



MOUNTAIN

URSULA PFLUG

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URSULA PFLUG

 INANNA

Young Feminist Series

ALSO BY URSULA PFLUG

NOVELS

Motion Sickness

The Alphabet Stones

Green Music

SHORT FICTION

Harvesting the Moon

After the Fires

To my aunt Michaela, in gratitude

1

VERY EARLY MORNING, the night's rain was dripping from everything standing, its rhythm a backdrop to my first fatigue-warped vision of camp. My eyes were grainy from lack of sleep and secretly I cursed Laureen, wished I'd gone east to Lark after all, back when the truck first broke down in B.C. My mother could've come down here alone.

Winter's ice was coming unstuck under the April sun, washing down the mountain through the camp. I'd been to the mountains before, knew even at noon it would still be cold under the Ponderosas, among the crates of vegetables sunk for refrigeration into white hips of remaining snow. Next to the kitchen tent, a creek ran under the picnic tables; except it wasn't really a creek, just runoff in a gravelly gully. Pieces of the mountain, ground down by ice.

A youngish guy in a white T-shirt sat on a picnic table paring apples. Bushels of apples, gone soft and bruised over the winter, good only for cooking with now. "Laureen!" he called, seeing us, waving his skinny arms in greeting.

My mother swore, spun her wheels. He grabbed a board from a pile and came running over with it. I stared, wondering how he wasn't cold; even with my jean jacket on I was still shivering. A woman started cursing for the missing plank. I could see how without shelves to sit on, the cardboard boxes of beans would soak through in a minute, and then no matter

how you stacked them they'd get knocked over and would be everywhere. "You think this is party time," my mother said, turning to face me. "Like all the other places we've been. But it's not. This gathering is different."

Since I didn't much enjoy the other so-called gatherings we had been to, I wasn't impressed. "Different from getting high?" I asked.

My mother was lighting her blue clay pipe, a present from Lark. "There's gatherings every year on this mountain in the spring. They say it's a holy place, brings necessary changes," Laureen persisted.

"They?" I asked.

"The people who come," Laureen said. "The Tribe."

We waited while the guy ran back for another plank. It was bright outside, but dark in the cab, so I couldn't make out Laureen's face as she offered me the pipe. "It will heal your bones," she said.

"My bones are the least of my problems," I said. "And you know I can't take your healing talk seriously after what happened."

"What happened?" Laureen asked.

"With Peter," I said.

Laureen stared at me for a long time. Then she abruptly changed the subject, a thing she'd done often, to my eternal consternation. "That's Skinny," she said, catching me watching the guy who was coming toward us again. "He's Tribe, too."

"Too?" I asked.

"As is your mother. Meaning me," Laureen said.

"My," I said. "Another accomplishment. You have so many. Whatever Tribe is."

My eyes were drawn back to the guy. "Shut up, Nan," he was saying to the cursing woman. "It's Laureen. Look, Laureen's here."

The woman stopped what she was doing to stare at us. “Fuck Laureen,” she said, full of animosity, turning back to her work.

My mother smiled at Skinny, her first smile since Vancouver, since the truck broke down the second time. I was beginning to think she was sour always: sour I couldn’t drive or change tires or push the truck very well when it got stuck. Sour I burnt the food and didn’t have enough money to take my bad moods back east to Lark on my own.

Last night when we pulled over, moonlight through windy pines strobed the wall of mountain blasted away to build a midnight coast road; so beautiful I was briefly happy. Still snow where in only another month everything would be brown and dry, or was that farther south in California?

There were other journeys west for my mother and me. Sometimes now the years and trips blur together and it’s only people’s faces that remain etched into the softened blacktop of events. Everything runs together: which route we took; which country we were in, ours or theirs; the brown hills outside the car windows a marker of a border crossed, the little route numbers marking the roads taken, the years passed and gone.

There I was, being eloquent in my own head. I figured it must be my mother’s pot, filling up the cab and my brain.

“You didn’t answer me,” I said.

“About what?” Laureen asked.

“You know about what.”

Laureen looked out the window so I couldn’t read her face. “This country is so beautiful to me because I see it so rarely. It’s always a respite, a reprieve from the east.” Laureen is wordy when stoned like me, only she’s not so self-conscious that she keeps it to herself, like I do. “They run a drug free operation here,” she rambled on evasively, “have to, to get permits. Skinny, you old son of a bitch,” she said, turning her attention to the guy. Leaning out of the window she laughed while he stuck a

second board under our wheels. Success! She came free and pulled us up onto dry land, turned the motor off, jumped out and threw her arms around Skinny. He threw his, too.

