

THE VOICE OF THE TURTLE
By Ardis Coffman

The first time Agnes Penworthy heard the flute she listened with only one ear. The other was pressed to the telephone.

Mrs. Bosnik was on the line saying:

"Our committee recommended against sex education and they're starting it anyway. I'm just beside myself."

Before Agnes could reply, she heard the flute again. Louder this time, a fluid trill of notes from beyond the back yard, past the fence, out by the willow that arched over the creek. At first Agnes thought it was a mockingbird. Several families nested there each spring and the males sang with such range and endurance, it seemed they must fall exhausted from their perch.

But this was no bird.

There was something human in this tone, something that summoned from her a feeling she associated with her husband --and she seldom thought of him at all.

"They're planning to actually pass out those -devices- to the students, Agnes. I can't bring myself to say it. What are we going to do?"

"Do you hear music?" Agnes asked.

"All I can hear is the rush of blood in my ears. I hate to think what my BP must be. Why did they ask us to serve on that committee if they ignore our recommendations? It's an outrage."

Agnes struggled to keep her mind on the conversation. She said, "When are people going to learn that self-control is the answer? The good Lord meant us to keep our minds on heaven not to rut around in the dirt like animals."

"Control," she repeated for emphasis as she warmed to her subject. "Discipline, sacrifice, restraint. That's what the Arcadia Schools should be teaching the youngsters, not ways to circumvent morality with Latex."

Latex morality, she said to herself, pleased with her turn of phrase.

"That new superintendent better remember he's a public employee. It's the citizens of this community who sign his paycheck," Gail said.

The flute caressed a high note, sustaining it for an impossible stretch. Agnes, listening, held her breath. And then the melody descended, dropping in a heart-stopping slide to a rich, mellow vibrato.

"The school superintendent needs to grow up. He's living in the past, Gail. Free love. Remember free love? It was a lie. There is no free love. The price is high: unwanted pregnancies, Herpes, and now - AIDS. And that's what we need to tell those high school kids. There is no safe sex."

"Maybe we should call a meeting of the committee. After church tomorrow at my house?"

"Good idea. I'll telephone them now," Agnes said and hung up. Her fingers massaged the stiffness at the back of her neck. She was relieved to end the conversation. Her mind seemed oddly muddled when the music halted. She felt she had lost something as if she held some important thought that slipped her mental grasp.

She rubbed a forefinger across the bridge of her nose. What is the matter with me? It's only music. No need to be so nervous.

She thumbed through the Rolodex on the the desktop, looking under Sex Education Committee. The members were cross referenced by surname as well. Agnes took pride in running her personal business as efficiently as she ran Mr. Grey's law office.

The flute trilled again, calling to her. Agnes swayed with the music, breathing deeply. Her palm traced her slender waist, followed the curve of her rounded hips, slid her fingers over her thighs. She caught her image in the window above the desk and gasped.

"I'll put a stop to this," she said aloud.

She threw open the kitchen door, ran down the curving path to the back gate, past the raised ground where her flower garden used to be. Years ago she spent brilliant spring hours working her fingers in that moist, fertile soil. Such promise. Life renewal. That's how she used to think of it. She'd grown out of that, thank God. Flower gardens were a waste of time and good land. If she grew anything now it would be vegetables. But she had no inclination toward gardening these days. All dirt, in the end, is dirty.

Lifting the familiar latch, she walked through the gate, closing it carefully behind her. Gates closed. Doors locked. A place for everything. Everything in its place. She used to tell her daughter, Susan, that - free, unfettered Susan. Dark hair, uncombed, flying. No, don't think about Susan. Susan might as well be dead. Living in Chicago with a musician. Raising her love child in a squalid tenement.

When she reached the bank above the creek the flute music rose to a demanding, maddening pitch. She had a sudden image of herself throwing off her clothes, feeling the evening breeze on her skin, bathing in the magic sounds.

