

Animal Shadows

by Dirk van Nouhuys

Nicky, who called himself Joe, pushed his mountain bike up a long, steep slope. A well-graded dirt road was climbing through steep hills covered in the gentler slopes with vineyards, above that by dry grazing land with occasional oak trees. They were traveling west, and the sun of a long summer day had just set before them, relieving them of the dazzle and replacing it with clear twilight where the dry grass grew duller, and the oak-clumps became greener. He wore a black tee-shirt with torn-off sleeves that showed his white, thin, bruised and scabby arms and the figure of Joe Camel driving an ornate 50's convertible over his heart. In the late afternoon he had seen his shadow, his form humped over the bike as if he were himself a camel on a random journey from the Arabian Nights. He was following his pal Muñoz, a Hispanic, younger than Joe and shorter but built heavier. Muñoz' mountain bike was new, red and flashy, but he wore threadbare bluejeans and a faded plaid shirt, also torn off at the shoulders to reveal surprisingly bulky and sinewy arms. They each wore cross-trainers and carried a backpack.

Their companion, who called herself Mary Pierce, a plump girl with hair died jet black, was having hard going on an old-fashioned ten-speed a quarter of a mile down the slope behind them; while they had back packs, she had a basket with a bundle on her handle bars. Muñoz stopped at a crest. They leaned on their bikes and stared back coolly at Mary. Muñoz pulled out a cigarette pack, took one and offered one to Joe. They had finished the last of their food an hour or so before.

"Would you fuck her?" Muñoz asked nonchalantly.

"Yeah, in the ass," said Joe, with 14-year-old contempt.

"Shit," Muñoz added. Mary reached them. She wore black bluejeans and a black tank top that showed her pliant white shoulders and hung tight over limber breasts. Tiny fences of silver

rings and studs guarded each earlobe and part of one eyebrow; a silver tongue ring tingled when she spoke.

"Shit," she said and stopped to remove one platform tennis shoe and sock and examine her white foot with metallic blue nail polish and toe rings. Muñoz offered her a cigarette and she took it.

Joe needed to piss. He was pee-shy and wanted a place where he could not be seen. The nearest clump of trees was about fifty yards away across a dry field of hay stubble. He dreaded bringing attention to his problem; Muñoz would stand and piss by the road like a horse. But he excused himself without explanation.

"Let's go," Muñoz said as if to Mary.

"Don't be an asshole," Mary said and removed her other shoe.

Joe walked with big steps crunching in the stubble, on the one hand grateful to Mary, and on the other hand hating her for understanding his problem. He continued around to the other side of the clump of trees where he felt exposed to some unseen predatory eye, then back into the middle where at last he could let go in the shadows. When he came back they were smoking in apparent disregard.

"I'll race you to the bottom," Muñoz said, gesturing toward the downslope ahead.

"Anyone can see us from as far back as the New Jerusalem," Mary said, put her foot down, winced at the gravel, picked it up again and brushed it off before sitting on the ground to replace her shoes, balancing the cigarette in the other hand adroitly all the while.

"Lets get going," Joe said. They tossed their cigarettes onto the road and started down slope.

The sky was growing darker. Mary saw them pause ahead of her at a clump of small trees by the highway. They were on their bikes now, but her feet hurt, the fuckers. Joe was standing silhouetted against the twilight gazing into the hills. She knew the tiny town he came from was somewhere up there. Muñoz pointed with silent irony at a small sign beside a gravel road, which only came to view when she reached the others. The sign was an oval of weathered

boards with a raised edge painted a faded pink. Within the raised oval faded orange script letters spelled out: *circus fantástico indico*.

"Didn't you assholes believe me?" Mary said shrilly.

One day when they were sitting on the curb together at 4th Street and Mendocino Avenue in Santa Rosa and Joe was calling out to passers by in a singsong voice, "Spare change for cigs," she had persuaded them that they should try to join the circus. At her father's house she persuaded the Evil Princess to give her the address and to promise she would not tell her father where they had gone.

"I believe Anglos different from how I believe other people," sneered Muñoz.

"I'm no fucking 'Anglo' Mary said, "I'm your *compadre*, I'm your *ho*." She had turned a few tricks for Muñoz. It had been a middle-class Hispanic, a relative of his.

Joe envied Muñoz his bravado and physical strength and envied Mary her ready answers. "Come on," he said, and climbed onto his bike.

