



## **I Can't Hear The Drums Anymore**

By

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I stand below the washbasin and stretch my arms upward toward the water flowing from the spigot. My mother is there beside me asking why I wash my hands so often. I am only three; how can I possibly know? I simply want my hands to be clean. I stretch farther to reach the water. I suppose it eventually cleans my hands, but I don't remember. The next I do remember is sitting before the coffee table in the living room, looking at the family album.

It is a cheap dime store album, bound in cardboard. The edges are frayed and the pictures are held in place by corner tabs. Many have come loose and the pictures cringe in the fold of the album.

One particularly catches my eye. There I am, the centerpiece of the photo, still no more than four, if that old, held forcibly by my father's muscled arms, the fingers of one hand gripping my jaw so hard it is bending my face into the bone structure. Tears are flowing from my eyes like lava. I cannot see her, but I know it is my mother taking the photograph. I cannot remember what happened to cause the event, what childish error I must have committed, but their vengeance appears to have been wrathful. For the rest of my youth, I feared always, especially when returning from fishing trips when I would lay my head on his lap as he drove us home in the Chevy pickup, that my father was going to murder me.

For the rest of my life, I feared that my mother would deceive me. They had conspired against me at this early age and I felt I could never forgive them. My desire was to have had their love while they lived, but that did not permit me to condone my forgiving them now that they had violated my childlike trust.

Twenty-four years later, when the phone call came, my father was on the line, telling me my mother had died. She had placed a plastic bag over her head and neatly tied it closed around her neck with a red ribbon, and then had pulled the covers up.

I did not feel pain or remorse, but a dull blankness, a deadening of my senses. I flew home and confronted the preacher who was to read the service.

“Don’t make it long,” I said. She was not a believer of anything, I think. Keep it short, will you?

“God forgives all, my son...”

“Please, keep it short.”

“Tell me about her...”

“Short, do you understand? She lived, she died, she’s dead. Put her away and let us get on with our lives.”

“Son...”

“Short.”

I turned and walked away.

From somewhere I heard the drums. Thum thum. Thum thum. Thum thum.

What does one think of inside a plastic bag with the covers over one’s face as the air grows dull and thick and one’s lungs suck heavy for oxygen? How does one not pull the bag back off, but simply lie there knowing one is dying, and do nothing?

Years later, thinking of her death, I tried it. I pulled a plastic bag

over my head, not intent to die, but to experience what she experienced. The air becomes something other than air. It becomes poison and it insists that one find fresh, real air. It commands the hands to find air. It demands they do it. I did. I could take it no more and jerked the bag from my head. She did not. She lay still, and left me.

I never knew her. I never remember her ever touching me, holding me, her kiss, the taste of her mouth, the smell of her body, nothing. She was never there, but in body to be seen. Who can she have been? She was not a beautiful woman, although not unhandsome. I remember she was tall, long-legged, dark haired, with a large nose, a full, sensuous mouth, substantial breasts, and dull, dark eyes, which were as deeply withdrawn as were her thoughts, inwardly-perforating, outwardly observing me as though she did not trust me.

I wonder if she trusted anyone?

Did everyone, when she looked at them, see the same thing? Did they all sense she did not trust them? Or was I alone in this? My sister never spoke of this, or my father. We did not speak of such things when I was a boy, or as a young man, or even when I was older – when finally I became what I supposed was a man.

“Do you think they are together now?” my sister curiously asked

after our father died years later, his body eaten away to a wisp of himself by the invasive cancer.

“I don’t know about such things,” I answered.

He had been a mountain man, a mason, a hewer of stone, as had been his father, and his father. He had in his life also become a hewer of men, and a ravager of life.

He and my mother were country people, she the daughter of a quarter breed Cherokee Indian woman and a misplaced Scots/Irish/-Englishman, who was the sheriff of a tiny Oklahoma plains town.

All that is a long way from Hollywood.

I do not consciously remember her as I sit outside a Hollywood café and observe the dark ringlets of massed hair on the head of the beautiful women at lunch today. How do such beautiful women come into being? How far away they always seem to me. I see them with my eyes and I recognize that the short distance from my table to theirs is a lifetime – even as we exchange simple lunchtime pleasantries. Perhaps they would be closer if we did not speak. They have all seemed so far away, all these beautiful women. So distant. So unreal. But for them, though, I would never have remembered the drums.

Thum thum. Thum thum. Thum thum.

When did I first hear them? I can't remember precisely, but I sense when it might have been. I think it was before I was born, when the Cherokee came to Oklahoma on the Trail of Tears, one of the six civilized Indian tribes driven to reservations by Scots/Irish/Englishmen like my grandfather after endless battles with the savage Apache and Comanche.

Thum thum. Thum thum. Thum thum.

When *did* I first hear them?

My memory bows before the mountain stars toward the level plains, and a template of meaning impresses a design upon my mind. Faint, ghostlike beats tumble into my thoughts.