A memory invaded - a spring evening much like this early in her marriage. She and Mike walked down this path. They made love on this bank in the lavender dusk, shadows from the willow tree decorating their naked bodies. A delicious year - sleepy, love filled days and nights, one connecting to the other in a mindless daisy chain.

Then Susan was born and Agnes woke up. She was a mother. She had responsibilities, diapers, a budget to maintain.

"All you ever think about is sex," she raged at Mike. "Grow up. There's work to do."

One day she looked up from her budget book and found her husband gone.

What will be, will be, Agnes said. No self pity for her.

But the next years were difficult.

She had no work skills. She clerked in a convenience store and waited tables at the Arcadia Inn. Her income barely covered the sitter's fee. She appealed to her parents for help.

"We're putting your brother and sister through college," her mother said. "You made your bed. Buy your own bedding."

Agnes learned about worry. She worried about rent. She worried that her battered Volkswagen would collapse. She worried about money every day and every night of her life.

Evenings she came home exhausted, lugging her baby daughter into her small empty apartment. She looked at the haggard woman in the mirror and sobbed. Next morning she was up and standing in the employment line again. I'd like to have a nervous breakdown, she thought, but who would care for Susan? Breakdowns are for those who can afford them. Mothers trudge on and make the best of things.

At last she landed a job as secretary to old Mr. Grey, the town's attorney. She had no experience as a legal secretary, but she was willing to learn and willing to work for less than his previous employee.

Agnes budgeted her time as precisely and carefully as her money. Two nights a week she studied shorthand and typing in a night class at the local high school. Saturday and Sunday night she still worked at a neighborhood convenience store. Her one indulgent use of time was the hour she spent in church each Sunday morning. After several years of this exhausting routine, she was able to set money aside to purchase a small house on the outskirts of Arcadia.

Somehow through the years she managed, but the management exacted a price. The youthful, fun-loving Agnes wore away like sandstone leaving only hard, joyless granite beneath. Life was work, sleep, church and duty. She remembered that other Agnes only in her dreams.

It would have come as a shock to Agnes if it were said aloud, but at forty she was still a beautiful woman. Strands of gray highlighted the blond hair she restrained in a tight bun at the back of her neck. Her features were small, delicate. Her back was ramrod straight, her bust and hips full. She weighed no more than she had at sixteen and that was no accident. If the scales showed a pound gained, she fasted until her weight fell.

"Eat to live," she told her plump daughter. "Don't live to eat." Restraint. Control. Life is not a party.

The young man looked up as Agnes made her way down the river bank. He sprawled on the grass by the creek, his legs in the water up to his knees. A Pan's Flute was in his hand. She'd seen the instrument on a television variety show. It looked like the pipes of a church organ in miniature.

He wore low cut, white shorts and a fur vest, open over his bare chest. Agnes puzzled for a moment at the unusual markings of the fur. Somewhere she'd seen that. In the window of Batson, where they had the pictures of endangered

species. Lynx. The vest was a lynx pelt. His broad chest was muscular and bronzed by the sun. He had an amber beard, full and curly, and a thick head of auburn hair that cowlicked to points on either side of his head.

"Hi," he said in a soft, caressing voice that was almost feminine.

"Are you aware this is private property?"

"Yours, I guess?" He smiled at her with teeth as white as shirts on a Clorox commercial.

"I don't allow trespassing." She'd meant that to sound stern, but it sounded, to her annoyance, like an apology.

A battered Army surplus backpack leaned against the willow tree. Agnes hadn't seen one since 1968, the demonstration on the state university lawn, the night she met her husband to be.

"I'd like to stay the night," he said. "I'm just passing through."

"Oh, no. I really couldn't allow..."

"Just for tonight. I'm looking for work."

"What kind of work do you do?"

"I'm a shepherd."

Agnes folded her arms over her chest. "You won't find much work here. Used to be a lot of sheep ranching, but most everybody works in the lawn furniture factory now. The money's better."

"I'm an outdoor type," he grinned. "Inside jobs make me crazy. I don't even care for motels. Will you let me stay here? I have a tent."

His gaze was so direct, his plea so sincere, she found herself relenting. Well, what harm could it do?

