

August 1947

Chapter 12

TERROR OF AIR ON THE AWFUL TOOTH

The Model A skipped nimbly down the street, around the corner, out of my life. So gleeful was the boy hippety-hopping off to frolic in the past. So mournful was I left stranded in the present. Nevermore from haughty heights of square-cut anachronism would I, secure in childhood, snicker at heavy-haunched adult frogs infesting postwar highways. Descended to the pit behind the steering wheel of a squat unlovely 1935 Ford V-8 coupe I was on their level, low and old and glum.

Dad and Mother were right, of course. Youthful-agile though it appeared, the A in fact was elderly-spry, eaten to the marrow by 17 years of rust and corrosion; since I refused to become a mechanic and couldn't afford to hire one, in a year or less I'd be afoot. Better sell the machine (that's all it was, don't sentimentalize) while this spoiled brat of war-wealthy parents was willing to pay a preposterous \$200 for a decrepit toy. Add the money to my folks' wedding-present \$100 and buy the V-8, meticulously maintained by the legendary little old lady, good for thousands of miles of cheap transportation. Think how much closer the mountains are with a cruising speed of 42 miles an hour.

Keep pace with America. ~~Germany~~ The A day was over and neither by age nor economic circumstance was I of the toy-owning class.

Grow old along with me!
The best is yet to be,
The last of life, for which the first was made.

Fie on it. Loss of childhood doesn't compel acceptance of adulthood.
Putting away toys doesn't mean an end of games.

We played house in the garret, wickedly giggling at the landlady's foolish trust in a scrap of paper, her gullible faith we weren't sinning under her roof.

Betty conspired against her mother, self-absorbed mistress of domestic arts too ~~prideful~~ prideful in their practice to bother teaching them to a clumsy daughter. To the liberated little girl, mock housewife, the kitchen was as excitingly illicit as bed. She bungled ~~hysterically~~ about, ever in haste lest Momma catch her dirtying the ~~good~~ dishes with mud pies. Charred potatoes taught her that boiling water evaporates, and stomach cramps that not every green leaf in campus gardens is suitable for a green salad, and nearly-broken teeth that the first step in making a cherry pie is to pit the cherries.

I conspired against Ernst Hardware. The warehouse was a one-man show, a transfer point between large trucks unloading kitchen appliances and garden supplies and small trucks hauling them to retail stores. My bosses were a mile away in downtown offices, smoking big cigars and feeling mighty slick to have a stupid kid busting his gut for a lousy \$35 a week. They'd

have ruptured their fat heads to learn that by performing warehouse chores not in the normal proletarian sulk but in berserker frenzies of puffing and sweating I stole half of every day for a self-taught course in the history of English drama from interludes and mystery plays to the Closing of the Theatres.

Thus the weekday play. Weekends we sampled the foreign Cascades, camping on meadow shores of cirque lakes near Snoqualmie Pass, or returned home to the Olympics to roam ~~beloved~~ tundra ridges. If Betty was slow as ever on the trail, never mind, there's more to mountains than hiking. Rolls in the heather with the nut-brown maid gave the ultimate union with the Green Woman.

A summer idyll. Yet something was missing, something other than the lamented A. Not until an August Sunday did I know exactly what. That afternoon as we were finishing breakfast came a knock on the door. Odd. Nobody ever invaded our garret.

Monie.

Busy with games we'd scarcely noticed her post-honeymoon disappearance. ~~She'd burst into~~ Now she burst ^{into} our sensual languor vibrant and cackling, newly returned from 2 weeks in Wyoming, "climbing a Teton a day."

We compared summers. She'd dodged a lightning storm on the summit of the Grand Teton. We'd sniffed flowers at Snow Lake. She'd rappelled by flashlight down cliffs of Mt. "Moron." We'd swum limpid waters of Swan Lake.

She'd climbed Rainier again and Shuksan again and a dozen other peaks. We'd strolled Deer Park again and the High Divide again and several other meadows. Suddenly I was discontent.

Summer is short. Hardly have old snows melted when new snows fly. Here it was, August 17, winter a few weeks ^{off} ~~away~~, and what was the sum of my 1947? Measured against 1945, a lot. Against 1946, nothing. Momentum of that splendid summer and fall had carried through winter into spring, then with job and marriage ^{stumbled} ~~stuttered~~ nearly to full stop. The shame of it -- a bright August Sunday created for hill-rambling and I was lazying around the garret.

