

The Initiation

After leaving El Paso, Anthony was hoping to find a tribe of kindred souls out there in the wide wide world. But he came up empty handed. Most of the homeless kids he ran into, from the Boston harbor all the way to San Francisco's Golden Gate, were pretty screwed up. So he decided to give up on the cities. It was early summer when he found himself propped up against a huge piece of driftwood somewhere on the wild, windswept coast of Mendocino. And it was there that he met Calvin.

Looking down at him, the tall, old black man asked, "What are you going to be, Anthony?" That was the same question that his parents were always asking him, the one that pushed him out the door, the one that he was so tired of trying to answer.

"I'll figure that out later," he said, dismissively.

"You should figure it out now, Anthony."

Anthony looked up, suddenly curious as to why this old man should be telling him what to do. He sure didn't look like somebody you'd find on a lonely California beach in the middle of nowhere. He reminded Anthony of some broken-down basketball player from the NBA or maybe it was Uncle Remus, with those flicks of gray in his beard.

Calvin smiled as if he knew what Anthony was thinking. "Ah, you think I'm some dumb ass black guy, don't you?"

"I didn't say that."

"Maybe not, but it's written all over your face."

Anthony shrugged.

“You wanna become a man, Anthony?”

Anthony laughed. “Sure.

“I can help you with that,” Calvin said, squatting in the sand across from him.

Somehow this old black man ruffled Anthony’s feathers. Anthony didn’t like being talked down to by anybody, shaking his head, he demurred, “Naw, thanks anyway.” He stood up. “I’ve got too much of Bartleby, the Scrivener, in my soul,” he said smugly. “But you wouldn’t know anything about that.”

Calvin smiled, nodding thoughtfully. “Ah, Melville’s little friend who said “I would prefer not to”.”

“You know about Bartleby, the Scrivener?”

“Of course,” he said looking up, shielding his eyes from the glare of the sun. “I do a lot of reading.”

“Yeah, well I didn’t actually read the book, I saw the movie.”

“It wasn’t a book, just a rather long short story.”

“Whatever,” Anthony said irritably.

Calvin took a deep breath, smiled, and stood up, holding out his hand. “Alright then, Bartleby, if that’s what you want, good luck, I wish you well.”

Anthony felt deflated, surprised that the old guy backed off so suddenly. “Yeah,” he said awkwardly, shaking Calvin’s hand, “maybe we’ll meet again.”

As they stood there in the sand, Calvin’s demeanor changed, looking intently into Anthony’s eyes, no longer smiling, continuing to hold on to Anthony’s hand. Overcome by the power of Calvin’s gaze, Anthony felt as if he were peering into his soul, this uncomfortable sense

of vulnerability only intensified by the deep silence that had taken over the space between them. Speaking in a whisper, Anthony said, "I'm sorry." He didn't know why he said he was sorry, and he was even more surprised when he started to cry. Quickly brushing away the tears, he nodded and turned to leave, embarrassed.

Calvin called after him, his strong voice tender, compassionate. "You do remember what happened to Bartleby, don't you, Anthony?"

Anthony turned around. Speaking in a hoarse whisper, no longer sounding very confident, he asked, "What do you mean?"

"Bartleby ended up starving to death in prison. Is that what you want?"

"I don't think that'll happen to me."

"Maybe not, maybe you'll just die of spiritual hunger." Calvin walked toward him, smiling once again. "Why don't you stay here awhile?"

"Stay here? Where?"

"With me, here, on the beach. You can take a break from living on the streets."

Calvin lived in a huge driftwood teepee out on the dunes, hidden away from the tiny parking lot where Anthony met him. The parking lot offered clean rest rooms, hot and cold running water, a drinking fountain, even an outside shower for cleaning off sandy feet, all the necessities. But the best thing about it was the fact that nobody ever seemed to use any of this stuff, nobody except for Calvin.

Much to Anthony's surprise, the first thing Calvin taught him was how to cook. "After all," Calvin said, "you need to resolve the basics, a warm place to sleep and some good food to

eat.” Their primary meal was a simple rice-vegetable dish Calvin learned to make in Vietnam, absolutely delicious, dirt cheap, and lasting for days. Unlike many of the homeless vets that Anthony ran into on the street, Calvin didn’t touch alcohol or smoke cigarettes.

One night, Anthony having lived on the beach with Calvin for about a month, the two of them were sitting by the fire, watching the sun slip into the ocean, silently eating their rice.

“So when are you going to show me how to become a man, Calvin?”

“I am showing you.”

“There must be more to becoming a man than cooking vegetables and sleeping under the stars.” He laughed.

“Well, unfortunately, you need to pay the piper first.”

