

October 1946

Chapter 9

WHAT STRANGE UTTERANCE OF THE LOUD DRY WIND

No better retreat for a stylite than ~~ascetics~~ the top floor of a doddering Northlake rooming house. Neighbors rigidly respected privacy, wouldn't so much as knock on the door until you'd been dead a week. Outsiders were intimidated by the stink of mortality, descended from the University and crossed the railroad tracks reluctantly and never uninvited. Solitude was absolute if one wanted, and I did. Solitude for inner explorations.

Among the freedoms of spring and summer had been the release from a prescribed English-literature curriculum, the leisure to sample turmoils of foreign souls and compare them to my 1946-America own. Particularly I was ~~enthralled~~ enthralled by the pre-Revolution Russians. What superlative purgations! Surely none since the Elizabethans have so deeply felt the ecstasy of gloom. Who could imagine Tom Jones, Huck Finn, Leopold Bloom, or Jay Gatsby suffering the sort of spiritual catastrophes everyday-routine for the heroes of Dostoevski?

Raskalnikov, now -- there was the guy to teach you the exaltation of degradation. You can't ^{base} ~~build~~ a three-dimensional morality ^{on} ~~with~~ good alone, you must know evil -- by being evil. Well, I wasn't up to skulling old ladies but did steal cans of Vienna sausage from supermarkets.

Prince Myshkin -- there was your quintessential holy Idiot, blessed and damned. Would that I could share his terrifying plunges into the "moment of eternal harmony." Would that there were ~~such a thing as~~ a voluntary, temporary epilepsy.

For where, in the end, does all our conventional sanity lead? Full of years and learning, the illustrious Whitehead eventually settled for trying to prove ~~that~~ 1 plus 1 equals 2. Not ~~for~~ me. I was going to become a scholar because it was a clean ^{work} living, not because I expected to gain from books ~~separately or collectively~~, more than a few clues to the ~~eternal~~ puzzle, a few direction signs. The Truth, which some dress up as God, cannot be known, must be felt. There's no long road, patiently cramming ideas in your head until they achieve critical mass, methodically stripping layers from the onion of reality. If any road exists it's a shortcut similar to an epileptic seizure, an instantaneous stabbing to the core. (Hoping ~~that the epileptic seizure is inappropriate, that~~ Truth neither blows up your brain nor makes you cry.)

that
where
prayer
and poetry
had
failed
alcohol
would
surely
succeed.

Two years ago I'd thought ~~alcohol was the sure-fire way~~. And Truth indeed was often in the wine, and gin, and beer. The pity was ^{next} ~~in the~~ morning I never could remember what it was. I took to writing down revelations on the spot -- and ^{in following} ~~next~~ days would pull from ~~my~~ pockets crumpled slips of paper proclaiming the likes of: "I am HERE in the (illegible) BEER-EER-EER!!!!!!!" Danged if I knew what that meant. Crystalline
~~The~~ Truth of boozy moonlight melts in the sun.

Gas had seemed a possibility. Once while having a wisdom tooth pulled (irony!) I'd died and gone to Platonic Heaven and approached the

very throne of the Form of Forms. I'd awakened in a fit ^{of ecstasy,} wrestling with the dentist and two nurses and receptionist, ^{imploring them to give me} ~~accusing~~ "More gas! More ~~gas~~ gas!"
 No more gas. And I didn't have any more impacted wisdom teeth.

I'd been ^{enchanted} intrigued by an anthropology professor's description of the ceremonies of the Peyote Cult, during which the Great Spirit appears to the Indians and tells them to cheer up, the white man soon will get back in his ships and sail away over the sea and everything will be dandy again. I'd wanted to try peyote, which according to campus rumor was distributed from tribe to tribe all over the West, but couldn't find an Indian.

Indians. By golly, they had another way. The puberty rite. Fasting. No special supplies needed for that. Mountains were the proper scene, of course, roaming wilderness until a raven or salmon or coyote struck up a conversation. Northlake, though, would do for a test run.

The first day I walked the shores of Lake Union wondering how long it would take to so enfeeble flesh and brain that Truth would come blasting through. Would it be a seagull, mudhen, sparrow, or rat that gave me the Word? The second day I was too faint to leave my room and lay on the bed impatiently waiting for veils to fall from ~~my~~ eyes, trying to ignore sullen accusations of stomach. That night, dizzy and fuzzy, I decided I was too far past puberty. Screw the Truth. I dug into my supermarket loot and gobbled a can of Vienna sausage.

