

St. Helens in the Mix



A novel by Jnana Hodson

As the third in the **Northwest Passion** series of novels, **St. Helens in the Mix** joins **Promise** and **Peel (as in apple)** in tracing the influence and legacy of Jaya in the lives of those around her – including her husband, Erik. This time, the story picks up in the Ozarks before leaping on to the apple country of the Pacific Northwest and the crucial eruption that could end only in heartbreak.

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St. Helens

in the

Mix

a novel by Jnana Hodson

Also by Jnana Hodson

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Peel
Promise
Hometown News
Daffodil Sunrise
Hippie Drum
Hippie Love
Subway Hitchhikers
Ashram

Poetry:

American Olympus
Green Repose
Elders Hold
Blue Rock
In a Heartbeat
Johnny Badge
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Waves Rolling Too

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Revolutionary Light

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OPENING MOVE

WE LIKED WHERE WE WERE and would have stayed forever if my husband's company hadn't been sold and his job consolidated out of existence.

So there we were, stranded in the Ozarks, while Todd tried to find an opening somewhere his geologist credentials might land him work. He had a few nibbles — western Pennsylvania, West Virginia, New Mexico, and Arizona all looked promising and then fell through — but the outlook was becoming more and more disheartening. And then, least expectedly, came an inquiry from the Pacific Northwest.

We knew about the location ever since our neighbors Jaya and Erik moved away. Their Christmas cards and letters praised its unique landscape and the folks they'd met.

We'd shared more than a garden with them, but I was left feeling we'd gone too far in some of our adventures. Or maybe it was simply that we playing with fire and nobody quite knew where we really wanted that to end. Nevertheless, their departure left a hole in our existence.

And now there was a slight chance the sixteen hundred miles between us might just drop away.

At least it wasn't overseas. I didn't want to leave the good old U.S.A. and live in a colony of Americans surrounded by an alien language and culture. Not yet.

I would be dishonest, though, if I didn't admit the possibility of this move left me feeling jittery. Of course, the real anxiety was my husband's. Todd was the breadwinner, and his career — and professional identity — were on the line. Anywhere we went would still be a huge gamble.

And then I was left waiting for his news from afar.

UPROOTED AND WAITING

LANDING IN SUCH A PLACE was anything but easy. There were false starts, missed opportunities, anxious unemployment. Finally, when Todd received a phone call, we wagered the last of our savings and he flew off for the interview.

He remarked that any journey like that confines you to limbo. There's so much waiting. To leave home and then sit in the car or a bus for the drive. Wait to check in. To board. To take off. To land. Wait for the connecting flight and its repeated waiting. For your baggage and then the hotel van. Wait to eat. Wait for your appointment and then their decision. All of it driven by a curious consensus that requires synchronized clocks. All of it a product or byproduct of civilization.

Of course, in another time we might have been waiting for the tide to turn or for rain or for prey to appear or for the sun to rise or set. What he traversed now had a different quality, that of the waiting room and its nervous strangers waiting to be ushered into a physician's examination cell, a hospital's cavernous X-ray studio, or a carpeted lab with an insurance agent or lawyer seated behind a big desk. A plane itself is a waiting room. In its own way, a sojourn is a time of waiting to arrive in some new place where nearly everything you love and desire might reappear or come together.

As my husband waited in mid-air while crossing the continent his first time, he hoped to observe the geography below him — this scrolling map of pilgrimage. The initial stretches he had observed before — the dense farmlands with crossroads set a mile apart as far as you can see, before eventually thinning to every two miles. Increasingly, the orbs of center-pivot irrigation will appear. Finally, the roads themselves run jagged and you realize you are over mountains that had been the edge of your earlier travels. You could also place yourself in relation to the pattern of interstate highways and clusters of small cities, railroad lines, and rivers or lakes on the scroll. You might even think you're succeeding at naming the details so far below until clouds thicken and erase whatever might be seen under the window. Still, he watched, just in case, and was rewarded by a sudden flash of mountain jutting up toward the airplane; he gasped silently in wonder, looking straight down on what he'd later confirm was a dormant volcano's glacier-covered crown and flanks. From all he'd read and imagined, it could have been any of a number of North Cascades summits. This, then, before turning over Puget Sound and the descending flight broke into free views now under slate-gray sheets. Never had he imaged such a leaden landscape — the fingers of Pacific Ocean waters, the mountains, the evergreens, the meadows and lawns, the highways and houses all amplifying the drab monotone. None of the travel books or brochures, mind you, acknowledge this reality of the place. Humorists speak of it, yes, but only as if it were nothing more than

a localized London fog. You will learn that those who dwell here learn to wait months for the sun to appear.

It's natural to feel disoriented. No amount of study could prepare anyone for what you will experience. It might provide concepts and names, yes, although those can also become blinders. He debarked and followed signs to another pavilion, where he'd await a connecting flight. This time the room was hushed and secretive, with recessed lighting casting small pools of fire, an attempt, he recognized, to create a place of restful privacy within the often crowded and all-too-public realities of travel. The carpeting and upholstered chairs stood in contrast to the vinyl and tile in other terminals, and the designers were wise to employ shadow instead of sunlight here. Their acknowledgment of local character included gallery cases of beadwork and basketry — some by tribes where he was headed. Here, then, was reason to pause, to wish to linger, to observe intently with pleasure. Even on the initial glance, he could see the styles of his destination contrasted with those of the coastal peoples, especially, as well as with other inland realms. The blue beads, emphatically, struck my attention — as will the vast sky on my arrival. Land the job, maybe we might begin a collection, he supposed, unaware such craftsmanship ceased nearly a century earlier. Besides, what's available would be priced way beyond our means. How strange, to chance upon spotlighted clear sheaths of native artwork in a darkened stretch of terminal — one now silent as an art gallery, apart from the

manipulated movement of air. Pieces made all the more remarkable considering the nomadic rounds of their creators and users. Even the most ceremonial pieces would have required packing and transporting. A person owning little may have had all the more reason for each item to be made well and express beauty. Little wonder, then, that discrete pieces should come to embody the vast landscape about to be encountered. Leather matching parched foothills, with beads as bits of dehydrated sky or bone itself. Baskets from quills or grasses already dun. The contrast, too, of moccasins, for journeys afoot, displayed in a temple of air travel. Horse bridles, as well. Baskets, set apart from baggage constructed of synthetic materials. As if to say that looking inward will be the secret to survival. Is that woven container really empty? When the horizon runs into the sky, think small. Savor each bite.

So what prompts this universal impulse to embellish and decorate? How essential is it to defining humanity itself, in contrast to other animals? How much effort and cost is required, even on utilitarian items, and how often do individuals balk at the expense or, on the other hand, willingly contribute? No matter how impoverished the people, a dash of color or a twist of the line appears. How much of this, too, arises out of wanting? Out of status? Out of naming and claiming within an environment? Why, too, this impulse to define and redefine our existence? All along, I've been surrounded by mechanical décor — patterns in the flooring and walls, in advertising, in clothing. But the

human touch within the beadwork and basketry had a different spirit. One I was waiting to discover, even though I didn't yet know what was unfolding.

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His waiting and gamble were rewarded. He repeated the transcontinental pilgrimage, this time on the ground, accompanied by his wife.

I marveled how everything had been created overnight just for our arrival. Except for the earth itself, nothing seemed terribly old. In places, the construction appeared about as substantial as a movie back lot. In others, there was stunning contemporary architecture. Landscaping by masters. There were even moments to be uncertain which side of the Pacific we were on, a sensation intensified when comparing details of rock and trees in the clear high country to photographs of Japanese gardens or Chinese scrolls. Climbing up the street to take in spectacular views of mountains and the town and orchards in the valley meant crossing fenced-in, concrete-lined streams that gush through the city. These irrigation canals, we would soon appreciate, are the lifeblood of everything green hereabouts. This was, we would realize, a manmade oasis under the distant forested mountains.

Nothing quite resembled what we'd known. The sun's brighter. The sky, bluer. Summer night, uncomfortably cold. Where were the clouds? Emphatic rain? Lightning and thunder? Assimilating the new sensations into your skin is difficult. Maybe a climb or

two into the surrounding hills, or getting lost in canyon roads will change all that, as he'd done before, on the Eastern Seaboard. Some things, as I already knew, take time.

When I used my driver's license for identification, with our former state mapped out in solid color, I confronted the blue-eyed searching of clerks who seemed unable to read the large numerals of my Social Security card. "What's this, Idaho? Or Georgia?" One even thought it was Texas. Another, Maine. I told her, "Many people believe there's no other place than this one. I wonder how much geography they really know, starting from home." Neither of us wanted to admit that even big country can produce small minds.

Being uprooted also strips you of so much of what you've clung to. You need new words to describe many of the unfamiliar birds and plants. Uprooting also opens perspectives on places you've left, in addition to initial trysts with an unfamiliar arid climate. I remembered trying to sleep in the car while watching the strokes of utility poles along country twilight. Going to the farm. The rhythm of short posts looping to flocks of cucumber glass. How the lines would sing, too. Elderly relatives telling of a cousin who ate so much ice cream his stomach froze, as they said — ice cream an exotic communal festivity on the farm before electrification. Hot water bottles saved that one. Another, though, rested his rifle on a stump when hunting and died from the hemorrhaging, out in that field, there. Such family lore, like chickens running around headless in

Grandpa's long stacks of lead tubing in assorted sizes and, yes, as recited, so much the more delightful for their terror. Those plumbing pipes we children jumped around upon were already all history, replaced by copper and PVC and a new owner for the shop so far from these ghostly treeless mountains. Now my husband and I were a thousand miles from our nearest relatives. We were, to some extent, becoming adult ourselves. As we drove, I calculated that so many of the stories the elders had told of had occurred at the time the orchards were being planted in Cowiche and Naches, just upstream from where we were settling.

At the moment, we were nearly anonymous. Uprooted not just from a place, but from the people who dwell in it. In fleeing the religion of our parents and grandparents and many of their ways, we'd also left people we could name, as well as people who could place them. Or their fathers. Or their grandfathers. Even strangers who would inquire of Todd, "Oh, you're Marion's boy? Good family. I know your grandfather."

There were levels of intimacy, too. Classmates. Neighbors. Coworkers. Lovers. Nothing as complicated as the clan kinship and taboos of Native Americans — relations defined primarily by matrilineal connections — or even the derbfine of the English Borderlands in Todd's own ancestry.

He was the latest in a long line to make these breaks by degrees. His father had faint memories of the days before they moved to town. His grandfathers cleared woodlots for farm fields. My great-grandfather

could have told how, in his own childhood, Confederate troops marched past the house while my great-great-grandfather hid out in the woods rather than bear arms and how later he and his brother followed relatives to Indiana and beyond. So there had been running. Still, anything beyond first cousins now blurs into insignificance. Scatter across the earth, then, like weeds. The paradox, too, of setting out alone or maybe with a spouse and children only to find yourself without natural allies.

To some extent, then, Todd, especially, played into the American mythos of the self-made man. Played, too, into the mythos of the American West as a realm of fearlessly independent adventurers. He was still, in Horace Greeley's famed phrase, a young man, out to seek his fortune. As a geologist, he would find there really is gold in those hills — it would just keep slipping out of his pan.

Ominously, the flip side of these mythologies is seldom developed. Many who set forth end up dead busted. Others who survive have relied on elaborate family connections. Often, it's a last-chance scenario for people who couldn't make the grade back home. You get away while you can. Either way.

Surveying the view, I wondered what kind of Canaan the lily white — and later, Asian — settlers had expected. I suspected they were even less prepared for desert than we were. I assumed the Hispanics came north from similar parched vistas. Long before all that, the aboriginal population likely edged into the place

slowly; arriving with the fewest tools, they learned its intrinsic ways most thoroughly. The others presumed this parched valley was merely waiting for them — waiting to be cultivated into long green bands of orchards and hop vines and hay fields.

I, too, played into the optimism prevalent in the American mindset. Every problem can be solved. Every person, redeemed. Never mind that we were fleeing, either from something or toward something. Todd believed we'd come here in pursuit of vertical holiness — mountaintops being superior to the treetops and low hills of his childhood. It could have as easily been argued that I'd come to escape the suburban disintegration of exhaling televisions and air conditioners — the constant driving to isolated compartments. Unable to sit still, the family disintegrates in every direction. The parents and children could learn to wait in wholeness, but don't. With no stories of significance to tell of their own kinship, they chatter of entertainment figures — the pretty faces jabbering from boxes in the boxes they call home. The boxes where they work, too. Speaking, but not listening. Flash an image and hear the recitation of idols' names and current spouses or affairs. Their box-office take and year, their platinum sales and year. But not their governors. Not their senators. Watch out, then. Mickey Mouse gnaws at the hereditary cupboard. Is this any way to define your life, by another's commercial tune or celluloid frame? See the tapping. Toes. Fingers. Even the buttocks, all wound up. But

where's the rattlesnake? I wondered how everything had come down to this, with nobody apparently able to control individual destiny. So the public dotes on celebrities. As for the American outlook, of course crime stories have public appeal: there is, at least, some action, however tragic. But don't overlook the victims. I scanned the headlines, the half-conscious pileup of blurry details in their own way like freeways. Sprawling. Or maybe running. Jetting about. Renting cars for business. Perhaps nothing more. I'd seen the smoldering, then.

