

We Are Different

a sf short story

by John Argo

Marie and Steve Compton, when they moved into the empty house next door to Charlie, brought with them an electricity that convinced Charlie he was in love like never before in his life.

The delicious new feeling frightened Charlie, for he had to be very careful. And he really meant to be good. And he hoped that, after his last brush with the police, the court-assigned shrink had been right when she told him he was cured.

Charlie Hart was 30. He lived alone with his secrets, his pleasures, his yearnings, in the house his late mother had bequeathed him. As Charlie's lawyer pointed out to the judge, Charlie was an educated man, a contributor to society. He just had this minor problem. He liked to peek into people's windows at night.

When Charlie was thirteen, his Daddy had run away with another woman. His Momma thereupon rarely smiled. Her eyes had a shocked, bereaved glitter, as though brimming with tears. She'd stare at Charlie and say: "You'll come to no good end, boy."

Charlie's testicles ached a lot, and he felt a yearning, some dreadful and nameless hunger. When he tried to ask Momma about it, she turned away with a resentful look that made him feel guilty. She would throw her sewing down, say "Men!" and storm out of the room. He would call after her, but a door would slam, and the boy, tiptoeing into the long dark hallway, would hear the sound of muffled sobs coming from Momma's bedroom. He began to realize that he was a victim of his male nature, as Daddy had been, and he felt a deep sense of guilt and shame.

At the same time, he could not resist his growing urges. Wearing his black sweats and a wool cap, he would ease out of his second-story bedroom window, slide down a hard cold tree limb, and roam the neighborhood like a feral animal, alive with the night. Never mind the thin and artificial thread of civilization: a narrow street, a clump of houses, a passing car. There was a deeper truth in the night, a friendship with the owl, the rodent, the passing clouds. Stalking from lawn to lawn, through holes in fences, he became a student, an expert, of windows. He turned away from the things that did not please: an elderly widow, part invalid, struggling with monumental heroism to straddle an aluminum potty; he turned quickly away from such indictments of mortality. The beatings, the fights that took place behind venetian blinds, those he avoided.

He got to know the places and times to look. There was the tall, big-breasted woman with thick glasses who lay naked in bed reading and eating cookies. There was the young mother who breast-fed a baby every night at ten. But his coup d'etat was the discovery that, from seven-thirty to eight each evening, Laurie Tomasini practiced cheerleading in front of her bedroom mirror while undressing for bed.

Girls liked Charlie at first. Laurie had been no exception. He was a compact, nice-faced boy with dark curly hair. All the boys desired Laurie Tomasini. The boys from nearby Foster High even stopped by during lunch time to watch her practice with the 8th grade cheerleading squad. Laurie had SPOKEN with Charlie. Laurie had a boyish body, but softer in the hips and shoulders. She looked flat-chested; but had acres of glossy mahogany hair, and a gorgeous face. Her skin was the color of brandy. She had dark

eyes, naturally elongated like an Egyptian princess's including the snow-white corners. A woman's beauty, Charlie decided, was indescribable; it could only be looked at, not touched, and he had a rare talent for looking. She had the fig-shaped nose, the lotus mouth, the football jaw Charlie found in the library in books on timeless Nilotic art.

Alas, her attraction to him lasted little more than a day. Charlie saw her walking home with the captain of the basketball team. No matter, he knew where her window was. The boys wondered what if anything was becoming of Laurie's tits, as they so crudely put it. With his friends the owl, the bat, and the moon, Charlie gazed contentedly through a fault in the venetian blinds. Yes, she did have breasts though small, with large chestnut nipples, and they even wobbled a bit when she did the back high split. She had a habit of grasping her hands against her bare belly and turning this way and that to admire herself in the mirror. Charlie would grow excited (but never touched himself, for guilt and fear) and when his pants got wet he would steal softly home like a wild Indian returning from the hunt.

One evening, as he watched Laurie, a dog started barking ferociously. The Tomasinis had gotten a shepherd with slavering muzzle and vicious looking teeth. It thudded up to the fence and started cutting the air with hammer-blow barks that hurt Charlie's ears and scared him. Charlie slipped and fell, getting muddy. A door opened, and Mr. Tomasini appeared carrying a rifle and a flashlight. Laurie's hand pushed open the blinds, her other hand covering one breast. A chestnut nipple looked at Charlie; it was the last he ever saw of Laurie; and he would carry a lifetime memory of the loathing and fury in her eyes. A gunshot cracked through the air, and Charlie ran like hell.

