

## INTIMACY

1

Hey, Bear! Guess who?"

"I'll be damned."

I hadn't heard from Hooker in almost six months, a rare long silence in our fifty-year friendship. We'd met in Germany just before the Berlin Wall was built, both Russian linguists in the Army Security Agency. I was a college dropout, who had enlisted to avoid the draft and had been put into ASA because I had two years of college, then sent to the Army Language School after my years of high school Latin helped me ace a language aptitude test.

No one but Hooker called me Bear, his nickname for a large man with small hands.

"It's about time you checked in. Are you still in Mexico?"

His last call had been an invitation to go to Mexico with him, where several former colleagues in ASA were hoping to form a community of Cold War expatriates for whom two years of a Trump presidency was more than enough.

"Cal and Duane have put together something special down there, Bear. But I had to come back. That's why I'm calling you."

"Where are you now?"

"Spokane. I need you to get here as soon as you can. If you leave by lunch, you can get in tonight."

1

I measured my response.

"You're not terminal or something, are you?"

"I'm healthier than I deserve to be. I need to talk to you about something. Urgently. "

"We can't talk on the phone?"

"Too heavy. I need you in Spokane. I'll be at the Super 8."

"With my back, the drive will take me more than a day."

"I can live with two days. Can you leave right away?"

"What the hell is this about?"

"When you get here I'll tell you more than you ever wanted to know. Bear, I need you. You're the only human in the universe I can brainstorm with right now. I've got some serious shit to figure out."

Over the decades Hooker had become my closest friend. We demonstrated the cliché that opposites attract: a fellow linguist in ASA had called Hooker a small man with a big personality and me a big man with a small personality. We were the Mutt and Jeff of the outfit. Hooker was charismatic and eccentric; I was shy and self-conscious. Even after I quit drinking in my fifties but Hooker didn't, our friendship was close and special, though now and again the booze drove a temporary wedge between us.

"What do you say? Bear?"

"Are you drinking?"

"Sober almost a year."

"Okay."

I told him I'd leave bright and early in the morning, but I ended up leaving later that afternoon and made it past Hood River before I decided to call it a night.

In the motel I phoned Bud, Hooker's son. A second son had died in high school from an overdose, and Penny, a daughter, had disowned him for his many infidelities over the years.

"Bud, it's Robert. Bear."

After mutual greetings of surprise and delight, I got to the point, but through the back door. Hooker and his son had a volatile relationship, and my loyalty was with Hooker. I didn't want to give anything away to Bud until I talked to his father.

"What do you hear from your dad?"

"Funny you should ask. He's back from Mexico and called a few days ago. He said he and mom are renting a cabin for a few days. Now I can't reach him or mom either. I don't know what to think."

For half a century, Hooker and Jennifer, his ex-wife and the mother of his children, had played a game of separation and reunion that all close observers, myself included, considered strange, fruitless and, when fueled by alcohol, self-destructive. They had married out of high school but divorced after the kids got older, then remarried in their fifties, which didn't last a year. In their sixties, Hooker had supported Jennifer through treatment for breast cancer and a mastectomy, after which she rejected another marriage proposal. Now, in their early eighties, apparently they were spending time together again.

Bud went on.

"When has one of their reunions ever worked out? Penny's freaking out. She thinks we should call the police, that dad is after her money. She thinks he's dangerous."

"Do you think he's dangerous?"

"Not really."

"Did you tell her that?"

"What's the point? She never listens to me."

I'd never known Hooker to be physically violent but his tongue could be a lethal weapon. For her part, Jennifer could go through a Jekyll-Hyde transformation when drinking, the former homecoming queen and cheerleader turning into a foul-mouthed virago, who was prone to breaking and throwing things. Once she had sent Hooker to the ER with a flying frying pan.

"Is your dad drinking?"

"He says he's been sober for a year. At least there's that."

I decided not to tell Bud about Hooker's phone call. We agreed to check in with one another more often and ended the conversation.

