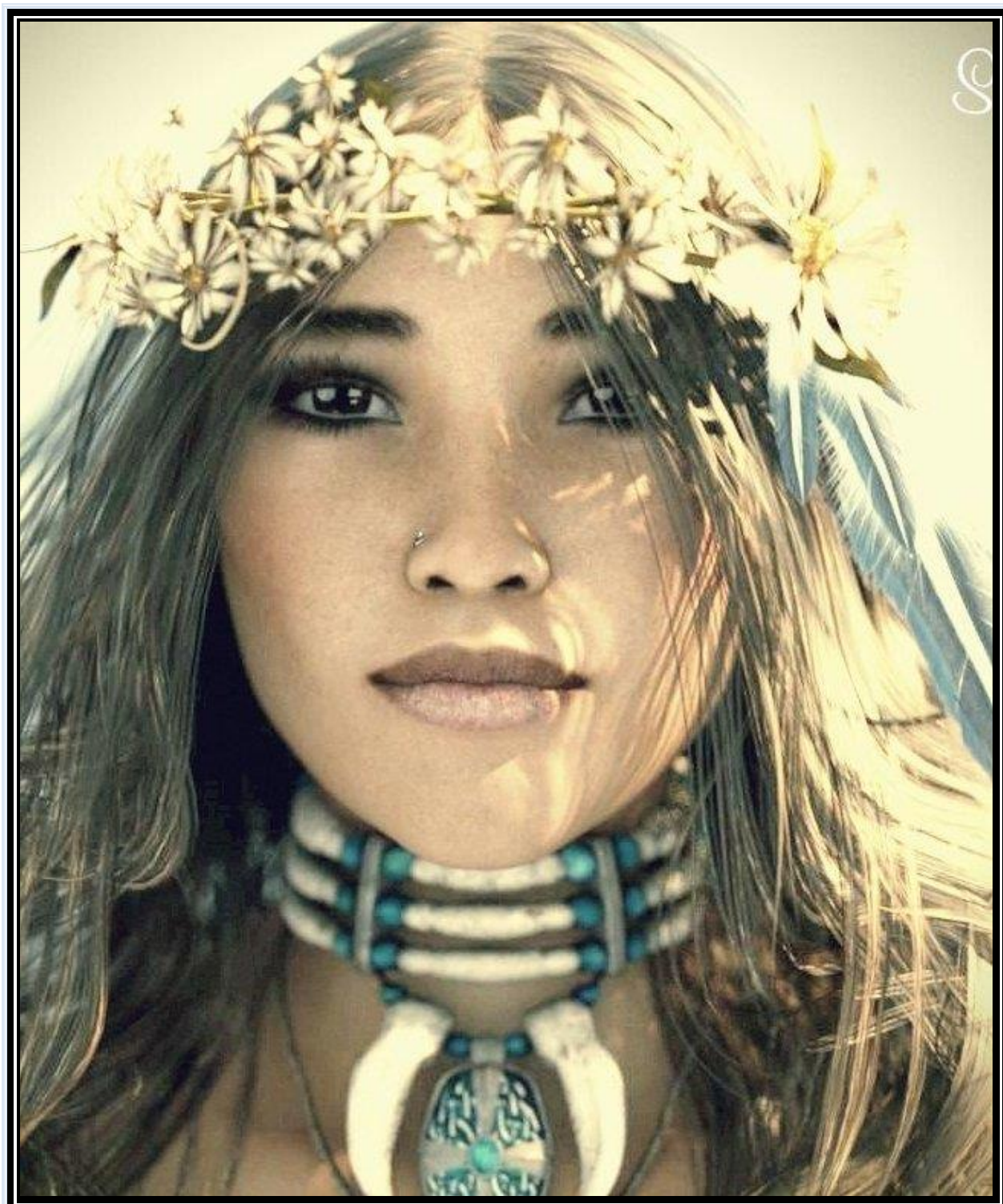


Under One Sun

Bradley Stoke



It was with a mix of emotions but primarily envy that Heather watched her sister stride ahead of her across the windswept open moor while chatting animatedly with the boy they'd met only the day before. Heather acknowledged that Fern was much the better looking of the two sisters—not just because she ascertained this herself but from the repeated observation that, given the choice, any boy in pursuit of a pretty girl invariably gravitated towards Fern and not at all to Heather.