Already, I missed the molasses and hard-back bacon, or the underlying legacy we shared of pig nipple shriveling ablaze in the fireplace. Of shacks and cabins in shagbark hickory hollows. Of relentless wind whipping through expanses of cornstalks and soybeans. Whatever else, the sycamores, yes, and buttonwood were largely absent among the trees imported from the Delaware and Ohio valleys that had been were inserted in this desert. As for the red and white roses, drawn from Lancaster and York, England, to the Pennsylvania Dutch farms and on west, I could ask if the Japanese gardeners at work here had their own parallels of flowers representing rival dynasties.

There was no way of imagining the expansive eastern forests that had been cleared, largely by stripping and burning by the earliest settlers. Much of its best topsoil already washed away by the time of my birth. Yet my great-grandfathers as youths could have walked the sixty miles from their farms to Cincinnati or

St. Louis without ever leaving the shade. There was still a sustainable balance. But everywhere these days, people burn black rock seams and oil sucked from the earth. The populace largely clusters in rings around cities they leave rotting. Having already destroyed much of what our ancestors built, we've all become uprooted, to whatever extent. Lack holy rivers. Even a Jordan. Hollywood, Wall Street, Las Vegas, the White House, Fort Knox, Yankee Stadium, Graceland have instead become America's sacred temples. Even in the Bible Belt. No wonder I was uneasy, anxious to flee the workplace, to race anywhere. In that regard, I was hardly different.

As we speeded past a bead shop at the edge of the reservation, I speculated whether I'd truly chosen to relocate across the continent or was merely a victim of some cosmic joke. Todd's job offer was here.

And all we had to cling to was each other.

DISORIENTATION

THE DIRECTIONS WORKED, and we pulled up around noon at Jaya and Erik's. Their shanty at the back of the orchard barnyard was smaller and more rundown than I'd pictured, and they weren't home. Just a note on the door to welcome us.

Their landlords, Wes and Emma, came up and introduced themselves, said we were expected and should go ahead and make ourselves at home. They even gave us a newspaper classified section with some possibilities for our housing search, and a dozen or so offerings were circled.

But first we opened the door, showered, nibbled from a tray Jaya had prepared, unloaded what we'd need for the night, left a note of our own, and headed off to town to start looking for our own new place.

The rents were much higher than we'd expected. Certainly much higher than we'd been paying. I gulped. No wonder Jaya and Erik were living as they were. I wanted to know more about the neighborhoods we were considering — what was considered safe, where we might fit, what else was nearby, all of those things. Truth was I was feeling pretty disoriented. This land was nothing like home.

I was glad to get back their place for dinner, which we ate in a circle on the living room floor — the same space where we'd be sleeping.

It was great seeing them again. Jaya gave me a big hug, and I remembered why I'd looked up to her. She was older than Erik, who was my age. Older than Todd, too. And she'd lived in an ashram, where she'd learned a lot about yoga and people, too, before she moved off to the prairie where she'd met Erik.

We met them when they rented the other half of the duplex we had in the Ozarks, and here we were again, starting over.

Things with Erik were a little more complex. He and Todd got along OK, but they weren't best friends. Todd was closer to Jaya — well, we all were. She was simply the magnet that drew us all together. Maybe it was just because she was a little older and had been to more places and had more experiences than the rest of us, but I'd say it was really because she simply had a commanding presence, even when she said nothing.

While Jaya was making last-minute adjustments for dinner — she'd wave me off from helping, saying the galley kitchen was really too small — she asked Erik to show me around the orchard. Todd was making phone calls for more apartments to check out and didn't need my further instructions.

It was chilly when we stepped outside, and not just the air.

"Still not speaking to me?" Erik said.

"Who said I wasn't?"

"Well, things were never quite the same after our last time together."

"Last time? You mean second?"

"Yeah."

"Well, let's make this clear. You're not as good as you think you are."

Actually, he was better.

We walked about a bit, and he pointed out the groves of apples, peaches, pears, and plums, as well as the cherries and hop fields below. He tried to explain the irrigation systems and water rights legalities, which pretty much confused me. What I realized was that this land was quite different from what I'd known all my life.

"Erik?" I finally said. "Just remember. It was your idea."

"Yeah, but you were the one who took the first step, as I recall."

Well, maybe. Jaya made a move, too.

What I could be sure of was that it wasn't Todd, even though I think he gained the most from the experience.

We took our shoes off on the porch.

Inside, I was glad we weren't having pizza. Jaya had once been a strict vegetarian, and Erik had joined in for awhile, but she was more flexible these days.

Tonight she was serving us crab and showing us how to crack the shell and eat it in dipped butter and lemon. It was sweet, tender, and downright heavenly. She was telling Todd, especially, about its regional status and ecology. Erik wondered if I wanted another beer, not that we regularly drank. But this was a special occasion.

Finally, I piped up about my initial impressions of the place. "It's not what I expected. I remembered everything being wet and green, but this?"

Erik's laughter interrupted.

"Yeah, this sandbox? These dull brown foothills and dead-looking bunches of cheatgrass? I hated it at first, too."

"Believe me, he did," Jaya underscored her husband's statement. "I had enough challenges at the office, and then his emotional tailspin didn't help."

So not everything was rosy?

Well, Erik was still pretty much in Jaya's shadow. He appeared to be finding himself before they moved away, but it seemed to me that his newfound interest in making art was no more his passion than his working in a restaurant was. It was just something he was having fun doing. Period. From what I heard, that was about where he was these days, too — drifting along in the sun, as it were.

They did tell us how they landed this place after living in town. They met Wes and Emma through the Darshan circle, their New Age interfaith worship group.

Jaya and Erik had been part of one when they were our neighbors, and they brought the idea along with them and replanted it. We hadn't gone with them back then, but their invitation struck a chord with me here. She said it was a great way to meet people as they really were — great people, at that.

I didn't want to be lonely.

Todd would be meeting new people through work.

TASTES AND GLIMPSES

AND SO WE WENT to a Darshan potluck. This one was held in a large bungalow in an established part of town. Spacious but not fancy. The food ranged from brown rice and beans through several kinds of salads and soups to homemade breads and a wonderful flan for desert. The people were mostly our age, plus a smattering of older folks like Wes and Emma.

The conversations over food were lively and informative. I could see why Jaya and Erik would go, even before we got to the evening's worship time.

I overheard Todd relating how his wife considered the desert a cruel joke. "Yes, her husband had promised we would somehow relocate. But her nascent jubilation at the news I'd been offered this job sprang from her expectation of settling in an overcast stretch of crabs and moss, not under the treeless hills surrounding their valley. Even though she had crossed this expansive void multiple times as a child, she'd forgotten its presence. Now the open country has become an embodiment of the desolation where I've led her. She followed me, all right."

Jaya could have been speaking of Erik: "Some days he found comfort or even joy in our religious practice, but on many others, he felt only growing tension. These were practices he'd taken up because of me, and now my answers didn't quite satisfy his curiosity. His

concept of hiking and camping were more along the lines of an extended party rather than communing with nature. In his heart, he's torn between a desire to be the center of a social scene and the solitude thrust upon us. The glacier-covered mountain in all of its majestic upheaval reminds him how far things are from what he'd expected."

"You lied to me," I heard him accuse her.

I could say something similar to Todd.

I overheard someone else saying, "In my own trajectory — a band built over the years, stretching from New York through Oregon and Washington at last — I'd found each state could be its own nation. Each one projects a unique essence and swirl of pigmentation, something I was anticipating exploring here. But when moving our household this time, we couldn't tarry, except for dinner and a motel. The tension built as we crossed the country. One night, as I walked through dark streets in Idaho, a sense of profound loneliness startled me, as well as gratitude, realizing how close I'd come to landing a job around the corner, rather than where I'd met her. Watching college students carry six-packs back to the potato-state campus, I pondered other paths I might have followed. In many ways, I'd already spent years in a manmade desert. This one, I would find, would be quite different."

And yet another: "Whatever her reasons, she chose to remain back in the motel room. The movie on the

television reminded her of other paths she, too, might have taken. At least we avoided a blowup."

So we've come far, maybe everyone in the room has. As I would eventually find, we've all come from other parts of the country and been uprooted.

Todd and I were just beginning to feel out this peculiar patch of the United States. Already, we'd had tastes and glimpses, but in many ways that's all we'd had of each other, too. To build a home requires time and commitment. Knowledge comes later. Instead, this was too often a place where one might tell a beloved, "I'm leaving you." Todd said you can just sit in a place and watch the road wind out and out and pull your eyeballs right over the horizon with it.

"But you can be clever and parry Coyote's threat. For now. Consider it nothing more than a lens cloud atop one summit. But don't forget, your beloved is also a volcano," as we heard in Darshan.

The worship that night was an introduction to Zen Buddhism. Todd was especially impressed by its freedom from dogma. "If I get it right, you just have to focus on what's there right in front of you."

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What was right in front of me these days was piles of boxes. Rather than the Void, this was an occupied zone to be made orderly. We'd found a place in town and had barely unloaded the truck when Todd came up behind me while we were moving some boxes to the

bedroom, wrapped his arms around me, and started nibbling on my neck. He had his own ideas about sinking roots here. One of his hands moved north, under my shirt and bra. The other headed south and explored. Soon he was doing more than nibbling. He was sucking on my shoulder. That's all it took. Kicking my shoes off and peeling my shirt over my head, I bent forward and let him snap the clasp open. My boobs bobbed free as I extended my arms to the mattress and his hands worked down to the five buttons on the front of my pants. I hadn't even made the bed, and here we were, adding to the debris. His eyeglasses and wristwatch were the last things to go on the pile atop a box beside us. "Stay in that position," he said, "let's do it doggy-style." I arched my back and held my breath as he entered. I was very wet, and we weren't wasting time getting to happy faces. I came first, and that sent him into Nirvana, too. I still had my socks on when we drifted off for a nap. The boxes could wait.

"I was so glad to have some familiar territory," I told him as we roused. "You're my rock, Todd. Everything else around here is sand."

Well, not everything, as we'd see. And technically, it was volcanic ash more than sand. As we would see.

For the next few weeks the house was in total disorder, boxes everywhere. My job, mostly, was to unpack and arrange everything.

There wasn't much space for a garden, but it was late in the season to be getting started. At least we had

a big kitchen, well, compared to the Ozarks. We could host some dinners and parties.

Todd, of course, was focused on getting his new job in order.

Once things were in place, I found I had a lot of time on my hands. As I looked ahead, I realized I would love to wrap up my degree, if we only had a college close by. We weren't planning on children anytime soon, and our bank account had been pretty much depleted.

I wound up landing a job waitressing where Erik was tending bar. The tips were good, but the hours were erratic — often nights and weekends, which rarely dovetailed with Todd's. We made do best as we could when we were together.

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Saturday and Sunday mornings and early afternoons we usually explored what we could through the remaining summer and early autumn before winter set in. There would be drives up into the passes and beyond, parking at the trailhead for the day. Other times might have invitations to dinners or parties. Or rounds of stores and restaurants. All a matter of getting our bearings.

Back in the flatlands, my mother-in-law marveled how corn, soybeans, and wheat thrive in monotonous stretches of Iowa and Kansas. "Why can't everybody farm where it's really pretty, instead of boring places

like this?" she asked on the phone. "We're planning to come out as soon as we can. Will you have us?"

"Mom, what kind of silly question is that? Of course we'll have you!"

In our previous travels out from our little house at the edge of the woods in the Ozarks, when traveling to visit parents or cousins, one town would initiate the boredom — the town where the hills end and great rich farmlands begin. "I don't think it was always like this," I remarked on one of those trips. "I think that in the days before modern farm machinery, there were a lot more woods breaking up these vast fields, and a lot more animals in them, too."

"You're such a romantic," he retorted.

Another time, I thought: "Prairies should give birth to exploding music, wild artist strokes, visions springing unexpectedly from black earth, fuming hollows where concealed brooks or rivers gurgle holy names."

"Nobody would believe that."

And so we'd come to foothills desert.

CASCADIA

SO FAR, TODD HAD explored no further than the hills and valleys surrounding his new job and home. The time had come to range further west.

Because my grandparents had lived on the other side of the Cascade Divide, I had memories of the mosses and ferns of childhood romps while visiting there.

They'd lived in "stinky Tacoma," with its paper mills besmirching the air. If that wasn't enough, my mother hated the gray — the long seasons of rain — and couldn't wait to bolt. But it was still in her blood.

Our plan was simple enough. My parents would rent a cabin on Puget Sound for two weeks of fishing, come over to check our new digs, and take me back with them. I'd just take the time off. Things were slow anyway. Todd would rearrange his schedule so he could wrap things up by 11 p.m. Thursday and follow.

