

unsaddled

Patti and I lived one summer in San Francisco, at Green and Van Ness, across the street from a Russian Church. The bells rang all the time. We woke up to bells every morning. On good days Patti would press against me and say hello and ask if I slept well, moving her hands around, her right leg coming over my hip. On bad days she was gone from under the covers and in the shower. Even with the bathroom door closed, my ear against it, and the water running, I could still hear her crying like it was the end of the world.

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We were naked a lot. Naked morning, noon and night. Whenever she felt good. It didn't matter if we didn't have any curtains on the windows. We didn't care if anyone saw us without our clothes. They could look all they wanted. The couple on the floor across the street certainly did. They watched us live our naked lives. We'd look up and see them standing at the window, like a pair of mannequins, moustache on the left and beard on the right. We waved. They never waved back. We made love on every piece of furniture, even the foot ladder. They never applauded. One night they kept their lights on and showed us how they had sex. They were better at being mannequins.

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I liked Playboy. I liked Penthouse. Especially the pictures. I liked Road and Track and Car and Driver. I liked Auto-Pilot and Blue Skies. I liked Time, Sports Illustrated and the National Enquirer. But my favorite was World Wide News, because it talked about the crazy things white people did with their lives. A whole bunch of stuff happened to them. They had UFOs, two-headed pigs and human monkey babies. The pictures showed a baby with the head of a monkey and it was screaming. I would be screaming too, if I had a face like that. It also had a tail. A tail would be fun for a while, you could curl it around things, but I wouldn't want it all the time.

I sat in the Red Star and drank a beer and read the World Wide News. I sat at the bar, on a stool, because I saw that was where they wanted me to sit, at the bar and my back to the tables. So they wouldn't have to look at me. They were white people.

This week's News had a story where a family of vampires was found in the California woods. The family in the photograph was standing in their living room, a mother and a father, a teenage boy, a young girl and a baby in the mother's arms, and they all had pale skin and big, pointy teeth, even the baby. Coffins were in the background and a portrait of Bela Lugosi over the fireplace. The baby carried a peace symbol rattle. The teenage boy wore a Ralph Nader t-shirt. The mother had on a very low-cut dress.

I looked behind me at the people eating lunch at their tables and wondered if they were vampires. They ate like vampires. Munch, chew, wipe their mouths. Munch, chew, wipe their mouths. Nah, I thought, not vampires, nothing nearly as good as that.

My lunch arrived and I folded the News so I could set it by my plate and keep reading. I enjoyed reading now. I read books, too. Since I'd been with Patti I'd learned how to enjoy lots of things. Champagne, pate', blindfolds. Those were all fun.

Sometimes Patti brought home remainder books from the store. Some we used as doorstops. Some we read. Patti liked exotic adventure books, where people went to weird places around the world, usually on horses. On good nights she would read aloud to me while we sat naked on the couch. I liked the one with the French woman in Mozambique the best. She was crazy. I would have gotten into her pants if I could. Patti didn't like it when I said that. We had our clothes on in the matter of seconds.

I looked over my hamburger, making sure things were right. They did it good at the Red Star. They listened to me. A hamburger, no cheese, cooked until the outside was hard, one thing of lettuce, one slice of tomato, no pickles, onion or special sauce, no, absolutely no mustard, and tons of mayonnaise, as much mayonnaise as possible, without the top bun slipping off.

Most places didn't listen at all. It was like they didn't care what I wanted. They'd bring the hamburger and I'd pick up the top bun and look inside and then I'd spend the next ten minutes taking off onion and pickles and scraping off gobs of mustard and ketchup. At least the Red Star did my hamburger right. Plus their beer was always good and cold.

In the bar mirror I saw Patti come through the glass doors. I saw Patti see me. I saw that Patti was trying to decide if she wanted to stay inside and sit by me and eat lunch or if she wanted to leave and return home and lock the bedroom door without saying hello to me.

