

THE ELECTRIC AFFINITIES

WADE STEVENSON

A NOVEL

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Buffalo, New York

The Electric Affinities
by Wade Stevenson
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BlazeVOX [books]
131 Euclid Ave
Kenmore, NY 14217

Editor@blazevox.org



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blazevox.org

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CHAPTER I



It was the fourth of July, the first official weekend of summer, and the broad lawn at Ben Steinberg's house in Sag Harbor was crowded with editors, artists, writers, architects, decorators, models, and movie and theatre people. Andre Cordier, a film director, was speaking. He was a burly, rather aggressive young man in his late twenties. "The fireworks ought to form a pattern like, let's say, the American flag, red, white and blue, unfurled, exploding against the night sky. I see the image lasting for an instant, and then being torn apart by a rocket shooting through the center of the stars."

Ben moved about his guests, his arms around the shoulders of Robert Lord and his girlfriend, Carolina Cook. He introduced them to his friends, saying, "They're just back from California and are going to spend a few days with me. They're the most charming couple I know!"

Over the bay, the sun was about to drop into the slot of the horizon like a flaming coin. The light floated, fine, superb. Guests talked loudly, confidently, gaily, discussing new projects, plans, and mutual friends with the faint arrogance of those who have earned their holidays. There was no hint of anything wrong, of anything that could possibly go wrong.

Satisfied, yet seeking more pleasure, the guests swarmed around the food on the buffet table like hungry birds. Laid across the table were plates of tiny meatballs, Virginia ham, and several varieties of paté. One of the guests commented wryly, “Americans don’t like their innards; they sell them to the French who sell them back to us as paté!”

The arms of the handsome, young caterers rose up and down as they pumped drink after drink out of endless bottles. Under the shadows of the century-old trees beyond, people were sitting in a circle on the lawn, quietly talking. A curious American tree with some of its limbs lopped off towered above them. There was an abundance of pretty girls, their faces masked by sunglasses, all perhaps desiring to meet that man who could unmask them or take away that slight edge of superiority their dark glasses gave them.

Cars streamed up the long driveway that wound through bushes and trees. All those who could afford it and many, who could not, had left the city and found their way here. They greeted each other with quiet, formal gestures of welcome. There were many quiet, friendly, young men, wearing colorful clothes, with a vaguely hippyish appearance. Small, well-toned, pretty women talked eagerly and enthusiastically. Ben did his best to point out his friends to Robert and Carolina.

“There,” he said, “is Irving Salzman, the decorator. That lovely Japanese woman putting a drink to her lips is Fumi-Fuigi Tofuigi, Buckminster Fuller’s assistant.” Blonde, fragile, bubbling with her airy laughter, Carolina teased, “Fuigi or not to fuigi...” Robert helped himself to another vodka. He noticed that everyone had the rather modish appearance of watered down, slightly stylized hippies.

Ben steered Robert and Carolina toward a particularly stylish couple, “Do you see that tall, lean man with the serious but friendly face speaking French with Louise? He’s one of the editors of ‘Vogue’. He has

thirty people working for him and lives alone near the Creek.” Robert was about to ask which one was Louise, when Ben divulged, “She’s a French woman from Paris, spending the summer here with the most interesting woman on the island.” Before Robert had a chance to find out who “the most interesting woman on the island” was, Ben was talking to Louise, telling her that she “ought to find herself a guy.”

Louise, apparently, was very excited. She had put on a see-through knit dress. Her hips, thighs, breasts could be seen without any difficulty. Although her proportions were modest, she was very well shaped, curvaceous and compact. After Ben had introduced them, Louise asked if her costume flattered her? Before Robert could answer, she added, “But the shawl isn’t mine, it belongs to Maya.”

For the first time since he had come back from California a few days ago, Robert felt excited, free, tuned in. The lovely Fourth of July party on the lawn, the sun sinking over the bay, the presence of the flashy guests, the kindness of Ben, the fact that it was the beginning of summer, the Polish vodka - all had gone to his head. He forgot the horrors of the Vietnam War. He forgot Carolina and the difficulties he had with her. It was as if he had jumped out of his skin and mind and begun to live.

