



SEVEN

Work Hard, Play Hard, and Learn Lots

We were trying to give each one of us a well-rounded life on the commune. Some of us were very emphatic about this need; others, like me, were just grateful for any attention to the whole life experience. It would have been so easy for me to just work endlessly. All work and no play, they say, makes a dull person.

Once I twisted my ankle and had to rest with my foot up for a day or two. Eleanor brought me stacks of books and lots of tea. I started at the top of the pile and simply read. That evening she came into the cabin to chat with me, wondering what subject matter was filling my head. We talked and talked. At the end of our time together, she hugged me and said, “See, you need intellectual time. You’re so interesting, given a chance.” I knew what she was getting at, though we never talked about it explicitly. I had brought to the commune a real anxiety around responsibility. How could it be otherwise given my years of life as a single mother? And look at all the jobs there were to do . . .

So we organized ourselves to allow each of us to have a “day off.” On your day, all your responsibilities were picked up by others. This was unusually formal for Camelsfoot, most likely because if we didn’t do this deliberately, a day off simply wouldn’t happen.

When my day came up it was a beautiful, hot summer day. Shannon and Willie were visiting their father in Ontario and Julie was away with a friend. Kip offered to cook dinner while covering listening hours on the radiophone. What a capable guy! My plan was to head up to Independence Ridge, with a lunch and my water bottle, and frolic in the mountains all by myself. I could hardly wait. After breakfast, I loaded up my day pack with rye tack, cheese and trail mix. I was in shorts and a T-shirt. With the precious Tilley hat that Eleanor had given me in hand and my stout hiking boots on my feet, I set off.

It took me a good hour to reach Independence Ridge, so named by Fred because from it one could access secret valleys where Fred said we could hide out if the shit ever hit the fan. I wasn't sure what, exactly, Fred was afraid of, but I loved the place. The mountain country was perfect for hiking. While it was hot, the air was dry. The smell of ponderosa pine was everywhere, the sap oozing from the bark like sticky toffee. The sound of the cicadas pierced the air. From the Ridge, valleys folded one into the other. This place was heaven on earth.

After an hour or so of steady climbing, I reached the top and stopped to soak up the vista and have a little lunch. It was really hot. I was the only human being for as far as the eye could see. I took off my shorts and T-shirt, feeling the sun's warmth all over me. A sensual and spiritual experience all in one.

Being a human being though, I was curious. So I left my clothes and pack in a little heap, and headed down the slope into one of these hidden valleys, wondering if there was water at the bottom, or just . . . wondering, and wandering. *Better get back up to the top and start thinking about heading home*, I finally thought. So I headed up. When I reached the top, it wasn't the same ridge. Back down I went, and then up in another direction. Again, not the same place. The sun was falling lower in the sky. I'd been out in the mountains alone since mid-morning and now I was naked except for my boots and hat, and beginning to panic. For the last

time, I headed up. At least from a higher vantage point, I might be able to get some bearings. I was trusting myself because I had to; there was only me here and time was running out.

I knew that the sun hit Goat Mountain, behind our little settlement, in a certain way at a certain time in the late afternoon. So that was my direction. I started walking towards the setting sun. There was no trail, and I had to head downhill because of the terrain. Thrashing through underbrush, I stuck to my crude directions. My arms and legs were getting seriously scratched and were bleeding, though I hardly noticed this as I carried on. Eventually, I broke through into the lower garden.

With great relief, I headed home and almost fell into the cookshack. Kip seemed to me to be handling a huge amount single-handedly: listening to the radio phone, chopping vegetables, and keeping an eye on the several boiling pots. I was confused, and slightly ashamed that I got lost—but utterly relieved to see him.

He helped me wash the blood off my legs and couldn't help but chuckle, which rankled me. That was it! I had to reclaim my dignity. I had to head back up to Independence Ridge right then and there to get my clothes and pack. But dinner was just about ready, Kip said. I didn't care.

I put some clothes on, grabbed a flashlight and set off. Something in me insisted on completing this day by tying up my own "loose ends." I reached the Ridge in record time. I couldn't help but linger just a minute to take in the breathtaking scene, the evening light on the trees, the warmth of the day still being held by the soil and the rocks. The smell of the forest and the night sounds were all around me. I had found a new confidence in myself in this place that was always here, even when I was not. I marvelled at its magnificence, its huge solid presence, and reminded myself, with some humility, that I was the ephemeral one, just passing through. I did well, I told myself. I used my head and didn't ever give up. I gathered up my things and quietly made my way down the hill. What a gift that day had been!