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## THE SETTLEMENT

ON THE PROPERTY next to my grandfather's farm stood a haunted house. Its dormers stared doom, its rusted tin roof was slippery and dangerous with torn metal.

It was a place to break rules.

Rhoda and I slid the steep tin roof, enduring rips to our clothes and skin until one night in the summer of 1948 she went off the roof's edge, soaring like a ski jumper, convinced that because she was a skinny girl she would land like a feather instead of hitting the gravel like a bomb.

Rhoda refused to take responsibility for the self-damage. I was blamed for her broken arm. My grandfather said I had no sense.

Although Rhoda and I spent summers together, plunked often into the same bathtub or sharing a bed in our babyhood, or skinny-dipping together in the pond behind my grandfather's barn even into the years of puberty, my impetuous cousin remained somewhat of a mystery to me.

In a photographic negative where day is night, black is white, the twelve-year-old Rhoda, her arm in a plaster cast, grins or grimaces at the camera, I cannot tell which.

**I**T WOULD NOT BE UNTIL MY MIDDLE AGE that I connected the haunted house to the cyclical nature of the settlements in the Catskill foothills, the rise and demise of generations, each succeeding wave in tension with the one that had come before.

After Rhoda's broken arm, the abandoned house was forbidden to us. But on moonless nights when we could not be spotted, we continued to make our way there to conjure ghosts and generally scare ourselves silly in the total dark of a country night. The following winter, Rhoda wrote from the farm that the haunted house had burned down. My grandfather, Sam Pearl, insisted that Negroes from the village had done it. He had seen smoke wisping from the crumbled chimneys for weeks, he said, and had seen the laid off laundry workers setting up a squatter's camp there.

Rhoda suspected that our grandfather had torched the place. She guessed that it was to protect her from herself. Or from what he believed was my recklessness.

**T**WO SUMMERS LATER, in the year 1950, when my cousin Rhoda and I were both fourteen, we stumbled into a new geography of temptation.

Up the road about two miles, past other working farms and summer boarding houses and collections of bungalows we discovered not just another abandoned house but an entire, haunted settlement, a resort of the nineteenth century, hidden a quarter mile in from the road, twelve cabins still standing in good order around the murk of an old pond. One cabin for each tribe, my cousin Rhoda said. But this settlement predated the coming of the Jews to the Catskills. There was something about it, in the design, in the careful pattern of houses as they approached the pond, in the ranking you might say, that smacked of Protestant reticence, and modesty, and order.

Even the placement of the privies seemed organized and discreet.

The settlement had been built of old growth timber. The outhouses still were roofed, and contained piles of magazines, the *Saturday Evening Post*, *Collier's Weekly*, and catalogues from Sears, all yellowed and water-stained, but somewhat readable. The oldest magazines, *Godey's Lady's Book* and *Leslie's Illustrated*, were crumbling into dust. A few *Police Gazettes* from the 1920s seemed racy even by 1950s standards. In one of the outhouses, hanging from a hook, we also found copies of a more recent publication, the *Negro Digest*, from the mid-1940s.

Rhoda loved to use the outhouses. She would straddle the wooden seat, pee forcefully into the pit below, and smoke a cigarette. “To keep the bees out,” she said.

“Out of what?” I once asked.

“You, boy, mind your manners,” she said, slamming shut the outhouse door.

**I**N THE CENTER OF THE SETTLEMENT was an old well, its iron pump brown with rust but still serviceable. The water fed by underground springs was potable, delicious, filtered through sand and stone until it had a blue sparkle to it. Of course, you couldn’t just pump the well on demand. You had to prime it first. We used old milk bottles, always careful to refill them before we left. No one moved the bottles while we were away. Those who had dug the well, and the generations descended from them, were long gone.

We got used to the creepiness, the creak of a door on rusted hinges, the cracking of old wood, the unevenness of the crumbling brick walk which ran from the well to the cabins. But we were always out of there by dark, not sure at all that the original builders and vacationers would not return, those old stock Americans about whom we had learned in school. They, the Dutch, the English, the Scots-Irish, had paid a blood price for this place. They were a tough people, impatient of government and quarrelsome about religious visions, not the kind of folks you’d want to run into on a dark night when you were a trespasser on their history.

**B**Y THE NEXT SUMMER WHEN WE WERE FIFTEEN, Rhoda and I were walking even more dangerous ground. It had been years since we shared a tub or a bed but we would still strip on a summer’s day and dive into the pond we called the frog pool at the back of our grandfather’s property.

My grandfather disapproved, as did Rhoda’s mother. What had been charming to my aunt in her daughter’s early childhood now seemed fraught with peril. And in her mother’s lectures Rhoda and I caught the sulfur-and-brimstone whiff of incest, a hint that a flirtation between first cousins might have been acceptable in the isolation of the *shetl* but certainly not here in our America, and that perhaps we were literally seeing too much of each other and if we could not be separated in our adventures—we should, at least, like ancient Adam and Eve know that we were naked and cover up.

My bathing suit was of the old-fashioned kind still worn at the time, all black wool and itch, wet or dry. It was an instrument of torture, and I wore it only on those rare occasions when we were invited to swim in a public lake or in the pool of a Catskill hotel. Rhoda, too, owned a suit, flowered, of one piece, with a little skirt sewn to the bottom, which she considered ridiculous. My own mother, Rhoda's mother's sister, on those rare weekends when she came up from the city, thought the whole bathing suit crisis was somewhat overblown.

"You're not doing anything with Rhoda, are you?" she asked when we were alone.

"Doing anything?"

"Don't be cute," she said.

I protested my innocence, and my mother let it go. But my aunt and my grandfather were adamant.

"No more birthday suits," my grandfather said.

I HAD NOT REALIZED that having a naked girl cousin would be such a problem. Rhoda's developing breasts, the short red hair curling up from the joining of her thighs, the way the pond water beaded on that red moss, were, particularly at the beginning of the summer, objects of curiosity. After a separation of almost a year, I suppose we were each interested to see how far the other had progressed.

