Sacred Limbs

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I decided to unstuff my suit case before searching out the hotel for a club sandwich and seltzer water. I laid my clothes in various drawers. Spreading out made me feel more at home. The newest Danielle Steele book went on the nightstand. I don’t remember the title. I read them by color so it was the pink book with gold lettering. Maybe it wasn’t going to be so bad after all: a few hours in the pool, a few hours reading, maybe a business-suit-type in the lounge. In Council Bluffs, Iowa? Who was I kidding?

I checked to see that the room key was in my purse and opened the door. I missed running into a mouse of a woman by about six inches. She was standing there with two suitcases and a shoulder bag out of her control. When she saw me, she jumped back and her glasses slid down the bridge of her nose.

“Oh, hi. Uh, 312 right?” She shoved her glasses into place with her middle finger.

“Yes, this is 312. This is my room.”

“I’m here for the retreat. I guess one of the girls cancelled. We’re roommates.”

Great. “Come on in.” I stepped back and, as she passed me, I got the clearest whiff of Vicks Vapo Rub that I’d had since I was eleven years old. Bess, you owe me for this one.

It was Bess’ idea to come here in the first place. A weekend retreat. She was the one who’d found the ad in the Sunday paper over a month ago. A woman’s workshop to find the “Power Path Of The Feminine.” Bess was in her thirties. Maybe that explains it, but she was the one who ranted on about the white-male-oppressors, wore buttons that said ERA-now, and opened the door for Eric, the shift supervisor. When she told me about the retreat, in the break room that Monday, it seemed like a kooky idea. But, lately, even a kooky idea was better than another weekend alone with my thirteen inch Sony. So I said, what the hell, why not?

Bess made all the arrangements. An Indian woman, something-something-Mountain Eagle, was in charge of helping women “reclaim power over their ovaries.” All I could see was that this Mountain Eagle woman was claiming power over my sixty-nine dollars and ninety-five cents. That morning, Bess called into work with the flu. She was too sick to talk. Lots of moaning and a wheezy cough. But on the drive over, I wondered. This would be just like Bess. She was very sure of herself, always knew the right thing to do and didn’t hesitate to tell me to do it. Oh well, no time to get a refund and I got stuck with her typing and invoicing too. So there I was wondering why the hell I’d listened to Bess.

The mouse spread her stuff all over both beds. As she did this, she never stopped talking. It was amazing the way her hands and mouth worked simultaneously. Her name was Ida and she was from Lincoln, Nebraska....hour
drive...cramp in her foot...is this bed okay?....we really should share the drawer space...and on and on. I moved my clothes into three drawers. So much for feeling at home.

All of her clothes had been perfectly folded into two purple, brocade overnight bags. When she opened the matching shoulder bag, a medicine chest spilled out onto the double bed. She looked about my age but, judging from her cargo, she wasn’t long for this world. I counted fifteen prescription bottles before I gave up. The little brown bottles were interspersed among tubes of Deep Heating Rub, a box of Kleenex, bottles of Rolaids, Nature Made vitamins, and Chloraseptic. Two Ace bandages unrolled onto the floor. They looked like they were trying to escape and, I must admit, I gave the idea some thought, myself. Ida reached her hand into the bag and fished around for any stragglers. She snagged something still hiding in the corner of the bag and pulled out an eight ounce jar of Vicks Vapo Rub.

"I’ll just set these on my side of the dresser."

"Do you work for a pharmacy or something?" I asked with a smile, but it sounded a little rude, even to me.

"Better safe than sorry."

My God! I’m rooming with my mother.

The conference started on Saturday morning. We met in the White Elk Room for an introduction and brunch. Ida came down with me. Well, actually, she was always about three steps behind me, even though she appeared to be hurrying. The Elk room was pretty big with dark-oak panelling. Stuffed animal heads hung on the walls along with deep red drapes. I stepped over to the drapes to get a look at the view but, when I pulled them back, a piece of warped paneling was all that was there. There wasn’t a big crowd, but somehow it was reassuring to see eight other women whose dance cards were all as empty as mine.

Two women sat together, whispering, in the front of the room. One of them looked like a 60’s survivor. She had on a green tie dyed shirt and her hair hung long and straight. Her face was long and narrow, the hair framing it so you had to look fast to see her eyes. The other woman wore blue jeans with a denim jacket and cowboy boots. Maybe they were cowgirl boots. From her ears, turquoise earrings dangled on silver threads for about an inch. They bobbed and swayed in rhythm with her whispers. A turquoise ring was on her left hand.

