to watch Brian at meals, and saw all the conversation topics that others brought up which would exclude him, whether intentionally or not. At one lunch, at the table next to mine, a group of members were discussing the ironies of the post-French Revolution political structure. There Brian sat in silence, the second child born to a single mother on welfare. He had done with that what he could. Sure, he’d never read Voltaire and couldn’t talk about his political awakening experienced during a study abroad semester in London, but he knew that he had lived, and what could be more honest and true than that?

He worked hard. In his first week he exceeded the work quota by six hours, vowing to continue the streak for the rest of his stay. While the rest of us digested our meals out on the porch, rolling cigarettes and playing cards, Brian buzzed from place to place, asking if they needed an extra hand, usually to be turned away. He didn’t fit; he was a square block trying to force his way into a round hole, and so he spent many nights on the deck outside of Aurora house smoking cigarettes in a hammock and staring at the road or the sky, thinking of things to say or do that could get him into this club.

And, really, when it came to wanting to belong to such a club, how was Brian wrong? Who could blame him for settling into Twin Oaks? In Brian’s world, it was not succumbing to something lesser simply because it was available. It was the perception of how life should be that he thought, this whole time, he had been creating in his other life. The farm took care of its workers, took care of each other. If the farm ever had to dissolve there was enough money in the bank to give each person enough to start over somewhere else. There

would always be a job for those who wanted to work, and after all the years of digging one's fingers into the dirt, when joints got rickety and the hearing and sight went, Twin Oakers would take care of each other until the last breath. Regardless of social cliques or sometimes hypocritical behavior, at the end of the day at Twin Oaks, all backs were being scratched.

The fact that several of the visitors that summer had wanted to apply to Twin Oaks was of no surprise to the communards. America was in a rut and it looked as if things were going to get worse before they got better. People who had spent tens of thousands of dollars on education had ended up waiting tables, and those who ate at their restaurants were tipping sparsely. Congress couldn't agree on anything, and in the meantime the middle class was dwindling, drowning, the last of them sucked under the surface of a sea of the laissez faire mentality. Some people were calling the president "socialist", a very scary word for most, the distant cousin of that dirty "C" word. Suddenly all those people who had "done the right thing"-- completed school, started at a basic salary in hopes of moving up the ladder, paying their taxes dutifully-- were feeling cheated (the poor, on the other hand, were used to being poor, their destitution a steady constant in their lives).

While members of Twin Oaks were classified as living below the poverty line, most of the members came from somewhere in the ranks of the middle to upper class. Most of them held college degrees from private universities and had come here after abandoning their comfortable income statuses. In his study of Twin Oaks titled *The Illusion of Permanence*, Kuhlmann notes "the vast majority of recruits thus attracted to Twin Oaks are white, middle class, well educated, and alienated" (160) who have "left-wing political attitudes [making it] difficult to see that [the member base] is actually a constantly changing group of people" (168) because they share "both background and socialization" (170). They'd left it all behind for various reasons, I'm sure: mid-life crises, revolutionary

thinking and the unwillingness to participate in economic slavery, and more recently, foresight of the coming downturn. The older generations were hippies who had never stopped believing in the commune when the sixties and seventies ended. There were people who were terrified of pesticides and all the things in our modern lives that cause cancer and kill the earth, who wanted to live the solution and not just preach about it--radical, but not ignoble. For the many reasons the members offered about their departure from the outside world, it was still a mystery to me. Here were people who attended schools like Vassar or Brown but then referred to public schools as "indoctrination centers". My own experience in private, liberal arts colleges was that students received a very expensive piece of paper after four years for being able to coherently regurgitate only the things the professors had professed to us, and within the confines of our assigned reading.

When Brian called home and told his mother he thought he finally found his niche and was going to apply for membership, his mother paused for a second and said, "Can you take Dale with you?"

There was one member who had somehow made it through the admissions process to Twin Oaks even though he seemed closer to Brian than any other member. They said he was a man who had fallen too far down his own rabbit hole-- scary news, coming from a group of people that I felt had lost touch with reality. I had seen him only in passing, the same way I had heard about him; through the fir trees he rode his bicycle like a shadow, gone too far down the road by the time I'd realized who I'd seen. When he joined the commune ten years ago, he had introduced himself as "I.P.", short for *Independent Person*. No one asked for his real name. He was the only black member of the commune, and at that

the only racial minority. He never came to community meals, working only at night and sleeping during the day. He was angry, they'd said, *non-cooperative*.

I tried to get as much information about IP as I could. I didn't want the others to feel that I was promoting gossip, or that I was the undercover CIA agent they had always feared would be planted into their exclusive world. I dropped his name at different work shifts or ask questions I already knew the answer to like, "So, do you have black people here too?" (this is the same question George Bush asked Brazilian President Fernando Cardoso in 2002, but for all the fellow Bush-haters on the grounds, no one seemed to get the reference).

I felt as if I couldn't get enough information about the elusive IP mostly because I genuinely *couldn't*. He was an enigma. People loved to hate him but acted as if it were a brotherly sort of hate, resentment towards someone who had rejected the group before the group could reject him. The community felt IP had pushed them away, and they seemed to push right back. I couldn't understand it, the concept of one hundred people sleeping together, eating together, working together, all save for one who did all these things in his own solitary nocturne. Why did he remain here all of these years? What was he getting out of it?

Over the weeks I had gathered this much: he was brilliant but troubled. He had over-thought his way onto a no-man's land nestled on the brink of insanity. He was entirely self-educated and seemed to have read every book he ever came across. He built chairs and wove hammocks at 2 a.m. to meet his weekly work quota, and in this way he was like Santa Clause: in the morning there would be a batch of freshly-woven, flawless hammocks and no trace of IP but for his hastily signed initials on his timesheet.

During the scabies epidemic over the winter of 2009, he refused to be sanitized. A few wandering Canadians had stayed at the commune that December, and a celebratory

orgy ensued. After they left, Twin Oakers discovered that the Canadians hadn't come alone. Scabies were rampant. Everyone was required to delouse and boil their sheets, or burn them. They almost kicked IP out for non-compliance, even though he hadn't been within a thousand feet of the orgy and associated with almost no one.

IP was "hard to live with" but at the same time they never saw him. "He has walls up" I'd hear. There was some empathy for what he'd gone through, some of the members offered; IP was the one who'd found Arizona's dead body that one autumn, when he'd hung himself in the shed.

"He was the best person to have found Arizona. Better it was IP than anyone else" said Anisa, an older woman who'd been at the commune for almost ten years.

"Why?" I asked.

"Because of his beliefs," she said. "He's got a lot of beliefs about this life, and the next." She explained that IP had created his own religion, but she became more and more vague as she saw my interest peaked. No one wanted me to like IP, or think I might like him.

After the way everyone had talked about him I thought I was pursuing the Loch Ness monster, something beautiful and rare but volatile. I knew that some things were better left undisturbed, but my curiosity drove me to make contact. I'd left a note in his cubby, telling him who I was (an outsider) and that I would like to speak with him, really, about anything. It surprised me, then, when he invited me into his quarters.

His room was sparsely furnished with fifth-hand furniture: a metal desk that seemed to be taken from a school, a stained mattress on the floor, and a bookcase made from cardboard boxes that housed works on a variety of academic subjects. The place seemed like it needed many things, but through the eyes of necessity it needed nothing at all.

When IP walked into the room he seemed taller than he probably was, his presence alone added inches. He looked like he was nearing fifty, and wore a traditional garb of some African nation while holding a bongo in one hand and a pot of tea in the other. He smiled just enough to communicate that, at that moment, he was a man who had everything he could ever want or need.

I had always imagined a man who chose to live in solitude, who acted as if he didn't belong anywhere in this world, to be a man of few words. I was wrong. IP was full of words, so many that I could hardly keep up with his ideas. He had a bottomless bag of theories on everything, some of which I found reasonable and others that led me to Google the symptoms of Schizophrenia. He would express coherent, deep thoughts and then unravel them into nonsensical strings of obscurity. Concepts bounced around in his mind like kinetic energy, crashing into each other, giving birth to successes and failures alike.

The dilapidated room in which he lived was more like a Hilton Suite to him; he'd chosen to be homeless for many years. After hitching across the U.S., he'd built a wooden shack in the woods in Oregon and lived alone (he'd stopped in Oregon only because he was tired of riding in cars). For years it had been only him, his shack, and whatever creatures he shared the forest with. No television, no cell phone, not even a radio. He read voraciously, so much so that he secretly feared one day he would run out of books and be forced to read pamphlets in stores. His days were Spartan for a man who lived so freely; he went to bed when the sun set and he woke when the day did. Each afternoon he made the long walk to town to spend his hours at bookstores and libraries.

He said, "When you're poor there are few things you can do for free, and luckily reading books was one of them."

He'd sold his plasma to buy things like toilet paper or drinking water. Some days he had spent a few hours washing dishes in the back of a local diner, and in return they would

give him a hot meal. He did this for eight years. There was a quantum shift, though, after an experience in the town library that sent him off into the next chapter of his life.

“I saw this book called *Egyptian Mysteries*. As soon as I saw the book, I saw in my mind’s eye these three guys, bald headed, looking down at me. They looked Egyptian. I swear to you, they popped right off the book, and only I could see them. They were beckoning me, and as I got closer their reaction was exactly like they were cheering someone, like someone seeing a touchdown on TV, I imagine. I took the book from the shelf and they disappeared. This was the first and last time something like that happened to me.

“It was a small cheap little book. I opened to a random page and there was this story about this man who worshipped as he walked, like praying with each step. There were pictures, kind of like the Egyptian version of a tarot deck, and I saw myself, my own damn face, right there. There were three paths: the path of the forest, the path of Isus, and the path of Osiris. I was on the forest path, but on that path was ‘the hanged man’ down the road.”

I thought of Arizona, and if IP had thought of that picture in his *Egyptian Mysteries* when he’d found his friend who had been swinging from a rope for days. He seemed unfettered by his own reference, and carried on with conviction.

“First I was ‘the hermit’, but afterwards I was living up in the air, backwards and upside-down, and I was on the path of the hanged man card. It was clear to me why those guys wanted me to read that book. It put me on the map of where I was going, telling me what stage I was at in my path.

“‘The rhythm of life’ is the best card, but you have to go through the shit to get to it.” He poured some tea into a paper cup that was nearing the end of its use. “That turned out to be true.”

“Now,” he said, finishing his tea in one gulp and setting the cup aside, “I am going to tell you all you need to know.” And he began:

“I’m not the kind of person who has gotten used to the fact that in this world there are beautiful things, because the world has a tendency towards the ugly things. This world is going in the wrong direction. For me, it’s like coming to a restaurant and there’s a gang rape going on in the middle of the restaurant and everyone else is just trying to enjoy their evening! Let’s say that girl, she’s nature. And in this restaurant there are people with dark sunglasses and invisible rifles, but there are drinks at the table to help you not think about it. We create inner apartness with drugs, booze, whatever. The masses are being drugged, like in *Brave New World*. Legal drugs too I mean. Zoloft, Prozac, Valium, Ritalin, Paxil, Xanax, Lithium.

“I was guilty, once, too, like you. I wanted to get to the place where I didn’t think about it. But that’s not the kind of situation in which you can really live. I never got to that place of wanting to be someone in the restaurant. I just wanted to go get help. If that girl is nature, well then we can’t separate ourselves from it. We can’t separate from nature, but we tryin’.

“I was raised in the ghetto. Growing up, I just kept asking myself, what is going on? I knew whatever was wrong with the world was wrong with me too. I knew I couldn’t really just *decide* who I was. I had intuitions, something inside of me telling me what was going on, intuitions I thought I could trust, it but they weren’t very articulate. I guess you could say I was pregnant with thought and feeling but with no words.

“You wanna get out of that restaurant? You have to abort all of what you know. For the first part of my life, which is like birth through twenty-four, I tried to avoid becoming socialized into this situation. Trying to avoid having to ignore these intuitions. I spent a good part of my life trying to do that. I think a lot of people end up dying early because

they're so sensitive, if that's the word, to what's happening. If you decide to ignore it but are well aware, you require anesthesia. You get drunk and die in a car wreck, you overdose on heroin.

“When I was eighteen I left high school. I asked myself: do you wanna keep doing this? Do you believe in this religion that you've been forced to participate in? We believe it, and we go to college! I said to myself, no sir, I didn't.

“I think it's around the ages of five or seven that as individuals we start to see that people are crazy. They're destroying the planet. I didn't want to be like that. I became a bum, a tramp, whatever poetic euphemism you want to use to describe it. I didn't have the incentive to succeed in such a system. There was no reason to try and get myself socialized, learn how to drive, be technically efficient. So I started hitchhiking.

“I am not a man most people want to pick up on the side of the road, least, that's what they see. I had a lot of time to think when I was waiting. I remembered this grade school teacher I had once, named Mr. Westhammer. One time he called my parents to ask if he could take me to this place in the countryside. I remember there were a lot of animals there, I think it was a commune-- it was the 70s. I started reading Alan Watts, and his book about alternative lifestyles (I was a bookworm even when I wasn't outside in the woods). What Mr. Westhammer had done was implanted into me that there was this other kind of place. *The countryside*. I ended up hitching my way to one community in Greenfield, Massachusetts. I wanted some place to give birth to my new self, to figure out what the hell was going in a way that mattered.

“But in that commune, all those people were also crazy. It was a shared income place, they had their own business, and all the houses had new age slogans on the walls. It was like going through a soap opera. I didn't want that kind of karma so I left after three months. My parents and my family were all Christian but not that concerned about me

until I went there. To ease their minds I ended up visiting my sister in Texas and stayed there for a few months. I told her I knew some place west somewhere where I could do something, get some work. Really it was all just a lie. I told her that just to get out of the house.

“I hitchhiked to Los Angeles, then to Portland, Oregon, where I spent the next eight years of my life. I lived in the woods in a place called Washington Park. I ended up in a little shack in the woods that a friend of mine helped me build. I’d hang out at the bookstores and talk to a bunch of yuppies. I didn’t know why I was choosing pretentious intellectual yuppies to speak with, but I did. Also there was an older guy there who gave me half-priced teas all the time. And this was the guy who helped me build my shack.

“I’d met a guy in the bookstore who knew me from seeing me around, and asked me to be a manager of the hotel. He said I could live there in return, and that he was sick and tired of all the alcoholics he’d hired that were causing him trouble. He said there would be lots of opportunity for pussy. But let me tell you, I was still a virgin at this time. Sex, whatever it was, was part of figuring out what everything meant. I didn’t think sex itself was gonna liberate me or anything. I was twenty by then. Anyway, I didn’t take the offer. I was not socialized. I didn’t initiate conversations. I didn’t want to work. What for? If I could live otherwise and think, then I didn’t see a need for slavery. Work is a compulsive thing, the push to do something that doesn’t really need to be done. I was drifting in this way. That’s when I gave birth to my ‘first child’: since then I’ve had a groove of ideas that strike me as being representative of my best diagnosis and prescription and how to heal it. That happened at the age of twenty-four.

“I moved on to another intentional community. I wanted a place to ‘raise my kids’ so to speak, an environment for the seed to grow in. The seed in question was my explanation of the meaning of life. It started with this word that I coined called *Wholesthesia* (like

anesthesia, but opposite), and it means complete sense perception. Here's something typical about us humans: when the shoe fits, the foot is forgotten, and when the belt fits, the belly is forgotten. That's the silence of health. When your liver is working right, you won't notice it. That's local wholesthesia. General wholesthesia puts people into comas, and from the comas we die. When this feeling of healthiness spreads all over our body so that we're light and effortless and we barely know you have a body, that's general wholesthesia. When this quality enters the central nervous system, I call it *phenomenasthesia*. I was stuck there for a while.

"It's a good place to be stuck, it's an awakening. Maybe you can imagine jumping out of an airplane, and the shoot doesn't open and you get this sense of all of experience, your whole past, the biggest sense of being and your part in it-- that is what I mean by *awakening*. Many people would call that *God*. I decided it's the presence of spirit.