By night they sounded, the drums, on trails first distant then closer, low on the plains, carried by men without women. They sounded on the ground while the men's feet bit into the earth as they marched their broken march. They came to be together now that they were beaten by my White ancestors, without women, to huddle, to smoke the pipe, to tell stories to one another. They poured from many directions, as does the news of a printed journal, and over many hills to meet on plateaus where the high far mountain winds screamed down over the ridges and into the valleys like enraged serpents, and then abruptly glided to stillness on the level plains to cool their meeting place, the cooled air then warmed at night by campfires

of gathered mesquite and oak.

One, or another, would start. A yarn, a tale of muscled men, a fiction, a narrative, a chronicle, a revelation, and they would imagine themselves in their minds into other men. Each man came alone, without his women and children, without his sister, without his mother; and each man spoke for himself alone. Man did not go to man and say, "join with me in my thoughts."

That is not the way of mountain men or plainsmen.

Such men stand alone.

Existence is a vital struggle to such men: singular, consisting primarily of being one with oneself and knowing that one's oneness is the essence of being. Male alliances are forged, but each man in an alliance is keenly aware that he is solely responsible for being where he is and may depart at any time without betraying the alliance. The alliance is fluid. Being alone, a mountain or plainsman knows, is permanent. It is what it means to be a man. One does not huddle to be manly. One is manly alone. One sits before the fire and thinks one's own thoughts, and his most private thoughts he does not share, as the smoke from the fire climbs into the sky.

Mother was smart. She was more. She was keenly intelligent. I remember that much about her. I see this now. I did not see it earlier for

my need was to possess her love. That is no longer my need. I need only to forget her, so I may let her go, let her be. Possibly, I do want her love even now, but more, I need to let her go. She has fought her battle. And I have mine to fight.

Father was not so keenly intelligent as she, but he was clever. He suffered fools poorly. Like prophetic fisherman of old, he was patient, and stealthily planned his strategies. He knew that resignation brought all things to fruition: with forbearance, the fish would bite. Imperturbably manning one's line a long, silent time would snare the trout, as it would also eventually snare the truth.

Raised in the shadow of the Cherokee, he remained only a mountain man, a hillbilly, an uneducated white woodsman who dropped onto the plains to better his lot in life. He was, I like to believe, a contemplative soul, imprisoned in an ignorant mind hiding in a roughened pioneer body. He was driven not by any philosophy but by basic survival needs. Inside him dwelled, I think, a dwarf of potential nuance who could not transcend his large outer roughness. There was certainly something charismatic about him. He charmed people without effort, he gathered them to him. He knew this and used it to become successful in his trade. He sensed his own power, and it freed him to rise above his monumental ignorance. His was a life of

pure instinct.

How did he, this ignorant man, join with this intelligent, withdrawn, unfathomable woman? Such are questions beyond my capacity to answer. My stoic Indian ancestors, these men with their drums, the drums so far from my father's comprehension, these Cherokee mythmakers who sat in circles under the stars, these braves without women, telling the tales of their forefathers whose cloth had been deerhide and bearskin, they had been hunters. They had lived discreetly from and on the earth, and the drums intoned their lost simplicity

These were the drums I first must have heard: the simple drums of life transformed into to rhythms and chants from simple beats of the heart.

Thum thum. Thum thum. Thum thum.

Thus they guarded their innermost hearts from women. Their tales wove into themselves the mythology of the relationship of men to women. Of husbands to wives, of brothers to sisters, of lovers to lovers, of sons to mothers.

They taught themselves the necessity for the keeping of the peace with women through gentle deception. They became the original heretics, who pretended – for women's sake – to acknowledge an eternal spirit, but believed in their hearts that the black earth of the mountains and the plains

was the real god. It was what sustained life. It was what could be taken in the hands and felt with the fingers. It did not require subjugating oneself with false humility to any unseen god. It told man to accept himself and all humans as all powerful and all responsible. It made him, he thought, self sufficient and inviolable, unneeding...untouchable.

And so he sat by the fires at night and thought, and beat his drums.

She did not touch me with her hands, but she taught me small things. She taught me how to fry lemon rinds in sugar to make candy. I remember that much about her. Did she remember that as the air grew stale inside her plastic bag?

We would peel the rinds off and cut them into tiny slivers. Then we would dip them in sugar and fry them in a butter-filled skillet until they were crisp. They crystallized and their bitter sweetness was astounding to the tongue.

When I think of them, however, I cannot truly discern what is memory and what may be imagining on my part. Did she teach me how to cook these sweet and bitter lemon rinds; or have I invented it to create one tangible, intimate memory with her to last me a lifetime?

I know I used to replace her in my memory by the drums.

In my memory by the silent, lonely men without women sitting

before the fires, endlessly telling their tales, building their male mythologies.

After her funeral I go into her bedroom. Upon the dresser is a book. I pick it up and read its title: "One Hundred Ways to Play Solitaire."

I lay it back down upon the dresser and look at the covers over the pillow on the bed.

What am I to do with this? What am I supposed to think? What am I supposed to feel?

I listen intently for an answer.

Where are the drums? Where are the drums?

I can't hear the drums anymore.