Everything that summer was Patti and me and Patti or me.

"You're having a hamburger?" She took a stool.

"That's right. You want one? They're good here."

"Too early. I didn't sleep well last night."

"I know. I know why."

On her second beer she asked if I had found anything interesting in the News. I showed her the vampire family article. She asked why the baby had a peace symbol rattle. I told her it was because some people thought the peace symbol was a satanic sign, an upside down cross. I told her how, in third grade, I had a teacher who sometimes lowered the blinds and turned off the lights and made us be real quiet while she explained to us that the communists and atheists were trying to take over America. Tie-dyed t-shirts, my teacher said, George McGovern, the Beatles, the peace symbol, all the Devil's conspiracy. Patti said she could understand that.

I asked her not to have another beer. She said it was her life. I said it was. I asked her how bad it was.

"Horses," she said.

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When suddenly he gets the feeling he's surrounded by horses, horses, horses, horses coming in in all directions white shining silver studs with their nose in flames, he saw horses, horses, horses, horses, horses, horses, horses.

---Patti Smith

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She went behind the bales and removed her hat. She placed the hat where she would not step on it as she changed. She pulled off her t-shirt and put on her bikini top. She tied the strands in a loose bow behind her neck. Sitting on a low bale she took her boots off, slid out from her jeans, feeling hay scratch under her thighs. She had worn bikini bottoms instead of her regular underwear. She pulled the boots back on her feet. Standing, she returned her hat, and she came back from behind the bales.

Last night, on the coffee table, he cried, "Ride me, cowgirl!"

Like she had never heard that before.

She saw him watch her. He drank his beer and leaned back against the rail. He wore dark slacks and a shirt the color of vomit. She knew she excited him, in her bikini and boots, but she didn't give a fuck. The barn was hot and the wind outside was hot and the horse needed a wash and she put on a bathing suit when she washed the horse because it was better than getting her clothes wet. She didn't give a fuck if she turned the guy on, she didn't care if she got a rise, she was done fucking the guy for the very last time. It was fucking over.

She saw him naked last night and again this morning. It was okay. She let him see her naked last night and again this morning. Twice was more than enough.

This was a long way from San Francisco.

She washed the horse. It had white legs and a brown tail. While the horse dried, she stood in the heat, letting the sun sting her skin, tilting her hat down to cover her face from the light.

"Patti, baby," the guy said. He motioned. "Come here, baby."

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In the taxi from the airport I fell asleep twice. The driver kept the heat on high and I drowsed. Traffic backed up and we sat for a long time and by the time we made the Lincoln Tunnel night was already in.

A dry cold front sheltered the city. Few people walked the streets. Steam came up from manhole covers. Two men stood at a corner, dressed like they were ready for the Artic. In our old apartment I took what I could carry.

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If you drive Farm-to-Market 360 far enough you will begin to believe you are at the end of the world. Farms disappear, power lines are gone, birds can't be found. When you stop the truck and turn off the motor and listen all you can hear is the rising and falling of the crickets in the summer fields.

My grandfather said he could tell the time and the temperature by listening to the crickets. Yeah, my father said, when its twenty degrees below zero and all the crickets are dead, it's fucking cold outside.

I believed my grandfather. So did Patti. He was our favorite person there ever was.

Patti got a watch for her seventh birthday. She loved the minute hand, the way it moved without looking like it moved, no matter how hard she stared and tried to catch it moving. She could spend hours, the watch against her ear, listening to it tick.

The band was too big for her wrist and my grandfather used twine to make it fit. The twine rubbed against her skin but she never said a word. The twine rubbed so deep that she still carries the scar on her wrist to this day. Like how I have the barbed wire mark across my forearm.

At the fishing hole, while the bobbers drifted on the water, she handed me her watch. She let me wear it sometimes. It made me feel closer to her. We were sharing one more thing.

