

Lesley Choyce

Conventional Emotions

It took me less than six months from the time I left Mulgrew to begin seeing things differently. I guess I had my moment of satori when I was sitting in MacDonough's anthropology class. He was explaining something about the Achilpa tribe, who lived in the deserts of Australia. Up until then I hadn't been all that concerned with anthro. In fact, at that exact moment I was hard at work studying the geography of Carolyn MacCormack's sweater. That terrain was complex enough without moving off to parched landscapes in the Southern Hemisphere.

But I guess I must have been listening to the professor with half an ear. He was an arrogant intellectual, too young for the job. When I left Mulgrew, I expected all of my mentors at the university to be ancient. MacDonough looked more like an excuse for socialized medicine. Yet, this thing about the Achilpas hit some strange chord. I turned my attention from Carolyn country to hear this: "You see, the Achilpas are nomads. They wander around in the desert, never remaining in one place for long. How do they figure out where to go?" (A "we could care less" silence issued from the half-slumbering class.) "They place a sacred pole in the ground each time they stop. It's a connecting rod between man and the heavens. They have a direct line to the guy upstairs." (More silence) "And then, they wait for the pole to tilt. Whichever direction it tilts in is the direction they move toward their next destination. For them the system is perfect."

Absolute belief in a direct line to God. No big decisions as to where to go next. The decision was always made for you. MacDonough went on to explain a variety of rituals that involved the pole. As usual, he never passed up his chance to explore the very phallic nature of this structure: "an instrument of man having veritable intercourse with the heavens." I shot a quick glance over at Carolyn, squirming uncomfortably in her seat.

"Only one problem with the system. For one Achilpa tribe, there was a crisis. They went out one morning to find the pole broken in two, rotted away from years of use. No direction. No direct line to God. It was devastating for the village. No one knew which direction they should move in next. Without the heavenly mandate, they were inextricably lost. They wandered for years in a quagmire of spiritual bankruptcy and finally destroyed themselves from within.

I leave you to think about the obvious cultural parallels. And think on this as well: the role of the anthropologist is to see man as he really is, to skim away the surface trappings and understand man the primitive, and man the civilized. Detached observer or willing ritual participant, the anthropologist must come to grips with all members of the human family."

It could have seemed like some cornball religion in itself, but I was really taken. I would devour whatever I could on anthropology. And for a guy hot out of the cultural myopia of Mulgrew, intellectual pursuit all of a sudden seemed like the most exciting thing in the world. As I reached out and woke up, I was even then remembering the last time I saw my father. He was heading off to work, to do his daily route delivering stove oil. He put on his green jacket emblazoned "Jessup Bros. Fuel Oils—providing warmth since 1898." It was my last morning in town before catching the bus to Halifax and university. My old man's jacket smelled as if it had enough spilled fuel on it to heat the house for a week. The smell never bothered him. It was like putting on aftershave in the morning. Before he left, he graced me with a last short dose of his own wisdom. "Kenny, look, when you said you were going to school in Halifax, I thought you were gonna take up a trade or somethin. But no, you want to go off and stuff your brain full of useless crap. I think you're wastin your time. But two words of advice: Don't take up no strange religions and don't shoot up no drugs . . . and one more thing in case you're still listening: steer clear of communists and labour organizers."

So far, his advice had been followed, although not on purpose. I wondered what he'd think about anthropology.

Over the next few weeks, there wasn't a primitive desert tribe in the world that I didn't become acquainted with. At first, I had a hard time getting beyond my attraction for primitive women—the perfect black skin, the composed faces and the marvelous parading breasts that the photographers for the texts seemed to linger on so gratuitously. Perhaps it was Oscar Hemmings-Hume though,

creeping around the Kalahari with yet another nomadic desert people, who helped me get beyond my adolescent obsessions and on the track to deeper meaning. He wrote with such eloquence.:

Such intelligent survivors as these have rarely graced the planet. The bushmen of the Kalahari have achieved an almost perfect symbiotic relationship with their cattle. To the man, a woman is not nearly as significant as his cattle from which all nourishment comes. In his ability to strip himself of familial sentimentality, the Kalahari bushman is to be applauded. Yet in his personal attachment to his beasts, he applies the same maudlin conventional emotions that are the intellectual sacrilege of male/female relations in the western world.