Even now, several days' walk from their village in the West and loaded down with baggage, it was as if the sweat and exertion of their brisk trek over moorland, along the river banks and through the thick forest was suffered only by Heather—making her seem even more plain—while her sister was as fresh and pretty as she ever was. Fern waved her head to one side in her characteristic way so that her long brown hair fell over a bare shoulder while she smiled coquettishly at Fox, the young man they'd met the previous day at a village they passed through on their pilgrimage to the Great Temple of the Sun. How could someone of the same mother (but almost certainly of a different father) be so very unlike? While Heather was a girl whose bosom was less than ample, whose ankles were thick and whose face was flat and brutish, Fern had eyes that shone brightly even when the Sun was hidden behind clouds, a face that charmed every man who cast his eyes on her, and slender and shapely legs that prompted a man's ardour as she strode bare-foot over the grass and moss. Even the seasonal brown tan of her skin seemed so perfect whereas Heather's flesh tended towards only a freckly blistering as the Sun inexorably approached its annual zenith.

There were others besides Heather, Fern and Fox in the company of pilgrims that clambered up the moor burdened down by the wares they'd brought along with them from their homes in the West. These pilgrims were on the same expedition, loaded down with the produce of their villages to exchange with that of others who were also congregating from all across the land, from North, South and East as well as West, each and every one gathering with the intent to express gratitude to the Sun for his annual bounty and beneficence. It was principally to pay respect to the Sun that so many pilgrims massed at the Great Temple each year. Such an awe-inspiring and magnificent complex of shrines, of both stone and wood, would never have been raised merely to give people the opportunity to socialise and exchange wares. But opportunity it was and of which everyone took full advantage.

Neither Heather nor Fern had ever travelled before so far from their riverside village. Already there was much that was alien and mysterious about the world beyond. They'd walked across the Western lands, following a route marked out by tradition not so much to afford the shortest journey but to gather companions from other villages on the way. It fascinated Heather to discover how much custom and even language changed over distance. Those who lived furthest from Heather's home were the ones most difficult to understand. But however diverse the accent and the customs of dress and habit the sisters encountered as they wandered from village to village, sharing in the bounty of field, forest and river, it was Fern who attracted the most attention and the one most likely to be fucked by the dashing young men with their youthfully spare beards and their reliably excited erections. And it was always Heather who'd sit cross-legged, bare limbs and bare breasts, but alone dining on the

last few roasted bones of aurochs or deer that few others were still concerned to eat.

Even now, as their company—swollen to five men and five women—marched onwards, it was always Fern the boys were eager to chat with and so keen to shoulder the burden of her deer-hide sack of tin and copper. Heather, meanwhile, had no one to share the weight of her baggage and had fewer fond memories of being fucked or buggered by the flickering flames of a great fire. She knew also that there was little likelihood of respite from the load she was carrying towards the Great Temple, because on her return she'd be weighed down with as much flint from the Eastern chalk lands as she could carry. It was a privilege indeed to be elected to represent her village at the Great Summer Gathering—an honour that might never be offered again—but Heather knew that it was only because her sister was so favoured that she was also on this pilgrimage, spared from labour in the field and meadow for two cycles of the summer Moon, to represent her village at the critical moment of the Sun's highest elevation in the firmament.