Fasting made me lonesome. Unable to remember why I'd been mad at Bob anyway, I emerged from my casbah and once more we went a-beering.

But with a difference. Now the calendar nagged. Freedom ~~time~~ was ending. I wasn't quite ready to re-enter Graduate School, would delay to January the compulsory ordeal by boredom, studying in fine detail minor poets of the 17th and 18th centuries. Bob, however, after 3½ years in the Army time capsule, would resume the University grind in October.

Not twice can one drink from the same ^{bottle.} ~~river.~~ Never would there be another such summer. A fitting denouement was demanded, some notable coup, an ending with no whimper but a hell of a bang. Inspiration came from several pitchers of beer, yet survived -- nay thrived -- in sober daylight. We'd stuff sleeping bags and a loaf of bread and jar of peanut butter in Trapper Nelsons, stand by a highway, and in our final 3 weeks of joint freedom see how far we could travel on our thumbs. And if 3 weeks weren't enough -- well, Bob didn't ^{really} have to start school in October, nor I in January. We might spend fall and winter roving California and the Southwest, maybe Mexico, drift north in spring to Canada, maybe up the wartime-built Alcan Highway to Alaska.

We were all set to go when who should blow into town but Bill, bosom buddy of Lincoln days, since then imprisoned in Army camps and friend by mail ^{only} ~~alone~~, partner now in swilling pitcher after pitcher of Red Robin beer. When he departed bleary-eyed for California to enter Cal Tech the moment was lost. Bob decided he'd better, after all, get into the University ^ratrace, join the mob of vets running to catch up with life.

Far horizons lost, all the more essential were berserker city nights. The Brothers Raskalnikov left taverns at barmaids' urgings, feasted on

stolen hamburgers and french fries, and stalked the campus seeking sport. Fire extinguishers were amusing. And ^{scrawling} ~~wild~~ words ^{of obscene wisdom} ~~scrawled~~ on blackboards.

The Anatomy Shack proved a treasure trove. One room held dozens of caged, howling, wailing cats. Certainly these Mehitabels deserved a reprieve from students' scalpels, a chance to again sing their wild free tunes, wotthehell wotthehell. We emptied Death Row and then, between 3 and 5 a.m., arranged new homes for several pretty pussies, giving them to girls of our acquaintance who lived in ^{mildewy} ~~musty~~ basements ^{where} ~~apartments and left~~ windows ^{had to be left} open for ventilation.

Another night we stumbled upon the big bonanza -- the cadavers. What's to be done with a corpse? Ingenious schemes collapsed under the weight of too too solid flesh. Unwilling to utterly abandon ^{our prize} ~~our prize~~, we hacked off an arm with a pocketknife and delivered it through the window of a girl's basement, ~~apartment~~. Her dog had hysterics and she lept from bed and delivered the arm right back. Not to ^{completely} ~~totally~~ waste labors, next day ^{at Cal Tech,} we chopped off the hand and mailed it to Bill. His anguished postcard was most ^{gratifying.} ~~satisfying~~. So were subsequent letters, ~~reporting the journey through Cal Tech of the cadaver to hand~~. Bill's ^{rummy} ~~alcoholic~~ roomy, waking with the morning horrors, found under his pillow the Beast With Five Fingers and climbed the wall. A gaggle of Nobel Laureates basking in adulation at a formal banquet were ^{observed} ~~seen to~~ squint, quizzically at the bizarre table decoration.

Bill appreciated our gift -- as had not the first recipient, Betty. She forgave us, though, just as she'd forgiven me for comparing her legs unfavorably to her lips. And I'd forgiven her for being a girl. The ~~band of~~ trail days and nights, during which she'd become no longer

a total tenderfoot, had ^{given her} earned status as something of a wildland comrade, were ^{a bond} stronger than could be broken by the Camp Mystery tempest. ~~which in fact spoiled the relationship.~~ True, sisters never could be brothers, one must be ever alert to the dread potential, yet the tension added ^{spice.} ~~interest.~~ Brothers are more comfortable, sisters more intriguing. Bob and I never would've thrown a cat and an arm through each others' windows. Betty's, yes.

Monie would've gotten a cat, and maybe the arm, if she'd lived in a basement ~~apartment.~~ Though now working at Boeing as a mathematician, helping ~~the~~ imported Nazis make an American version of the V-1 buzz bomb, on weekends she contributed to our revels. Amazingly, I was beginning to enjoy her kinks. Such as: Walking by a stucco building she'd close her eyes, put fingers on the wall, and bust out cackling. The stucco, she said, contained messages in Braille (which she'd learned during several years of childhood ~~of~~ blindness, before an operation and Coke-bottle glasses restored ~~her~~ sight). Messages from whom? From the Infinite. What did the Infinite have to say? "Oh gosh, I couldn't repeat it. The Infinite is a dirty old man." Cackle.

