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1947

Chapter 3

TERROR OF AIR ON THE AWFUL TOOTH

After undergraduate years ~~of~~ communing ~~and~~ with major poets, it was now my lot to be drowned in drivel of minor poets unread for centuries -- except by aspiring scholars. Whatever pulses of antiquarian enthusiasm I was able to pump up by sheer force of will ~~quickly~~ were stifled in mandatory graduate courses ^{taught} ~~received~~ by ~~ancient custom for~~ the most senile members of the faculty, few of whom could stay awake ~~to the end of~~ ^{through} a two-hour seminar. My monthly stipend of \$42 was earned by spending ~~my~~ ^a ~~brain-fogging~~ ^{feeding} dozen-odd hours a week grading the torrent of "bluebooks" gushing from the army of vets who'd invaded the campus, so quiet a year ago. Academia was a darkling plain offering no surcease from the pain of Cowper and Crabbe and one damn ^{stack} ~~pile~~ of bluebooks after another.

The ~~half-year~~ ^{summer} of freedom had been my ruination. Boredom was intolerable, and never mind what fame and wealth its discipline might bring in ~~the distant~~ future. When the world was too much with me, late and soon, desk so buried in bluebooks I couldn't see the collected works of John Dryden, I'd skip an afternoon seminar and run off in the Model A to a beach on Puget Sound or ~~the~~ mossy depths of Green River Gorge -- places where life was real, life was earnest, and the doctoral dissertation was not its goal.

As a further distraction, during a winter evening that began with the same old fun and games I was startled to discover Betty was not merely a

crazy face but a warm body. We began escaping from Parrington together -- to the ocean, walking lonesome sands pounded by thundering surf, ^{to the Olympics,} up gloomy-dripping ~~rain-soaked~~ valley forests into high-bright snows. If she was as slow and clumsy as ever, somehow it didn't matter.

Mountains, woman, and school. One had to go, there wasn't enough time for all three. Thus at the end of winter quarter I turned in my last stack of bluebooks and left the University payroll. Where next? My ~~only~~ ^{only} long-range plans were to wander as many hills as possible. Dominating the short run, though, was the decision by Betty and me to ^{avoid} save trouble with University District landladies -- ~~salacious~~ ^{dirty} old crones who stay^{ed} up all night spying on ~~their~~ tenants -- by making our arrangement legal.

This required, to start ~~with~~, space suitable for light housekeeping, not easy to ~~find anymore~~ ^{obtain in competition with} the horde of vets. However, several blocks from the Avenue, in a decrepit ~~house~~ ^{mansion} minutely subdivided into a student warren, we found an "apartment" -- a third-floor garret consisting of ~~a two rooms~~ ^{one} room large enough for a bed and a desk, ~~plus a kitchen, formerly a study~~ ^{the other a closet-became-kitchen} equipped with sink and ~~two~~ gas plates. Two other apartments shared the refrigerator in the hall and the ~~restroom~~ ^{basics-only} bathroom. Rent was a ~~gouging~~ ^{gouging} ~~profiteering~~ \$25 a month but we were in no position to object.

The second need was a job. What does an English major do if he doesn't become a professor? I thought there ~~might~~ ^{must} be a spot someplace ^{around the city} working with words. At radio stations I learned the ~~terrifying approach~~ ^{imminent arrival} of ~~television~~ television had made live local programming a thing of the past. The city editor of the Seattle Star offered me a tryout as a cub reporter starting

the next day -- but next day the Star didn't publish, having been bought overnight by the other ~~evening~~ ^{afternoon} newspaper, the Times, and put to death.

If I couldn't sell my brain surely I could sell my ~~back~~ ^{muscles}, as throughout the war. Not necessarily. Defense industries had been dismantled and the vets were ~~returned~~ ^{back}. Weeks of searching were fruitless, discouragement deepened to despondency, and I ~~concluded~~ ^{suspected} the only career open to me was shoplifting from supermarkets. Then I lucked out and by paying ~~a~~ ^{an enormous} bribe (the money borrowed from my folks) to an employment agency was hired by Ernst Hardware to push a handtruck in a warehouse 40 hours a week for \$35. We were in business.

The evening of Wednesday, May 28, Betty and I had a short session with the preacher of a convenient church. Friday morning, Memorial Day, the three of us set out on our honeymoon. The third member? Not the preacher, for God's sake. Monie.

Monie?

Well, despite the tittering ~~that went around~~ ^{among acquaintances} it was a perfectly square affair. Betty and I, rather ~~completely~~ ^{totally} self-~~occupied~~ ^{absorbed}, had lost touch with ~~such~~ ^{such} as Arild and Bob ~~most~~ ^{as} old friends, who in any event were fully involved in their own new ~~entanglements.~~ ^{entanglements.} ~~lives.~~ But Monie was around, as always, and often over a pitcher of beer we listened to more sagas of alpine disasters, more anecdotes about her ~~group~~ group of eccentrics, The Mountaineers. Now and ~~then~~ again she hinted we ought to take up climbing -- I brushed aside every sly invitation. I was a ridgerunner and satisfied. Betty was barely fit to be a valley-pounder. The hell with that Cruiser crap. The wicked witch never would snare this Hansel and Gretel.