2

With an early start, I reached Spokane at midday. Along the way, I thought a lot about how rare my friendship with Hooker was, not only by its longevity but by a close trust that had me taking Hooker at his word now, that driving from Portland to Spokane to talk to him in person would prove to have an urgency worth the effort. And this was not the first time I had driven many miles to see him during a crisis.

The first time had been early in our friendship when we both were out of the Army and back in college. It was the experience, in fact, that had taken our friendship to a higher level.

I was a senior at UCLA, living off campus with a girlfriend in a relationship that wouldn't last the term. Hooker was still an undergraduate at the University of Idaho in Moscow.

We frequently talked on the phone but one night Hooker's tone was different. He sounded troubled.

--I'm leaving Jennifer.

4

--That would be a great mistake.

Jennifer was pregnant with their third child.

--I'm suffocating, Bear. The woman has so many hangups. I'm not a shrink, I don't know how to help her.

--I know you love her.

--But I can't live with her.

--This is no decision to make when you're drinking.

--What the hell do I do? I'm suffocating.

--Don't do anything until you talk it through with me.

--I wish you were here.

--I'll meet you half way.

--You will?

--Right now. I'll meet you half way. I'll meet you in Reno.

I'd made a guess, not realizing that Hooker would have a much longer drive.

--When?

--Right now.

--Are you serious?

--We'll both leave right now.

--How do we find each other in Reno?

--First one there calls Kate where to meet.

--And you're leaving right now?

--I'm halfway out the door.

Kate was furious.

--You can't do this! You've been drinking beer all evening. You'll kill yourself.

--I'll be careful. I'll be fine.

But after less than an hour on the road, I realized how stupid the idea was. I phoned Kate, hoping Hooker had called to cancel. He'd called but only to see if I had canceled. I continued on.

The trip was a long nightmare but somehow I drove into Reno before sunrise without killing myself or being arrested by a traffic cop. When I called Kate, she told me Hooker had only made it to Winnemucca, Nevada. He couldn't stay awake any more and had gotten a hotel room.

I picked up a hitchhiker, who drove most of the rest of the way. When I joined Hooker in early morning, he was in bed, snoring. I hit the other bed and went immediately to sleep. When I awoke, it was almost noon and Hooker's bed was empty.

I found him in the cafe downstairs, reading the paper. He held up a section.

--Sports?

--Thanks.

A waitress came over and we ordered lunch.. We silently read the paper. We silently ate lunch.

Hooker finished first and grabbed the check.

--I'll get this.

I found him waiting for me outside.

--Well, Hooker, which way are you headed?

--North. Going home.

--My best to Jennifer.

We embraced.

--Thanks, Bear.

--No problem.

Hooker got in his car and drove north. I got in my car and drove south.

When I got back to L.A., all I wanted to do was go to bed. But Kate wanted a blow-by-blow description of what had happened.

--Nothing really.

--Nothing? You drive all night to see your friend and save his marriage and nothing happens?

What did you talk about?

--We actually didn't talk much.

--You didn't talk much? I thought you were going to convince him to stay with his wife.

--I didn't have to. He'd figured it out by the time I got there.

--Then what the hell was the point? You drive all night after drinking beer all evening, you could've killed yourself, and all you do is stare at one another?

--There was nothing to say.

--Oh, really? Men!

--It's not about talking. It's about showing up.

Several years later, the roles were reversed and Hooker was the one coming to the rescue.

Even after so many years, the memories feel surreal. One moment I was ecstatically happy with my life and the next I was having a breakdown. Suddenly I felt as if I had not been living life but hallucinating it.

Happiness was defined by meeting a woman in grad school. I was working on my Masters in Education. She was on a PhD program, studying Old Icelandic and other obscure languages. She was bright and funny and, to my eyes, beautiful in a natural, bohemian way I found attractive. Her name was Sally.

Set up on a blind date, we hit it off immediately. Before the term was over, we had moved in together. I proposed at the party celebrating her doctorate, and after marriage we moved to Maryland's

Eastern Shore, where Sally began teaching at Salisbury State College and I eventually taught math at the local high school. I couldn't imagine being happier.

