

CHAPTER 10: HARVEST SEASON

-- AUGUST 3rd, 1993 --

AWOL getting invited to this party wasn't really the same thing as Milton getting invited, himself, but Milton decided not to worry about that. Milton was so bad at parties that it was usually better if nobody had invited him, because that way nobody had anything to regret. Milton could not foresee that his mother would be completely willing to drive out to the middle of nowhere, near a useless blip of a town called Chalk, and leave him there. In truth, though, Milton's mother worried about her son's social life, because Milton was her only son and she had the luxury of worrying about everything to do with him. So she thought the party was a fantastic idea. She was almost gleeful about it, and for the first time Milton thought of her and his father in courtship, before the marriage, before the family, and before the revelations of himself to himself that tore Milton's father away from Karen permanently. "But I do think there is going to be a ton of pot at this party," she said to Milton, in a matter-of-fact way. Milton had attempted to reproduce AWOL's invitation on a plain white sheet of paper, as part of his confused attempt to broach the subject. Unfortunately, Karen had misunderstood it.

"Harvest season, it says."

"Mom," said Milton, reasonably, "it's autumn."

"Oh, is it? Is it autumn? Is *that* why it says harvest season?" It was the season for harvesting marijuana.

"Probably people will be drinking," Milton said. "I'll give you that. Who knows, maybe they will be drinking moonshine." Milton was prone to words like 'moonshine' because of public television documentaries. "I'm sure no marijuana. Everyone in the school was invited." Obviously, Milton was lying about the invitation going out to the whole school. His mother did not press the point. In her brisk fashion she was getting ready for the drive. She found her keys in one of their many hiding-places, then put on a worn-out purple sweatshirt. They took the drive very slowly, going for an hour out into the tree-lined roads in total darkness. Once or twice a driver appeared from behind a blind curve, headlights obliterating their view with a dazzle of light. Milton was trying to work himself into a state of enthusiasm. Such artificial passions last about five minutes, but whenever Milton was in a fever of anticipation he responded by rehearsing things.

The party house, Jasper and Ray's house, was encircled with old cars, cheap secondhand bargains of every description. A lot of them

were Volvo station wagons. Karen said a restrained goodbye and watched Milton leap out of her car and sprint to the door.

"Was that your mother?" asked AWOL, who was immediately recognizable from his glittering eyes. His body was a tense proliferation of veins and showy muscles. He looked like a human manzanita. He'd come over from a circle of boys standing outside under electric light. A drift of smoke was hanging about the wide bulb.

"Yes, it was, how are you, hello!" Milton said, trying to sound impressive.

"Is she cool with you being out here?"

"What's happening? She's fine with it -- is the party really going yet?"

"OK, yeah, we're doing alright. Full house. We've got a joint out here, do you wanna join in?"

Milton had never had a joint before in all the square, uneventful days of his life. He wasn't ready to puff one now. He wasn't ready for this party any longer. His mother was somewhere unreachable in the winding trespass of roads that shimmied across the dense forests.

"I think I'll check it out inside," he answered, imitating casualness.

Tiny hands were choking each word as it formed in his throat.

"Cool, take your time." AWOL was shifting from foot to foot like a boxer. No doubt about it, he frightened Milton, and so did the rest of these longhaired, mocking, laughing, invincible boys, spitting because the joint was falling apart and they were eating weed when they sucked on it.

To *check things out inside*, at a party, means going in through the screen door that closes too quickly and crushes your Achilles tendons. It involves greeting the people inside, the ones trying to get the music changed (either to James Brown or else to something that *isn't* James Brown). Milton did not know how to do any of this. The music was various stoned jams in Spanish, by Santana, with whom Milton did not interfere. The scattered crowd inside was in a reptilian state. Across the couches lay immobile boys with the half-lidded eyes of crocodiles. Perhaps they were trying to understand what Santana was saying in languages of their own.

The girls were down the hall, behind a door, past the bathroom -- which was being circled by bathroom vultures -- and away from Santana. Milton heard socked feet on a hollow wood floor and big peals of laughter. He turned the handle to look inside, blushing, and Jaspar answered the door in velvet. The velvet was red-brown, earth-colored. It was a dress stitched together from numerous pieces. It looked like

a dress made by a prim Victorian woman using the pattern of a Picasso guitar. It was a little small on Jaspar, and tight against her thighs under its caterpillar fur. The sight of her turned Milton to stone. Jaspar was extremely high and dully smiling, but she did her best to peer at him through her rosy-colored eyes and become cordial. Behind her, a girl in black slacks and a formal tailcoat was crawling under the bed, pursued vaguely by another girl with equally dyed hair, in an old all-black settlers' dress. The follower had skin belladonna pale. Jaspar turned around to see what he saw, nodded, then turned back around and said, "What did you think of Grandpa's? You're Milton, is that right?"