Both of them had name tags stuck on their shirts, the disposable kind you forget to peel off and end up wearing to the grocery store. The sixties throwback’s name tag read Pocahontas and her friend’s said Calf Woman. At first I thought this was all some kind of joke but, after watching the two of them, I decided they were serious. The rest of the women were milling
around wanting to know the translations of each other’s names when a tall, slender woman entered.

“Welcome. I am Mountain Eagle. I’m so glad you could make it. We’re just getting acquainted.” An Indian woman approached me. She was dressed all in suede. The top was beaded and the skirt was fringed. She was beautiful but in an odd sort of way. She had three or four dark moles on her face - not the kind that makes you think of witches, more like beauty marks - and her hair was a long, black curtain of silk.

“We are choosing our Native American names.” She handed me a peel-off name tag. “Please use your Indian name this weekend. If we intend to throw off our oppression, we must reject our patriarchal names.” Mountain Eagle told us to help ourselves to some herb tea and granola bars. “There will only be the eight of us this weekend. I like to keep the groups small, and two people had to cancel at the last minute.”

Ida had already picked her Indian name and stuck it to her shirt - Running Leaf. I thought she should have chosen Running Nose, but I was having my own trouble coming up with a name. I finally decided on One-Who-Waits because that was what I was doing, waiting for this to be over.

“Pocahontas and Calf Woman have been to my seminars before. This morning’s introduction will be a repeat for them,” Mountain Eagle said. I guess they had only gained power over one ovary. Pocahontas leaned into Calf Woman, said something, smiled, and took hold of Calf Woman’s hand. I noticed they wore matching turquoise rings. My thirteen inch Sony was looking better all the time.

Saturday afternoon we went on a nature hike. Really, we were supposed to be getting some wood for a Sweat Lodge Ceremony, whatever that was. Before we left our room, Running Leaf pulled a face mask out of her bag. “Allergies,” she said. Then Mountain Eagle took us behind the hotel to a wooded ravine. The ground was muddy and Ida, I mean Running Leaf, kept slipping. She would almost fall down. Then her flapping arms would straighten her, and off she’d go again.

“We will ask the tree permission to cut one of her branches,” Mountain Eagle explained. “Since our ceremony is tomorrow, we will only cut a single branch and take it with us. If we had the time, we would build the Sweat Lodge here in the ravine. The hotel is going to let us use the sauna for our Sweat Lodge. We will place the sacred branch in the sauna with us.”

The Indian woman stepped up to the tree. She raised her hands and began chanting. The rest of us stared at the tree. Then she asked the tree if it was all right for her to cut a branch. “Oh Wakan Tanka, Oh, Great Spirit above. We are her below to build our pitiful little lodge upon our Mother, Mother Earth.” Two women helped to support the branch. “The sacred limb must not touch the ground.” As she said this, she took an axe, and began chopping at a small limb.

“Wait a minute,” I said. “What did the tree say?”

“I beg your pardon?” Mountain Eagle turned and faced me, but she didn’t let go of the branch.

“I was just wondering. I mean, I didn’t hear the tree say anything. Are you sure it said okay?” I looked at Running Leaf for support. She was frowning at me. “I mean maybe the tree just wants to think about this for awhile. I just think we ought to be sure.”

Mountain Eagle cut the limb loose with one final chop.

“After the Sweat Lodge, hopefully you will be able to understand the language of the tree.” She cradled the limb in her arms and
started back up the ravine. As she passed me, I felt her suede skirt brush against my leg. Her strides were long and secure. She didn’t slip on the wet leaves the way Running Leaf had. I watched her walk away from me. She had that easy-assed gait that thirteen year old girls have when they walk past a group of seventeen year old boys. I didn’t like her.

Running Leaf clambered up the hill after her. I turned to see the others. The only ones left were Pocahontas and Calf Woman. They were sitting on their knees, facing each other, in the wet leaves. Pocahontas was rubbing some of the leaves into Calf Woman’s hair. Their gazes were fixed on each other. “Christ.”