“Laureen, where you been all year?” he asked. “Remember in Vic with Dwayne and Sarah and Estevan? Have you seen them? How are they? Do they write? Where did you come from, today? Did you drive far?”

“I remember,” my mom said, thumping his back. “And Felicity and Johann and Jean-Marc. You look great, Skinny, just great.” I got out too, stood respectfully back, staring at the line of trees. The smell of pot hanging everywhere in spite of the regulations; several hundred people camped in a mud puddle with bad food and no medical. By week’s end we’d all have scabies and staph infections running down our legs and die. I pretended not to watch Skinny and Laureen hug and kiss. Old lovers, for sure. Laureen would ignore me now, and I’d have to navigate this maze alone.

But Skinny had stepped back from Laureen to look at me, and then my mother walked away to go talk to someone else. It happens every time.

2

HE WASN'T SO TALL exactly as extremely thin and had shaved his head recently; his hair was only just starting to grow in. His skin was so pale I thought he must be a redhead; his fuzz so short it was hard to tell what colour it was. A sun-freckled nose turned up at the end like a kid's, but his eyes were the most surprising. Such a dark brown they appeared all pupils, but seemed to show emotion all the same. One emotion, I should say: mirth.

"You're Laureen's daughter. I know she must've told me, but I forget your name, how old you are; all that stuff. You been out West before?"

Why did his eyes laugh, I found myself wondering.

I answered the last question first. "Laureen comes more than I do. She worked with this famous designer Estevan again, all last year up in Vic. Oh, but I guess you know that part, you were there too. I remember that now. I live with my dad in Toronto, go to high school. This year I left early, so I could travel with mom. I'm sixteen," I added, which was the truth, and "my name's Camden," which was not. I never go by Amethyst. Even Crystal would've been better; I could've changed the spelling to its European counterpart, Krystle. Very traditional, nothing new-agey about it. "It's the name of the part of London I was born in," I lied again, idiotically.

Skinny nodded. "Nice name," he said, still staring. I figured

the stare meant he knew me for a liar; Camden Town is actually the name of a song my father wrote me on the back of a postcard from England, on tour a few years ago. It was a minor hit and I remember my friends envied me for that but I just wished he'd come home. I'd stay with Laureen when he was away and sometimes we'd fight. Because of all those things, Camden Town marked my life. Some tattoos are names, so are some events. I didn't feel so bad about lying once I'd figured that out.

"It's all coming back to me now," Skinny said. "Your dad is Lark O'Connor. What's it like having a rock star for a dad?"

"He's pretty small time really," I said, trying to weigh whether Skinny was impressed or not. "But he's the purveyor of almost everything decent in my life, namely pizza, rock T-shirts, nice jeans, and concert and airline tickets."

I thought I'd managed to sound a tad ironic but all the same Skinny just muttered, "Things of great value."

I winced again but went on bravely, "I'd much rather be back east with him than out here, but Laureen insisted I go with her this time, and besides, Lark's recording and wouldn't have time for me anyway."

"And what do you make of your mother?" Skinny asked me.

"She smokes too much pot," I said.

Skinny laughed. "If that's the worst thing you can say about your mother, I suppose you two are still doing all right."

I looked around for the mother in question, hoping she'd come rescue me from this awkward conversation, but she was nowhere in sight; there was just mountain everywhere I looked. There were no flat places to stand; one foot was always higher than the other. Alpine meadow full of snow, mostly tramped into mud now. Tents spotted among the pines, people hunkered under their flies, trying to start fires with wet kindling, or hanging wet sleeping bags on lines strung between trees,

pissed off. There was mist everywhere, rising from the ground. Still farther up, more people, sitting up on logs to keep out of the mud. Up there the snow banks weren't just in the woods but also on slopes that didn't face the sun. Go up two hundred metres, and you're in a different microclimate.

"It's pretty, isn't it?" he asked.

"Sure," I said, "Pretty snow waiting to be melted, make more mud."

My sarcasm usually throws people, but it had no effect on this guy, least not on his laughing eyes. I wondered if anything did.

"Your mother didn't even park the goddamn truck properly," he said. "If she comes back, get the keys and put it over there. That's the parking lot, eh?" Love that *eh*. It was his Victoria time showing, or maybe he was actually Canadian, like me.

"Yeah, sure," I said. "If I could drive."

Skinny stared at me as though it was astounding, that I didn't drive. "You do anything useful?" he asked. "Or just your nails?"

Mine were ice blue. Revlon double coat, a present from Lark. I'd done them yesterday, while Laureen changed tires again. They were only a little chipped. I know what that sounds like, but you don't know Laureen.