"What I am trying to tell you is that I came to the conclusion that what we are experiencing is not life. It's very depressing. There's a difference between the *sense* of a spirit and a *union* with it. I don't have a fancy word for that, so I just call it freedom. This is our purpose of being in the world. It isn't just to survive, like evolution. There's some other thing going on that is pulling existence into being. It's the final call. It's in everybody, this original sin and original virtue. I wondered, how to use them both to tack towards freedom? There's this constant debate about whether man is either innately good or innately evil, well the answer is both. Once you embrace that, it actually augments the good; it heals the evil by giving the good unconditional acknowledgement.

"Don't you have this idea that most people aren't really alive? We can be alive or free but not in any manifest way. It's an exhausting labor, to be that way. What does one do after a revelation like that?

“When I first came to this understanding, I meditated a lot. I felt like I needed to do something to get it into my bones, mark the transition. I got depressed. I didn’t really know what to do, except to just keep thinking about this stuff. I didn’t know if anything else was coming. Maybe I wasn’t meditating right; my eyes got really shiny and some people were afraid of me, but others were attracted by this energy that was up in my head. I grew despondent.

“I left that second commune, and had heard about this place called Alpha Farm. I wanted to develop these ideas to challenge what was happening in the world. How was this going to translate to stop that rape from happening, not just to stop it, but to reverse it? For one, I think private property is like the ring of power. Ownership is a unilateral thing acquired by coercion, maintained by coercion. You can seize this and use it-- individually or collectively-- this ring of power, for good. All the people falling out of the middle class are seeing this ‘one ring to rule them all’ sort of *Lord of the Rings* shit.

“That’s what the plan is: to gradually own us. The banks own everything, the people who have been slaving for the banks eventually get thrown away by the banks. Land is land is land. Nobody owns it. You can’t eject people from something we all inherited.

“When I was going through my membership process here, some people were telling me ‘you won’t make a good fit,’ as if they have the right! It’s the economics of belonging *with* as opposed to belonging *to*. Twin Oaks should be like a twelve-step program for people addicted to sick culture, it should be how you find out where you need to be, and what you really need to have. Intentional communities are this other way of being born into the world.

“Take the evil with the good and use both to cultivate the things that are good. I’m not into this ‘better’ game like people here. It’s not like we’re better than the mainstream, we’re not better than the government that tortures people; ultimately none of these people

are any different. They are eroding like everyone else. A lot of people come here not to be good but to be *better*. It's addictive to the ego. They don't seem to get that we are doing this *for* the world. We are not free of sick culture just because we live here. If we don't keep our eyes on our own shit, it's going to corrupt everything. People need to deal with their shit collectively and individually.

“This place is not inspiring. The activists work as though once they establish this one thing the world will be better, but it's not getting at the real disease. It's like killing one symptom that gives way to another symptom. People have to get to the bottom of the thing. There's a proverb that I know: 'Everyone has a piece of the truth' and I added 'and everyone has a piece of the lie'. It's this piece of the lie that comes in charge if you don't deal with it. Sometimes it's like people here are saying 'I'm channeling more of the good than you are!' I don't want good or bad, I want equality. Someone is always going to be a little bit more or a little bit less. All you can do is befriend one another. Get rid of all the subtext of every conversation that tries to establish whose better. Just assume we're both wrong and we're both right. You won't have the ego thing getting in the way of everything. Competition keeps people infantile.

“Okay, I've talked enough, and I see you're tired, so I will leave you with this to think about: your perception becomes your reality. Examine yourself, examine the world, and take the time to fully know what it is you are perceiving, 'cause it's gonna be your whole world. You know, we all live in a different version of the same world. Once you see that, you're free.”

“Because things are the way they are, things will not stay the way they are.”

--Bertolt Brecht

CHAPTER 6

After Jaime left I became so desperate to fill the void where her presence had been that I grasped at any comfort I could manage. The first thing I did was hunt down Wizard and place a small piece of paper in his hand, on it listed two items that I wanted him to retrieve from town: Coca-Cola and Oreos. He unfolded the paper and looked at it, winked and said, “Will do.”

The second way to deal with the loss of Jaime was to drown myself in hammock weaving. Each of the visitors had taken several hours worth of lessons with the head weaver, Shal. Shal was a tall, lanky sixty-something-year-old man who wore tie-dye pants and a headband that kept his braids in place. When I saw him, I imagined he had been captured by someone who had gone back to Woodstock in a time machine, plucked from the mud-covered crowd, and plopped down into the hammock shop at Twin Oaks. When I first came in for a lesson he was just finishing up with another visitor, only to start over the lesson from scratch, again, with me. All the visitors had to learn how to weave hammocks, because it was one area to which they could quickly contribute.

I'd been looking forward to weaving hammocks I was a little resentful that my lesson had been scheduled so late in the game. I had always been an arts and crafts person, good with my hands. Within the first ten minutes of the lesson I couldn't deny that I was having a lot of trouble. I was surprised by my inaptitude, but more surprising was the undaunted patience with which Shal conducted the lesson. Each time I tied the knot incorrectly, once, twice, three times, *every* time, he never showed frustration or disappointment. He would calmly say, “Try that again.” I'd apologize-- for wasting his time, for not getting it quickly-- and he'd tell me to stop apologizing, and that I'd get it eventually.

“Everyone learns differently,” he said. “I just have to figure out how you learn so that I know how to teach it.”

The other primary worker in the hammock shop was Cameron, an old Scotsman who looked like Sean Connery. He, too, exhibited the same kind of Zen-like serenity in the face of hammocks that had to be undone after an hour’s worth of work.

“One bad knot and we have to do it all over again,” he said, smiling genuinely as he took apart my second hammock of the day, looking as if he’d just heard a pleasant anecdote. I realized how much the ways of the outside world had shaped me when it came to supervised labor. I was terrified that I wasn’t working good enough, fast enough, smart enough. Despite knowing that there were no consequences for my mistakes in the hammock shop, the fear of them kept a steady hold in my conscious. The concept that my “boss” understood I was human, that I would learn it in time, almost made me feel as if I was in the midst of some sort of prank for which I would pay a heavy price in the end. But then, nothing.

Sometimes I’d look at Shal, who was so tolerant and serene, and wonder what he’d seen in his lifetime. I felt that he must have trudged through some hard places to get to the place he was at in his head. At times I sensed that he had experienced a lot of pain and suffering in his life, because it seemed like the sky could fall and somehow it still wouldn’t be as bad as the things he’d seen on the outside.

Shal and Cameron were the kind of people I had imagined communes to be full of: open-hearted, easy-going members who were happy with how they had chosen to live their lives. The more time I spent in the hammock shop, the more I had a chance to see varying members of the commune come in to weave, and the different ways in which they acted. I noticed a pattern: the aging members, the ones who had been at Twin Oaks from the

beginning, were the ones who fulfilled my expectations previous to coming to Twin Oaks. It was the younger generation that seemed to poison it all with a bad attitude or the inability to shake off the tensions from their lives spent in outside world. They hadn't been here for twenty, thirty, forty years like Shal and Cameron. They hadn't broken through yet.

Many of the older members felt the same way. They had kept with the old ways, completely eschewing material things and rarely leaving the commune. Shal hadn't left the grounds of Twin Oaks for ten years. When we talked about the changes that were happening at Twin Oaks, he only offered an opinion when it came to hammocks.

"People here forget, this was the first business we had at Twin Oaks. Hammocks used to be the flagship of our little town. Now it's all about the tofu. They're building that damn tofu addition and they don't give a hoot about the hammocks anymore, and that's not right. It's good, honest-to-God work."

Shal went on like this, upset and nervous, knowing that something was happening, but that the younger revolutionaries outnumbered the old fogies who were stuck in their ways. He just wanted to weave hammocks, and as long as the shop remained, he had a reason to be at Twin Oaks.

Shal was right; hammocks had once been the business that kept Twin Oaks afloat, and now it was a mere sideshow business. They had lost their contract with Pier One, which would order tens of thousands of hammocks from them a year. A couple of years back, Pier One told them without warning that they'd had found another provider and would not be needing Twin Oaks' hammocks anymore.

"We found ourselves with a thousand hammocks that had nowhere to go," Cameron recounted. "We were in shock. We'd placed all our eggs in one basket. We almost had to disband."

Now, members wove hammocks to fill small, private orders for individuals and no longer rushed to make hundreds of hammocks to fill stock orders. This had not only wounded Shal and Cameron's pride, but signaled a new era. Twin Oak's eggs were now in another basket: the Tofu Hut. The business's expansion was racing to meet a growing demand for organic Tofu, and it was turning Twin Oaks into a commune of the future-- one that cared about business. The hammock shop was littered with strips different colored ropes and wooden bows, quiet and earthy, while the Tofu Hut shined with brand new metallic machines and automated appliances.

Cameron, the fiery Scot that he was, was more vocal about how he disapproved of the hammock business making a home on the back burner.

"What ever happened to working with our hands, with good, sincere work making crafts?" he said in his fading brogue. "You see them in the office now, making tofu deals, making business deals, making money. These young professionals come here but they can't check it at the door."

Cameron addressed these statements to no one, because no one spent much time in the hammock shop but me. It had become my second home after Jaime. At one point Shal and Cameron had started putting out cookies and soda (big luxuries at Twin Oaks) to entice more workers. They'd come, tie a few knots, and then make off with some cookies the way I'd grab a handful of mints at the door on my way out of a restaurant.

The only one member who showed a love (and a talent) for weaving hammocks was a man named Van Halen, who, from year to year, sometimes decided to be a woman name Calliope.

"Co only works at night," Shal said. "We don't see co much, but every morning I come in and co has put up a bunch of finished products. Van Halen always turns out perfect hammocks. Co's work is flawless."

“Co?” I asked. “I thought he was Van Halen? Did he change his name again?”

Shal laughed and said, “No, no. We use ‘co’ when we don’t want to focus on gender. Instead of saying ‘he’ or ‘his’ or ‘she’ was say ‘co’. It gives more room, you know? There are so many boundaries in gender pronouns.”

I thought it was kind of funny, that a word was meant to take the focus off of gender yet so conspicuously made an issue out of it.

Occasionally Van Halen came in at the tail end of the evening when I was the only one in the shop. He didn’t look at me or say hello, but instead strapped on a massive pair of headphones and started working immediately. He rocked back and forth as he worked, weaving with the beat of the blasting rock and roll.

“Well, good night,” I managed to say to him once on my way out.

“Up Periscope!” he yelled, never looking up at me.

I paused. “W-what?” I asked meekly.

“Up periscope!” he said looking down, pointing to his headphones, “Up Periscope!”

I stood there. Van Halen was still rocking back and forth and yelled, “Up Periscope, from: Sheffield, England. Genre is: Experimental, progressive.”

I smiled awkwardly, and realized something as I walked towards Aurora house, something I knew for certain from my previous work: Van Halen was autistic. He was an autistic adult who identified himself as a man one year and as a woman the next, and had lived under the radar at Twin Oaks for the last five years without incident. It was oddly impressive.

“Now the young people want wireless internet!” Cameron guffawed. “Why don’t they just go make their own commune and put in wireless Internet? We don’t need that rubbish here.”

Cameron liked that I was there to hear these things, that I was learning the history and the culture of Twin Oaks through their eyes. I seemed to be someone who understood how they felt. Shal, quiet as the air, simply loved to listen to me listen to Cameron. Often Cameron went off on other tirades, though they all came back to his dissatisfaction with how things were changing.

“They love technology, sure, when it works for them. Do you know,” said Cameron, as he moved away from the far side of his hammock and closer to me, leaned in and whispered, “that they had a trial hearing here, for me, because of my air conditioner?” Cameron’s weaving sped up as the memory of his trial upset him. He could weave a hammock from start to finish without so much as glancing at it. He could weave when he became a sightless old man, his fingers calloused by years of rope slipping through them.

“What do you mean, a trial?” I asked.

“As you may know, air conditioners are a big no-no here. They eat up electricity and they’re a luxury that not everyone can have. If everyone had an AC we’d be broke. But the summers get very hot here, and you know, it’s much harder for us older people.”

He explained that some of the more aged members were allowed to have ACs in their rooms, but first they had to undergo a lengthy application and approval process from the community. Requirements included a note from a doctor stating that an air conditioner was essential for one’s health, and a unanimous approval to foot the bill for the AC unit. Cameron decided that these policies were ridiculous, and installed an air conditioner on his own. I suppose he had saved his money; like the other old members he didn’t buy things or go places, and so he had had enough to purchase a decent AC.

“One of the new members in the house went and told on me, and there was a hearing and everything. People were furious, mumbling, *Who does Cameron think he is?* People who had been here not even a year saying that about me! *Well*, I’d say to them, *I’ll have you know I built the very house you’re living in.* No one would tell me who had gone to complain about it, but I know who it was.” After the hearing Cameron agreed to submit to the application process, acquired a doctor’s note and got the community’s approval. Two weeks later, after forcibly removing his air conditioner, the members reinstalled it.

Despite all the ways in which the older members disliked the modern adjustments that were creeping into Twin Oaks piecemeal, things like air conditioning were working their way into the lives of old Twin Oakers by default. Along with increasingly sweltering summers came the inability to get around the vast acres of the farm as one aged, and so in the past decade the commune had voted to buy a few golf carts for members who had trouble walking. It was almost comical to hear the humming of the golf carts each meal time, all the white-and-grey haired members rolling down the dirt path out of the woods. They were mostly coming from Nashoba, a house that was still in the process of being built (slowly, now that so many funds had been allocated to the Tofu business) to accommodate the aging population, and would ultimately serve as a hospice (though there was no nurse or doctor in residence). Not until these last few years had Twin Oaks had to face the problem of how to care for elderly members, and it was becoming an expensive concern.

While some of the younger members had jokingly referred to how “behind” the old-timers were, I empathized. If the only way I could care for the elderly of Twin Oaks was to listen to them complain, then I’d happily oblige. After all, this was the generation I had missed out on, the ones I had been hoping to find reincarnated in the younger members. I spent more and more time at the Hammock shop, logging in my labor hours listening to the

Rolling Stones or the Beatles and running the spindle of hemp under, over, under and over, while Cameron talked and Shal listened.

When I finally learned how to weave a hammock without supervision, and the irritation of slow learning passed, I found myself retreating to the hammock shop more and more often to meet labor quota. I liked being around Shal and Cameron, or simply being by myself. There was a wall of CDs from which I could choose to play on the shop's stereo, and for hours I would be lost in thought or on better days, no thought at all. It was like a vacation from myself.

I began to fall into a routine, which made Twin Oaks feel strangely like home. I knew it had been Jaime's departure that forced me to adapt to life at Twin Oaks. With that safety net gone, I was alone, and had to find another way to make the best of it. When Jaime had been around, I had had an ally, a partner in crime with whom I could run away with to our room, away from the challenges of the commune, away from the loudness in our heads, drums beating over and over: *What are you going to do with all this? What are you going to do with all this?*

I'd begin my day by putting on a sweatshirt to keep the chilly morning air from biting, hood slung over my head, hands in my pockets, and I walked the two hundred feet to the dining hall for tea. I walked past the Tofu Hut, the dumpster outside smelling like vicious horse shit. The stench was just soy, the smell of rotting tofu byproduct sitting in a dumpster in the sun, but it was foul. Sometimes the stink woke me up before my alarm when off, Aurora house being downwind of the Tofu Hut. Like everyone else, I got used to it. I could always smell it, but it became less offensive, and at times I noticed if I didn't smell it at all.

One rainy morning, a few of us had gathered by the Today Board in Zhankoye over our mugs of morning tea, no one really talking to each other. In a commune one is constantly surrounded by people, and so the need to be alone in the midst of others becomes the reigning irony. We were like birds on a wire, spaced far enough apart that no one was expected to chirp. It was silent except for the echoed sipping of herbal teas, the shuffling of slippers on tile as we moved from one part of the Today Board to the next like patrons of a museum examining the paintings.

The Today Board was littered with different color index cards, each one with a message scrawled in different handwriting. This was where members announced what was going on—calls for volunteers, notifications of new labor ventures, and open invitations to various social events. It was the kaleidoscope of Twin Oaks culture reduced to a few pieces of paper. “TGIF kombucha nights” were a regular occurrence, where members were encouraged to gather in the barn at five p.m. on Fridays and drink ginger kombucha, made by a new member who was developing her brewing skills. It was this kind of thing that showed some people hadn’t been here long enough to shake off the traditions of the outside world. People still wanted to mark the end of the traditional work week, even though here there was no nine-to-five, no Monday through Friday at Twin Oaks.

