

# I'VE TOUCHED THE SUN & FOUND IT COLD

"I THINK THE MOISTURE PROBLEM in the greenhouse could get serious, don't you Steve?"

It was Carla's moisture problem again. I was hoping she wouldn't lay into me with that one again tonight. After all I was the one who convinced Bif and her to build a solar greenhouse. "I'm afraid that all that excess moisture will rot the house though if it's attached," she had said to me at a party just like this one, nine months ago. The idea of a greenhouse appealed to her; the idea of it being attached didn't. Bugs, moisture, weeds, even pasteurized cow manure and peat all seemed a bit too outdoors to be bringing it that much indoors.

Bif had been as gung-ho to go solar as I was, though. He got especially hyped up over rock storage, filling sections of the greenhouse and half his basement with crushed rock, tons of it, that would, according to all the books, heat up as the warm air heated by the sun in the greenhouse passed over it. Bif believed in those rocks like he had believed in the Carlos Castenada books.

One brilliant sunny day in March he phoned me and asked me over for a look. There was a problem. "Feel this, Steve." So I did. The rocks were cold. Ten tons of cold rocks walled up in what used to be Bif's rec room. He had sold his snooker table to make room.

"Stone cold," I said. "Maybe you need more insulation. Or better air circulation. Sometimes these things need to be tuned up." Bif said something about wishing he had invested in a hang-glider instead.

And now Carla on the moisture problem again. "I can feel it creeping into the house. I think we'll have to buy a dehumidifier. That might do it don't you think, Steve?"

I told her that maybe it would and gracelessly angled my way out of the kitchenette and over toward Craig who was opening up a couple of quarts of his home made beer. "Just don't pour out the stuff on the bottom," he was addressing a small, respectful audience. "The sludge, all the yeast and goop, it's deadly. Good for the soul mind you but, hey look, this was the stuff that really killed Jim Morrison."

Accepting one of the paper cups being passed my way, I sipped the brew and found it bitter but potent.

"It's a shame people can't have fun without taking alcohol," someone was saying to me. It was Alex Radkin.

"That's very true, Alex," I said slugging back what remained in my Dixie cup. "Whatever happened to hard drugs anyway?" I taunted him.

Alex swished around a little Perrier water in his cup which was emblazoned with information gleaned from the *Guinness Book of Records*. He had been born with liver trouble right from the start—congenital, unlike others who had to work at it all their lives. This gave him a sense of superiority, a sort of snobbishness that fit well with his expertise in Social Philosophy. Alex had been published in dozens of scholarly journals, an expert of Hegel, Marx and Lenin; contributing editor of *New Left Review*, associate professor of philosophy.

"It is a shame, people can't make up their own minds," he told me. "Instead they're brainwashed by the media, by the ad men." Swishing more Perrier water, knitting his brow and focussing intently on the bubbles he added, "Oh well, the system is corrupting itself into oblivion. It'll all come out in the wash."

No one I had ever met paid any serious

attention to Radkin. It was the price you had to pay for being a respected scholar, I suppose. Obsessed with moving society toward a more *humanistic* sense of government, he was condemned to stand forever in parties full of drunks, drinking Perrier and hearing myriad excuses from people who abruptly walked away from his conversations.

"Think I'll get a refill," I told Alex and caught Craig's attention just in time to get what was left at the bottom of a litre of homebrew. "It'll creep back on you in the morning, I'm warning you." I slugged it back and went looking for something commercially produced.

Darlene was hanging out by the table full of wine. Tom Marshall had latched on to her. Poor Darlene.

"Do you think one of us should call the babysitter to make sure everything is O.K.?" I intervened. Even though the kid was almost three, I still felt decidedly nervous about leaving her with a stranger.

"I think she's alright, Steve. Call if you want," she turned back to Tom. I realized she was actually interested in whatever fabricated "true" story he was telling her. Her hands twirled a coffee cup around, half filled with Donnini. She wasn't usually a drinker, but a diluter of drinks, the only person I knew to water beer with ginger ale. I'd have to keep an eye on her.

"I guess if you're not worried about the kid, why should I?" It occurred to me that afternoon that in less than two years our son would be going to school. I had found that thought irrevocably frightening. From behind an enormous hanging spider plant, I studied Darlene's attention to Tom Marshall and his story about the time he swam across Halifax Harbour in the fog—on a dare—and almost got run down by the ferry, then just about swamped when a submarine came up almost right underneath him. Darlene was pouring more Donnini... for them both. She took a gulp and a tiny bit dribbled down her chin. "What did the cops say to you when you came up at Privateers Wharf?" I heard her say.

At that moment I was pounced upon by Felice. "You know how hard it is to keep spider plants alive when you heat a house this size with a wood stove? This one hasn't had hardly any babies in months."

People with spider plants were always talking about babies. "If it wasn't for six hours of Renaissance harp music a day and a change of potting soil every two weeks, this beautiful creature would be long dead."

Felice was our hostess. Thirty-six, single—I never got the story straight about her marriages. She had kids somewhere—she always referred to them as being "in other parts of the world." Always trying to shroud herself in mystery, she swore to me on one occasion sitting in her kitchen drinking goat's milk that she was a witch. "It's in my family. My grandmother was a witch, a famous one in fact. If I want I can have absolute control over other people, men in particular." (She had called me at eight o'clock in the morning, told me her toilet was overflowing and she didn't know what to do. Being the closest neighbour, I was obliged to go over and stem the tide.) "If I wanted, I could make myself irresistible to you." I polished off the goat's milk. "This stuff isn't half bad," I said to avoid her big cow eyes that were burning away at my soul. "Maybe if you put a couple of bricks in the tank, it'll shut off better. I'd check out the septic field too, if I was you." She let her kimono slip open from the top and leaned across the table,

suppressing a belch. I caught one glimpse of an incredibly oversized nipple, an areola as dark as Africa and made my exit. "There's a piece I have to get done on illegal RCMP search and seizure tactics," I apologized. And split.