"All right. One night. But no more flute playing. It makes me nervous."

His grin made her wish she'd sent him packing.

"A lot of ladies feel that way," he said.

Back at the house, Agnes completed her calls. The eight member committee would meet at noon tomorrow at Gail Bosnik's. They just might get that superintendent fired, Agnes thought with satisfaction.

She was amazed and gratified by how easily she swayed the committee members to her thinking. Perhaps she should take up politics. I'm a mother figure, she said to herself. That's what does it.

On the kitchen counter was a plate of plums picked from the backyard tree. She decided to dispose of them by making a plum cake to serve at the meeting tomorrow. Food gave dull meetings such a homey, intimate touch. And it puts mother in control.

As she worked in her Dotted Swiss kitchen, Agnes' thoughts turned to the times she and Susan spent here. As a small child her daughter loved to help bake, but she sampled all the ingredients, spilled flour on the floor and created such a mess that Agnes declared the kitchen off limits.

She shook her head. The girl never had a speck of self-control. She couldn't even manage to run away properly. Several times in the past year she'd called her mother crying. Agnes hung up on her. When Susan sent pictures of her new baby, she took them straight to the garbage without a glance at the child. She had will power, even if her daughter hadn't.

Agnes made one concession to efficiency, though. Before throwing out the envelope, she noted Susan's return address and telephone number in her Rolodex.

That's all it comes to, she thought, a name and number stored away. You work and worry and struggle to raise them - and they're gone without even a good-bye, Mom, thanks, Mom.

When the baking was completed and the dishes done, Agnes found herself restless. Her thoughts strayed to the strange young man camped down by the stream. She thought of his chest, bronze and glistening, under the Lynx fur vest. She'd had the oddest impulse to reach out and stroke his skin. What in the world had gotten into her?

In her tidy, aqua-on-white living room she took her childhood Bible down from the shelf. The metal she won for memorizing verses still stuck to the cover where she glued it years ago. With closed eyes she allowed the book to drop open in her lap. She fancied she obtained secret, special messages in this way. Agnes looked down at the Song of Solomon:

"My beloved spake, and said unto me, Rise up, my love, my fair one and come away.

"For, lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone.

"The flowers appear on the earth; the time of the singing of birds is come, and the voice of the turtle is heard in the land.

"Arise my love, my fair one, and come away."

She slammed the book shut with her knees and went to bed.

Sleep did not come easily. When at last she dozed she was awakened by the flute, calling, summoning her. She turned on one side, then the other. Should I go out there and speak to him? I told him to stop playing and he just gave me that look. So inconsiderate. And yet, so... attractive. Young enough to be my son. Still... when she pictured herself talking to him in the moonlight, she felt strangely excited.

She threw off the blankets and hurried barefoot down the stairs. Her heart beat to the rhythm of the flute and an unfamiliar heat pulsed through her veins. Pulled along by the music's promise, she two-stepped out the door, through the yard into the spun silver moonbeams.

Her nightgown swept the dew damp grass. Joy danced in her heart and desire beat in rhythm with her blood. She opened the gate wide and ran through, not bothering to close it behind her. She felt she could reach into the air and catch the flying notes of the flute.

She raised her arms, spun round, dancing, her hair flying out behind her.

When her nightgown caused her to trip, she laughed and pulled it over her head, casting it aside.

A night change altered the familiar path to the creek. Moonlight painted the grass and bushes silver. The damp green odor of plants pushing up through spring soil stroked her senses. A breeze touched her flushed face.

Leaves whispered, "Come, Agnes. Come to him. Come, Agnes."

He waited for her in the blue moonlight beneath the willow tree where she knew he would be. She ran into his arms breathless. Wanting. His lips on hers hurt, bruising, but she did not protest.

And when his mouth moved along the curve of her body she moaned softly as he pulled her down to the moist, sweet-smelling earth.

"Who are you?" she asked. Her voice seemed to come from far away.

"Who do you want me to be?"

"I think you are Pan and I'm an enchanted mortal."