Next day at school, the principal called him in. "Charlie, were you near Laurie Tomasini's house last night?"

"Nossir," Charlie said forthrightly.

The principal's face showed uncertainty and disgust. "Charlie, Mr. Tomasini filed a complaint with the police about a peeping tom. He says Laurie thinks she saw you, but she's not sure, so they can't prove anything. You're lucky it won't go any farther than this. Don't do that again or you'll wind up in jail one day. Do you understand?"

"Sir, I am innocent," Charlie said with humble honesty.

But his mother somehow knew. She told Charlie: "You'll come to NO GOOD END, boy!"

In high school, a similar episode took place. The young lady in question was Mary Salada, who could have passed for a slightly more mature Laurie. Same Mediterranean beauty, but fuller body, and a faint Puerto Rican accent. Mary and Charlie went together for a week during Sophomore year. Then she shut him out, saying angrily: "You have no soul. You have no insides, man. You just look and look, you stare like a mutt. In six weeks, we've barely held hands and you never tried to kiss me. Is there something wrong with my mouth?"

"Mary, I could kiss you now."

"Don't bother," she said picking up her books and flying off to class. Within days, he'd see her off with a Senior who had a tough, serious face and his gaze told Charlie to stay away. Charlie, wounded, visited the night again. The owl, the bat, the moon, and the trees did not downgrade him, did not accuse him. He picked up his old skills where he had left off, only better. He gazed with satisfaction on Mary's smooth form as she showered and toweled and lay for ten minutes under a sun lamp.

There were more episodes during the ensuing years, each bringing Charlie closer to the attentions of school authorities and police. Once, he was arrested under a woman's window. A second time, a few years later in college, it was near the window of a girl who played on the basketball team. The third time was near the ladies' room at the park. Each time, his mother pronounced her judgment: "You'll come to no good end, boy." Now, Charlie had a choice: Risk jail as a sex offender, or submit to psychological counseling.

The shrink was a friendly New Age guy in a sunlit room who broke through the barriers of Charlie's loneliness and frustration. Charlie confided: "I think there's more than one way to have sex. Sure, there's screwing, but what's that?"

"Have you ever screwed a girl, Charlie?"

"Well, not exactly."

"Would you enjoy it, do you think?"

"Oh sure," Charlie lied uncertainly.

"It's the real thing," the shrink said.

"Would it help me?" Charlie wondered out loud.

"Sure," the shrink boomed. "Go out and get laid and stop sniffing around women's windows." He pronounced Charlie cured, and the matter was resolved. Charlie stopped prowling around windows. He became a computer programmer, made decent money, and even dated a little. He moved out of his mother's house to an apartment. The relationships were short, always ended by the woman, but Charlie was in fact having sex with them and considered himself to be something of a stud. He wore flashy suits and drove a red Corvette. He wore a gold ring and necklace, leaving his shirt open to expose a mat of curly black hair.

Then disaster struck in the form of a slender secretary and part-time fashion model named Anne Mackovich, with long raven hair and sultry dark eyes in a chiseled face. Charlie bought her flowers, spent a lot of money on her, called her several times a day. Then his demands began to make her uneasy. He wanted to watch through her window while she undressed. She started to do it, perhaps for a joke. She slipped her panties off behind the blinds, with an embarrassed smile, then fled holding her breasts and squealing to another room. She locked herself in the bathroom and refused to come out until he left. It was the last he saw of her. With tremendous pain and restraint, he resisted the urge to watch her from a tree that grew right outside her bedroom window.

Mother died, and Charlie missed her but felt a sense of relief; finally, he did not have her sad, accusing, weary eyes lingering after him anymore. She would not witness the no good end she'd assiduously pronounced on him. He moved back into the house. He quit his job and took in consulting work. This kept him busy in his home computing center day after day and into the long hours of the night. Gradually, he became more and more isolated. Still hurting from the Anne Mackovich affair, he took long walks in the evenings, looking up at the golden windows of houses containing all sorts of sensual secrets, but he managed to stay out of trouble for a while. Always, he remembered the fear, hurt, and rage in Laurie Tomasini's eyes while she clutched a bed sheet to her meager chest but one unripe, nut-hard breast pointed at him.