This wasn't a privilege of blood alone. In her village, as with all the villages in the West, only the mother's bloodline mattered. All else was as one under the watchful eye of the Sun, his wayward partner the Moon, and their many companions the Stars, whose constellations guide the fortunes of all men and women and the beasts of field, forest and sea. Although Heather envied her beautiful and charming sister, she'd been chosen because there was no one in the world she loved more than Fern, including all the boys who'd fucked her only after rolling off her sister's exhausted body. And Fern loved her too. Theirs was a pure love where sexual intimacy was no more appropriate than it would be with one's mother or with one's

dog or goat. It was like the love they felt towards the Sun and the Moon and the Stars who they worshipped and which also gave comfort in the bleakest and hungriest days of winter, gave purpose to every waking moment and solace in the hours of sleep. So ardent was the sisters' love for one another that when Fern was elected to make the great spiritual journey far to the East, it was only natural that Heather should be her companion.

It was fortunate that there had been no step of their journey during which the sisters were unaccompanied. There were great evils in the world. Bears and wolves and lynx and aurochs for sure, but also malevolent spirits that lurked in the darkness of the night forests and prowled across the moors. But when a company of men and women, mostly young but also some who were old, wizened and balding, strode together singing songs of praise to the celestial bodies and emboldened by the righteousness and joy of their shared faith, what possible harm could the evil spirits cause? And it ensured as well that any predator, however fierce, kept a prudent distance knowing that the pilgrims were armed with flint-tipped spears and knives that would send them scampering back to their dens with their tails between their legs and bloody gashes across their hides.

“Look ahead!” said Hog, one of the men in their company. “Smoke! And lots of it. Surely, that must be the site of the Great Temple.”

“What else could it be?” remarked Lynx, the oldest man in their company whose beard was as bushy as his head was bald.

“It could be a forest fire,” warned Gorse, a woman of intermediate years. “I saw one once when I was but a child. It was fearsome and destructive, even though

our village feasted for many days on the flesh of the aurochs and boar that had perished in the flames.”

“It can only be friendly fire,” said Lynx. “See how many plumes there are. A forest fire is one great black cloud of menace. These can only be the fires on which deer is roasting on spits and pilgrims are gathered together in honour of the Sun.”

And so it was as Heather and her companions discovered for sure when they’d ascended the higher slopes of the moor and could see stretched ahead of them a wide vista of fires each attended by a company of pilgrims. There were many more people from villages across the known world than Heather believed could ever exist. Amongst the blazing fires and the attendant pilgrims was more shelter than could be found in any village. And this was in the form of countless scattered wooden, stone and earthen huts scattered about the plain and roughly the same number of paces apart. These had been constructed over many generations by the multitude of pilgrims who’d assembled, forswearing conflict and war, caring not that in later years other pilgrims they’d never know, who might speak a tongue they couldn’t understand, from hills and valleys far far away would take advantage of the product of their labour to shelter from the wind, the rain and the midday Sun.

“What do we do now?” asked Nettle, another girl in the company much the same age as Heather but still more attractive to the men than Heather could ever be.

“We seek a shelter for our own use and build a fire beside it,” said Lynx. “And if all the shelters are taken then we approach a company of pilgrims who’ve arrived before us and implore them to allow us to share their shelter. That is how it’s done here and how it’s always been done. We are all as one under the same Sun and we are

gathered for the same cause and in the same spirit.”

“And that,” said Gorse, although it didn’t need to be said, “is to pay homage to the Sun and beseech him to provide for our village and for all villages in the West...”

“And beyond,” said Fern excitedly, who was as generous as ever in sharing whatever bounty she had.

“And beyond,” echoed Lynx piously.

The company were fortunate to easily find a shelter to claim as their own for the duration of the Festival of the Sun. Although many pilgrims had already arrived from the North, the East and mostly the South, there were many more still to come and many of the shelters, unoccupied since the previous Summer solstice (or perhaps the less well attended Winter solstice), were still available. Lynx ensured that, before they settled down to prepare a fire and feast on the game they’d earlier caught, the company should repair the shelter and, as custom dictated, add to the collection of baubles and decorations already on display.