This comment set Anthony’s suspicious nature going into overdrive. Suddenly angry, glowering at Calvin across the leaping flames, he spoke harshly. “Pay the piper first? What the hell does that mean? You want money?”

“No, Anthony, I mean that you need to go all the way down before you can become a man. I’ve only seen a little bit of that from you so far.”

“I’m not following you.”

“I said there’s no sign of you going down.”

“I still don’t know what you’re talking about. Go down where? And who am I supposed to pay?”

“Give it time, Anthony.”

“Right.” Standing up, Anthony threw his plate into the sand, ducking into their teepee, muttering. “You’re just like everybody else I’ve met, Calvin. Everybody wants something.”

Calvin got up and followed him inside. “Come on, Anthony; don’t go gettin’ all pouty on me. You don’t understand what I’m talking about, you said it yourself.”

“Leave me alone, Calvin.” Anthony crawled into his sleeping bag, turning toward the wall.

“Get out,” he heard Calvin say.

“What?”

“I want you outside.”

“I don’t want to go outside.”

“You will never go to sleep in this sacred space with egoistic anger as your mistress, understand? Get out,” Calvin’s voice boomed. “And clean up the food you’ve wasted.”

Spending most of the night sitting outside the teepee, cold, angry, confused, Anthony was surprised to find Calvin still awake, reading by flashlight, when he finally slipped back inside just before dawn. Exhausted, now embarrassed at his ridiculous outburst, he wondered if Calvin was still mad at him, still wanting him to stay outside.

Calvin turned off his light, the silence accentuated by the deep darkness within the teepee. And just as Anthony was beginning to surrender to much-needed sleep, he heard Calvin’s disembodied whisper. “Is she gone?”

Anthony stirred, half asleep, unable to keep from chuckling at Calvin’s strange question.

“You mean my mistress?”

“Yeah,” Calvin said.

“She’s gone.”

“I thought so.” Calvin’s voice was warm, comforting.

It was after this that Calvin showed Anthony how to sit and pay attention. Cross your legs, put your hands on your knees, keep your back straight. “Just make sure you don’t go actin’ like some Pullman Porter,” Calvin said, gently pushing in on Anthony’s lower spine from behind, straightening his shoulders, tilting his head down ever so slightly.

“What’s a Pullman porter?” Anthony asked.

Calvin tapped him on the shoulder, laughing. “I mean don’t go hoppin’ on board any of those trains of thought that you’ll be encountering.”

“Sorry, Calvin, I still don’t understand what you mean.”

Calvin sat down in front of Anthony. “I’m saying as soon as you realize you’re following your thoughts, let them go and return to your breath, boy. Breathe in, breathe out.” He sat up straight, taking several deep breaths. Then he said, “If you’re doing it right it’s just like sweeping snow across a rug to get it to the other side.” Calvin laughed at his cleverness.

“And why am I doing this, Calvin?”

“To become a man. To get ready for your initiation.”

“Now you’re messin’ with me.”

“Nope. I’m serious.”

“So where did you learn how to do this?” Anthony asked him.

“After Viet Nam I was a mess. Have you ever killed another human being, Anthony? No, I thought not. It was shortly after being discharged that I ended up in Thailand, where I met a Buddhist monk from Tibet. It was Rinpoche who taught me all I know, saving me from myself, so I feel compelled to pass it along, you know what I mean?”

When the rains came, Anthony thought he might have made a mistake in deciding to stay with Calvin. Whenever it rained, he was forced to spend more time inside the shelter, which meant more time sitting, sitting the way Calvin had taught him. The plastic tarp over their little enclosure kept them dry but the wind still hissed through the cracks. Sitting was like that, like wind hissing through the cracks. Sitting was very difficult, uncomfortable, painful even, not so much the physical part, more the emotional part, with Anthony's longings growing into great gaping, tender wounds. Late one evening, with the wind howling and the rain pelting the top of their teepee, the image of his high school girlfriend seized him and wouldn't let go, causing him to experience such a powerful yearning that he became obsessed with returning home, telling her how much he loved her, settling down, making babies. How ridiculous would that be? Thoughts of touching her body and kissing her lips were so vivid that they overwhelmed him with an aching desire. The very next day he told Calvin that he thought he might be doing something wrong; Calvin only smiled, shaking his head. "There's no right or wrong as long as you're actually sitting, Anthony. Just keep sitting."

It wasn't too long after this that Anthony started crying a lot, crying for what he perceived to be no reason at all. But then, later on, he realized that there were thoughts, or images, or visions that touched his heart, causing the flow of tears. They were visions of being bullied in school, or of his father telling him what a failure he was, or of his teachers telling him he needed to apply himself if he ever wanted to go to college, slights, insults, abuses, rebuffs, an endless stream of hurts, hurting him anew. His sorrow came from someplace deep down inside his gut, a sorrow like no other, a sorrow that had nothing to do with regret or self pity or even sadness. And

as he tried to understand what was happening to him, Anthony was forced to let go of that word, sorrow, for this was something different than sorrow, something that he didn't have a name for.