However, the question had arisen of where to go hiking Memorial Day, which because of my job would be one of our three long weekends the whole summer and could not be wasted. ^{Because of the bribe} ~~We~~ were too broke for the expensive ferry ride across the Sound to the Olympics. ~~My~~ knowledge of the Cascades was meager.

When Monie suggested Monte Cristo I almost spilled my beer. Twice in the spring of 1942 Arild and I had battled toward this legendary 1890s ghost town, first from the South Fork Stillaguamish River and then up Silver Creek from the North Fork Skykomish, and both times bogged down in soft snow. In all the Cascades it was one of the few places that stirred my imagination. Monie ^{told} ~~informed~~ me, what I ~~hadn't~~ hadn't known, that a road recently had been pushed through to the townsite. From there, she said, we could haul our packs ^{a camp at} up to Silver Lake and explore. She volunteered to come along as guide and ^{gladly accepted.} we ~~thought that was swell.~~

"There's a nice little peak above the lake," she said. "We could climb Silvertip in several hours."

Climb! "Dammit, Monie, don't you ever give up?"

"Well gosh, it's mainly easy snow this time of year. There's a little bit of rock at the top but only one move you could call climbing. It's really just a hike -- really."

She confessed Cruiser ^{was} ~~had been~~ a swindle, her hope had been to get us to the false summit and enjoy our nervous collapse. But Silvertip was no plot, [↑] She sounded honest. And surely, making our honeymoon an ordeal was beyond even her shame threshold. She'd get sufficient kicks ~~by~~ breaking up her fellow Mountaineer freaks. ("What did you climb Memorial Day, Monie?" they ask. Cackles she, "Oh, the Mannings and me were too busy to climb -- it was our honeymoon!")

was hardly more complicated than Buckhorn.

~~She comforted Elvise had been a while. Silver tip wasn't in the same class, and he sounded honest. Any way, it was our honeymoon and we had to get beyond even he and his wife.~~

The Model A rattle-banged along the narrow, rough road, much of it the bed of the old railway that stopped running in the ^{early} 1930s. The ghost town was ghostly indeed in dark fog and drizzle, collapsing buildings engulfed by brush and young forest. We started up the hill, meeting a steady stream of fishermen descending from Silver Lake, complaining there wasn't a drop of water showing.

No fishermen we. I was carrying my own personal ice ax — rented for the weekend at the ~~Coop~~, but who could tell? Fishermen took me for a climber and showed due respect, marred by their indiscriminately extending it to Betty as well.

Monie pitched the tent on a patch of soggy, snow-surrounded ground near the 4200-foot lake. We melted snow in ~~Ten Cans~~ over smoke billowing from soaking-wet wood. Hard rain drove our honeymoon threesome to the tent for a 12-hour sleep.

In late morning we crawled out into drifting mists and ascended slopes above the frozen lake, kicking steps in soft snow. Trees grew smaller and thinned and the ridge got steep and airy — yet I felt amazingly comfortable, securely connected to the mountain by the ice ax stabbed firmly into treacherous whiteness. How different would have been the Graywolf Ramble had Arild and I possessed these third legs!

Betty needed more help than that, preferably a stretcher. On a nearly level bench she lost footing, flopped on her stomach, and every so slowly began sliding.

Monie and I watched, incredulous. Only a virtuoso incompetent could slide on flat snow.

Plaintively she wailed, "Help me! Help me!"

If she maintained the pace, and I wouldn't put it past her, in a half-hour she would go over the cliff-edge a dozen feet distant. So, after finishing my sandwiches ~~and~~ I gave her a hand and saved her life, warning her to be more careful when the honeymoon was over.

We clambered onto the rock jumble of the 6000-foot summit ridge and looked all around into a bewilderment of gray walls and white snows sliding in and out of black clouds, spotlighted now and then by come-and-go shafts of startling sun.

Below was Silver Creek, where Arild and I had hiked through virgin forest beside white waterfalls. The valley now was a desolation of brown clearcuts; logging trucks rumbled at the very base of Silvertip. So the stomach turns. Down there were the vandalized ruins of Eden, my youth. I was getting old and rotten and so was the whole bloody damn world.

We fell short of the 6100-foot summit. Confronted with the reality of the "little bit of ~~exposed~~ rock" I was, despite decorations of rope and ax, an adamant hiker. As for Betty, ~~she had~~ ^{she'd} progressed from tearful trembling to catatonia and when time came to descend refused to move until we tied her

(And how did my aged Northlake neighbors feel about the devastation of the Seattle-surrounding forests they'd known as children?)

to the rope and by brute strength dragged her off the rocks into the snow.

Down the sparkling-white crest cleaving the turmoil of boiling clouds we plunged. I paused to take pictures featuring rope and axes, the better to jolt the folks back home. ~~At some point~~ Betty revived, entered the spirit of things, and jumped off a small cornice to sit-slide into a little bowl. She ought to have mentioned her plan beforehand. Monie and I were rapturizing over the scenery at one moment — and the next I was flying ^{and instantly thereafter, Monie too} — Betty had forgotten we were roped. Well, thought I, tumbling head over heels, hearing squeals of delight below, at least my ~~idiot~~ bride was getting some fun from the honeymoon.