One note read, “Debbie is due next week, so make your visits now!” while another read, “A van is headed to the Living Energy farm 8 a.m. tomorrow for those who want to help. We have six seats.” One member had posted a card asking if anyone had seen his sunglasses, and another had decided that she wanted to learn conversational French, and could anyone teach her? I’d heard whispering about posts like that one, members talking amongst themselves saying “what, is she going to leave us, move to France?” Members *did* up and leave with little notice, and so at times any deviation from the usual—or the request for something more—was analyzed for signals of an impending departure.

I had posted an index card on the Today Board the week before, asking if any of the members would grace me with an interview, and had gotten some unexpected responses. No one I had gotten to know in any way had offered to speak with me, perhaps because they felt they had already been interviewed simply by talking to me (I had a lot of questions). The offers were from members who I'd not even seen, and most of them were older. Since some members tended to work on far areas of the farm or were constantly "somewhere else", a communication system was put into place that was like Twin Oaks's version of texting. Members would take a scrap of paper from the pile that sat by the Today Board, and write a note which they then left in a member's mail pocket (a felt slot on a wall that had a pocket assigned to each member). This was handy if a distant relative or friend had called the commune's one main phone line and needed to relay a message to a member, many of whom didn't have cell phones and rarely checked e-mail. After I'd posted a call for interviewees, I made a habit of checking the visitor's message pocket, and I responded to the members who had gotten in touch with me. It went like this back and forth for a couple of days just to arrange and confirm a meeting time and place, particularly for members who didn't check their slots too often.

What saved me from trying to figure out who was who was Twin Oaks' name policy, which commanded that no two members could have the same name. Because of this I was not standing in Zhankoye with a piece of paper wondering, "Which Chris wants to meet?" If someone entered the community and an existing member already had that name, the new member had to decide on a new name. It seemed a harsh rule to swallow, at first, but in times like this made more sense. Like being born (again) and then christened, the new members held naming parties. Leading up to the naming party (there was a two week window to give the namee time to think about a new tag) the new member asked for suggestions, or perhaps have time to earn a nickname based on a memorable event or a

quirky habit. I don't know what exactly went on at these naming parties; so far the term "party" was vastly different at Twin Oaks than in my own experience in the outside world. A "party" at the commune was really just a bunch of people hanging around in a room and talking, sometimes with music playing on an old radio, or someone strumming half-songs on the guitar, sometimes not.

There was no other Jane at the commune (and despite the supposed commonness of the name Jane, I have yet to meet another in my lifetime), but I was given a new name by the other visitors. After the first week I had dropped a few pounds from my small frame. I blamed it on the lack of extra calories as a result of soda deprivation combined with slaving away in the fields. Soon my pants didn't stay up without help, and I took to running rope through my belt loops and tying it off on the side, looking like some sort of raggedy depression-era orphan.

"Hey, Fats, you sure getting fat!" Mischa said one day as I walked up the road to Aurora house. The others laughed, pointing at my rope belt, while I pulled my shirt down over it. From then on, they called me Fats. I imagine it would have caught on beyond the visitor circle, if enough members had bothered to talk to us.

In the afternoons I walked past the today board to make sure my request for interviews hadn't been covered by another person's announcement, something that had commonly caused conflict between members at Twin Oaks. One particular afternoon I was on my way to the kitchen for the dinner shift when Rain was posting an announcement over a call for volunteers' on the Today Board.

"Are you going to Caroline's naming party?" Rain asked the people flitting from card to card.

"Oh, when is it?" said Claire, a middle-aged member who was a dead ringer for Diane West. When she smiled everyone around her must have felt warmer.

“I think at 7. It’s actually on the board,” Rain pointed to a mint green index card hovering over a salmon-colored one.

“Okay, good to know,” Claire said in a way that was absent of any commitment. That’s how it was here. It felt as if everyone was trying to be as nonchalant as possible, as if they were not only practicing non-attachment to things, but to people as well.

Though she was getting a new name, Caroline wasn’t a member. She had just turned seventeen and was spending the summer months interning at Twin Oaks, helping to prepare for the upcoming Intentional Communities Conference and the Womyn’s Gathering. When I first met her she was naked, swimming with some of the children at the pond before dinner. She was Nordic looking, with light blonde hair and light green eyes that couldn’t decide if they were blue or green. I thought she was too young to be here on her own; when I spoke with her there was something very naïve and unsuspecting. When she told me she’d chosen to intern at Twin Oaks because it meant getting out of the house, where her parents were drunk around the clock, I’d realized I’d made assumptions.

“They probably don’t even notice I’m gone,” she said, shrugging.

Rain continued to point at her mint green index card on the board and different members came through. She was in her second year at Twin Oaks, and was one of the younger members who was more vocal about change and what she labeled “efficient innovation”. She was wearing a forties-style dress, stylish enough that it seemed out of place. I’d seen that dress earlier this week on someone else, and I asked her where she’d bought it.

“I didn’t buy this. Please, this probably would have cost a whole month’s allowance,” she said, looking at me as if I’d suggested a kick in the face. “I got it from commie clothes”

Commie clothes were not available to visitors, and none of us knew where the collection was actually located. Somewhere on the grounds was a giant store room of clothes

that anyone could take from and wear as long as it eventually found its way to the common laundry room. None of the skirts I'd seen the men wearing had been a part of their personal wardrobe; even Wizard's bright red tango dress that he had worn to dinner the night before was from commie clothes.

I followed Rain into the kitchen, since I had the dinner shift and assumed she was too. I'd signed up because I felt it was something I could do. I'd been experimenting with cooking nice meals before I'd left for the commune, and was coming into a new appreciation for the culinary arts. While the volume of cooking seemed intimidating, I was told that usually four or five people worked a meal shift, each of them branching off into separate duties like washing, cutting, peeling, and sautéing or laying out the food. I knew how to cook well enough that I felt confident I could be of use, as long as I had some direction-- I'd never cooked for a hundred people and wouldn't have known where to start.

"So, what's on the menu? Where do I start?" I asked Rain.

She looked at me as if I'd said something in another language. "Huh?"

"For dinner. I'm here for the dinner shift," I said as I put on an apron.

"Oh, um...I'm not. I was just grabbing a snack." She walked over to a whiteboard in the corner and ran her finger over what looked like a schedule. "Looks like you're on your own" she said, as if she was telling me it was a nice day outside or something.

"WHAT?" I said louder than I had intended.

I saw my name, alone, on the whiteboard, surrounded by erasure marks from what had surely once been other names. *No one else had signed up for dinner shift.* It was four p.m., and dinner would be served in two hours. I had two hours to figure out where the pots and pans were, what the kitchen fridge had in stock, the various main and side dishes I'd whip up, followed by readying all the burners for the steam table and laying out the food. This might have seem doable - overwhelming, but doable—if there weren't so many dietary

requirements at Twin Oaks. Every meal had to have something that each member in the commune could eat. Some didn't eat garlic, others avoided onions and a large portion abstained from dairy products. Some of the older members needed low sodium dishes while others ate meat (something the vegans had learned to tolerate). Each of the dishes had to be labeled one by one using the wooden blocks that had been labeled with specifications noting which foods were gluten-free or low-cholesterol. This was a fucking nightmare.

Nina left me standing there, the enthusiasm that had come with putting on the apron completely gone. I didn't even know where the spatulas were. I looked at the screen door from which Nina had left, and I heard the birds of late afternoon chirping, the generator from the nearby tofu hut chugging away. I could leave right now, I could go back to Aurora and shove my head under my pillow, telling others I was ill and couldn't cook. It wouldn't have been the first time the members had gone without a meal. Just last week I shuffled into Zhankoye at lunch time, voracious from garden work, to find the hall devoid of a mess line-- and food. Pam was standing there, holding an empty plate and sweating. She had looked at me and said, "Would be nice to have a meal after making sure there's enough food to go around this place!" That's the way it went: if no one volunteered to cook at Twin Oaks, then members scavenged the leftovers or resigned themselves to a dinner of toast and tea.

I stood there wishing Shal or Cameron was there to tell me it was okay if I messed it all up. The first step was that I kept my apron on. I wasn't sure if my motivation came from my aversion to quitting or because I genuinely wanted the members to have a hot dinner to end their day. For whatever reason, I stayed. I figured even if I wasn't serving up something gourmet, the members would be thankful that a visitor had taken on the burden of being the sole chef who had made sure they'd have something to eat.

I poked around. The walk-in refrigerator was bursting with seasonal vegetables. In the dry storage room were giant vats of dried beans, potatoes, vegetable oil, peanut butter made on the grounds, and shelves that housed large glass jars of spices-- a far cry from the tin plastic shakers I'd buy in the grocery store. One hundred mouths were a lot to feed, and I was just starting to grasp the amount of food I'd have to cook. It was not one hundred Janes, who would be happy with a banana and a granola bar; it was a hundred people who had spent the last few hours doing hard, physical labor or who had worked through lunch. They'd be hungry. With all of the luxuries I had enjoyed in the outside world taken away, I had come to appreciate the members who always delivered a good meal, those who could make the healthiest, simplest foods into delicious concoctions. Just last night we'd enjoyed falafel and homemade hummus accompanied by freshly baked pita bread. I had to step it up.

It took me the better part of an hour to find all the cooking utensils I'd need, and in that time various members had come and gone from the kitchen to either fetch a beverage or to ask what was for dinner. I'd answered, "You'll see", with a smile, making sure to avoid an actual answer while at the same time leading them to think it was something amazing. Inside I was screaming, my heart racing, the clock ticking before a hundred people filed into Zhankoye, the clinking of plates and utensils ringing in my ears.

I dumped a ten-pound bag of lentils into a pot full of water, the liquid overflowing to make room for the beans. I had no idea if a ten pound bag was enough or entirely too much, but I put on the burner and hoped for the best. What started as a lentil-soup-by-default thickened into a lentil curry. I reheated leftovers and threw together a salad in a bowl the size of a bicycle. I took two loaves of thick bread from the pantry and decorated it with crushed garlic, butter and dried parmesan, stuck it in the industrial-sized oven and hoped I wouldn't forget about it.

The whole time I was panicking, and I was aware of my panic. I kept saying to myself *what are you so afraid of? Who cares is they have to eat leftovers? This is impossible!* I reminded myself that if I couldn't complete this task it was not my fault, that I would not be punished, and that really I was going out of my way. I realized, as I furiously chopped the carrots for the salad, that sadly, this was what my work ethic had always been based on: fear. In school it had been the fear of failing, the fear of disappointing the teachers I liked, or the fear of being perceived as dumb (or believing myself to be dumb). In the summer jobs I had as a teenager, it was the fear of not having financial independence, or just the fear of being scolded by someone who I didn't know that well. In college it became the fear of having nothing on my resume. When I graduated college and entered the adult world, fear ruled all. Without a job I couldn't pay rent, couldn't eat, couldn't cloth myself. As jobs dwindled but the demand for them grew, I had to keep up with the competition. I found myself doing the jobs of three different people. I was always admonished when something was done under par, but never rewarded when I exceeded expectations.

There I was in the Twin Oaks kitchen, wanting to cry, not because of the onions but because I felt duped, my whole life, duped like a fool, only afraid because I had been directed to feel that way. So many of us are afraid, absolutely terrified. Of what? Losing our jobs, hearing it from our bosses, getting crap for taking a sick day, competing with our co-workers, not being good enough, sinking. We wake up in cold sweats about paying our mortgage, being secure, never once asking ourselves if we are actually okay with the fact that we spend most of our lives at our jobs. The only thing that allowed us to wade through it was the idea that everyone else was going through the same thing. For ten years of my life-- no, more-- I had lived in fear and now that I didn't have to, I reverted back to it. I couldn't help myself; it was as if it was the only way I knew how to live.

It was my first real understanding of the community. No wonder the people here had traded in their lives on the outside for Twin Oaks. Sure, there was fear here, there was social pressure and the possibility of expulsion, but the fact was that it took a lot to be voted out of the community. So many of those small ingredients for panic were absent with this lifestyle; there was no hourly pay deduction if I was five minutes late, no lecture from a boss if I made a mistake. If someone was feeling sick, they wouldn't have to go to work, and nobody thought twice about it. If someone couldn't find work here (which was hard to do), there was no fear of making rent or going hungry or clothing one's children. The fears upon which most of us in the outside world live our everyday lives were alien here, and it would take me my whole visit at Twin Oaks to wrap my mind around that.

Some evenings I laid on one of the ground's hammocks, looking at the sky and taking deep breaths, just trying to allow myself to relax. I had to make a conscious effort to relax, and continually remind myself that as long as I showed up for work I was fine. And if I didn't, chances were I was also fine. It was that simple. I was so thankful for this temporary peace that I found myself slightly resentful of all the members who had passed through and taken it all for granted.

I was going through the phases, the exact phases that the visitor handbook had predicted for us. The back-and-forth of dislike and admiration for this culture was messing with my head, and I no longer knew which group was out of touch with reality: was it them, or was it really me?

For the few minutes before the clock struck six, I believed that I had had some sort of breakthrough. I had been blinded by the outside world, I had played into all the structures built by the powers-that-be only to be molded me into a perfectly loyal little slave who was always afraid. Now I saw, now I got it. The people at Twin Oaks had it figured out, I told myself. Here I thought they were strange and hypocritical, but really it was I who had

been blind; I had not been ready to see. No wonder they had been averse to conversing with such mindless droids as myself. I had not yet had *the* realization. I felt like I did the day after I'd lost my virginity: could anyone see the difference in my face? Would anyone be able to tell I'd been altered?

I began laying out the food on to the steam table, huffing and puffing as I carried vats of food from the kitchen to the meal line. Could I trust myself, then? Was I genuinely feeling this way, or was I being brainwashed? Was I so desperate to understand these people, to adapt to my surroundings, that my mind was forcing itself to believe in things it didn't? Had I been here a day too long?

My thoughts were suddenly interrupted by a loud, booming voice that said, "What IS this?" It was Pam, the same woman who had been so upset a few days ago when there was no lunch to be had. She stood there in front of me with the same empty plate.

"This? This is lentil curry, and here's some brown rice, over there is a—"

She was poking the lentils with her spoon, a disgusted look on her face. "It doesn't look very appetizing."

She put her plate back on the stack of dishes and placed two pieces of bread into the toaster, adding with a sigh, "Toast and tea it is again today." I stayed only long enough to watch my concoction get the same reaction from several other members, at which point I decided to save myself any further grief.

I hung up my apron and groaned. In that moment everything I had convinced myself of in the last hour faded away and I wondered if anyone, anywhere, would ever be happy with anything.

To work out my anger over the reception my efforts had gotten, I found myself in the only place I knew I'd find quiet contentment: the hammock shop. It was eight o'clock at night, and the sun had just set. I didn't have the patience to listen to Dennis talk about

Zombies disguised as CIA agents all night on the porch, or spend an hour in my room killing spiders before bed. I wanted to be alone. I never really knew what the members did at night, only that I could find them nowhere, and especially not at work. As I went to switch on the overhead light, I jumped when I saw someone standing there in the dark. It was Caroline.

“Caroline! You scared me. What are you doing here in the dark?” She had clearly been crying, but was trying to hide it now with a weak attempt at a smile.

“I was hoping people would come to my naming party tonight,” she said meekly.

“Oh, shit, that was tonight wasn’t it?” I said, remembering the note posted on the Today Board.

“Yeah, an hour ago...but I guess no one is coming.” She tucked her hair behind her ear and moved closer to me. In that moment she had stopped trying to be the worldly, older-than-her-years girl that she had tried to be for all of Twin Oaks. She seemed desperate for comfort, for affection, as if I could be the water for the fire of disappointment that raged in her now. “I guess everyone was distracted by dinner time.”

I wanted to shake her by the shoulders and say *you don’t know the half of it*, but instead I said, “I’m sorry, Caroline. I just heard about it a few hours ago, and I had to do dinner by myself, and I got so flustered--“

“It’s okay, nobody really cares anyway.” She tried to chuckle, tried not to let her eyes tear up.

“I’m sure they do,” I lied. Not even Rain had bothered to show up, Caroline’s closest friend here, the very girl who had made the announcement. “Did you decide on a name?” I asked as I set up to weave a hammock.

