

July 21st, 1976: Harry Hess

When his wife told him he lacked a sense of sexual adventure, Harry Hess struggled to recognize it as a criticism. Although he would not place it in these terms himself, Harry truly prided himself on his straightforward sexual tastes. He considered “the fringe stuff”, as he thought of it, to be a clumsy and misguided attempt to elaborate on something that was perfectly enjoyable without additional bells and whistles. When his wife brought this up to him, the conversation reminded him of a quote he saw on the “Monthly Words of Wisdom” calendar she hung in the kitchen: “Don’t speak unless you can improve upon the silence.” - (Anonymous). To Harry, normal, healthy people do not need to make sex complicated (he would leave that to the homosexuals on Castro Street or Warhol and his friends).

When his wife made this remark to him, the one about Harry lacking a sense of sexual adventure, his mental rolodex of placating responses sputtered and jammed. He somehow landed on suggesting she look through magazines and come back to him with an idea. He promised to “stay open-minded” and reassured her that if she were doing this because she thought it was what he wanted, she was “wrong”.

Unfortunately for Harry, his wife returned to him a few days later with a proposition. She clutched a paperback sprouted with post-its, a naked couple embracing on the cover. She wanted to attend a swinger’s social to “see what happens”, emphasizing that there was “no pressure”, and that it was “worth a shot, as far as [she] could tell.”

Harry felt as if he “came to” (as he would describe it later to his friend, Rocky) at a party at Laverne and Larry’s house on Redwood Street that Friday night. The carpet was a faded brown, as well as most of the hors d’oeuvres, which extended themselves like a nation across Laverne O’Neill’s fine table. Harry stared at a loaf of something, embellished by slices of green olives, and imagined its careful preparation by a pair of delicate hands (the hands of someone’s wife!) How strange, he thought, she must have made this while meditating on the event it was intended for. She would be mashing the mush and slicing the slices, thinking of it as a lovely addition to a night of swinging. The more Harry thought about this the more he found the whole thing very distasteful. It soured even more as he contemplated all of the dishes on the table. Even his own wife brought something that she made using gelatin in a mold. Everything about the night

seemed to him like a crass, unnecessary leap into a new frontier. Two of the wives wandered close to the table and began to discuss couscous. Harry felt absolutely hopeless.

Later on in the night, Harry found himself in the kitchen with his wife and another couple. Both were psychiatrists. Harry resisted scratching his arm in case this signaled something to them, psychiatrically speaking. Thomas and Roberta smiled frequently and wore three stains between them. They seemed eager to make Harry and his wife feel comfortable, asking questions that were neither invasive nor impersonal and being only reasonably attractive. They held yellow cocktails with cherries floating in them (childish, unpretentious). Harry felt the conversation move him like a tide, he was unmistakably a part of it but he didn't feel responsible for how it moved or where it landed. Roberta felt strongly about the liberation movement and Thomas called himself a supporter. It seemed clear and vitally important to both of them that having sex with other people's spouses was something that would help all women, everywhere. Harry felt a small flare of skepticism, but put it aside, knowing this really wasn't his area.

The party receded into corners, smaller groups drawing back into smaller spaces. Thomas and Roberta remained quite charitably unimpressive, any bolder people would have made Harry feel even more out-of-sorts. He began to feel a bit better, but only because the immediacy of the conversation held more of his attention than the projected direction of the evening. The four took their place on the front porch, Roberta next to Harry on the porch swing. By this time, the group developed about two running jokes and they all shared an unwarranted suspicion that they were having a better, more "real" time than anyone inside. They all drank the yellow cocktail.

Harry contemplated Roberta's turtleneck. The porch swing rocked back and forth. Harry's wife seemed to find most contributions to the conversation funny. Thomas offered to retrieve a plate of hors d'oeuvres for the group, making a show of framing the whole task as a risky mission.