Late in the summer, one sparkling afternoon, after sitting for several hours, Anthony was sobbing uncontrollably inside their shelter when Calvin peeked through the torn piece of canvas serving as their door. "Now you're paying the piper, Anthony."

And, in this way, little by little, Anthony began to change, began to feel more anchored, more self-assured, more mature. And his sitting became less painful, the crying having cleansed him, bringing freshness and spaciousness where there once was only fear and anger.

It was toward the end of September that Calvin announced the impending arrival of a visitor. "By the way," he said, "my son, Taylor, should be here by tomorrow afternoon."

"Your son? I didn't think you had any family."

"Why would you think that?"

"I dunno, I just never saw you as a family man."

"I need some things."

Anthony thought this very strange. A homeless man who gets supplies from his family? But Calvin wasn't your average homeless man, either. "So you have a wife and children, then?"

"Of course, I have six children, three boys and three girls. They're all grown up now."

"What about your wife?"

"I have Emily right here," he said, tapping his chest.

Taylor showed up the next day carrying two large cartons. Anthony was struck by his ruggedly chiseled good-looks. He was dressed in jeans and a sweater, looking just like one of

those thirties-something male models you might see in a clothing catalogue. Anthony had a hard time believing that this was Calvin's son.

After placing the cartons in the sand near their teepee, without any word of greeting, Taylor hugged Calvin for what seemed like several minutes. Anthony thought he saw Calvin whispering something into Taylor's ear as they embraced, and Taylor, in return, kept nodding, grunting affirmations. Anthony felt awkward, watching them, straining to hear what Calvin might be telling him.

Finally, their greeting having ended, Calvin turned to Anthony. "Anthony, this is Taylor, he's my youngest son, my pride and joy."

Taylor held out his hand, smiling. "Hey, Anthony, it's good to meet you."

"Can you help Taylor bring the rest of the boxes, Anthony?"

"Sure."

As they trudged through the sand, heading for the little parking lot, Taylor never uttered a word. Anthony hadn't spoken to anyone except Calvin for the last few months, so being silent had become quite natural for him, but he found it curious that Taylor didn't ask him any questions, didn't attempt to make small talk, didn't try to break what was for most people the uncomfortable silence encountered when strangers are unexpectedly brought together to perform some common task. They had to make several trips to Taylor's van, plodding doggedly up and down the beach, and by the time they had finished, Anthony counted fourteen cartons stacked next to the teepee. Calvin covered the boxes with one of his tarps.

"You're a good boy, Taylor."

"Thanks, Pop, see you soon. Take care, Anthony."

Anthony stood, staring at the sudden profusion of supplies. “Whoa, you sure do need a lot of stuff for the winter don’t you, Calvin?”

Calvin didn’t answer him, smiling, a self satisfied smile.

“Where are we going to put all of this stuff?”

“That’s my problem, Anthony. You have some business to attend to.”

“I do?”

He pointed down the beach. “See the bluffs over there, on the other side of this inlet?”

Anthony nodded. “Sure, I wander around up there a lot.”

“Yeah, so I’ve noticed. I want you to go there now, Anthony. And take all of your stuff with you.”

“Are you kicking me out again?” he laughed.

“Yes, I am.”

Now Anthony was hurt. “You are? What did I do?”

“It’s time for your initiation, Anthony.”

“Are you going to initiate me up there on those cliffs?”

“No.”

“But then why do I have to leave? What’s going on here?”

“Those bluffs will serve as your walk in the wilderness, your sacred retreat, your vision quest, you get the idea? I want you to find the spot that screams at you, the one saying ‘this is where I belong’. Take some water but no food. After three days you can come back, if you want to. But don’t return until after night fall.”

“Three days! I don’t get it. What am I supposed to do up there for three days, other than get really hungry?”

“That’s up to you, Anthony.” Calvin was staring at the distant cliffs. “You’ll need to stay in that same spot the whole time. It should be about an eight foot circle.”

“Where do I go to the bathroom?”

This question caused Calvin to laugh. “C’mon, boy, we’re talkin’ wilderness, right? You can pee outside your circle, okay?”

“And what if I refuse to do this?”

“No one’s forcing you to be initiated; you can take it or leave it.”

Anthony quickly gathered his things, put them in his back pack and stood in the sand in front of Calvin. “I guess I’m ready.”

“Here, Anthony.” Calvin handed him a small envelope. “If you decide to come back you can open this right after the sun goes down on your third day. If you don’t want to come back just tear it up without looking at it. OK?”