That night most of the women drove over to Omaha. There was a special showing of Native American art at the Joslyn Museum, a fundraiser for a local women’s center. Ida took an antihistamine, and went to meet the others in the lobby. I stayed behind. There’s something about hotel rooms. Maybe it’s the way the beds are made, the sheets quarter-bouncing tight with military corners, that makes me want to muss them up. So I bought a big bag of pretzels, two cans of diet Coke and propped myself up on the oversized pillows. Reruns of I Love Lucy were on channel 4. Lucy and Ricky were fighting. She wanted a chance to sing at the club and he wanted her to stay home with little Ricky.

Danielle Steele was on the night stand where I’d left her that morning. I picked her up and started reading about Rosalind. Rosalind felt her youthful skin glowing. Sometimes Rosalind felt the insides of her thighs tighten involuntarily, or a warming in the pit of her abdomen. I wondered about Rosalind. I looked down at myself, my crumpled nightgown lying in folds around me, pretzel crumbs adding flecks of brown to the blue printed flannel. A diet Coke balanced between my breasts. I couldn’t remember the last time I felt my thighs tighten.

My Coke can rose and fell with each breath. I looked at the phone. I hadn’t called him for a long time, three weeks. At first, I called him a lot, the pit of my abdomen warming to the sound of his voice. But by that time, I was calling just to hear his voice, just to make sure I could still remember it, recognize it. Lucy, Ricky, and Rosalind weren’t enough company, so I picked up the receiver.

“Hello.” His voice was thick and sounded as if he had just finished dinner. I said nothing because that would have interfered with hearing him. His voice was so close that I could taste his salty skin. The way it was in the morning, after a sweaty sleep. I always liked the blanket turned up high and when we divided up our things, I traded my portable CD player for his electric blanket. I would always wake up to that warm smell.

“Hello?”

I smelled the dust in his hair, soft black curls. He never could grow side burns but it only made him look younger. His emerald studded earring twinkling out from beneath a wavy lock. It was his birthstone and I gave it to him for our six month anniversary and house warming present all in one. He kept the earring, of course. I imagined her blonde. Sometimes I got the clearest picture of her strawberry hair and his soft black curls all plaited, interknit, complicated.

“Just hang up the phone.” I heard her in the background. “You know who it is.” Her voice reminded me of Bess. I could tell from the sound of her that, if we ever met, I would like her. I always tried to hang up first. I waited as long as I dared and then pushed the button down with my finger. He hadn’t changed all that much. I managed to time it just right. I got to know his attention span pretty well after only
three years.

Lucy was crying. One of those wide mouth wails with turned down lips and no tears. She’s a true clown, although, it was probably just the whipped cream falling off her nose that was so funny. I clicked off the T.V. and the lights. Later Ida came in, stumbling around the strange room in the dark. She tried hard not to wake me and I tried hard to sleep.

Everyone met at the sauna at 10:00 a.m. Sunday morning. It was pretty small with eight of us crammed in there. Not to mention that sacred limb. Mountain Eagle began with a prayer to the Earth, our mother. I was wearing the black unitard I used for aerobics. The others were all in swimsuits. Two of the women were wearing souvenier t-shirts from the Joslyn museum over their swimsuits. Mountain Eagle sat next to me and that was when I noticed her fingernails. I’ve always believed you could tell a lot about a person from their hands. Her fingers were long and tapered and her nails were exactly filed. She painted them with clear polish so that the little half moons next to her cuticle showed through.

“The Sweat Lodge Ceremony is sacred to Indians” Mountain Eagle explained. Her hands were folded, cupped inside each other, as she spoke. I looked down at my nails. The latest coat of new nougat was chipped and peeling from Friday’s typing. I stuffed my hands under my thighs.

“The Sioux word for this ceremony is Inipi.” If you wish you may celebrate in the nude.” Mountain Eagle stood up and began to pull off her swimsuit. “You need not be ashamed of your bodies.” Pocahontas and Calf Woman immediately stripped. Slowly, some of the others undressed. “The ceremony is for cleansing us physically and spiritually for the tasks that lie ahead.” Running Leaf and I looked at each other. There was a silent agreement and both of us kept our clothes on. One of the museum goers managed to take off her swimsuit and leave her souvenier t-shirt intact, a skill acquired from endless numbers of sleep-overs in Jr. High.

“We will begin sharing,” the Indian said. “Each woman will tell something about herself that she has never told anyone before. In this way, we will be sisters.”