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It was typically a five-hour jaunt over Snoqualmie Pass. When he set out, the half-moon was already scudded over, suggesting the Cascade Range would be socked in clouds. Out in the windswept lonesome, though, only a few wisps had appeared. At midnight, the Dipper's pointer disclosed the freeway's deceptive twisting. He perceived how far out of a straight route the engineers had to plot this course. To travel

northwest, you drive mostly northeast. He'd never before considered geology and geography as competitive. So much for the old adage about the shortest path between two points being the straightest. In this terrain, curves and circles are often the only passageway. Any spider knows these calculations. The highway veers into contortions. The constellation of Gemini exposed itself before vanishing in a puff. A rhythm of running wisps and summits and then drizzle soon made viewing much of anything impossible in this nightscape — especially when construction detoured freeway traffic into narrow two-way bowling alleys. In an arcade of spray and oncoming headlights, he advanced toward the mountain pass, expecting the roadway to climb. Instead, its pavement followed the upper stretches of the Katonkah River through terrain that appeared less mountainous than Pennsylvania's — at least until he glimpsed large stump-filled reservoirs while steering through tunnels that were open along one wall. These, his father-in-law would explain, are avalanche sheds, in this case set against now emptied lakes that impound snowmelt to irrigate our orchard valley. Unexpectedly, the slab twisted past a cluster of sodium-vapor lighted A-frame cabins, three lodges, their chair-lifts, and two gas stations. A green exit signified Food, Phone, Gas, Lodging, and Skiing. So this is it? Before he could deliberate further, the car plunged under black crags awash in fog. Watercolor paintings of Chinese mountains he'd reckoned were purely artists' fantasies instantly become plausible. (Just wait a little longer, until seeing photos from China of those Lu-shan

peaks even more jagged than their paintings.) Cold drops spit on his windshield. Suppose the car breaks down here, so far from help in the small hours? He recalled a sensation of daring in midnight trips not all that many years before — travel after night classes in a college town back east. That journey delved into blackness, isolated stretches where the radio could receive nothing even if it did work. By now only prayers for protection left his lips (ah, fragile vehicle) as he entered more construction zones, rather than the switchbacks he anticipated. Little did Todd know how dreadful the switchbacks had been before this trajectory replaced them. Nor in the darkness did he see the new roadway on pillars — a decade under construction on the opposite incline of this chasm — or know how most highways in Western mountain gaps simply nest on skin slipping between an inch to a foot each year before ripping away altogether. Little did he know, indeed, even as a geologist.

Fighting off sleep and the fog condensing on his windshield, he rolled into Seattle. In the predawn hours, it was clean and youthful, already projecting a yearning for greatness. Flying along a nearly vacant Interstate 5, he wondered about the city's future, whether this axis would become an industrial powerhouse like Pittsburgh or Detroit, a terminus like Oakland or Philadelphia, or even strong enough to stand independently of San Francisco, as Minneapolis does of Chicago, rather than orbiting as one of its larger moons. How would the city's leaders address

construction and crowding? Would its populace stave off corruption or civic stratification? Would this Valhalla simply be loved to death, overcome by congestion and pollution? In the hushed hour before dawn, lights glittered atop concrete not yet blackened by industry and traffic exhaust. He was finally somewhere he'd long dreamed of experiencing, even if just whizzing by in a flash. He sensed a downtown just rising to urbane aspirations — an evergreen port village becoming a Pacific Rim capital, an offbeat harmony of Victorian frame neighborhoods and gleaming aerospace construction.

Cities stand as polar opposites to the desert he'd been investigating. It's always been so, whatever the name of one's personal Babylon, Athens, Jerusalem, or Cairo — a center of temples and a destination of traders. For Todd, today's temples include a symphony hall, art museums and galleries, university campuses, banking and insurance headquarters, major-league athletic coliseums, high-end boutiques, and theater and opera stages. He worship in some of their precincts. Now, though, we could understand even London, New York, and Paris have their deserts, too.

This early morning taste remained a mere tease. He must drive on another hour, button my exit, track his in-laws' instructions through canopies of murky boughs to a gravel apron's feeble street lamp. "Hope this is it," he mumbled as he pulled in, parked, and hefted his rucksack. He located the narrow stairs and a ramp to a row of tightly packed cabins propped up against bluffs.

There wasn't much room for the makeshift walkway from cabin to cabin. Step carefully or slither on a monstrous garden slug. This, too, was part of my waterlogged Pacific Northwest memories. Misty rain tapered away and patches of faint light hinted of dawn, if there was to be any sunrise at all. He found a cabin fitting our description and tiptoed around front.

"Hey? That you?"

"Sure is, Poopsie."

I came out from a screened-in porch. "Be quiet, we're sleeping over here," which is about the last thing he remembered until noon, when in his late-morning grogginess he overheard something about going out fishing at the turn of the tides and sensed that his in-laws' former neighbors have dropped by. Everyone spoke of how things used to be: abundant big fish and an expansive undeveloped waterfront before wildlife got crowded out. The salmon they frequently caught appear no more. These days, it's unlikely that youngsters could find a seal like the one they playfully chased while it, in turn, kept coming back for more teasing. Todd drifted off, only to awaken to his mother-in-law's, "Well? He gonna get up and have some of this fresh clam chowder for breakfast or do I get to eat the rest of it?" Her laughter indicated she could hardly wait for him to try her latest concoction.

"Do I get to shower first?"

"That depends. How do you smell? Better hurry up, though."

Meanwhile, I conspired with some childhood friends to head off and show Todd around Seattle while also giving him bearings for procuring gear on later trips.

And then, off we went, stopping at an Edwardian saloon in Pioneer Square for a draught before traipsing down to the piers for Ivor's raw bar. Everywhere we turned, another bookseller, record store, or gallery begged scrutiny on later journeys.

The university district, jammed with youth from many states and continents, with exotic emporia, and with inexpensive restaurants, zipped Todd into a time-warp flexing through my own naive self-discoveries in another Queen City when its Mount Adams neighborhood was emerging as a Bohemian after-hours haunt. The then-daring book dealers, galleries, bistros, and jazz joints faded into other recollections: memories, too, of Nathan's on the Boardwalk, wealthy Ann Arbor, experimental Yellow Springs — places where he'd observed colonies confidently living out colorful styles. Once more, he yearned for an unconventional sweetness he'd not yet tasted in himself, except, perhaps, when living in the Ozarks. Instead, he often felt himself perched precariously between responsibility and poverty, between being one of the boys and exile, between being merited to succeed and eternally doomed. Stay long enough in the desert and all of these will burn away. For now, however, his wife and her friends would drag him aboard the elevator of the Space Needle and zoom up its seemingly wobbly legs. On a clear day, there would be walls of mountains to view.

Today, even without them, the view of the city and its waters was spectacular. He'd get to know them in time. Beneath us, Tivoli Gardens were fastidiously free of the carny filth expected of city parks. Its carrousel tossed wistful chords our way. From the downtown wharves, ferries plying Elliot Bay reminded him of Staten Island and trips with his own circle not many years earlier. The hillsides surrounding the water mirrored big lakes he knew back east, even though the houses here gravitate toward San Francisco and Vancouver, or even Anchorage and Tokyo. In one pavilion, Scandinavian dancers released energies of another northern soil and its variations. In the end, as Jaya would explain, all becomes Maya's glittering play, a world in sparkling spider wrapping.

It was enough for one day.

We headed back to the beach, where Daddy was building a driftwood bonfire and Mommy was wrapping corn-on-the-cob.

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The next morning, I woke Todd in time to ride out on the water with my crew. Never mind that he didn't hook a single fish or crab. "That's the way it is these days," his father-in-law shrugged, secretly enjoying an excuse to get out in the boat as much as actually hooking something. "If we get a fish, Evelyn refuses to clean it, which leaves me to do it," Jack grinned pointedly. Overhead, a bit of sun broke though soupy gray. The air was tart with the sting of fir and salt and

creosote under fire. "When it's clear, you can see Mount Rainier sitting right down there, seeming to rise almost out of the water. The Olympic Range is across the Sound over there, while the Cascades jut all along the eastern horizon," Jack said. "Maybe it will clear up, but I wouldn't bet on it." Jack was, as he said, pleased as punch Todd had landed this new job, if for no other reason than the excuse it gave for revisiting.

"When I was stationed out here," he continued, "the local newspaper used to sponsor an annual salmon derby. The guy who caught the biggest one during the contest won something, I forget what — probably doesn't matter. To make a long story short, one character hooked a whopper, got his picture in the paper, showed him standing next to this huge fish, and they asked him what kind of lure he used. 'A Lucky Louie,' he told 'em. Next thing you know, everybody around here's using Lucky Louies. You couldn't buy one for any amount of money. A week later the guy's picture's in the paper again, this time with an even bigger catch. Well, you better believe that really had everybody buzzing, especially when the following day's paper came out. This time, the guy's being arrested while trying to steal another salmon down at the dock. See, over there?" Jack nodded toward one side of a large oil-tank farm. "When I ran into my neighbor that night, he told me, 'You know, I seen him reel in that second fish way off in the distance, and I'll tell you, it looked pretty stiff.' I looked at him and laughed, told him, 'Guess it would. Must've still been frozen.' "

From the boat, I scanned a waterfront city tainted with the blood of frontier massacres, especially when the sheriff and his "citizens" rioted when radical labor Wobblies floated into the harbor. Shortly before that, the settlement's presumably upstanding denizens had marched off in the middle of the night and stolen the courthouse records from another village, thus relocating the county seat for good. I pondered the frozen salmon and the stolen county seat, then wondered if that mob had used its own equivalent of Lucky Louies.

Despite years of studying maps and geographies, no landscape is quite what you imagine. For example, tons of logs have been thrown up along this shoreline. Tattered U.S. flags flutter against this surf. Back in our valley, the rivers coming out of the mountains are also an unending surf.

Jack pulled up to the dock. In front of Evelyn, shrieking gulls fought over a potato chip. Todd surveyed the shoreline and remembered how close he once came to a job in this city before landing in the Ozarks. From all appearances, he was making headway. Already, we missed full sunshine. It was almost time to head back, at least if we were to stop off in some high country.

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This time, I drove. He rubbed my neck much of the way, and then my thigh. I wished I'd worn a skirt. Scotch broom along the dual highway resembled Todd's trip home from the airport after an inauspicious trip to

Colorado. When he steered that time, we followed a yellow-bloom lane away from Springfield. Both times, we met up midway in a journey of churning color.

I pondered American history and thought of an aunt's scrapbook, its newspaper clippings reflecting a distinctive naivety before and after the Great War, especially as many left their family farms forever. The blind embrace of progress. The optimistic, rampant Western expansion, too, on the heels of the War Between the States — as well as its bitter realities. Between those two armed upheavals, an influx of pioneer families settled in the Katonkah County. Already, I'd heard old-timers, who were children then, tell of the years they and their siblings slept in a wall tent until the barn and house were in place. That is, once the valley's Indians had been constrained. Always, it seems, a rhythm of warfare — and economic depressions — each time dispersing a populace, stirring unease, taking a toll on the Old Ways and on community. Progress, indeed. The Second World War — with its aircraft, radios, beach landings — extracted much of the remaining populace from hollows and homesteads, east and west, to cities and their new suburbs. Television and rock 'n' roll were inevitable. Even in the desert, you find abandoned storefronts and motel cabins, evidence of vain labor. Look at the maps for the blue-and-white ribbons of affluence and escape. Asphalt and concrete spill inside-out. Freeways have even overrun drive-in theaters and hamburger stands built for automobile society. Driving the U-Haul cross-

country, we found everything's more visible from wide-cut Interstates, as if the land were exposed for the taking; yet, in many ways, there's less to discover. The landscape imitates television, a wide screen without authentic stars. A buena vista. "Sweetie, do you see?" I wanted to ask, but the words never quite formed. In the far reaches of the dense rainforest before us, I hoped there might yet be the hovels of cranky individualists, surviving paragons of some vibrant conviction. I wanted to understand them as a fundamental part of an American destiny, a spirituality to preserve and regenerate. For now, whatever pattern fermenting in my mind still eluded full comprehension. I saw only bits of a mosaic. Perhaps I would someday see it in its fullest scope, but I knew even that would be possible only in due time.

For now, it seemed we were driving backward in time. The freeway was well behind us, as well as the housing developments. We encountered more tarpaper, unpainted siding, elk antlers above the shed door. Forest, and then steep hillsides, closed in on the road until, as the incline pitched noticeably, we entered the national park, with its hairpin curves around canyon walls finally giving way to switchbacks rising up a mountainside to Paradise Needle a mile above sea level.

I observed a rhythm, too, in the cloud cover. Initially, it presents lapses and teasing glimpses of nearly-sheer green slopes shooting above the roadway. Finally come earnest visions of actual summits overhead. Unexpectedly, the breathtaking white

immensity of Mount Rainier itself appears. Even so, you're unprepared for the snowy mass before you. No photograph could have suggested such vast dimensions. Even if this view were displayed full-size, it would occupy an entire gallery, including the floor and ceiling, and still the camera lenses would have compressed the vertical and horizontal expanses. What you behold is so broad the windshield cannot frame both flanks simultaneously. Rather than a smooth, cloud-like shroud, the mountain's mantled glaciers reveal themselves as fractured, violent, and disdainful amid rocky spines. Everything shimmers in the thin, cold, crystalline air. As I pulled into the trailhead parking lot, Todd regarded rocky saw-tooth ridges arrayed around the stratovolcano itself, and these remained separated from it by fathomless gorges. Starting with his chin to his chest, and rolling his head upward until my neck could stretch no more, he regarded the nearly three-mile elevation from valley bottom to summit. "Thou whose heart constantly reaches upward," he began to pray, standing within a supreme example of spiritual architecture. "This is nothing like what I'd read in those textbooks. Wow!"

He, too, was frozen in space.

"Hey! You old Toad!" I chirped. "We haven't got all day!"

Indeed, the day was already getting on. We set out on paved trails only to hear camera-toting tourists in halter tops and polyester shorts complain about the

path. "If these idiots can't follow blacktop, heaven help us," I told him.