Not by my desire. Given an eager companion, or no companion, I'd have fled the city every weekend, sunshine or storm. But Betty returned from the easiest walk so exhausted or so blistered or so mosquito-poisoned or so footlog-terrified she required long recuperation before ~~was~~ another ordeal. Ordeal! Not once had I broken a good sweat, stretched legs or nerves. For me the summer was purely Green Woman, never a glimpse of the Old Ones.

I felt ~~pragmatic~~ a fleeting disloyalty verging on a regret: was Betty, seeming a girl, in reality a woman? In hitching myself to her had I accidentally grown up? Certainly, as I realized ~~on~~ that Sunday, except for books and bed the summer of 1947 had been dull as middle age. Monie made it so, Monie with her goddam^g tales of the Tetons, her unwitting reminders of what -- with a different turn or two in the maze of past years -- I might have been. Monie was the serpent in our garret garden.

Monie recognized my symptoms, saw my guard drop -- and struck. How jubilant she was in victory. How baffled I was by my lack of resistance.

Day by day as the next Sunday approached I pondered ~~more and more deeply~~ why I'd committed us, and to what.

Said Monie, to a staircase of buckets and doorknobs. Exposed, sure, but exposure only hurts if you fall. She wouldn't permit it. Every pitch was protected by a bombproof belay -- if we died of fright she could hold us on the rope to Judgment Day. But we wouldn't be that frightened. Heck, she'd led people up the staircase who'd never ~~before~~ been near a mountain. Heck, we'd been to the false summit of Cruiser (nearly) and the top of Silvertip (nearly). We'd waltz up.

I wasn't fooled. Vividly I recalled her first mention of the staircase a year ago, during the Red Robin plotting that eventually led to Cruiser. I saw the mask slip, heard the, quickly-swallowed beginnings of the witchy cackle. She was up to her old tricks. No, she didn't plan to kill us. Yes, she bloody well intended to scare the hell out of us.

Why did I tamely submit? Had I forgotten my trembling retreat from the false summit ^{of} Cruiser, my panicked flight from the Graywolf? ^{No.} A coward never forgets. I remembered too well. A slate needed cleaning.

But a mystery ~~is~~ deeper. Some ^{strange} ~~man~~ itch wanted scratching. Is it possible to enjoy fear? To desire terror? Madness, madness, strictly for the freaks. For me the Green Woman, the Green Woman-nut-brown maid, the sane ecstasy.

Suppose, though, that for a day a person deliberately went mad. A single day. Several unnatural hours would provide a strenuous purgation of dormant emotions, give a zip to this slothful summer of my discontent.

Shit, nowadays I didn't even go beering o' nights.

After all, the danger wasn't real, as in the Graywolf. Death and dismemberment were completely out of the picture. Monie would keep us safe, Monie and the rope. And this was no slippery, wind-horrified Cruiser roof, ^{this was a staircase.} And there weren't thousands of feet to endure, just hundreds. Like climbing the garret steps a dozen times.

By week's end I'd fashioned ^{from} ~~from~~ Monie's descriptions and my brief highway views ~~in~~ a peril-free peak, ~~constantly offering~~ a pleasant tingle, ^{of adventure.} Like jumping in an icewater tarn, like riding a rollercoaster.

Sunday morning, August 24, we drove east in the V-8 almost to Snoqualmie Pass, hiked the trail to headwaters of Denny Creek, left the path and ^{ascended subalpine} ~~climbed~~ forest and huckleberries to a ~~little~~ heather nook. Above loomed a ~~great~~ precipice -- no cause for alarm.

"That's the West Face," said Monie. "None of our business."

We scrambled up a rocky gully to a notch in Gum Ridge. On one side rose modest fangs of the False Teeth. But on the other!

"Behold!" cackled Monie. "The terrific and famous South Face of The Tooth!"

~~She~~ I went into shock.

Monie went into a paroxysm, ~~she~~. She'd got me, she'd finally got me. Far away, barely audible through the roar in my ears, came her voice. Telling funny stories.

The supreme jest among the freaks, she ~~was~~ revealed, was beguiling hikers onto the South Face. Some behaved very badly -- crying, praying aloud, going limp, wetting their pants. Others were crazed by anger and vowed revenge. There was the case of Limber Jim, one of the chief pranksters, who during the ~~war~~ war encountered an old victim, then training as a fighter pilot. Bygones were bygones in merriment of the far-from-home reunion and Jim innocently accepted the offer of a joy ride. At 10,000 feet Old Victim chuckled over the intercom, "Hey Jim! Remember the South Face? Well, HANG ON!" That night Jim had to sleep on the floor because he kept falling out of the bunk.