I was struck by the phrase "conventional emotions" and I could see what the guy was getting at. Look at the mess people had made out of their lives back in Mulgrew. All in the name of love and honour and family crapola. There was, after all, obviously something deeper to be gained from life--an understanding of the true nature of mankind. I had no intention of being duped into a conventional belief that I was in love with some girl just because her body attracted me, only to find myself stuck in a conventional marriage with a couple of screaming kids and a mortgage. A life dedicated to the pursuit of anthropology would provide me with a vision of the human experience that no one back on the Shore could even begin to comprehend.

After a while the library wasn't enough. To study the deep down meaning of man, one had to move into the jungles, the deserts, the veritable hinterlands of civilization. I started at the Public Gardens. I studied an old man eating a sandwich; a creature for whom time was like a trained pigeon: it could be taught to stay put in one place. The old guy ate ever so small a morsel at a time that I thought he might keel over before the ritual was completed. Finally I approached him. Nodding at the sandwich I asked, "What does it mean? To you?"

He looked up bewildered and then down at the sandwich. "Mock chicken?" He claimed only to be eating a sandwich; no more, no less. I scoffed at his unwillingness to divulge his interior logic. "Man does not live by bread alone," I chided him and he got up and left. A great anthropological lesson had been learned: don't butt into private rituals. I would henceforth remain the passive but attentive observer. Soon I grew bored with listening to women discuss the white sale at Woolco and men outraged at the price of gas. Kids all seemed to be intent on feeding squirrels and pigeons, or watching ducks

copulating. It was all too, well, ordinary. I needed foreign cultures desperately; and the best I could shoot for would be down toward the docks.

I was hoping for a few strange characters from a Libyan freighter, but had to settle for a couple of sailors coming my way from a Russian naval vessel. I figured that if I could watch them watching *our* culture, I might learn something about both. They saw my interest and stopped for a chat. Unfortunately for me, they knew only two words. "Liquor store?" One of them grunted in pretended friendliness. Any breakthrough in establishing contact with foreigners was valuable I figured, so I led them off toward Hollis Street and the Liquor Commission. They shook my hand, indicating that my services were no longer needed and one of the sailors placed three black cigarettes in my hand.

Back in the dorn, I lit up the first of the strange looking things hoping to get blasted out of my gourd, but it turned out to be an evil variety of tobacco and not some incredible Russian hybrid weed. "Ask for some caviar next time, instead," my roommate chided me. Mel Dorton was a schlemiel from Digby. His very existence persuaded me that evolution probably had by-passed that part of the province altogether. I suspected Mel of borrowing my *National Geographic* for auto-erotic stimulation, and I eventually gave him the whole collection rather than remain privy to his personal indecencies. Instead, nights would find me absorbed in reading up on Australian primitives, Hindu marriage customs, Micronesian puberty rites and Nubian migrations. I had positively devoured every word that Hemmings-Hume and his colleagues at the "World Studies Institute" had produced.

The year flew by. I ignored Christmas and spring break and held fast to the urban life, milking it of every drop of available intellectual insight on primitive cultures and anthropological wisdom. I remember the night that Oscar Hemmings-Hume himself came to town. He was giving a lecture on "Circumcision Among Amazon Tribes: The Knife Rarely Slips." It was part of a pop-cultural programme series held at the Myra Cohen auditorium at the other university in town. This was a big year for trying to make academia look interesting and there were grotesque posters of a huge knife held up to the male organ plastered all up and down Barrington Street. It wasn't really my idea of anthro. The posters were obvious drawing cards for a multitude of cultural platitudes that appeared on the posters like night-blooming flowers the first evening they were up.

But when Hemmings-Hume arrived in town, he himself was in the fever of it all and when he realized that the Cohen would be packed to the rafters with an assorted horde of local citizens whose prurient interests only peripherally touched on anthropology, he went for broke with the opening of the lecture. Standing at spear's-length away from one of the said posters on stage, he proceeded to throw a knife directly at the artist's colorful conception of the organ. It was a large triangular knife. The blade caught the printed member head on (so to speak) and at least one mournful, sympathetic groan sounded from high up on the balcony.