"Can you imagine these suckers in deep forest?" he answered.

"Actually," I said, "these asphalt walkways are far superior to the logging roads around here. If they only knew!"

In time, he'd see just what people inflict on back country when their sport-utility vehicles and litter invade logging roads. For now, observing a huff-a-puff, bug-eyed depletion force out-of-shape sightseers to halt pitifully at ten-foot intervals, Todd reevaluated his theory that mere exposure to wilderness might bring about mass spiritual enlightenment. He conceded that without preparation, including effective teaching, the encounter itself can be meaningless. Knowing the names and relationships of what one meets is important. A true spiritual discipline has no shortcuts, as we'd already heard in Darshan.

Nearly back at the parking lot by the park service's rustic high-country lodge, I nodded toward an eleven-year-old boy. Cheeping "here kitty-kitty-kitty" and waving a peanut, he chased a chipmunk. "That kid," Todd scowled. "Look at those big-city clothes. Listen to that superficial refinement. My, my! He's a perfect example of getting all the breaks."

I was confused. "But you like fashion," I nearly said. "The high style that wealth commands. World travel. Moving on the inside track." But I hesitated, surveying

something else. Silently, I admitted he wasn't alone. He, too, knew the seduction of beauty and, especially, power. Masterpieces. Museums. Flawless performances. Celebrity presentations. There were good reasons he'd been sent to a desert household. Look first to essentials. With an unflinching gaze. Be quiet. Hold still. Thirty million years, the age of this mountain, isn't such a long time after all. As for this humanity and its disregard for the wisdom available in nature, my heart ached. Heights such as this reiterate the importance of taking the long view of historical events, of seeking out the right action for the betterment of all people. "Call it righteousness, if you will," Jaya's guru once explained. "The Holy One's plan. Supernatural order." A cosmic spider's web of proper transmissions, each line and junction informing others. What I observed instead is what her guru called "dog awareness" — concern for little more than individual lusts for food, flesh, and sleep, with entertainment and comfort as primary considerations. Feasting, without the fasting. Carnivals, without the penance. In short, an unbalanced existence.

For me, the costumes of wealth separated one class from other people and from nature itself. In this range, I now saw how some forms of civilization are as alien as both the child and a peanut. I wondered, too, if humanity itself can be equally out of place. This, too, is a snobbery; in this regard, perhaps we've both already spent too long in the desert, to say nothing of our earlier forays into woodlands and meadows back east.

At the moment, on the heels of watching international tourists swarm over the harbor city and the park, throwing money around for gadgets and jewelry, sojourning in hotels we may never afford, dining in restaurants with tips larger than Todd's daily pay, we both confronted a suddenly uncapped, deep-seated resentment. In front of us, emerging from rented limousines at the park lodge, a few diamond-studded invaders even wore morning-stripe tuxedos. From the evidence at hand, it would be so easy to assume everyone who lives overseas is rich, rather than Americans. Yes, I'd encountered the universal assumption that all Yankees are fabulously wealthy. There were the letters from Mommy's postage stamp-swapping pen-pals, "Please send me a new suit, we are so suffering, my preference is silk, I wear size ..." But I'd seen too much poverty in the Ozarks and our new valley, to say nothing of Detroit or Pittsburgh, scenes few foreigners ever visit. Indeed, they hit expensive jewels of both coasts, San Francisco and Manhattan, Disneyland and Boston, and never discover a varied continent stretching out two thousand miles between. And then they'll boldly proclaim they've seen America.

Silk? Todd wouldn't have recognized the fabric if he touched it. He'd just discovered the luxury of woolen shirts. It seemed everyone in the Northwest wore Pendletons to keep warm and retard rainfall, too. Evelyn had just bought him three, and his first-ever woolen shirts fit perfectly. Or would, until his lovely

bride decides to wash them, in the process shrinking them to her own measure.

For that matter, I perceived how few Americans have seen much of their own land. They're not alone, either. It's taken Todd nearly three decades to get to this corner of our country. Who knows if we'd ever see the remainder.

I nodded toward the path again. On the last leg of their summit assault, a line of climbers emerged around a wind-swept thicket, their eyes covered by dark glasses, their faces covered in white zinc oxide sunscreen, their heads wrapped in woolen caps, their backs burdened by heavy backpacks, their footsteps measured in heavy boots. "Next to the tourists, they look like astronauts," I whispered and then declared, "We're enlisting in an environmentalist organization. The more militant, the better."

We would also discover how little most Americans know of their own history. If knowledge is wealth, its lack imposes a price. The spider's web connects many points, each one informing the other. Dinner has arrived. Or will, if one waits.

This invasion, too, will pass — I hoped.

The Cascades are aptly named, for creeks thread and lunge down precipices. The range drew its name from Celilo Falls in the Columbia River, a site now submerged by a hydroelectric dam. Nevertheless, we viewed milky threads everywhere on both sides of the

Cascade Divide and realized our own thoughts cascade, too.

"Hey, you old Toad," I teased. "Did you notice where the clouds broke away when we were coming up? Like, it was miserable back in Seattle but absolutely sunny by the time we get here. Where did it happen?"

He hadn't noticed. We were finding the Pacific Northwest to be like that if you don't pay attention. I drove the leg homeward through ever-drier timberland until trees themselves end without notice.

On this trip, we had tasted many points along a line to fill out later. The experience itself sent Todd back to his charts for verification and additional details. So this is how it fits together?

Thus, we enrolled as ecological snobs, with a reverence we hoped would counter heathen actions. It's the old pearls before swine warning. Proper preparation and veneration rather than exploitation. Anyone willing to make sacrifices and to yield in an appropriate Spirit will be welcome. The initial steps require Right Thought and Right Effort, as they said in Darshan. Rounds of purification follow. It's an invitation to join in the Dedicated Laborious Quest. Otherwise, as far as I was concerned, it becomes No Trespassing.

When I attempted to settle in to my devotions the next morning, my mind chattered so much I had to pull out a strand of prayer beads to help me focus on stillness. I felt lightweight, in a profane way. Some days can be like that, which is just another aspect of the

spiritual quest. They show up without warning. Even so, each one remains a gift to be accepted. A lesson in rejoicing.

Regardless of my thoughts, or his, logging and hay trucks whiz through night mountain passes on their way from empty flatland to drizzling coast. This world devours timber and mountainside. Cattle penned up along the river are destined for Tokyo and Osaka. The whole eastern half of America was logged, burned over, and gone before anyone knew what had been lost; many of its barns, houses, one-room schoolhouses, and chapels were left to rot or blaze or be bulldozed under; families and neighbors scattered. Natural riches moved once canals and railroads had been rammed through mountains and swamps. Elsewhere, farms flourished before the black humus washed and blew away. Buffalo and beaver hides were shipped to Europe. Folks would do it all again, too, given the chance: strip the hardwoods, acidify the coal streams, trap the otter, let iron rust, cast silver to princes, wars, munitions — all blown to hell. Calvinists, especially, can talk all they want about how hard work and the fear of God paid off, but someone should remind them the young nation sagged under international debt until gold was ripped from mountain veins, some not far from where we now resided. Now, heavily indebted again, where would the nation turn? Already, we saw the stupid lusts that destroyed so much back east now astir in virgin turf. It's all a pattern. Before us spread all the allure of Far West, its opportunities for quick riches and its open

breakout; yet in rushing to embrace it, each person contributes in some manner to its demise. Everyone bares the betrayal of his own promise.

Perhaps observing the number of distinct peaks in the distances around Rainier had me thinking about human giants as well. Somehow, as the twentieth century progressed, the stature of its masters began diminishing. In politics, science, the arts, and the military, pure genius became more difficult to name. Who could succeed Churchill, Einstein, Eliot, Faulkner, Heifetz, Hemingway, Horowitz, Jung, Picasso, Pound, Roosevelt, Schoenberg, Schweitzer, Stravinsky, Toscanini, Carlos Williams, Frank Lloyd Wright? Something has clearly changed. Maybe that's big mountains' appeal. The celebrities who have followed are principally mirages. Perhaps there are exceptions, especially in sports. But I wondered.

There's a parallel in religion as well. Without any current standards in discipline, without commonly accepted determinants of great prayer, without preconceptions of form or method, I perceived both a void — a lack of solid foundation from which to build — and opportunity. "Such disarray presents the biggest challenge since the Protestant Reformation to blow spiritual practice wide open in a rapidly evolving culture that seems to break new ground almost daily," I noted in my journal. "Yet paradoxically, greatness these days just might be limited to a single work — and no more — for each aspirant, each spiritual artist. The

goal, then, is a single conical stratovolcano like Rainier, rather than foothills."

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On their own homeward trip, my folks stopped by. Jack spoke of hydrogen bomb testing: "The thing that impressed me the most was water cascading, tumbling, rolling down from fifty thousand feet, maybe more. Our radar couldn't follow it up so high. There's no way to express that experience." Fish, too? Todd's boss had almost been assigned to that post, same lab and period when Jack was in charge. Sometimes it is a small world! Todd wondered how his boss and his father-in-law would get along. Ultimately, there's only one way to find out. Just like testing the bomb, perhaps.

Jack spoke of difficulties the clash of mountains and ocean caused him when he lived on Puget Sound. He always ran the seven a.m. briefings rather than send in an assistant. "The pilots always appreciated that." He took another sip. "Usually, it was the younger pilots who ran into mountains. The older ones had feelings, so they wouldn't take any risks. One young guy set down in the sea while coming in on formation. Nobody knows why. All they found was a charred helmet. Then one of my closest friends vanished over Mount Olympus. Did he misread his altimeter as nineteen thousand feet rather than nine? Nobody knows. They searched for two weeks and never found anything. Those peaks can be pretty wild. Just last week they located a World War II wreck in a glacier on Mount Baker. The guys inside have remained frozen just as pretty as you please.

That's how remote things can be around here, even in sight of a city."

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A week later, Todd suggested we go to Rainier for the day. "Give me a reason," I countered.

"To avoid the heat down here. It's supposed to be in the nineties."

I didn't argue, for high country is always chilly, or so we'd been told.

As we drove toward our destination, Todd was in his glory. So much of what he had studied was unfolding like a movie right before us. This was no academic text, either, but the real thing. He provided a running commentary as our arid foothills and their orchards narrowed into the corridor the winding highway followed. A few evergreens appeared in clumps along the rushing water, which was soon lined by them before it was actually forest — the open ponderosa of our side of the mountains, rather than the thick rainforest on the other side. The air smelled spicy from the pine. "You'd need a botanist to explain all that," he said. "Or a forester." As for the wildlife, well, there were zoologists. There was plenty of natural wonder to go around.

"You want me to drive so you can watch it all?" I offered.

"Thanks. But I'm having too much fun just driving."

We were lucky there were no logging trucks or leisurely campers and trailers about this early.

The road made a turn and rose steeply beside a dam with white water spilling down its side. And then we plunged through a tunnel before continuing along the lake and its string of vacation homes and resort cabins.

Much of the route passed summer homes along the river, often on the other side of the water. You had to wonder about living out here, year-round, if you could. It had to be a different world from even the orchards.

He had already had an introduction to this concept behind these highway routes that were known as "passes." The road would follow a stream as far as it could into the wilderness and then rise to a gap somewhere in the wall of mountains above before descending to follow another stream out. Often the gap, or pass, would itself contain a ski resort, as this one did. By this point, the forest would have thickened with tall, straight trees — the Douglas fir and red cedar, especially, along with hemlocks, larch, and pines — plus an understory thick with moss and ferns. And then, rounding one bend, Rainier itself burst into view, not exactly ahead of us but more over us, even though we were still miles away. It was a breathtaking view, however brief and teasing.

We were in for a clear day.

Soon we crossed into the national park and pulled into Ohanapecosh Hot Springs, a former resort now reduced to swampy spots of steaming ooze.

Todd was agog at the thermal action in front of him.

"The Feds closed it down, and I wish they hadn't," we'd been told in a Darshan conversation. "The Japanese would cultivate this resource into a natural wonder, as it deserves."

That had me thinking the entire time we followed the trail to Silver Falls, which throws glittering spray higher than the plunging torrent, while roiling emerald waters churn through a ravine so narrow I was tempted to leap. Miscalculation, obviously, would prove fatal. A sixty-foot-long trunk of a fallen Douglas fir had shot like an arrow over the lip and in whirlpool below shattered into three pieces. If a mighty tree can't survive, just consider a swimmer's odds.

We walked back to the car and had a choice of two high country points we could reach by driving. Each had a large, rustic lodge — a three-story hotel, actually, where reservations were made far in advance. We'd already seen photos of the building nearly buried in snow in midwinter. We could choose to head to Paradise, which would mean driving along hairpin Stevens Canyon, or head to Sunrise, which we had tasted on our return from Puget Sound. We decided to loop northward and get a fuller view of that option.

Once again, we were following the switchback roadway up the mountainside to the lodge and parking

lot. We changed into our hiking boots, hoisted our packs, and set out through the airy subalpine slopes on a trail that soon left even the trees below us.

"So this is alpine terrain," Todd marveled. "You'd have to travel to the Arctic Circle to find anything like it at sea level."

Four hours after setting out from home, our toes approached a lookout at 7,200 feet above sea level. Though blessed with the clearest day one could hope for, Seattle remained shrouded in auto exhaust, a violet haze covering Puget Sound from Valhalla to White Horse. Above it, the Olympics wrote a cyanine line. So much for civilization. To the south, Mount Adams, the Goat Rocks, St. Helens, and Hood scanned our movement. To the north, Baker, remote Glacier Peak, and Stuart dominated the panorama. As we clambered about the trail, the mountains winked at me, or so Todd insisted.

