

“Come on. I’ll go with you.”

David and the girl walk back over to the grown-ups, who are all standing and holding hands around the fire. Just like the children at the cooperative used to do before they all went home for the day. Phil is there too, but he’s standing with a different group of grown-ups, across the fire from Carole.

The man with the guitar says something, then Carole and Phil each hold up one of their hands. They stand like that for a moment, then speak in the same kind of chanting voices as those shaved-head people at the airports who wear robes and have white, painted squigglys on their noses.

“We dissolve our union ...

We relinquish our souls to Mother Earth ...

We are free once again.

Free ...”

“What are they talking about?” asks the girl.

“I don’t know,” says David, but he does know he is watching something that will change how everything works from now on.

Phil and Carole take off their wedding rings and throw them into the fire. Then they turn and start heading toward the ocean. The other grown-ups follow Carole and Phil, most of them taking off their shoes as they do and some of them taking off other clothing as well. Soon they are all playing around in the ocean the way the kids used to on their field trips with the cooperative, only now there are no grown-ups to watch and make sure nothing bad happens to them.

David and the girl walk back over to the tide pools and sit down. The girl picks up her stick and starts drawing in the sand again.

“I think my parents just got divorced,” says David softly.

“You’ll get used to it,” says the girl, but she sounds as

though she knows what she's talking about, which makes him feel a little better.

She finishes drawing her shape in the sand and shows it to David.

"Why did you draw a circle?" he asks.

She shrugs and throws the stick into the bushes, then slides onto her stomach.

"Let's play our own circle game," she says, putting her finger at the bottom of the circle.

"How?"

"Simple. Take your finger like this ..."

She takes David's finger and puts it next to hers.

"Now trace it all the way up to the top of the circle. Go up on the left side and I'll do the same thing on the right side."

"What's the point?"

"To see if we meet at the top and right in the middle."

"What does it mean if we do?"

"I'll tell you later. Now lie down and close your eyes."

David slides onto his stomach and waits for her to close her eyes before closing his own. He doesn't know if he should move his finger fast or slow, or if she wants their fingers to meet at the top or not, or if he should even want them to. He remembers what Phil said about marching to your own beat then he stops thinking and slowly starts moving his finger up the circle.

They hear a scream from the water. David and the girl open their eyes and look over at the ocean, where Carole is standing in the water with her arms raised high above her head.

"I'm free!" She spins around and around until she collapses into the water and the crashing sound of the waves finally drowns out her voice.

David and the girl turn their eyes back to the sand. Their fingers are touching at the top of the circle.

"Right in the middle," the girl says quietly.

David swallows. "So what do we win?"

"Each other's souls."

"What do you mean?"

"A circle's a perfect shape. So is the soul. If you find someone who can trace the outline of a circle the exact same way, then that person and you will be together."

"For how long?"

"Forever."

"There's no such thing as forever," says David. His lip starts to quiver. "People die and there's the Bogeyman and people get divorced, too."

"There is too such a thing as forever. If you think there is."

"What if I don't?"

"Then I'll think it enough for both of us."

She shivers, but neither of them wants to go over to the fire, so David moves closer and puts his jacket around her.

"Thanks," she says, putting her head on his shoulder. "I'm so tired I could fall asleep."

"Go ahead," says David.

"No way. That's how a baby is made. A boy and girl go to sleep together. When they wake up, the girl's pregnant."

"Did your mom tell you that, too?"

"No. That's just science. In books and everything."

"You better stay awake then. Because I don't want a baby."

"Not even someday?"

"Nope."

The girl moves closer.

"I don't want a baby, either," she says.

"I thought all girls wanted babies. That's why they play with dolls."

"Not me. I just want things to stay like this."

David wonders if maybe there might be such a thing as

forever after all. "Me, too, he says."

"Let's wish for it then. Close your eyes."

"Again?"

"Yeah. You gotta close your eyes before you do anything special."

David closes his eyes.

"Now wish," she says.

David and the girl are both quiet for a moment. He counts to twenty then opens his eyes.

Hers are already open.

They turn to each other at the same time and she kisses him quickly on the lips.

Something inside David's chest feels like it flipped over and it takes him a second to catch his breath.

"Why'd you do that?" he asks.

"Sealed with a kiss. That's how you make something yours."

He thinks about it, then shrugs.

"Okay," he says softly.

"Topanga ..." A woman's voice calls out from above.

"Looks like my mom woke up," says the girl. She wiggles out of his jacket and stands up.

"Your name is Topanga? Like that canyon my mom always drives by?"

"We lived there when I was born. My mom used to call it the Garden of Eden. Now she says the canyons are Mother Nature's bad children that she destroys with fire and floods."

Topanga starts to walk up the stairs leading up to the bluffs. David watches her for a moment then he grabs her stick and runs over to the dying fire. He pokes the stick around until he finds the rings, then slides the stick through the rings, pulls them out, and dunks them in the wet sand. By the time he's finished, Topanga is halfway up the staircase.

"Topanga ..."

David digs the rings out from the cold wet sand and runs as fast as he can over to the staircase.

“Wait!”

Topanga turns around as David catches up to her. He takes the smaller ring out of his pocket and places it in her hand, then closes her fingers around the hot wet circle.

“There.”

Topanga smiles, then turns around and heads back up the staircase and disappears into the long wild grass at the top of the bluffs.

On his way back, David thinks about her smile. He is only six years old, but he can't remember another smile that made him smile so much just thinking about it. He wonders if maybe someday he'll meet her again and if she'll make him smile the way he does now, and if his smile will connect to hers and form the kind of perfect circle she was talking about. Maybe when he's grown, up he'll think everything will look different from how it does now, but a circle will remain the same. And then maybe he won't ever have to wonder about smiles and happiness and if anything really lasts forever.