And then I came home one afternoon to find Sally packing.

--Did I forget something? Do you have a conference?

--I'm leaving you, Bobby.

I was speechless.

--It's time I stop living a lie.

She looked up from what she was doing and stared at me but she couldn't hold it and looked away.

--I'm a lesbian. I'm moving in with the woman I love.

What happened after that comes only in bits and pieces, like a highlights reel – or lowlights reel – from a grotesque visual collage of bewilderment and vicious comedy. I remember breaking a window. I remember burning our marriage certificate. I remember trying to get one of Sally's students into bed. I remember being arrested for drunk-and-disorderly conduct. But most of all I remember waking up beside Hooker on an airliner.

--Hooker?

--Hey. Bear. How are you feeling?

--Where are we?

--On our way to Idaho.

--Why?

--We'll get into all that later. You've been in quite a state. I've got an offer for recuperation that you can't refuse.

--Sally left me.

--I know.



--She says she's a lesbian.

--We'll talk later. In the meantime, trust me. I know what I'm doing.

--I feel like I've been run over by a truck.

--A whole fleet of 18-wheelers, I'd say.

Our destination was Hooker's ranch in Harrison, Idaho. I knew he'd made a lot of money in real estate. When he said he lived on a ranch, I assumed this was the usual Hooker hyperbole. Hooker was a man who narrated his life with superlatives. If he liked a steak, it wasn't just a good steak but the best steak he'd eaten since one in a small cafe in Paris when he was on leave in the Army. The unknown jazz singer at the local club wasn't just a good singer, she had the best phrasing since Billie Holiday. Everything in Hooker's world was given special context. If he lived in a large house with property, it was "a ranch."

But as we drove down a long driveway, I saw three cows in the adjacent field.

--You have cows?

--I'm a rancher, Bear! I'm a cowboy! Yee hah! You're going to love it here. Screw the east coast, they talk too fast back there. Welcome to God's country.

On the ranch property was a small building Hooker called a bunk house, and Jennifer had redecorated it to resemble a studio apartment, my new home until I recovered from the shock and disorientation of my divorce. Bud, the oldest, was almost a teenager, Clayton was still alive, and Penny was as cute as a bug. I was welcomed into the Hooker family. To the kids, I was Uncle Rob, the closest I ever came to being a parent.

Hooker had aged a decade during his six months in Mexico. Or maybe it was the stress of his current predicament that had cast a morbid pallor over his features. In short, he looked like hell.

He didn't waste any time getting to the point. He had made coffee, and we sat at the only table in the room to drink it.

"Jennifer's dead," he said.

For the briefest moment, I imagined the worst, that he was going to tell me they had fought and somehow, struggling over a butcher knife perhaps, Jennifer had fallen on the blade, that he accidentally had killed her. But it was much more complicated than that.

Jennifer's breast cancer was back. She didn't want anyone, especially her children, to know but she desperately needed to consider her options with someone she could trust. This was why Hooker had returned from Mexico.

He rented an isolated cabin at Priest Lake, Jennifer's favorite, so they could evaluate the situation without distraction or interruption. But Jennifer, Hooker told me, already had made some decisions on her own.

She'd brought along the pistol Hooker had bought her years ago, after her house had been robbed a second time. He even had driven her to lessons until she was comfortable using it.

"Bear, she told me she was done. She couldn't go through treatment again, and she definitely couldn't lose her last breast. The kids knowing would make everything worse, like the first time. She wanted to kill herself but suicide was a sin. She wanted me to do it for her."

"Holy Christ. What did you say?"

"Obviously she was in a state. She also had been drinking. Sometimes she acted like a character in one of those soap operas she watched. I told her we had more options than she realized, we just had to put our minds together and come up with the right one. She'd have none of it. She'd made her decision and since she couldn't do it herself, I had to do it for her. If I really loved her, I wouldn't hesitate to pull the trigger."