"Yes, Jaspar," he answered, calling her as familiarly as we do in dreams. For a moment the whole strange scene had sent Milton into the nerveless world of dreaming. "Everything there is so exciting that I can barely keep up. I still don't know what to make of those nesting dolls." Jaspar keyed on to this, and smiled. Milton thought her teeth were white as doves. Now Jaspar was so close and so human that he could see the capillaries around her brown pupils. He wanted to know her but forget those capillaries.

“What was your summer like?” he asked. She bobbed perceptibly. Then she recovered herself and talked while staring into a corner of the wall:

“I lived at my father’s house, down in San Diego, and I watched television.” The corner of the wall obsessed her, and Milton didn’t know anything about pot, so he was soon also staring there, unclear about what she saw. Maybe she was hallucinating wormholes, if that was something stoned people did. Or maybe the depths of things scared her, and she was seeing a flatland of beautiful surfaces.

“Were you working or anything down there?” There was a heavy note of depression at the end of her last sentence, right on “television,” which sent Milton’s budding social instincts in search of other subjects.

“No, just watching television, occasionally reading, and going out with my father, who likes to wine and dine me.” There was a soft edge of unspoken, digressive thought after each sentence. Perhaps it was just vacancy, but in a general way, Jaspar was nonetheless engaged and having a real conversation. In his wary sobriety, half leaning against the doorway, Milton felt his every hair pricked by fright and joy, which in Jaspar’s presence melted together into a single emotion.

“What kind of things did you do with him for your outings?” This match wouldn’t strike. Jaspar was onto something with television, perhaps she even saw a fabulous creature - alive, sad, and symbolic of channel-surfing -- curled in the corner of the room with the rest of her thoughts.

“When I was there watching television, I thought, this is fabulous, this is who I want to be? What does that even mean—I wonder. You see these people, this idea of beauty, such big laughs all the time, and you come to think that is how I should live. You are completely addicted to it and the entire purpose is to brainwash you.” Milton hadn’t realized how small the eyes of a person could get. Jaspar was peering at the world through the tiniest eyes. The two girls behind her had ceased their game at some instant, and flopped asleep, like magic dolls when their owner returns. The ghostly black-haired one was still under the bed, in a Zen garden of dust boulders.

“To brainwash you? It’s as bad as that?” In response to Jaspar’s slitted eyes Milton was turning jovial. He was quite conversational, all of a sudden. Something about her paranoia had given him a little feeling of superiority, of strength.

“Milton. It’s awful. They shouldn’t do that. They have the power of all those images, thousands of thousands of images, and yet it all

boils down to the same thing: Be beautiful. Laugh. Buy things. Before television people used to worship galleries of fine art. They would dream of being able to spend all their days among fine things. Now that is for everyone, even the least little girl can have her silks and the boy his fine instruments. Television the magic gallery. But it's as if someone has robbed us, robbed us of everything except what a robot could feel." She trailed off.

"What do you mean what a robot could feel? If we taught robots emotion? Or do you mean no emotions? Robots have no sentiments, right. That is their nature as machines."

"You can't teach a robot real feelings. They're born complete. Real babies are wild things in need, screaming creatures, needy little animals. Babies are born naked and hungry. We teach them to feel in more beautiful ways as they grow up."

"So what happens to a thinking robot?" Milton said, licking the tip of an imaginary pencil and taking lots of notes.

"Oh I don't know. We..." Jaspar trailed off. "Robots, when they have feelings, will be sentimental."

A new excitement arose within Milton, an intense pleasure from talking to Jaspar, that joined his other feelings like the third note of a chord. He began talking quickly, and making gestures like hers.

"I do see what you mean. What is programmed in from outside is sentimental. I think television is horrible. But what about movies? What about arty photographs?" Milton then cringed at himself. Arty? For fuck's sake.

"Everything mixed up. It's like seeing everything, and being blind. Everyone is the blind man now. I see, says everyone. Sight is not seeing. Oh. Oh shit. I've lost the thread."

Jaspar gave Milton her best embarrassed smile. He was frantic to be invited in. He thought she was taking an idle summer too hard. She couldn't accept what boredom will do when it takes power.