I was aware in those first few swims that my cousin was also giving me the once over. She commented at the start of our fifteenth summer on the lengthening of my penis, and asked bawdily if it got in my way. We were, like most youngsters, students of the flesh but the idea that her mother and my grandfather clung to—that we were in danger of copulating in every dark mountain corner—seemed to both of us a bit ridiculous. I do admit that I was grateful for Rhoda's nakedness. It helped me to understand what lay beneath the angora sweater combinations of my female classmates in high school; and Rhoda's earthiness, her lack of modesty, helped dispel fantasies to which I would have otherwise been inclined, but save for the beginning of each summer I pretty much took Rhoda's physical self for granted and, unlike the adults around us, did not feel that we were on some downhill run, drawn forward not by gravity but by hormonal convergence.

**T**HAT FIFTEENTH SUMMER, in the year 1951, I had my first real job, clerking for the W&K Food Mart in our tiny village of Slaters Ridge. The Food Mart faced the Ontario & Western tracks in the village center. The store was owned by Sam Wilensky. His partner, Ezra Katz, was long gone, dead or bought out, I knew not which. To take care of the summer resort trade, there were three full-time employees—Izzy, a squint-eyed Camels chain smoker, gentle and soft-spoken under his smoke cloud; me—the kid—who ran the produce counter and was in charge of the schmaltz herring barrel, a stinking chore; and Ditch Pollard, a colored man who did deliveries in the W&K's rattle-and-bang Studebaker pick-up truck, calling on the bungalow colonies, and small hotels, and farms.

For at least a third of our customers, particularly the old-timers, Yiddish was the language of choice. It was the language of my grandparents, certainly, but almost never spoken by my mother and father, and aunt. I learned some of the basics for waiting on customers—*vos noch?*—what's next?—and learned to count in Yiddish but would often be lost when confronted with a non-English speaker.

Wilensky was furious that he had hired such a moron. Gentle Izzy would move along the counter under his cloud of smoke to interpret when he could but it was Ditch, a black man and practicing Methodist, who gave me Yiddish lessons when things were slow. Ditch's mother had come up to work at the Sullivan County Laundry along with a group of black women from Georgia. He had been raised, most of the time, on a chicken farm about two miles from town where his mother boarded, and had learned his Yiddish from the couple who ran the place. The couple lived as husband and wife but they were, in fact, unmarried. Ardent communists, Ditch said, believers in free love. They came from a city called Vilna in Lithuania. Apparently, their brand of Yiddish had a special accent.

"A *litvak!*" customers said with surprise.

"No, no," Ditch would counter. "One of Noah's grandchildren, one of the sons of Ham."

**D**ITCH WAS THE MENTOR and I was the apprentice in the language of my own forefathers, and in the lore of Slaters Ridge. And in the keeping of certain secrets. He asked me, for one thing, not to discuss the political beliefs of the couple that had half-raised him. With America beginning its second year of war against communists in Korea, Ditch did not want the Lithuanians to get in trouble. Ditch seemed old to me, perhaps he was forty-five to my fifteen. He

treated me as someone badly in need of an education. "Whites," Ditch insisted, "go through life denying the reality of other people." He paused for a long drag on his cigarette, and then continued.

"They pretend that the eyes and ears and brains of others do not properly function.

"It's comical," Ditch said as he double-clutched the truck into low gear.

**D**ITCH POLLARD HATES WHITE PEOPLE," my grandfather said. "Be careful where he leads you."

"I don't hate anybody," Ditch told me. "I am a Christian man. But I do hate the *idea* that you can take all the evil that's in you and then lay it off on some other folk, and then go around clucking about how bad those other folk behave."

"That cuts both ways," I said.

There was a long silence between us.

"Certainly does," Ditch said.

Roaring down the long hill from the ridge into the village, the old truck bouncing and rattling on the torn macadam, we often passed the hidden point of entry into the old settlement. I did not yet trust Ditch with the secret of the twelve lost tribes. But one day, Ditch pulled the old Studebaker onto the grass and skidded to a stop.

"Got to show you something," he said. And then led me onto the faintly visible path through the high grass that Rhoda and I had worn down on our visits.

He stopped by the old well in the settlement, lifted the old Crowley Dairy milk bottles and peered at the water. "Ghosts," Ditch said. "They always keep this pump primable."

"Yes," I said.

"You and the girl cousin," Ditch said. "You come to this place."

I nodded.

"I've seen her red hair, here and there," he said. "In an outhouse, caught in that blackberry bush.

"You trippin' the fantastic with that Rhoda?" he said.

"No," I said.

"Good," he said. "I know you Jews do marry your cousins some of the time, but it is kind of close, you know. For comfort."

I nodded again.

"Girl's mother, though. She was a wild child."

I laughed. Not my widowed aunt. My aunt was a worrier, and a prude.

"Most of the girls in the village," he said. "They played right out here, in this lost settlement."

Ditch stood there, looking around, shaking his head, seeing what I could not see. I watched the late afternoon sun pour through the trees, the leaf shadow dappling his chestnut skin.

"Lord, what didn't they do?" he said. It was not really a question to God. It was a statement down to earth.

**W**HEN YOU ARE FIFTEEN, it is not difficult for an adult to use you for purposes that you do not know. Sometimes your instincts save you. Other times, it may turn out you are just too damn smart for a proper understanding of your own limited universe.

A few nights later, Rhoda and I slipped past my grandfather's barn to the frog pool to skinny-dip by the light of the stars and a three-quarter moon. It was a cool August night and we sat on the old stone wall around the pond letting the breeze raised by the heat of the day take the moisture from our bodies.

"Ditch knows," I said.

"Knows what?"

"About the settlement. He took me there," I said. "Even showed me your red hair, a strand of it in that outhouse you favor."

"He is spying on us," she said.

I could feel Rhoda shivering next to me.

"I feel violated," she said. It was an extraordinarily adult thing to say. I wondered if she had read it somewhere. Or, as with many of her prejudices, borrowed it from someone.

"I'm not using that outhouse any more," she said.

"You are making this into a big deal," I said.

"It's as if he's staring up from the bottom of the privy, at my whatsis," Rhoda said.

"Hell, every turtle and frog in the pond has seen your whatsis," I said. "It's no big deal."

