

September 1946

Chapter 8

ALIENS ON THE TRAIL

We talked about -- what else? -- mountains. Not the beauties and exaltations, too sacred ~~to~~ for jukebox-raucous tavern. The miseries and terrors, made hilarious by beer. From Boy Scout days, my rambles of the war years, our hikes together of spring and summer, Bob and I had no end of harrowing memories. Even Betty made a small offering. She'd once gone to Campfire Girl camp -- and been sent home as hopeless. Last fall, encouraged by a sadistic Mountaineer friend, she and another incompetent hiked a couple miles into storm-drenched forest, were caught in the middle of nowhere by darkness, failed in attempts to build a fire, huddled under a tree all night soaking up rain and nibbling raw potatoes, and at dawn barely escaped to the highway.

That was the sum total of the addlebrain's wilderness experience. Yet she managed to ruin the subject. Was she as artless as ~~she~~ she seemed? I'd swear there was revengeful triumph in her giggle the night she brought that same sadistic Mountaineer to the Red Robin and introduced her by saying, "Monie climbs mountains!"

Shit. I didn't want to hear about it. But Betty egged on the wiry little bitch, who though only in her mid-20s had stood atop Constance and

The Brothers and every other peak I knew, scores more I'd never heard of, and worst of all had climbed Rainier -- often.

For Bob the highlands were merely a playground, his ego wasn't threatened. He would insist, on stimulating Monie with his ~~open-faced~~ ^{wide-eyed} fascination, to tale after tale of blood and slaughter -- and on showing his naivete by repeatedly asking why people climb mountains. Ask a silly question and get a silly answer. She'd toss off Mallory's flip "because it is there." Or taunt us with the lines of some nameless alpine poetaster:

Men can go where the clouds can go
But they must be sturdy men!

Men, yes. I'd long known why men (better say boys) climbed. The symbolism was embarrassingly manifest to any sophisticated male -- one climbs a peak to make it an extension of the body, a gargantuan tool for screwing the sky. Only pubescents not yet initiated into shame ~~were~~ ^{could be} unaware the sport was the equivalent of walking a public street with naked prick on high.

What mystified me was why a female climbed. Fouled-up hormones? Penis envy? Anyhow, that Monie was a climber, and that Betty should intrude her into our cheerful beering, was a damn outrage.

No rudeness of mine could drive her away. Invite Betty drinking and the ~~tag-along~~ tag-along was inevitable. What did she want from me and Bob? Not sex -- in her weird way she was as sisterly as Betty. Not beer -- she'd nurse a single glass all evening and when urged to chug-a-lug would bleat, "Oh, I'm high enough on animal spirits!"

Something sinister lurked in those ~~staring~~ ^{magnified by} merry eyes ~~behind~~ glasses thick as coke bottles, in the constant convulsions of cackling. It came

out in the open when she suggested the four of us climb a peak called The Tooth.

"Just a staircase, really -- but good for laughs!" Cackle.

Whose laughs? Not ours. What was her game? Castration. Aroint thee, witch!

Surprisingly, she ^{appeared} ~~was~~ not the least disappointed by the foiling of her plot, became virtually human, began speaking less of peaks she'd climbed with ~~The~~ Mountaineers and more of trails she'd hiked with her folks.

Grudgingly I had to admit her knowledge of mountains far surpassed mine.

~~And~~ ^{And} she wasn't arrogant in her superiority, once off her damn cliffs and glaciers was a sincere and humble lover of the meadows and the woods -- "one of us," even if female.

That's why I agreed to her second suggestion -- that we go hiking. Whatever doubts remained about her motives, I saw no ^{possible} physical or psychic danger ~~in~~ ⁱⁿ the 5-day trail tramp she proposed through my beloved northeast Olympics. And there was the promise of infinite amusement in observing the wilderness progress of tanglefoot Betty.

Wednesday morning, September 4, under now-and-then showering clouds, we four ferried across the waters and drove to the end of the Quilcene River road.

Bark Shanty. Eight years since my last visit. Nothing had changed. The moss-grown shelter. Tall old trees. Almost I could see the Big Red Truck, the yipping Scouts. But something certainly had changed. Now,

no beer for excuse, what the hell was I doing, going hiking with girls?
Camp Parsons phantoms jeered, "Sissy! Sissy!"

However, phantoms took the river trail; our way, new to me, lay up a tributary, Townsend Creek.

The laughs came on schedule. Betty placed each boot, at each step, as if navigating a nest of rattlesnakes. I helped by warning of pebbles she might trip over, puddles she might drown in.

Hours passed. Miles didn't. The joke wore out. Bob and I settled into a pattern of strolling leisurely 5 minutes and waiting 20 for the females; Monie, impelled by masochism or loyalty, stuck with the stumbling clown. But whenever Betty -- back bent under Trapper Nelson, brows furrowed, eyes glazed, lips twitching -- saw us sprawled on the ground she ~~knelt~~ collapsed in a heap; we began resting until we heard whimpers around the bend, then ~~escaping~~ ^{stealing away} before she came in sight.