After a mile or so the driveway curved through a bunch of trees, and in hushed, late twilight among the first stars they saw the circus buildings in the valley. There were three barrack-like buildings, two small houses or cabins, all five built along a main road, and a large van at the near end of the valley facing up hill. Lights came from the windows of one of the barracks, and they could make out someone sitting on the lighted porch of one of the cabins bent over some work. They looked at one another as if to say, 'This is no more than we expected.'

Despite the crunching of their tires on gravel in the silent air, the man on the porch remained bent at his work until they were straddling their bikes silently in front of him. He was tall with a large narrow head, bald on top but with long hair and with a long beard. He was wearing a buckskin jacket with hanging frills, blue jeans and soft deerskin boots. They could see he was sewing a large

piece of cloth like a yellow sail. Then he looked up and asked them to come closer. They downed their bikes and stepped up before him. Mary recognized him as the man she had met at her father's party. He smiled at them blandly as if they were expected acquaintances.

"This is Thomas Meunster," she told her friends, then, turning to him, challenged, "Do you remember me?"

"That's for you to guess," Thomas Meunster said.

They paused, disconcerted.

"Did you come for advice," he addressed all of them, "or do you want to join the circus?"

"We want to work," said Muñoz proudly.

"We're kind of freaks anyway," Joe said.

"Freaks," Thomas Muster looked thoughtful. "Freak is a stage like being a larva. You guys are all larvae."

"Is that some kind of bug?" Joe asked.

"You know what that means: you'll change," Thomas Meunster said "and you all want to come and feed on the circus like a big leaf," He chuckled at his own joke. "so someday you can fly away." He made a butterfly motion with one hand.

"We can work," Muñoz repeated. He didn't know about his friends, but he wanted to show them what he could do.

"Well, you'll have to tell me about yourselves first." He put aside his work, and his glance fell on Muñoz. "What's your name? Where do you live? Where do you go to school?"

Muñoz stood as if at attention and could look down at Thomas Meunster who was still seated on the step. "My name is Carlos Muñoz. My mother is from Michoacan, but I was born here. I live with my mother and my aunt and their kids in Santa Rosa. I go to Comstock Middle School."

"When was the last time you were there?" Thomas Meunster asked.

"Tuesday," Muñoz said, speaking neutrally because he was telling the truth.

"Have you had any jobs?"

"I've worked after school at Burger King and at a nursery."

"And maybe done a little dealing," Thomas Meunster stated.

"Maybe," Muñoz granted sarcastically.

"And you," Thomas Meunster turned to Mary.

"My friends call me Mary Pierce, but my dog name is Cheryl Bascomb," she said and stopped.

Thomas Meunster remained silent, watching her mock patiently.

"I live in Old Courthouse Square."

"How do you like the music?" he asked. The authorities had recently begun piping classical music into the square to discourage the kids.

"It makes me feel like an insect," she said with a shrug in her voice.

"Have you always lived in Old Courthouse Square?"

"My mom married a Saint and we lived in the New Jerusalem; it was hell. I ran away to my Dad who lives in the Bower of Bliss, but the education police dragged me back to the New Jerusalem, but I got away again and came back to the Bower of Bliss where my father was living with the Evil Princess — you know her: she used to fly on the rings. I loved her but she enchanted my Dad and tried to poison me so I had to move to the square."

"Where is the New Jerusalem?"

"Salt Lake City."

"How do you get money?"

"I ask for it."

"I'll bet you get more than you ask for," he said with an intonation meant to end their conversation, but she did not let it end.

"I get the last word," she said.

He gave her back his attention. "Do you think you can get the last word here?"

"It's easy," she said.

"Maybe we can ask some questions you don't know how to answer."

"Maybe," she said.

"We'll see," he said.

"That we will," she said.

He shrugged and turned to Joe. Joe saw Meunster could not stop Mary's mouth but felt he could stop or start his own.

"What do you call yourself?"

"Joe Camel,"

"That's cool, Joe." Thomas Meunster said with a sly little smile.

"What do your parents call you?"

"Nicky MacHenry."

"Where do you live?"

"I used to live in Buchanan; now sometimes I live with my uncle in Calistoga and sometimes I live in the square," Joe said.

"His uncle owns a big spa," Muñoz volunteered.

"He's a fag," Joe said contemptuously.

"But you've worked at the spa?"

"Yes."

"Why don't you live with your parents?"

"My dad left and my grandmom, she don't have nothing, she don't know nothing, asked my uncle to take care of me."

"Where do you think you should be?"

"I'm supposed to go to Comstock."

"How did you get those bruises on your arms?" Thomas Meunster asked.

"My father did it," he let himself say.