The stone shelter that Lynx had chosen was as solid as any building in her own village but it had obviously not been built as a permanent residence. There was space to sleep but nowhere to store domestic fowl or dogs and no surfaces on which to prepare food, nor even a hole in the roof for smoke from an indoor fire to escape. But, as in every home in Heather’s village, there was space reserved for a shrine to the Sun, and it was to this that the two sisters bestowed a clay figurine of the Sacred Mother, the spirit of fecundity and prosperity. The two sisters kissed the holy image and then, with due respect, took turns to press it against the crotch in order to bless it with the scent of womanhood. They then placed it in the little space left between the other

tributes already placed at the shrine. And these were strange and diverse.

There was a necklace made from mussel shells. There was a clay figurine of what resembled a beaver. There was a wooden carving of a deer's head and antlers. There were many precious stones—including flint, tin, pebbles, ammonites and fossil wood—together with feathers, bear's claws, viper's fangs and shrivelled toadstools. There were so many different ways that the various people under the one Sun honoured the mother and father of all creation.

The sisters enjoyed their best night's sleep since they'd left home, stretched out on the bare dry ground in the flickering glow of the fire they'd helped prepare, limbs entwined with their fellows and hardly much space between them for even Fern to fuck. And on the following morning Heather and her sister were granted permission to explore the environs of the Great Temple of the Sun towards which they'd travelled so far. It exceeded anything that Heather had ever imagined. Not only were there so many people, far more than Heather could count however many notches she made in the sand, but scattered all around the complex were many splendid sacred tombs and temples whose purpose remained mysterious to the sisters. But it was towards the Great Temple at the heart of a concentric ring of pilgrims' settlements that the girls' gaze was drawn. This was a massive edifice of towering wooden poles and massive stone obelisks within ring after ring of ever increasing magnificence, culminating in a final inner circle built so high that only the tallest trees could exceed its height. This splendour was further enhanced by the fact that there were no trees growing freely in any direction for many paces, although a generous supply of timber had been piled high on the outskirts of the settlement so that pilgrims could build their fires. And so

neatly were they sliced that they must have been felled by axes with the sharpest flint edges that had ever been knapped.

The pilgrims were so various in appearance that Heather was initially startled and even shocked by what she saw. Only those from the West were attired in the same style as herself, that is, in deer-hide smocks that covered the torso from below the arms to the top of the thigh but barely hid the groin. The bare legs, arms and shoulders of the Westerners with which Heather was familiar wasn't at all typical of the attire of other pilgrims. Some were completely naked (but surely only for the summer months), but nudity could never shock Heather as most people in her village wore clothes only when the Sun shone least warmly or, as at the moment, when venturing beyond the tribal territory. There were some who were bare chested, but wore skirts almost to the ankles. There were some who wore strange attire that enclosed all the leg and groin. There were some who sported headdresses or had feathers, twigs and even pebbles knotted into their hair. But the priests of the Sun, whose role it was to preside over the ceremony to celebrate the annual zenith of the Sun were the ones most outlandishly attired.

The priesthood of the Sun were held in high esteem throughout all the land. Only they could reside all year round in the vicinity of the Great Temple, which they equipped and tended. And it was they who ensured that the sacred rites of the Solar and Lunar Calendars were correctly observed. The priesthood was represented by both men and women, although custom dictated that women held the most senior positions, thereby reflecting the significance of motherhood and fertility in the Sun's domain. The priests were elected from the company of shamans who lived in villages

throughout all the land. A new priest was appointed only when an existing one had died and, according to custom, only on rare occasion from the priest's child or kin. Both male and female priests wore resplendent headdresses, most often made from the skulls of aurochs, boar, bear or deer, adorned with as wild an array of feathers or antlers as could be found. The rest of their dress varied from priest to priest but was generally colourful and wild, and mostly assembled from the fur of wolf, lynx, bear and beaver. The genitals and bosom were generally uncovered (at least in the summer) to make apparent whether the priest was a woman or a man, as the priest's sex was significant in the lovemaking that usually followed the climax of the festivities.