Twilight. The forest too brush-choked and soggy and dripping to camp. Time to ~~build~~ ^{make} a lightning bug. With a large nail Bob and I punched holes in both ends of one side of a ~~tin~~ Ten Can, inserted a length of wire for a handle, and punched a larger hole in the middle of the opposite side to hold a candle.

Now, of course, we had to travel in a bunch, Betty in front setting the inchworm pace, Bob or I at the rear with the bug, its diffused glow far better for hiking than a flashlight. At 9 o'clock we reached Sink Lake ~~Shelter~~ Shelter. Seven miles hiked, 1500 feet of elevation gained. In 8 hours! Impossible to believe, seeing the speed of the idiot's lips in a tavern, her legs could go so slow.

A sandwich ^gsupper having been eaten on the trail, the females immediately crawled into sleeping bags and conked out. Bob and I built a fire and brewed a bucket of coffee. After several cups we decided to visit our original goal for the night, a cabin said by Monie to be just 5 minutes distant ^{but} --/4 minutes ~~away~~ beyond Betty's ability to move except in a stretcher.

Before setting out we should've asked directions. An hour we searched the forest. No cabin. And by now very little candle. Best make haste back to camp by the obvious shortcut -- following Townsend Creek to Sink Lake, then the shore to the shelter.

Before setting out we also should've looked at the map. The creek left forest, entered a boggy subalpine meadow, divided and redivided into a maze of meandering ~~distasteful~~ channels. Expecting ~~to~~ momentarily to find the lake and thus camp, we hurried through knee-high grass and over-the-head willows. No lake. As the map would've told us, once upon a geological time there ^{had been} ~~was~~ a lake. Now there was a marsh.

Not enough candle to retrace steps to forest. Surrounded in moonless starless drizzling night by infinite marsh. And by innumerable silent sloughs -- each of us in turn, while the other was in the rear with the bug, plunged into ~~many~~ pits of black water.

Soaked to the skin up to the neck. No wood or even dry grass for a fire. Shouts ~~answered~~ unanswered by ~~the~~ sleeping bitches. A hop and a jump from camp, if we knew where to hop and jump, and facing the most miserable night of our lives.

Candle guttered out. Marooned in blackness. The ~~the~~ shivering began.

A firecracker! There! In 50 stumbles we were scrambling up the bank from marsh to forest and in 20 steps ~~we~~ more were at the shelter -- saved by explosion of a gas pocket in the dying fire. Long after midnight we were squeezing and steaming water from shirts and pants.

In wilderness the rule of law~~s~~ is absolute. But no commandments are posted at ~~the~~ trailheads, they must be learned the hard way through the punishments that inevitably follow transgressions.

Parsons phantoms chortled, "That's what you get for going out with girls." Yes, Bob and I had contributed to the delinquency of females, had contaminated the purity of a male preserve. Wilderness would show no mercy. The 8 hours to Sink Lake were just the beginning of the penalty. And the purgatory of the marsh, though it didn't strike me as exactly fitting the crime, was a warning, ~~there could be more~~. Four more days we'd pay, and pay, and pay.

Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow
Betty creeps in this petty pace...

Mark Thursday. The 3 miles and 2200 feet of elevation to 5200-foot Windy Lakes, in headwater meadows of Townsend Creek, were properly a 2-hour job. Betty labored up the switchbacks from early morning to late afternoon. It was necessary to stare intently at her several minutes to be sure she was moving at all -- ~~not~~ and half the time she wasn't.

Mark Friday. A steep mile up to the tundra ridge of 6270-foot Mt. Townsend, 4 ~~steep~~ ^{abruptly} miles [^] down to big trees of Copper Creek at 3300 feet, ^{gentle} 3 miles upstream to Copper City, 4300 feet, in subalpine forest. An [^]

easy half-day. However, though ^{at Windy Lakes} we shouted her out of the sack at dawn to start the climb while we slept to mid-morning, the three of us (Monie's loyalty exhausted) were hours exploring ~~the~~ collapsing shacks and caved-in tunnels of the old mining camp before Betty staggered in at nightfall.

Mark Saturday. Ascend rolling meadows 2 miles to 6000-foot Buckhorn Pass, traverse wide-sky slopes of Mt. Buckhorn $1\frac{1}{2}$ miles to Marmot Pass, descend a mile to Camp Mystery. Call it a before-luncheon saunter. Or, for Betty, a day-long grind. But then, how fast can a person travel when every other step she falls on her face and lies so corpse-stiff ^{that} companions ~~must~~ prod her with boots to make sure she isn't truly dead?

Strange days. I was used to a kaleidoscope wilderness, scenes passing in swift succession, and was disoriented by the other-worldly changelessness. This wasn't hiking, it was homesteading. But short of carrying the oafish lump piggyback, there was naught to be done. ~~But~~ Exasperation yielded ^d to resignation, impatience to ~~exhausted~~ languor.

Eerie days. In the land of the stopped clock are mysteries.

The trail was spread with a faery banquet -- ~~orange-yellow~~ orange-yellow salmonberries in wet ravines, dusty-blue and wine-purple blueberries in forests and meadows, tiny red strawberries on rock outcrops. Enjoying the feast, I felt the presence of a Host, wouldn't have been surprised at ~~the~~ materialization of a benign Smile.