"I've been peeing on that nigger's head," Rhoda said.

"Nobody calls him that," I said.

Rhoda grabbed my hand, placed it on her left breast. "Feel my heart pounding," she said. "This whole thing makes me afraid."

I could feel Rhoda's nipple thicken and rise.

"Nobody calls him that," I said again.

She gathered up her clothes and ran past the barn toward my grandfather's house, her skin reflecting the starlight. Rhoda naked. Now that's really going to piss off the old man, I thought. And my aunt, too, no matter what Ditch implied about her. And maybe exactly because of what Ditch implied.

**T**WO WEEKS LATER, at the end of the Labor Day weekend, big pre-war Cadillac and Packard limousines with faded paint and sagging springs crawled up the hill out of the village toward the ridge. A few hours later, those same hackies descended, loaded with people, household goods, pots, pans, pillows tied with clothesline to fenders and running boards, the hired cars heading for Route 17 and various boroughs of the city of New York.

Other family groups crowded the village, lining up for the afternoon train, or piling up suitcases and cartons at the Short Line bus stop.

It was my last day of work at the W&K. Within a week, I, too, would return to the city. Around four, Ditch motioned me outside. We piled into the truck and headed for the long hill up to the ridge. Ditch showed me a bottle of Four Roses under the seat.

He stopped the Studebaker about a hundred yards past the secret entrance to the settlement. "Got something else to share," he said.

We came to what looked like a tiny chapel, at a considerable distance from the twelve houses of the settlement. The little stone building with its arched entrance was almost invisible, overgrown with poison ivy and thick, thorned stalks of wild roses. Underfoot, I saw what I guessed to be a continuation of the brick walk that had begun or ended at the well. Here, deep in the woods, it was mostly grown over with brush but a brick here and there jutted at an angle, heaved up by winter frosts.

Ditch offered me a pull from his bottle. I rolled the Four Roses around in my mouth. The whiskey was surprisingly sweet, and flowered warm in the belly.

On the floor of the chapel, Ditch pried up several bricks and extracted a large paint can wrapped in yellow oilskin. While I watched, he pried up the lid with his work knife.

"Like I told you," he said, "the village girls played out here long time ago. And it's a secret I think you deserve to share."

He took another pull on the bottle, then handed it to me. The whiskey tasted even better the second time, hitting the belly with a small explosion.

"It's something that more than just a few black folks like me need to know," Ditch said. "Something that's gonna die out in the community when my generation dies out, unless..."—and here he pointed his finger at me—"... unless I pass it on to a young squirt like you."

Ditch pulled out from the paint can a cardboard packet tied with an old shoelace. He carefully unfolded the cardboard to reveal a small collection of black and white photographs.

Here were the women of Slaters Ridge as the girls they were thirty years before.

They were all artfully posed. And they were all naked.

There was Sam Wilensky's wife-to-be, Madge, at age fifteen or sixteen, without a stitch and with her index finger inserted in her vagina. There was the girl who would become the doctor's wife—holding the penis of a boy whose face was out of the frame. Was that the future doctor? I could not tell. There were some fourteen photographs in all. Ditch had saved my aunt's photograph for last.

There was Rhoda's mother, looking very much like Rhoda at fifteen, kneeling on a brick floor, the nipples of her breasts erect, with a disembodied penis in her mouth.

"Where's the rest of the guy?" I asked.

Ditch laughed. "It's a dildo," he said. "Made out of wood, I think."

**A**S THE STUDEBAKER TRUCK SLOWLY CRAWLED in first gear back down the hill toward the village of Slaters Ridge, Ditch was drunk. And I was not far behind. He pulled into the red clay drive that ran from the road to my grandfather's front door.

"Live and let live *iz meineh* motto," Ditch said, slurring his words, half-sliding into Yiddish.

"But the next time you hear people making fun of the colored in this town," Ditch said, "you think of what you saw today. Next time you hear some asshole rattling on about 'niggers on Saturday night' you think of those white girls on whatever morning they took those photographs."

Ditch slowly punched the thin steering wheel.

"I am counting on you to remember," he said. And then he punched me hard in the arm. And pushed me out the door.

Before dark, I walked alone up to the settlement and retrieved the photograph of my aunt.

That evening, I asked Rhoda to walk with me to the charred ashes of the haunted house next door to my grandfather's property. It had been a particularly bad week for both of us. My grandfather had caught us in the frog pond in the full light of late afternoon and my aunt, fearful of her daughter's virtue, had once again raised holy hell.

She had called my mother in the city, and my mother had called me in return.

"Are you and Rhoda *doing* something?" she said.

"Yes," I lied.

"Yes?"

"And she's a couple months pregnant," I lied again.

"Don't you get smart with me."

For the first time in my life, I hung up the telephone on my mother.

**Y**OU MAY NEVER FORGIVE ME FOR THIS," I said, sitting with Rhoda on the ground next to the collapsed tin roof.

"You gonna break my arm?" she said. "Again?"

"Worse," I said.

I turned on the small flashlight.

Rhoda stared for a long time.

"It's wooden," I said.

"Let's go swimming," she said.

**W**E LAID OUR CLOTHES ON THE STONE WALL that bordered our grandfather's frog pond. Rhoda took my hands and placed them on her breasts.

"They might see us," I said.

"To hell with her, and him," my cousin Rhoda said.

Then she grabbed my penis, and put it into her whatsis.

That is how my first cousin and I lost our innocence.

## PART II

**M**Y GRANDFATHER SAM PEARL never forgave me for becoming involved with my first cousin, Rhoda, his other grandchild.

“With all the pussy in the world, you enter your own blood.”

Ditch Pollard, a deacon of his church, the African Methodist Episcopal which held services in a concrete block one room structure down by the town’s failed sulfur springs resort, had on a liquor-fueled afternoon wanted some revenge on Sam Pearl, for the old man’s outspoken prejudices and contempt. But when sober, which was most of the time, Ditch was a man of conscience and my friend, and was troubled that he had been responsible for throwing Rhoda and me together, for brokering the fornication, so to speak.

