

An Ancient Symbol for Fire

by Morgan Harlow

How are we to know, except by looking back, that the direct route we have chosen is really the most twisted? But then, I was deceived by the maps of our modern age. I saw the solid blue river of I-80 flowing through that Great Salt Desert—effortlessly, I thought. It was only after I made it to Wendover that I realized I'd been following in the ruts of the disastrous Donner-Reed wagon train.

And now it seems the trace backward will reveal the way forward. I know I'll find my old self, every step along the way—watching, helpless. It all began long ago, with a misunderstanding of sorts, a case of mistaken identity. .

Mimi and I happened upon a box of candied insects in her mother's top bureau drawer, half-hidden under a lacy red camisole.

"Looks like she ate one," said Mimi, indicating an empty space where the honeybee cream pastille should have been.

Our eyes ranged the secreted selection of mummified confection. Only afterwards did we notice the marks we had made on the thin sugar coatings.

"She'll just think she did it," said Mimi. Her mother was an artist. She never noticed anything.

We decided to give one to somebody.

"Your sister," said Mimi.

"These chocolate-covered ants could pass for chocolate-covered raisins," I said.

I still remember the way it sounded in Genevieve's mouth when she bit into it.

"This one's crunchy," she said.

"Oh, sometimes, raisins have seeds," I said.

"Or maybe it was a stem," said Mimi.

"Tastes like dirt. . .sand," said Genevieve. She rose to get a napkin. "Ick, it looks like some kind of bug!"

Genevieve left the room. At the end of that summer, she left home for college. She was never the same again.

When she came home for Thanksgiving, Genevieve was a vegetarian. It seemed that she had also decided to let herself go. She still wore makeup, but it was so sheer I could actually detect a freckle or two beneath it. She hadn't even tried to conceal the birthmark on the right side of her lower jaw. And she wore jeans—I suspected she'd stopped shaving her legs. All she talked about was her anthropology professor.

"Ken says that, if given the choice, our earliest ancestors would have preferred a vegetarian diet," she said, holding her glass up for more wine.

I passed the dressing to her. She looked at it suspiciously.

"Oh, it doesn't have any turkey in it," I said.

"Are you sure, Eleanor?" she asked.

"Yes, Genevieve, I made up the recipe myself. It's got bread, nuts, orange peel and. . ."

"What are these dark things?" she asked, indicating with the tip of her fork.

"Raisins."

She waved the bowl away without giving it a second glance, all the while jabbering on about how everyone at school called her Gigi, and she would appreciate it if we could remember to do the same.

Genevieve used to believe anything I'd tell her. If I told her the large black fly that had landed on her knee was a tsetse, that it was rare in this country but I'd read an article about how they hide in luggage and come over on airplanes, and that usually it's nothing to worry about but as a precaution she could wash with Lava soap or maybe an antibacterial preparation—she'd believe me.

So it was a difficult thing when, much later, after I had graduated from the University of Indiana and become well established in my

job as technical editor at Special Waste and Industrial Pollution Engineering, I couldn't persuade her she was throwing her life away looking for the gigantic hominoid known as Bigfoot.

"Please, not Bigfoot. Sasquatch. In North America the preferred name is Sasquatch."

I knew she was under a lot of stress. Ken had met a paleobotanist named Dot whose research involved tapping into the collective unconscious of plants. When he left Genevieve he took the weeping fig with him, claiming she just wasn't meeting its needs.

I tried to console my sister, explaining how her obsession with Bigfoot indicated a relatively normal condition called cognitive transference--in which the afflicted, having suffered a rejection or similarly painful experience, romanticized a fantasy being or object. Although this might seem a safe alternative to real world relationships, it wasn't the answer. Trust me, I said, I'll help you get over it.

That was our last conversation.

For five years, all I knew of Genevieve was what was printed in the Sasquatch Preservation Society newsletters that came without fail every month. They read like fiction after a typical twelve-hour day analyzing scientific reports.