Standing nearby, Ellen, the editor of “Architecture Today”, was getting quite drunk, wobbly and tough. Her woman friend, who lived with her, had grown even tougher and smarter with her tongue and was telling Louise how much she hated the French.

“But, oui, I agree,” said Louise, astonishing everyone. “You know, I much prefer ze Americans to ze French. I came to America in search of a ‘new life’.”

As the old sun set, the bay shone with light atomized in the evening vapors. The party drifted, flowed; groups broke apart, reformed. People permutated. Ice clinked in glasses. Upon the porch two well-

known pianists began to play a duet. The air, breezing over the water was cool and refreshing. Jack Mandel, head of the Vietnam desk in Washington, was trying to defend the disaster of “Hamburger Hill”, where 241 Americans were recently killed, to some of his weekend friends. More and more liquor flowed as the lights over the bridge to Sag Harbor flickered.

Carolina took in the extravagance of her surroundings. Swinging her bag absentmindedly she watched as Norman Mailer engaged Jack Mandel in a vigorous debate about the war and whether the U.S. was right to bomb Laos. Suddenly the chain handle broke and her purse fell to the ground. “Oh no,” she exclaimed. “Robbie, look, it’s broken.” He grabbed for the bag before its contents could spill out. “A screw came loose. I’ll fix it. You stay with the guests.” He headed off across the broad lawn to the house. In the kitchen he used a knife to replace the screw. He was just finishing the job when it slipped and cut his finger. It came so quickly, the blood, he thought, as he hurried to the bathroom for a band aid. He hoped it wasn’t an omen for the summer.

He came back outside, down the porch past Ben’s bronze Giacometti-like sculptures, past the gay piano players, into the deep, exotic evening that, as a bough with fruit, seemed to be laden with promises and expectancies to be plucked for the simple asking. Fruit with selections of French cheese was being served for desert. As he walked past various guests, he overheard bits of their conversations.

“Where should we put our plates?”

“Why doesn’t someone bring out something for the garbage?”

A stunning, serpentine girl approached Robert and asked, “But what do you think of God?”

“If He’s there at all, He’s probably laughing it up with some woman right now,” Robert responded and watched with pleasure as the discomfited lady slithered away.

Carolina, her funny Turkish pants flapping in the breeze, stood out on the edge of the grass near the fence where the apple trees grew, eagerly scanning the horizon that glowed with darkness, as if looking for some sign. No matter what she did, Carolina always managed to be like a sentinel on the outpost, the frontier of things. She never let herself be assimilated to any group. ‘Carolina’ wasn’t even her given name. She had chosen it because she said it sounded “free”.

Nearby, in the illumined waters of the swimming pool, a few daring girls, anxious for publicity, had stripped and were leaping nakedly around, giggling.

Ben grabbed Robert. “There, take a look. Have you ever seen a woman with green eyes and six bracelets on her arm? I damn sure never have. Come, I want you to meet Maya. Aside from you and Carolina, she and Andre are my favorite couple.”

Maya was wearing a white lace vintage dress that accentuated her willowy, elegant figure. On the stem of her neck, she wore a black velvet cameo choker. The moment Robert saw her, from the very first glance, he felt troubled by her in a way that he had never felt before. She did indeed have gorgeous green eyes and wore a kind of extravagant, curly wig that crowned her head and gave her an imperial look. She had a way of constantly inventing herself with a fantastic allure that had the effect of a bomb upon those who saw her for the first time.

Robert would later learn more about her incredible sense of theatre, of disguise, combined with the airs of an empress, something regal and superb that mocked itself through play, that delighted in creating a series of illusions and sleight-of-hand appearances, so that you could

never tell where she began and where she ended, what was her and what was not her, or if she even existed at all. But Maya did exist. Behind all her lacy camouflage, there was something precise, joyous and powerful.