“Yeah I did!” she brightened. “Lux.”

“Lux. That’s Latin for ‘light’, you know.”

“Is it?” she said “I got it from a movie. In it, Kirsten Dunst played a girl named Lux, and people say I look like her.” She brushed her hair behind her shoulders, as if to suggest I hadn’t gotten a good enough look at her in the first place.

“Yeah, you kinda do,” I said. “You know, Lux...don’t let this stuff bother you. I have a feeling most people around here don’t have a very good memory.” I wanted to say something more, but wasn’t sure what. “You should really finish up this internship before things here get to you.”

She didn’t say anything, but stood there for a while, watching as I completed my first hammock, mistake-free.

“To live is to choose. But to choose well, you must know who you are and what you stand for, where you want to go and why you want to get there.”

-- Kofi Annan

CHAPTER 7

Imagine you are going to die. You will, of course, but imagine it is as near as it is inescapable. This is a story line seen often in books and films: someone is told they have a short time left to live, and starts to reevaluate his or her life. What were once years become only days, days become seconds. The plot is formulaic. The afflicted person tells off his boss, spends his life savings on elaborate trips, gets rid of his meaningless possessions and at the same time, passes down the ones that matter. Suddenly priorities have changed: the sick person will get up early just to see the sun rise one more time, or confess his true feelings to the person he'd long loved from afar, all the while regretful that he didn't live his life like this every day. There is no more fear of rejection. The concerns of yesterday become irrelevant (getting that fiscal report in on time, fretting over the five pounds of holiday weight gain, cursing the world because TiVo didn't record the right show) these things all become oddly hysterical, instead of regular parts of the day.

Standing in a field in the middle of central Virginia, suddenly the items that were on my daily lists have become hysterical. Walking the dog before it pisses on the carpet, blogging, being angry about the woman at Super Cuts who trimmed my bangs crooked (again). These things are not irrelevant because I think I'm going to die. It's because I'm the only person in a crowd of fifty who is not dancing, and I'm the only person with my shirt on. I am the only person here who is not named after an earthly element or a constellation or a concept. I am one of eight visitors-- the outsiders-- to Acorn. Acorn is a commune comprised of twenty people and just down road from Twin Oaks.

Acorn earned a living cultivating and selling seeds, and was currently wrapped up in a lawsuit with agricultural giant Monsanto (the people who brought us Agent Orange and PCBs). The commune boasted organically grown vegetables and sold the seeds generated

from their crops. Lately, though, Monsanto's GMO seeds had flown over on the wings of the wind from neighboring farms, and created hybrids with Acorn's crops. This posed two problems for which Acorn had sued Monsanto. First, Acorn could no longer label their seeds as 100% organic, which had been the big selling point. The larger problem was that Monsanto had altered the seeds' genes to self-destruct after a few days (which prevented anyone from stealing the patented super-food seeds). Monsanto, in turn, sued Acorn for using the GMO seeds without permission. Acorn communards (which is what they called themselves) were confident they'd win the lawsuit, and were relying on their public defender to reign in a multi-billion dollar corporation whose lawyers would surely bury him in red tape.

Acorners wouldn't be the first farmers to lose everything they had to the company-- Monsanto had a record of getting what they wanted. They'd hired "intimidators" to show up at farmers' homes and make some very real threats. Their business practices were recently connected to a growing rate of suicide of farmers in India. Since the introduction of Monsanto's biotech cotton seeds in 2002, one hundred farmers in India had committed suicide (almost all of them by drinking pesticide), which prompted others to label the area "the suicide belt". The Indian farmers were killing themselves over failed Monsanto crops that had left them with an unpayable debt. They had had to borrow large amounts of money in order to buy Monsanto's expensive but "superior" GMO seeds. In response to public outcry and finger-pointing, Monsanto released a statement that dodged blame, saying, "Suicidal behavior occurs in all parts of the world...weather conditions, religious beliefs [and] living conditions...can make suicide rates differ by country (Monsanto)". In other words, if those farmers hadn't been so damn poor and Muslim, perhaps they'd still be alive. Or if only it had stopped raining! It was this kind of outside interference that had led Acorners to want little to do with outsiders (unless it involved dancing).

When we entered the farmhouse living room people were hanging around drinking boxed wine and passing around a newborn turkey. It was still partly naked, its feathers just growing in over its pink-skinned neck. It was passed from person to person, each balancing a cup of wine and the bird in turns. It was still pecking at the air when they put it back in the barn to sleep. They had to retire the bird for the *real* fun; tonight they were having a scarf party.

A man was going around with large garbage bags full of scarves- silk, nylon, cotton, transparent, solid, patterned, plain, new, old, or lacey. He had bought them in bulk from a Good Will in Charlottesville, and at the moment they were the only things covering up some very naked revelers. The members of Acorn, who were people of all ages and walks of life, had just built the frame of a new house, and the floor looked like a makeshift stage in an open field of crops. The field was full of crops that had just been planted at the start of the summer months. Strings of Christmas lights were wrapped around the beams, an aging stereo system was leaning in the corner. By the time the sun had set we could have been anywhere, it was so pitch black. It might as well have been the end of the world. The Christmas lights shed their glow just a few feet around them, and all fifty of the attendees were now dancing in the-almost-house.

“Why aren’t you dancing? C’mon, daaaance,” said a man I’d never seen before. His penis shook as he jived back and forth, held his arms out and moved them in a wavy motion. He came closer, took my hand and went to lead me on to the dance floor, turning so that his flat white butt led me closer to the group. I pulled away, back.

“No, I’m fine. I just really don’t want to.” He turned around, a very confused look on his face, but not angry. “Really, I’m having fun.” I kept going, “I just want to...hang out.”

He shrugged his shoulders and laughed a little, "Suit yourself," he said, dancing away from me.

I needed a beer, a joint, anything to take the edge off the ocean of conspicuousness that I was drowning in. There was nothing here: no drugs, no alcohol-- just saggy body parts and unsightly hair in intimate crevices, women with moustaches and the men (and women) who kissed them. There were all these out-there, on-the-edge people, but no mind-altering substances.

I'd never had trouble getting booze when the occasion called for it. I once smuggled beer back to my hostel in some balled up newspaper in Aswan, a dry city in Egypt. The men who'd sold it to me at an inflated price had been sitting in a dark restaurant, just drinking, so that when the cops drove by there was no reason to enter and search for sinners (Islamic law forbade the consumption of alcohol). I'd bought cocaine in Thailand, the white powder stuffed inside a pack of cigarettes; I'd gotten a rush from purchasing drugs in a country where possession was death. I had never felt so free to break the rules as I had then. But that was then, before I had been tamed by the world's realities. Now I was in a place with no rules, yet I was trapped by my own.

It was because that naked man who'd asked me to dance had laughed at me (and not me at him) that I fell even deeper into this feeling of immobility. Everyone was having fun, each person dancing his or her own way, everyone moving in different motions to the same tune....without beer! Without tequila! I'd never been able to dance without being drunk. I blame it on a lot of things (I'm too white to have rhythm, I hate this song, dancing is just not for me) but I never had to work very hard at an excuse because it never mattered like it did tonight. There was nothing to do but let loose and dance.

A woman who had gigantic breasts that had trouble staying in one place came up to me. Her nipples were a color I didn't know nipples could be, a sort of purple-brown. Maybe

it was the Christmas lights. She was large, the folds of her fat nestled one atop the other, a long scarf tied around her nude midsection as if to bring attention to her shape.

“Don’t you wanna dance? It’s fun!” she said in a sing-song voice, raising her arms and spinning in a circle, the scarf struggling to hold on. “Come dance!” Some sort of techno was playing. She took my wrist and began to lead me to the center of the floor. I was looking at myself more than anyone else was looking at me, but I couldn’t let go of my stiffness. My mind and heart couldn’t relent. What was it that I was holding on to? Why did every particle of my being refuse to give up? Why couldn’t I just *dance*? Dancing is just movement the body at random or with a beat, like walking (it didn’t seem to matter here). How was it that I was clothed, but the vulnerable one?

Then again, the relentless insistence that I dance seemed hypocritical. If everyone was encouraged to do as they wish, to bask in their personal freedom, then why was I being hounded to dance? Why couldn’t I just be the woman that didn’t want to dance, and was fine enough in the corner, watching it all happen? They pushed me because I wasn’t having fun, and they could see it. If I couldn’t find the fun, then I was doing something wrong. I wasn’t having fun because I was being pressured to be something I wasn’t; I wasn’t a naked boogier.

The woman didn’t stop dancing as she pulled me through the smaller cliques of shufflers, dippers and grinders. I couldn’t allow myself to be sucked further into this jungle of pulsating skin. I suddenly felt like a small animal that had stumbled into a lion’s den. I pretended to laugh lightly, as if I were chuckling along with a joke someone had just told, and said “I’m good, just enjoying the view, watching people dance,” I said, “Really.” I smiled back at this woman I didn’t know. I appreciated that she had tried; most of them had ignored me when they realized I was not a “communard”. She didn’t smile but shook her head and left me where she had drug me, alone in a sea of people.

I came here because I thought it would be a good idea, a chance to do something different. It was only my second night at Twin Oaks, which was long enough to feel the shock of such a lifestyle change set in, but not long enough to realize how much of an effect it could have on my programmed psyche. I heard “dance party” and I thought *I can do that, I can do a party*. Some Twin Oakers had carpooled to Acorn after hearing a rumor that their sister commune had built a gargantuan soccer ball out of bamboo (this is thrilling stuff when one lives in the middle of nowhere). I hitched a ride with Jayson, Mischa and Jaime, whom I had known for no more than a moment in time, and hoped for the best. I was no way in hell prepared for the worst. It’s one thing to imagine a scenario, and another to be in the midst of it.

An empty field with a pile of broken bamboo revealed that the Acorners had failed in their attempt to build the giant ball (it was later to be used for a bonfire). The other visitors were all on the dance floor, not entirely naked, but getting there. We visitors hadn’t been changed by commune life yet, because we still knew we’d return to our lives outside. It was only days ago that we outsiders were kicking and cursing at the washing machine, or making a deposit at the bank. No one from that life could see us now. The visitors all danced as if their time to truly live would end the moment the sun came up, or the moment they had to repack their bags and head home to their obligations in the outside world. They twisted and turned like people who didn’t care about looking good. Nobody here was asking very much.

I thought about running out into the dark as I tried to remember on which patch of grass Jayson had parked. I thought about slinking down the side of the car, falling asleep until they came back to drive “home”, my excuse: jet lag was killing me. Over and over again in my head I invented new excuses, entertained various escape scenarios, though I never went through with them. It wasn’t jet lag that was making my life hard; *I was*

making my life hard. They were naked and jumping around, I was clothed and just standing there. The hour dragged; I spent each second trying to look busy, walking around or examining my shoes.

I had come here expecting everyone to be crazy, but by the end of the night I realized it was my own neuroticism that had gotten in the way of immersing myself into something different, and getting a full experience of the thing. I would likely never get another chance to attend a naked-scarf, almost-house party in the middle of a field of soon-to-be cornstalks. I didn't know if I regretted it or not, only that I didn't understand why I could not explain myself to...myself. Here I was, in a place I had voluntarily come to, in a situation I had chosen to be in, and instead of letting go and embracing it I was planning a James Bond-esque escape to the car in my head. What did I care? I'd never have to see these people again in my life if I didn't want to.

My mind felt like an hourglass full of sand that had just been turned upside down. Nobody here shared the same worries I did. They no longer suffered from the petty insecurities that had been carved into the darkest corners of my being. There was no such thing as Thank-God-It's-Friday, or crash dieting, or first impression handshakes. However much I wanted to, I couldn't see the world like they did. They had once been like me, susceptible to rotten moods at having missed the bus, or easily excited about some crappy romantic comedy coming to a theatre near you.

I tried to keep an objective perspective (which sounds like an oxymoron, to me). I was not the loser and they the winners; it was simply a paradigm shift. Communards were not flawless or necessarily better. This kind of life came with its own complications. I'd seen the graveyard of suicides at Twin Oaks, where none of the eternally-rested lived past their mid-twenties. I had been escorted there just earlier that day, where I saw graves decorated with mosaics, hundreds of pieces of glass from broken bottles artistically assembled.

“It’s one way to recycle,” said Moonbeam, a six-year resident with the community, a woman not much older than those we stood over. When I looked at her in horror, she put her hands on her hips and said, “Well, the person underground is being recycled right now, if you think about it.”

She said *what do they have to worry about*, whether there’s glass or shit on their graves, or if they have graves at all. They’re dead.

“So free, they couldn’t be,” Moonbeam said as if she were reciting lyrics from a children’s poem.

I asked her why so many people had committed suicide at Twin Oaks-- there were a disturbing number of graves. The commune had lost a few people this way over the last couple of years.

“People come here from the outside world, looking for answers to their problems.” Moon walked from marker to marker, half-examining the spots but mostly lost in a daydream. One man had asked that his burial spot stay unmarked, buried between two trees with a hammock hanging over it. That was his grave.

“When people don’t have the usual things to worry about, everything gets turned upside-down. You guys on the outside, you use up so much of your thought space with things like how you’re going to pay your rent, if your boss will promote you, your cell phone plan, rules and more rules, all that. When it’s taken away, some people, they just don’t know what to do with themselves. All of a sudden, all these issues that you’ve been too busy to deal with come flooding in. You have to deal with the real shit because the stupid shit just stops being important. Entirely.”

She stops at one grave in particular and lingers. “Some people, when they realize they can choose anything they want, they choose wrong.”

It was like not wanting to dance, so to speak. If people were truly free, they could choose whatever they wanted. With a theory like that, how could suicide be wrong? Hadn't they chosen what they wanted?

"I think they chose wrong because... it's the only choice that takes away any chance of ever having a choice again." Her words stayed with me for hours after that. I'd had a suicide in the family. When I was ten my Aunt Lucy committed suicide; she'd overdosed on her anti-depressants. My grandmother had tried to convince the priest that Lucy didn't mean to do it, that she just accidentally took too much medicine. This way they'd be allowed to bury her in a Catholic graveyard. My grandmother visited the priest every day for a week, petitioning for my Aunt Lucy's innocence, asserting that the girl simply hadn't been paying attention to the dosages. *Two bottles is not an accident*, the priest had insisted. After her death, my father made a point of including Aunt Lucy's soul into our nighttime prayers. He never said it then, in the dark of my childhood room, what he thought, what we'd been taught: *everyone knows that suicides go to hell*.

Twin Oaks tried to weed out those who might make that one wrong choice by conducting a grueling interview process for all prospective members. It was used as a tool to determine how someone might respond when faced with an alternative lifestyle. Deeply personal questions about childhood experiences, private urges, and a history of mental health are a few that run the interview gamut, along with a mandatory submission of a personal exit letter explaining why they want to live at Twin Oaks. Among the barrage of questions were "Have you ever owned a gun?" and "Have you ever thought of killing somebody?" A member had to wait at least one month before applying to Twin Oaks after the visitor period, to force them to think about their decision. Twin Oaks wanted their world to be life-changing, not life-ending.

Some visitors didn't even make it that far; the summer trial alone was enough to send them fleeing for the hills like chickens with their heads cut off. A member named Zane had told me about one visitor who had literally run out in the middle of his third night at Twin Oaks. Zane was the last sort of person I ever expected to see in this place: he was from southern Missouri, pushing sixty and dressed like a Hell's Angel in leather pants and a bandana. He smoked like a chimney and walked and talked like a man who might have done time. But he had been here for almost fifteen years, and rarely found a reason to leave the grounds.

"Yeah, so a few years ago there was a visitor who didn't make it halfway through the first week," he said. "Some of 'em drop like flies."

The visitor had climbed out of his guest bedroom window in the middle of the night, throwing his duffle bag out ahead of him, and ran. The other visitors awoke to the sound of sneakers hitting gravel at a hurried pace. By the time they had gathered out on the front porch, all there was to see was a dissipating cloud of stirred dust, or so the story goes. He hadn't come by car-- Wizard had picked him up from town (naturally upon hearing this, I wonder if the visitor in question had endured the same monologue). No one ever knew how he got out of Louisa County; there wasn't so much as a gas station for miles. Louisa was a place where people shot and barbequed a squirrel because the next 7-11 was about thirty minutes away (other pastimes included cow tipping and meth lab construction).

