



Sacred Circle

THE VAN'S HIGH BEAMS LIT UP A HOUSE AT THE END OF the lane. As we got closer, I was surprised to see a red brick ranch style home with a neatly trimmed lawn and square hedges hugging the house. A huge, beige and brown motor home sat in the driveway. Several cars filled a small parking area off to one side of the lane.

"Where are we?"

"This is Rhonda's house. She's hosting the gathering tonight."

Cynthia killed the engine and opened her door, throwing her keys on the dashboard. I got out, deciding to keep my mouth shut for a while and absorb as much as I could. I followed her up concrete steps to the front walk. A motion sensitive light blinked on as we neared the front door. A dog barked a repetitive, lonely howl behind the house, while a huge Luna moth fluttered at the glass on the front door, as if desperately trying to warn anyone inside of our arrival. When we knocked on the door, the moth disappeared into the darkness like a silk scarf whisked away by the wind. The door suddenly opened and a portly, ruddy complexioned blonde, apparently in her late fifties, stood before us, a toothy grin on her face.

“Cynthia! We’ve been waiting,” she said smiling, as the creaking screen door swung open. “C’mon in. This must be Joseph. I’m Rhonda.”

“Hi,” I said, extending my hand as I walked in. “Call me Joe.”

Four women sat silently in the living room, staring at me with concerned looks on their faces. It seemed like I was attending someone’s funeral. “This is Sandy,” Cynthia said, gesturing to a forty-something woman of medium height and heavy build, with shoulder length brown hair and glasses. Sandy rose to shake my hand. “Sandy’s the nurse midwife we talked about — my partner. And this is Doris.” A younger woman with straight, long blond hair nodded and smiled. “Doris is a librarian at an elementary school in Youngstown. And this is Linda,” she pointed to a short woman whose young face belied her age; her cropped hair was lightly salted with gray. She wore a row of earrings up both ear lobes. “Linda’s an artist.”

“Actually, I’m a gardener. But I’m an artist too!”

“What sort of art?” I asked, trying to be cordial as I shook her hand.

“Watercolors mostly, but I also make jewelry, do some batik, you know, that kind of thing.”

“I’m Deb,” the fourth woman said. “And I don’t know what I am!” They all chuckled at Deb’s comment, effectively warming the icy atmosphere that gripped the room. Deb was dark complexioned, perhaps Latin American or Middle Eastern. She was the youngest of the bunch, maybe twenty-seven. I thought she was attractive, but I also saw something vaguely attractive about all of them. I no longer suspected that they wanted to boil me in a cauldron of witch’s brew. They had a sincerity about them, maybe a sense of maturity or something I couldn’t quite put my finger on, but I felt fairly comfortable among them. Most of the women were dressed in long, flowing skirts, and had an artsy gypsy look about them, except the younger, dark-skinned Deb, who wore blue jeans and a tank top.

“I know who I am,” I said. “But exactly what I’m doing

here I don't know. Maybe you all can fill me in."

They looked at each other as if they didn't understand what I had just said, then Cynthia blurted, "Joe doesn't know as much as I thought he did!"

"What exactly *does* he know?" asked Sandy.

"Not very damn much," replied Cynthia, whose Pippi Longstocking braids flapped behind her as she laughed. "He doesn't even know anything about his own Aunt!"

"Lucille?" one of the women asked.

"Yeah, my Aunt Lucy. She died and now I'm here. Go figure."

"Well, why *are* you here?" asked Doris. Someone chuckled, and she said, "No, I mean, how did you happen to come *here*? How did you know to contact *Cynthia*?"

I sat down on the couch, made myself comfortable, and proceeded to tell them of Lucille's original letter, my subsequent trip to Montana, and of the tin box with the business card inside and "Sisters of the Sacred Circle" written on the back. I also told them about the money, although I had a lot of reservations about doing so, since I didn't really know these people. And I confessed of my persistent skepticism and how Annie was the one who actually talked me into following the mysterious trail. When I was done recounting my story, they all wanted to see the letter, so I pulled it out of my pocket, relieved that I had remembered to bring it with me.

"Incredible!" exclaimed Linda, passing the letter.

"Really!" Rhonda muttered, her ruddy complexion turning even redder. "This is unfuckingbelievable." She glanced up self-consciously, and grinned. "Pardon the French."

"So what are you saying? This is something serious?" I asked.

"What did you do with the money?" asked Sandy.

"I put it in my bank account. I spent some on the trip to Montana."

"Thirty thousand dollars?"

"No. I still have the twenty grand check at home. I'm

just going to hang onto that one. I don't want to get too deep into this if I don't have to."

"Good."

"Why good? What do you mean 'good'?!"

"Good that you're hanging onto the money and not squandering it."