The second hand was my favorite, though I couldn't figure out why they called it the second hand, when it really was the third. I liked that it went around the dial every sixty seconds. The hand showed progress. It made the tick-tick-tick sound.

My grandfather caught a fish early and Patti not long after him. Since then we had fallen into a summer day silence. I held the watch near my ear and counted the ticking seconds, seeing if I was right when I made it to sixty.

The crickets rose and my grandfather cocked his head and said, "Two-twenty-nine and ninety-eight-point-four-two on the Fahrenheit scale."

Patti grabbed her watch from me and read the dial. "Two-twenty-nine. He's right!"

My grandfather, that hot day, asked us if we had ever owned any sawhorses. Sawhorses, when he was a kid, were something else. Every family kept at least one, if not a whole passel. Back then you could drive around here and see sawhorses everywhere. Blue ones, brown ones, purple ones, no yard was complete without one.

Patti eyed him. "You don't mean those wooden things, do you?"

"Wooden," he said, "is in the mind of what you see."

Then the sawhorse rustlers showed up in town. Sawhorses disappeared left and right. Family favorites taken off in the blink of an eye. Night was the worse. In the morning who knew what might be gone. People started bringing in their sawhorses for the night. You'd go over to houses and there'd be the

things in halls, dining rooms, dens, bedrooms, and you'd head to the bathroom in the dark and go ouch, ouch, banging your shins all the way there.

It got where people didn't even trust having their most special horses locked behind closed doors. If you didn't have a truck to ferry your loved ones you stacked them in the trunk and used a thin rope to keep the lid from flying up and around. Late afternoons there were at least dozen sitting outside Runnel's Ice House, with at least a dozen set of eyes keeping careful watch out on the dirt parking lot.

My grandfather painted his own speckled brown, with white legs, naming it Cruz, after crustaceous, the family the crawdad came from, his best thing he liked to eat in the world, besides corn-fed beef. He used to have it, kept it near, had Cruz all his life, moving him room to room and finally the garage, until one day he came home after a walk and found my father taking the sawhorse apart so he could build himself a liquor cabinet.

"My daddy has one. I've seen it." Patti said.

"You keep a sharp eye, girl." My grandfather nodded. "In case those sawhorse rustlers start coming round here again."

He got a nibble. Patti had a throwback. The sun stopped moving and the crickets sounded like it was five hundred and fifty degrees. Patti said her bottom felt hard. She said I reminded her of the orphan boy in the cowboy movie. I pinched her thigh. She slugged my arm. We clenched fists and readied to set on each other.

"You youngins'," my grandfather lifted his hat and smoothed his hair. "You are a couple of two peaches in a pear. Why don't you get on swimming? The water's there, waiting for you. You're still an age where you can get naked without causing a stir."

"But what about the fish?" Patti already had her shoes and socks off. "We'll scare them away."

"I wouldn't worry about the fish. They've gotten the better of us the whole day. I'm not worried at missing none of that."

Patti got in before I had my shirt off. I was sorry I didn't get to see her naked. From the water she watched me as I stepped in naked. We liked to look at each other naked. It wasn't anything other than seeing how we were without clothes. Absent the obvious, we could have been twins.

We circled in the pond. We splashed. Patti did her attacking Pinto, ending with a wet neigh by my shoulder. She did her changing horses in midstream pantomime. I used my arm to do my horse's tail routine.

I would like to say it was fish nibbling at us that caused us to circle around until we touched, her fingers on my arms, my hands holding her back. I want to say something spooked us. But we touched, touching an unknown, a tender mystery, her fingers on my arms, my hands holding her back, nothing moving. The end of the world could have come and we never would have known.

We were 7 and 9 and 17 and 19 and 27 and 29 and even 37 and 39.

Then Patti bent her head and placed her lips near my ear and she whispered the words that would change both our lives forever and ever and like any good romance the words reverberated through the heavens and traveled across the universe.

She whispered.

She whispers, "And when white legs are wet the skin is pink."