She was perpetually hysterical at Betty's stupidity in having once joined American Youth For Democracy, possibly the sole person on campus unaware it was Uncle Joe Stalin's funny-face popular-front disguise for the old Young Communist League. Monie delighted in singing taunting Trotskyite songs:

A Y D, A Y D,
 See how they run, see how they run,
 They all run after the bourgeoisie
 To make the world safe for democracy --
 Did you ever see such hypocrisy
 As the A Y D?

After which Betty and I (politically-ignorant Bob ~~was~~^{gaping}) would join her in startling the tavern throng with selections from the Wobbly Song Book ("I Dreamt I Saw Joe Hill Last Night," "There'll Be Pie in the Sky Bye and Bye") or heart-~~wringing~~^{rending} picket-line ballads of the '30s:

I don't want your millions, mister,
 I don't want your diamond rings,
 All I want is food for my baby,
 Give me back my job again.

Monie was fun. Also an ~~infinite~~ rich lode of alpine lore, ~~to be~~
~~carelessly mined.~~ One Sunday, to answer some of my questions about the mysterious Cascades, she led us up Red Mountain, a 5900-foot ~~mountain~~^{peak} just north of Snoqualmie Pass and a short and simple scramble from the Cascade Crest Trail. The summit view was a revelation. I saw the Cascades are two distinct and very different ranges, Snoqualmie Pass the dividing line. Look south: Wave upon wave of green-forested ridges rolled 35 miles to the great ice cream cone in the sky, ~~the enormous bulk of~~ Rainier lording it over humble hills -- and over its neighbor volcanoes, Adams and St. Helens, as well. Rainier I knew of old. But look north! There, hidden from Seattle by front ridges, unsuspected even from the highway, was a vast maze of peaks savagely sculpted by Pleistocene ice, a rough wilderness stretching a hundred miles to the distant white mass of Mt.

as the map told me,
Baker, and in all that distance crossed by ~~only~~ a single road. The Sunrise Mountains were full of surprises.

Red was a romp. But I was soon to rue the day. On that ~~pleasant~~ relaxed hike I came to trust Monie, wasn't wisely wary the beer-befuddled night she suggested the four of us try something "a bit ~~more~~ more interesting."

"Cruiser is a cheap thrill," she said. "Good for laughs." Cackle.

Saturday morning, October 12. We honked the horn At Monie's house
and she ~~appeared on the sidewalk~~ ^{emerged} carrying ~~her~~ gear. Holy shit! What was the ice ax for? And the rope?

I remembered. She'd said Cruiser was no ~~tougher~~ ^{harder to climb} than Red -- but ~~that~~ ~~it~~ had some "exposure." That's not what opens your eyes at the burlesque house. That's the climbers' euphemism for "one false step and you go screaming through space and splatter your brains on a rockslide." Exposure, for Chrissake, is air under your feet. Exposure is for the birds. And that skinny string of manila rope was supposed to make us safe? Bullpussy.

I remembered Monie pointing out, on the drive to Snoqualmie Pass, the shocking fang called The Tooth, and cackling as she recalled her month-ago attempt to lure us there. How merry in victory was the weird sister now, en route to the horror of Cruiser Peak.

^{The instant}
As soon as I saw the rope I should've commanded: "Back in the basement with that garbage, Monie. We're going hiking."

Why didn't I? Because ^{it was} ~~it~~ October. Summer was gone, the summer of 30-odd wilderness days and nights, more than ^{my} ~~the~~ total of the preceding

3 years. Soon the high country would be mucked up by snow, fit only for skiing, I'd be drudging in seminar room and library and might not for years be truly free again. The epic summer was gone, and without the final bang required for a masterpiece. Many had been the luscious-soft meadows since the Graywolf, so many they'd become nearly humdrum. Almost I was lonesome for the Old Ones, for the Pan Terror, the one sure way I'd found to stab the onion.

So I didn't ^{gripe} ~~blather~~ about the rope. Who could ^{tell} ~~say~~? I might like walking on air -- ^{it} ~~it~~ might ^{give me} ~~get~~ the Big Bang. And if nerve failed, there was plenty of time before tomorrow ~~was~~ ^{an} for ~~the~~ Artful Dodger to elude the witch.