Monie cackled. I did not smile. Monie chomped squirrel food. I did not eat, silently smoked a cigarette, sat in the warm sun shivering. Monie rejoiced to be back from the Tetons in her home hills. I did not gaze at scenery, kept eyes fixed on my tennis shoes.

Don't look at the giddy cliff rocketing upward, upward into spinning blue. Don't give ^{substance} ~~reality~~ to the nightmare. Wake up! This can't be happening! Impossible I'd let it happen. Every instinct from 10 mountain years screams, "People don't go places like that!"

Monie had put away the squirrel food, was ~~uncoiling~~ uncoiling the 120 feet of 7/16-inch manila. She was tying a bowline around my waist. For God's sake do something! Anything! Run! Swoon! Wail! Laugh! Beg on bended knee! Punch her in the mouth!

Nightmare paralyzed will. Catatonic I watched her walk from the notch right out onto the flawless cliff, right out into the middle of the sky.

Walking on air, nothing beneath her tennis shoes but air, she traversed across the cliff, angling upward to a corner, and vanished. The rope, a living snake, followed its mistress. To where? Her head materialized in the gray jumble above.

"Hello again, folks!" she cackled. "Like the man said after he fell down the elevator shaft, watch out for the first step, it's a long one!" Her head dematerialized. She yelled, "Belay on!"

Untie the fucking bowline, that's the ticket. Fingers too feeble. No escape from the rope.

Betty. I'd forgotten she was here. If I'm petrified, what about her? She'll break down, she'll save us both. No. She's staring intently at something in or beyond the sky, seems neither to know nor care where she is, what's happening to her -- or more importantly, to me.

Rope tugs impatiently at waist. "Climb!" commands Monie. She won't allow me to choose dishonor. It's got to be done. Why? To get it over with. So I can go home and crawl in bed and pull the covers over my head.

Breathe deep. Not that deep -- too much oxygen -- dizzy. Don't breathe, let head ~~settle down~~ ^{stabilize.} Dizzy again -- breathe. Christ, the damn carburetor is haywire, the ^{whole} machine is out of whack.

Wipe slimy palms on blue jeans. Stiffen limp knees. Whose body is this I'm trapped in? Some robot. Some mindless helpless robot. The poor bastard. He's got to get it over with. So he can go to the garage and get the carburetor fixed. Order a foot forward, order hands to clutch rock.

That wasn't, after all, thin air under Monie's tennis shoes. A ledge. With ~~For~~ solid knees each step would be sidewalk-easy. But knees aren't solid

because at each step away from the notch the cliff below lengthens.

The corner. End of ledge, boundary of sky. Stop. Freeze. Try to re-engage brain, ^{Somehow get out of this.} No time, the rope tugs. Peek around the corner. A platform wide as a tennis shoe.

Gulp ~~down~~ dry terror and step around. Both tennis shoes on platform, ^{nose} both hands plus ~~thumb~~ on cliff. Morbidly curious, look down between legs, down to shrubs in the valley of Source Creek. Don't do that again!
I've hiked through those shrubs, ^{dear God,} they're trees a hundred feet tall!

Knees jitter. Sweat-greasy fingers slip and slide. Eyes ^{mist.} ~~blur~~. Look up to formless gray. This will be no agony of hours, we'll be here all week. ~~No~~ No, not a week, not even hours. In seconds I'll die. Alone in the void my heart will simply quit.

Not utterly alone. A motherly face above, a gentle voice, "Take your time. Relax. We've got all day. You couldn't pull me off the mountain if you tried. You couldn't go anyplace if you fainted."

How did she know I was planning to faint? Yes, faint into foetal curl. But my first womb is 22 years in the past and fainting wouldn't deliver me into my second and final womb. ^{I'd not have the satisfaction of dying.} I'd hang like a sack of potatoes and when I revived the shuddering gray cliff would still be here. Monie is kind but cruel, won't give me enough slack to retreat to the notch. A year she's plotted, this witch-mother, she'll not relent ~~now~~. Only by trusting the umbilical cord can I escape.

Energy of despair. Hands fumble -- and grip doorknobs. Feet stutter -- into buckets. The gray blur comes into focus as a staircase. I join Monie, belaying on a broad shelf, and instantly sit down so she won't notice my knees won't hold me up.

"You've got it whipped," she said. "Nothing above is worse than that."

"Really?" I giggled. "That wasn't so bad!" Liar.