Calf Woman started. Her secret was slow to come out, but you could see it building inside of her. Her face contorted and she looked, first at Mountain Eagle and then at Pocahontas. “I...I’ve slept with a man.” You couldn’t tell if she was crying or just sweating from the heat. She cupped Pocahontas’ chin in her hands. “I’m so sorry,” she said.

Pocahontas’ lower lip trembled. “So have I.” They both were crying as they held each other.

“Well, at least it wasn’t the same man,” I blurted, with a trail of nervous laughter following. This seemed to stop everyone. They gave me sideways glances and a couple of them whispered to each other.

“People don’t really like me.” Running Leaf got the show going again. Her voice was thin and nervous but she continued. “I don’t know why. I try to be friendly.” She looked at me questioningly.

“I like you,” I lied.

“No. I can tell. You haven’t had any fun since you came here and it’s my fault ’cause you have to room with me.” She fumbled with a ruffle on her swimsuit. I looked at the other women for some support. But they looked back with sour-lemon faces.

“We like you, Running Leaf,” the museum goers chimed in. “You’re our sister.” Running Leaf smiled. Then she did something
that amazed me. She stood up, straddled the sacred limb and stripped off her swimsuit. All of them were hugging and praising each other. You’d have thought one of them had just gotten married or something.

“It’s your turn, One-Who-Waits.” Mountain Eagle had been sitting quietly. She looked at me and I felt like I had been challenged. The other women stopped talking and sat down, looking at me with wide eyes. No one saying anything. Just six huge eyes coaxing, ‘Go on. Spill your guts.’

I heard his voice - “Hello.” I felt the receiver in my hand. Something I’ve never told anyone? But Bess knew about the phone calls. Not all about them, but most of it... So they didn’t count...right? The steam was making me dizzy. I wondered if anyone had ever thrown up in a Sweat Lodge before.

“I stole a piece of candy when I was

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Chain Male
Andy Bouska
Pencil
eight.” I wasn’t in the mood for any breakthroughs. They kept staring until I shrugged. I thought I saw just a trace of disgust on Calf Woman’s upper lip.

“Well,” Mountain Eagle interrupted the silence, “who would like to share next?” They continued confessing and embracing until the last of them had left us all with a piece of herself to take home. Later, during the ceremony, I looked up and the Indian woman was looking at my nail polish.

When it was over, the naked women pulled their suits back on and the museum goer peeled the front of the Joslyn t-shirt from her sweaty breasts. Once the door had clicked shut, I heard someone say “One-Who-Waits is going to be waiting a long time.” I stayed in the sauna, in my own sweat, listening to them. Maybe it was the heat. Maybe it was hearing them talk about me like that. I don’t know. But suddenly I jumped up and pulled at my unitard. I do like Ida or Running Leaf or whatever-the-hell-her-name-is. I am sensitive. I want to control my ovaries. The unitard rolled into a little ball as I peeled it off. I threw it down and it hung itself from a branch of the sacred limb. I grabbed at the door because I had to catch them before they left. They had to know who I was.

He was a short man. I had a good three inches on him. His hair and mustache were peppered with brown in a sea of silver. He wore a green jumpsuit with the name Virgil embroidered in pink thread on the left front pocket. I don’t know how long he had worked at the hotel but he looked like a fixture, no different than the red drapes or animal heads in the White Elk room. He was about to clean the pool and he held what looked like a butterfly net on a seven foot pole.

“Mornin’.” That was it. That was all he said to a stripped naked woman, screaming something about her ovaries, coming out of a sauna that he probably cleaned. I knew right then he was a retired farmer. Only someone who had survived a tornado, seen their crops destroyed by drought, shoved their hands up inside a cow to turn an unborn calf, and lived through the eighties would say mornin’ to a bare-skinned woman dripping with sweat and yelling, “Wait! I do control my ovaries!”

On the other side of the pool, I saw Mountain Eagle looking back at me. She wasn’t smiling and she wasn’t embarrassed. She just looked at me with her head up and her shoulders back. And there stood the three of us, a triangle in a Council Bluffs hotel. I turned, not fast but not slow either, and walked back into the sauna. As I walked away from Virgil, I felt myself move in that easy-assed way. The muscles of my ass tightening and relaxing, pulling and releasing, sliding up and down next to each other.