Through the spider plant, I watched Tom Marshall gesticulating away, sloshing white wine all over an asparagus fern. Then he led Darlene over toward the bay window that looked out toward Cow Bay.

"I did it's chart, you know." Felice again.

"Hmm?"

"The plant. I did a natal chart. I knew exactly when it germinated. I was there...like a midwife. So I knew the exact time, date and place. It'll live a long life although I thought there was some indication of being barren in old age." She stroked the tiny green tendrils in consolation. The party was getting noisy, you could hardly hear the Bob Marley record.

Alex indulged himself between Felice and myself and fingered the potting soil. "You use commercial plant food I see," he said with the utmost indignation. "I believe I read somewhere that much of the world's artificial fertilizers are made in Fascist countries."

"This stuff was sent to me by my aunt in the States."

"Proves my point."

"Bug off, creep." I liked Felice for that one remark. For a woman perpetually on the make, it was good to see her willing to castrate at least one male. And Alex was a good victim. She took my elbow and shovelled me toward a table laid out with expensive cheeses and all sorts of vegetable dips. For some reason almost no one was eating. Felice bit off part of a radish and thrust the rest in my mouth. A voice behind me, male but effeminate, insisted, "You must try the Brie, it's delightful." Funny how the word delightful, just wasn't in my vocabulary. I turned to see a tall, thin guy ogling me from behind delicate, rimless glasses. Felice and I smiled and she shuttled me along to what she claimed was guacamole dip. It could have been colored yoghurt for all I could tell. I tried some and found it palatable but dull. I tried to get a glimpse of my wife who had seemingly disappeared. Felice wasn't about to let me go; she nuzzled her breasts up against my arm. As if the woman had muscles there, my puny bicep felt like it was handcuffed. She was breathing Camembert breath down my shirt. I felt a bit nauseous.

Fortunately, (or unfortunately as it turned out) Brian showed up just then. He opened the solid mahogany door that no one had answered when he rang and looked around the room in total bewilderment for a familiar face. He almost retreated but caught a glimpse of me being stuffed with pickled cauliflower and came my way.

Brian, I should point out, is one of the most sensitive men I've ever met. Twenty-six, just a kid, he is hopelessly at the mercy of the world. How he's survived I'll never know and whenever he's around I feel compelled to insure his survival for however long I can. I had taken the liberty to invite him to the party. I knew Felice wouldn't mind. Out of self-preservation, I thought that maybe I could unload Felice on him for a while. Immediately realizing the potential devastating consequences, I erased the thought and began plotting how to avoid just that. It was too late.

"Hi, Steve. What a place, eh? I didn't

know you had wealthy friends." He was all youthful ingenuity; a thing hard to come by in a man of twenty-six.

"I don't really. This is Felice. She owns the place." I murmured.

"I don't own it really. I mean, I'm not into possessions or anything. It's just a place to sleep. Good fortune has made it possible."

Good fortune and about fifty grand a year in alimony, but I kept my mouth shut.

"Possessions are so *transient*, don't you think?" She was giving Brian the once over. I savagely bit into a piece of celery laced with cream cheese and olives. "I believe in sharing everything I have," Felice finished. Oh, Christ.

"I've been lucky, I guess. Up till now, I've been able to avoid owning much more than the basics of what I need." To Brian this wasn't crapola; he meant it. He had lived for the past years out of vehicles. I don't think he'd slept without wheels beneath him in all that time except for when his Ford van was up on blocks for a month. Now he was shackled up in the back half of a '65 Volvo station wagon down near Clam Bay Beach. Over the years he had worn out three VW bugs (really cramped quarters by anyone's estimation), one '58 Buick (which to this day, he remains a little embarrassed over), two VW vans (each which transcended several worn out engines before the carcass itself resigned itself completely to rust), and his recent Volvo.

In the Volvo, he wrote poetry. Occasionally he made enough money to survive by working part-time as a baker in Atlantic Canada's only whole wheat bagel shop.

"And what do you *do*?" I heard Felice ask Brian, steering him toward an enormous wedge of Gouda and away from the admiring eyes of the guy in the rimless glasses. Both of them seemed to have forgotten about me.

A free man at last I was about to go searching for Darlene, only to be overcome by a sense of guilt for having brought Felice and Brian together. I could here Brian answering, "I write poetry, mostly about how things affect me emotionally." Felice was loosening something that held her hair in a bundle. It cascaded like a polluted waterfall down around her shoulders, throat and collected in the valley between her mountainous breasts. "Would you read some to my umbrella plant? It positively *thrives* on oral poetry?"

Her umbrella plant was in the bedroom. Brian was trapped. He was beyond my help. I knew him well enough to realize that even with Felice, he would fall in love. Few men fall in love the way Brian does. A true poet in spirit, he was overwhelmed by women and when he fell in love, his enthusiasm would crucify him. He felt things too intently. Felice would use him and then he would be destroyed. Reams of free verse would be produced, none of it would be published. Felice would snare him, ultimately castrate him mentally and then send him scurrying off in his rusted out Volvo to live further down the coast, away from the clutter of civilization. And it would be my fault.

Darlene was nowhere to be found. I was being absurd. I trusted her; we weren't the pair to be fooling around. It just didn't happen. Still, I didn't like Tom Marshall one iota. The bastard did men's clothing commercials on TV. They paid him a hundred dollars an hour to flash his all-too-perfect smile and walk down Barrington Street in three piece suits from

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