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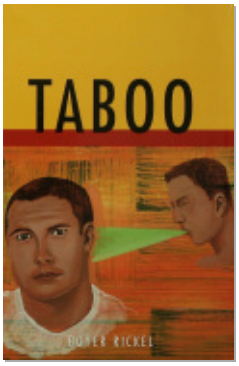
The Touch



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"Some people just have it," my young friend, a former poetry student, tells me. We've poked our heads into a blanket-draped closet that he calls his grow room. He's rigged it up with special lights on timers and a fan. "People used to say 'green thumb.' Now it's vibrations, So-and-so has the right vibrational level, no kidding," he says, his voice rising to the strangeness of what he's about to reveal.

It seems he read about an experiment in which a scientist walked through a room filled with plants, hacking off leaves and branches. The plants were hooked up to sensors, which all went nuts, measurements off the wall, like the plants were screaming. When he left the room, everything settled down. When he walked back in, the plants started up again, as if they remembered the guy.

"Of course, they didn't remember him," my friend explains, "but they knew his vibrations from the last time. See what I mean? He could even go into rooms where the plants had never seen him before and they'd get hysterical. So I figure I just don't have the right vibrational level," he concludes, pointing sadly to his marijuana sprouting pots, which have no sprouts.

Which reminds me of the experiment I read about. In this one plants in I don't know how many rooms were set up with all the same conditions—soil and water and light and nutrients and temperature, everything identical. But into each room was piped a different kind of music. One got ZZ Top, another Mozart, another Zappa, another Ellington, another Staukhausen. It turned out nothing compared to Mozart. Plants in that room grew greener, taller, had better

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self-concepts, better sex. I was disappointed they didn't try Schubert, though some of his music is so ethereal, like the poems of Rilke, who wasn't much of a gardener, I suppose the tomatoes would tend toward wanness.

My mother thrives on Bach, especially when she's doing yoga. She's also a vegetarian. It's all been incredibly good for her, this combination of Baroque music, yoga, and the right food. Now she's eighty-one, as lean and upright as a Corinthian column, with pale blue eyes that never stop laughing. She can stand on her head for days, and has the circulation of a sixteen-year-old. Her doctor writes her up in medical journals; her guru has her demonstrate headstands in workshops from Bali to Jamaica.

One thing she can't give up entirely, though, is bacon. When she first turned vegetarian twenty-five years ago, it was the last flesh she ate. Somehow breakfast just wasn't breakfast without that sizzling, salty, crunchy meat. Then one morning she said she started frying up a batch and just like that, *bam!*—it smelled like shit. Not as a figure of speech, mind you, but actual shit. If she could eat that, she figured she might as well start shopping for groceries in public toilets.

That all changed eight years later when she had a little problem with her masseur, who was also one of her yoga students. His own body was so tied in knots she had to rig up every prop in the house, all kinds of pillows, rolled blankets, specially shaped objects she orders from The *Yoga Journal,* just to get him into basic poses, passive ones where you position yourself a certain way and let gravity take your body's weight, pulling you in useful directions.

But he seemed to have the touch. His hands could play her body's muscles, organs, and skin like a great pianist revealing the inner truths of a Beethoven sonata.

My father was a pianist. My mother divorced him after twenty

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years. Sometimes great music-making's not enough. My father, good man that he was, had a very old-fashioned sense of how a wife should conduct herself. But you can't put a straitjacket on a woman with the soul of a samurai and expect her to perform the tea ceremony without eventually spilling a little.

In the end the masseur said something that reminded my mother of my father, something insulting to her samurai soul. More *how* he said the thing than what he said. Some echo of a premise in his tone: "Oh, Louise, the trouble with you is. . . ." It happened while she was under his hands, naked and lotioned and trusting and relaxed; trying to become more so, as he worked her over. It was all she could do to keep from shaking right off the sheets and onto the floor.

She made it through the massage somehow; the anger had not yet risen into words. That can take twenty years. This time twenty-four hours did the trick. She fired up her '79 Mustang at the crack of dawn, picked up a pound of bacon at a nearby all-night market, cooked herself a fragrant, tasty helping, then another. Felt better. Kept turning the matter over. Had a Coke with lunch. Felt even better. Then called the masseur for the pleasure of treating him to a verbal roasting. After which she placed the remaining uncooked bacon in the freezer.

Now when I'm contemplating a visit, I call the night before to test the waters, managing always to inquire, "So whatcha been having for breakfast lately?"

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