Robert hesitated, hung back; it looked as if they were interrupting a scene. Maya, the girl with the green eyes and the exuberant wig, was saying, “Andre, I beg of you, will you please be quiet!”

The film director, using his fingers like claws, raked his nails into her flesh above her stacked bracelets. His angry mouth blasted words into her ear, “Suicide, despair, luxury of the rich, you say! You know damn well we’re all just wolves prowling around the fire, looking for something to warm us. Now that we’ve got the summer ahead of us, why not be free?”

Superb, without moving, with a proud and savage serenity, Maya answered, “If you think I’m going to be your sheep ---!”

Seeing the others approach, Andre stopped. They both stood in an uneasy truce, fiercely glaring at each other like animals at bay.

Radiant spokes reflected from under Maya’s lashes. She sneezed, held her nose so that the sneeze was choked through her mouth. “Pardon me, all the flowers, scents in the air...”

Ben introduced Robert; Carolina appeared; Andre drained his glass, trying to muffle his rage. Maya said, “Would you excuse me, please, I would like to wash my hands.” There was a droplet of blood on her arms. Her eyes glistened with moisture, the radiant spokes of the fake eyelashes becoming undone.

“Do you have a repair kit with you?” asked Ben. She laughed. “No, absolutely nothing!” Eluding the encounter, anxious to be alone with her own feelings, Maya bounded away, stooping to pick up some lavender flowers.

She struck Robert with the impact of a revelation. He had never seen a woman who united within her such grace, extravagance and dignity. He had already decided: I must have this woman; it is absolutely necessary to my life that I have her and make her mine.

The dark pool waters hid the dangerous nudity of the girls. Tirelessly they swam back and forth, as if celebrating some forgotten ceremony. Maya came back out, turning her head sideways. She looked washed, refreshed. Her long Nefertiti neck rose up. Was it possible that she loved Andre?

Ben was conversing with some famous writer who summered in the Hamptons when Carolina snapped, “For goodness sake, let’s stop talking about the meaning of art and literature. We’ve been stuffed with that fare for more than two thousand years. Let’s just enjoy the air, the sparkling water, the evening, and the delicious company of ourselves. No need to go any further. We are here, we are ‘it’, we are what’s happening, baby.” The summer of 1969 had begun; the people around them were chattering a lot about revolution and discontent and Vietnam and the unliveableness of the cities.

Gradually the evening settled and the first fireworks were arched up in lovely, incandescent, multicolored expanding parabolas. Over and over again, above their upturned heads, far out over the bay, burst parachutes of convulsive color. Carolina kissed Robert; she hugged him and sighed and whispered into his ear, “What a sexual thing, just think of a man bursting like that inside a woman!” Detonated mushrooms of diamond and emerald glitter deployed, floated and crashed into infinity. Snuggling her warm little nose into his neck, Carolina murmured, “When the world blows up, which I think will be soon, I hope it happens like that.”

CHAPTER II



After the party was over, the last lights blossomed in the sky and the cars disappeared down the driveway. Ben took them all to the local clam bar in Sag Harbor. Luckily the jukebox was broken so that it was quieter than usual. Eight or nine fat, solitary men, squatting on bar stools looked up as they entered, laughing loudly. Immediately, Andre said in a provocative tone “Look at all those asses dripping over the stools. What an image for the Fourth of July! Think of all those fat, lonely asses on the stools stretching onward, expanding like tombstones into infinity.”

“You bore me,” said Maya.

Andre was already quite drunk. When drunk he resembled a blind bull. He turned round and round upon himself and never stopped talking. “Once I was working in a garage in Detroit. I’d just come to the States and needed to make a little bread. One night I took some girls out and they asked me what religion I was and I said I was an atheist. The next day the boss called me into his office and said, ‘Look, I know you’re from France, but stop teasing these girls. I know you’re not an atheist. It was a joke, wasn’t it?’ Crazy! A week later, you know what? My boss went home to dinner one night and his wife was undressing in front of the window and across the street another guy was watching her and jerking off. The boss picked up a gun and shot him dead! He went to court and was

acquitted! Public opinion was for him. Of course this was in 1958... Still, I'd be happy if Maya inspired someone to amuse himself....”