"That, ladies and gentlemen," began Hemmings-Hume, "will give you some idea of the accuracy of the lowland village medicine men—the Jacussi—in performing this delicate, but culturally critical maneuver. The Jacussi are a little known people and their numbers are few. They alone, perform circumcision in the Meganon Basin of the Amazon jungles. And they alone were subjected to the visitation of Helmut Vensgar in the early part of this century. Vensgar, educated in the study of primitive cultures, left Germany after shedding his Jesuit robes and espousing the teachings of the Talmud. He fancied himself a Jew, but retained the missionary evangelical zeal of the Jesuits and finally found himself deep in the Amazon heartland, where he altered once and for all time the future of the Jacussi"

I began to see even more clearly this problem of anthropologists becoming overly involved in the life of a naive ancient culture. And later, when I had the odd fortune of meeting Hemmings-Hume's wife, I vowed to be wary of women anthropologists as well. I somehow had wangled my way into the reception for the notable chap and ended up in a corner near the over-juiced punchbowl, with the over-juiced Mrs. Hemmings-Hume. As I learned, she had been involved with monkeys while her man was off in South America watching disgusting rituals near the Amazon. She said that she and "HH" had a wonderful relationship, that they were always at one with each other, as long as they were on the same side of the equator. Mileage was irrelevant.

Her fascination with killer apes had led her to live in close proximity with one in a rainforest for six months. I asked her what close proximity meant and she looked at me, rubbing her hand up and down her neck and responded, "Don't be childish." After a dozen or so glasses of punch, I found her steering me irrevocably toward the coat closet with several unusual body movements, reminiscent of dancing on the early "Bandstand" shows.

I successfully escaped, thanks to the arrival of Professor McDonough who came looking for his coat. He seemed a bit miffed that I was getting on so well with famous world scholars, while he had been ignored at best. He left with the advice that I could spend my time better in the library. I agreed and slipped somebody's muskrat coat into Mrs. H-H's arms, while I departed.

I could go on with this. Tell you about the incredible void in my life that anthropology had filled. I mean, the books all made sense, even if their authors turned out to be looney-tune material. Eventually I even saw the joy I'd get out of becoming as eccentric as the planet would allow, once I'd copped a graduate degree in my field of endeavour and had snooped around a little-known micro-culture in Micronesia for a few years. But they cancelled summer sessions, because of the new budget cuts and I had nowhere else to head for the moment but back to Mulgrew.

On the bus ride home, I found it impossible to fantasize that I was on the outskirts of Timbuktu and I was continually reminded of my destination by the loud chewing of gum coming from a hulking woman behind me. Blowing bubbles, she would let them burst at periodic intervals, breaking whatever reverie I could lull myself into and riveting my attention on the present. Her eight-year-old son, who sat beside me, eventually threw up on my pants after downing a half dozen Vachon cakes. The man across the aisle, whom I recognized as an old-time resident of Mulgrew, was ticking back some Andrés Port and asked me five times if I had a light. He finally asked how my father was doing. I told him I didn't know, as I tried to fan my pant leg near the heat vent to dry off the puke. I said that I hadn't spoken with him in eight months.

That's when I learned that my old man had had a bit of a hard winter. He had been fired from the Jessup Brothers, after he accidentally forgot to shut off his hose at Esther MacMurphey's house. In fact, about two hundred gallons of the stuff must've overflowed, ending up in Esther's well before the old man could himself shut her down. According to my informer, my old man must've been fooling around with Esther somewhere inside while his pump was working overtime outside in the cold. Esther had always had a foul reputation with the other women in town, but I still can't see my old man getting involved with her. I suppose that it doesn't matter all that much, since fiction is as good as fact in Mulgrew.

When I arrived home, he was trying to fix the lawnmower. He looked up at me, and without a bit of surprise or welcome said, "Have

you seen my goddamn 5/16ths wrench? I got every one but that one and that's the one I need." Then he threw the mower into the depression left from where the outhouse used to be and took me by the shoulders. Looking straight into my eyes, he asked me if I was straight. "What do ya mean, straight?" I responded. He pulled out a folded up page from a glossy magazine he had stashed in his pocket and held up a color picture of a young naked woman in cowboy boots.

"I mean does that do anything for ya?" He shoved it into my face, too close even to focus on. It smelled like stove oil . . . or maybe it was gasoline, I couldn't tell.