"I don't think that's so. Television's just one way of seeing. I know a lot of people are devoted to it—" Jaspar closed the door in his face. Milton just had time to get his fingers out of harm's way. The noise awakened the sleeping girls. Faced with the cheap wooden door Milton was certain their enchanted dialogue was over. But he still bothered to knock. Jaspar opened it up and said, "Hi Milton. I'm sorry, where were we at?"

"I've never slept like that in my life," said the girl in the tailcoat. She had short, straight hair and looked like an equestrian. Jaspar turned around and said,

"Oh I want to sleep! I must sleep, I long to sleep!" They all giggled and the giggles sundered Jasper from Milton. Grudgingly, he returned to the party outside.

Here things had reached a climactic whirl, with the bottomless bags of pot sinking even the most stalwart regulars in a dizzy haze of talk and alienation. Strange visitations flashed from inner worlds and exclamations followed. Milton walked through them, and the host called out to "Milt" to smoke something. Milton told him no thanks. He made a dismissive gesture. Milton felt angry like them, apart like them, subject to visions too, but he was separate, unto himself. He went out towards the unlit half of the lawn where the first huckleberries and rhododendrons announced a forest. Some enormous dark shape was there, looming off the ground. The inky shape revealed itself to be a water tower, wooden, climbable via a series of nailed-in boards. Milton looked up and saw a pair of sneakers and two legs, dangling over what was evidently a ledge. A deck, in fact, with someone sitting there.

"Is that you, Ray?" a disembodied voice asked.

"No, he's being a good host. I'm Milton, is there any room up there?"

"Sure. I'd rather be alone, though."

"I'd like to join you. Could I?"

"Alright." The legs scooted over so that there was room next to the ladder. Milton climbed up and found himself next to one of the gentle giants. He called them the "gentle giants" because they were born big, like football players, but they had no hauteur, no muscles, and long hair. Milton remembered that the giant's name was Herman.

"Herman, hey. I thought I'd walk out and get some quiet."

"You've destroyed my hermitage. My Herman-tage. What's the party like?" He was in just a T-shirt and heavy black pants, perhaps made of canvas. Milton thought he must be shivering, but his body was still. He was sucking on a beer, and there were two empty bottles next to him.

"It's pretty crowded. There's a bunch of boys smoking out in the front, and Jaspar and some girls in one of the rooms. I talked a bit to Jaspar, and a bit to Ray, but it's extremely difficult when I'm sober and they're on a trip. I'm pretty sure Ray doesn't like me."

"That's okay. Trust me, I've been friends with Ray since first grade, and when he doesn't like you that's an excellent sign. Ray is a human personality test." They sat for a minute in silence. Milton was trying to decide whether he'd drink a beer if Herman offered. No offer was forthcoming. It occurred to Milton that Herman had been sitting here quite a while, perhaps since before Milton himself had arrived.

"You talked to Jaspar Tousalle?" Herman said finally.

"Yeah, she was in an interesting mood. She wanted to talk about being brainwashed by television. At one point she compared babies and robots."

"Wow, you really covered the bases. You must've talked for a while to ol' Jaspar."

"I wanted to talk to her. I find her interesting." This made Herman snort. It was the second time Milton had said *interesting*, Milton realized with embarrassment. Herman was contemptuous in his conversation, even now, when Milton got the distinct feeling he wanted to talk.

"Please, you find her attractive. Jaspar thinks she deserves respect because she shows off her breasts."

"What? Everybody shows off their body, at least every girl does. Plenty of guys do, too, Herman. It's only here that all the guys dress like you, without thinking about muscles. And don't you think she has a beautiful face?"

In the dark, with the house twinkling below us, three-quarters drunk Herman decided to make a confession.

"Jaspar's the only reason I'm still here," he said.

"But you're sitting up in the water-tower. What is that for?"

"I enjoy drinking peacefully. That's much more satisfying than going down there and trying to talk to her about babies and robots. I don't know a thing about babies, and I know a ton about robots, so we'd be awkward on both counts."

"I really like her. I wish I knew what it was, besides her beauty, that made me feel so much, so quickly, for her."

"First of all, it is the beauty."

"You mean, it's all the beauty. But I'm telling you that's not right, not for me at least."

"No, but the beauty is so much to you and I. We've never known it. Have you seen Jaspar eat ice cream?"