It was my responsibility at SWIPE to shepherd the findings of the geologist, the chemist, the hydrologist and the air emissions expert into semi-readable reports while checking for all the little errors that undermine credibility. Consistency errors, Mr. Fred Weatherby, for instance, becoming Red Feathery later in the body of the report, and the usual word processor's errors—start without the s, slag with a u instead of an a, public minus the l—abounded. Our clients, some of the most prestigious names in American industry, had their reputations at stake. Some of them were paying millions to prove proactive compliance with environmental and occupational safety standards. Our reports were the end result. It wasn't unusual for our scientists to toil for years in the field, measuring and remeasuring parts per billion of some toxic chemical or another in

personal air spaces, drainage ditches, domestic shower head flows, dump truck beds. . .

My favorite report came out of what was called the North Pond belonging to one of our largest chemical manufacturers. The Methods section contained an update of the measurement, at different depths, of a great settling basin for a total of 136 substances. Three field engineers dressed in Tyvak body suits, headpiece with air cartridge, safety glasses, disposable boots and impervious gloves launched a boat at 12 noon and midnight, every 12 hours for a period of two years. The author of the report, a man I never met due to his quarantined status, never failed to transmit a touch of the beautiful in his accounts. I could almost see the soft moonlit glow rising like vapor off North Pond, and the sheen of the midday sun shortening the shadows of the three men in their chemically-resistant boat.

Just last week, as I sat at my desk reading the North Pond report, I felt a presence which I can only describe as something not of the now tugging at the elbow of my sleeve. I attributed it to the mood that often washed over me in the face of that report's idyllic tone. Feeling slightly woozy, I walked outside to watch the cold November wind take the last yellow leaves from an aspen. A fax bearing the SPS logo, a large ape-like footprint, was waiting for me when I returned.

My first thought was that finally, here was the apology I'd been expecting from Genevieve for what had happened between us.

I was wrong.

A miscalculation, a small airplane, a mountain--and Genevieve. . .now dead, forever dead.

The little Morton salt girl stands as tall as any other giant next to the Morton plant west of Salt Lake City; the famous umbrella shields her face from the desert wind and sun. That's where I found Thaddeus, waiting for a ride next to a North Pond Chemicals tanker.

My first impression was that he was a grizzly-looking sort, from

what I could tell approaching as I was at 65 mph and driving into a deep red-orange sunset that really did drown the whole sky. The tanker made him seem like a long-lost friend though, so I pulled off about a mile past him and backed up to see if I could be of help.

Well, he'd had some engine trouble but he needed to get to Wendover tonight—he had promised his wife—yes, they lived there, up north a little in the hills, their own place—no, well, there'd be some guys coming to get the truck repaired tomorrow.

He had to get a few things from the cab. He came back with a pick ax and a small plastic-coated book.

"I do a little prospecting on the side as long as I'm traveling through these parts," he said, holding the pick ax away from his body so I could see it better. I couldn't persuade him to leave the thing and get it later, and, seeing as how it was clean—he said it was brand-new—I allowed him to set it on the floor in back, wrapped in newspaper.

"Well," he said, settling into the passenger seat as we pulled away from what he called 'the mother ship,' his rig, "we've got about eighty miles of the world's worst desert ahead of us, so we can be thankful we won't see most of it."

Indeed, the sun had set. All that remained was a burning white horizon line, the kind that stays behind your eyes when you look away. At the time I thought that was the reason Thaddeus and I attracted longer than normal stares from the occupants of other cars. The average stare is, of course, just a brief glance lasting no more than a second or two. But these people continued staring well past the social norm for rudeness, some registering as high as 15 on the Rudeness Index, or RI.

Now that I think back on it, we must have been a pretty pair. My chestnut hair was gathered in an elegant French knot; I wore scarf and sunglasses in the manner of Grace Kelly, a pearl choker set off by a mauve jacket buttoned to maximize cleavage, and no blouse.