He told me about the Cascade Range itself — about twenty volcanoes strung at about fifty-mile intervals all the way from Lassen and Shasta in northern California to Silverthorne and Franklin in British Columbia. Twelve of them reached to more than ten thousand feet in elevation, and two — including Rainier, which sits on a coastal plain — rose to more than fourteen thousand feet.

"Rainier may look cold," he said. "You know, all snow, although much of that is actually glaciers — those slow rivers of ice inching down its sides. But there

are warm, sulfur-fume caves on its summit. That's a sleeping volcano that could pop at any time."

"And then what?"

"The devastation would take out parts of Seattle and Tacoma."

Oh. But it was so lovely and so awe-inducing.

He turned my attention back to the three ice cream cones to our south. The shortest of them, Mount St. Helens, was so perfectly shaped that many considered it to be the American Fuji, though compared to Rainier, its was somewhat more remote to access. "In the Native lore, the mountain is named Loowit, a lovely young lady who kindled a rivalry of attraction from Pahtoe and Wyeast on either side." I could guess those were Mount Adams and Mount Hood. What happened was those two big guys began hurling molten rock at each other and shaking the earth. "And that's all in the Native memory," he said. "From their perspective, thousands of years ago isn't that far back."

Todd reached for his guidebook. "She's all of 9,677 feet tall," he said. "Look how pure she appears, even from here. She's your mountain, Lucy. Or your sister. We'll have to go sometime."

I laughed with enchantment. "I'm a little shorter than that."

"Not in spirit."

As we sat in the clear sunlight, I regarded at my husband as much as the surrounding wonders. He was trim, with curly hair he could let grow wild, if he'd listen to me. His green eyes sparkled.

"Logging roads lash the needled slopes beyond the park," he told me. "They're scarring them forever. Our sustainable logging practices are really short-term in their calculations."

Tentacles of the vast mountain we stood on blocked any view of our orchard valley. "How small this state is. Look, to the south we see peaks in Oregon. To the north, that ragged brink drops off into Canada. You expect mountains and rivers to run on without end. Alas, they too have limitations." Yet sitting at the margin of a snow bank, there's no way to remain gloomy. An invisible trickle gurgled below us. I fed bits of chocolate-chip cookies to fearless chipmunks who put their paws and even their mouths in my hand before scampering away to nibble. I stripped off my turtleneck and was down to my bra so the good sun would tan my back. We had sufficient privacy, just the two of us. Loafing in this place is like riding an intensely colored cloud, for we'd plopped down amid a miraculous alpine garden where brilliant complementary colors harmonize: red-orange joins indigo, royal purple embraces screaming yellow. Some blooms stood out spotlessly white against sparkling soil. The low plants growing amid sharp stone resembled broken china, which rattled when we walked along a sweep of juniper and scree. Eerily, this high country makes everything

appear both bony and airy. Todd remembered viewing microscope slides and now saw the resemblance. Perhaps this phenomenon is caused by the atmosphere's thinness. You could wonder about life, too, despite its apparent concrete existence. How extraordinarily insubstantial we become! Most other hikers veered off toward a neighboring lookout tower, leaving us largely uninterrupted in a heavenly afternoon. But nothing on this planet, not even these mountains, lasts forever. A growing chill indicated the hour to bid flowers and chipmunks adieu.

~*~

Again, at the parking lot and souvenir shop, beer-gutted tourists complained every step. I was satisfied they don't venture far from these facilities. "May the alpine flanks always be spared such intruders!"

We wheeled down miles of switchbacks to highways clogged with sluggish camping-trailers we could pass for miles and as soon as a straightaway would appear, those fools gunned it rather than pulling over as state law requires. "If I were emperor, those vehicles would be banished!"

"You old Toad, you'd get my vote," I grinned.

~*~

We returned home, leaving Todd ever more intrigued by subtle changes in light on these summits, by expansive vistas, by driftwood clouds, by cockamamie people, by the fact that Anglo culture is

such a thin surface upon this dust, by the intensity of Amerindian vibrations beneath us, by the very presence of ancient traditions most modern people simply brush against, by Cascadian evergreens, by snow pack, and by glaciers where we would hike at first ignorant of the names of most trees and birds and even the little mammals trying to climb into our packs, which, though they looked like chipmunks, were another species altogether.

Our place still wasn't home, not fully. "It's distressing to admit we young professionals are basically homeless unless struck by the kind of luck few have in finding a site to settle in," Todd said. "Normally, the assigned path requires moving around footloose; you know, the way young professors work their way from school to school up the ladder of expectations and prestige."

I smiled enigmatically. "Yes, hereabouts they do hide Rainier in clouds, and along the highway that mountain plays peek-a-boo until you're right there." So today's masters might simply be in hiding, out in the boondocks, too? I had my own work to do to establish my place, whatever it was going to be. I'd rather be in the city, or at least by the water, but I was finding we weren't really all that far from either.

"In the meantime, I'm hiding in the clouds. If you want to blow them away, feel free."

He started by untying my hiking boots and removing them and my socks. He worked his way up,

like climbing a mountain. Jeans and panties, blouse and bra. Then he hoisted me on his own trunk over the torrent and shot like an arrow through the lips into my ravine.

"You're my own little hot springs, too," he grinned. I pressed my body hard against him and nearly fainted. This wasn't big city lights, but it would certainly do for now. Todd just might become a master along the way.

ECHOES

WHAT I HADN'T ANTICIPATED was how central the Darshan circle would be to our new life. It allowed me to see Jaya more fully than I had in the Ozarks — in her fuller glory, actually — and the teachings that were presented and discussed opened my eyes and heart in new ways. These weren't the kinds of conversations I could have with my coworkers. Not even Todd or Erik, alone.

Todd seemed to be taking far more of it in than I would have expected, too. He was usually pretty quiet, but he was also a deep observer. I could joke that he was solid as a rock that way, but I really did love the steadfastness I found in him. Maybe he really did believe the veins in the earth had spiritual natures. Maybe the idea merely amused him.

We shared a dream that we could save up enough that he could go back to school and earn his doctorate, which would greatly increase his job opportunities. I could see us settling down around a college campus. The unemployment stretch we'd just come through had set us way back on that plan, though, so we were kind of starting over. At least Todd was adding to his fieldwork experience again. Having a family of our own would just have to wait.

I had assumed I could be very happy as a housewife, between cooking and gardening and raising the children, but I was feeling a void in my life. Without

either kids or my own classes to contend with, I was lacking a direction of my own. Todd's work was already demanding longer hours in the field or in the lab. As a waitress, though, I was finding that many men — husbands, as often as single or divorced men, judging from the wedding bands — had no compunctions about hitting on me. If I wanted to fool around, I wasn't lacking opportunities. But I was perplexed. I dressed modestly, wore my diamond ring, maintained a reserved demeanor. At first I thought much of the interaction was innocent flirtation on their part, but then they started handing me phone numbers or even keys. That's when I got really baffled.

Sometimes, especially on slow nights, Erik and I found ourselves talking. I finally broached the subject with him. I didn't want to say anything to Todd, knowing it would upset him — and he might even insist I quit. We needed the money, and I did like having some pocket cash of my own.

"So what's the attraction," I asked.

Erik looked surprised.

"Lucy," he said carefully, "you're a very lovely woman. Make that young woman. And, to all appearances, very wholesome. If my Jaya is all Mediterranean sensuality, you're all-America freshness and purity. They can find slutty anywhere on the road, but what you offer is rare. Your very apple-pie propriety is enticing. They're hoping they'll be the exception to your well guarded gate."

I thought about that for awhile. "So what can I do? If chastity appeals, I can't very well go the other direction, can I?"

"No, and it's not your fault. Maybe if you gained forty or fifty pounds, some of them would back off. But even that might backfire."

I reflected some more. Had he just confessed more than he would have otherwise? I could ask him about us but figured we'd better leave the past alone.

I changed the subject to Todd's long hours and what I saw it doing to him.

Erik was experiencing something similar with Jaya as she took on more management responsibilities. He wasn't so sure he really wanted to be a househusband, but he also hoped to have kids of his own. Jaya, however, kept insisting they weren't ready.

Somehow, that felt familiar.

There was also something in Erik's underlying restlessness that disturbed me deeply, something that echoed deeply in my own soul. I wished I could define what it was, but even that seemed dangerous.

Erik, Todd, and I were all so green and simple, or so I thought. We hadn't seen nearly as much as Jaya had or investigated so deeply. But we did know what we had in bed ever since that night when we'd, well, I was the one who actually got the ball rolling. It started out as a confession over pizza, which led to his joke. And now we had this lingering tension.

Then came the conversation during a Darshan potluck when I asked about cheap sources of peaches for canning. That's when I learned about drops — the ones that fall from the trees. The farmers don't sell them, but if you know someone who has an orchard, you can often glean the fruit before the rot sets in. And Erik said I could come over to pick through his landlords' trees.

Which I did.

This time as we walked down the rows, he reached for my hand, and I didn't resist. In fact, I think I pulled him around to me. That's all it took before our lips locked and we were rolling in the dust. I don't know what hit me or him, but it was strong. We fucked in bold sunlight and, afterward, regarded each other in a kind of shock.

"Next time," I said, brushing the dust off my jeans and shirt, "bring a blanket." No sooner were the words out of my mouth than I heard their echo. Next time?

"We better gather some peaches," was all he said. And we did.

STUMPS AND SLOPES

IT WAS ALL SO CONFUSING. I'd had sex with only two men in my life, and they were both here. Maybe the fact that Erik was a known quantity allowed me to let my guard down with him. I knew he was discreet. He could also back off, if I asked. His impetuosity was so unlike Todd's methodical approach as a lover. The reality was that I was crossing unfamiliar ground with both of them.

Here, the herring gulls cried, "Klick-tat! Klick-tat!" and seadogs drove salmon. I wondered why bats must fly at night. In a play of dark clouds over the Cascades, the sun set at an angle illuminating all the ridges and intensifying the perceived depth of rugged, treeless slopes. A yellow cap sat on the humpbacks of the ridges defining our valley. The wind drove smoke around our living room, hinting at my own existence as a nearly homeless monk newly come to a place unlike any I'd known, to witness forces I barely understood. Where were the relevant theologians and historians? Yes, read the wood smoke. Can the burning logs tell you what death means? In the Evergreen State, everyone apparently had a fire.

Ignoring the bed, Todd spread the big sleeping bag before the fireplace and then spread me upon it. Watching the upside-down fire, I recalled the blue flames of the gas heater, back before we married. This fire goes back a hundred thousand years. Maybe much more. Sleeping in caverns. In tents. In igloos. In cabins.

Accompanied by how much murder, too? And arson.
Even wine in the apple grain.
Jealousy and guilt, as well as ecstasy and pleasure.
We thought of other fires, too.

"Lucy? You remember what you offered me in the Ozarks?"

I knew exactly what he wanted.

"Give me a few minutes to get ready," I told him. I padded off to the bathroom, came back in a teddy, and got down on my knees and elbows. He knew this was so taboo, even nasty. Except it wasn't.

Back when Erik first described it, I was repulsed. But he'd insisted it felt incredible. "Just ask Jaya," he said. The more I thought about it, the more intrigued I became. So there was something we were missing? There was nothing I wanted to hold back from my husband.

At the time, a few weeks of reflection was enough for me to want to offer myself to my husband that way, but we both needed to be prepared. I was glad we did.

At the moment, Todd was getting into high gear. He had a smooth rhythm going, and I knew I'd come just after he popped. Which is what happened.

In the afterglow, even before we cleaned up, I asked him how he'd felt that first time.

"A little guilty, actually. I mean, the first time wasn't with you. It was learning what to do when we were together. But it felt unlike anything I'd experienced before, too. So I was grateful. And I couldn't wait to deflower you, girl."

"Which you did rather expertly."

"And did you feel shameful?"

"A little, yes. It wasn't exactly our little secret now, was it? We practically had witnesses."

"Lucy, I wanted to punish you. You were a very bad girl. You came to me with a suggestion and an offer, and these weren't what good girls do. I was shocked, actually. Just who had I married? What other dirty tricks did you have in mind for us, what other secret desires ran through your head? You got us into a risky situation, and I could be scared."

"And it didn't hurt your abilities any, either."

Todd was a gentle lover. I fell asleep happily in his embrace, before I squiggled free. Who could want more?

The next morning, I read an obituary about a fool who died cutting a standing snag. "He never even notched the tree for the fall." I had to ask what that meant.

Basics. I recalled how I'd fallen for Todd. He was a senior; I was just a freshman. Of course, we married when he graduated and then moved to the Ozarks. I was all his.

So it was burn away ignorance. Burn away folly. Burn deeper in delight and pure light, as Jaya would insist.

On our first visit to the other side of the Cascade Range, we viewed many massive old trees leveled off twenty feet up — "so their saws wouldn't drown in buckets of pitch," we were told. The practice left behind stumps the size of houses. Todd calculated the waste. Maybe a third of the board-feet, a century before.

It wasn't the only way to view those stumps. "Dicks or tits," I said wickedly. "This forest is full of them." And Todd smirked in response.