"She belonged in a hospital."

"Clearly. But she had the gun and when she wouldn't give it to me, I got scared. If I stayed, we'd start fighting, I knew this in my gut. So I had to get out of there. I told her I was getting a room in town. There was no hurry to decide anything now. We'd look at it with fresh eyes in the morning."

"This was acceptable to her?"

"Don't I wish. She was screaming at me all the way to the car. I kept waiting for a gunshot."

The next morning, Hooker returned to the cabin to find Jennifer on the floor, dead from a gunshot wound in the stomach. She'd decided to sin, after all.

"Bear, I blame myself. I never should have left her alone. My first instinct, of course, was to get the police and an ambulance. There was no phone in the cabin, so I--"

"You didn't try your cell phone?"

"I've never owned a cell phone in my life. I don't do technology. Anyway, at the car I realized I'd been really stupid and picked the gun up off the floor and put it on the coffee table. My prints were all over it. They were going to think I did this, especially with our history. And Penny would be cheering them every step of the way."

He took a sip of coffee before continuing.

"To make a long story short, I wrapped her in a blanket, put her in a boat and rowed to the middle of the lake and dumped her. Not exactly spreading her ashes but it's where she wanted to be."

I waited for more but he was done.

"And the police?"

He didn't reply.

"Hooker, you could go back to Mexico."

"I thought of that. It might be my best option. But Bud knows I'm back and I'm sure he told Penny. They'd assume I did it and was running. I'd have to live with that."

"Jesus, Hooker. If you got me here to get you out of this, I'm not sure I can help you."

"I thought of another option. I could join her."

"No way."

"What the hell, I've lived long enough. A damn interesting life it's been, too. What am I doing now but filling up space, waiting to die?"

"I said no way, man."

"I think we're stuck with bad choices, Bear. What would be best for the kids? What would be easiest for them to take? If they thought we'd had an accident and drowned ..."

He let the possibility fade into silence.

"But Penny would never buy it. Anyway, I want to show you the cabin. I started cleaning up but may have more to do."

I stayed with the Hookers for three months, which was longer than I intended but long enough to learn more about their marital life than I wanted to know.

What became an unfortunate pattern began only a week after I'd settled into the bunk house. I spent my days reading, walking, and drinking too much (but not enough to lose control). Most of all, I repeatedly went over my life with Sally, trying to understand how I could have lived with a lesbian for six years and not have known it. We were so well matched. Our sex life was uninhibited and mutually satisfying, at least by my lights. Why on earth would she want to leave me for anyone? And that it had been for a woman was shocking and confusing.

One night as I was getting ready for bed, Hooker came to the bunk house in pajamas and a bathrobe. He let himself in and went to the refrigerator for a beer. Obviously he'd been drinking.

--I'm married to Miss Puritan Morality of 1645. She thinks it's unnatural if I go down on her. And as for giving me a blowjob, Jesus, Bear, you'd think I was skinning small children in some Satanic ritual by the horror of her reaction. I keep thinking she'll grow out of the brainwashing she got from her mother but it's not happening. I'm so damn frustrated trying to get through to that woman. And she wonders why I go elsewhere for sex. I don't want to. I want my sex life with her. But what the hell am I supposed to do if she's as repressed as she is? I'm a virile man in the prime of life.

--You could masturbate.

--Jesus, Bear. Are you serious? That's so goddamn mechanical.

So began a parade of visits from Hooker late at night, during which he vented his sexual frustrations with Jennifer and shared some of the strangest theories about sexuality I'd ever heard.

--There's this tribe, I forget where it is, and they've figured out that when a woman stops having her period, a baby is on the way. So what does the pregnant woman do? She becomes promiscuous! Bear, she sleeps around as much as she can!

--What the hell for?

--Because they believe each man who puts sperm into her is claiming part of the fatherhood of the child. And a baby born with ten fathers has a better chance at survival than one with just a single father. It's a beautiful solution in a difficult environment, Bear. It's ingenious.