Then Thaddeus—greying hair tied back into a rough ponytail, brown t-shirt, greasy jean jacket, two-day growth of whiskers on his face, and hands that probably wouldn't come clean even if he had

tried washing them. And he sat there in my classic green MG—with the top down of course—steadfastly rolling cigarettes until there was no more light to see, and licking them like in the movies. I can imagine what it looked like to people who didn't know it really was just tobacco.

Oh, and on my collector's license plate, MISS EL.

We'd been riding in silence for awhile so I asked him about the book he was reading. What was that on the cover?

Oh that, he said. Just a symbol, an ancient symbol, for fire. He liked to keep up on things and, being a writer—well yes, no not fiction, a journalist really—he was always interested in words, language, that kind of thing.

A sticky business though. Once people knew they stopped talking to you, often in mid-sentence.

"What, because they—"

"Well, for one thing," Thaddeus said, "they think you might write about them, expose all their faults, twist them around."

I could tell he didn't want to go into it, so I didn't say anything.

"Take Claire Kemmons, for example, formerly of Grand Junction. Divorced, two teenage boys, about 38. I met her gambling away her last pennies at a casino known for its raunchy male strip tease act."

I told him I could see what he meant. Then he started telling me some real doozies. I suspected he got some kind of a cheap thrill out of telling wild stories off the top of his head.

"You know, this here area is unique in all the world. The salt desert is part of a large inverted triangle known as the Great Basin."

"Yea? What's so—"

"It's got an interior drainage system, if you can imagine—a sort of inland Bermuda triangle. There's many a river that gets lost here, never finding its way out to the sea."

He stared way out ahead, nodding knowingly. Then he took a roll of Lifesavers out of the breast pocket of his well-worn jacket and, peeling down the wrinkled silver wrapper, offered me one. The top one was

so dirty I declined.

He bit loudly into his piece, and when I looked over there were sparks flying out of his mouth.

"Good God!" I said. "Are you ok?"

"Did you see it?" he asked.

He leaned close and did it again. "Win-to-greeeen," he said.

I decided to stop talking.

"Chemical light," he said. "The army spent a lot on these, trying to figure out what caused it, how they could use it."

Well, after that we got along better. He had one candy after another, quietly sucking now, said he was hungry, thought he'd be home for dinner by now, but then, the engine trouble.

"Well, there goes the last one," he said, rolling the wrapper into a little ball and tossing it over his shoulder. "The wife'll be disappointed, we were planning a sparky party for tonight."

I didn't ask.

"Can't get these in Wendover. Pharmacist has 'em classified as a military weapon, says they shouldn't be sold without a prescription."

What, is he crazy? I asked.

"It affects us in different ways," he said. "If you could look out to either side of you, you'd see the signs. Restricted Area, Danger Keep Out. Missile test ranges reaching farther out than the naked eye can see, even on a clear day."

All I could see was my reflection in the side mirror—Eleanor Wilson, 39 already, never married, no teenage children, riding at night through an empty desert with a liar; her last living blood—Genevieve of Weed, California, recently deceased.

"So what do you do, Eleanor?" asked Thaddeus.

"Oh," I said, "I'm a writer, like you. I guess I'm what you might call a casual observer."

"Well, that's an oxymoron if I ever heard one," said Thaddeus. "Didn't you ever open a newspaper, or see a Hitchcock film?! Well, howdy! I thought the last casual observer was seen around 1945, or thereabouts. You, Eleanor, are the last of a dying race."

He asked if I'd ever read *The Tibbets Story*.

No, I said, I didn't believe I ever had. He was starting to get on my nerves.

"Well, it ought to be required reading," he said. "We should all know what it felt like to drop the atomic bomb on Hiroshima."

We drove in silence. After awhile, my eyes started playing tricks on me. I'd tried to drive straight through to California from Indiana, stopping at rest areas and gas stations, unable to sleep or eat since the news of Genevieve's death. Every hour brought me closer to the memorial service, but the closer I got, the more unreal it all seemed.