Contradiction! Bells should have rung. Maya did repeat, “You bore me!”

Andre didn't seem at all jealous of the electricity that had begun to crackle and flow between Maya and Robert.

On the wall behind the door Ben stopped to inspect a painting of an old whaling ship, rendered with acute detail. “There's somebody home there,” said Maya. “And that coat rack in the corner is quite lovely too,” she remarked. “It's like a Brancusi sculpture. So much better than all those modern minimalist sculptures you see.”

In the back of the room there was a billiard table; the year before, Ben said, there had been a bowling machine. Ben had been drinking quite a lot and hadn't eaten anything at his party earlier. It was impossible to know how much liquor he absorbed during the day but it was a substantial quantity. Although he had had undergone several detox cures, often drinking nothing but water for six months, Ben had a way of falling abruptly back into alcohol. At such times he would say, “I heard yesterday that Bunuel, the famous Spanish film-maker, is alcoholic too. But he does pretty good stuff, don't you think? All the more reason, I tell myself, to go on drinking!”

Upon that particular night, Ben already had a good head start. He kept talking back and forth with Maya and had obviously fallen under the influence of her extraordinary, high-pitched charm. “You know what, you're my little sister!” he kept trying to convince her.

At the same time, in front of both Ben and Andre, Maya was engaging Robert ---who was not slow to respond ---- openly, without reserve, as if to show her independence, flaunting her liberty. It wasn't

certain whether Ben knew what was happening. Andre did. Vexed, he stomped, stalked and fumed. “Quit playing these games,” he demanded.

“What for?” came her quick retort. ‘I want to live everything.’

“You better leave now if you want to live.”

Again her ironic, savage, “What for? It’s the Fourth of July festival. Once a year, you know, everything is permitted. I’m having a good time; I’m amusing myself. If you’re not, you’re free to leave....”

Was it the presence of Ben, of the others, that kept Andre from slugging Robert, attacking Maya? Or did he feel that his control of her was such that he didn’t need to worry about physical possessiveness? As masters sometimes allow their dog off the leash, was he condescending to give Maya a moment of unleashed liberty?

Carolina hadn’t wanted to come, but had finally let herself be persuaded by Ben. She would often say, “I don’t like cocktail parties; people are always so self-promoting. If they had a good relationship with their dog, they wouldn’t have to go there.” Now she was managing to make the best she could of Robert’s antics. She was all too willing to give him this liberty and had often encouraged it; she was totally against the kind of jealousy and possessiveness that pushes a man and woman to devour each other. Carolina felt there was complicity between them that went beyond whatever he might do. Still, it did hurt her to see him cavorting so openly in public. Did he have to use her presence as an arena in which to prove his independence?

Louise sat next to Ben. She had become very quiet and demure, playing a humble, defensive role. The atmosphere of the evening, the bright gaiety of the party, the fireworks that for a moment had cut the sky to ribbons, had triggered something deeply in all of them. The summer had begun with a bang and already it seemed that this evening would serve as a launching pad for everything that was to come later.

Robert too, felt a terrible need to go outward, to expand himself. The volatile moods of protean Carolina, their constant oscillations, all encouraged him now into a great openness. There was a moment when life had to be seized, when a man, like a trapeze artist, had to leap without knowing whether his outstretched hands would catch a bar or fall through the nothingness of space.

What did it matter anyway? He was sure they were all so drunk and delirious that by tomorrow everything would be forgotten.

Ben, ebullient as a “godfather” surrounded by his adopted family, ordered another White Label and soda, followed by a round of clams on the half shell and clam chowder for all of them.

The clams were small and exquisitely fresh. They ate them before the clam chowder and then again afterwards; it was a little like having desert. How pleasant it was, after the hot chowder, to have the clams return; Robert said they tasted like ice cream from the sea.

