

LOUISE E. ALLIN

I Don't Want to be Remembered as a Chair

DAVID BLINKED in polite astonishment at the studied frenzy, the spastic movements in contrast to sedate linen dresses, butternut trousers and white cambric shirts. Young volunteers from nearby Harrodsburg, men with hair chopped across the forehead and women wearing cloth caps and shoulder kerchiefs for modesty stepped with confidence.

No one alive has ever seen Shakers dance. Contemporary engravings showed neat rows of men facing women, frozen in the motions to banish sin and the Devil which had given them their name. One observer in 1781 had been scandalized at the hopping on one leg, the convulsions, the swinging arms turning an imaginary wheel, and a woman twisting on the floor, wind filling her skirts as if extended by hoops.

Shakers had practiced what any post-Freudian mind could understand as sexual sublimation. No wonder, with their legendary celibacy. Members were recruited from orphans left in their care, from adults, even whole families, the larger the better. Though strictly segregated, men and women enjoyed total equality.

It was patently unfair to draw similarities between the misguided Hale-Bopp hitchhikers and these toiling agrarian pacifists. The venerable Mother Ann had come from Toad Lane in Manchester, England, with eight followers to found the chapter house in the wilderness near Albany in 1776, a dangerous year for upstart religious sects whose heavenly sights transcended patriotism. Yet once a wounded nation had healed, the Shakers blossomed like fertile dandelions blown in the wind, establishing nineteen prosperous

settlements from Maine to Kentucky. If you build it, they will come. Pioneers with a growing uneasiness about the perilous West often stopped for a meal and found themselves staying on, contributing their worldly goods, a plow, a piece of furniture, a horse or ox, from the less fortunate, a cheese or pot of honey. Even “winter Shakers,” those Mr. Slugs who lingered between harvest and seedling, found refuge with their generous and forgiving hosts.

The last dance was beginning. Pressed against him on the narrow bench, both of them sweating from the rising heat, Charlene took his hand. David was a college librarian, a twin of decimal system Dewey. Colleagues joked about that resemblance influencing his choice of profession, but he was self-conscious about his monkish appearance and merely enjoyed the cool solitude of the towers, the quiet research and documentation of arcane topics. They had met at a coffee hour after Mass on Easter Sunday. With her religious upbringing, Charlene had confessed that she had considered entering a convent, but joined the Peace Corps in a more proactive gesture. In only six months, though, a “conspiracy” had broken her spirit and sent her home from Zambia, twenty pounds lighter and a martyr to allergies. Instead, she had become a grade school teacher, a good one, bound to her charges by steely threads. Soon, in a well-established routine, she and David shared their evening meal, lacto-ovo-vegetarian style, even though he yearned for a spicy beef curry. Her choices of classic films never included any violence. She’d turned off *The Maltese Falcon* half way through. At the end of every uneventful evening, when the dishes were washed at either place, they said goodnight, a dry kiss at the temple part of the sacrament.

Would marriage have brought any surprises, he wondered as he shifted on the hard bench, remembering a pain in his groin so familiar that it had become a long-suffering brother? “We’ve been over this before, David. Why do we need that foolishness? Don’t we have a fine and deep relationship? You’re my special man, you know,” Charlene had said, strain pulling at the corners of her mouth. To know all is to forgive all, yet watching his colleagues with their children, eavesdropping on the challenges and rewards of parenthood, he felt cheated. He could have been a good father, undone the cold rectitude of his own parents.

Recently he sensed a positive direction in their relationship. She had welcomed his idea to visit Pleasant Hill after he’d shown her their intriguing web page. During the summer they often made

weekend trips from Columbus in her new Buick, and Kentucky was just across the line. Instead of travelling quickly on smooth interstates, they cruised the backroads of Daniel Boone country, each boyhood cabin preserved like a mossy time capsule. Stephen Foster tunes with a slide show. The old well, long grown over. The towering chestnut tree with its lightning groove. Miles of split rail fences gave way to horse farm territory, foals frisking with their mothers as sun broke the mists. And this afternoon she had even snuggled up in the car.