“What is this?” he said, holding up the envelope.

“Let’s just say that it’s something for the end of your journey.”

Anthony headed down the beach toward the overlook on the other side of the inlet, walking along the bluffs for about half an hour until he reached a clump of coastal redwoods forming a circle not far from the cliff’s edge. He remembered this spot from his earlier wanderings; even then it seemed to hold some special significance for him. He left the trail, entering the magnificent circle of tall trees, looking up at the towering giants. Then he laughed. It was as if these wonderfully ancient beings had been waiting for him to arrive. Sensing their

gentle protective spirit surrounding him with warmth and acceptance, Anthony knew that this was the place, his place, the place awaiting his arrival, an undemanding, non-judgmental oasis perched majestically above the blue Pacific.

Anthony found it surprisingly easy to just be with the trees, the salty sea air, the soft needle covered earth. He didn't miss eating, the air and his bottle of water being enough. He understood that spending these days in this place was a magnificent gift, a gift given to him, in a sense, by Calvin.

Looking through the trees, watching the sun setting on his third day, he suddenly remembered the envelope. He waited until the sun disappeared into the ocean, the purple sky fading into a grayish black, the little pinpoints of stars beginning to twinkle above the silhouette of his trees. Taking out his micro flashlight, holding it between his teeth, he opened the folded piece of paper that was inside the envelope.

“When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child, but when I became a man, I put away childish things.” 1 Corinthians 13:11

And at the bottom:

It's time for your initiation, Anthony.

I'll be waiting.

Calvin

As Anthony walked back along the path, using his flashlight to illumine the way, he could hear the throbbing sound of drums in the distance. He stopped to listen. He had never heard this kind of a sound in the stillness of the night before, with only the drums and the surf, a sound completely exotic, and yet totally familiar for some reason. *Who would be playing drums way*

out here? Reaching the place where the trail overlooked the beach, he was surprised to see a huge bonfire with its many sparks drifting up into the night sky. Making his way across the sand, he could feel the pulsating rhythm of the drumming through the soles of his feet.

As he got closer, he was astonished to see a large group of men sitting in a huge circle around the blazing fire, gathered right there on Calvin's lonely beach. The drumming was deafening now.

Calvin was waiting for him outside the circle. They embraced.

Anthony scanned the drummers. They appeared to come in all shapes and sizes, all colors and ages. The only thing the same about them is that they were all men. He saw that two of them, who were quite close to him, were dressed in State Parks uniforms and drumming away just as ardently as all the rest. He recognized Taylor sitting next to one of them.

"I always thought that a bunch of men banging on drums was some kind of new age cliché."

Calvin smiled. "Have you ever tried it?"

"Can't say that I have."

"It's like weaving a web of interrelatedness, an activity especially appealing to men. The Africans and the Aborigines figured that out long before we ever arrived on the scene. I've been doing this ever since Emily died."

"Drumming?"

"No, initiations. It's sad to see most modern cultures dropping the idea of giving their young men some kind of recognition, some kind of celebration to mark their achieving manhood. I know our Jewish friends still have their coming of age rituals, and, of course, so do most Native

Americans, but I think there needs to be a renaissance, a new kind of American rite of passage. So after Emily passed away I decided to do it on my own. Taylor was the first, and these are most of the others, some couldn't make it here tonight but this is most of them." He paused and looked kindly at Anthony. "I knew it the first time I met you, Anthony, I knew you were an old soul. So I've taken some extra time with you."

"So what do I do now?"

"Do you want to be initiated?"

"As long as it doesn't hurt."

"It already has, hasn't it?"

"Yeah, before, but not so much now."

"Anyway," Calvin continued, "I'll present you and then you'll be marked, symbolically, of course, and hopefully you'll be accepted by the others after they've been allowed to ask you some questions. Afterwards we'll feast." Seeing the tubs of wine and beer sitting in the sand outside the circle, savoring the wonderful aroma of fish cooking on the portable grills, Anthony could hardly believe that this was the same place where he had spent the whole summer sleeping in a teepee, living on rice and water.

Calvin turned toward the drumming circle, holding up his hands. After the drumming had ceased, Calvin spoke in the voice of an orator: "Brothers, we have a candidate for initiation. Are you willing?"

"We're willing," they intoned.

And turning to Anthony, he said, "Are you willing Anthony?"

"I'm willing."

And as Anthony was led into the middle of the circle he felt that same sense of warmth and acceptance he experienced just three days before. Only this time it was coming from the men surrounding him instead of the beautiful redwoods growing on the cliffs. Anthony was at once painfully vulnerable and totally at peace, the boy and the man becoming one.

THE END