"O.K., that's not so cool," Thomas Meunster said with his little smile; then he addressed the group:

"You know we don't allow any drugs here. The only highs here are our philosophy and what we get off the audience. Are you guys clean?"

"You can search me if you want," Muñoz said.

"Clean as the sidewalk after rain," Mary said.

Joe nodded.

Thomas Meunster rose, stepped across, jerked up Muñoz' pack, felt it all around, then took a small pair of scissors from where he had been sitting, snipped open the stitching on a side compartment and removed from an in-sewn pocket three little plastic bags of

white, crystalline powder. "I'll hold these for you," he told to Muñoz, "Get the idea?"

Muñoz glanced first at Mary and then at Joe; neither friend met his eye.

"Yes." Muñoz said.

"Is that it?" Thomas Meunster continued, "I don't have time to fuck around with you guys."

"Yes," Muñoz said with downcast eyes.

"What about smoking?" Joe said.

"If you stay here you can't smoke, but it'll be OK tonight if you do it outside. You're lucky: there are places to sleep tonight. We'll talk more in the morning; you'll meet the others. We may be able to use you. Come on." He gestured for them to follow him.

He led them to one of the small buildings they had seen from the upper driveway. A single hall bisected a cabin no more than 20 feet square. On the right was an open doorway without a door, on the left another doorway without a door and a second, closed door. A wood stove stood cold at the end of the hall. Thomas Meunster gestured at the open door to the right. Inside, a three-level bunk bed with blankets and sponge-rubber mattresses lined the inside wall. About three feet of air remained between the bunks and the wall, which had a window overlooking the main road. Thomas Meunster pointed out that the other room without a door was the bathroom, and Joe's bladder clenched. Thomas Meunster explained how to control the airflow in the stove and pointed out a nearby woodpile. Then he said Muñoz should take the top bunk, Mary the middle, and Joe the bottom.

"You have a watch, right," he said to Mary.

"Right," she affirmed.

"Breakfast is at seven in the big building. Stay out of trouble."

"See you then," Mary said.

Thomas Meunster looked back at her and curled a sly, knowing smile half way between response and none.

The friends went out on the porch and smoked. They didn't have much to say. Mary was anxious to hear what the others thought. Muñoz said Thomas Meunster was an asshole and he might leave in the morning. Joe said Thomas Meunster was a great guy and Muñoz should try and stick around. They went back and climbed into the bunks in their clothes. They were softer than the ground in Old Courthouse Square.

Joe's bladder woke him in the night. Bright moonlight flooded the window. He listened to the breathing of the others. They seemed to be asleep. They were both sound sleepers. He knew if he slipped out of his bunk and went to the doorless bathroom and pissed, they would never wake or notice him. He believed that Meunster had given him the bottom bunk for that reason. But it did not seem like something he could really do. Or he could sneak outside and go beside the woodpile. People would not think it too strange if he was outside. He waited as the urging of his bladder turned to pain, but then he had to do something. He rolled out of his bunk and stood listening to their breathing. It went on. He picked up his shoes and walked to the door on feet as silent as a stealth bomber. He paused and listened again, then slowly opened the door and stepped on the porch.

He heard a sound at the other end of the driveway toward the truck. He froze. It was a sound like shuffling and mumbling. The moon was low directly ahead of him and the buildings cast long shadows across the road. Gradually three inhuman figures emerged from the shadow of the truck. They were doing a shuffling dance, which brought them up the road; their long, black shadows spanning towards him seemed to dance with them, flying away when they lifted their feet and stepping back to them when they toed the ground. One by one he made them out: the first figure was a person wearing white and the giant head of a rooster. The rooster pranced, thrusting out its chest, feinting from side to side. A person dressed in black wearing the head of a bear followed. The bear moved comically, shuffling and casting itself down in comic pratfalls. Joe

had to stifle laughter. The moonlight was so bright that he could distinguish the color of the third figure as they came near, a person dressed in orange and wearing a large deer's head with a brace of antlers seemingly four feet wide, an elk. The elk stalked forward lifting his knees high, head and broad chest moving smoothly forward as if on a guideline. This must be Thomas Meunster. Joe stepped forward. As the procession passed, the shadow of the antlers touched him, and he believed that Thomas Meunster saw him and even nodded ever so slightly, trembling the antlers, as if to say, 'yes, you can watch, even this is for you.' When they had disappeared into the shadows around the big truck Joe turned, walked back to the bathroom with no door, turned his back to it and pissed unabashedly, as if the shadow were behind him, guarding him.