As the days passed, Heather observed more and more pilgrims arrive. Generally, those from the North were the ones dressed most in defence against inclement weather, while the Southerners were the ones most often naked. As she'd learnt as a young girl, the further south you went, the nearer you approached the Sun. And it was known that beyond the Southern Sea there was another land where although the Sun shone more fiercely it was accorded less veneration and where, consequently, there was much strife and warfare. And this, more than anything else, was what the shared ceremony of the Festival of the Sun guarded against and which gave the lands north of the Southern Sea such stability and prosperity.

It wasn't long until all the available shelters had been taken even while yet still more pilgrims were arriving, tired and exhausted after their long trek across hills, moors, valleys and even rivers to reach the Great Temple. Heather observed these sometimes outlandishly attired pilgrims warily, conflicted between her natural suspicion of strangers and her knowledge that the right and proper way to celebrate

the Sun's indiscriminating bounty was to be equally generous to all born under the one Sun. But when people dressed so peculiarly and spoke in ways that was barely intelligible, generosity came less naturally to her.

"Do you mind if we share your shelter?" asked one of these newer arrivals in a barely comprehensible confusion of long vowels and nasal consonants. "We have travelled many days, have forded great rivers, ascended high mountains and sheltered in dark forests as rainstorms have beat upon our heads."

"Gladly," said Lynx, who due to his advanced years, long beard and evident baldness had become the spokesperson for Heather's company. "We extend to you our generosity as the Sun has extended his to us, without favour and without hesitation."

"Thank you kindly," said the strange man, who Heather was soon to learn was called Wolverine. "We return your favour and kindness with the bounty of a freshly slain aurochs for our mutual feasting."

Aurochs was the most prized of all meat, more so than deer, fowl or boar, so Heather and the rest of the Westerners were more than delighted to welcome Wolverine's company. And a hardy band they were too. They'd come from the far North close by a sea that stretched both North and West, where lived pine martens, reindeer, wolverines and other exotic beasts, and where the winters were so harsh that there were more days of snow than days without. But, as Lynx reminded Heather and Fern and the others, the Festival of the Sun was an occasion when no difference was made between those blessed by the warmer Sun in the South and West and those less fortunate from the North.

Not only were the Northerners strange of tongue, there were other peculiar

differences between them and the Westerners. Despite the warmth of summer, they were attired almost as Heather and Fern might be in winter, although the fur was of a lighter weight, which hid from sight almost all their arms and legs. The men's beards were thick and dark brown and the hair was plaited. The women's faces were obscured not only by long bushy hair but by feathers and fur knotted into the locks. Their feet and ankles were shod by leather and tough hide. And when they huddled together around the fire, tearing out hot flesh and offal from the aurochs roasting on the flames, the Northerners were reserved: intent more on consumption and less on conversation.

As the evening wore on and the freshly nourished Westerners relaxed in intimate sport with one another—Fern as always at the centre of the action, but Gorse and Nettle also enjoying attention—Heather resigned herself as ever to be the one the men resorted to from need only rather than desire. As a result, she had more opportunity than the others to study the Northerners. And no greater contrast could there be. While Heather's company were naked and carnally engaged, the Northerners sat together fully clothed, hardly exchanging a word, warming themselves by the fire and bashfully averting their eyes from the lovemaking opposite.

And in amongst a company of generally much older men and women gathered round the fire, was but one boy of about Heather's age who sat slightly to one side and entertained himself by poking the flames with a stick.

What the heck, thought Heather. We are all one under the Sun. So, although she was mindful of the difficulties of communication and of the greater likelihood of finding sexual satisfaction in her own company, she sidled over towards the young

man and addressed him boldly.

“Hello,” she said slowly and precisely. “My name is Heather. What is your name?”

The boy seemed startled, shocked even, at being addressed. “Name?” he exclaimed.

“Mine is Heather,” she repeated. “What are you known as?”

“My name is Marten,” said the boy just as slowly and carefully. “And you are...?”

“Heather.”

“Like the plants that grow?”

“Yes. And my sister is called Fern.”

