



(from Chapter 39)

(Bob narrates)

All around the edge of the hot tub there's a bench to sit on, made out of the same tile that covers the bottom and sides of the tub, that's about two feet below the surface of the water. The bench runs out about 18 inches from the side of the tub, and then the bottom of the pool elsewhere in the tub is about three feet deep. Sherm has set the water temperature at 92. It's a little warmer than bath water, but it won't cook you if you sit in it for a while. None of the jets are going, and all of the house lights are off. There's ambient light from the town down in the valley and the mother lode of stars above. The chill of the evening coaxes the warm water to release little tendrils of mist up into the clear night sky.

Joy sits in front of me on the bench, her back up against my chest, and I've got my legs spread around her butt, leaning my back up against the side of the hot tub. We stay submerged up to our necks to avoid the chill. I have my arms wrapped around her, one hand resting on her breasts, the other in her crotch. I slowly, gently massage both. Her head leans back on my left shoulder, eyes gazing skyward. Rick and Alex are about a third of the way around the circular tub from us, similarly situated. Neal is sitting between Sherm and Harv about a third of the way around in the other direction. "They're beautiful, aren't they, Bob?" asks Joy.

It takes me a split second to decide she isn't fishing for a compliment about her breasts, "Yeah, they are. You know, we're only about a week away from the peak of the Perseid meteor shower. It should be a spectacular show from here."

"I love looking at the stars. It kinduh puts everything in perspective. So many people worry and fret about so many things in their daily lives, an' you haftuh wonder to what end. Think about how many people get upset over the silliest things, somebody cutting in line, bein' late, breakin' a glass. I could go on. But think about how insignificant all those things are, how insignificant we all are, the whole world, compared to all those stars up there. Whenever I think something's unfair or I start to stress, I just think about the stars. Here's where I rejuvenate myself, on nights like tonight, looking up at the stars, letting them burn themselves into my memory, and feeling the warm embrace of a lover sharing it with me. We're all born wild, y'know, Bob. If we let it, we all love the stars, the Earth, everything natural. We can't help it. We're part of it." She tilts her head to the right and kisses me on my cheek. "I'll treasure this time forever. There may be other nights like it where I get to see the stars, but there'll never be another tonight."

Wow. That's pretty deep and profound. I'm pretty sure I'm supposed to say something back that's equally insightful. I just kind of thought it feels really nice here in the warm water and the sky provides a pretty backdrop. Of course, I guess that's kind of what she's saying. I can do this. "I always enjoyed getting out into nature as a kid. My dad would take the whole family camping. Of course, there were nine of us, seven kids, so we were more a roving band of noise an' chaos than a couple communing with nature. My dad took me fishin', too. Just me an' him lotsa times, particularly as I got older an' my brothers moved out. Sometimes we'd leave late on a Friday night an' set up camp in the dark, so we'd be ready to fish next mornin' at the crack a dawn. On clear nights he'd point out constellations to me, an' tell me the stories about what they were an' why they were important to people in the old days. I never quite thought about it this way, until just now when you said what you said. But even though I agree, we haftuh love it because we're part of it, we also have this need to master it, to feel like we're not completely insignificant. So we name everything an' explain how it fits into our frame of reference.

We're so insecure about our insignificance, we use the only tool we have, our consciousness, to set aside that reality by makin' up stories that affirm our centrality an' importance." How about that?

"I like that, Bob. Duality. It's totally eastern. The yin an' the yang. We can know we're insignificant, but at the same time invent a reality why we're not."

"Some might say we spend a lotta time doing that. It's called joinin' the rat race. I signed up when I graduated. Little more than a month from now I'll be workin' at an engineering firm in Alexandria, Virginia. I'll be beginning my rise from insignificance to a spot up the corporate ladder. Sometimes I wonder . . ."

She pulls her right hand up out of the water and rubs her palm against my right cheek. After about 30 seconds, she says, "There's nothin' wrong with working, Bob. Don't beat yourself up just because we need to find a way to eat. All I'm sayin' is we can't lose touch, that we always need to remember we belong to the natural world. That we're part of it, not masters of it." After a brief pause a particularly brilliant shooting star streaks across the sky, "Ooh. Do you see it?" She points the hand that had been stroking my cheek.

"I do," I say, as we watch it arc across the southern sky and vanish. "I've always loved shooting stars. They're like the original unexpected pleasure. You're just lookin' up at the sky, minding your own business tryin' to pick out a constellation, an' bang! You get this tremendous spectacle just streaking across the sky. If it catches your field of vision, you're drawn to it. You can't help but look at it, follow it to its conclusion. I guess that's why people usetuh think they were omens. Think about it. A star streaks across the sky and vanishes for good. It came outta nowhere an' it's gone. Like bad things."

"Or good," she says as she places her right hand back in the water and drops it to the inside of my right thigh, where she begins massaging me. "Or good, Bob. An' I don' know that shooting stars are the only unexpected pleasure." Her hand begins moving up my inner thigh.