“Let’s have some more,” Andre urged.

Ben called the waitress over and asked her to bring another round of clams. “How long have you been working in this joint?” he wanted to know.

“I’ve worked here all my life. I’m the fisherman’s daughter.”

“That puts you in your place, Ben,” Maya said. “Stay there!”

“Right, right,” muttered Ben, and became quiet for a moment.

“How can anyone know what their ‘place’ is if they have to stay in it all the time?” Carolina wondered, glancing at Robert.

Robert paid no attention. He felt a rare spark had flashed between Maya and himself. Some sign had identified them as belonging to the same nervous family. Maya stretched her body out sideways on the seat, like a panther exercising. Robert moved against her. He was mad for

her. Under the table he tried to play hide and go-seek with her hands. She moved them away.

“They’re like children; they’re just playing,” Carolina said to Ben.

Ben made a movement with his hands as if brushing flies away from his head and announced he was going to have another drink and then go home; he had just driven out from New York City that morning.

Leaning over Robert’s shoulder, Maya announced to no one in particular how much she loved this local bar. “It’s wonderful,” she said. “It’s classic Americana.”

Andre then jumped up on his chair and, his voice half-drowned in the din, amusingly crooned:

“This is America, America, America,
Land of highways, hotdogs and lights,
Of cash, commotion and chaos,
Motels, churches and communist fears,
Kids touch-footballing on the White House lawn,
Salesmen groaning in front of empty doors,
Fantastic sounds breaking through space,
Waw jaw faw caw cat cool man dig hip yeah super wow!!!”

Everyone in the clam bar laughed and clapped.

At the end of the bar a squat, sturdy blonde woman stood up and jeered raucously. “In my country, in certain bars in Marseille, you can see the same thing,” Louise remarked.

“This ain’t nothing but a local bar in Sag Harbor,” said Ben, “and you gotta keep the proportions right.”

“Hey, baby, don’t forget this was a whaling town,” Maya answered quickly. “That’s what I’m looking for, the great, white whale!”

“Funny to hear you say that,” Ben laughed. “I always had you pegged for an Egyptian sphinx.”

Seeing how the delirium was spreading everywhere, Carolina began to laugh; her laughter spread out like a Japanese fan, cool, soft and gracious.

Bored with the nonsense, Maya knocked her head against Robert’s.

He realized what he hadn’t wanted to admit: like a car going faster and faster, the evening was escaping their control. They were no longer acting so much as being acted upon by other forces and atomic states of mind. All this is a test, Robert thought, nothing but a test, and you must somehow endure it and move into the space beyond.

Ben, by now infected too, was looking up at Maya and imitating her gestures, her bright laughter and the swift, lively movements of her hands. Putting his own hands to the side of his face, he let out a loud squawk.

Ben poured himself another drink and mumbled something; he clearly had had too much. But his lapses only seemed to stimulate Maya. Quite superbly, she kept slashing at him with her brilliance. Robert was stunned; this was a side of her that he hadn’t seen.

At the end of the bar, next to the raucous blonde woman, Andre skulked. Carolina rose and joined him. Every now and then Andre shook his head in disgust.

Louise broke her silence to announce, “It is very crazy, no, how busy this bar is tonight?”

True, it was the Fourth of July, but in such a small town as Sag Harbor, at past two in the morning? The door didn’t stop opening and shutting; brawny, boisterous men swaggered in and out.

“It’s because of all the activity down at the fishing port,” Maya answered. “The fishing boats going in and out and the fishermen coming in for a drink.” She paused. Ben and Robert both knew the port was closed down during the night; there was absolutely no fishing activity at all. But Louise was so curious that Maya continued, putting her on, “It’s on account of the whaling activity, too, you know.”

It wasn’t clear whether Louise had understood, but Robert and Ben broke up laughing.

“That’s not bad,” Ben kept saying. Admiringly, he glanced across the table at Maya.