After he'd seen that visitor group to Aurora, Wizard had told the other members, "This kid won't last. He didn't even like my butt sex story." Question answered.

"The funny thing is," said Zane, resting his spurred boots on a pile of fire wood outside the visitor house, like some sort of displaced John Wayne, "Y'all are free to leave at anytime. We ain't gon' nail you to no tree. That's your choice. You don't like it, then don't stay, no need to sneak. That there's freedom."

While he was right-- we were free to leave at any time-- perhaps that visitor had left so stealthily because the person he didn't want face the most was himself. It's no easy feat to admit when there is something we cannot do, and even harder when we know, deep down, it's because we didn't try hard enough. I told Zane that maybe the guy had been embarrassed, that by choosing to come here and then leaving early he'd broken a promise to the community and to himself.

"Ain't no promises here. That's an *outside* thing. You do what you wanna do and you don't do what you don't wanna do." He took his cigarette from his mouth, inspected it and then threw it on to the damp tree stump a few feet away. A real nature lover.

"I don't know, Zane, that's not an entirely sound concept. Thinking that like can hurt people. It's scary, not worrying about consequences, living like there's no tomorrow."

He looked out at the road in front of us, the very road that the midnight escape artist had taken to. I thought about my own plan the night before, when I had wanted to hide in the dark by the beat up Ford, waiting for the nudity and the dancing to stop so I could return to something just a degree more doable.

"Heck! You'd think people that come here are just begging to find a reason to let go of their shackles. They want freedom, and when they get it..." He chuckled and shook his head. "Some people simply can't handle being that free. Some people, they just climb out windows, and run for their damn lives."

People should be very free with sex. They should draw the line at goats.
---Elton John

Chapter 8

The day before I saw Claire with Roberto, holding hands and cuddling, but today I see her with Mardoch (a man half her age), doing the exact same thing. It was hard to figure out who was with whom at Twin Oaks, but it might have been safe to assume that everyone was with everyone.

I shrugged off my initial confusion; polyamory was, after all, the one aspect of commune culture I had expected to see. They'd thrown me a curve ball on everything else, but free love was not one of them. It was kind of liberating to watch, the way a woman could do whatever she wanted here without the judgment of the world. I think of how she'd be regarded if this *were* the outside: slut, whore, a "cougar" to Mardoch but a "trophy girlfriend" to Roberto. But here it's different; anything goes and no one minds much. Sure, it's weird when orgies are dropped into a conversation as casually as *what's for dinner?* I supposed that if I acted like it was no big deal then eventually I genuinely feel that way.

The more I thought about it, the more I realized that if this were the outside world, it would most probably be the women who would roll their eyes and use these labels, not the men. At least, this has always been my experience. I couldn't figure out why women did this to each other. Was it that they had subconsciously adopted the white, Christian male agenda that was so loud in this country? Was it jealousy, sprung from a primal sense of competition?

Sexuality, in particular women's sexuality, was on the table and out in the open at Twin Oaks. The unisex bathroom (as they all were) in the dining hall had a giant collective menstrual calendar pasted to the wall, an alternative kind of bathroom reading. Drawn lightly in pencil behind the months was a diagram of fallopian tubes and the uterus. On top of that each female in the commune had recorded their expected dates throughout the year,

peppered with some erasure marks from corrections. I wondered how many of the men had referenced this calendar to see which women to pursue at what times. Sex was everywhere; the guest house was fully stocked with (expired) condoms and lube. It was a part of life and it made no sense at Twin Oaks to treat it as a delicate subject.

As a married woman, I was sort of relieved to be exempt from scrutiny when it came to free love. In that vein (or should I say vain), here's how much of a city girl I am: I brought lipstick. *Lipstick*. It never occurred to me that it wouldn't be of much use when pulling weeds or boxing tofu. Had I used it for anything other than marking a trail I would have stood out like a sore thumb; the women at Twin Oaks didn't try to make themselves beautiful—they presented themselves as is. There were no push-up bras, no hairspray, no crash diets or anti-wrinkle creams. It was like being in the locker room of my local YMCA: so, I'd think, this is what women really look like. I'd often look at myself and immediately start finding flaws, picking out the areas where I wasn't good enough, and then for the finale, all the ways in which I could cover it up. There was none of that at Twin Oaks. What you saw was what you got.

One evening outside Aurora house I came upon some of the male visitors who had found a deck of vintage playing cards in a bureau drawer. They were in the middle of a heated poker game. I picked up the cards and examined them; they were pin up girls from the 1940s and 50's. By today's standards, they were chubby-- or curvy, as one might politely say these days (That's another thing! Turning the word "curvy" into a word with negative connotations, the polite nomenclature for a bigger woman, taking the very *nature* of us and deeming it flawed). I asked the guys what they thought of the women on the cards, in particular that blond on the ace of spades or the redhead who was plastered on the nine of hearts.

"I can barely concentrate on this game, that's what I think," said Jayson.

“So...you think they’re nice?” I inquired. “I mean, you like their bodies? Cause look, their boobs are kind of droopy...this one’s hips are kind of big.” I was doing it! I was doing what all women do! I was doing what I did to myself, everyday!

“What?” Jayson said, laughing a little “That’s what boobs look like. And big hips are nice.”

I couldn’t grasp it. I thought maybe he was just trying to be nice. “So, you like them?”

“Yes, I like them! They’re natural. It’s better than some stone-hard set of tits that I’d be too nervous to squeeze on account of some saline bags.” He went back to playing.

I looked at each card, and I had that thought again: so *this* is what women really look like. At thirty, I had started seeing the birth of wrinkles on my face, noticed the way in which my body was ever- so-slightly beginning to change, and I panicked every time I looked in the mirror. It wasn’t just that this was a reminder of my mortality, or the idea that death was closer than it was last year. It’s that I was afraid, deep down, that I was losing my value in society. It wasn’t until the last few years that the MILF was invented, and I don’t think I could use a more appropriate term. Women who were married, who had children, women who had smile lines—they had a semi-retired sexuality, or at least that’s what society seemed to dictate. From the beginning of time a woman’s attractiveness has been a currency, and while I despised it I had also played into it, as did most of the women I knew. With that came a two-layered shame: the shame of feeling shame in the first place.

Holding that stack of cards, I realized I’d been so brainwashed by media images of women that I had never really known how “we” looked when airbrushing wasn’t in the picture (literally). I remember reading that Marilyn Monroe, one of the sexiest women of all time, would be considered a plus-size woman today. By all means she would be banished from catwalks and advertisements (save the ones about losing weight, which are almost

always exclusively targeted towards women). The (ever-changing) look of the modern iconic woman has become harder and harder to achieve, yet women are still chasing it. We see the image repeatedly until we believe them, and then human nature comes into play: who doesn't want to be beautiful to someone, in some way? And what is preventing us from being beautiful to ourselves, first and foremost?

Anyone who tried to beautify themselves unnaturally would have stuck out like a sore thumb at Twin Oaks, the same way each of them would have been conspicuous in the outside world—hairy legs, braless, pale-lipped. Kat Kinkade claimed that women at the commune had a much better rapport with each other than they did in the outside world because they didn't cater to society's idea of beauty. She wrote, "We do not wear makeup or keep up with the latest 'fashions'. So-called standards of beauty are ignored. Because there is no sense of competition based on looks, we know that we are all beautiful (Kinkad, collected leaves)". Kat believed it was this kind of liberation that allowed the antagonism between women to crumble. It extended to men, too, who no longer felt they had to beat their chests in shows of machismo. "The men feel no pressure to live up to an artificial image of 'virility'; the women know that we are 'feminine' whether embroidering a shirt or stringing barbed wire fence," she added. In other words, Twin Oakers boasted no hidden agenda; if they felt like having sex with someone, they did. But was it really that uncomplicated?

Of course not. It was Twin Oaks, which meant that one double-standard was just replaced with another. For one, I'd gotten a lot of flack about being married since I'd arrived. *I was the freak, I was the confused one.* They saw my choice to marry the same way I saw their choice to sleep with anyone and everyone: confused, unable to really grasp the idea of it, but conjuring as much respect as one could for such an alien lifestyle.

Paxus, a middle-aged man whose attractiveness lay in his personality and not his looks, had interrogated me about my marriage. He flirted with me in the meantime, as if to see if I could pass some sort of test (he had slept with a majority of the women at the commune, which gave him good reason to believe his prowess to be undeniable). He asked why I felt that creatures as complex as human beings could be with one person for the rest of their lives, saying, “No one can predict the future, you don’t know who you’ll be in twenty years. No one can say it’s definitely going to be *this way* or *that way* for the rest of one’s life. That’s half the fun!” I agreed and said I had the very same idea, just as a married woman. The more I defended my choice, the more aggressive he got with his theories and added, “People who get married are just afraid of being alone.” I responded that it would be easy to see the same thing about someone who was juggling a bunch of lovers. The funny thing, I thought without saying, is that I knew deep down inside that my real fear was of not getting *enough* time alone.

Paxus’ life partner of twenty years (who I couldn’t help but see as his number one concubine) was a woman named Divina. While they were each other’s “home base” they had an open relationship. Paxus had a handful of other lovers, some more established and some mere flings, some at the commune and some scattered throughout the globe (he had spent some years in his youth hitchhiking by sea, working his way from port to port). He and Divina had two children together who were old enough to know what was going on. It was all they had ever known, and so they didn’t show any surprise at seeing their parents with other people. I picked up on this when I’d gone to the hammock shop to do some weaving one evening, and Paxus’ seven-year-old son Luke was there, playing with a spool of rope.

“Where’s your dad?” I asked.

“He went on a trip with his traveling girlfriend,” he responded matter-of-factly.

When Divina showed up to lunch the next day holding the hands of two men and taking turns kissing each of them, Luke didn't even blink. I tried not to either.

I'd often compare how they did things in the commune to how things were done in the outside world. It no longer became a question of who was wrong and who was right, but which way was best for what sort of people. I'd spent enough time in the world to know that one way of life was not the best way for every single person walking the earth. The question in my mind was, is there a way that was best for the majority? As a nation we're still wondering if, when and how to teach our kids sex ed. Adult relationships were a million times more complicated than that.

Sex was a non-issue during my childhood. This is a ridiculous statement because sex is always an issue-- the average male thinks about sex something like fifty to a hundred times a day. Sex can never be a non-issue, we're wired for it. It ensures the propagation of our kind. During my childhood it was a non-issue in an Irish-Catholic sort of way. This meant that it was never discussed, and when it was referred to (in the vaguest terms) what followed was the declaration that it was something to be saved for marriage. This made it seem tainted, like a necessary evil. Needless to say, I never got *the talk*. One day in junior high I came home to my room to see a book on my pillow titled *What's Happening To My Body?* When I asked my parents about the origins of the book, they said that they had no idea what I was talking about. Hm.

And where did that leave me? Embarrassed to be a woman, for starters. Too shy to say anything, when I needed my first bra I "borrowed" one from a friend. After dating my first boyfriend for a year at the age of seventeen (the exact age at which the average U.S. female loses her virginity) I made the decision to sleep with him. The guilt I felt was overwhelming. I felt like I had betrayed God, or my parents, the world. I had no one to go to for guidance, out of fear of getting in trouble. The responsibility that came with sex (like the

acquisition of birth control), was hard to muster when it was supposed to be a secret. I remember sitting at a Planned Parenthood in Brooklyn after school, wearing my Catholic school uniform, waiting for an exam so I could get the pill. Outside the building there was a protest going on. *Baby killers!* I heard them shout. I hung my head; I had crossed over to the dark side, I was lost to God (here I see Paxus had a point about not knowing who we'll be twenty years from now; now I'm an agnostic with potential to graduate to full-blown atheism).

I wonder, seeing Luke watch his parents or seeing Claire flit from man to man in lustful bliss, would things have been different if someone had just talked to me about sex? What would my choices have been if someone had spelled it all out for me, let me know it was a way of life for almost every person that ever spent time on this earth, and given me the room to decide what to do with all that information?

I was not looking down on the idea of polyamory. I had to remind myself on occasion that experiencing culture shock was not synonymous with negative judgment. After all, I had gone to a college where most people could find common ground when it came to whom they'd slept with. In college it seemed like everyone had been with everyone, just like Twin Oaks except with less tofu.

Going from my childhood to the college was a jump from one end of the spectrum to the other, so it's not surprising that I had had a lot of trouble with the idea of marriage before I met my husband. It wasn't that I felt it was a faulty institution, but because people were fickle and life was fickle. I watched my parents' marriage fall apart, my friends' parents' marriages fall apart. I am of the fifty-per cent divorce rate generation. When I taught high school English, it became common practice to hold two parent-teacher meetings per child; I'd see the mother of a student separately from the father because a lot of them couldn't be in the same room for more than five minutes.

What I saw behind the petty arguments were broken hearts. I saw how broken a heart could change the course of someone's life forever. The idea of marriage had scared me because it meant handing over my whole heart in to someone with the knowledge that that someone might let me down (as is so natural to humans, we don't consider that it might be *us* who do the letting down). A heart, if broken badly enough, may be a trauma from which one never fully recovers. Even now my father eats his cold sandwiches for dinner alone, never takes communion anymore, and looks away when he sees old couples walking down the street hand-in-hand. *Damn the heart*, I could hear him say, *it's not worth the gamble*. Where was the gamble in polyamory? All it seemed to take was a sort of learned nonchalance.

At first glance it seemed like Twin Oaks was a place where everyone was floating somewhere between multiple lovers or committed monogamy, but really it was a musical chairs of couples. Everyone paired up quickly and no one wanted to be the odd one out. There were jealousies, for sure, when a lover saw other people. The (temporary) solution was to force oneself into accepting it, until the intimacy grew so strong that the person either chose monogamy or ended it. Sexuality is complicated, though, not just for the individual but for the society as a whole. Skinner could take away all the material possessions in the world, but he couldn't have stopped the envy that comes from a pretty face or a nice pair of breasts. Even in the absence of cosmetic upholstery, people competed with one another. I seemed to see, as an outsider, what those on the inside could not see for themselves: envious looks flew across dinner tables, women and men strategizing how to keep the other laced into every action and every thought.

Couples grew close quickly because they had to live together from the start. From day one of dating they ate meals in the same place, worked on the same farm, attended the same social events and some even lived in the same house. It was like launching into a

serious relationship by default, sometimes without so much as knowing your other half's last name.

In the musical chairs of couples, those who didn't manage to grab a seat before the music stopped found themselves alone for long periods of time. Wizard, for one, would often say he'd accepted that he'd be single forever; there were no men there that liked him the way he liked them. New members who were gay (and to my surprise, the vast majority of Twin Oakers were straight) weren't young enough, or cute enough, or gay enough.

"I'm meant to be alone in this life," Wizard once said, teasing his salt-and-pepper afro with a comb while staring at the sky, lounging on a hammock. "But that's just how it is. I'm a loved person. A lot of people love me. Just not the way I want them to."

Visitors were like a sexual breath of fresh air to members. None of the members wanted to get to know a member unless they were somehow *achievable*. Mischa and I both had spouses, while Dennis and Brian were too disliked to be considered partner material. Wizard pursued Jayson (no matter that you could divide his age with Jayson's by three) for a couple of weeks, stopping by Aurora house after having drawn up Jayson's astrological chart.

"Look here. It says you're *sensual*," Wizard read, smiling at Jayson. Jayson was not into it. Wizard didn't care.

Different male members expressed their interest in Jaime, but it was done covertly. The secrecy was due to a policy about member-visitor involvement.

"We can't tell anyone what to do, but when it comes to whether or not to accept you as a member, that *will* affect our decision," Ian had said multiple times throughout our stay. The reason for that, he explained, was because they'd had too many instances where visitors applied for membership based on a hot romance they'd had with a member during their trial stay. When those relationships fell apart, the one with the broken heart would

leave the commune, unable to stick around and watch their former find happiness with other people-- a few of them.

“The available pool of sexual partners at Twin Oaks is small, and so some members have been looking to start a new romance for many years. It’s hard, seeing new--especially young and attractive—people,” Ian had explained to me. “It’s even harder when a new member gets all the romantic attention they themselves can’t seem to get. It pushes buttons here.”