* * *

Then the Comptons moved in next door. Marie Compton had dark dark red hair the color of forest honey. The Comptons were somewhat androgynous, from Steve's slim hips and pale face to her almost boyish cheek contours and strong hands. Hers was not the Mediterranean face with its smooth, curvy lines; rather, a (when you looked close, freckled) more angular beauty, graceful by its strength rather than its curves. But the inner light was the same Laurie-like, soft incandescence through patina'd skin. Marie's eyes were filled with challenge and humor and compassion. "Hello Charlie, nice to meet you," she returned his greeting as they met the first day, thirty feet apart at their respective mailboxes. She had a heavy white bandage around her left forearm, wrist, and hand. When he saw Marie, Charlie's mouth went dry (am I a teenager still?) and he felt a pang in his gut. She was already turning away, leggy and hurried, but called out: "Come over for tea anytime!" and the spark in her gaze told him she knew she did this to men (and how did she then deflect them? he wondered).

That afternoon, Charlie purchased a strong, compact telescope on a tripod that could be quickly carried from one room to the next. He spent the afternoon calibrating optimum lines of vision between their houses. He came up with: Their kitchen, his pantry; their living room, his mid-stair porthole; their downstairs shower, his upstairs bathroom; their upstairs bedroom, his upstairs bedroom. That night, he began his observations, feeling somewhat like Kepler, making star catalogs in a long robe. I should have a magician's cap, he thought, bent over the brass eyepiece, watching Marie walk up their front porch with a bag of groceries. Her rear swayed in blue jean miniskirt above long slim legs. Did she cast a glance, a hint of white smile, in Charlie's direction? He blanched, remembering Laurie's loathing. He looked again; no that was a faint, bemused smile Marie had.

Consulting-work volume was heavy. Charlie kept at it, knowing he must be at the telescope during the hours when Marie was home. He got to know the sound of her car, the time of her arrival, her manners and her habits. It was like that when you secretly watched people; you fell in love with them; you became a part of their life without their necessarily knowing it, though with this Marie he wondered if she might not know she was being watched.

At first he thought they might be brother and sister, so much alike did they seem in a way he could not quite figure out. But when he watched them in the kitchen, saw his hand press against her buttock, saw her arms (hands holding a paring knife, a potato) encircle his head; when he saw him mounting her from behind on their bed; he knew they must be husband and wife. Perhaps they only resembled each other in a superficial manner, the way the Irish were often red-haired, or the Swedes blond. Did Charlie see something else while Steve was piling her from behind? Her face? stunned with pleasure? resting in the crook of her elbow? Her eyes, glittering directly toward Charlie?

As months went by, Charlie was too busy working and watching to actually go over to meet the Comptons. He did begin to notice they had a lot of remodeling going on. All sorts of workmen in all sorts of trucks came and went. Windows were replaced, banisters, drywall sections, the roof was redone. Phone and electrical lines were overhauled.

Charlie noticed also: During the summer, when the framing and the cabinets were being done, Marie seemed to have a little something going on on the side with the carpenter, a brawny red-haired man in white overalls. Once Charlie saw Marie and the carpenter standing in a hidden spot between truck and house, where they must have thought they were unobserved; he was kissing her passionately, and she had both hands down his overalls. What would Steve say if he knew? Then the carpenter stopped coming. The house was silent for a few days. Finally, Marie and Steve could be seen limping painfully. His arm was bandaged, and both of her hands.

Then during the Fall, when the plumbing was being done, Marie appeared to have a fling with the

plumber. Charlie saw them smooching behind a large bush near her house just after twilight. The plumber, a graying man of olive complexion, seemed about to rip her clothes off, when she took him by the hand and led him into the house...to Steve? Curiouser. Again the week of silence. Again, the slow, painful emergence, the limping, the bandages; and no plumber.

The backyard pool was remodeled; it had a three foot high wall around its kidney-shaped perimeter, and some type of large, exotic fish swam around inside. The season was changeable, the sunlight fickle, so Charlie could not quite make out what was swimming in the pool, but Steve and Marie took turns evening or morning going out with a large bucket to drop things in, and then the water seethed. Else, the long dark shapes floated like pickles, shadow within shade, occasionally stirring a flipper or tentacle or whatever. And Marie, holding her bandaged hand away from the water, would reach in with her other hand to pet the long shapes.

One day, Marie knocked on the door. "Hello, Charlie," she teased. "I thought you were going to stop over and see us some time." The bandage was gone from her arm, and patches of skin shimmered with something like scar tissue.