Monie showed me how to belay, sitting with legs braced against ~~knobs~~^{rock} knobs, the rope from below passing around the left side of my ~~waist~~^{and} waist ~~held~~ held in my right hand. Instructions: as the climber comes up, use both hands to pull in slack, keep the line taut but not too taut; in case of a fall wrap the rope around the front of the waist and ~~hang~~ hang on tight. To make sure, Monie sat in a second belay ~~above~~, anchoring me.

"Belay on!" I yelled.

My own danger over for the moment, I chuckled at the moans and whines marking Betty's progress ~~from the ledge~~ along the ledge, the whimper-shriek at the corner. Pitiabile face appeared a dozen feet beneath my feet, chin quivering, tears rolling down cheeks.

"What do I do now?" she sobbed.

"Follow the rope," said I cheerily. "Walk up the steps. You can't fall. This belay has a moneyback guarantee." Glib climber talk.

Now we were alone on the shelf. I tried to comfort my love -- but again the call from above, and who was to comfort me? Again knees jittered, eyes ~~blurred~~^{misted}.

However, the second pitch was not exposed to the ~~precipitous~~ valley but only to the ~~hazard~~ shelf, and though it led to a narrow ledge, a stout tree growing there masked out the sky, offered a hundred handles.

Monie petted the branches. "A sweetheart, isn't it? We call it the Thank God Tree. First time I met it I proposed but it said a thousand other Mountaineers had already asked."

There were more beautiful trees and more broad shelves, snug harbor-homes in the ocean-sky. There were more gray walls, too, but now eyes, hands, and feet were ~~coordinating in~~ ^{coordinating in} a smooth rhythm. As I kid I'd ~~climbed~~ climbed ~~a~~ ^{the} Douglas fir^s near our house, and apple trees, and cherry trees, and maples. Climbing cliffs was ~~little~~ ^{not much} different, the ^{basic} principles were the same. The old skills came back ~~to me~~.

One difference ~~was~~ was the air, the enormity of air. But though I was inside the alien sky I was on the friendly ^{Earth. And} ~~rock~~ ^{rock}. The rope that had seemed a skinny string ~~now~~ was a ~~housen~~ ^{housen}. And Monie who had seemed a scrawny witch ~~now~~ was a sturdy Amazon. The rope and Monie were security against flying off, off, and forever away in the sky above, the sky below, the sky all around. An inch from death (call it 7/16 of an inch) yet gloriously, victoriously alive! I ~~snapped~~ ^{bite} my ~~finger~~ ^{thumb} at you, Old Ones!

One last gray wall ~~led to~~ ^{crested in} unmixed blue. Since we'd be descending the easy North Ridge^x the South ~~A~~ Face was nearly over -- over forever. These thrills I'd never have to repeat.

A cozy chimney split the final wall. To obtain photographic documentation of our once-in-a-lifetime madness I had Betty go first, she being unable to hold a camera to take the preferable picture of me. She wiped away tears, stared blankly at the chimney.

"Where do I go?"

"UP, idiot!"

Idiot erupted. Idiot, I'd learned in recent months, didn't always enjoy being an idiot. The little girl with the wobbly eye had adopted

clowning as a defense, hoping at least some ~~of her~~ clumsiness would be
 thought ~~of~~ ^{conscious comedy.} But she was a big girl now and occasionally rebelled at
~~against~~ indignities; periodically, for reasons ~~that~~ that had nothing to do
 with the moon or constipation, ~~she flung off~~ ^{she flung off} ~~retreated from me~~ into a 3-Day Mad. She was
 in no ~~damn~~ mood ^{on The Tooth / called} ~~to be~~ to be an idiot. Not ^{bewailing her predicament but cursing me} ~~weeping but cursing~~ she
 scrambled up the chimney.

I followed, dreading yet another spell of no love and ^{damn} ~~damn~~ little
 conversation. But it was only a 3-Minute Mad, she'd collapsed into her
 characteristic alpine pose, a face-down coma.

No collapse for me. I had Monie take a picture of me ~~on the topmost~~
~~peak~~ wearing the rope. What a trophy for the photo album! I scampered
 about the wide, flat summit raving at the views, especially those down the
 South Face. I gobbled squirrel food. I ~~laughed~~ laughed at everything and
 nothing.

I'd thrown such a fit on Del Monte Ridge to celebrate the Graywolf
 week. Now I was equally delirious from ^{mere} ~~a~~ couple hours on The Tooth -- hours
 of more fear, more exhilaration, than a whole summer of trail-pounding and
 ridge-gunning.