Actively pursuing a visitor, particularly when the feeling was not returned, was called wolfing-- and it happened often (a perfect example of rules that are made but never followed because of a lack of consequence). Just two summers ago a visitor had left half-way through her stay because a member (who had decided to stop taking medication for his bipolar disorder) had “wolfed” her so badly that she no longer felt comfortable staying at the commune.

Whether it was unsuccessful wolfing or secret jealousies, broken hearts were not reserved for the failed marriages of mainstream culture. There were a lot of stories. Tigger, who tended the ornamental flowers garden, had been at the commune for over fifteen years. He was from Scotland and still had enough of an accent that it was easy to place him. He wore wire-rimmed glasses, always looks disheveled, and mostly kept to himself except at mealtimes. When I’d pass him in the garden, he’d always looked enamored by his daffodils and sunflowers. Paxus told me it was a broken heart had led Tigger to Twin Oaks, and it was his broken heart that kept him there.

“He’d been with this girl back in Scotland when he just a ‘young lad’, I guess you’d say. Anyway for one reason or another it didn’t work out, and she moved to the U.S. and ended up here at Twin Oaks. She met a guy-- he’s not here anymore-- but they had a kid together. After a couple of years things fizzled between her and the guy. He took off. She

kept thinking about Tigger. She got in contact with him, and he confessed he'd been thinking of her for years as well, so she suggested he come out here and they try again. Tigger flew out and when they saw each other again, it was like no time had passed. They floated around the commune like two teenagers in love, and after only a few months they got married." This is where Paxus rolled his eyes.

"That's cute," I said, wondering why he would tell a story that might disprove his own ideas. "Is she here?"

"Kind of. About a month after they got married, she found out she had end-stage breast cancer. She died six months later." He said it with almost no feeling; maybe he had told this story too many times. Even still, this was a woman he had lived and worked with. Like sex, maybe Paxus accepted death as just as much a part of everyday life. He jerked his head in a sideways direction, pointing somewhere outside. "She's buried out in the graveyard by the cow fields, if you want to go see her. Her name's Madeline."

Tigger had stayed all these years to raise his wife's son as his own. After hearing that story, I tried not to stare at him, this mysterious and solemn Scotsman with a name like Tigger. I romanticized him; I turned him into a quixotic, suffering hero, a bastion of the broken heart, a walking memorial to Madeline, a silent man thwarted by life's cruel twists of fate. Some evenings I watched him water the lilies as I fed the chickens in the coop across the dirt road. I never went to see Madeline.

My idea of Tigger- the Tigger I had created in my mind, based on one story- was shattered when I heard other stories from some of the women in the commune.

"That Tigger is a bastard," said Angie, a woman who was both Paxus' *and* Divina's lover. "What grown man names himself Tigger?" she threw in.

"He seems like a nice guy. Keeps to himself," I said.

“Oh, you must have heard about Madeline. Yeah, after she died and new members came in, Tigger used that story to get as much pussy as he could. He would cry and break down and talk about how he’d never be the same again, all while hopping from bed to bed. Then he’d get into relationships and he’d cheat on the women, one after the other. He’s a cheater.”

Angie clarified something about polyamory for me. It consists of having several lovers at any given time, but with the mutual understanding and consent of all parties involved. Any relationship is a contract, social or legal. If you give one impression and then act otherwise, you have broken that contract. Tigger wrote the fine print really, *really* fine.

“He doesn’t respect women. Stay away from him,” Angie warned. My immediate reaction, aside from the fact that I was married, was that Tigger was twice my age. Staying away from his bed wasn’t a problem. I guess Angie still felt she had to warn me, because marriage and age were irrelevant things at Twin Oaks. The few married couples who had come into Twin Oaks had not lasted, and age was really just a number to be ignored. The only real restriction was the “understanding” that a member not engage sexually with someone who was not eighteen, though as long as the member was sixteen the “understanding” went unmonitored.

Angie was an interesting woman who tended to dress in dark colors and had scars on her forearm from what had obviously been a foray into self-mutilation. She was easily six feet and a rounder woman than most (should I say ‘curvy’?), which I couldn’t figure out considering the strict vegan diet at a commune totally devoid of junk food. Angie had a lot of pull at the commune because she was the lover of Paxus and Divina, two long-time members who had helped build up Twin Oaks into what it was today. She had recently encountered some resistance from a few of the older members who didn’t like the BDSM workshop she was offering at this year’s Womyn’s Gathering. The “WG” was an annual

retreat hosted by Twin Oaks for any woman that wanted to feel empowered (if only for a week) in the company of a hundred other women.

“BDSM is not a bad thing.” She covered up the neat, white scars on her forearm—I think she’d caught me looking, “It’s simultaneously about control and the loss of control. Pain control.”

She pulled a piece of paper out of a folder she had been carrying.

“Look,” she said, holding up the flyer and pointing to the pink “W.” “It looks like a vagina. Isn’t that cool?” I asked her why she spelled it w-o-m-y-n. “Some modern day feminists prefer to spell ‘women’ as ‘womyn’, to remove the male aspect of ‘men’ from the word,” Angie lectured. “The epistemology of ‘woman’ actually comes from the Old English ‘wifman’, meaning ‘female human’. It’s weird I guess, ‘cause ‘female’ still has ‘male’ in it.”

“F-E-M-A-I-L?” I tried. She pretended not to hear me.

“Some feminist writers have used other variations, like ‘wimmin’ and ‘wom!n,’ but you get the point” she said, not checking my face to see if I did.

The annual Womyn’s Gathering, organized exclusively by Twin Oaks, offered workshops, guided group meditations, and recreational activities (like rolling around in the Fem Mud Pit) all available for a “suggested donation” of \$100. Women (or wom!n) stood naked in circles, chanting *we love our bodies*-- and there was a picture album from prior years to show for it. Scattered around the chanting circles were mud-covered children, boys and girls, doing their own thing and not at all phased by the eye-level ambushes of pubic hair. This year was the first year a web page was created for the Womyn’s Gathering, and the link to the BDSM workshop was placed on Twin Oaks’s homepage. This sparked outrage from some of the members who felt it would invite the wrong kind of people and stigmatize the commune.

After digging up some of the council's notes (open to all visitors) on the meeting's minutes earlier that year, I read over the scribbled notes about the BDSM issue.

"Cameron feels like BDSM is not liberating because nothing is 100% voluntary; those who have previously been in abusive relationships might feel predisposed to participate because of their experiences with sexual violence, subconscious issues, etc." I also read that when it came down to a vote, an eighty-year-old commune member, Piper, was very vocal in her support of the BDSM workshop and added, "I love being perverted! I had some fun in *my* day with that stuff." These were actual meeting minutes. In the final meeting (there were many on this debate), the notes read, "It is the opinion of the council that BDSM does not constitute violence or abuse as defined by our bylaws. It is acknowledged as a grey area about which people have widely varying opinions and strong feelings. In this particular case, the BDSM workshop will remain at the Womyn's Gathering, and no further action will be taken." In the end, the compromise was that while Angie could host the workshop, the link was to be removed from the Twin Oaks' website because "creepy and unsavory" people had inquired about it after a Google search.

The Womyn's Gathering was only one of many opportunities for members to participate in what the mainstream might consider 'sexually deviant' behavior. On the fourth of July, in place of a patriotic display, they'd gathered in a very large hot tub (to which I was invited but respectfully declined). The result of the July 4th orgy was a pink eye epidemic, and I could tell who had been party to the hot tub by their red, irritated eyes and bitter expressions. Pink Eye was so contagious that anyone who had it or was suspected of having it was confined to their living quarters, their meals left outside their door.

There was Validation Day, the substitute for Valentine's Day, which was a massive, commune-wide orgy with different groups in different rooms. It was a day when even the

more exclusive couples allowed themselves some “wobble room”, as they put it. Prior to the event, each person filled out a piece of paper that read like this:

I want to hug: _____

I want to kiss: _____

I want to dance with: _____

I want to have sex with: 1. _____ 2. _____ 3. _____

One trusted member (and this was usually a member named Charlotte who identified co-self as neither a man or a woman) gathered all the pieces of paper and match up whoever had written each other’s names as the answer. This member was never to let the beans spill when it came to an unrequited desire to hug/kiss/dance/sleep with, though Charlotte had told me people always tried to pry it out of co. Such a practice in the ways of lust and love led to its own problems. A few years ago, one member launched an explosive accusation the day after Validation Day; a female member, Coyote, accused a man named Bolt of forcing himself on her.

“It wasn’t rape,” said Paxus, (who seemed to know every story there was to know about the commune). “She said they had had too much to drink, and he got more aggressive with her than she had wanted. She never said it was rape.”

The whole thing resulted in months of deliberation by the council that resulted in Bolt’s expulsion from the commune. There was an exodus of twenty other members when Bolt was kicked out; the debate created a rift in the commune that had ended in a marked shift of alliances, and of course, the formation of more policies.

“No one will ever really know what happened that night,” said Paxus. “There was drinking, and everyone was, well, busy.”

I thought of a poem I had loved as a child, one by Shel Silverstein that went:

There are too many kids in this tub,

*there are too many elbows to scrub,
I just washed a behind that I'm sure wasn't mine
there are too many kids in this tub.*

New Year's Eve, though, was the biggest sex-fest to trump all other holidays, and whenever a member brought up the subject their eyes sparkled like a child's the night before Christmas morning.

"New Year's Eve here is soooooo fun!" Serenity said, raising herself on her tip toes for a moment without being aware of it. "Everyone goes crazy. We all just get naked and drunk and horny, and you could walk into a room with fifty asses and have the time of your life."

When Serenity told me this, I was having some late-night tea at Zhankoye with Mischa. We had been talking about ideas of right and wrong, normal and weird. Our time at Twin Oaks had turned everything we knew upside down, and we were grappling for some sort of objective reason.

"Look at us right now," Mischa said. "You're married, I'm married, and we are having a conversation about sexuality. Your arms are bare. In some countries, we'd be put to death for this. Everything is relative."

His statement must have struck him as much as it struck me, because after hearing about New Year's Eve he phoned his wife back home. He spoke with her for a half hour before he returned, half-smiling, half-deterred. He had asked his wife if she would be up for visiting with him over the New Year, and what she thought about being in an orgy. It hadn't gone as well as he'd hoped.

"She was upset," he said, tight lipped. "I told her to think about it." He flicked the air away with his hand.

“Mischa, what’s the point of getting married if you’re going to be with other people?” I asked.

This was Mischa’s second marriage. His first marriage dissolved after he’d had an affair. He admitted to cheating on his current wife, but offered any number of explanations (that’s the way it is in ballet world, emotions run high with the music, things happen).

“Things don’t *happen*,” I said. “You make conscious choices.” I felt defensive, almost hurt, that he would be so flippant about a subject that was clearly a big deal, that involved the delicate hearts, the lives, of other people.

“You’re so close-minded,” he said to me, almost with disdain. “Just be free. Let go. Do what you want.”

It infuriated me that he saw me as close-minded simply because I chose differently than him. He spoke as if I was shackled by something I felt obligated to do, and could conceive that I wanted to be with the same person for the rest of my life. I felt I had been respectful of other people’s choices while at Twin Oaks, but wasn’t getting the same in return. I was tired of hearing people tell me to be free when I thought I already was in the first place.

The only person at the commune who appeared to respect my choice to marry was Helm, a forty-something immigrant from Germany. He was tall and skinny with one gold hoop earring in his left ear, and moved in dainty but concentrated ways. He was aware of himself but not at the very same time, as if he was aware of whom he was to himself but who he was to others. Helm had introduced himself to me the second week, when I was going through all the binders of policy (I received two hours of labor credit per binder I reported to have read). I don’t know why he felt compelled to talk to me-- none of the other members had. The first thing he did was ask about me, and waited until I had nothing left

to say to talk about himself. It was a change from having been the interviewer for most of my stay.

“You’re married?” Helm asked, pointing to the ring on my finger, his tone friendly.

“Yes. I just got married six months ago. He’s on deployment, so I’m hear checking things out.”

“You must miss him so much,” he said gently, tilting his head.

“Yes.” I couldn’t talk about it for long to anyone, not beyond the basics (*he’s on a submarine, I can’t see him or hear him*), because I would start crying. I never expected someone to know what deployment was like, how it felt to wake up every day and know that something huge was missing. I told Helm as much.

“Love. You can’t explain it to someone who’s never experienced it, ya.” He crossed his legs and rested his folded hands on his knee, smiling the way one does when they recall a private memory.

Helm had quite a story. At the moment he was in a relationship with Roberto, even though they were both straight. It was a non-sexual partnership, he called it. He chose to be celibate (he had gotten tired of sex), and he and Roberto were basically friends who made life decisions together.

“I had a partner once, we spent a very intense year together,” he started. “I sold my business and my property back in Germany, and we had a year where we didn’t have jobs. But it didn’t work. I like stability; I need a tribe, a family, but not like other people. You know, fears and insecurities, they get in the way. I like to stay protected on some level.”

“What happened, exactly?” I asked.

“Well, she fell deeply in love with me. But when things got stale it became hard to appreciate her. I would become emotionally unavailable, just like my parents did. After it had gone on long enough, she left. I remember one of the last things she said before she left.

She said ‘I’m pissed. I’m pissed that some other woman will get to love you’. She told me how unfair it was that it’d be someone else who’d reap the benefits of everything I would learn after she left, all the ways in which I’d change for the better.”

“Did you? Learn anything? Change?”

“Not enough. Still I feel the fluctuations, the attachments, the clinging, it makes everything less stable. I am still in love with her, but from afar. She’s married now. She has four children.”

I looked at Helm, who behind his polite smile seemed to be hiding a deep sadness. It was the same smile I gave when anyone asked me about deployments.

“It makes me happy that she found a good person, even if that person isn’t me. That’s what love is.” As he got up to leave for his tofu shift he added “and if it doesn’t work out for her, she can always come here.”

After all this talk about love (or the illusion of it) I had to work a shift at the Emporium. I headed to the barn and started the monotonous process of taking down dried garlic, cleaning it and trimming it. They were talking about vampires when I came in.

“How did they ever come up with the whole garlic keeping away vampires thing?” Sapphyre said to the rest of the team who sat working in silence. “I mean, they can turn into fog or bats, but they can’t handle garlic?”

Another member shrugged. “It’s not like everything else about vampires make sense. Like, they’re dead, but you have to stake them in the heart? Come on.”

Sapphyre was about my age but in a totally different place than I was. She had moved to Twin Oaks with her two young children, a result of yet a failed marriage. Her ex-husband was living with his new girlfriend in Miami. Sapphyre was pretty but in an

unconventional way. She had a giant purple octopus tattoo that spread from her chest to her clavicle, the tips of its tentacles reaching the base of her neck. She had long, jet black hair she wore in a single braid that fell down her back. She never wore a bra and her breasts hung low, and her nipples always showed through her threadbare camisoles.

Sapphyre stabbed a rotten piece of garlic that she'd pulled from the bucket with a pair of rusty scissors. "Stake in the heart. I know what that's like."

"Oh please, Sapphyre, you left HIM," a member said.

"Yeah I know but that didn't make it any less painful. It's not like I chose it. You think I like that my kids don't get to see their dad?"

"Do you think you'll ever get married again?" I asked, swearing to myself that it was the last time I'd talk to anyone about this before I started to feel like nothing was sacred anymore. I'd heard a hundred different opinions about that grey area called love, and I so badly wanted it to be like this: either you loved someone, or you didn't. You stuck with them or you didn't.

"Maybe, but I don't really see it happening," she said.

"Why not?"

"I dunno. I mean, I was in love with my husband for six great years. We had two children together. And then, one day, I woke up, and I just didn't love him anymore. It wasn't like I hated him or was repulsed by him. I just wasn't in love anymore. It was like someone flipped a switch. I can't explain it. I guess you have to experience it."

Sapphyre did not tell her story with any sort of bitterness or carry an anti-marriage banner. Her experience had taught her that the human heart was unpredictable, and at the very least she could appreciate that she had tried. I wondered how many couples in the world had met the same fate, committing their lives to each other, creating human beings that weren't there before, only to one day wake up and wonder why they felt nothing.