"I've been busy," Charlie stammered.

"I'll bet you have," she said. She wore tight jeans and a white blouse in which her breasts looked shadowy. "Aren't you going to invite me in?"

"Of course," Charlie said, stepping back. Marie's loafers made hard sounds on the floor as she entered the house. With her entered an ambiance that changed the house from a lonely barn into a glimpse of the unattainable. Having her this close unnerved Charlie. He was much more comfortable watching from a distance. And yet he was excited. Looking was his form of music; and her breasts played the universe's most basic and natural song, common to cells and stars; why the very Earth was a globe, and the symmetry of those perfect breasts was breathtaking. Marie seemed to sense his mixed emotions, and did not press him. "Why don't you show me around?" she suggested quietly. "And then we'll make tea."

Horrified, Charlie remembered the telescope.

"It's okay," she said as though reading his mind.

He showed her the rooms, upstairs and down. "So this is where you work," she said. She walked past the telescope, which stood aimed at her bedroom, barely touching it with her precious fingers. Charlie felt a swoosh of relief. Then she turned, and the telescope was between them. "Charlie, will you level with me?"

His heart nearly stopped.

"Charlie, you have been watching, haven't you?"

"No," he insisted. "No, not at all."

She laughed. "Charlie, it's okay. It's OKAY. Will you tell me all about yourself?"

He did. They made tea in his kitchen, and sat for an hour or two, while light turned to dark, day to night, and the owl and the bat and the squirrel made their nests outside in the swishing trees. "I have been so full of longing," Charlie told her, staring at the glossy V where her bare breasts met behind the top button of her blouse.

"I understand," she said, "we are all full of longing."

"Then you don't mind?" he asked plaintively.

"Charlie," she said sternly, and her beautiful features crinkled in a smile.

Charlie, strengthened by her approval, protested: "It's not unnatural. It's it's... just me."

"Of course," she said, pressing her fingers between her knees. "We feel the same way."

"We?"

"Steven and I." There was a caution in her eyes, a withholding, fondly, against possible worldly harm to her mate.

"You're married, huh?" Bargaining time. Information exchange. Letting down further barriers.

"Yes. But we're different, Charlie, SO different, and society just doesn't understand."

They sat kneecap to kneecap. He could feel her warmth in his knees. He longed to hold her soft fingers. "There's a million genders, aren't there, Marie?"

"Maybe six billion," she said wisely, with humorous lips and coy eyes.

"As many genders as there are people," he said. "It's not just fuck, fuck, fuck, pardon my English, not hump hump hump, that's just the way the plumbing works."

She smiled. "That's just first gear. Would you like to come over this evening?"

"Huh?" Could this be?

She held out her arms.

Should he? Would it destroy his watching? Was he afraid? Would Steve touch him?

"Charlie," she said.

He trembled, stepped closer. Her arms were surprisingly strong, her hands gentle, as she pulled him to her. He closed his eyes. Their lips brushed. He heard her breathing (eager), smelled toast and tea on her breath. She whispered, "We will shock your balls off." She exerted a minute downward pressure, somehow, wrist or hand he didn't know, and his lips traveled down her shirt. His eyes opened upon a spoilt print of fine freckles the color of ancient photo blotches. There in the crevice, he kissed her skin. "Yes," he said, "yes yes yes."

"Good." She pushed him away, or rather steadied himself against his shoulders in rising. "Come over at seven, Charlie. Please? Steve will make us something to eat..."

He raised a hand, unsure. "The only thing.."

"Yes?" She stopped, benignly puzzled.

He felt his face burn. "Steve."

A short plosion of breath. "Oh." A laugh. As if to say, is that all? She touched his cheek tenderly. "Don't worry."

That evening, as Charlie crossed the mooney street, his palate had a metallic taste. He would not eat anything, he knew, for anticipation of her. A thousand genders, a million. Some, like himself, specialized in watching. Others, dull drones, married, performing sexual mechanics once or twice a month to procreate the race; others yet, perhaps mating in threes or even fours. We'll see how this goes tonight, Charlie thought, maybe it will be better than just watching through windows.

Charlie was alone in the dining room with Steve. "Where's Marie?"

"She's not feeling well just now," Steve said coldly as he stepped about lighting dinner candles. Steve resembled her but in a crisp masculine way. He took care of himself, you could see, had a flat belly. His trousers were spotless, and kept a crease. His shirt was dark, subdued, green/black like a hedge of fine leaves. "Don't worry," Steve said, "she'll deliver."