"Nobody would believe you'd ever talk dirty. My wholesome little slut."

It was my turn to smirk.

Back home he identified the tamarack aroma in city air when we stopped for doughnuts and coffee. We walked our two bicycles to the heart of town for repairs and then rode the bus all the way around on the trip home. Past the suburban housing, before the high school students boarded. The boys were emphatically bland, in contrast to the girls, who flashed studied lipstick and brushed hair, cat jaws, knowing glances, the cocky thin-thigh beauty at fifteen or sixteen. How often, too, they flaunted flawless skin. A pang threw him back to bicycles and those wild discoveries of a never-passed taboo of one long-gone from his life. The flaxen hair. Hanging threads. Out in this valley, there was a chromium downpour. Cascading mountains to

the west. Sun in the desert. All in one sweep. By late afternoon, a snow line along the ridges followed a storm riding straight for Priest Rapids Dam. Fast clouds spilled over the gap to the north. To the south, yellow slopes.

But why halt there? On one drive home from a day in the mountains, we pulled off the highway and followed trail markers to sheer palisades of cataclysmic rock. Todd envisioned a dangling Tibetan Buddhist monastery. I saw only a San Quentin wall.

The next weekend, in the unit next to ours, the nurse moved out on Saturday. Unassisted. At ten Sunday morning, another walked out the door with a guy in a three-piece suit. There was no car for him. Goey, half-embarrassed long kisses. Ah! The loving nights! And on to church. The white Toyota pickup parked in front belonged to the third roommate's beau, the one who left at three a.m. and returned at eight.

Such was the singles scene in cowboy-town country. After a heated dispute, I wondered if this was what Erik wanted. Especially when he argued with Jaya, "You had fun. I haven't."

"But you weren't there."

Was that the missing element, fun? Or was it something more explosive? I was pondering this in the kitchen during a Darshan gathering one Sunday when Erik came up behind me and put his hands on my hipbones.

"Just measuring," he whispered. "You should be able to bear children easily. You've a really nice pelvis."

I was speechless.

"I'd love to knock you up, you know that, Lucy, don't you?"

"Uh, I'm glad I'm on the Pill."

"You could make your husband think it's his, but we'll know differently."

Here I was fully dressed and feeling naked. No wonder Erik was dangerous.

Todd, on the other hand, asked me to consider the August night in 1928 when a mining town upstream blew up because so much moonshine was stored in an old shaft under the village. "Half the town was on fire, the other half stone drunk." You'd never see a hint of that now, unless given a clue. In the heart of the Prohibition, the town prospered by bootlegging. Now it's mostly depressed. In its own way, so symbolic. Its biggest moment is history, having existed on underground activity. If we stopped to investigate, we'd find the No. 3 Tavern now sits atop the No. 3 mine shaft. Walk in and they'd staple your hat to the ceiling, along with a couple of hundred others. Listen to the Dirty Beaver Jug Band. "Mike will letcha, he really will," everybody told Todd. So this is where they dug coal for the Northern Pacific? It's all in the solitaire deck, toward the origin of statistics.

"Boy, I'll bet that was a fun night," I insisted. Fun nights and disastrous mornings-after. That's not a Pietist way of living, not if he's seeking bliss eternal.

If, on the other hand, you're seeking another kind of bliss, fire away.

Sometimes Todd's thoughts resembled an art book. Other times, just the comics. Mostly, they're maps. Sometimes I felt he was mapping me. Maybe if he'd actually taken ink to my skin, we would have fun.

Recalling a former girlfriend, he began counting the many quiet, echoing galleries where they had circled Buddha statues. And how many high-assed Tibetan and Hindu goddesses. Manhattan. Brooklyn. Chicago. Cleveland. Where else over the years? Yes, that had been fun. Maybe it was just the company he was keeping.

UMTANUM

I HAD NOT YET explored the buff foothills of this valley. My own new backyard, so to speak. In summertime, the hills are threaded with rattlesnakes. But in the depth of winter, no need to worry.

"It's your turn," Todd said, checking the U.S. Geological Survey maps, driving up the canyon, and parking. "Well, Poopsie, this is it," he announced, slipping into his daypack.

"This?" I stared at a gravel patch, room for five cars beside a basaltic upheaval the size of a decent lab building. A footbridge crossed rapidly flowing, crystalline black water. "Looks like a popular spot for fishermen," I said, staring at the riverbanks and then three other cars.

"One of the ten best trout streams in America, I'm told," he answered. "According to the maps, there's supposed to be a town here. Wymer, population less than 1,000."

We stepped out on the swinging bridge over a bone-colored cliff and dark-green pool. While he took long, bouncing steps, I whimpered, fearing the swaying cables might twist or snap.

"Don't worry," he reassured. "This span's been here many years." Pressing his heels down quickly sent undulation in both directions.

"AIGH! That's what scares me. Its time is probably up."

I shuffled across and poked around the landing.

"Some town," I sniffed. "All I see is a single boarded-up bungalow. The roof looks still good, though. Might even be new. And what about the railroad siding? Who'd live so far from anywhere?"

Maybe it was a site for steam locomotives to take on fresh water. But that could have been done at either end of the canyon more easily. More likely, it was a round-up spot for livestock. He nodded. "Don't overlook that water pouring from a bulldozer-mangled pipe. The faucet, too."

'Dozer tracks, all right.

"Think it's a bunkhouse? Ranchers still use this range?"

"Might. There's a huge sheep ranch just down the road. Or maybe cattle graze here." I'd seen several herds along the interstate a dozen miles west.

A silver half-moon rode the Sunday sky. We'd set out to conquer Umtanum Ridge, which rises like a massive tawny cloud billowing ever upward behind the house. Thousands of rattlesnakes must come down from there every summer seeking cool beneath the bungalow. No wonder nobody lives here!

"I thought you said we were going to climb a hill."

"I thought we were, too. You've heard the locals. They call these things foothills. Say mountains are the big things to our west."

I dragged my feet. "I don't think I want to do this."

"Then don't. Nobody's making you. Nose around down here, go back to the car, come on up with me. Your choice. But I'm curious with a need to explore, which is why we set out."

Stubbornly, I started up but then halted as soon as the route angled sharply. Todd refused to cave in. That one spine would provide easier footing than the seared crannies on either periphery. As he forged ahead, my lungs burned. "God, I'm out of shape. It's true, though: the only way to get in shape is to get in shape. It's lousy philosophy, a terrible tautology, but absolutely true." As far as he was concerned, this climb would primarily be a conditioning effort in preparation for summer. Even so, I half-expected my chest to explode. Every forty or fifty feet I halted to catch my breath, at least until I became accustomed to the sensation of my pounding chest. About halfway up the slope, I cried, "Hey! Wait up for me!" He saw a clump of sagebrush move far below.

As he sat on an outcropping, he extracted a kite from his pack. Tried to launch it while I worked her way up, but the canyon wind is tricky. He'd wait to try this again from the summit.

The house and cars — including our own — were already distant specks. On the horizon, snowy Mount

Stuart rose behind the white speckles of a small college town. The view could be taken from a movie set in the Alps. At my feet, I kicked pieces of jade from the rill.

"She can be such a pain at times," he mumbled before applauding my grit. He needed to give me some room. If he had stayed behind with me, neither of us would ascend. On my own, though — and goaded by his example — I'll arrive.

"Whew!" I exhaled, joining up at the outcropping. "I made it this far!"

"Poopsie, I knew you could. Want a sip of water?"

"Yupper."

He handed me the canteen.

"Yummers. Sure tastes good."

Passed me a toffee candy.

"Where'd that come from?" I laughed, grabbing the morsel.

"Quick energy," he smiled.

And then it was gone.

"That's some view."

"It's what we came for — fresh perspectives. A little more understanding. Some good exercise, too."

We sat together in the sunlight. Then, fearing I'd haggle if we tarry any longer, he headed off anew. This time he stayed with me.

"Hey! My foot's going out of whack again!"

"When did that start?"

"Yesterday!"

"I'd swear you're trying to slow me down."

As he maneuvered again up steep anticline and was winded, I recalled an earlier trip as well as the mountain he climbed that time. Here, a thousand different scats and small shafts he couldn't identify left me jittery. Rattlesnakes, of course, although the holes in the ground between elk and deer tracks could be caused as easily by ground squirrels and who knows what other critters. Desert supports an unexpected variety of grasses as well as sagebrush and the dried flowers I was observing. Its soft soil strikes him as fresh dust mixed with bubbled volcanic stone. We were surrounded by scree and boulders. On this ground, with its peculiar, uneven texture, I frequently sank — slightly pained and surprised. Freshly dug dirt appeared out of nowhere.

"Animals?"

"Must be."

Clouds thickened overhead and cast enchanting shadows across sandy drifts. A few tattered conifers and cottonwoods along the river were the only trees in sight.

When we set out, the sun shone straight down the mountainside. The dramatic illumination turned moody

as we climbed. Some of the views were bold, stripped of detail and massive in their sweep. Others, though, were harsh, discordant, perplexing. All the way up, I framed views both large-scale and miniature. Repeatedly, he told me, "You should be an artist." Already, I recognized how little of this a camera could record with any fidelity. The work would have to be oil or maybe watercolor or even, to my surprise, tapestry. Only later would I detect its influence in ancient beadwork and basketry.

Still, the only evidence of earlier human presence at hand was an array of spent shotgun shells, beer bottle necks, and an empty soda can.

"Why would anyone want to come up here?" I puzzled. "Much less litter it."

In the coming months we would learn about different kinds of hunters. Prospectors, too. A few daring artists. Who knows what motivates other adventurers? I barely knew my own reasons for this outing. At least the toffee wrappers were in my pocket.

All afternoon, we heard distant mooing. A chorus in the wind. The Burbank Ranch? Most of this slope is too steep for grazing cattle, he assumed. In the emptiness, sound carries for miles. Eventually, we gazed almost straight down on double-trailer rigs poking along the canyon highway, and finally the high arched Interstate highway bridge over a side canyon comes into sight.

I burst ahead a bit, then waited for him to catch up. It became a kind of cat-and-mouse pace, our climbing.

I'd sit and sip from the canteen, munch sugar cookies, peer out through binoculars. When he rejoined me, I noticed a bird soaring by the Squaw Creek Ranch. It swept down over the canyon highway on large flat wings; its head and tail are white; its body is preacher black. "Could it be an eagle?" I whispered.

"You're crazy. There aren't any eagles out here."

"It's just a big old Toad," I countered.

"I've never seen a bald eagle. Golden, yes, but not the national bird."

We humped upward some more, and again I burst ahead. When I paused to catch my breath, I looked again for the bird, only to see a white airplane in its place. From my perspective, I scarcely expected the craft to clear the saddle the highway twists around.

When he caught up to me, he admitted, "I anticipated a crash there, too."

It was a scene, we realized, that could normally be viewed only from another aircraft, rather than from the ground, this viewing the top of the plane. Had it crashed, we would have watched its parts scatter.

Who knows what Todd had anticipated to encounter on this incline. What had appeared from the river to be barren earth turned out, in the exploration, to support bunches of brown grass blades bending in the wind, as well as wiry low branches of as-yet unidentified flowers or small shrubs. The soil and rocks — and whatever

might live in them — had so far proved elusive. We had much to learn.

"One of my coworkers was discussing mountains and valleys, game and man," Todd said. "He insisted ridges like this are still back country. I'm already disappointed in much of the wilderness hereabout. It seems there's nowhere we can really escape mankind and its enclaves, the mighty destruction of chain saws or even the chattering on CB radios. Four-wheel drive makes any wilderness tame. Canada's just over the last ridges northward. Oregon's premier peak is to our south. And airplanes, as we now see, are everywhere."

My thoughts, however, were elsewhere. I wondered if there was any more candy in his daypack. Even more cookies would do.

The sun reappeared as we crossed over the last rim. "Hmm," I scowled, not expecting to find a Jeep trail and many cow patties. Through our binoculars I detected a ranch hut and outhouse and what looked like a billboard up ahead. "This isn't the Promised Land," I sputtered. "Nobody tells you about this reality. Nobody publishes these photos. So much of the Far West, it seems, is a littered moonscape. Is this why we Americans want to range through space, to leave a trail of foam plastic and beer cans?"

He smiled. "And billboards floating through space will advertise 'Hamburgers, Next Planet.'"

From the summit we viewed the city of Katonkah between swirling clouds and were disappointed that

glacier-clad Mount Rainier and Mount Adams remained obscured. Meanwhile, windshield reflections were ten times bigger than the autos cruising the expressway. Resting meant savoring our exhaustion, new blisters, winter sweat, and an awareness that the faraway snow looked thin. I remembered the kite, and soon the brisk wind at the summit raised the sheet firmly just as a Ford Bronco came into view behind the billboard.

"Well, I can guarantee you that while others in vehicles might wind up at the summit, they haven't encountered nine-tenths of what we have. Maybe the journey and the effort are what's most important. Maybe there are no shortcuts when it comes to experience."

Of course, I wished there had been some cutoffs. Maybe even a different destination. For me, it was a trek between nowhere and nothing with a lot of sharp rocks in-between. I wondered, too, how the folks in that off-road machine must see me, as one of two kooks with a kite who have emerged out of thin air. How could I possibly answer their questions?

"Let's go," I said. "It's getting late."

As we slipped away from the crown and began trekking downward, a rosy pickup backed up from the jeep trail. Four kids climbed out to watch us vanish. The day's three-thousand foot elevation gain was my harshest ascent to date — one with no trail, either: just straight up/straight down, relatively speaking.

