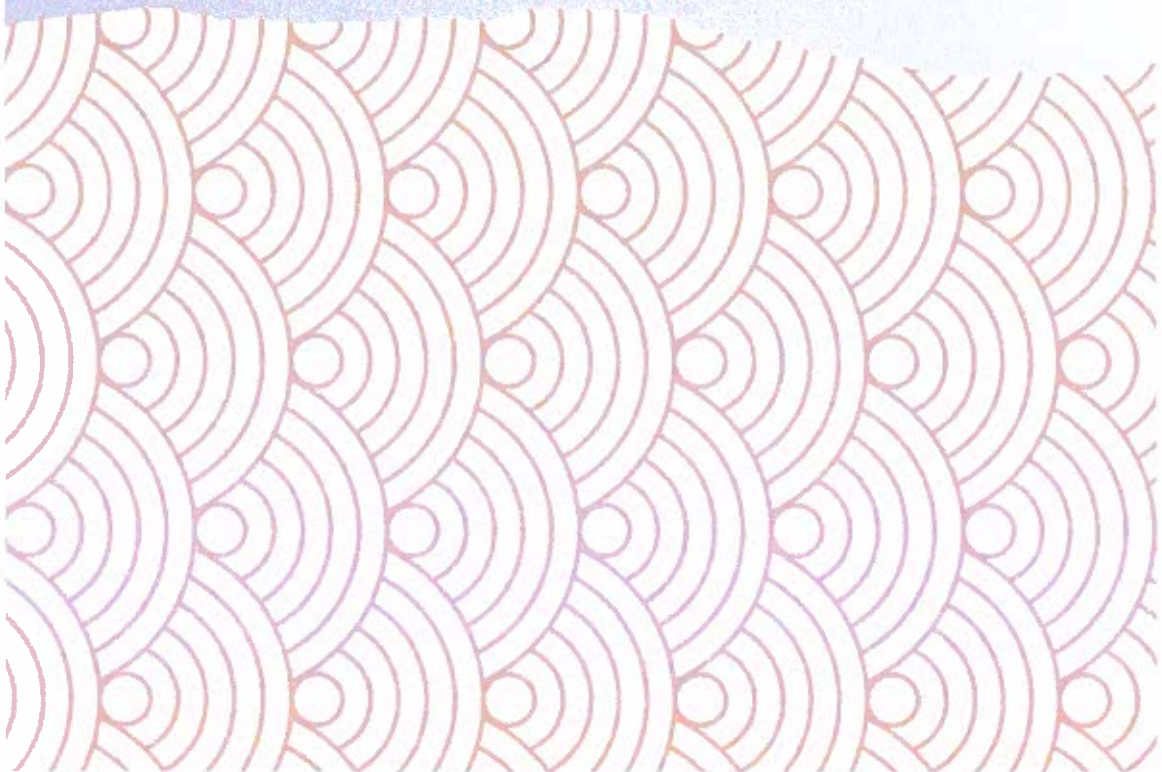




Embers



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It was Maine. It was close to the end of the summer. It was the late sixties. Dr. King and the Kennedys were dead. There were few stars left in a clouded sky. A slim moon and college were on the horizon. And I didn't like coffee.

The rest had gone to sleep. Her son and daughter were in sleeping bags in their tent. Her brother and sister-in-law and their three kids slept in the camper. That just left my brother on the ground, under the tarp slung from the side of our Volkswagen bug and pegged to the ground.

Now it was just she and I. And the dying fire.

What made the talking easy was speaking into the fire, making the embers, not our shadowed faces, the images we each beheld.

"Do you like looking into the fire?" Her voice wasn't anything special. I'd never heard it before that afternoon, and I wouldn't hear it again after leaving the next day. That was the first time she spoke to me directly.

"Yes."

"I feel the flames bursting. Not just in my face, but more inside. Like my husband's anger when he'd hit me. My face would sting, but it was inside where it would hurt more."

"Would?"

"He's gone . . . Left . . . No note . . . No drama . . . No job . . . Just outta here."

She paused, even longer than between each of her flat statements of the facts. They had each followed a verbal line, from dot-to-dot, completing a square—as she had done while playing with pencil on paper before the kids went to bed. Her initial was trapped inside the box. Her silence said: *Your turn.*

"Me? Well, I look at the embers."

"Why?"

"I can imagine more things in the embers than in the flames."

"Like what?"

"You ever see those carved elephant tusks, with the gardens and lanterns and people and houses, all in that blanché arc? Set deep in the interior under the smooth outside, like pueblo cliff dwellers' ruins in the southwest?"

"Yes. I even climbed up those ladders and into one of those pueblos once. But why bring that up?"

