

Hostage to the Devil

Nothing ever obliterated his memory of the farm incident, (first experience of something paranormal) but he never returned to St. Joseph. Subsequent vacations were spent with his father and brothers in Canada. And it was only toward the end of his seventeenth year that another incident occurred which again effected a profound change in Richard.

He had joined a group of his own classmates who, under the supervision of an ex-forest ranger named Captain Nicholas, were to spend three weeks camping out in Colorado. The purpose of the vacation was to learn some of the arts of survival in the wilderness. Their schedule was a full and very active one. When it was over, they would know something about mountain climbing, swimming, life saving, gathering food, making fires, cooking, trapping, scaling trees, first aid, and seemingly anything else that Captain Nicholas could manage to teach them in those few weeks. When the vacation was finished, the eight had been invited to spend a last evening in the ranch house belonging to Captain Nicholas and his family.

As part of survival training, each boy was to spend one night alone at some distance from the base camp. When Richard's turn for a night "out there alone" came around, he was instructed to spend it in a small clearing on a hillside overlooking a lake about a mile from the camp. He was given a whistle and told to signal in case he needed help. According to camp rules, the other boys and the forest ranger left him at nightfall.

As their footsteps and shouts died away, Richard turned around to gather some brushwood for his fire. He was facing the lake about 150 feet above its surface. It was ringed around with mountains covered with forests. The moon had already appeared full-faced over the rim of the mountainside and cast a sheen of light on the water below and on the silhouettes of the trees around him. The smell of resin was an abiding atmosphere in which he felt as a welcomed stranger. He was aware of very little sound except for the wind shaking the pine trees and skimming the water's surface with light ripples. The air was still warm, with a little chill just creeping into it.

He stood for a moment to take his bearings so he would not get lost as he gathered his firewood. But the hush all around him seemed in a sudden instant to have opened. An invisible veil fell aside, and he was no longer a separate and distinct being from it all.

His first reaction was fear and he groped for his whistle. The rule was: any sense of fear or apprehension must be signaled to the base camp by one long and one short whistle. No stigma was attached to this. It was part of the training program to recognize and respect such feelings.

That first reaction, however, was almost immediately lost in a deeper sensation. Richard will swear today it was the same as if the night with its light, its weaving voice in the pine trees, its smells, and its seeming stillness was remonstrating with him and saying: "I am only secret. Not threat. I don't hurt. I reveal. Do not repel me."

He dropped the whistle from his mouth and sat down on the slope, overwhelmed with one idea that kept drumming quietly at him in words that sounded like his own: "I have yielded. I am going against my training. But I want ... I have yielded . . . against my training . . ." About this time he felt surrounded by shapes and presences which had lain hidden or dormant up to this point. He was sure they were there, although he could not see them. Fear was gone. Only perplexity remained. The wind in the pines and the light on the water were part and parcel of those presences. But there was something else he could not recognize, could only accept or struggle to reject. Something spoke in the wind and shone in the light. All together, these mysterious things wove a web around his perplexity, washing it in a strange grace and, at the same time, softening some part inside him, some part of him that was supposed to be hard and insoluble, but that now was becoming soft, supple, diffuse, flowing into some mystery. He remembers murmuring again and again: "I have yielded ... I want to ... against my training . . ."

Then, even in the darkness, he began to notice details: the variant colors of rocks around him, different kinds of ruffles on the water, various shades to the trees, successive notes in the wind. And, in flashes of memory, was back in the past: on the edge of the woods in St. Joseph, listening to his sisters and his mother chatter and talk, watching his father dancing with his mother at a family celebration the previous winter, holding the hand of a high-school girlfriend as they walked home from the cinema.

And, as that deep core of him melted, he heard his father's voice in a frequent phrase used to his sons, "Chin up, young man!" dying away into repulsive jumble, "We men must be strong. Chin up chin up young man chin man strong chin up man . . ."

He felt his body shudder as if shaking off scales or armor. It did not go limp or cling to the ground. Rather, it was now a supple continuation of ground, light, the voice of the wind, the silver of the moon, the silence. His body seemed to hold the possibility of all natural things at once. He knew it was incredible. There was one last, clutching moment when something in him warned with a sharp voice.

But, after an instant's inner pause, he appeared to himself to let go, willingly to accept, and to do so in almost poetic language: "I don't know you. I want what you are. I want to be in that mystery. I don't want a man's hardness and strength. I want your wholeness." He actually spoke the words. They tumbled out half-whispered, incredulous—for his brain kept telling him he was alone at night on the mountainside. But something more

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powerful, not in his brain, kept enticing him. He responded: "I want to be a woman . . . yes . . . man woman." He did not know the sense of what he was saying, but he kept saying it. And everything that night responded to him in turn—infallibly, it seemed to him—and said: "You will be. You can be. You will be. Secret. Strong. Mystery. Open. You will be. You can be. Woman. Man. Soft. Hard. All. You will be. You can be."

He lost track of time. He lit no fire. He did not budge from where he sat. The moon rose and set. The wind waxed and waned. There were occasional cries from night owls, and once or twice the scream of a bird surprised by some night killer. Richard's memory recorded all this indirectly. Filling those hours was something else: the voice or the sensation of a voice which soared and sank in a melody of notes.

Richard now underlines two things in his memory of that song. It had no particular rhythm, no detectable beat. It seemed to be fully and completely, but only, melody. More significantly, it told him nothing new or shocking or awesomely strange—he seemed to himself to have had all its notes already recorded in him; but now they were evoked as echoes to the melody. And, as they resonated, they delineated a quality or condition in which he always was but had never realized, much less ever expressed it in his taste, walk, glance, in the corners of his words where meaning's shadow hid, or even in his perception of the world around him.

But no longer now was knowledge a thrust outward to grasp an objective, to obtain an exact pinpointing with the lens of logic—"fixing the cross-hairs on it," as his shooting-enthusiast father used to put it. In that melodized condition, all objectives were received within a delicate maze of sensibilities, emotions, reactions, intuitions. And, over all, a sense of sacrament, of pact with what made water and earth and air simultaneously strong and tender, soft and unyielding, masculine and feminine. For this sense of the possibilities of all natural things at once, in one condition, was an inner persuasion now. And he felt a light-footed, almost unstable touching on all things, with strength that was gentle, with firmness but no pride, with definitive choice but no violence.

On and on that melody went throughout the night, until at sunrise his classmates and Captain Nicholas found him sitting on the slope, fresh-faced, smiling, a little dreamy, but fully awake.

Only Captain Nicholas noticed the change in Richard: the peculiar haze at the back of his eyes and the way he turned his head to greet them as they approached him. After the first bantering, as they were all clambering down the slope toward the camp for breakfast, the captain drew abreast of Richard and said: "You okay, kid?" When Richard turned his head to the ranger, the haze Captain Nicholas had caught in his eyes before was gone, just as if Richard had pulled veils down closing off his inner state. His answer was normal: "I had a ball. Did I do okay?"

A week later the vacation was over. The entire party left the mountains in the late afternoon, climbed down the slopes, and walked to the forest ranger's wayside post where they had left their station wagon. After an hour's ride, they arrived at the ranch house, where Captain Nicholas' wife and daughter, Moira, greeted them. They were all tired; and after dinner all went to bed.

Richard, however, did not sleep very much. From the moment he met Moira, he had a renewal of his recent experience on the mountainside.

(And that appears to be the entry point of what turned into full demonic possession.)