Several buildings at Pleasant Hill were fitted for overnight stays, and their room was in the West Family Dwelling House, built in 1821. Unlike their usual separate accommodations, due to the height of the season, they agreed to twin beds. Another good omen, he imagined with a catch in his throat as he signed the VISA slip. In three years an unremitting stasis, but people could change, couldn't they? "Isn't it quaint, David?" Charlene observed as they unpacked, pointing to the Shaker chairs and classic flat brooms hanging on the wall. "The brochure says that this was where the elders lived, specially designed so that they could work with less physical energy."

The Shakers were innovative leaders in sanitation, animal and plant husbandry, and nutrition a century before science affirmed the concepts. Refusing to apply for patents, they had offered the world the clothespin, metal pens, swivel-footed chairs, a water-powered wind fan, and ventilation ducts for oil lamps. Primitive networking through letters and travel among the colonies had helped them learn and improve what worked best. Their furniture, sturdy and practical, now commanded thousands of dollars at antique shows.

David pressed on the thick mattress, noticing wheels on the frame. "Ergonomics. What else, considering that they were onto the metric system and ZPG, too." He laughed with nervous brio as he took out his toilet kit, his glance passing a shiny foil condom package. At a convenience store it had joined the cans of iced tea he'd purchased. Charlene seemed different, warm and relaxed. Why not be prepared?

Placing his *Great Expectations* on the maple lapstand, he looked around. Was this the perfect form and function Dickens had labelled "grim" after a visit to New Lebanon, New York? Victorian bricabrac materialism confronting a spare opposite? On the wall a rugbeater waited for the first task of the day. A sewing

rocker held a drawer underneath for supplies. Clothes pegs were everywhere. Windows turned inside for easy cleaning. The world as workshop; the workshop as world. Would the next millennium spiral back to this simplicity? Cocooning or reaching out to a global village? Yet what did a sterile information age fashion with its own hands? He ran his fingers over the nubs of a framed sampler: "I have come to sweep the house of the Lord."

After settling their belongings, they had joined a tour. Most of the buildings were pre-Civil War, the washhouse, the cooper's shop full of cedar pails, buckets, and churns, the water house with its first public system, shoemaker's shop, brick shop, tannery, and stone shop, loading up on gifts at the preserve shop. A calicoed silver-haired lady volunteer with a plummy voice ushered them along with unbridled enthusiasm. "The Shakers believed in egalitarianism," she had said, eyes sparkling beneath her gingham bonnet. "At the same time they recognized that not all were equal. Those blessed with extraordinary gifts became elders and eldersses. You might be surprised to learn that a woman, Sister Tabitha Babbitt, invented the circular saw in 1810!"

Charlene's dark brows marched like mischievous beetles. "But weren't their tasks segregated? Men to the farming and toolwork, and women to the food, clothing, and nurturing?"

The woman laughed good-naturedly, apparently accustomed to feminist concerns. "Once a visitor asked what would have happened to a woman who wanted to become a blacksmith. Actually the Shakers wouldn't have minded whatever work she chose, as long as she didn't mix with the men. Temptation had to be avoided."

Yes, David thought, so they died out, except for a few token recruits at the Sabbathday Lake facility in Maine, likely retro-hippies. But it was simplistic to attribute the failure to celibacy. For two hundred years they had thrived without couplings. Then the age of mass production had replaced quality with quantity, to them a baffling paradox. Their goods were so durable that they lasted forever, like the washing machines they sold to large hotels, an indestructible product threatening an industry of planned obsolescence. A turning point came when the Shakers compromised to buy their cloth from mills.

After the dance exhibition, they proceeded to supper at a long table where a banquet awaited them: herbade and lemon beer, buttermilk biscuits and huckleberry muffins and brown bread, chicken pot pie, fish chowder, Sister Abigail's blue flower ome-

lette, carrot salad, baked greens, scalloped onions, corn relish, gooseberry ketchup, watermelon pickles, preserves of tomato and grape, and succulent pies, lemon, rhubarb, pumpkin, and maple. The waitress explained the homeopathic use of herbs and leaves: common basil, marjoram, and parsley as well as the more exotic feverfew, borage, and even geranium.

"It's chive blooms. The blue flowers," Charlene said with guarded approval as she helped herself from the heaping platters. "I am allergic to garlic, though. Same family." She piled the garnish at the side of her plate.