"Just like life," I said. "Or so it seems."

On the drive home he told me, "Three miles in three hours. It's a terrible rate in the east." He realized he'd need to recalculate the amount of time needed for hiking hereabouts. The car engine sounded louder than usual. I reminded him I needed to see a dentist.

"The candy?" he almost said. Instead, it was "Boogers!"

Home with the field guide, we determined we had indeed seen an American bald eagle. Ours was among the first sightings in these parts in years. At the lab, three phone calls confirmed the identification.

Was my real reason for tackling that desert mountain, to fly with an eagle? Or was there more?

BENEATH THE SURFACE

IT TOOK ME A WHILE to see the canyon climb as a breakthrough in my awareness. It made me directly face much I'd initially found repulsive about our new landscape. The ascent wasn't something I'd wanted to do, much less something I'd repeat. But it did make me perceive a unique beauty where I'd seen only ugliness, as well as life where I'd seen only barren waste. At the summit, nothing hemmed us in, not even trees. So this is the way birds see the world? I felt nearly weightless. OK, during the climb, I felt unbearable weighted. This was, as I was discovering, a land of stark contrasts.

If we'd only been able to undertake more experiences of such magnitude together, I might have more clearly understood what was going on within him. Or me. Instead, I resisted.

All the while, the more Todd learned about our new environment, the smaller I felt in his eyes. Or, I was fearing, in his desires.

I wished he'd explore me as thoroughly as he was probing the new landscape.

People often describe me as sensible or practical as well as pretty. Jaya was the one who insisted on beautiful and sensual, emphasizing the contrast between my waist and my breasts and hips. She also saw an intellect at work that others just thought of as bookish, as well as something else brewing under what

often appeared as domesticity. She said it was a tactile exploration of the physical world. "Sensible doesn't have to mean dull, Lucy," she observed. "There's nothing wrong with being playful, too."

I remember the first time she put my hair up in French braids and Todd's reaction, "You look like a movie star."

I wished I'd done that for our wedding.

Playful? I could have used more of that in our relationship.

I didn't realize how lost he was feeling, especially within his own heart. Yes, his heart, which seemed to be turning to stone.

He said little about his job, which I've never really understood. In the Ozarks, he spent much of his time in the lab, but these days he was largely in the field, and that often involved travel. Sometimes he'd be gone all week.

I really, really missed him, and I wanted him at home. Period.

I had no idea of the ethical conflict he was facing. Professionally, he was being paid to violate the earth — tear up the rock, rip open the surface and streams, gut a vein — even if it meant displacing people from their homesteads. And at Darshan, he was hearing the opposite.

Yes, human society required fuel and ore and desired gold and gemstones, the essence of jewelry and commerce. And he required an income, especially to support me and our future.

He was torn, living more and more with two distinct personalities. His inner one hiked and camped in the mountains or snuggled up to me in the night. His public one weighed the economic worth of the view.

He was hoping he might land a job with one of the nearby irrigation canal districts, a highway department, or an environmental agency, but those were coveted and rare, even if they paid much less than private enterprise.

I was oblivious, of course. I wanted to be comfortable and have fun. Just like Erik.

Erik, who hated to snuggle.

~*~

Whatever I had with Erik couldn't be called love. You might say it was more primitive. Or less encumbered. We could be in each other's presence in a public gathering and be cool as cucumbers.

It wasn't love any more than two logs in a fire were.

Or you might say it was just a comfort zone.

But it also entailed risk. One day as I snoozed, he took a pen to my skin and started mapping the entire valley on me.

"How am I going to hide this from Todd?" I practically screamed. Except that I was also laughing. "This won't come off for days."

"No, darling, it won't. You'll figure out something."

I wore a bathrobe more than usual. And every time I dressed, undressed, or showered, I thought of Erik, devilish Erik, and smiled.

Of course, I got my revenge. And from what I heard, Jaya was none the wiser.

He looked at me differently than my husband did.

As I revisit many of the photos of Todd and me together, I notice that I'm usually gazing on him with adoration, while he turns toward the camera or some out-of-range action. There's one shot where we're staring into each other's eyes — I face him as I sit on his lap and have my knees tucked up around his waist — but he stares at me with cold calculation, a look that drills right into my questioning eyes. Did he see me as a stage prop in his busy life? That's how I began to feel.

Erik, however, grew up with older sisters and was more attuned to a woman's reality. For instance, he suggested I buy nail polish and makeup — I've always preferred a natural look, apart from a little eyeliner. He even helped select the colors. And then he applied them. It was very sexy, beginning with my toes. As for my lips, well, he said they were perfect. He couldn't decide if he liked my mouth more when I laughed (and he loved running his fingers over my teeth) or when I

was serious. "You have such fine cheekbones," he added. "Let's highlight them."

It wasn't a look I wore around Todd, but when I was waitressing, it boosted the tips. Erik was right.

I think he also had an artist's eye, and I'd swear it was often in the palms of his hands as he cupped me or stroked my legs — my recently shaved legs, if I knew we'd be together. "You have such a perfect complexion," he observed, rubbing my face. "You're so soft and supple all over."

Todd, in contrast, always seemed to be looking for the underlying strata of calcium — the hard structure that held me together and in motion.

Not so Erik.

"I love it when you bend over," he said. "You have such a fine ass." And ankles and calves and thighs. The small of my back. My earlobes. And neck. And ... He had a long list.

There were other facial expressions he told me he liked. When my mouth was open in a moment of discomfort as he probed me in the way he'd long ago suggested, or when I was in aglow with satisfaction after achieving release.

So it wasn't just his intensely blue eyes that got me.

~*~

The side of Darshan I found pleasurable was the social connections that happened before we'd get serious. There were some neat people, beginning with Jaya and Erik and their landlords, Wes and Emma. Of course, considering what was going on between Erik and me, I felt some apprehension being around Jaya, no matter how much I admired her. It would be too easy to let some little comment reveal I knew too much about her husband. On the other hand, Todd had once joked that if Jaya was free, he'd love to pursue her — assuming, of course, he was as well. The big problem here was that as much fun as I was having with Erik, I could never imagine actually living with him. You need someone reliable rather than a work-in-progress. For both Erik and me, that also meant someone who could pay the bills. But that didn't stem the attraction.

In the Darshan circle. I liked what I was hearing about living closer to the land, the way many of them were, and about alternatives to organized religion.

Now Wes was telling Todd about a neighbor down the road who might have a place to rent out, if we were interested. It wasn't any bigger or fancier than what Jaya and Erik had, but it would be a lot less expensive than what we were paying in town.

We followed up and liked what we saw. It was our turn to move out into an orchard.

I'd even have a garden again.

NORTH OF HORSE HEAVEN HILLS,
MOSTLY

WHEN WE MOVED FROM town to our own orchard cubbyhole, we gained additional rhythms in living. There, when we did, a half-moon blanched ribbons of orchard. Moving from the rental in town, where we first landed, to the little house months later, we jettisoned more possessions. An incinerator and Goodwill boxes overflowed. No matter how much I wanted the change, I wept, for I always hated to leave what's familiar. The conflict was so typical. We'd been through it before, culling things that led astray or entrapped, as we affirmed simplicity and a chosen direction.

"Ignore those insatiable gluttons who encourage contortion and confusion over directness and clarity," Todd insisted. "Our cosmos itself is order. The straightest path has a destination."

The move — and the savings it produced — gave me an excuse to quit the restaurant. Todd told me he was glad.

"What do you mean?"

"I'll have to admit I was getting worried about your seeing so much of Erik."

So he'd harbored suspicions? What about Jaya? I should have prepared for this. I sighed.

"Don't fret. A little bit of Erik goes a long way. He gets tiring."

I hoped Todd didn't follow up on the double meaning. Instead, he seemed relieved.

What comforted me more, though, was seeing how our puppy, whose name predicated food, was friskier in the new domain — embarked in rounds of cautiously nosing trees, fearless pouncing at bumblebees and grasshoppers, and expert slinking through tall grasses. In many other ways, I was doing the same.

Now, with the arrival of spring, we cut stalks of asparagus growing wild in the sun-drenched airy soil along the irrigation canal. I discovered the more I cut, the more sprouted back. In season, we devoured so much our appetite became sated, to hold us over to the following year. This, too, is the way of nature.

The closest dot on the map turned out to be nothing more than an empty grocery, junkyard, and trailer court encampment — a feral cowboy, Mexican, and Indian agglomeration. I wouldn't shop there for anything. Instead, we drove on past the local tribal long-house and smoke-shop. At the old railroad station, we turned right into a small Far West city where I envisioned hitching posts and horses rather than battered cars and pickups. In front of stores and taverns, the tumbleweed, glare, and hot noonday wind are no strangers. Saddle up and ride, partner.

Toward nightfall, in our orchard along the base of long sagebrush mountains aptly named Rattlesnake

Hills, one black mass hovered behind our flimsy box. Countless light blue pinpoints overhead illuminated our tenant setup where it backed against the barnyard and skirted a gully. Concrete foundation slabs drifted toward some faraway disaster. We were surrounded by a low forest of apples, pears, peaches, cherries, and prunes. In the midst of thousands of miniature trees, each sculpted to increase the harvest, our view opened out upon two isolated apricot trees rooted in the gully's embankment. I could look beyond, across the dusty lane at the bottom of that rut and up over outstretched orchards until the pale hair of bunchgrass on rounded Sugarloaf blocks a sunrise. In the early light of day, someone sang an unfamiliar thread that wasn't not quite a sigh and not quite a guttural fuming, either. This plaint, fearful and broken, gave way to unspoken thanksgiving. Once familiar with this tract, I knew of a few solitary trees kept not for market but for the residents' own delight. The single cherry tree covering the back of the wash house, which also encased the well and pump. That, and two winesap apple trees, are kept separate. Many winds tossed this orchard. Even the woodpecker holes under our dwelling's eaves mystified. When I walked beside the irrigation canal and gazed out across the Lower Valley's array of fruit trees, hop yards, river corridor deadwoods, hayfields, and meadows clear to White Swan, I sensed this was, indeed, the end of a road. We'd arrived where I was supposed to be. Rising distant and aloof, glacial Adams and Rainier peered over tawny mountains encircling the valley. Their icy cones returned my stare. Indians

considered these two snowy mountains to be humanlike: they do resemble giant skulls, each with two creases between the highest crest. Below them, like a wall, western ridges rise six thousand feet, their tops splotched by dark woods rather than the snow I had sketched as a child. Sunset causes hazy bands to separate, revealing endless blue crests where previously only a single bulge had appeared. Closer, atop the summit behind our orchard, wild horses browsed. On the porch of their house, Wes handed me field glasses to help him make out untamed stock from billowing sagebrush. He explained that over the years neighbors' horses have bred with free stock; other folks would lose a steed or two, which joined the pack. Unsaddled, they'd romp.

Back in our own casa, I might have perceived forewarning. Three drains and the toilet gurgled whenever the water ran. The bathroom floor angled upward. Windows rattled. The front door needed three steps but had none. Spiders crawling along the walls wrote messages. All the floors were uneven. Unlatched doors would swing open. My little frame ramada in the orchard was run down; its walls were never squared. This could easily be a beach house with dust instead of surf. This home out in back of a brick bungalow was as simple and eccentric as any long-legged house clinging to riverbank. Toward morning, when a thousand birds opened their throats, I apprehended that even the woodpecker holes needed paint. I was mostly grateful we were renting at a ridiculously cheap price.

We adjusted to the pace of this countryside. Each afternoon, distant hills turned blue under diffused molten alloy clouds. Even the white barn yellowed. We watched storms in mountains an hour away, but the rain rarely came this far; at best it would hang banners over western fields. Everywhere that water had sprayed or dripped, chlorophyll celebrated. Fruit beyond imagination unfolded in winding belts between sagebrush wrinkles. How much water is manipulated to make this valley fruitful? The Katonkah isn't that big a river! How carefully the snowmelt is husbanded, how far it stretches, yet how much is wasted, too. Gophers tunneled through pears. Limbs swelled rapidly. Bell-shaped flesh formed on flower tips. I put tomato plants in front of our pad and then I staked the banks of our new garden and turned the ashen soil, another task in possessing our new digs. The compounded sun tanned my back. Empires of dirt filled my shoes. I gagged in the swirling dust. In other words, it was another day in the orchards and, being late spring, neither too hot nor too cold.

As things turned out, getting work done was a direction. Amid the rounds of his own errands, Binnie stopped by and commented on the excitement his wife and I were having in shopping for vegetable and flower seed. In the evening, he returned for a beer.

~*~

Down the road, Wesley owned one of the few traditional barns in the entire valley. Most others were one-story galvanized shells to protect machinery and

controlled-atmosphere storage units, or else old frame sheds added to repeatedly. Wes, however, owned a solid post-and-beam masterpiece that could illustrate a children's book. Unlike hay barns I'd known, this one was so snug that little light filtered through the siding. Two walls of the bottom floor snuggled into hillside; the other two opened to sunlight. He planned to remove stanchions from the bottom level to make room for his stepladders and picking buckets. "To think," he said, "the people who built this cared enough to provide for dairy cattle and horses. It's been a long time since there was any significant dairying this side of the mountains."