Doris emerged from the kitchen, carefully balancing a large ceramic teapot and cups on a wicker tray. She went from person to person, handing them each a delicate china cup filled with an aromatic greenish tea. The women took small sips from their cups and passed the letter back and forth. I raised my cup to my nose and noticed the unusual odor of the steam rising from the tea. "What is this?" I asked, gesturing toward my cup, trying not to look repulsed.

"That's a cleansing tea. It will prepare us for the sweat tonight and the divination. Drink it all, if you can," Doris instructed.

"Sweat?" I asked.

"Sweat lodge ceremony. We're going to do a sweat to prepare for the divination," replied Rhonda rather matter-of-factly. "The sweat will purify us." She offered no further explanation, but told me to drink my tea and bring the letter. She seemed to be somehow "in charge" here. She was built like a tank, too, and I wasn't going to argue with her.

"C'mon everyone. It's time. The fire should be ready by now."

I decided to go with the flow and reminded myself to keep an open mind. Besides, I was outnumbered. Me versus six women. I chugged the bitter tea as a shiver went down my spine. Everyone stood up. Someone threw me a towel and a thin wool blanket.

"What're these for?" I asked.

"The sweat."

Of course. Silly of me to ask. The tea I drank had sunk to the pit of my empty stomach; I fought a wave of nausea. Everyone grabbed their towel and blanket, and we all filed out the back door into the darkness. Rhonda led the way, I

was second in line, and the rest followed along behind. The moonless sky was strewn with stars, and a chorus of tree frogs and crickets serenaded us as we walked on a dark path behind the house, directly into the woods. When the going got too dark, someone behind lit a flashlight to keep us on the path. Our shadows cast eerily in front of us, dancing up the tree trunks and across the trail as we marched along. Foliage crowded us on both sides, and an occasional thorny bramble tugged at my pants.

“Don’t worry,” Rhonda whispered over her shoulder as we walked, “There’s no poison ivy in here.”

Ha! I thought, that’s not exactly what I was worrying about. “You don’t sacrifice virgins or anything like that, do you?” I asked.

“Why, are you a virgin?” someone behind asked. The rest of the group chuckled.

“No.”

“Then you have nothing to worry about.”

But I was hardly reassured. We walked a hundred yards or so until the woods opened into a small clearing. The trees arched overhead, but the center remained open. Smoke from a fire in the middle of the clearing snaked its way through the opening in the trees and disappeared into the pitch black sky above. A fire had burned down to a large bed of red coals and a number of softball-sized rocks sat in their midst. Off to one side, about fifteen feet from the fire, sat a small, dome-like structure. In the darkness, it looked like an igloo covered with blankets. Several plastic gallon milk jugs sat on the ground beside it.

The women set their towels down on a log and gathered around the fire. They gestured for me to join them. The firelight danced on the front of our bodies as we reached out and joined hands in a circle around the low flames. I didn’t know what they were doing, but I did my best to follow along. We stood quietly for a few minutes, hand in hand, arms outstretched in order for our circle to reach completely around the fire. Some of the women had their eyes closed, some cast their eyes heavenward, some

stared at the glowing coals. They looked deep in thought. I kept my eyes wide open to make sure I didn't miss anything. The mood became somber. Then Doris started to sing in a soft, melodious voice. The rest of the women joined in, one at a time. They repeated a few words over and over, harmonically combining their voices into a haunting melody.

*Earth my body,
water my blood,
air my breath and
fire my spirit.*

Their voices reached a crescendo each time they sang the last three words, as if defiantly announcing their spiritual nature. I self-consciously stared at the fire. Just when I thought the song was going to go on forever, they suddenly stopped singing. Then we let go of our hands and the women began unbuttoning their shirts and removing their shoes.

"I hope you're not uncomfortable with nudity," young Deb whispered as she yanked off her jeans. "Because you



*The lodge of the Sisters of the Sacred Circle
prior to the sweat ceremony.*

need to get naked. We're going into the lodge now, and our contact with the ground helps us to connect with the Earth."

I watched, with some embarrassment, as all of the women completely undressed and slowly crawled on their hands and knees into a small hole in the side of the igloo-lodge. Each carried a towel; one-by-one they disappeared into the semi-spherical black abyss.

"C'mon Joe! Bring your towel," someone whispered from inside.

Well, it was dark enough, and I'd always considered myself willing to try anything once. I figured there were worse fates than sitting around a fire with naked women on a Monday night in an igloo, so off came the clothes and into the lodge I went, stark naked on my hands and knees like the rest of them. Rhonda sat beside the entrance and guided me past her as I crawled in. Someone shut the door behind me. The ground was damp and chilly. "Sit here," she whispered, patting a layer of straw beside her. It was so dark I couldn't see a damn thing and had to be guided by sound and touch. As soon as I was seated, Rhonda crawled out through the doorway, leaving it slightly ajar. Through the small gap I caught a glimpse of her large naked body poking through the fire with a pitchfork. She was back at the door in seconds.

"Hot one coming in!" she warned.