Maya blinked her eyes and hid her head for a moment behind Robert’s shoulders, squeezing his arms as she did so. Robert felt full of her light, of her energy, but fearful of the consequences --- certain acts being irretrievable --- and suddenly became aware how he must be hurting Carolina.

Something felt twisted and broken inside his stomach. He withdrew slightly.

Ben must have sensed something too, for he stopped drinking, and looked up solemnly long enough to say, “It’s a little bit late for you to be coming on with such charm, isn’t it, baby?”

Maya smiled but said nothing. She turned and started whispering rapidly to Louise. Ben sank back, a little resigned. “All right, Maya,” he murmured. “All right, you’re not too bad.”

Something in this family reunion of exiled souls that had adopted each other was going sour.

Too late, Ben realized what was happening. “My god, you’re a pretty intelligent girl,” he said to Maya. His tone changed, became somber. “Don’t be stupid. I don’t think you and Robert should be so close

together: your heads are too strong. And you and Andre are such a good two-headed animal.”

“What do I care for your morality?” countered Maya, impetuously bumping her head against Robert’s.

Robert felt a new emotion stir inside him. He knew he had entered the danger zone.

Maya could do whatever she pleased. She had won the night for herself. In this game, she had triumphed. Like a beast in a labyrinth, lured now here, now there, Robert struck out at melting mirages, fantasies that faded as soon as they were formed. Carolina was far away, watching them with amused, ironical indifference. She thought: if he truly belongs to me, he’ll be with me. If not, he won’t.

The bar began to spin like a merry-go-round. The walls shrank and Maya’s head was enlarged as if projected upon a screen.

Although Louise tried to restrain her, Maya got up suddenly, pulling Robert with her. “Let’s go and see the billiards.”

Only too happy to leave the table’s oppressively ambiguous atmosphere, Robert rushed to the smoky rear room with her. Maya pranced up and down with excitement. For her the night was just beginning to unfold and its hidden possibilities emerge.

The moment they were safely away from the table, Maya stood on her tiptoes, threw herself against him, almost collapsing Robert with her embraces. Of course, he responded; how could he get himself to say “no” at such a moment? Even if he had had the willpower, he couldn’t have done it. After the cool arabesques and oriental harmonies of Carolina, he was recklessly overjoyed to abandon himself to this hysteria.

It didn’t matter that they were both giddy. It didn’t matter that everyone was looking at them. It didn’t matter that Andre was murderously smashing the billiard balls. It didn’t matter that another night

would come and another and another and another...How could their fury be contained? Or sustained? At bottom, Robert was as desirous of losing himself in Maya as she was of losing herself in him. Together could they vanish?

The old theme in Robert's head surfaced: throw yourself away; fling yourself like a match into the barn of a woman. Life's nothing, particularly today, so hard to have a dignity.... nothing but a grain of sand, pouring away along with all the other lost grains... Good. Who cares? What difference did it make? He kissed her, enjoyed the feeling of letting that part of himself flow into her.

Carolina herself once said, "Throw yourself like a knife into the trunk of a springtime tree. If you don't vibrate, you're other than you're supposed to be!"

Andre stood with his cue raised, poised menacingly in his hand like a spear. An obese, sloppy-shouldered youth slouched over the tattered green table and racked the bright-colored balls. They jumped together with a military clack. Effaced in the corner, half-hidden in the shadows, Carolina laughed. "You all look like soldiers. Why don't you challenge each other to a duel?"

Then it happened. Robert shot first. The white ball burst into the fixed triangle, exploding it. Balls scattered in every direction; a red one dropped in a pocket. Maya squealed with excitement. Andre was serious and enraged. Robert stroked the cue again. Maya cried out. There was a bewildering whirl of aimless motion. Andre lurched over the edge, drew the cue carefully, painstakingly back between his arched fingers, and let loose.

"Wow!" Maya cried.