"I am Pan. I am 'all,'" he teased. Taking her chin in his hands, he forced her to look into his eyes. She saw the moon reflected there.

"I'm that part of yourself you deny. I'm the beast from within - without," he said.

"I'm a Christian woman. I am no beast."

"I walked this earth ten thousand years before your Christ. And you, my love, walked with me."

"Whatever you say," she shrugged and stopped his talking with her kiss.

The clock radio playing an old Beatles tune, "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds," woke her from a deep, troubled sleep. Her arm reached across the bed to hit the Off button. A curious dream. She remembered it with clarity -- and not a little embarrassment.

She opened one eye and saw her bare arm in front of her face. Odd. She always wore high necked, long sleeved gowns even in the heat of summer. Awake now, she pulled back the blanket. Her slim body lay naked and vulnerable on the pure white sheets.

"What?..." she asked aloud, sitting up.

Eyes widening, she looked down at her thighs where two blades of grass and a willow leaf lay pressed.

She swung her legs over the side of the bed and dropped her head into her hands. It was no dream. What had she done? What possessed her?

Pushing her body from the bed, she stumbled into the shower. She twisted the dial to fiery hot and stepped into the spray. The punishing stream turned

her flesh to scarlet. She soaped her hair, scrubbing her scalp until it tingled.

Out of the shower she found to her surprise that she felt almost cheerful. What will be, will be. What's done is done. The moving finger writes. Don't cry over spilt milk. When confronted with emotions she didn't understand, Agnes often retreated into platitudes. She rubbed her body with the rough towel. No harm done, she thought, looking down at herself. I'll just forget the whole thing.

Then she began to wonder: Is he still there? That boy down by the creek? Can I face him in the light of morning? Of course I can! I have never been a coward.

Ten minutes later, dressed in white slacks and a gray striped blouse, her hair pulled into a braid behind her head, she walked toward the creek. In her path lay her flannel nightgown draped over a mulberry bush. She stood staring at the torn and dirty cloth. Then she dug a hole with her shoe, wrapped the gown into a ball, thrust it into the makeshift grave and covered it over.

The sun warmed her face. Mockingbirds sang in the oak trees above her. She half slid down the riverbank, aware of how passionately she hoped to find the young shepherd there.

He was gone.

She looked in all directions. No sign. She checked the grass for an impression left by his tent. The ground lay pristine, untouched. Perhaps he was a phantom, a night spirit summoned by her thoughts.

She stared up at the willow tree and found herself smiling. How long had it been since she'd smiled for no reason at all? Into her mind came a picture of them coupled here in the grass. The absurdness of the scene sent her into a fit of giggles and the sound of her own voice giggling like a teenager made her laugh uproariously.

"My God, I don't know when I've felt so good," she said to no one in particular.

Back in her kitchen, the plum cake reminded her of the meeting. That seemed so far away now, an appointment made in another world. She checked her watch. Gail Bosnik would be dressing for church at this time. She dialed the number.

"Yes," Gail whined.

"I'm not going to the meeting," Agnes said.

"Are you sick?"

"I don't think so. I think for the first time in twenty years I'm well. I'm not sure we should censor the superintendent. He may be doing the right..."

"I'm hanging up," Gail said. "I'll talk to you when you've come to your senses."

The telephone clicked in her ear.

Agnes looked out across her backyard just turning to spring. The Mockingbird trilled an aria. The Dogwood bloomed with pink fragile flowers. Thick leaved morning glories on the fence turned blue and white faces toward her.

She found herself saying, "This is the day the Lord God hath made. Rejoice and be glad in it." She hadn't thought of that verse in years. Lately her Biblical quotations all seemed to deal with fire, brimstone and eternal damnation. Perhaps it was time to think of life, not death.

She flipped through her Rolodex until she found the number she wanted. She dialed, holding her breath in anticipation. A moment passed as the phone rang. It rang again.

"Hello."

"Hello, Susan, this is your mother."

From somewhere in the distance the piping of a flute floated on the gentle spring breeze.