Doris, who was on the other side of the door, held the flap back and grabbed the pitchfork handle with one hand. She very carefully guided the red hot rock that was balanced on the tines into the lodge. Rhonda, bent over and peering through the door hole, held firmly to the pitchfork. The two of them directed the glowing stone over a breadbox-sized hole, about a foot deep, in the middle of the earth floor. Doris yelled, "Okay, let 'er go!" and Rhonda tilted the fork, dropping the brick-sized rock deftly into the depression. The ground sizzled as the intensely hot stone cooked the moist earth. Although I couldn't see smoke, I could feel it burning my eyes. Rhonda went back

to the fire and got another rock, then another, and another, and, with Doris's help, dropped each one into the hole in the lodge floor until it overflowed. An intense heat radiated from the stones. Rhonda crawled back in and shut the door tightly behind her, leaving us with only the faint glow of red stones in the center of an inky blackness. Sweat almost immediately began beading on my skin.

I couldn't hear anything except heavy breathing. Then Rhonda began to speak. "This is the womb of the Earth Mother. We ask her for purification. We rejoice as we feel her strength and power under our bodies, as our ancestors have since the beginning of time. I hold this cup of water, the water of life, the blood of the Earth Mother, and I pray for the guidance we need for our brother Joseph. I pray for our beloved sister, Lucille, who has passed into the universe. I pray that her spirit will join us now and guide us tonight." Rhonda emptied the cup's contents on the stones and a great hissing sound preceded a rapidly rising cloud of steam. The hot cloud, although invisible in the darkness, billowed to the top of the hut and rolled down along the outside walls and over our backs, enveloping us in a sweltering heat. Sweat poured profusely from my body. I could feel a hand reach for me in the dark as it groped my right knee. I took it in my own hand, then I reached out to the left and took Rhonda's hand.

We were all presumably joined hand-in-hand, some breathing deeply, almost gasping, when another melodious chant began, this time by Rhonda.

*Where I sit is holy,
holy is the ground.
Forest, mountain, river,
listen to the sound.
Great spirit circles all around me.*

Everyone joined in the chant, which was repeated over and over. I eventually joined in, quietly at first, then louder as my deeper voice balanced the tone of the six female

voices in the lodge. The chanting continued, developing into what seemed to be a trance-like atmosphere. Then suddenly, our voices merged into a single voice. For a brief moment, no separation existed between them, there was only one voice and it was no one's voice and everyone's voice at the same time. At that point, we abruptly ended the chant together, on the same note, as if by magic. I was stupefied and exhilarated at the same time by this phenomenon. I had never experienced anything like it.

"I will pass the cup," Rhonda announced quietly. The cool glugging of water could be heard being poured from a plastic milk jug. In the hazy glow, I could just barely see the cup being passed between shadowy silhouettes, traveling clockwise. When the cup reached Doris's hands, she began voicing aloud her life's hopes and concerns. When she finished, she poured the water onto the hissing stones and began another chant. We soon joined her and chanted together until our voices merged again into that single, incredible voice. This procedure continued around the circle from person to person until the lodge dripped in hot steam and our bodies issued sweat from every pore. At one point the heat was so unbearable I had to put my face to the ground where a tiny bit of coolness remained.

Finally, the cup came full circle to me. Whoever had the cup obviously had the "floor," so to speak, and the others simply listened, or allowed the cup holder to be silent if she so chose. With the cup of water in hand, I took a sip, as I had heard others do, and thanked everyone for including me in this experience. I confessed that I had never been in a sweat lodge before and didn't usually hang around (no pun intended) in the company of naked women. I jokingly added that it was something I could get used to and maybe even learn to enjoy — the naked part, that is — I wasn't sure about the sweat lodge. I said I would prefer a hottub next time. Nobody laughed. I admitted that I never did much singing, but that the chanting experience in the lodge had been satisfying in some inexplicable way. In jest, I couldn't resist telling them that the

whole experience was my idea of a tea party in hell. I voiced some doubts about whether this experience is what my aunt had intended for me, and I hoped out loud that there would be a cooling off period at some point. Then I poured my share of the water on the stones, and waited. After only a few minutes of silence, Rhonda crawled out the door. Everyone followed, one at a time. I was the last one out.

In the cool night air, steam rose from our bodies like smoke from chimneys. Little was spoken, the mood was quiet and serious as we stood around the fire. Rhonda picked up a jug of water and poured it over Cynthia's shoulders and down her back. Cynthia gasped in relief, took another jug, and rinsed the sweat off her legs. Each of us rinsed in this manner, one by one. I reached for my clothes.

"We don't need to dress yet, Joseph. We need to do the divination now, and clothes would just impede our connection," Rhonda whispered.

"Connection to what? What divination?"

"Now that we've purified ourselves in the sweat, we're going to consult the Cards. They always reveal the truth. They'll answer your questions."

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