“Your sister. The pretty girl?”

“Yes,” sighed Heather resignedly. “My sister Fern. The pretty girl.”

Nevertheless, despite this halting start and the fact that both Heather and Marten often had to repeat themselves to be understood, their conversation became relatively animated. It was fascinating to Heather to learn about the many differences between Marten’s home in the far distant North and her own home to the West. It was a novel experience to describe her daily customs and local habitat to someone who knew them so little. Marten’s home, however, was in a range of hills and fells with peaks much higher than those in the West where roamed reindeer, ptarmigan and wolf. And in amongst these hills were many lakes and babbling brooks. However, whereas Heather’s life was settled in one place where villagers tended crops and cared for goats, fowl and a few tethered aurochs and boar, Marten’s tribe led a roving life, as

they followed herds of aurochs or goat up hills and across dales, with the constant company of their dogs and always with a spear in hand to fell any deer or boar they should encounter. The Northerners were experts in building temporary shelters from stones and slabs of shale which they might find on their wandering and which might still stand unperturbed when their travels next took them to the same valley or hilltop.

“Is it *very* cold in winter?” asked Heather sympathetically.

Marten seemed puzzled by the question. “Yes, of course,” he said. “But we stay out of the snow and the biting cold. The winter is when we rest in a cave where it is never very cold and we live off the grains, nuts and salted meat we’ve hoarded for the months when it is hardest to forage and hunt.”

Heather was sure that Marten was a fine young man, although all she could see of him was his face, which was only lightly bearded, and his hands which continued to nervously play with the stick he used to poke the fire. But out of politeness, if nothing else (after all she hardly knew him), she placed her hand on Marten’s groin and squeezed what she fancied was his penis under the aurochs-hide gown. She certainly didn’t expect his sudden and panicked response.

He immediately leapt up, looking guiltily around him at his family, who were mostly now dozing together, still fully dressed, and brushed down his crotch as if a wasp had stung him.

“What are you doing!” he exclaimed rather than enquired.

“I was just being friendly,” said Heather who was as alarmed at Marten’s response as he’d been at her polite gesture.

“It’s not our way in the North,” said Marten who warily positioned himself out

of reach of Heather's probing hand.

Although Heather and he continued to talk for a while longer, the air of growing intimacy between them had dissipated and so it was with relief that Heather returned to the company of her sister and companions who had now amassed inside the stone shelter. As Heather gratefully received the few last dry humps from Fox who'd exhausted all his semen on Fern, Gorse and Nettle, she ruefully contrasted the offhand attitude that Western men had towards sex with the more earnest one held by the Northerners.

The following day, Fern and Heather were again out together to admire the Great Temple whose magnificence they both agreed could never be surpassed. How could a building ever be larger or more splendid? The legends of how the great stones that were the Great Temple's foundations were transported from the mountainous lands across the Great Western Channel had been recounted many times and never ceased to amaze the two sisters. Such dedication. Such effort. And such an honour to have been one of those who'd volunteered for such a holy duty.

But Fern and Heather weren't the only ones admiring the Great Temple from a vantage point.

"Hey!" exclaimed Fern excitedly pointing towards a nearby hillock. "Look over there. Isn't that the Northern boy you were chatting to last night? And I notice that he's been staring at us rather more than he's been admiring the Great Temple... And look, now he's pretending not to have noticed us. I do believe he's taken a liking to my bare legs. Perhaps he doesn't see many bare legs where he comes from..."

"Or much else," remarked Heather grumpily.

“I’m sure he really likes you, sis,” said Fern. “Look at how he keeps looking at you...”

“You know it’s not me he’s looking at,” said Heather.

“Oh rubbish!” said Fern. She waved towards Marten and shouted “Coo-ee! Hello! We’re over here.”

Marten couldn’t really pretend not to have heard, but after almost perfunctorily waving back to acknowledge Fern from where he was, he then abruptly stood up from where he’d been crouching and strode off.