In plotting his revenge, I do not think he believed that Rhoda and I would take things so far, that within two years I would get Rhoda pregnant and, consequently, would so narrow the line of the old man’s descendants—hurting old Sam Pearl, sure—but in Ditch’s eyes, hurting ourselves even more.

**W**HEN WE WERE BOTH SEVENTEEN Rhoda told Sam Pearl we wanted to get married, that we, in fact, *had* to get married. The old man eased himself down on to the front steps of the farmhouse, put his head in his hands, and wept. He was shedding no tears for me. Only for Rhoda, the beautiful and, he had assumed, virginal granddaughter who had lived in his house most of her years. If I had told him that Rhoda initiated the first carnal connection, he would have disbelieved. If I had told him that Rhoda had done this because she had seen a photograph of her mother, Laurie, snapped thirty years before in which the teenaged Laurie Pearl was playing the whore, he would have closed his door and his heart to me forever. As it turned out, even with what little he did know, he was sick at heart to think that Rhoda’s innocence was gone and, even more complicated, that the family was faced with a union of first cousins which might produce a damaged progeny: imbeciles, fools, a line of naturals burdened with imaginary ruffs and bells.

My Aunt Laurie, now shunning me as violator and rapist, insisted that Rhoda get an abortion. Although the operation was then illegal, Laurie said she knew of a Russian émigré, a doctor in everything but name,

who ended the lives of unwanted embryos in a sterile, white-tiled back room in Monticello, New York, not far from Slaters Ridge.

My own father, a failed artist and flouter of conventions, and a man sometimes involved in small illicit enterprises including cheating on my mother, could not conceal his pride in the evidence of my manhood. Years later, he, artist and rogue, confessed to me that he had envied my penetration of Rhoda. But at the time he also urged the Russian solution.

Rhoda would have none of it.

“You made a mistake,” my Aunt Laurie said. “You can erase the mistake.”

“You want me to kill your grandchild?”

“That is no way to pose the question,” my mother said.

Rhoda looked over at me, the guilty bystander. How did I propose to get them off her back? I shrugged.

“They want me to stick a knitting needle up my cunt,” my cousin Rhoda said. “And kill our child.”

“My God,” her mother said. “Where did you learn such language? From him?”

I shook my head, no, no, not from me.

Rhoda began to laugh, nothing hysterical, just a slow giggle that bubbled up from deep within her belly where for all I knew a son or a daughter of mine was in that very moment laughing with her.

It was the sight of me trying to be a good boy, she later said. I was standing there hunched over as if to make myself smaller in the world, an object that would do no harm. Laugh or cry, it would have made no difference, she said. In that moment she realized she was completely alone.

My grandfather, Sam Pearl, had been sitting by himself in the corner of the kitchen of his farmhouse, chain-smoking Phillip Morris cigarettes. He withdrew one every ten minutes from a tobacco-colored package. It was a hot and humid Indian summer night and the smoke hung in layers around him, dispersing only when he coughed.

"In Russia," Sam Pearl said, "young women died from these operations.

"The boy, I would like to kill," he said, pointing to me. "But I do not want to lose my beautiful girl."

He slowly rose, stepping into the cone of tobacco smoke wreathing around him, and walked out. I could hear him peeing off the side of the porch. My father looked over at me with a small smile but Sam Pearl's daughters pretended not to notice the old man's drizzle.

"A few days of discomfort," Laurie said, "and it's over.

"Maybe for you," Rhoda said, shaking tears into her long red hair. "But not for me."

There was a long silence in which I suppose each of us pondered our own solutions.

"Maybe I should have taken him in my mouth, instead," Rhoda said.

Her mother gasped.

"Then I wouldn't be pregnant."

I looked up to see the imprint of her mother's five fingers across the pale and freckled skin of my cousin's face. The sound of the slap was so sharp and clean, it echoed off the hard, horsehair plaster of the kitchen walls.

Rhoda did not raise her hand to touch her face. She stayed composed, not surprised at the sudden violence.

"Whore," her mother said.

"It takes one to know one," Rhoda said. She stood and walked slowly through the kitchen door to join my grandfather on the porch. Through the window, I saw old Sam Pearl put his arm around her and draw her close to him. I felt sorry for both of them. I convinced myself that I was responsible for all this.

"What on earth made her say that?" my father said. An outsider in Slaters Ridge, he was not privy to its secrets.

All I could do was shrug. And be grateful that she had not described her mother as a cocksucker, as Rhoda had done the night she had leaned

back against the stone wall of my grandfather's frog pond and opened her legs and taken my penis and directed it inside of her.

**S**HE IS NOT PREGNANT," Ditch Pollard told me.

"Ditch, you are so full of it."

"I been delivering Kotex, Kotex Super, and I haven't stopped."

"That's for her mother," I said. "For Laurie Pearl."

"No, Laurie Pearl's been through the change. She stopped ordering a few years back."

"You seem to know a lot about what goes on in my relatives' underwear," I said.

"I told you once before," he said. "Everybody pretends colored people is blind, deaf and dumb. But how could I not know?"

"You smuggling the Kotex into the farm?"

"As a matter of fact, I am," Ditch said. "Rhoda pays me."

"But she doesn't even like you. Why would she trust you with that kind of secret?"

"Beats the shit out of me," he said.

"This does not make any sense."

Ditch smiled. "Maybe I'm gaming you," he said. "Or maybe Rhoda is gaming me, and laughing up her sleeve."

**R**HODA MAY HAVE BEEN MORE DEVIOUS than any of us imagined. But I saw no evidence that she was *not* pregnant. And, fearful of being denied access to her body, it was a long time before I even hinted that the pregnancy might be false.

On a walk in the meadows above my grandfather's farm, Rhoda sat on a low stone wall, opened her legs and asked me to lean into her with my ear to her belly.

"I certainly do have something growing in there," she said.

All I could hear were small gurgles and pops, and what sounded like a small fart.

"Sounds like gas," I said.

Rhoda giggled.

"You can feel the heartbeat."

There was indeed a pulse but I could not tell if that was our formative child or Rhoda's own plumbing.

"Kiss my *pupik*," Rhoda said.

I dutifully put my lips to her belly button.