Saturday was reassuring. We crossed Puget Sound on the Seattle-Bremerton ferry, not the ^{good old} Edmonds-Port Ludlow ferry ~~preferred~~ but still part of the Black Ball Line, cabin walls ~~decorated~~ decorated with familiar photos demonstrating use of a life jacket, the ~~favorite~~ model being the black-haired pirate we assumed ~~was~~ was Mr. Black Ball himself. We drove south and then north around the tip of Hood Canal, turning off the Olympic Highway up the Skokomish River. A different river, different forests, different peaks, but still the familiar Olympics, though the southernmost portion where I'd never hiked.

The trail was comfortable, ascending 4 forest miles to the cozy basin of Flapjack Lakes, 3900 feet. Familiar too, if not so comfortable, ^{was the row of peaks} ~~were the Sawtooths~~ ^{the Sawtooths,} standing above the basin, a miniature version of ^{But they were tomorrow's worry.} The Needles, ~~and built of the same basalt.~~ We camped on the isthmus between the two lakes and ^{huddled around the} ~~built a~~ fire; ~~in~~ the early darkness, the frost

forming on gear, reminded that winter was days -- or hours -- off. The full moon rose behind night-black crags; one was a perfect mouse ^{in profile,} ears laid back, snout thrust up to sniff the brilliant ball of green cheese.

^{An}
 Sunday, ~~would've been~~ idyll ~~to~~ had we ended our hike at 5000-foot Gladys Pass, or turned left and continued to the rounded summit of little Gladys Peak. Two miles we followed the trail, climbing from forest into ~~peaks~~ fields of straw-yellow grass and wine-red huckleberry leaves incandescent with ~~the~~ backlighting of ~~the~~ low October sun. In Puget Sound lowlands the seasons are blurred, often one awakes in a gray-drizzling day and must struggle to recall if it's July or January. There's no drama in the autumn, no mournful glory in the ^{funeral} pageant of death; alders and willows ~~monely~~ turn leprous and the yellowing of maples and cottonwoods is vivid only by contrast with ~~the~~ ~~dispirited~~ somber ~~and~~ evergreen firs. Not since the fall of 1932, when before my child's eyes all New England abruptly burst into flame, had I been so overwhelmed by color. I'd have been content to call this the Big Bang.

But we didn't end our hike at the pass or atop Gladys Peak. We turned not left but right, toward Sawtooth precipices of the same greenish pillow lava constituting much of Mt. Constance and ~~all~~ of the fearsome Needles. One of those lurching splinters ^{neck bendingly high} way above ~~is~~ was Cruiser Peak -- not even Monie could tell which ~~was~~, (so chaotic was the jumble of crags)

The instant she started up the rockslide I should've declared: "Go and you go alone, Monie. This is horse shit!"

Why didn't I? ~~But~~ Because the Artful Dodger was too chicken to chicken out. Or rather, to ~~do~~ do so first. I looked at Bob and he looked at me but said nothing. Betty was ~~still~~ gasping for breath, ~~she~~ didn't know where she was or what ~~the hell~~ was happening. She ~~damn well~~ should ^{have} ~~sure~~ had sense enough to quit. But she didn't. So how could I?

The rockslide was a stroll for a person with depth perception; Betty teetered and tottered as if every boulder ~~was~~ were a ^{steeple.} ~~skyscraper.~~ The way ^{entered} ~~narrowed into~~ a vertical-walled gully and ~~steepened~~; Betty got down on hands and knees. I wanted to yell, "Give ~~it~~ up, ^{moron} ~~you idiot!~~" But didn't. And she didn't. So I couldn't.

When Betty began ~~squirming~~ squirming on her belly, Monie uncoiled the rope and tied us in. I was roped up. And bless me, it didn't hurt a bit. Why had I ~~been~~ been so scared? Despite the forbidding appearance from below, the gully was no tougher a scramble than many in my past, wasn't the least dangerous. I exulted in the feel of rope around waist, pretended I was Whimper scaling the Matterhorn.

Near the top the gully was full of hard-frozen snow. Between snowfield and gully wall, however, was a deep and commodious "moat," ^e its bottom a staircase of 6-foot steps and broad ledges. Each step took Bob and me a few seconds, Betty many minutes. While Monie was soothing and cajoling ~~and holding~~ the whimpering spastic ~~on the rope~~, I borrowed her ice ax and hacked at the snow, pretending I was Mallory on Everest.

So this was climbing! A snap. Here I was, tied to a rope, ^{swinging} ~~carrying~~ an ax, ^{using my hands to clamber up} ~~ascending~~ a thousand-foot "couloir" to a 6000-foot "col," and no sweat. Too bad I didn't get into the sport years ago.