From my newly civilized manners, he couldn't figure what to make of me. When he finally gave up asking me about college girls and whether I had been approached by any homosexuals, he started in on drugs, then religion. But sex bothered him the most. He had read some article about Halifax gay rights marchers in the *Chronicle-Herald* and feared that I had been abducted into the movement. I tried to explain about anthropology, but it was like trying to explain cheeseburgers to a wombat. I gave up.

As usual, my mother always went along with my father and believed him to be incapable of any wrong or any mistake. She remained silent for the most part, the way he liked her, and I settled in for an uncomfortable summer with a night job at the fish plant, where I was supposed to cut fillets off cod for eight hours straight.

The old man let me use the car to go to and from work and it wasn't long before my interest in work disappeared and I found myself sneaking off on occasion with Debbie Conrad. Debbie was a packer and I was a cutter and we found ourselves attracted to each other during a brief stint that we had together working in the freezer. We both agreed that there were better things in life than fish packing and as long as we made it to work at least four nights a week, we wouldn't be fired.

She and I had grown up together. But she left school at fifteen to marry Bart Kinsmen. Bart had since gone off to sea with the armed forces and not written in three years. Debbie told me how she had always admired my brains and I admitted that I had often admired her body, so we hit it off on that note. I could see that the summer wouldn't be a total loss.

We spent our one stolen night a week in the Rambler parked out near where the old wharf used to be, before the hurricane of '62 ripped her off. There was a cozy little clearing in among the alders and plenty of room in the old man's '61 Rambler, a car he had kept all

these years. I silently thanked him for this small luxury the first night that I noticed that the front seat went all the way down, making the interior of the car a sort of playground area for our nocturnal rituals. In fact, I soon learned that Debbie liked the ritual to be exactly the same, every single time. Nothing fancy, nothing new. Just the basics. But then who was I to complain? I admit that once or twice I would get worried that some of the other local ne'er-do-wells would sneak up on us at night, as we were all wrapped around each other in that steamed up car with the radio on. So I kept a baseball bat in the back seat just in case.

Meanwhile, the old man was getting a bit edgy about why I missed work at least one night a week. News always travels in Mulgrew, but he only heard part of it. He kept prying me at dinner time with questions about political beliefs, drugs and screwy fad religious movements.

Now, the sad part is that he would have approved of my surreptitious activity had it been clear to him and had I the sense to tell him. But in the end, it had to come to this.

It was a Thursday; full moon, warm as it ever gets on this shore. I'm out in the Rambler with Debbie and I have the radio tuned in on an opera on the CBC, the Mikado. I hear a noise near the trunk of the car, like someone's climbing on the trunk lid to look in. Debbie looks panic stricken, her moans of ecstasy transformed into whimpers of terror. I don't know what she thought was out there or what I thought for that matter, but somewhere deep in the DNA of my brain, a signal went out. I was overwhelmed by a protective and even somewhat violently aggressive urge. Without trying to piece my clothes back together, I jumped out of the car screaming and wielding the baseball bat ready to take on whoever was out there. My pants fell down to the ground and I kicked them away into the bushes still snarling. Debbie, scared out of her wits, leaned out the door and pleaded, "What's happening?" She too was less than thoroughly clothed.

And just then there was a blinding flash of light and then a click, and then a series of blinding flashes. I was still holding the bat aloft, Debbie was hugging my rib cage and we didn't have the slightest notion as to what the hell was going on. And then I heard my old man say, "Well, I'll be damned. I'm sorry to interrupt you like this boy. If I'd a know'd. I guess I could saved you the film."

We never said a word about it to each other after that. He'd just wink across the dinner table once in a while. I thought he was satisfied, but I guess the loss of his job had given him more time to

think about his family and the future of his son. When I returned to university in the fall, I wasn't there but a day before I was summoned into the dean's office. Sitting before me were the dean, Professor MacDonough and someone introduced as the university ethics committee. Professor MacDonough held out a series of four photographs to me and the case was presented that whatever I had been up to, it indicated an uncertain mental stability and at the least, a lack of moral fibre. The ethics board had decided that for the good of the institution, I was to be denied permission to attend school any longer. MacDonough indicated that not only was I lacking the common decency necessary to attain any academic achievement, but that a career in anthropology for me could set back the field a hundred years.

Completely baffled, and humiliated, I turned to go. The dean handed me the photographs and MacDonough added, "And when you see your father, would you try to convince him that he should learn to spell. This is a civilized country, you know."