"Now kiss the place where our child was made."

**W**E SHARED A FEARSOME JOY. Two seventeen-year-olds withdrawn from our respective high schools while our families pondered our fate, and the fate of our unborn child. My father returned to the city to run his part-time business in art supplies, and, according to my mother, his full-time monkey business, currently involving a lady magician who played school assemblies in greater New York. But my mother stayed in Slaters Ridge. She and Laurie Pearl and my grandfather, old Sam Pearl, and Rhoda and I all lived on the farm waiting either for Rhoda to do the sensible thing and have an abortion, or for nature to take its course.

Given the fact that we had already surrendered our innocence, almost all barriers were down. We were not allowed to share the same bed. This was 1953 after all. But there was no more carping about our trysts. We made love in the barn, in the loft where the scent of seasoned hay filled our noses and could be tasted on our tongues, up in the high meadow above the farm among the headstones of an old private graveyard where the original settlers had laid their dead around the time of the Civil War, and on the broad, flat lichen-covered stones that capped the walls built by those ancient farmers.

My cousin Rhoda was all straw-scent and moss, a fever of wetness, with a mind and mouth full of four-letter words and events. In the vocabulary we shared, there was no out of bounds. She kissed every inch of my body, and I hers. And with Rhoda's announced pregnancy, there was

no need for any artificial barriers or pauses, no interference between flesh and flesh. We did not need to be protected from each other, or so we thought.

“Well, if she ain’t in the family way,” Ditch Pollard said. “You sure going to put her there.”

**A**ROUND ARMISTICE DAY, Rhoda came to breakfast pale and shaken. And announced that she had miscarried. Within days, her mother put her back in school in Slaters Ridge.

I wanted to spend that school year with her up there in the mountains. My grandfather Sam Pearl would not hear of it. He said that I was barred from the farm for life. I had ruined his granddaughter. And that act could not be healed or retrieved.

If Rhoda had been faking the pregnancy as Ditch first insisted, what did this faked miscarriage signify? If indeed, she had flushed a child down the commode, had we lost a son? A daughter? Could she tell? Rhoda refused to discuss it. But with the fact or the fiction of the pregnancy ended, I was exiled to the city. Had that been her intent? She insisted not. She screamed, she raged, when I left for the railroad station. But I wondered if secretly she were glad to be rid of me. Free now to grab some other boy by the penis and place him inside her body.

**I** SHED TEARS FOR WEEKS after my return to Manhattan. Unable to sleep through the night, I counted the places in Rhoda into which I had intruded, and the openings we felt we had invented—the space between her breasts, the cheeks of her thin bottom, the crook of her elbow, the bend of her knee. I was near mad with loss.

The separation felt unnatural and wrong. It was not against the law for first cousins to marry, and I believed such a marriage would be a success since we had been together since infancy every summer on the farm. What couple could have been more compatible? What couple was more destined to live happily ever after?

If it had not been for my grandfather’s maneuverings and the terrible fire in Slaters Ridge, I believe we would have married in our eighteenth year. Laurie Pearl, Rhoda’s mother, was of course totally opposed. She had no idea that we had leverage, that we had uncovered in the abandoned settlement a few miles up the road from our grandfather’s farm a photograph of her committing an unnatural act, or at least imitating one, with a wooden dildo. Rhoda at her worst moments, frustrated that we were

kept apart, swore to me that she would have copies made of the photograph and paste them on telephone poles along the village roads.

I took heart from Rhoda's fury. It meant that she *did* miss me, would risk almost anything for us to be together. But posting those photographs would cut the cord that kept us children, transforming the lives of all of us. My mother would have wept with shame for her sister. My father, Max, would not have entirely understood. The only person I assumed who would have really understood was Ditch Pollard who had set this all in motion, a man I still believed was my friend.

"I could say I was drunk that day when I took you to the photographs," Ditch said. "But drunk is no excuse. Getting high only makes folks do faster what they had in mind to do in the first place. I am no fool. When I showed you the photographs that day I knew you would come back for them, and I strongly suspected you would show her momma's photograph to Rhoda. I fear I have ruined that child's life. Or at least made her old before her time."

Ditch pulled a pack of Luckies from his shirt pocket, peeled off the cellophane wrapper, carefully opened the silver foil on one side of the blue tax stamp, and tapped the opened pack gently against the edge of his left hand. He snapped the head of a wooden kitchen match with a thumb-nail, the same way I had seen heroes light their cigarettes in the movies. The smoke smelled delicious, particularly in the contrast of the clear country air.

"Disillusion about your parents comes early enough without some country nigger like me shoving your nose in it."

"I was the one who went back for the photograph and gave it to Rhoda. You seem to forget that," I said.

Ditch laughed. "Lord," he said. "You got to understand, boy, that someone three times your age can make the earth open and close before you, armed as they are with experience that you don't have."

**M**Y RUSSIAN-BORN GRANDFATHER'S antipathy toward Ditch Pollard and all black people, for that matter, was not, as he was all too ready to explain, something he was born with. He had come of age, after all, in tsarist Russia, a country that celebrated a black man as its national poet and hero. The young Sam Pearl, although an ill-educated peasant, was a great admirer of Aleksandr

Pushkin, great-grandson of an African prince. Pushkin, the Eritrean, had turned the language of ordinary Russians into music, my grandfather said. The dark-skinned poet had been a thorn in the side of the tsars, a fact that had endeared him to the Russian Jew, Sam Pearl. And the duelist Pushkin's death was an affair of honor, my grandfather said, as if honor, itself, were more important than life. Sam Pearl did not simply forgive Pushkin his color, he loved him for it. And was prepared to love those Africans he encountered in America when he arrived here a penniless immigrant. He saw them as he saw himself, despised by the powerful majority, recently borne out of a condition lower than serfdom, burdened with its heritage.

What changed him?