At the col I stopped chuckling. Through the notch roared a gale from the North Pole, fiercely cold, alarmingly loud. We retreated to a protected nook for lunch. Monie chomped. I nibbled. Betty didn't even pretend, crouched against the rock and stared ~~was~~ into space, brows knitting, lips quivering, eyes ^{brimming.} ~~brimming.~~

Not merely howling wind menaced. From the col the ridge crest rose in a steep slab a precarious dozen feet wide, cliff to the left and cliff to the right. And it was up that slab, into the torrent of roaring air, we must go. Monie entertained us with anecdotes of her ^{four} ~~two~~ previous ascents of Cruiser. She got no laughs.

Sudden salvation! Full of squirrel food, Monie announced the summit was beyond our grasp, that four people ~~on one rope~~ would take forever on the peak and we'd been too long in the gully. Betty was good for something after all.

^{Equally} ~~Just as~~ sudden damnation. Said Monie, "Might as well run up to the false summit and at least see Cruiser." And she coiled the rope, slung it over her shoulder, and scampered up the slab, out of sight.

And ^{deserving to} ~~she~~ be struck dead for ^{it,} ~~the~~ ~~betrayal,~~ Bob followed.

Betty and I remained. No summit for her, true or false. She gazed down the couloir to safe meadows, doubtless wondering if she'd get back there alive. I wondered how so miserable an incompetent had allowed

herself to be dragged so high. No denying it, she had ^{a lot of} guts. Or more likely no brains, ~~which is~~ the same thing. The idiot should've quit at the pass. Nobody blames girls for being cowards.

They blame boys, though. It wasn't Monie who forced ~~me~~ me to risk death -- she was a freak, irrelevant. Bob was the villain. The traitor had followed her and thus I had no choice. I'd not sunk so low as to be a male Betty.

From our snug nook I poked my head into the gale -- and was stunned. Man couldn't withstand such a bludgeoning. Yet one had, and also a scrawny woman. I crawled onto the slab -- a roof, the roof of the world, naked to the sky.

Alone. Two above, one below, none in sight, none to help. The knobby basalt was easier than the slick shingles of Parrington Hall I'd climbed many a campus night. But this roof was high, way high, above gardens of Gladys Pass to the left and forests of the Hamma Hamma River to the right and below me everywhere was air and I'd no gin in my blood.

Wind ^{wailed} ~~roared~~ by ears, deafening, unsettling. I needed one ~~hand~~ hand to hang onto my hat, the other to hang onto my glasses. No hands for hanging onto Earth. The next gust ~~surely~~ would hurl me into the void.

Voices! Not Bob and Monie ^{above.} Not Betty ~~below.~~ Right here.

While on the perilous ridge I hung alone,
With what strange utterance did the loud dry wind
Blow through my ear!

Nobody will see me go. Monie and Bob will return to Betty and ask, "Where's Harvey?" And she'll answer, "Isn't he with you?" And I'll be

~~an autumn leaf already blown~~ halfway to California, toy of the Old Ones to be eternally kicked around the sky.

Crap on the false summit. I retreated. Betty smiled eagerly, glad not to be alone. I smiled eagerly, glad not to be alone. Hansel and Gretel, ~~were~~ glad to have escaped the wicked witch, shared a cowards' intimacy.

The two returned from above, Monie cackling, Bob solemn, ~~remotes~~ ^{my feeling} The natural pairing was restored, despite that moment of ^{being} closer to the sister than the brother. He and I quickly descended to the pass and sprawled in sunset-dazzling ~~yellowed~~ meadows to wait. And wait, and wait.

We sat in silence, I from shame, Bob for another reason. At last he spoke.

"You ever seen a picture of Cruiser? Know what it looks like?"

"No."

"It looks like hell. How long you known Monie?"

"No ~~longer~~ longer than you."

"Well, there's something wrong with her. I mean really wrong. I know ^{her idea of} it was a joke, ~~for~~ getting us up there. But that kind of joke isn't funny. The bitch actually ^{tried to talk me into climbing} ~~suggested she and I had time to climb~~ the fucking thing!"

The girls arrived, we hiked to Flapjack Lakes and the road and drove to Bremerton, to the ferry home. On the surface we were a jolly group returning from a happy hike. Betty's mouth was breaking the sound barrier. Monie was cackling about the time half a Mountaineer party, on reaching the false summit and seeing Cruiser, quit cold. Bob and I exchanged glances. This was a dangerous female. Really dangerous.