Towards the end she was even begrudging me a place to sleep. I remember one night last week, I think we were in Oregon, Oregon or Washington. She'd pulled the truck onto a side road, too fried to drive any longer. Sometimes we did that, slept on side roads. It was cheaper than camping passes even. "Without you I'd have the whole cab to myself for a bed," she'd said, tilting her seat back as far as it would go before she grabbed a quilt and closed her eyes.

"I'll sleep in the back," I'd offered, knowing the box leaked and I'd be wet. Laureen had only glared at me.

Skinny seemed to have forgotten he'd just insulted me. He turned to look at the so-called parking lot, at the edge of still

more dripping Ponderosa pines. “*Voyez le stationnement! Et là-bas, beaucoup de granolas,*” he said, pointing and laughing.

His accent was worse than mine, but I had to ask. “You speak French?”

“Not really,” Skinny said. “I went to one of Elder Com-manda’s gatherings in Quebec with Estevan years ago. Picked up a little.”

There were a lot of old boards down in the parking area so the vehicles wouldn’t go waist deep in muck, but of course the mud was just squelching up between the planks. The sight of the parking lot made me miss Lark’s newish Subaru with something close to pain. Falling apart cars and trucks; big ugly biker-looking guys arguing tranny repair procedures, looking under hoods, lying on their backs underneath their vehicles, getting mud in their long filthy hair. They all made Skinny look positively angelic. *Beaucoup de granolas*, I only wished.

Suddenly Laureen was back. “How many people you got?” she demanded of Skinny. “Looks to me like three, four hundred. Not much for this late date, not much for a Tribe thing.” She looked at her watch. “You guys are slipping, Security. You don’t even have Kitchen going, yet.”

“Maybe not but you’ve got a watch on,” Skinny said.

My mother stared at him.

“Screws up your electromagnetic field,” he said. “As any healer of any modality can tell you. You’ll be nicer with it off, I’ll bet.”

Laureen looked horrified and took her watch off, tucking it into a pocket of her fraying down vest. “I’ve been driving too long,” she apologized. “And in the city too long before that. So anyway,” she said, switching to shop talk, “where’s the hardware?”

You either love my mother or hate her and what with all

the hugs and kisses Skinny definitely seemed to be part of the first club. “You know so much, Laureen,” he kidded. “You go over there and talk to Daniel.”

He pointed to a huddle by the line of conifers. Daniel, it seemed, was yet another tall, ugly, bearded man speaking in hushed tones to an assembled group of minions.

“Daniel who?” Laureen said. “I’ve never heard of him.”

“Me either. Someone Estevan recommended. He’s from the south, Mississippi or Arkansas or someplace.”

“That’s a good sign,” Laureen said. “They’ve been broker down there for longer, had to learn more the hard way.”

“Indeed,” Skinny said. “So, apparently he knows his shit. Especially good at bicycle-powered sound stages.”

Laureen snorted. “Sound stages? Who the fuck cares? What does he think this place even is, a frickin’ rock show? Hey, Daniel,” she yelled.

Daniel looked, wasn’t impressed, and turned back to his little group.

My mother strode across the field; her too big black rubber boots going *squish squish squish*. She got to the circle. She must have been yelling, because I could hear her clear as day from where I was standing. “Hey, Daniel. You listen when I talk to you. Don’t you know who the fuck I am? I’m Laureen, man. Does that name mean anything to you?”

There was a touch of humour in her words, just enough. All the same, at first I was afraid he was going to hit her, or ignore her entirely. Thing is, Laureen doesn’t look scary, but she doesn’t look like someone you can ignore either. My tiny middle-aged mother stood there, dressed as always in a faded floral dress, a stained down vest, barn boots. Her long brown ringlets looked like their weeks on the road, not that Daniel’s hair was any cleaner. But oddly her routine seemed to work and I wondered whether she’d tried it before on guys like that.

He clapped her on the back, laughing, introduced her to his people in low venerable tones.

Skinny watched me watching. “Laureen’s really shy and she tries to fight it,” he said. “Sometimes her trying to fight it comes out a little weird.”

That was strange, him saying something insightful about Laureen. It was like he knew my mom better than I did. “So explain why the biker didn’t hit her,” I said.

Skinny laughed. “Her legend precedes her. Your mom can be a royal pain, but she’s still the best.”

3

TEN YEARS AGO I moved in with Lark and his model of the year, while my mother left for British Columbia to study with Estevan White. Estevan runs a renewable energy co-op, as well as a school in DIY design and implementation. In spite of being a woman, my mom's a hardcore hardware geek. She was his best student ever, or so she says he says. It must have been at least partly true, because now she travels around, getting paid just enough, to design and install the portable power stations and water purifiers and satellite linkups and things at these gatherings.