Charlie flushed. "Smells delicious," he said eyeing potatoes, green beans, breaded steaks.

"Thank you," Steve said, a first glimmer of smile lighting his preoccupied features.

There was a yell somewhere. "What was that?" Charlie asked.

Steve shrugged. "Probably Marie. Here, let's start eating."

"What's she doing?" Charlie asked, as he and Steve passed back and forth bowls of this and that.

"Tending to our children," Steve said.

Charlie felt a twinge. So far, he hadn't questioned anything. One read about swingers and such. He was prepared to go along with anything on the program, as long as it somehow ultimately would lead to his kissing Marie's breasts. Until this moment, he'd felt no compunctions about sharing dinner with a man whose wife he was about to share. But children? "Children?"

Steve napkined his lips, sipped some wine. "Sure. We have several."

"Hm," Charlie said, "haven't seen them around."

Steve smiled broadly. "We don't advertise."

"Oh." What a strange thing to say. "Do they go to private school or something?"

Steve nodded. "Very private."

"That's nice." As Charlie ate, the chewing made his jaws sound odd in his ears, just bones muffled by rather gristly muscles and tendons, right? It was that quiet in the room. Pleasant though. All lavenders and pretty colors. Soft music, piano with hiss suppression, Bartok, Satie. The clock tick, ticked pleasantly, no doubt a well-jeweled expensive works inside its crystal and china body. The room was almost female but not quite, actually more androgyne like Steven and Marie. "What do you do?" Charlie asked.

"What do you mean?" Steve stopped chewing.

They stared at each other.

"At work," Charlie said with flushed cheeks.

"I'm a poet."

Charlie gave a single chew, then stopped again. "Really." Not a big demand for that.

Steve carefully marshaled all his potato bits together in a central pond of gravy. "It's an important job. Someone has to do it. And our people take care of me."

Your people? Charlie was going ask, but somewhere Marie screamed. A ragged, short bellow, like someone having a dressing changed. He remembered her bandage of months ago. Remarkable how that had healed. "Is she okay?"

"She's doing great," Steve said with gusto. "Don't eat too much, now. Your stomach won't like you."

"Oh, okay." Charlie obediently put his fork down.

Steve sat back. "Glass of wine?"

"No thanks," Charlie said, "I don't drink."

The clock ticked. Marie was silent. The house rustled. Somewhere, water splash, plashed. The pool, Charlie thought, with its occupants. Before Charlie could ask what kind of fish were in the pool, Steve sat back and asked: "Did Marie tell you about us?"

Charlie's face got heavy with shame. "No."

Steve laughed. "It's okay, Charlie, we're just a little different, but we're nice family people. I'm sure you understand. You're different too, aren't you?"

Charlie nodded.

"Come on," Steve said, "we're almost ready." He rose and held out his hand. Charlie did not take it. Steve ignored the rebuff and led him by the hand down a hall, to a bedroom near the patio. It smelled there of the pool, or of the sea, or was it just chlorine in the laundry room? "Do you mind, Charlie?" Steve started taking off his clothes. He'd left the door open, as a sign to Charlie that he was free to go if he chose.

"No," Charlie said bravely. Charlie started to unzip his trousers, then looked outside. "Do you mind?"

"Not at all," Steve said.

Charlie closed and locked the door. "I'm new at this."

"I know," Steve said. "Marie will be between us. I won't touch you."

Charlie let out a sigh of relief. He fairly jumped out of his clothes. The vision of Marie's freckles was seared in his mind's eye. Naked, shivering, for the bedroom floor was of ceramic tile, he let Steve direct him. So this was how it was done. The Comptons had, tipped straight upright against the wall, a king-size bed. The mattress was covered by fresh sheets still stiff from the wash. "I won't hurt you," Steve said. Charlie stood with his back against the bed while Steve took soft white lengths of linen and tied first one of Charlie's wrists, then the other, to the bed frame above, and his ankles to the bed frame below. "Can you wiggle okay? Does it hurt?" Steve murmured solicitously.

"Yes. No." Charlie replied, thinking of Marie's freckles.

Steve shut the windows, cutting out all sound from outside. In the silence, Charlie heard a groan, a low drawn-out sound that could not possibly be from a human throat.