The spinning balls disintegrated in a profusion of bright, cool color. Maya's body careened into Robert's. On that crazy evening, were

they not all like billiard balls, ricocheting off the slightest impulse of their feelings into each other? Maya pressed against him, dancing, her face and eyes lit up. Robert let his lips run across her cheeks, trying to convey to her quickly, as in a telegram, how wonderful she was. He didn't have much time, when, his cue held up like a sword, Andre lunged at him. Robert leaped aside. There was a brief, intense scuffle. At the back of the room, Ben and Louise sat observing them. She didn't know what to say or do. Ben's face had changed. It grimaced with discomfort as he pleaded with them to stop it all.

The few blows Andre had thrown didn't satisfy him. Curiously, he didn't seem angry with Robert anymore. All his fury was directed at Maya.

Snappily, she spun on her feet as Robert grabbed her by the arm, and they strolled back to the table. They sat down. Ben didn't say anything. He got up, ordered a beer. Carolina hung back in the shadows, feeling a stranger to everything. She couldn't understand what was happening or why Robert was deserting her like that.

When the waitress came over with the check, Maya told her how wonderful the clams had been. Noticing her accent, the fisherman's daughter looked at her curiously and asked, "Where are you from?"

Maya hesitated, hating to be put on the spot by such a typically direct American question. "Over the hills," she answered.

It was a fine reply. Even Louise laughed. The waitress was perplexed. "Where? Over there? What hills?"

As if nothing could be simpler, Maya repeated, "Over the hills!"

The waitress turned away, perplexed but seemingly resigned to her confusion.

The tension dropped. At four in the morning, people start thinking of going to bed, even in the Hamptons. Carolina yawned. She

took Robert's hand. Ben passed his beer around. For a moment, it was almost as if nothing had happened.

But Maya leaned over and whispered to Robert, "You know, when I was talking about the whale, I just meant: the search for the impossible!"

How well he knew that! The impossible, the absolute! Totality of a passion, unity of two minds, harmony of a love or a life! The forever inaccessible. What had they been doing all evening long but searching, each in his own way, for that absolute?

Softly, with an agonizing sweetness, Carolina kissed Robert. Ben put his arm around Louise, who stiffened uncomfortably. Maya told her to stop acting like that. Louise retaliated by rolling up two white fangs out of paper, putting them in her mouth, and grinning with them like Dracula at Ben and Maya.

Maya, overcome with laughter, rested her lovely head on Andre's shoulder, and Ben said they looked so well together.

"Don't lie to me," said Andre. "Tell me what kind of game you were playing."

"Don't bother to forgive me: it wasn't a mistake."

Louise whispered into Robert's ear, "She's so strong, so terribly and dangerously strong. Why is it then that the only thing she puts any value on is succumbing?"

"Bitch," Andre snarled as Louise gripped Maya protectively. Ben paid the bill. The bar was being closed, an iron grill lowered over the lines of whiskey bottles. "Fantastic," said Carolina. "It's as if they're putting the alcohol animals back in their cages."

They walked out onto Sag Harbor's deserted main street. In the diagonal parking strips, there were only a few white police cars. All the

fireworks had long been buried in the deep beckoning majesty of that early July night.

Like a little puppy, Louise trotted behind while Andre dragged Maya off. She was too weak to protest as Andre pulled her by the arm, but she managed to murmur to Robert, “I felt so comfortable with you, for a moment...”

“But that’s marvelous,” he began to say, but she walked off with Andre, and he cut himself short with a rebuke, “Idiot” he muttered. What a fool he was to have let himself get so excited for such an illusory spark of feeling.

In the Volvo station wagon driving back over the bridge, Ben said, “But things are simple, aren’t they?”

“I don’t know,” said Robert, shaking his head.

Carolina hugged him. “I hope you found the truth this evening.”

“What’s the ‘truth?’” he asked, more out of weariness than a desire to hear anything about the “truth”, whatever that might be.

“The truth,” said Carolina. “You don’t have to look for it. It’s inside you. It’s THAT. It’s a laughing cow!”