As he told it, he had expected to throw his arms around the colored men and women he met in America, and expected the same in return. Instead, he encountered rebuffs. In the few words of English he first acquired, he raved to them about his love for their standard bearer, their Moses poet, Aleksandr, and found that they had no interest and, in fact, thought him crazy. Wandering the streets of lower Manhattan in the late 1800s, the young Sam Pearl soon grew tired of being exploited for his greenhorn ways, not only by the native-born, both white and black, but by his fellow immigrant Jews. Above all, he wanted to be an American. And to be American, he concluded, based on all the evidence of his daily experiences, was to be a bigot.

My grandfather, a barely educated man of limited worldview, was determined, he said, to live up to the national expectation. But how could one turn his back on Pushkin? On all the genius of that race? And on the kindnesses one encountered in the midst of their poverty?

At this point in the telling, at least in his conversations with me about all this, he would grunt a few words about riding a freight car on the old Ontario and Western up to the mountains to seek a farm, one or two gold coins carefully saved and sewn into his jacket, attacked and robbed by fellow hobos led by a large Negro they called Brother Brownlow, then drifting in and out of consciousness, locked in that same car in the Middletown yards, and awakened to smoke curling from the straw and excelsior on the wooden floor.

Freed by railroad workers and suffering from smoke inhalation and minor burns, he was arrested for trespassing and destruction of railroad property and spent his first months in the Catskill foothills eating bologna sandwiches in a cell smeared with the excrement of former occupants.

It was in that cell that he began to fall out of love with Pushkin, and to see himself as a fool who knew nothing of the world and how it worked.

**G**IVEN A HALF-CENTURY OF ACQUIRED American prejudices, it was not difficult for Sam Pearl to convince himself that every Negro in the village of Slaters Ridge was a potential incendiary. But Ditch believed, as Rhoda did, that my grandfather had himself burned down the abandoned house on the property next door. The old man feared the itinerant black workers who sometimes sheltered there in cold weather, men from the county laundry laid off at the end of the tourist season. He did not want black people so close to his property. He also was still angry with me for sliding down the roof of that place Rhoda and I called the haunted house, and had accused me of contributing to Rhoda's fantasy that she could fly.

I could never be sure who committed the arson, or for what reason. I knew only that the scene of our childhood games had burned to the ground. And that my grandfather, Sam Pearl, afflicted by age and paranoia, had more than one motive for getting rid of it.

**B**Y MID-WINTER, I, TOO, WAS ON FIRE. I could no longer bear being without Rhoda, without the odor of her flesh, the liquid willingness of her, the pure joy of thumbing our noses at the world.

I was still persona non grata at the farm. Had I shown my face, I would not have been surprised if my grandfather fired a round or two of buckshot in my direction. Rhoda's mother, Laurie, like my grandfather, considered me depraved. I decided to risk all.

It took only three rides to hitchhike from the city to a town within striking distance of Slaters Ridge. I walked the last three miles from the main street of Mountaindale along a road that went right by the Slaters Ridge high school. It was a difficult trek in heavy snow. When I arrived, classes were letting out for the day. Rhoda was not there. She was confined to bed, one of the girls told me. And what in hell was I doing up there anyway? Hadn't I done enough?

**S**HE'S GOT THE PNEUMONIA," Ditch Pollard said. "The double kind. Both lungs." Ditch studied me carefully. I tried to mask my feelings but I think Ditch caught on. It was not one of my best moments. My first reaction was not fear for her well being, it was instead total frustration. No lovemaking, not even a frantic touching. What a dirty trick, after coming all this way. And there was not much

time. It was already growing dark and I would have to be back in the city a hundred miles away by bedtime. Ditch offered me train fare. I gladly accepted. But on the chance that I could somehow manage to see her, I walked the steep road rising from the village to my grandfather's farm.

In the kitchen, my grandfather slept with his feet propped up close to the coal stove. My Aunt Laurie sat at the kitchen table on an ice cream parlor chair, ignoring the discomfort of the wire back, and knitting a yellow sweater, probably for Rhoda. It was difficult to reconcile the slightly stooped figure of my aunt with the girl in the photograph of thirty years ago, playing the whore with an imitation of oral sex.

I crept up the outside stairs, shoes in hand, my socks soaked with melting snow. Rhoda lay in her room, her face bright with fever, the covers thrown off, her white cotton pajamas sweated through, showing pink patches where the wet cloth clung to her skin. The grate in the floor that allowed heat to rise from the kitchen stove was closed. The room in which my cousin slept was almost as cold as the mountain air outside.

I moved to cover her, pulling the down quilt slowly from her waist to her chin. As I tucked it in around her neck, she grabbed my wrist and slowly drew me into the bed.

"Father of my child," she whispered. And then fell back into her sleep or delirium, I knew not which. I lay holding her, listening for the footsteps of my aunt and grandfather. After a half hour, I heard the diesel blare of the New York bound train at a crossing a few miles outside of Slaters Ridge. I jumped from the second floor landing into the snow and raced down to the village.

The ancient passenger car of the Ontario and Western reeked of cinders and smoke absorbed when the O&W had been a coal-fired line. The car rocked with every shift in the track bed. The side-to-side motion of so many tons of iron and steel, the grinding of its wheels on the steel rails, felt dangerous and out of control. The only other passengers in the car were a family of Hasidim, a young husband and wife with four children, three boys and a girl. The woman's wig was slightly askew, the bottom of her long black skirt still wet from the walk to the station. She fed the children from a straw basket, carefully cracking hardboiled eggs and passing to each child a small purse of salt she constructed by folding paper napkins withdrawn from the pocket of her skirt.

For several minutes I observed their foreignness. My family had always made fun of these believers. Their values were not our values, if indeed we had any values at all. They were medieval, my mother said. And

dangerous, my Aunt Laurie said. She had never forgotten the night we were attacked by teenagers when driving through a Hasidic settlement after sundown on a Friday night. The boys in their sidelocks and wearing their fringes bore down on us for violating the Sabbath, pelting the old Buick with stones and fence pickets until Sam Pearl exited the car, bumper jack in hand.

It was difficult, watching the mother and father on the train, and their four polite children, to think they shared the same fanatical love of God's rules.

I IMAGINED THIS YOUNG FATHER AND MOTHER in the acts that had created these four children. I wondered what it would be like making love to a bald or nearly bald woman. I wondered what Rhoda would be like without her long red hair.