A flushed Laverne O'Neill appeared at the screen door, the merry roar of the party escaping as she pushed it open. She had an idea, inspired by the provocative spirit of the night, to sneak off to the park at the pier. She was pretty confident she remembered the best way to enter.

That way, it turns out, was to scale a fence that encircled the pirate ship ride. Harry stood back for a moment, watching the group climb the

fence, smiling, sloppy, making jokes about husbands letting the ladies go first up the fence in order to get a nice view. Harry's discomfort returned to him. The group beckoned to him from the other side. Their drunk, shaking hands shone flashlights toward the fence to help him, which further disoriented him.

He performed an inelegant hurdle and landed on his hands and knees. It was all so dreadful. He paused to regain his bearings in the shadow of the suspended pirate ship. It was a gaudy synthetic material given the superficial appearance of wood with paint. The main mast was topped with siren figures with exposed breasts. The rest of the group moved into the park, but Roberta hung back to wait for him. He half-jogged to meet her, hoping to appear youthful to her after having fumbled and fallen behind.

Holding Harry's hand, Roberta wondered aloud about the weight of all the rides on a wooden boardwalk that was... 50 years old? 60 years old? She didn't know precisely. Harry agreed that it was quite curious, and it all suddenly seemed very odd to him; the pier stretching out hubristically over the water. With so few people there, he could hear the ocean thundering beneath the boardwalk. He began to imagine the force of the churning water corroding the wood but dispelled the thought to ask Roberta more about herself.

Roberta was gracious, but would frequently steer the conversation towards the topic of sex. Reading lesbian pulp books in her bedroom as a teenager held an important place in her personal mythology. Harry had no frame of reference, but he asked follow-up questions to be polite.

They caught up with the others who were gathered at the darkened entrance of the mirror maze. The group was even more restless and flushed than before, tonight's couples had all revealed themselves by now; they clung together and whispered in each other's ears.

Harry's wife stood next to Thomas, but gave Harry a considerate look. He rediscovered, in that moment, his ability to leave. This beat back much of Harry's dread.

The drunkest members of the group ducked into the mirror maze, challenging and mocking the rest who were not as quick to follow them. Roberta tugged on Harry's sleeve and widened her eyes.

He concluded to himself that he does not want to have sex with the woman, this woman with the stains, who reads about lesbians, and so on, and he does not want a psychiatrist to sleep with his wife. He gives a look to

his wife to communicate *alright, the maze is our last hurrah and then we're going home. That's still an adventure right?*

Harry was so convinced of the universality and rationality of his feelings that he didn't consider how much this was to communicate with a look. Thomas and Harry's wife headed into the maze. Harry and Roberta watched as those remaining eventually followed, and finally he and Roberta went inside.

Harry immediately experienced some type of hell within the maze. A few steps inside and the entrance had become obscured to him, and he had the sense of already being deep, deep inside. The flashlights refracted blindingly off of every mirror. As he and Roberta ventured further, they heard the echoes of the rest of the group colliding with the mirrors, cackling. He heard a woman moan, exposed and breathy, like pleasure had made her weak.

The maze had the quality of a nightmare, like an abstract place disconnected from the rest of the world. Harry felt as if he had gone through a portal and arrived somewhere with a permeating sense of dread and alienation. He crashed into his reflection again, and as he stared at himself, he heard another moan from a woman who could be his wife.

Harry's breath quickened out of his control, and he fell back against the cold glass mirror. Roberta tried to attend to him, but he closed his eyes, fearful of her, a stranger, she seemed completely alien to him like there was nothing beneath the surface of her skin.

Harry thought of God the way a child thinks of God, floating in the sky. He imagined his prayers rising from him as he put the words together:

*God, I need this to end. I don't know why, but I feel like I will never get out of this place and like I have been here forever. I promise you I will go to church every Sunday. I promise to do good, to be kind to my wife, to everyone, please, I am asking you just to end this night and get me out of here.*