Steve said: "I'll be right here, tied up just like you." He pointed to the other side of the bed about five feet away. Charlie nodded, and could hardly wait until the space between them filled up with Marie's luscious body. Steve, as he tied himself up, had a very noticeable erection. Charlie looked down and had to admit that he too had one, and the mere thought of Marie made it rise longingly. "Ready, darling," Steve said to the air.

"Ready..." Marie said somewhere, then lapsed into a long, almost painful moan.

"We always have at least one, sometimes two," Steve said.

Charlie felt the bed move. "Two what?"

"Children," Steve said, "each time we do this. You'll be happy to know that the next one will look like you."

"Wait a minute," Charlie said, "I'm not up for any pregnancies. Come on." He wriggled against the restraints, but could not get free. "Wait. Let's talk about this."

"Too late," Steve said. "You had your pleasure all these months, Charlie. We worked hard, performing for you. Now you have to perform for us."

The lights in the room dimmed.

"What do you MEAN?" Charlie asked. He heard his voice, and it sounded thin, as if over water. The bed, he perceived, was slowly moving forward, and Charlie with it, tied up and standing on the foot board. He began to whimper with fear.

"Relax," Steve said, "just enjoy yourself." The lights went out, and Charlie was terrified in total darkness. Then a faint haze of light appeared. The wall ahead of them was not a wall, but a curtain, and now it rose like a stage scrim. Charlie heard splashing, smelled blood, heard groaning, heard also Marie's hissed breathing. Charlie could still not see.

Cold water flooded into the room. Charlie screamed as its chill enveloped his feet up to the ankles. The walls, he saw dimly, were like the inside of a pool. A second pool inside the house, not the one outside. Steve said: "We don't know who we are, or where we came from. As you yourself said, Charlie, the world is full of many kinds of people. Our kind, we live among you. We need you to help us reproduce. I have a theory that we evolved out of sea water and lightning."

"Oh God," Charlie whimpered. He felt his own tears hot on his cheeks. "Let me go, please." He writhed from one side to the other, but was unable to get free.

"You see?" Steve said, "you can taste the salt in your very own tears, feel the salt of the sea stinging your eyes. We are all from the sea." A light came. Dimly at first. Hanging down into the water were thick black cables. On the cables were pictures of red and white lightning bolts. Above were massive galvanized-steel boxes covered with lightning bolts and with signs that read DANGER and 10,000 VOLTS. "No," Charlie whispered. "N O O O...."

"Easy," Steve said. "I'll couple with Marie, while she will perform oral sex on you. Then we'll switch around, and you'll get yours wet. You'll get a charge out of it, Charlie."

"N O O O ..." Charlie said, and then he saw Marie.

She was naked, sitting in a kind of birthing chair across the floor. She acknowledged them weakly by a change in the shadows of her rapt and ravished face.

"Please," Charlie said brokenly, sagging in place. "Let me go."

With grave dignity, Marie tilted her head back. Her face contorted in agony. Her eyes were closed, her nostrils wide, her teeth big like sugar cubes in wide open mouth. A silent gasp, a series of choking sobs that racked her robust frame.

Numbly, through a kind of tunnel vision (or was the light going dim again?) Charlie watched as something long and shiny flowed from her distended vagina. It was a blue-black slimy eel shape, thick as a man's leg, about two feet long. Marie screamed as it passed.

Already, on the tiles, lay one of their children. Now there were two, and they lay glistening, waiting to be carried to their pool.

Steve reached up to check the electrical breaker switches.

Charlie could almost hear his mother admonishing him about his end, and hated the disgust in her voice. He remembered the loathing in Laurie's eyes. He remembered a single innocent breast, a chestnut nipple, like a Cyclops eye, a jewel in a lotus, a circle within a circle symbolizing eternity.

Slowly, Marie rose. The two children had tiny human-like faces. One of them looked like the carpenter, the other like the plumber. In a few moments, they would quit watching and slither through a tiny door out on the patio and into the pool with their older siblings who were maturing into Steves and Maries. But for now, they were frozen in fascination. Their faces shone weakly blue as the first arcs of energy crackled over the water, and the long cables hung ominously. The cables' black surfaces had been peeled back to reveal naked, freshly sandpapered copper wires. Evolved from lightning and sea water. The children, and Steve, and Charlie, watched hypnotized, as Marie walked ever so slowly and seductively through the water, toward the bed.