The fantasies, the motion of the train, triggered an erection. I folded my hands over my lap. The woman at the end of the car smiled at me and offered a hard-boiled egg. I smiled back and shook my head no. She shrugged, and turned back to her children.

Would she be shocked if she knew at that moment of my discomfort? I did not know the ways of the Hasids. But I was glad she did not know of my history with my first cousin.

As we rattled our way through the mountain dark, I pondered the mystery of how much I cared for Rhoda. We had been companions most of our lives, compatible long before we were sexual. Or perhaps, we had always been sexual. I could not tell. I did give myself credit for not having attempted to make love to her in her delirium. Perhaps this thing between us was entering a new stage. Still I was never able to separate Rhoda's body from her spirit. As far as I was concerned, they were one.

I DREAMED YOU," Rhoda wrote. "And when I woke, I saw the wet prints of your feet on my bedroom floor. When I showed them to my mother, she turned white. And almost choked. We got ghosts, I said. Then my mother screamed.

"Out of the room, cocksucker, I told her. Then she slapped me, and I knew I was awake. And that I would not die."

On the back of the envelope, Rhoda had written SWAK. Sealed with a kiss. And had planted a big red lipstick imprint across the white vellum. It was the courtship style of the times. She was still a child. So was I.

**W**E CORRESPONDED all through the remaining winter. Rhoda mailed letters to me, care of my friend Yitz, who lived a few blocks away in Manhattan. I mailed my letters to Ditch Pollard, and Ditch delivered them with his truckloads of groceries from the W&K Market.

That winter my grandfather consulted with a marriage broker on the Lower East Side of New York. The plan was to marry off his granddaughter before she ran away with his grandson, *me*. It was an old-fashioned, old-world maneuver. Rhoda wrote me about it. Two shy young men took the train up to Slaters Ridge, a month apart. The first one was kind of cute, she said. But she gave both the same treatment. On unescorted walks around my grandfather's property, she described to each young man how she had fucked her cousin near the frog pond. And in the barn loft. And against a headstone in the small gentile cemetery far up in the meadows. According to Rhoda, the young men fled.

Sam Pearl then decided he would ship his granddaughter off to Israel, to live on a kibbutz, learn hard work, meet a nice Jewish boy who was not her first cousin. Perhaps a nice Jewish boy from Russia who loved Pushkin. My Aunt Laurie was appalled. Israel was not the chaste, socialist dream he envisioned. They copulated like rabbits on the kibbutzim, she told him.

**I**N THE SPRING, I arranged a clandestine meeting through Ditch. In the old abandoned settlement up the road from Sam Pearl's farm, Rhoda and I opened our arms to each other. But suddenly shy, we did not make love. For a long time we sat in silence, holding each other, inhaling the once familiar perfumes of sweat and hair, of wet wool, of the warmed leather of boots and shoes, of plain soap and Rhoda's strawberry-flavored lipstick, of the heat of intimate flesh.

At the beginning of all the previous summers, we had paused in our first meetings to size each other up and measure the growth of the other, to detect the obvious physical changes and the more subtle shifts in the timbre of voice, in the way light reflected from our eyes, the changes in our dress and undress which signaled how much progress into manhood and womanhood we had achieved.

Now, we only clung to each other, feeling rather than observing, understanding through the exchange of breath, through the shifting tension of muscle and the pressure of flesh, how far we had come, how much we had changed and how much we had not.

For the first hour, Rhoda breathed against my neck. For most of the hour after that, she wept. I could only guess that she was exploring the entire territory of what we had been to each other the summer before.

**T**HAT WAS ALL.

“Don’t write to me,” Rhoda said.

Then she walked out of the settlement and through the woods toward the road.

Two hours later, when the sun had set, Ditch’s truck pulled up on the road. He drove me to the station in Fallsburgh, a town far enough away that I could stay out of sight of my grandfather who in the warm months was often in the village of Slaters Ridge.

**I**N EARLY AUGUST, after I received an unexpected note from Rhoda, Ditch picked me up at the Fallsburgh station. It was before the coming of the late summer rains and the electrical storms that would soon hurl themselves at the farm. The Catskills this August were dressed in a yellow of unharvested straw. The sun on grass, on the earth, smelled wonderful.

“We’re going to burn the photographs,” Rhoda said. “And then we are going to be married.”

The old settlement a quarter mile in from the road had not much changed. The twelve cabins still marched down to the spring-fed pond. The glass milk bottles used to prime the old well had frozen some time in the previous winter and shattered. Rhoda and I had left them filled with too much water. The shards reflected the August sun, one piece of glass splitting the daylight into rainbow colors, a celebration of our ignorance. The rusted iron pump was warm to the touch.

At a distance from the pond, one of the wooden privies had assumed an odd posture, leaning forward. The ground around it had turned marshy, an underground spring now bubbling on the surface.

Some hundred yards from the cabins, we entered the tiny stone chapel under whose floor the photographs were buried. Rhoda had seen the snapshot of her mother, naked at fifteen or sixteen, faking fellatio with the wooden dildo. But she had not seen the others. She recognized all of

the young women—the girl with her finger inserted in her vagina, the girl holding the penis of the unidentified boy whose back was turned to the camera, all of them, the grown-up women of the town as the girls they had been thirty years before.

“This is what people do,” Rhoda said. “This is what you and I do.”

“Take pictures?”

“No, be interested in each other, be fascinated by each other.”

She arranged and rearranged the photographs for almost an hour, studying them, juxtaposing girls, creating cliques, deciding who would have been best friends.

“They’re really not dirty pictures,” Rhoda said.

“They seemed dirty enough when I first showed you your mother’s picture,” I said.

Rhoda smiled at me. “I think I pretended to be more shocked than I was. How people use their bodies, come on now, most girls know that.”

I thought the photograph had meant far more than that to us, and I told her so. It was permission in black and white. It had changed our lives. It had worked as a sexual catalyst. And it had gotten me in a whole barrel of trouble.

“You make too much of getting laid,” Rhoda said. In her voice was a kind of world-weariness and maturity, perhaps faked, perhaps real, that I did not expect of her. It was more than just evidence that she had grown another year. Something had been going on, and I knew not what.