Skinny excused himself and went back to the kitchen tent, moved boxes around. Nobody noticed me. After my shoes were wet through, I went and sat down on a picnic bench under the fly. It was one of those big open sided things, utilitarian beige canvas, like the army or boy scouts have. Skinny and a hippie-looking woman kept moving boxes from one end of the tent to another, arguing about how it should be done. It was the woman who'd been cursing him the day we arrived. They had a little cook fire going outside by then so I took off my socks and shoes and put them nearby, hoping they would dry. "Where's your people?" the woman asked, walking past me with a box. "I'm Nan, by the way."

"My mom's Lauren," I said, as though that explained everything. She shrugged, not impressed, I guess.

Skinny came over just then and sat down beside me. “Hi again,” he said, and lit a cigarette.

Laughing Eyes, I thought to call him. He was like a dolphin with its fixed, perpetually blissed out smile, or those dogs with turned up lips: happy looking, even when they’ve just been kicked. Later, I was to come back to that observation and ponder it some more, but at the moment I was busy noticing that Skinny’s teeth were white. You notice good teeth now that they’re becoming rare.

“So, Camden,” he asked, “you want to come check in yet?”

“Where?” I asked.

He pointed to a big orange nylon tent set discreetly back among the pines. He’d worn a path through the muck and pine needles and bits of snow. “My office,” he said, a little proudly. The flap was open and inside I could see the screen of a laptop opened on a card table.

“Who set up the Wi-Fi if Laureen wasn’t here?” I asked.

“Daniel can manage a local area network,” Skinny said. “But there’s no internet yet. We’ve all been waiting for your mom on account of that.”

“Take her twenty minutes at the outside,” I said. Skinny wasn’t the sort you could complain about Laureen to, I got the feeling, so I might as well join the bragging club. Unlike some people, I had the right to.

Skinny laughed. He ducked into the tent and started typing without even pulling up his little folding chair.

“Can I wait?” I asked. “Don’t feel like moving yet.”

“Sure,” Skinny said. “Wait for your socks to dry. Where’s your boots, anyway?”

“Truck, I think,” I said. “It’s a bit of a mess.”

Skinny nodded as if he knew all about keeping your belongings in messy trucks. “So,” he asked, “you ever been to a Tribe thing before?”

"I've been to six or seven things like this with Laureen, but I've never heard of this Tribe before. If it's so important, how come she's never mentioned it?"

"Saving the best for last, is my guess. And the first. Tribe gatherings were the first, are the biggest, have always been the best. Everything else is a cheap imitation. I'm not complaining; you can't have too many these days. I'm an elitist in my own way, I suppose. Estevan is Tribe too," Skinny said. "Maybe you just haven't been listening."

It seemed possible. "But not Peter?" I asked.

"If Peter was Tribe I'd withdraw my membership," Skinny said.

"Ditto," I agreed. "Where do those crates of fresh vegetables come from?" I asked, pointing at the kitchen area that had miraculously sprouted crates and boxes of produce to augment the copious supply of cans and burlap-bagged dry beans.

"An organic farm near Redding. We make weekly runs."

"That is organized. These Tribe people must be smarter than they look." I made my own elitist face, scowling at Nan who was still muttering and moving boxes.

"Or is that part of their smartness," Skinny asked, "that they don't look it?"

As if I cared about his cryptic quips. I stared sulkily at the dripping trees.

"Forget it," he said, "whatever it is. Come for a walk?"

He was pretty cute so I said okay.

I put my still damp footwear back on. A muddy trail through pines opened onto another sloping meadow, this one empty except for a pile of logs on a rise, up out of the mud. Skinny possessively opened an aluminum toolbox sitting up on the logs, took out a thermos. He poured coffee, drank a big swallow, passed me the cup. I looked at him, weighing again. How germly could this guy be? The coffee smelled

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Photo: Anita Buehrle

Ursula Pflug is the critically acclaimed author of the novels *Green Music*, *The Alphabet Stones*, *Motion Sickness* (a flash novel illustrated by SK Dymont) and the story collections *After the Fires* and *Harvesting the Moon*. She edited the anthologies *They Have To Take You In* and *Playground of Lost Toys* (with Colleen Anderson). Her short stories and nonfiction about books and art have been appearing for decades in Canada, the U.S. and the UK, in genre and literary venues including *Lightspeed*, *Fantasy*, *Strange Horizons*, *Postscripts*, *Leviathan*, *LCRW*, *Now Magazine*, *Bamboo Ridge*, *The New York Review of Science Fiction*, and many more. Her work has been shortlisted or nominated for the Pushcart Prize, the Sunburst Award, the Aurora Award, the 3 Day Novel Contest, the *Descant* Novella Award, the KM Hunter Award, and others. Visit her on the web at <http://ursulapflug.ca>.