After dinner, they strolled the grounds, admiring the small apples beginning to redden the orchards and picking a second dessert of wild blackberries. Honeysuckle, the ever-present passport to summer, floated sweet in the air. They paused to trace the faded letters on a few crumbling tombstones. Near the end of the last century, the Shakers abandoned the custom of marking individual graves. Too time-consuming and wasteful. Their lives would serve as memorials. "All this devotion to the group, the mission," David said. "It sounds right, but it must have left some unsatisfied. 'I don't want to be remembered as a chair,' one woman said."

For a long time they sat in companionable silence with the buzz of helicoptering dragonflies keeping the mosquitos at bay. The sun was beginning to set as Charlene laid her head on his shoulder. "We'd best get in, David. Night's the worst time for bugs, and I avoid those poisonous sprays. Chemicals like that can cause multiple sclerosis."

Charlene took the first turn in the modern bathroom. "Thank God we didn't have to use a common privy like the ones we saw. Can you imagine?" she called as the shower went on. Closing his book, David listened to the sounds, holding his breath as he tried to imagine what was happening. The running of water, splashing, hair brush set down, elemental ingredients for a coming together. Then she emerged in a flannel dressing gown, her hair plaited down the back, thick and rich, her best portion. He glanced nervously at his rakish dark green pyjamas with the embroidered D on the pocket. They had cost more than expected, but the old striped ones had made him feel clownish. Vain, he thought. Whatever hours, days, or weeks a Shaker spent making an object perfect in all degrees, never did he place his name on it.

In the bathroom he stood transfixed on a fluffy towel carefully folded on the floor, its fibres wet with the shape of her small

feet, outlined faintly with talcum, one condescension to scent. He inhaled its fragrance until he became slightly dizzy. Then he undressed with deliberate motions, got into the shower and scrubbed carefully with the bar of pure glycerine soap Charlene had left. A slight beard was forming at the end of the day, so he shaved again. To draw attention from his gleaming bald dome, he rubbed his hand over the powdery talcum and buffed himself like a fine car.

Both of them read for half an hour. Charlene had chosen the memoirs of Thomas Merton since tomorrow they were to drive to Gethsemane Monastery where his grave was located. Finally she yawned. "Let's go to bed. They said breakfast starts at seven, which should suit us." He rose and came to her side, knelt down and placed a tentative hand on her cheek. She leaned back and closed her eyes. "How wonderful."

Had she had a bit of a blush from the sun, he wondered? The moment seemed right, yet he didn't want to upset the equilibrium. Forcing a gyroscope never worked, but left to its own devices, it wanted to relax, cease its motions. His finger was a millimetre from toying with the thin string of the nightgown at her neck. "If we'd lived here a hundred years ago, it would have been so perfect," she said, squeezing off a coy smile and presenting her face for a kiss. "Goodnight, David." Then she sneezed, helpless in convulsion until the tears flowed down her mottled cheeks. He rushed for a handful of tissues. For quite some time she blew her nose, gulped from the water glass. Suddenly her nostrils flared. "Did you shave? It must be the soap." She turned off the light and rolled over.

He lay on his back, restless hands folded behind his head, thinking in the dark. His life a collection of pages, from vellum to plasmic screens. And hers an endless gradebook. No, that was unkind. She was happy enough. She would have made a devout Shaker. The room was quiet, only the ticking of a windup clock, too far to see without his glasses. He reached onto the nightstand and checked his watch. Midnight. A snore came from the other bed, loud, then wheezy, snuffled, as if following a musical score. With soft steps, he packed his things. Recalling the squeak of the door, he would exit by the window, keeping his shoes in his hand. They were on the main floor, and there were no screens. In the bathroom, to the luminous beams of the risen moon, he wrote a note. "Goodbye." Why say more? She wasn't a stupid woman.

Only when he had navigated his way to the ground did he remember that they were in the middle of the country. For a moment he panicked, regretted the impulse, thought of climbing back like a whipped dog. Then a barred owl called in the night. "Who cooks for you?" It sounded so free. "I do," he whispered. He'd never have to suffer through a tasteless navy bean casserole again. It was only five hours back to Columbus. Easy enough to pick up a ride on 75 if he could reach the on-ramps. He passed through the gates of the compound, his duffel bag on his shoulder, and marched to his heartbeat until the sun winked awake.