"What?" Unfortunately, Milton hadn't learned to use *excuse me* as a retort. *Excuse me* is so much more effective than asking your torturer to give the knife another twist.

"*Have you seen her eat ice cream?* She can eat a whole pint for a snack - Jaspar, Mint Chocolate Chip, and a tablespoon. It burns right off, leaving no fat behind. People like us, gargoyles of thought, reflective types, might hold her in contempt if she was starving herself and applying makeup. But no, she is natural gorgeousness in all indifference, like an ungraspable rose." Beer had untied the roses that fell from his tongue. He was delivering roses, intended for

Jaspar, to Milton. Milton's outrage changed to pity. Eventually, Milton knew, the sunlight would come bearing unchanged news, and in the daylight Herman would be himself again, hungover, famished, and no longer a desiring demon. But for now he shouted.

“Do you know what she is, Milt? I've got her secret. She's nothing, not even a veiled and gentle presence like summer air. She is nothing. Ha! Nothing! I've seen her dance around bonfires, in a T-shirt and shorts, the hair falling wild over her shoulders, wild as a fern, sister to Lilith. I thought that was her, the great pagan, Pan's widow. I was wrong. I saw her take tea with friends, her hair hooped like ropes of gold under a beret, holding the tea between two long fingers and drinking it just so. Where was the pagan? Here was a mistress of culture, a Muse, and a poetess as well. Immediately I re-configured the fire-dance, and thought, that's a show of her naturalism, her dancing begins with a passion of the mind. Very good. Then I see her at another party, with some fool who she finds attractive, in a wife-beater shirt. Don't look offended, young Milton, I just mean a white tank-top for boys. She's drinking Schlitz beer out of the can. It's the worst beer in the history of the world, and she knows this, and she's wallowing, if you please, in the very nastiness of it. I've just seen her chug down a can, so I approach her, and she

asks me in a voice of brass and sugar whether I'd like to 'hear a pretty noise.' Of course I say yes. She belches at me. When she's been drinking Schlitz, her belches are just as foul as the belches of a forty-year old man."

"OK, so she's trying on different things. That doesn't make her less interesting to me. That doesn't make me doubt her. It fascinates me. Maybe her 'deal' is that she's an actress. You were able to find a connection between her paganness and her culture. Maybe there's a third connection, between everything, covering everything she does. You just haven't realized it. How is that her problem? She doesn't owe explanations to you." Milton was speaking with torrential enthusiasm. Milton loved to hear Herman say *her* and mean Jaspar, even if Herman hated her out of self-despising love. He was the first person in this new world to know Milton was in love. It felt like love to be defending her. They were both in love with her; it bound them together.

"I'm telling you, she is a trickster, and the rest is beauty. I suppose you don't see that it is beauty which has formed all of those masochistic friendships of hers?"

It was then that Milton saw how every theory about Jaspar that Herman had, had been transformed into visions of those deformations we

carry within ourselves, that forever limit how much we can be loved. In his hysterical way Herman had exhausted himself. He was back onto the beer, with his face turned away. He may have even been ashamed of himself. As a picture of vacuous Jaspar was scoured away by love, what remained was fury with Herman, in which Milton saw him stripped of his vivid speech and his intellectual gifts, hunched over in solitary misery. His great physical mass was curled with inner pain, like a large animal assaulted by whips.

“What hope do you have for Jaspar, if you hate her and despise her friends? What hope do you have for yourself if you’re in love with her?” A little bit of the intoxication of the tower, ringed round with darkness, was working its way into Milton. The knowledge that pot and alcohol were intermixed in the human tangle of the party loosened him up. Herman, at a disadvantage, struck an easy note.

“What hope, my friend?” He gulped at the beer. “Let us forget about today, until tomorrow. Who knows? Perhaps there’s hope after all!” With this he was plainly joking, as well as urging himself towards greater drunkenness. He leaned on Milton’s listening ear to make his intoxication into a careless oblivion. Milton was sick of him. They’d ceased to be brothers.

"So be it. I'm going to take another look at the party," Milton said, exhaling. Herman nodded, eager to be alone.

Then he thought better of it and said, "It's all the same, it's always the same thing, it's empty, my boy. As empty as this I'm holding in my hand. There's nothing important I can't see from this tower. Goodbye, goodbye, to each his own pain in the head and ache in the you-know-what! Say hello to Jaspar for me. Tell her it's an excellent little party tonight. First class." But Milton was already descending the wooden ladder and hurrying away.