Monie disappeared after Memorial Day. We scarcely noticed, ~~immediately~~ ^{busy} ~~in the enchantment of~~ playing house in our garret "~~apart~~" and in the high country. Twice we crossed the saltwater to ~~my home hills~~ the Olympics, and several other weekends explored the alien but cheaper, handier, Cascades. Had it not been for 1946, when I covered more wildland miles than in any previous year of my life, 1947 would have been ~~among~~ the best of mountain summers.

To be sure, problems misted over during courtship became prominent. I wanted to hike every weekend — and Betty often found reasons to hibernate in the garret. On every trip she was exhausted and/or terrified — and on no trip were my muscles or nerves stretched. This was the price for growing up, busting out of graduate school, going to work in a warehouse, getting married. The compensations were considerable.

to be in some degree a prison.

I wasn't complaining. I'd always ^{expected} ~~known~~ adulthood ~~would be grim~~

On a bright Sunday in August when we should ^{we} ~~have~~ been in highlands but were lazying around the garret because Betty was recovering from a case of mosquito poisoning, Monie reappeared, newly back from weeks in Wyoming, "climbing a Teton a day."

We compared summers. She told of dodging a lightning storm on the summit of the Grand Teton — and we of sniffing flowers in Seven Lakes Basin. She described rappelling ^{by flashlight} ~~through the night~~ down cliffs of Mt. "Moron" — and we of swimming in Margaret Lake.

I wasn't jealous. Monie was welcome to my share of the Tetons, and for good measure throw in the Alps and Himalayas and Mountains of the Moon. I no more wanted to be a climber than to sail a small boat alone around the world or be a professor of English literature, ~~to mention a couple other outrageous ambitions.~~

Yet the Teton tales poignantly reminded how dull was my mountain life nowadays. I never would ^{we} ~~have~~ believed it possible during the cowards' retreat from the Graywolf, but I missed being scared. In this soft newlywed summer an itch wanted scratching.

Monie spotted the symptoms and struck like a cobra. Why don't we all go hiking next Sunday? Great — where to? How about the good old South Face of The Tooth?

I snapped to attention. She was at it again.

In her most soothing and sincere voice she lauded the South Face.

The route was a staircase of buckets and doorknobs, she knew every hold

~~some of the flute on bikes and perched atop window knolls in twilight blowing
melodies suggesting conspiracy with pagan deities. She single-mindedly
denoted me as the one that she hated. I noted some familiar flowers
and asked its name she authoritatively responded that they
are called the mountain flowers. Indian brush and the other~~

~~the~~ Betty and me? I doubted she intended to murder us in the first degree. It was conceivable, though, she had chosen us as the butts of her ultimate practical joke, the one that would make her all-time champion of her wild bunch.

Sunday morning, August 24, we drove east from Seattle nearly to Snoqualmie Pass, hiked several miles up the Denny Creek trail, and climbed 2000 feet of brush, heather, and rockslides to Gum Ridge. There, in the notch between the False Teeth and The Tooth, Betty and I shivered in the warm sun while Monie chomped squirrel food and dropped all pretense.

We learned the supreme jest in Monie's crowd was beguiling ~~trusting~~ fools onto the South Face. Some behaved very badly, weeping, going limp, being half-carried to the meadows. Others were crazed by anger and vowed awful revenge — and some carried out their threats. There was the sad case of Limber Jim, who during the war chanced to encounter one of his old victims, then training as a fighter pilot. Rancor seemed buried in the unexpected pleasure of the far-from-home reunion and Jim eagerly accepted the offer of a joy ride. At 10,000 feet Old Victim said over the intercom, "Remember the South Face? WELL, HANG ON!" Jim had to sleep on the floor that night because he kept falling out of bed.

Monie munched squirrel food and cackled. Betty and I did not eat, did not smile.

I averted eyes from the jumble above. Bending the neck that far back made me dizzy. I couldn't see any possibility of a first step from the notch where we were sitting, much less a route up the cliffs shooting interminably into whirling blue. This would be no agony of minutes. We might be up there all week.

Monie tied bowlines around our waists — the rope supposedly was the symbol of security; actually it meant entrapment. She walked along what presumably was a ledge, though I saw nothing under her tennis shoes but air, rounded a corner, and re-materialized 40 feet above my head.

"Belay on!" she yelled.

My turn.

Betty was staring intently at something in, or beyond, the sky. If she broke down we might both be saved even this late in the game. But she seemed neither to know nor care what was happening to her — and more importantly, to me.

Breathe deep. Wipe palms on pants. Stiffen knees. Mechanically thrust the foot forward, the hands. It has begun.

The ledge actually was quite wide. But at each step away from the notch the cliff below lengthened. I came to the corner, the end of the ledge, the boundary of sky. I looked down between my legs — DOWN — to shrubs in Source Creek. Dear God, I happened to know those shrubs were trees a hundred feet tall!