“Not very friendly, is he?” remarked Fern. “And I quite fancied a Northern cock inside me. Do you think Northerners fuck differently to us Westerners?”

“I don’t think they fuck at all,” said Heather peevishly.

She was quite annoyed at Marten, even though she was used to being treated as the girl who a boy fucked only if he had to. There was surely a difference between a respectful reluctance to fuck and outright rejection. But the Northerners were an odd sort. They didn’t seem to talk much. And the men and women seemed strangely distant from one another. In fact, during the night’s slumbers, Heather noticed that all the women slept huddled together and the men slept apart. And it wasn’t that they were expressing a preference for intimacy with partners of the same sex, because there was no intimacy on display at all.

In the evening when the Northerners and Westerners shared a more meagre diet of squirrel, songbird and snake, Heather again had the opportunity to chat to Marten. As before he was amiable but strangely reserved, although there was so much of fascination and wonder in their conversation. Heather might not be eager to live in

a cooler clime, but she wondered what it would be like to live in a rugged terrain where there was so much winter snow. And Marten was fascinated by Heather's account of a coast that was never more than half a day's walk from her village where you could see puffins, Great Auks and seals. He was especially captivated by Heather's tale of having seen a whale in the distance from a high cliff top.

"I thought such leviathans were fantasies," he said. "Just fantasies that mothers tell children to get them to sleep..."

"They're real," said Heather. "I know, because I've seen one. And not just the once."

"So there must also be dragons, goblins and demons," remarked Marten.

There was a pause in the conversation while Marten mused on the mysteries of creation, while Heather wondered at his scepticism about such well attested phenomena.

And then she remarked: "Why didn't you talk to us today?"

"Sorry..."

"We called to you and you waved back to us and then you walked off. Why was that?"

"Because you were with your sister," Marten said.

Now it was Heather's turn to be puzzled. "Is it because you want to fuck my sister that you didn't talk to us?" she asked.

Marten visibly blushed, which endeared him to Heather more than anything he'd ever said or done before. "No, it wasn't that. It wasn't that at all."

"But you *do* want to fuck Fern, don't you? Everyone wants to fuck her. You

must want to stick your cock inside her...”

“No. No,” said Marten. “It’s nothing like that.”

“You admit that my sister is very pretty, don’t you?”

“Well, of course I do.”

“So what’s the problem?”

“It’s not that your sister isn’t pretty, and of course she is...”

“Well, then...”

“It’s that it’s *you* that I prefer.”

Heather wasn’t sure she heard right. “Me?”

“Of course. Fern is pretty but it’s you who I would much prefer to give my heart to.”

“I don’t understand,” said Heather. “Wouldn’t you much prefer to fuck a pretty girl than someone like me?”

“In the North, we don’t make love to every woman we meet,” explained Marten. “We choose our partners carefully and there are many factors we take into account. If you want to live with one woman for the whole of your life there are other things to consider than just how pretty they are...”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know. How well you get on with them. How much you enjoy their company. It isn’t just about sex.”

“Isn’t it?”

“Not in the North it isn’t.”

And so Heather came to understand that there were other unsuspected

differences between Northerners and Westerners. And chief amongst these was that in the North a man and a woman made a sacred vow to one another and didn't share partners with everyone and anyone, that there was a close bond between a man and a woman which ensured that the children knew who their father was as much as they did their mother and that only on the death of one partner did a man or a woman seek another.

Bizarre it might sound, but Heather could see the value in such a peculiar state of affairs and it confirmed to her what she already knew that under one Sun there were many differences of people and culture. And she also knew instantly that much as she loved her sister and enjoyed the sexual freedoms of the West, she could also happily exchange them for a lifetime's commitment to one man.

"Would you like me to return with you to the North?" Heather asked Marten.

Again he looked startled. "That's not normally the sort of thing that a woman asks a man in the North."

"But is it what you want? Do you want me to live with you in a partnership of just the two of us?"

"Only if you want to."

"Yes, of course," said Heather. "Yes. I do."