**R**HODA KICKED OVER the leaning privy, tore boards from its roof, and built a small pyre near the well.

“We are burning the town’s history,” I said.

“We are doing the town a favor,” she said. “I don’t trust Ditch Pollard. That nigger will use these again some day to get even with white people.”

“Damn, I said. “Ditch is your friend. He smuggles stuff for you, acts as your letter carrier, keeps your secrets. So you call him names.”  
 “Nigger’s not a name,” she said. “It’s a condition.”

"Where do you get this stuff from? You sound more like Sam Pearl than like you."

"The colored almost killed Sam Pearl," Rhoda said. "And if they had," she said. "You and I would never have been born."

Rhoda then bent down and set the photographs on fire.

**T**HE TOWN OF SLATERS RIDGE did not actually lose several thousand acres of mountainside between the village and the ridge, the land that underlay it all was still there, and would overgrow within a short span of years. But along with the settlement, two barns, a rundown colony of summer bungalows, and my grandfather's own farm were consumed.

The volunteers from the village and from neighboring towns could not directly confront the blaze. There were no hydrants on the road up there, and the few pumpers available soon ran out of water, although one truckload of volunteers did draw from the pond at the old settlement until they sucked it dry. So they built firebreaks, and backfires, and ultimately got it under control. Fortunately, the fire never jumped the road leading to the ridge. The flames were contained on one side by the road and on the other by the railroad right of way that cut through the woods on the backside of town.

**F**OR A WHILE, there had been so much smoke that it confused the farm animals. With the sun blotted out, chickens on one farm marched to the henhouse in mid-day. And cows on another farm turned back to their barn until the barn, itself, caught fire.

My grandfather, on the other hand, was not confused at all. He went gunning for whoever the incendiaries might be. My Aunt Laurie called the police as soon as Sam Pearl stormed out of the house, shotgun in hand, but the police were busy at the fire scene and never tracked him down. The next morning, Ditch found my grandfather stone dead near the Sullivan County Laundry. There had been no foul play that anyone could determine. He had died of a stroke.

With the fire at our backs, Rhoda and I had run up the road toward the high ground of the ridge. On the ridge was a colony of Hasidim some three miles removed from the village and with them we watched the fire's progress below. I saw the woman from the train but she did not recognize me.

The people up there were kind enough, not knowing we had been criminally careless, but as always I had the feeling we had been catapulted

back into another century, and another geography, where we were not sure at all of the language and the rules.

**I**F WE HAD SHOWN around the photographs of Slaters Ridge matrons once young and once naked, we would have transformed the village. As it turned out, we had transformed Slaters Ridge in another way, and ourselves as well. There were extraordinary consequences. As Sam Pearl's oldest male heir, I would say the prayer for the dead. And although the arson was never pinned on us, I felt that Rhoda and I would pay for it for the rest of our lives. Ditch certainly knew, or strongly suspected.

The village laid Sam Pearl to rest in the cemetery in Glen Wild, New York, a few miles below the ridge. Laurie and my mother had wanted an elaborate coffin but there was no money for that. Instead, we buried him in the old Jewish tradition, in a plain pine box, which would soon dissolve into the earth. The cemetery was large, with sections for each neighboring town and for some of the early Jewish workers' bunds. There was also a section for colored people, maintained by the AME church. After the service for my grandfather, Ditch took me into his part of the cemetery and showed me a headstone carved with the legend, Brother Brownlow.

"They lie close enough," Ditch said. "To be antagonists in hell."

**M**Y AUNT LAURIE found an apartment over a dry goods shop in the village but her world was destroyed. She was worn down by her losses and I think she would have consented to Rhoda and me marrying. We were both eighteen. And we would have been free to screw ourselves silly, to make babies and to become bored with each other except for one extraordinary complication.

A day after Sam Pearl's funeral, with my parents already returned to New York, Rhoda told me she was three months pregnant. Pregnant for real. She said it defiantly as if challenging me to dare to judge her or to explore the ramifications of what such an announcement meant. I had not slept with her for almost a year.

She refused to countenance an abortion. Like the Hasidim who had sheltered us from the fire, she considered that an abomination. But I could have her without questions and on her terms, if I still wanted her.

Who was the father?

She would not say. I did some arithmetic. He must have been the second young man sent up from New York by the marriage broker. Apparently

Rhoda's talk of fucking here and fucking there had not put the young man off as much as she told me it had. So my grandfather's best plans for preserving the good name of his granddaughter had gone awry. And now, yawning before me was the future with my cousin Rhoda that I had dreamed about, and wept about for more than a year.

**N**OW JUST THINK if that child would be born black," Ditch said to me on the way to the station. "Now that would give this town something to talk about."

"Surely would," I said. "My grandfather would climb right out of his grave."

Ditch lighted a Lucky for himself and one for me. "Race and sex," Ditch said. "Makes the country go round." He laughed, and nodded, not particularly at me but at the entire village of Slaters Ridge.

"I am going to miss your grandpa," Ditch said. "If a man is judged by his enemies, I just lost one hell of a yardstick."

Ditch turned into the parking lot in front of the railroad station. "He ever tell you about this Pushkin fellow?"

"Yes," I said.

"Seems like Sam Pearl either hated niggers in general and liked Pushkin, or hated me and liked niggers in general." Ditch thought about that a moment. "Last bit don't make sense," he said. "But maybe a little truth in all of that."

He reached down for the bottle between the seats.

"He loved a black man's music," Ditch said. "Maybe we can drink to that."

**W**E HEARD THE SOUND of the diesel locomotive at the far crossing.

"You're better off without her," Ditch said. "She's a wild child, like her mother was. It's not a life you were cut out to lead."

On the train back to New York City, I thought of how Rhoda and I had parted. She insisted that we say goodbye in bed, and Ditch had against

his better judgment lent us his small house near the AME Church.

I could not know whether Rhoda's taking me to bed in Ditch Pollard's dark and silent house was a generous and loving gift or an act of pure selfishness. In that bed, she provided few answers.

"I just wanted to be filled up," Rhoda whispered. "And now I am."