--Aren't they jealous of one another?

--On the contrary. They're a brotherhood of fathers. They have something very important in common: all of them have fucked the mother of the child. Think about it, Bear. It's so much saner than the custody battles and crap we go through.

One night Hooker rushed in with a question.

--Bear, what if we were like elk and had mating seasons? Look at all the grief and misery that's a result of men being hard-wired to screw women as often as possible. If Paris had kept his cock in his pants, would a thousand ships have launched?

Infidelity, Hooker reminded me on another night, had nothing to do with sex if you considered the root meaning of the word.

--The Greeks had three words for love. Three! That's how superior to us they were. Eros, philia, agape. Sexual love, friendship, spiritual love. So what does infidelity come from? Philia! It's a betrayal of friendship, Bear! It's not about sex, it's about friendship. Betrayal of sex would be inerosity or some goddamn thing. The Greeks didn't care if you slept around as long as you were honest about it, as long as you didn't lie and betray friendship. They knew monogamy was against human nature.

And so it went, every two or three weeks during my stay in the bunk house. By the time I was ready to put my life back together, having secured a fall teaching job in Portland, I'd had quite enough of giving ear to Hooker's frustrations. I marveled at how little I really knew him, which of course

complimented my realization of how little I had known Sally. Did people, even best friends and spouses, ever really know one another at all?

5

If anything Hooker had over-cleaned the cabin: it reeked of Lysol. I told him the room smelled like someone was trying to cover up a crime scene and opened all the windows.

He walked me through what had happened, from finding the body, moving the gun, deciding against calling the police because he'd become a suspect, wrapping the body in a blanket (from his car, not the cabin), dragging it to the dock and into one of the two boats there, rowing out a distance and throwing the weighted body overboard, finally returning to clean up the mess – and then staying alone in the cabin for over a day, wondering what to do, before deciding to phone me.

"Bear, I'm thinking more and more of joining her."

"Stop thinking that way."

"I'd have to be in the water, hanging on to the side of the boat, weighted so I'd sink, and the gun positioned to sink. Wouldn't people see the empty boat with the life jackets intact and think we had drowned?"

"You're not responsible for her suicide."

"You're wrong. I never should have left her alone."

"Then you'd have fought, like you knew, and everything would have escalated. She could have shot you."

"I don't know what to do."

"Under the circumstances, your best option is Mexico."

"You think so?"

"Yes, I do."

"What about Bud?"

"What about him?"

"He'd think his father was dead. That's a terrible burden to be a lie."

"I could tell him the truth later. After a year or so."

"You'd do that?"

"Of course. In time you could tell him yourself."

There was a silence.

"I have to think about it."

We returned to the motel, and I got a room. I was up early the next morning, expecting to find Hooker in the cafe waiting for me for breakfast, but his car was gone. I didn't like the thoughts this brought to mind.

His car was at the cabin but a boat was gone. Why would he have taken the boat out unless he planned to do the last thing I wanted him to do? If so, the authorities would be looking for him and the first place they'd come was the cabin. I got the hell out of there and returned to the motel.



I didn't know what to do. A part of me wanted to call Bud and tell him everything. Then the evening news made my decision for me.

There was a story about the empty boat being discovered. The occupants of the cabin attached to the boat were missing. Police were investigating.

A later newscast reported that several papers belonging to Hooker, including a receipt for the cabin, were found floating in the lake. The elderly couple renting the cabin almost certainly had had a boating accident and may have drowned.

By the next evening, the newscasts were showing photographs of Hooker and Jennifer and reporting the incident as a drowning tragedy, noting that neither of them had been wearing a life jacket. The tragedy was also a warning.

I drove home, then returned for the funerals. I wasn't used to so much driving, and my back was killing me. I was still trying to accept what had happened, that Hooker had gone to such extremes when he could have returned to Mexico. In the past I had heard him refer to suicide as an act of cowardice. His behavior didn't make sense to me.

I wasn't surprised when Penny corned me after her mother's funeral.