Nothing at all. Was it love to begin with? Could love just up and leave like that? I'd never thought about it. I only knew what I had lived. I remember finding my parents wedding album years after they'd divorced, and I remember seeing how wide their smiles were, how real their happiness was. I couldn't understand how they had gotten from that day to today, I didn't know what had happened that turned *I love you* into *I hate you*. All the failed marriages to which I had been witness had been a result of conscious efforts: someone cheated, someone drank too much, someone stopped trying. The love didn't disappear quietly into the night; it had to be strangled until there was nothing left to hold on to.

Tigger, Paxus, Angie, Helm, none of them could give me a definitive answer. Part of me had wanted that, to find someone who could tell me something factual. I wanted to know that if Utopia wasn't possible, then everlasting love was, because it'd be the next best thing. There is polygamy and monogamy and everything in between, but there is no system that spares the human heart. It didn't matter what logic we chose; we are not subject to the logic, the logic is subject to us.

I needed to hear my husband's voice. I had started to feel like I was in Wonderland, as if I were living between dreaming and awake. I went for my phone at moments like this, and then had to remind myself that I couldn't call my husband because he was gone, far away under the sea, on deployment for the next few months. I had wanted to be able to turn myself off, to flip a switch and feel nothing so that I wouldn't constantly find myself fighting back tears. No matter how much I had wanted to be one way, I could not fight that I was another way. *It's about pain control*, I heard Angie say.

I took a deep breath and saw my husband's face in my mind's eye. I said, "I love you" to the air, and I chose to believe that if I thought those words hard enough, somewhere under the waves of the Pacific, he would hear me. That was all the logic I had left.

All of us have moments in our childhood where we come alive for the first time. And we go back to those moments and think, This is when I became myself.

--Rita Dove

Chapter 9

Pregnancy rarely happened at Twin Oaks without permission. Everybody took a vote; after all, everybody would be the parent. A woman was only allowed to bear a child if she met certain requirements: the presence of a stable partnership and at least a year's experience taking care of the other children in the commune.

I didn't know what to think. For a group that prided themselves on their feminist principles, it seemed the women were confined to a strict protocol and heavy social pressure when it came to baby-making. In some ways this was a far cry from the outside, and I was torn between whether or not their approach was more advantageous than "out there". I'd grown up in Brooklyn, a child of two divorced alcoholics; my mother had never really wanted children, much less *four* of them. In my neighborhood, we *made fun of* the kids whose parents were still together. Perhaps we could have done with some rules ourselves about who could have children and when. It might have saved a lot of heartache.

It wasn't just that all the commune's members would help nurture the children; they also paid for the whole process, since they were a collective unit. They saw the addition of a child the same way we might in the outside world: another mouth to feed. If someone who receives government assistance keeps popping out babies, it's all the other taxpayers who are picking up the tab-- and the taxpayers don't get to tell anyone when they can and can't have a baby. So, as aberrant as Twin Oak's approach to pregnancy might have seemed at first glance, they were really just addressing a real-world problem.

Of course, rules went out the window when passions took hold or the yearnings of motherhood could no longer be suppressed, and eventually the unlucky few who had found themselves with child couldn't suddenly claim divine intervention in a forest full of atheists.

So the community would pay for an abortion.

A quick and quiet drive to town in the psychedelically-painted PeaceMobile and some bed rest later, the un-mother returned back to the wooden houses of the lumber lands. With all of it a necessary evil, the recovering patient was allowed to rack up labor hours for her troubles, and avoid the pitfalls of juggling an evacuation from the womb and harvesting the land.

In the rarer event that the community gave the green light for conception, a woman gave birth with the help of a midwife, never visiting a hospital if she didn't have to. During an afternoon shift cutting cubes of tofu I met another visitor, Erin, whose sister Debbie was a member of the commune. Debbie was awaiting the arrival of her first child, even though she had gotten pregnant without jumping through all the hoops for approval. After digesting a few documentaries on the subject, Erin told me, very matter-of-factly, that "*birth was business.*"

"Oh yeah, it is!" she proclaimed as she hosed off the tofu trays and put them back into the sanitizing bin. "Totally! I mean, the doctors just push the epidural on you, they always push a C-section, it's whatever gets you out of there faster, whatever makes them more money." She swept the auburn curls escaping from her hair net to the side by curling her lip and blowing, sweat dripping from her forehead.

"But can't a woman say no?" I asked, wiping off the trays as she handed them to me. We were working hard, sweating, and sore. We were giving birth to twenty pounds of tofu. The soybean processor was so loud I could barely hear her. We had to yell to have a conversation, and there we were, knee-deep in tofu and screaming about C-sections.

"Yeah, but they just assume 'doctor knows best', you know? Like, these women don't really know what's going on, what the motives are. I'm telling you, all-natural is the way to go. Babies born with a midwife have a higher survival rate than babies born in hospitals,

that's a fact. That's why insurance companies charge way more for midwife care-- it's better quality, and the prices make it harder for midwives to take business from the hospital in droves, which is what would happen if more women knew the facts."

She wasn't entirely wrong. About 99% of all births in the U.S. take place in hospitals yet we rank 29th in the world in infant mortality (CIA)— below Hungary and tied with Slovakia. Studies had also proven that mothers who chose midwives to guide them through pregnancy were far less inclined to suffer from postpartum depression. The truth was, some of the shocking things I'd learned about our country while at Twin Oaks were not conspiracy theories; I had to confess to myself that there was a chance the ideas I had been fed my whole life could be less than true, or even false.

Erin told me that later that evening there was going to be a gathering of women at the Degania house for the Blessing Way, which took place on the full moon before the mother's delivery date. It was a pagan tradition where women came forward to ready the soon-to-be-mother. They'd brush Debbie's hair, bathe her in lavender, rub her in herb oil, and light candles. The night would end with every mother in the commune telling their unique birthing stories.

The Blessing Way didn't happen; later that evening word spread from cabin to road-wanderer that Debbie was in labor. This was how news was spread; there were no texts, no tweets, no status updates, no faxes and no yapping away into iPhones, iPads, or Droids. The crowd came together but without gathering, and through the night people trickled into the dining hall on their own to determine the winner of Debbie's birth calendar. A birth calendar was posted in the dining hall every time a woman was due and each member would write their time-of-arrival guesses on the days they predicted the baby would come. The winner got no material prize, but enjoyed a collective wonderment at having such an intuitive spirit.

“She jumped the gun on getting pregnant,” I overheard the winning member say, “so I figured her baby would be the same way.”

By lunch the next day there was a calm confirmation that Debbie’s birth had gone successfully, and that the commune had a new member: a healthy boy named River. Debbie remained in quiet seclusion with her newborn son for the next few days, after which point she casually emerged with River bundled to her chest, his face pressed against her heart and breasts.

Unlike many working mothers in the rest of the United States, the commune acknowledged that caring for an infant was a full-time job. They encouraged women to hold their babies close to their bodies as much as possible and to breast feed heartily. Formula might as well have been arsenic. After the first week, a new tree sapling was planted with the placenta, buried at its roots, somewhere amongst larger trees of various sizes, each like a piece of a bar graph telling of all the childhoods that had come and gone. This, too, was a pagan tradition. In the patch of field where placenta trees had been planted, I could tell that none of the trees were older than thirty and some looked as if they had barely made it to where they were now. The saplings were silent testimonies of childhoods spent in an emerald forest. I wondered where the children who belonged to these trees were now, and if they felt a tug pull them back like an umbilical cord.

I thought of the yard in front of my childhood home, the little patch of grass where my father had planted a tree each time a new child was born into the family. I was the oldest of four but my tree was the smallest, an embarrassing fat shrub in the back corner, dwarfed by sister’s conifer tree. It was a false history (when my brother’s tree died he stayed awake for days, afraid it meant he would die too). That was a long time ago, and I’m not sure how I went from that child to this adult, but I gather it had little to do with trees.

It was only a decade before my time at Twin Oaks that their infants had been sheltered in air cribs, an invention of none other than B.F. Skinner. Made of glass with wide holes on each side, the air crib was a temperature-controlled encasement that was meant to provide the most comforting and secure environment during a child's first year of life. The theory was that such an ideal environment fostered the infant's confidence and health, though how was never medically explained to an acceptable degree. Air-cribs were later marketed by companies in a failed attempt to draw on the device's avant-garde fashionableness. The ventures failed when a speculative book on Skinner's practices was published, making a claim that Skinner had raised his own daughter (also a Debbie) in an air crib, and that Deborah Skinner killed herself later in life (to be specific, that she had taken her own life with a shotgun at a bowling alley in Billings, Montana). After reading about this in a London paper, the infuriated (and very much alive) Deborah wrote in to the editor adding, "I have never even been to Billings, Montana (Skinner)".

The community had done away with the air cribs because no society is immune to change when convenience is involved, though to my disappointment it was not because they realized how absurd the invention was.

Like babies everywhere, Twin Oaks babies learned to walk, and talk, and eventually the community worked dramatically toward distancing the children from their mothers. It started with bedtime. All the commune's children slept in Degania, a house filled with books, toys, and mattresses that have been made into one giant bed on which all the children slept. As toddlers, the children did not live with their parents but roamed free, making appearances at the communal meals, along with the stray dogs. I remember a three-year-old girl lifting up her summer dress in front of all the picnic tables full of people, as if she were on stage, and squatting down to pee. Everyone clapped and told her what a great job she did. A five-year-old boy named Morning Star showed up at lunch times,

holding hands with the other lost children, and floated from woman to woman seeking maternal affection wherever he could get it. He grappled their breasts as he struggled to climb onto their laps, and sit half-asleep, his eyes opening and closing slowly, drenched in a deep sense of security. After that he was gone again, and they all flitted away, like Peter Pans and Wendys, knowing that they had to be back to their living quarters when the sun reached a certain low point in the sky. The only adults that slept in Degania were the approved “alternates” and “handlers”-- invested babysitters who earned labor credits in childcare.

Over the formative years of Twin Oaks, mothers and fathers had stated to rebel, realizing they wanted to be the only parents their child would know and wanting to have a more dominant role in the molding of their child.

Their dissent was finally heard in the 1990's, when it came to light that a trusted and beloved member, a devoted “alternate”, had been doing more with the children than just sharing a house. It had been going on for years by the time anyone found out. Things came out, about touching and grappling in the dark for a child- any child- to feed his demon. The shattered trust rocked the community, and parents gravitated towards cohabitating with their own children and even went so far as to have family meals together, away from the dining hall. The Degania children were sent to counseling, though I flinched when I learned that only one of them had remained in the commune until adulthood. They had all gone. They had scattered in a diaspora of pain. It was like a twisted, real-life take on *The Pied Piper of Hamelin*. One girl had dropped out of the local public school by the age of fifteen, declared she wanted to be a traveling musician. After learning how to play acoustic guitar from an older member, that's exactly what she did. Last anyone had heard of her, she was traveling with John Mayer, or some other story that was likely to be only half-true. Those who left before they turned eighteen ended up doing something along the

lines of hitchhiking across the country, working odd jobs or joining a different commune somewhere else in the States. Some had waited until they turned eighteen to leave, only to end up living in one of the small towns around Louisa County, collecting unemployment checks and not doing much with the little they had walked away with.

Only one child of The Degania Event had chosen to apply for membership after turning eighteen, and that was Arlo. Arlo was a quiet teenager who was publically struggling to grow a moustache and who wore brightly-colored Nike trainers (*fresh from a sweatshop*, the other members would say). Despite his trendy footwear, his clothing did not seem anything more than rags that had been handed to him with the intent of getting covered in farm dirt. His room was littered with bongos and video game consoles, a representation of the nouveau demands of the next generation against which the elders fought so mightily.

He had just turned eighteen when I arrived, which was the age when a child of the commune could officially apply for adult membership. When I asked Arlo if he was really going to apply for membership to Twin Oaks, I asked if he was doing it because he felt he had nowhere else to go.

“I like it here,” he said, and he meant it. I could see it in the way he walked down the path in the woods to go to work, chopping firewood or fixing old bikes. His soul was older than his years and he was the owner of a tranquil heart. Twin Oaks was enough, for him, to be worth losing the outside world.

Arlo almost seemed destined for Twin Oaks, given all of the things that transpired when he was still in the womb. His mother, Kristen, was six months pregnant with her husband’s child when she fell in love with another member of the commune, Keenan. Kristen and Keenan’s feelings developed after they became walking buddies (she had wanted to exercise during her pregnancy and her husband had been too busy to

accommodate). Keenan volunteered to spend the hours promenading the acres with Kristen (not even for labor credit!). As Keenan said, “that was a big mistake on her husband’s part.” The long walks saw Arlo’s birth into a love triangle, both men telling Kristen to push as Arlo came into a world within the world. Kristen ended up divorcing her husband, who continued to live in the commune for a few more years before he finally left. Ironically, it turns out Keenan and Kristen are the only couple at Twin Oaks who practice strict monogamy to this day.

Despite things like the Degania Event or the extramarital affairs of very pregnant women, the implementation of B.F. Skinner’s conditioning tactics continued, as did the children’s absence from the outside world. Members saw public schools as indoctrination centers, and so most children were homeschooled. By any real definition of the word “school” they attended only the school of life. Emily, a seven year-old girl born and raised at Twin Oaks, could not read or write, but threw out words like “precocious” and “mandatory” with the ease of a veteran linguist. The children could express their ideas clearly and seemed to have a superior grasp of logic and a lot more common sense than the students I had taught in the past. They were not street-wise, but wood-wise.

Their enclosure within the community, however, made them completely unaware of the shocking impropriety of some routines. For one, there was Naked Lake. The lake (or rather pond) was for naked swimmers only. To go in to Naked Lake wearing a bathing suit would elicit the same reaction as if someone dove into a public pool naked as the day they were born. Girls and boys of all ages played nude together in the scummy pond whose water felt much cooler and cleaner than it looked. Their naked, squeaky, wet legs and arms slid over the bodies of their alternates, also naked and contented by the pre-dinner swim. Watching them laugh as they emerged from the water, it seemed the pain of The Degania Event had been lost to the new generation, with the only reminder being the rule against

visitors spending alone time with children. Nowadays, half of the children in the commune had been brought in with new members, and had not been born on the grounds. They seemed to adjust quickly, as children do, and viewed it as a sort of giant, never-ending summer camp.

There wasn't much school to be had, but it wasn't all fun and games in Naked Lake. The children were expected to start completing their own labor quota as young as the age of six, doing chores around the house or taking the time to read a book (of course, only a book approved by the community, one that showed no trace of sexism, violence, racism or religious influence). By the age of seven children were asked to complete several hours of work a week, though the newest generation began manipulating the system when they realized there were no consequences for doing none of the work. They couldn't have their TVs taken away, because there were none to begin with. They couldn't be grounded, because there was nowhere to go. It made for some interesting teenagers. Their strategic laziness was tolerated with quiet indignity, a muddled, unspoken understanding that one day they would grow old enough to see for themselves the value in giving to the pot from which they took.

The odds of a child staying in the commune past their late teens was around one in thirteen, with Arlo being the only now-adult who was voluntarily continuing his life in the community. During my stay I had tried to dig deeper into his unique choice, posing questions casually over a joint we often found ourselves passing back and forth after a long day of work.

I was inquiring about his plans and asked "Don't you even want to give living in the outside world a chance? Not even *a little*?"

“I know what the outside is like,” he forced a chuckle and closed his eyes as he took in the thick smoke. “I see my dad on some weekends. He has a big TV and we mess with the Playstation, eat junk food and stuff. I go to stores. I’ve seen a Macy’s.”

I tried not to look at Arlo as if I knew he had been one of the Degania children. I tried not to look at him and wonder if he had been one of the touched. I tried to view him as a person about whom I knew nothing intimate, but I could not, and so I tried not to look at him at all. I pleaded with him instead.

“But you’re giving up so many cool things-- like travel, or the perfect suit, or being able to meet someone new every day,” I countered.

He paused and turned to me, trying not to laugh. “If those things are working out so great for you, then why are you here?”

And I began to laugh, with tears in my eyes, just laughing; for the life of me, I could not think of an answer.

There is nothing like returning to a place that remains unchanged to find the ways in which you yourself have altered.