I told Thaddeus how the last sign we'd passed didn't look like it was written in English, more like Chinese. Was that possible? That's when he offered to take the wheel.

"Know what Tibbets named his plane?"

I pretended to be asleep.

"Enola Gay, after his mother."

I finally did get to sleep, despite Thaddeus's chattering about that book he was reading and how 2000 years ago aliens in spaceships visited the earth and how they knew all about the atomic bomb and on and on. After I woke up it took me awhile to discover where I was and why.

We were parked on some side street in what I rightly assumed to be Wendover. Thaddeus was leaning back, still in the driver's seat, smoking.

"Pretty, isn't it?" asked Thaddeus.

I had to admit I wasn't inclined to think so. The blue trail pouring out from his cigarette was so thick I could almost count the 117 or so known derivatives of tobacco smoke as they streamed lazily into space.

"Yes, a bunch of us pitched in and bought Winnie that last year," said Thaddeus.

The object he referred to was a neon horse face, winking brightly towards the entrance of an otherwise dark tavern.

He said we were in luck, the grill was still open. He insisted on

buying supper. He had already called his wife, she was coming to get him, and Winnie would put me up in her spare room for the night.

We ordered two house specials—venison steak broiled with sage and accompanied by mushrooms in sherry, cornbread, dates and roasted piñons.

I was so hungry I didn't even notice Winnie until I had finished eating. I looked up and was surprised to find that Thaddeus and I were not alone.

My first impression was that she was an older woman—probably in her late fifties, in need of a facelift and cosmetic dentistry. When she spoke it was unintelligible, but brief and to the point.

"Winnie speaks a Shoshone dialect," said Thaddeus. "She says she hasn't seen anyone look as hungry and tired as you did since the Donner party came through in the last century. She hopes you're feeling better now."

Thaddeus had led me down the garden path out there in the desert, but with my feet on the ground I'm not the kind to be bought for the price of dinner—though many have tried. "Oh," I said, "sure. Let's see, that would make Winnie 130, 150 years old?"

"Well, yes," said Thaddeus, "but not in the way you would understand it, Eleanor."

Winnie spoke some more, holding her hand out in front of her and then cupping it. She was so animated I thought they must be arguing over the bill.

"She says she knows this area like the palm of her hand," said Thaddeus. He cupped his hand and said, "The people are a vessel, she says, a vessel of time. What they can't hold on to spills out onto the ground but it is never lost."

I smiled at Winnie, wondering if I could make it to the next town, or the next, or even to California that night. I was pushing up the cuff of my jacket to glance at my watch when Winnie grabbed my arm.

"The desert is like a mirror," she said in plain English, "a mirror of the past, and of the future."

We spent the rest of the evening pleasantly engaged in small talk

until Claire came and got Thaddeus. Winnie told me how they met in a casino the day she won enough money to put her two teenage boys through college. Though I didn't meet her, I had a feeling I liked Claire—she just honked and Thaddeus went running.

After he had left I remembered his pick ax.

"Must be an interesting hobby," I said, bringing it in from the car.

"It keeps their marriage alive," said Winnie. "Thaddeus searches for signs of fire along dead stream beds, while Claire sifts for gold."

I stayed the night in Winnie's guestroom. After showing me how to fill the claw foot bathtub she turned the kerosene lamp low and said goodnight by the door. There in the shadows I noticed a certain *je ne sais quoi* about her that seemed almost beautiful—despite the fact that she wore no makeup or nail polish or any kind of adornment, didn't even color her hair. When I drifted off to sleep I saw her face before me, composing the center of a rose. Then the petals dried up and crumbled and were blown away into the purple background that appears behind closed eyelids.

I woke early the next morning and left without saying goodbye to Winnie. I didn't want to be there when the beauty I had noticed evaporated in the white light of day, as I knew it surely would. I hoped she would try the de-aging cream and moisturizing concealer stick I had, as conspicuously as is possible without seeming intentional, left behind.