"I think you know what really happened," she said. "There is absolutely no way mother would ever have gotten into a boat without wearing a life jacket. This whole deal stinks to high heaven."

"I don't know what to tell you. I'm as shocked as you are. You know, if they'd been drinking, which is what they usually did together, they'd get reckless and ignoring the life jackets wouldn't be that unusual."

"I can tell by the look on your face you're hiding something."

I was, of course, but mostly from myself. Although I had had no role in the events at the lake, I did have knowledge that should have been shared with the police, and this ate at me. I felt guilty. Weeks passed before I could get through the day without wondering if I should phone the authorities.

A few months later the routines of my life began to move forward as if none of this had happened. It didn't matter if I approved of Hooker's behavior or not. What's done was done. He was dead. This was the reality. Move on.

With Hooker off my mind, I found myself thinking about Sally. I wondered how she was doing,, what kind of life she had had. In the decades since our divorce, society had opened up to include a variety of lifestyles that were in the closet in those days, and transitions like Sally's were easier. If I had understood her situation, I could have been her friend and helped her. But I was ignorant and had lost it. I owed her an apology.

I tried phoning a few of our friends from those days but it had been so long ago that the numbers I had were out of service. Until Susan Hunt picked up the phone. She had been in the history department.

“Hello?”

“Is this Susan Hunt?”

“Yes, it is.”

“It's Robert Davis.”

“Oh my God!”

“I'm surprised you have the same number.”

“I'll die in this house. Robert, this is so uncanny. I've been thinking about you lately. I feel so guilty about how I treated you before you left.”

“Guilty about what?”

“Everyone blamed you for breaking up the marriage. Sally didn't come out at the college until later, so we had no way of knowing. We thought you were sleeping with her students. You know how rumors spread. Then when she came out, all the pieces fell into place. It must have been terrible for you.”

It had been, of course, but I didn't want to be reminded of it. It never had occurred to me that the consensus of opinion was that I had ended the marriage. I had left town as the bad guy.

“I'm fine. How about Sally? Do you ever hear from her?”

“She passed away quite a few years ago, Robert.”

Perfect. Hooker was gone, Sally was gone, my second wife Ann, whom I'd married in my fifties, was gone. I was outliving everyone I cared about. It occurred to me that my old age couldn't be more solitary. I didn't know a single person I'd want to ask out for a cup of coffee. Like Hooker had said about himself, I was just another old man filling up space, waiting to die.

And then, late on a rainy Portland morning, I opened the door to face Hooker, who was grinning at me and looking more like a con man with a back pack and an umbrella than like a ghost.

“Bear, before you take a swing at me, open two beers and let me explain.”

Very little of what Hooker had told me in Spokane was true. Yes, Jennifer's cancer had returned, which was why he had left Mexico. Yes, she had brought her pistol to the cabin and wanted to end her life. But the facts stopped there. All the rest was part of an elaborate strategy Hooker had put together to help Jennifer deal with cancer.

“I pretended to go along with her,” Hooker explained. “I could see what a state she was in. But I told her we had to be careful, if I just shot her they'd arrest me for murder. We had to make it look like an accident.”

“And she was fine with this?”

“Once I promised to help, she trusted me. Of course we had different interpretations of what I meant.”

Remarkably, Hooker went on, it was Jennifer's idea to stage a drowning accident. He immediately realized what a perfect idea it was. After that, the pieces fell together quickly.

“Why the hell did you have to involve me?”

“Two reasons, Bear. I needed someone convincing to back the accident story. I knew you'd believe me if I put the accident lie within another story, which you'd accept as the true one. And I needed someone who could stand up to Penny, who wouldn't believe the drowning story at all. I didn't want her to control the narrative.”

“In other words, you used me.”

“I couldn't help it. My priority was helping Jennifer.”

That didn't make me feel any better.

“So did you end up putting her out of her misery? You get a medal for the perfect crime or something?”