"Look at that long log. See the glow. On the side. Watch it for half an hour. It'll cave in. Starts in squares like a waffle iron. They fall off. It sinks in. Darks and lights change places. In the shadows and the glows. Keep looking. You'll see those pueblos. You'll see the ivory carving."

"Then what?"

"Then even they go away. It all collapses."

"Then what?"

"Then you crawl into your sleeping bag before the night leaves you too cold."

"You could crawl in with someone else and keep warm longer."

"After watching it go from a soaring fire to cold dark embers, I don't imagine company's what a person would want."

One of her children stirred. A car went by on the distant highway. An animal made a noise in the woods. *Because we stopped talking? Would they have anyway?*

She began to shuffle her feet but stayed sitting. She hugged her arms around herself and bent forward at the waist, yawning. Then she started talking to the ground, then the air, then to me. "As kids, we watched the clouds change shapes. Ever do that as a kid?"

"Yes."

"Are the embers like that?"

"Stay and see." My invitation smoothed it over. She re-settled, drawing her blanket around her shoulders.

She spoke first. "They pulse, don't they? It seems that way."

"I pick a spot and keep looking at it. It will glow for a bit, then cool off and go to shadows. But you can tell there's a chance for it to come back to glow again. Clouds just keep moving on. Change shapes, or just float away."

"My husband kept moving on. He just floated away. Left me and the kids behind."

"I'm sorry."

"Why? You didn't do anything."

"I never think of it that way."

"What way?"

"That being sorry is only for times *I* did something wrong. Personally did it, I mean."

"I don't need you to feel sorry for me."

"Don't be offended. I really wasn't feeling sorry *for* you . . ."

"Then what?"

I picked up a small twig at my feet. Peeled off a loose shaving of bark. I flipped it toward the fire. Careful not to disturb the core of the embers. Just letting it land at the outer edge of where the heat was the highest.

She waited. Watching. I sensed she was looking at me while I watched to see if the piece of bark would ignite. Finally, my thoughts were organized enough so I could speak, more carefully.

"Feeling sorry *for* you. That would be very condescending. That's not my place. Nor my intent." After a momentary pause to consider. "Feeling sorry for hurting you isn't right, either. I didn't cause you the pain. I'm not the one who left you behind." A shorter pause to head off the interruption I sensed was coming. "But I *am* sorry about your situation. Sorry that you were hurt. Sorry that you're on your own now and not happy about it."

I looked away from the fire and into her eyes, whose protest was fading away, then gone. "That's all. That's all I meant."

Only the gentlest northern nighttime breeze in the tops of the trees breathed a leaf-rippling sigh. Wisps of clouds skittered right through where my mind told me the rest of the moon should be. But my eyes convinced me it was an empty space, the incomplete arc of its arms reaching desperately to embrace it before it could slip away.

Her sad smile. A gentle shake of her head. "They used to say a generation was a full, you know, *generation*." Kids, parents, grandparents, great-grandparents. But it's not anymore. There can only be, what, six or eight years' difference in our ages. And your

generation is already separate from mine.” She pushed at the edge of a half-buried stone with her loafered toe. “For me—for us—*sorry* meant only one thing. If we didn’t do it—whatever *it* was—we didn’t have to feel sorry. We didn’t have to *feel* anything. We’d say: ‘That’s a shame’ or something like that. But we really didn’t . . . really . . . it didn’t really touch us.”

Looking silently at the embers brought us back together. Gave us something to do and be at one within, without having words get in the way. The words we’d spoken cleared the air, but they wouldn’t build anything from that point. Something from outside us both had to do that. Some “honest broker,” as the peace negotiators were fond of saying.

The embers remained steady, glowing and graying, ever present even in the act of burning themselves out from the inside; helped by the light breath of the night breeze. Our honest brokers.

She spoke first. At length. In reminiscing thought-bubbles per frame, if she were a cartoon. Which she wasn’t:

“What you said about the embers. My parents were like that. Always there ‘til they died . . .

“We saw their glow. At holidays. When babies were born. When relatives visited. And on our birthdays . . .

“We saw them cast shadows. Wakes. Funerals. When somebody was lost in the war. Korea was our war . . .

“But they were there. Even when they were at their darkest. We’d breathe a hello and they’d summon something up from inside and be glowing again . . .

“For us . . .

“And we had no idea what it took away from them inside. Brought them closer to losing their fire altogether. And we just never knew!”

She must have been thinking, because she was quiet, but not still, for quite a while.

She trembled. “What we didn’t know . . . we couldn’t become.”

She rose and moved over to the fire, carefully putting on some new wood without crushing the glowing ember cavern at its core. Then she sat back down. But now she was closer to me on the log. “I’m cold.”