

## DEPT. WITHIN

"Don't feel awkward," she grinned from behind a table on the front porch, which was draped in checkered plastic and set with orange juice, coffee, fruit, and pancakes. "We're all just staring at you."

I couldn't tell if she was joking or not. The others fell silent or looked away.

"You...you have a name?"

We hadn't formally met, I didn't think – but we had spoken, at least, the night before. This was her house. Everyone knew her, or acted like they did. It was a crowded, informal event; my friends had been invited, and someone had told me to come.

The carload of us had arrived in the afternoon after a few hours' worth of trees and a hard unmarked turn. As we'd pulled up to the hand-painted mailbox, people emerged from the backyard and greeted us with smiles. Have a beer. There's hotdogs, burgers, macaroni and cheese...line up over there by the barbeque for some plates and buns.

The yard where we ate opened up to a field with a river running in the back of it. We went for a swim and took someone's mushrooms and the sun was soon gone. Everything became black and silvery under the full moon and the stars were scattered above like sparkling coins at the bottom of a dark fountain.

People acted friendly, slightly bemused by our unfamiliar young faces. Our unannounced presence seemed to bring some kind of relief from the rank and file of former students, colleagues, lovers, friends, enemies, and relatives who flowed in, through, out, and around the house. At some point a man who must no longer have been particularly close with the hostess tried to fill me in: "Those were different times, before sexual harassment laws and political correctness took over the universities. It got tough in the 80's and 90's; the administration couldn't condone her sleeping with the students anymore...."

I moved away from him, out of the field toward the house. As I stepped indoors, the air grew warm and satiny; in the artificial light, surfaces took on a honeyed sultriness.

In the kitchen, I spotted her. Hunched over the countertop, standing next to a friend of mine, she glanced up, blinked, smiled at me – like I was just the guest she'd been waiting for. She was digging in a coffee tin, pulling out something wrapped in plastic.

Watching, I imagined her mind as an electrical, muscular diamond – both consummately and consumingly luminous, equally ultra-absorbent and ultra-resistant to surrounding energies. Every hair on her body, her eyes and her skin, seemed instilled with hair-trigger extra-sensory perception – screaming vicious-vivid-thirsty-hungry-perceptive – my fascinated thoughts opened up like the petals of a flower.

Looking up again, she beamed triumphantly. “Do you, uh, want a pot cookie? Have some of these. Careful, they’re very strong. Hah. Try to eat them slowly.”

In the morning I awoke in the attic where we had thrown down our sleeping bags. I rose and gazed around at my silent, sleeping friends, climbing down the ladder and walking through the kitchen, where unwashed dishes covered every surface of the counter and overran the sink.

I could hear laughter from the front porch. And then I was standing with my head pitched out of the spring-hinged door and everyone was staring at me. We hadn’t followed the rules – go ahead and sneak in, but make sure you sneak back out again. It was time to go. She was old enough to be my grandmother, that was for sure – and I felt stricken with the, to me, deeply intractable grief of offending someone elderly.

I went to hide in the back porch while I waited for my friends. Damp books lay in stacks near a mildewy couch. Rickety, sunbleached wood and peeling paint stood overhead. At the end of the overgrown lawn lay some large stones marking off an uneven boundary. The air was chill and moist, and it had started to rain lightly. An acquaintance shivered by the extinguished barbeque, smoking a cigarette.

On the drive home, I sat in the backseat. A friend of a friend was at the wheel. We dropped off a couple of kids I didn’t know, then stopped on a street near McCarren Park while another person I’d met once or twice hopped out and turned the corner at the end of the block.

My mind flickered back to the conversation I’d had with the man in the field the night before, the friend of hers who’d seemingly turned into a stranger over time. Between sentences he’d uttered some cryptic words of advice, which now intruded into my memory. Recalling the dim light of the back porch and the murmur of peoples’ voices in the yard floating toward us, I heard him say: “Whatever you’re doing, keep it up. Even if it doesn't seem like much, just keep doing it.”