When he came down, the outside patio was practically deserted. The smell of pot was as faint as a memory. There were two guys outside, both drinking cans of Bud, who were in a sinister partnership. They weren't part of the school, and they were much older than Ray. They'd heard the news but arrived too late. The brute ennui in both of them stank of violence. Milton looked at them involuntarily. One had a jean jacket, torn at the shoulder, and a baseball cap. The other had an old mohawk which had not been tended, so that it looked like a badly trimmed hedge. They let Milton pass without a word his way, but the snarling conversation they made was frightening.

Inside, boys and girls were splayed across the rooms, encased in sleep. Ray himself had disappeared to his room, but his friends were all over the couches, their faces settled. They were like infants in the pink of sleep, absent from the world, like the silence of flame when the paper catches fire from the match. In that moment the match does not blaze and the paper does not crackle. Milton picked his way among them like a man walking a trail bursting with roots. He headed, single-minded, towards Jasper. When he came to their door and let himself in, the girls were still there. The Goth had gone under the covers, and she was awful to see in black-and-white makeup. It lingered as a repulsive shell of personality.

Beside her, not covered, was Jaspar. It was evident that she'd fallen on the bed and fallen asleep in a single motion, because her knee was still arched in a restless posture of thought, one hand was on a belly rocked with laughter, and the other hand was just off the bed, palm upwards, ending with the fingers in a Buddha gesture.

Her face was not like the other sleeping faces; it was too finely made. When she closed her eyes in sleep, all the deep curves of her cheeks, the impatient dash of shadow of the cheekbones, and the brown lines of hair in the eyebrows that merged into a question, a leap - all this was preserved, and more. The question of the mouth was like

the question of the eyebrows, changing from hard to soft, from invitation to challenge, with the slightest change of breath. It was like a face that has been shaped as a violin is shaped, into bows and secrets. And she lay upon a streaming curtain of hair, and the dim light of the room (kept by a lamp in the corner) lay in her hair like embroidery. Down the channel of her throat, past the strong v-shaped tendons at the breastbone, Milton's eyes were drawn down her. Emotions of every kind, shame, love, desire like a touch of fever, all were gathered in the back of his throat. Lucid and in love, he felt an overwhelming need to cough, or in some other awkward way announce himself. Below the neck began the red-earth velvet of her dress that climbed her breasts and hung smoothly over her ribs and stomach. The velvet crinkled under her fingers, where her hand lay over her belly. Then the pleat in the velvet, at the wide point of the hips, and the rise where her leg rose towards her knee. One leg was straight. On the other leg, the velvet had fallen a little ways back, and Milton could see the curve of her thigh disappear under the knee, and then swell again into the curve of her calf, just as full. It was all Milton could stand to see. He looked away from Jaspar. He felt that to see her in this way, his desire gnawing at the rose of her sleep, was so

criminal that if he looked too long, some door would slam shut between them, and she would be forever behind glass.

The interesting form of the other girl, in her awkward out-of-date clothing, was sprawled on the floor atop an inadequate blanket. She was using her arm as a pillow. Milton did not investigate her, because he was remorseful about creeping without shame through the house, pillaging the sleepers with his gaze. At the same time, the absoluteness of Jaspar's sleeping face stayed with him and comforted him, as if it was an answer of some kind, making the party worthwhile. Outside the darkness was like lake-water at twilight. Earlier in the evening, while Ray took trouble over Milton because Milton was sober, and had been delivered by his mother, and might bring everybody down, he'd shown Milton a hiding-place for sleeping bags and woollen blankets. Milton opened the cabinet drawers and took an armful of bedding. An awe of silence had come over him. He wrapped himself up in this, with grey woollen blankets above and below, and waited for sleep. For a while he stayed up, thinking about Jaspar, and Herman, and Jaspar, and thoughts of her played among Herman's dangerous words. Milton wondered if Herman was able to sleep in the freezing tower. Just then he heard the sound of a car's engine igniting. The car backed into position, crunching the gravel, and then drove off.

Gradually the sound of the wheels and the engine disappeared. It had to be Herman driving drunk. At this point, though sleep carried him off, beyond all knowing. In our sleep, cut off from the play of the eyes, of the world, we come to realize (if anything of the ferreting curiosity of consciousness survives into sleep) how little we know ourselves as we truly are, hung like stars in a void. From the airy heights of sleep, we look down at life like stars seeing themselves in a pool - and in that pool our reflections are rocked by dreams. We see how we are drawn downwards towards life, like stars falling, burned to nothing by our passage.