From afar came wild music, melodies of Pan. Scanning meadows, atop a boulder outlined against the sky ^{I'd} spot a gnome in outsize boots and baggy pants and sloppy wool shirt and red bandana. The weirdest sister, Monie, blowing a flute.

4 Surely this was a dream. Eventually I'd awake and hike. Meanwhile, though, it was rather pleasant to float effortlessly through wildlands. The trip had the quality of an idyll. ¶ Until Saturday.

On the way from Buckhorn Pass to Marmot Pass we took a side-trip stroll to the 6985-foot summit of Mt. Buckhorn. Lazy Thursday-Friday clouds had been cleaned from the ~~grounded~~ sky by a brisk north wind. All around were familiar Olympic panoramas. I looked across the ~~low~~ broad gulf of the Dungeness valley to Graywolf Ridge and Safety-No Safety Pass where I nearly died a month and a half ago, to The Needles that haunted me those days and nights. No more. A fig for you, hard fangs. Elsewhere lies my future -- here in the soft and fearfree country.

Berry banquet and pagan pipings, forest and tundra and waterfalls and tarns, campfire evenings singing old folk songs (and old Camp Parsons songs by me and old Girl Scout songs by Monie) -- with sharing of these we'd become comrades. If Monie was weird she was entertaining. If Betty was a blundering fool she was a good sport. Hiking with sisters wasn't all bad.

Until the summit of Buckhorn. There Betty shattered the unity, ~~wrecked~~ ~~stirring~~. Stirring from her usual rest-stop ~~comatose~~ coma, she gaily asked Monie to demonstrate climbing techniques. Curious Bob stupidly seconded the request. The witch cackled and complied. One side of the summit block was a 20-foot wall lacking the slightest protuberance for hands and feet, ~~to grip~~. But she flowed up the glass-smooth rock as if on a

ladder. Supernatural. Hateful.

Worse. Urged by Monie, Bob tried the wall and damned if he too didn't clamber quickly to the top. Traitor.

Monie's challenge that I ~~give a go~~ ^{have a go} was rejected with a brusque "Goddam monkeys!" But from beyond the Dungeness valley The Needles rubbed ~~it~~ it in. Cowardice is sanity but cowardice still.

Later, at Marmot Pass, I stood again ~~at the spot~~ where 8 years ago I'd first seen a sunset. Then walked again down meadows where I first felt the beauty of a flower. And drank again from the Source of the Big Quilcene River. Past-in-present. ^{Nostalgia.} Melancholy. Shame. Disgust. Never would that promise of long ago ~~be~~ be fulfilled. All my trails had led to this.

The jolliness of the Camp Mystery evening was not for me. These laughing ^{my} hyenas were not [^] friends, were aliens.

Monie rattled and ~~she~~ cackled on, telling funny stories. Such as the time she and her sister were practicing rappelling at home, leaping out their second-story bedroom window, sliding down the rope howling and screeching, then running upstairs to do it again -- until neighbors panicked and the party was broken up by siren-wailing police cars and fire truck.

Presumably our food for the trip, planned ~~by~~ and bought by the great Mountaineer, also was a climber's jest. Her notion of breakfast was a pot of ~~stewed~~ dried apricots stewed with much water but no sugar. Nothing else. Just acid apricots. At lunchtime she passed around a cloth bag containing a mixture of chocolate chips, raisins, and peanuts. Nothing ~~else~~ else. Just "squirrel food." For supper she'd brought from the

Co-op, a place climbers buy ropes and axes and other fancy gear, a large sack of miscellaneous ^{unidentifiable} dehydrated vegetables. After boiling several handfuls into a mess less appetizing than what I'd seen barfed ^{on sidewalks by Northlake} ~~by~~ winos she'd add chipped beef or slices of salami and call us to table, crying "Delish! Nutrish! Alacazam!"

I detested her cuisine and detested her jokes. Bob's campfire laughter was his second betrayal of the day. He should've taken my side, not theirs. The problem, of course, was that having been 3 years ^{Army-claistered} ~~in~~ ~~the~~ he was in ~~many~~ many ways as innocent as we'd both been in 1943. Even now, after Red Robin nights and trail days, he treated the females with a politeness dangerously near gallantry.

He was openly shocked when in the midst of Betty's inane chattering I interrupted to declare ~~with a flourish that~~ I wished to hell she had as much ~~muscle~~ muscles in her legs as in her jaws.

Not what I said did the damage. I'd been far more vicious before, ~~and she'd laughed~~. It was how I said it. In mid-babble her mouth stopped. I'd not meant to bludgeon so savagely. After all, what was her crime? Being a girl.

Too late to ^{make it a} ~~blatant~~ joke. Fury flushed her face. Unspoken ~~but~~ curses twitched her lips. Monie sought to revive normal conversation. Bob joined in. Not Betty. Not me.

Thank God we'd only ~~in~~ a single day remaining, a quick 8 miles down the Poopout Drag to Bark Shanty. I didn't want to be here, of all places, with them. Any of them. I wanted to be alone.