--Nelson Mandela

Chapter 10

I'm back where I started, at the airport. I left the commune five pounds lighter than I'd started, but gained it back after a weekend spent in Charlottesville. After I checked out of Twin Oaks, my father came down from Brooklyn for a visit before I headed back to Hawai'i. His enthusiasm over our annual meeting was only slightly dwarfed by his chance to see Virginia's Civil War *anything*. He's a second generation Irish-American born and raised in the Bronx with a lifetime subscription to *Toy Soldier* magazine. I feel I've said enough. We filled the time the way I expected, visiting Monticello and watching *Wheel of Fortune* in our hotel room. I gorged myself on everything I had missed; the soda, the margaritas, the shrimp cocktail, the burritos-- but only so much as I could manage, my shrunken stomach averse to such heavy fare.

I got up at five in the morning to catch a plane back to Hawai'i. My father's flight was later that day and I didn't want to wake him. Before I closed the hotel room door, I looked upon him as if it could be the last time I'd ever see my dad. Some people call this morbid or pessimistic, but this is me appreciating what I have while I have it, never taking a moment for granted. My father is getting old, I thought, and that means so am I. He was half-blind, and had to wear a breathing machine to battle his sleep apnea. I'd just gotten glasses and everyone was asking when I'd become a mother. What if this was the last time I'd see the only parent I had left, the only person remaining whom I'd really come from, before it was my turn to be a parent? Would this be me one day, visiting my thirty-year-old child, fast asleep in a motel room while he or she went off to live her life? I shut the door, pressed the down button on the elevator, felt the weight of my pack. How can I live my life so that I am grateful for the presence of things without constantly being aware of their impending disappearance? *The only thing that does not change is change itself*, said

Heraclitus. I try to tell myself this every day, as if repeating the mantra would make the pain of its truth fade away. It does not.

Our society has this label for what I am doing, this western take on the Buddhist view of impermanence; they call it New Age. What is so new about it? Isn't it true that things have always changed? Or is it just that we are starting to recognize it? Of course I can laugh at the canned stereotype of the bourgeoisie, white middle-aged female who wants to meditate all the bad chi out of her chakras before she goes to Whole Foods to buy some organic granola. Was it worth making fun of, or was it worth examining, this quantum shift?

Anyway, like I said, I'm at the airport. I'm halfway home, killing time at O'Hare. The airport is like a city within in a city, and has a USO. The USO is a lounge for military and military spouses, and offers cots to sleep on, free food, games and television. It is usually overseen by old vets who are just happy to be around *their kind*. While I played checkers with myself through a five-hour layover, I saw spurts of new recruits and seasoned soldiers heading to much further ports-- Baghdad, Mosul, and I'd think *fuck, these guys are a million miles from organic granola at Whole Foods*. One of the soldiers was showing a letter he'd gotten from some random kid whose class wrote letters to deployed units to boost morale and say 'thank you' for God knows what. The card this child made said "Have a Good War", with a gun drawn on the front it.

At the airport bar I see this family, two parents and their son and daughter. I watch them for a while because that's all there is to do. They start out at a gift store, picking things up, looking at them, putting them back down. The son is wearing all black, lost in the world of his headphones, his face mostly covered by his unwashed hair. The mother isn't interested in being there, but follows others around, nods and smiles at the cashier.

“Dad! Dad! I want this! Can I get this?” the man’s daughter begs. She look about eleven or twelve years old, and is as obese as the rest of her family. The exertion of her trip across the room to her father has left her rosy-cheeked.

“What is this?” he said, taking a generic stuffed teddy bear into his hands. The bear is wearing a shirt that says I LOVE CHICAGO.

“It’s a teddy bear! Pleeeaaaase! It’s so cute!” she pleads.

“‘I love Chicago’. Hun, we haven’t even been to Chicago, we’re just in the airport. What do you want a Chicago bear for?”

“We’re in the airport so we’ve been here. Can’t I just have it? It’s soft.”

He checks the price tag. “No. I’m not paying twenty-damn-ninety-five for this thing. Put it back.”

She begs a little more, realizes her father won’t give in, and then stomps away, but not before mumbling *I hate you*. She puts the teddy bear back on the wrong shelf, in front of some magazines that tell women how to get skinny, how to attract men, how to *be* something.

Before they leave the gift shop, the father has acquired a few of his own (I’m sure, overpriced) purchases: a neck pillow, a magazine, some candy and an I LOVE CHICAGO magnet. They cross the walkway to the bar and restaurant where I’m sitting and order a boatload of food. The father takes out his bag of purchases and starts fiddling with them, and the daughter asks “how come I couldn’t get a teddy bear and you could get all that stuff?!”

“Because I worked for the money that pays for it,” the father answers. The mother smiles and dabs her mouth with a napkin.

“Yeah, but I’m just a kid. I can’t get any money!”

“And that,” he smiled, shoving his neck pillow back into the bag, “is why I set the rules.”

I found myself watching these people the way a Twin Oaker would. I noted all the ways in which our modern society had shaped people into super-consumers of junk made in China or twice-fried foods (or had we shaped society to be that way?). The lights were bright, the music loud; the bar displayed five TVs on five different channels that aired stories on Beyonce’s butt or the (third) impending government shut down.

How did we get here? Sure, this family was not a fair representation of every American, but they weren’t totally obscure, either. I was guilty of a lot of things myself. I played into some sicknesses, just not the same ones as the family I was watching. I was no better. I would be guilty of more things, I was sure, with time. Twin Oaks, while far from perfect, had forced me to ask myself what it was I needed to do to become the person I wanted to be around, to create the kind of world I wanted to live in. It made me realize how pointless it was to do something half-way when it came to forging change. It was like how I wanted loving someone to be: either do it or don’t do it, because fifty-percent of either was a waste of energy. How would I raise my children so that they wouldn’t warrant things like metal detectors in school? Does anyone start out with the intention of being a shitty parent, of having a spoiled child? I’d seen some good parents watch their kids become rotten, and just thrown my hands up and say *culture!*

I thought of the children in Willy Wonka, each of them bad eggs in a different way because their parents had made poor choices. Twin Oaks showed me how much everything we are is simply a compilation of our environmental factors. It can be kind of depressing; we’re programmed, like robots. We can look at a cult and call them brainwashed, but isn’t everyone? When does brainwashing begin and end, if ever? Everyone is a result of

circumstance, everyone is conditioned, we are all a sum of the parts that have been given to us by the dance of chance and choice.

Who was the one good child in Willy Wonka? Charlie. And why was he good? Because he was poor. Was taking money out of the equation really the only and final answer, the only way to return to “the way we were before” (if we even knew what that was)? And if it was, was I ready to really-- I mean really ready-- to accept that? I wasn't a spender, I can't remember the last time I'd stepped into a Macy's. It wasn't out of some sort of punishment, but a genuine disinterest. While I didn't live a lavish life I couldn't deny my love of small luxuries (after all, isn't that part of what makes us human?). If I seriously wanted a world without things like corrupt politicians and abusive corporations, then I'd have to forego all the little things: don't drink Coca-Cola (!), don't have a bank account or pay taxes, the list goes on. How badly did I want a better world? Or rather, how bad did the world have to get before I'd finally be ready to do something about it? If I wasn't ready, then was it really that bad, or was I just focusing on the negative?

Of all the changes I wanted to make, I was ready to make one immediately. Twin Oaks had taught me the value of eating better, and in particular, organic. I had felt a change in myself after consuming the members' diet of naturally grown foods and high vegetable intake (a former member had left the commune with the complaint that Twin Oakers ate too much soy, that it was making the men infertile). The fact is, organic food is more expensive. These days it costs money to live the difference.

I'd never hear from any of the visitors again except for Brian and Jayson, the last two people I would have expected to keep in touch with (with the exception of Dennis, which was understood and non-negotiable). I hadn't heard much from Jayson after a couple

of intermittent emails, but he updated his Facebook status every now and then with something cryptic like *I'm free* or *do what you want*. I know that he had gone to East Wind and then to a small, totally off the grid commune where he met and fell in love with an older woman. Then he disappeared. Maybe he was ready.

Brian had emailed me to say that he'd been rejected from Twin Oaks. He hiked the Florida Trail and ended up in Miami, where he spent his day participating in the Occupy protests. He made a point of noting that the bicycle cops, while cops, had been very accommodating. *They will join us soon*, he said.

Brian had spent a visitor period at East Wind as well, which had coincided with Thanksgiving. The members had killed a deer for the feast. In his email he confirmed all the things Twin Oakers had told us about East Wind. He was particularly upset about the karaoke situation.

"I found the karaoke machine last week and the cord for one of the mics had been deliberately cut. When I mentioned this to people, nobody seemed shocked or angered by it. They have a total lack of respect for community property. Before I organized their CD collection, it was scattered around the room where they were sitting face-down on dusty tables. Most are badly scratched."

He'd said there was a note on the community board that warned members to return the books they'd taken out at the town library-- there had been angry calls from the local branch. Brian had also witnessed a shouting match between two members the week before, in a common hall, something he doubted "would ever be acceptable at Twin Oaks."

East Wind, he said, was like a laissez-faire version of Twin Oaks. For one, their allowance was much bigger; the profitable nut butter business allotted each member \$150 a month, which members normally spent on weed and beer. Brian had a lot of trouble finding sufficient work to meet his labor quota (which was almost ten hours less than Twin Oaks').

No matter, because they allowed visitors to apply even if they hadn't met quota, and everyone had gotten eight hours of holiday credit over Thanksgiving week. Because it's in the middle of the Ozarks, one of the bigger problems is that there isn't much labor one can do after dark.

East Winders had things to say about Twin Oaks, the rivalry between communities readily apparent. The siblings to which Kat Kinkade had given birth had grown apart.

Brian wrote, "One member said that Twin Oaks is like high school while East Wind is like college because you have more freedoms here. When I told another member about being rejected from Twin Oaks she said that would probably be considered a good thing at East Wind. Another person complained that a member at Twin Oaks refused to send over some tofu shipments."

Each commune was different, but it was really just a give-and-take of trade-ins. Just as people had left the mainstream world for Twin Oaks, others had left Twin Oaks for East Wind, deciding they could forego certain perks for other kinds of advantages. Or disadvantages.

Brian had written me over the winter: "There is a lot of drinking and drug use here. You have to shit in a bucket and pee in the woods. In the cold weather they have to pee in a jar inside a cabin then dump it in a bucket outside. The outhouses have electricity, so they are warm and well-lit, and you can wash your hands (there's plumbing). But I'd really hate to be the person emptying those buckets."

Jayson had also reported back with details that made me glad I didn't continue on to East Wind (my original plan was to hop from Twin Oaks to East Wind, but I opted out of the second leg when I could bear my husband's absence no longer, and had gotten the message that communes were not for me).

“There are a lot of people here with depression, which I think some people interpret as ‘super laid back’. Visitors do get turned away....there was a guy who had visited here, and he’d seemed all right to start. In his exit letter, though, he talked about how horrible his life was and how hopeless and depressing everything is and how much he hates life and how much he wants to live at East Wind to find happiness. They rejected him because they didn’t want him to ‘suck the happiness’ out of the place. They want people who can enrich the community. The members said he shouldn’t have said anything like that in the letter, and that if he’d just kept his mouth shut they would have accepted him. He shoulda stayed positive,” Jayson relayed.

So, it wasn’t that the one visitor had been depressed-- it was that he admitted to it.

“They obviously have no empathy for strangers in need,” Brian said. “They will only help someone if there’s something in it for them.” In the meantime, Brian had emailed a few members at Twin Oaks, asking if they would let him crash there for a few days before he headed to the next commune. No one had responded. “I don’t know what to think, but it’s hard not to feel like they’re ignoring me,” he said. Of course they were ignoring him, but what we choose not to see, we will not see.

In August, a 5.8 magnitude earthquake hit Virginia, the epicenter practically underneath Twin Oaks. I wondered how they’d dealt with it. I remember hearing while I was there that it had taken much longer for the news of September 11th to reach the farm. There were no TV, and no one really listened to the radio (a member had gotten on one of the old, slow communal computers to check e-mail and then ran to tell everyone).

When the tremors hit, they didn’t think it was an earthquake at first. One member wrote that everyone believed “it” had finally happened: the nearest nuclear plant had

exploded. The power went out, and so they had to call their relatives and friends in the outside world to get all the details of what had happened. It's not like they could have just driven down the road to a neighbor's house; it was an hour to town, and who knows, maybe it was full of zombies just as Dennis had always hoped.

On the plus side, the quake caused enough damage to create a whole new opportunity for labor hours. Broken chimneys, cracked walls, destroyed shelves-- all had to be repaired or replaced. In their newsletter, *Leaves of Twin Oaks*, they include an interview with a member named Kristen that lingers on exaggerated details of a swinging door doling her a black eye. She talks about how the doors hit her, how she had bruises all over her body that weren't there before, that it was hard to talk about because of spotty memory due to a mild concussion (Winter 2011). Everyone was just fine, really, and it was such bravado, but people fed into it; I fed into it. This is what we want to read about, all of us desperate for a crisis because crisis means things are happening! I felt like I was reading my high school's alumni newsletter, seeing people I once knew holding their newborns or standing in front of the Eiffel tower. Life keeps going. Some of us choose Twin Oaks, some of us choose East Wind, some of us choose the Pacific, and more.

It's 2012 and too many people out there think the world is ending in December (and naturally, there's a TV series about it). These doomsdayers are preparing for crisis in makeshift underground bunkers. The Internet has exploded with survival websites, sites analyzing biblical text for clues about the last day, quoting Nostradamus. When I checked out at the supermarket the guy behind me said, "The kingdom is coming! Enjoy the last eight months of your life!"

Big oil wants to drill a tunnel through the heart of the United States to carry tar sands from Canada to the poor, cursed Gulf (kick 'em while they're down). It would drill through Native American land and cross (and endanger) one of the biggest aquifers in the

country. Palin chants “Drill, baby, drill.” It’s for jobs, the Republicans say, people need to work. How different from Pam’s “If we don’t work, we don’t eat”.

Not long after I returned home, Seal Team 6 killed Osama Bin Laden. They dumped his body in the ocean before the world even knew about it. It sounded like one of Mischa’s conspiracy theories comes true, and for a moment I felt as he did, as if life was just one big game of chess, and to survive you had to be wise to it all. The line between assumption and reality becomes blurred, what was once never thinkable was now routine, accepted. I tested this idea out; a few days before I left the commune, I called my dad. I had decided to play a joke on him, and pretend that I was brainwashed into staying at Twin Oaks. He was afraid, like a few people in my life, that it was a cult and I would never come back.

I said hello, and he said hello, and asked me how my last few days were going.

“These won’t be my last few days,” I said, trying to make voice sound robotic. “I have decided to stay. I like it here. This is a happy place.”

He paused for a second too long. “Wait, what? What are you talking about? What about school, what about your apartment?”

“I have made arrangements,” I said blankly. “I am staying. This is a happy place.”

He stumbled for a moment and then I stopped the act, surprised that he had fallen for it so quickly. “Are people making you say this? Are you alone right now? If you feel unsafe say...*rainbow*. Go ahead, they won’t know what you mean. Say *rainbow* and I will come down there and get you.”

“Dad! Did you really think I’d be brainwashed? That I *could* be brainwashed?” I asked grudgingly.

“As you get older,” he said, “you’ll see that anything is possible.”

It’s true, the only thing that doesn’t change is change itself. One thing my father asked me was how the other visitors had changed, if they were “converted” to that way of

life. I don't know how much the visitors changed as a result, since I hadn't known them well before. During the visitor period I hadn't gotten to know them well enough, though we did share an odd kind of intimacy after braving the experience together. The night before I left I sat with Jayson on the front porch as he chain-smoked, his eyes at half-mast like they'd been all summer.

"Isn't it weird" I asked, "that the nine of us spent all these weeks together, living side by side and spending so much time together, and we'll probably never see each other again in our lives?"

He nodded slowly, taking a drag and looking out at the rows upon rows of oak trees. "Yeah, I know. I will probably never ever see you again. And even then, only by chance. There's always chance." Jayson rolled up his pant leg in the evening heat, and I saw a tattoo on his calf. It was of three small squares in a row, two of them empty and one of them filled in solid with ink.

"What's that mean?" I asked, pointing.

He takes his finger and labels the three boxes: "Nothing happens, nothing happens, then everything happens."

He finished his cigarette in silence, and I understood.

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