When the sun came up about a half an hour later I discovered that I was driving due east. I hadn't remembered the road taking any peculiar bends. The sign for Salt Lake City told me the truth—I was back in the desert.

I didn't wait for a turnaround—the meridian was as flat as the surroundings, and I couldn't believe the same rules that applied to other freeways would be enforced there. A quick check in the rear view mirror confirmed what I had already sensed, that I was quite alone.

I don't think my tires left even the faintest indentation as I executed the U-turn and crossed over unobserved into the westbound lanes, laughing gleefully aloud at my accomplishment. I

suppose it was this same instinct for lawlessness that led me to park at the side of the road and walk out a ways into the desert.

The sunlight reflected brilliantly off the predominately white ground, revealing an entire spectrum of colors. A splendid mineral crunch clung with damp chemical adhesiveness to the thin soles of my lavender pumps. Tiny grains of alkaline salts cast enormous shadows one hundred and fifty times their natural size, due to the sharp angle of the sun at that early hour. The desert floor was cut by fissures and ridges encompassing two-foot-wide spaces in ropey oblong patterns, echoing the theme more grandly announced by pointy mountains bordering to the west. All in all it seemed a comforting landscape, not out of keeping with a childhood conception of lunar crust I used to summon while gazing out the window next to my bed—a nightly occurrence that I discontinued after Neil Armstrong's oddly anticlimactic step up on the moon.

I was heading towards the mountains, noticing how they didn't seem to get any nearer the closer I got, when the heel of my shoe turned in. Although both arms broke the impact of my fall, my cheek momentarily grazed the rough ground. Checking in my pocket mirror for damage I found I was able to brush away all but a few tenacious grains of the mineral salt that had streaked the makeup on my right cheek, achieving a one-sided war paint effect. I had been thrown clear out of my shoe and when I went to retrieve it had a vague notion that something didn't seem quite natural about it. Then I saw the fingertips of a glove securing my shoe with the no-slip easy grip texture peculiar to a brand of impervious gloves preferred by SWIPE scientists. The glove, half-erupted from a crevice in the ground with fingers pinched about the heel of the shoe, looked much like a tightly-whorled crocus emerging through snow and dead leaves. I didn't even try to recover it. I removed the other, threw it in the direction of the captured one and ran, stocking-footed, back to my car. Then I screeched out of that devil's playground, feeling that now I knew what those early pioneers must have known when they gave up looking for the river mistakenly drawn on their map of the desert. That sense of security known as

civilization dissipated all around me like a cruel mirage, and I saw, for the first time, the hard and heavy things that leave great marks where the surface is most soft.

The memorial service was small and intimate. I felt like a stranger there.

Genevieve died in a fog in the mountain wilderness, looking for her beloved Sasquatch in the snow. She never found a trace of scientific evidence in the long years of searching, not even a footprint.

Her diary tells the story of the objects she offered, the various artifacts of our culture—a steel knife, tin cups, bread, matches, blankets, construction paper, flashlights, crayons, books, binoculars, a video camera—and of their subsequent disappearance; of the broken threads strung across the path, and the snapped twigs.

I wish I could tell how I went out this morning and discovered, under a canopy of rhododendron, madrona and redwood, a careful path. At the end, at the foot of my sister's grave, I found a videocassette. Though out of focus, unsteady and improperly aimed, the picture might prove to be the only authentic definitive proof of the existence of Sasquatch. Alongside the tape an unusual collection of dried flowers and leaves may have fallen, as if someone had intentionally gathered them for a loved one. And there beneath the flowers, drawn in red crayon, on a piece of soggy brown construction paper—the ancient symbol for fire.

But. . .the Sasquatch leaves no well-lit trail; no clearly identifiable remnants, no measurable remains.

Today I'll drive into town and stock up on supplies. I'll buy combs, lipstick, shampoo, emery boards, scarves and earrings. And tweezers, the women need tweezers.