“Of course not. Jesus, Bear, give me a little credit here. I could never shoot anyone. I convinced her to come to Mexico. Whatever we did, it would be safer there. I wouldn't get arrested.”

“So she died in Mexico?”

“Yes. But naturally, of the cancer. Let me show you something.”

He took an album out of his back pack. He opened it on the table.

“Remember Duane in Germany, how he went everywhere with a camera? He's one of the ringleaders down there. He'd become a professional photographer, and Jennifer became his favorite subject.”

The album was filled with photographs of her, in color, in black and white, usually alone but sometimes with others, usually Hooker. There must have been over a hundred photographs in the album.

I slowly turned the pages. The more I saw, the more I was moved by the remarkable sequence of images Duane had created. At first impression, the album was a visual timeline of Jennifer's last few months of life but there was nothing morbid in this journey. On the contrary, the images were the most beautiful photographs of Jennifer I'd ever seen, and very different from others of her I'd looked at. Like many women who know they are beautiful, Jennifer always looked like she was posing for the camera, her body language stiff, her smile forced. She never looked natural or comfortable.

Pictures of Jennifer dying were the very opposite. Expressions that looked commonplace at first glance revealed something deeper the longer I studied them, a relaxation risen from acceptance, an embrace of fate. I never saw a hint of fear in her eyes. And her expressions when photographed with Hooker were especially revealing, and for the first time I gained a hint of understanding why this couple -- so strange and contradictory to me with their on-again, off-again mating rituals -- belonged

together. In photograph after photograph they looked related, twins of the spirit, expressing the same relaxed comfort in old age, almost looking smug and defiant, as if they shared a profound secret.

One black-and-white photograph in particular blew me away. They were cuddling, resting cheek-to-cheek, perhaps asleep. The longer I looked at the photograph, the harder time I had seeing them as two individuals, they became two parts of a greater unity, a single personage, like the paintings of Pinky and Blue Boy, or the white and black Scotty dog magnets, which together were greater than the sum of their parts. They embodied the tranquility of a sleeping child.

“Bear, I can get you a print of that.”

“I’d love one. You guys look so peaceful.”

“We were. Isn’t it something? Check this one out.”

He turned to the last photograph in the album, another of them together. But Jennifer looked different.

“Is she ...?”

“Duane took it a few minutes after she passed. Bear, I felt her last breath, and after it her body felt like it was melting into mine. I could feel her spirit entering me.”

I had no idea how to respond to that

“What can I say? That’s what it felt like.”

He set two smaller photo albums on the table.

“She made these for the kids.”

Each was filled with photos of Bud or Penny growing up. Jennifer had added notes of her favorite memories of them.

“She made one of Clayton as well. She told me they're her apology for keeping so much from them. There are some things in life that can't be shared even by family.”

“Hooker, you outdid yourself. You gave Jennifer a great gift, taking her to Mexico and letting her die naturally.”

“The gift was mine. I learned more about myself in those months than in all the years before.”

“That's a good thing.”

“You know what's weird? Cuddling with that dying old woman felt more intimate than having sex ever did.”

I tried to remember cuddling with Sally. I couldn't even recall her face. I could remember cuddling with Ann. She'd fall asleep and start snoring.

“It got me thinking, Bear. Having sex is like cooking dinner in a pressure cooker. Cuddling is letting dinner simmer for hours in a slow cooker. Which do you think will come out best?”

“I think it depends on how hungry you are, how long you want to wait before eating.”

“Slow cooking always wins.”

“It's a very weird analogy, Hooker.”

“I think it came to me because I'm hungry. You want to go out for lunch?”

“I could eat.”

“Let me call Bud first. See what he wants to do about scattering the ashes at Priest Lake. You can join us if you like. Uncle Rob.”

“Yes, I would like that.”

“Good.”

Hooker went to the phone and jabbed a number. While he was waiting, he looked at me, winked and said again, "Uncle Rob."

I nodded and gave him a thumb's up.

Hooker waited a moment more.

"Hey, Bud! Guess who?"

--end--

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