Milk was delivered from the sopping side of the Cascades; cows there were fed hay and silage trucked over from this scorched flank. Maybe it's just a small world after all. As a transplanted Midwesterner himself, Wes took pride in his barn. Like the piglets he bought for his two sons to raise, this barn recalled to him his own childhood. "I can't figure out whether to leave it white or paint it red. It's sure pretty with that cupola and weathercock and gambrel roof," he said. "Its high loft is intended to be filled with hay. Those three bay doors include winches as reminders."

Erik, meanwhile, set up a corner of that top floor as a studio, even though he had to keep everything under wraps when he wasn't working. The dust was prolific.

The middle floor, which opened out on the driveway, got the most use. One end was the tool shop, which is indispensable, considering all the required

machinery. On a raised platform at the other end, Wes erected a small packing and retailing enterprise. In season, customers drove up to purchase a bushel or two. Peaches and pears, especially, are popular here. Emma had already made yellow-and-orange signs to set out on the roadside.

Curiously, even though Erik and I now lived a few farms apart, we found far fewer opportunities to be alone with each other than before the move. In town, we knew none of the neighbors, so that kind of gossip posed little threat. And there were often times before or after our rounds at the restaurant. Here, though, we knew and were known by not just Wes and Emma but also Binnie and Fay, plus the kids. As Erik said, this was like living in the fishbowl of a small town.

That's when he came up with the idea of painting my portrait. A large, fully clothed portrait that would be a present from me to my husband. Since it was a secret project, well, if anyone saw me entering the barn studio, we had an excuse. In reality, the portrait would go very slowly. It would be for Christmas. Erik was also using me as a model — a nude model, wisely sketching only my head and shoulders or a headless torso or even just details like feet and hands, again just in case. We had a robe at hand in the event we were interrupted, and there was a three-sided dressing screen. Plus a cot.

Oh, Erik! Devilish Erik!

Our sex these days tended to be mostly on the fly. Still, it's amazing what you can do with just a mouth or fingers.

He said I was always ready. And usually I was.

I always walked to our trysts, taking my time snaking through the orchards.

Each time I entered the barn, though, I regarded wooden crates stacked up for peach season. In the old days, everything was packed in wood: apples, cherries, pears, plums, peaches. One by one, less expensive cardboard took over. These slatted peach lugs are the last of a dying breed. I had long thought of imitating one poet who used similar packing crates for his bookshelves. These were smaller than his were, and the slats, thinner. Would these support the weight of books? I wasn't sure. But placed atop another crate, the thickness doubles. Still, were they big enough? I measured them: dimensions fine for most paperbacks. Oversize books remained a problem. At last, I approached Wes.

"Any idea where I can get about two dozen?"

"If that's all you want, I'll sell 'em at cost. I'm going to have to go in and buy another truckload anyway before next season." Fifty-five cents apiece was fair, we agreed.

We loaded up. Our new bookshelves, lugs turned and stacked on their sides, freed up some essential space in our cramped crib. "Ah! Order!" we sighed.

"Hey, those are really nifty," Jaya said. "I shouldn't have scoffed when you suggested it. I'll have to see if Wes will sell me some."

The portability of these shelves also suited my style. "Next time we move, we won't have to repack the books. Just turn the lugs on their side and go. When we get to the other end, we won't have to unpack, either. Just turn 'em up in place."

"You're so practical," she said. "I wish I'd thought of it."

Later, Wes mentioned how miffed he was to find the mill nearly doubled what he had charged us.

"Well, you want us to pay the difference? It's only be fair. I mean, I don't want to take advantage of a friendship," I said.

"No, it's not the money." Wes pawed the dust a bit. "I think it's more the fact I don't like to see things change so much. Sometimes I'm just old-fashioned."

Maybe he was, even if he did enjoy tinkering with a future. He zipped about on a three-wheeled ATC and planned to install the latest irrigation technology as soon as the last apples were off the trees and into the warehouse.

Todd regarded our new bookshelves. In town, stores sold plastic milk crates at multiples of what we paid for the peach lugs. In corners of the orchard, crates once used for picking now rotted, broken and tossed atop brush piles. These days orchardists used them to start

trash fires. The ones he'd seen are too far gone to be salvaged. In this business, the crates have been replaced by plywood bins four feet square and two feet deep. Only a forklift could move the cubes, which were perfectly scaled for Industrial Age trucking and controlled-atmosphere warehouses — "C.A.," as everybody called it. The pastoral dimensions of agriculture had mutated. The U.S. Department of Agriculture saw these fields as assembly lines cranked up to meet the international trade balance. Cowboys rode helicopters. There's a price tag on everything. And away they went.

I began reading *Crime and Punishment*. "It's a good thing we didn't steal those crates," I said before flying away on another family visit.

Somehow, Todd felt guilty he didn't get more vacation or have an income to travel the world, much less revisit back east. Once more, my parents paid for my ticket.

My first night back, I seduced him in his sleep. He should have had plenty of rest in my absence. Admittedly, I was horny. But the fact was that I loved both my husband and my artist-lover. They were just different, and that made everything all the more pleasurable. I recalled the Native story Todd had told me about Mount St. Helens. If I was Loowit, and her two suitors were Patch and Wyeast, which one was Todd — and which one, Erik? And where were all of the flying molten rocks, except within me? As I straddled my husband and rode, I felt the explosion building

within me. Could anyone really see my conflicted desires? Erik claimed he could picture me as a mature matron in thirty years, busty as I was already. For now, Todd's hands grasped my biceps to keep me steady as the bedsprings croaked like a frog pond and my bazongas flew around his face.

I remembered why we married, and now we were riding the current. What a great start to the week!

In the morning, I announced my folks were on the way.

In the whirlwind that followed, I wound up taking off with my parents for a few more weeks to visit the rest of the family back east. I hoped it would be good for us. At least I'd be away from Erik.

In my breakaway, I realized that my husband played by the rules. And my artist-lover didn't. But how can anything go far without no-no's, something to count on, to serve as the skeleton for the rest of the body? Yet Erik was ultimately a big no-no, or even a wild mountain stream that needed its bed. I started to say "my bed," but the truth was it was Jaya's. And I was an interloper. Or would be, if she'd been around more.

But what if I, too, was just a wild mountain stream? Where would I be without Todd and his structures to contain me? Would I just spill out on this desert floor and evaporate? Would I just be one of those rainclouds we looked out on — the ones where the downpour evaporated before hitting the ground? Were Erik and I

two streams merging together? But what would then contain us? As it was, we didn't merge together for long.

So my mind turned back to Todd, faithful Todd. Dependable Todd.

As he set out to fetch me at the Seattle-Tacoma International Airport, Binnie asked which route he was taking. Todd opted for a grand view of Mount Rainier and the mile-high, finally plowed road. "Chinook Pass is open already? That's early," Binnie said. Two hours later, at the Cascade Divide, roadside snow dwarfed our car by twenty feet. That wasn't the only surprise. A stone's throw past summit, he hit a bank of fog and drizzle and the mountain vanished.

Sometimes long-distance driving is a meditation. Todd kept the radio off. Had it been on, he would have heard more snow was on the way. In seven hours the state would again declare this highway closed, this time for three weeks.

At airport two Krsna freaks pestered me, coming on like doorknockers or preachers who equate salvation with membership gains and income. Putting their rap to me, they left no room for conversation. They refused to discuss anything, and instead stuck close to their text. When I challenged points they raised, reinforcements encircled and outnumbered me. I wanted them only to step beyond Krsna into Brahma, the Absolute, or Allah or the Living Word of God — anything that breaks free of inert conjecture. I wanted to tell them to stop talking and start singing instead. I

wanted their legalism to yield to a caring spirit so that whatever their theology, their faith would come forth as a loving radiance. At times I did see through all things with crystal-clear vision. At the moment, like the mountain pass Todd had just come through, I was receiving a snow job. "Namaste," I said with a slight bow — that of God within me greets that of God within you — as I turned to sprint away. "Now arriving at Gate So-and-So" was another way I'd hear a voice from above.

I wished Jaya had been with me. Everything I'd told them had come to me through her. The religious insights weren't the only thing she'd taught me. She'd also opened my eyes to much about myself as a woman, especially — woman to woman. I also knew that if the two of us entered a bar, she'd be the one getting all the attention. I've always thought Erik should be the one to watch out. Did she suspect anything? Or was she, like Todd, just too preoccupied?

It felt good to pull up the lane and fall asleep in my own house, even if it still seemed more a camp than a home in the sense I didn't feel my roots were established here yet. But nothing else felt like home these days, either.

The next morning, a fighter pilot sprayed our neighbor's apricots. "He's probably spraying us, too," Todd said dryly.

The droplets made me wonder about our weather. "Sure, there must be raging rainstorms out here, maybe

once every other year. But we haven't seen any yet." I hoped that someday, somehow, all seeing men will believe the unseen motions of Spirit. When that happens, an extensive war will be won. The true revolution will begin.

In the meantime, I learned additional rhythms of celebrations in their seasons. The squash blossom, especially, as one of the Native's favorites.

When drums beat like basketballs on the long-house court of the reservation, we joined the observers. There, above a swirl of furious tribal dancing, an innocent or perhaps wise sparrow flitted from one door to the next. The hall was already filled with feathers. Tinowit, great powwow, resounds with twenty-five thousand tiny bells in unison. It also feeds a hunger for fry-bread and a knowledge that the real action begins when the last White Man leaves for home at midnight.

Nevertheless, I respected some things I didn't comprehend. Maybe next year we could afford to pick out some silver-and-turquoise jewelry from any of several hundred traders.

How would I look with a shawl around me and a feather in my braided hair? How would I look dancing in that circle? Me, with my high forehead and resolute chin, as Erik insisted. Me, with my straight eyebrows — like a soaring eagle or raven, as he noted.

Would Todd call me his Indian Princess? Would he want to ride my pony? Would he want to crack me open like a ripe melon and feast? Or would he just let me

keep going round and round in one more dance with all the other women?

When I looked up into that deep blue desert sky, I realized I was looking into Erik's eyes, not Todd's.

At last, a rare rainfall broke weeks of flattening heat and dampened the dust. Even if it precipitated this way for a month, though, the water wouldn't add up to half an inch. In this valley, rain was seen as just a nuisance. That should have been fair warning.

"There's a moment every morning when neither stars nor sun is visible," Todd observed. "You wonder if the day will be cloudy."

"Maybe it's a choice you make," I suggested. "You know, 'Keep on the sunny side, always on the sunny side.'"

"Like an egg?" he countered.

After the apricots, the cherries offered their flowers in full glory; apples don't fully blossom until their leaves are already out. As a result, their spring song's muffled in turquoise and silver. Perhaps that's their choice.

Sometimes the sun, just below the rise, woke me with an explosion of bird chatter.

Squinting at aerial jewels and dust on the daybreak, I deduced it would be just another blazing summer day.

Nearly blinded by dawn, I shuffled out to the porch and checked on the nestling I found the day before. Perhaps it, too, would be singing in its cage.

We had been sunning ourselves and reading in the backyard when the mother, worm dangling from her beak, swooped over us. Our puppy crouched in tall grass by our two apricot trees. A foot away from the puppy, the chick moved. As it trembled, we discovered its wings were unbroken. I tossed the puppy into the house, despite its irate squirming to get back to that mottled robin. We tried to lift the birdlet back to its hysterical mother. No luck. Although it could hop vigorously, the little fellow's wings weren't yet strong enough for flight. I wound up feeding him with her fingers. Every time my hands came close, it opened its mouth nearly 180 degrees and let my fingers go way in, warm and soft.

"It's the healthiest looking chick I've seen," Fay said when delivering an old hamster cage. Perched on our fingers, the chick rode around the yard.

This morning, though, its head was so tiny, collapsed in death.

Many things remain beyond our abilities. I uttered a prayer for consolation and comfort.

~*~

In the early years, nobody floated the river, not even loggers who washed their log booms down from the mountains to the city's big mill. To float the river

these days, you need an old inner tube, a case of beer, a group of friends on a hot afternoon, and two cars — one where you enter the water and one where you plan to get out. "Just be sure to leave the water before it goes over the dam or sweeps you through a siphon. And be careful not to step a rattlesnake along the shore. Other than that, it's tons of fun," Fay said, hoping to take Todd and me along with the boys and Binnie next time there was a break in the orchard work. "It's just like life," she said. "Merrily, merrily, floating down a stream."

Todd wanted to go, but I came up with dozen reasons to stay home, beginning with the dam and its siphon. As long as the orchard claimed so much of Binnie 's attention, our chances of going were slim to zero, anyway.

So Todd added floating to his list of dreams.

~*~

We ventured into neighboring range. There in the daylight, lion skins — stubble blades — crouched between thirsty mountains. At night, from the distance, a flashlight aimed through venetian blinds to strike on spherical pillows — it was just that moon illuminating these uplands.

"Can you imagine living there?" I asked. "It would be like trying to live on the surface of Mars."

"Well, it is grotesque," he acknowledged. "But not quite that remote. Maybe it's more like trying to live on the face of Venus."

"Without the clouds?"

"You have a point."

For miles we passed fields now shorn of their golden barley but saw no farmhouses or sheds. Mint was the other crop of this plateau. Both were renowned and treasured.

At its best, life seems an unending miracle. "Just consider how the colorless rain turns green within grass," I said. "It procreates blood on the apples."

"Blood in all the cattle, too," he said. Paused. "Have you noticed? The Golden's turned yellow last night."

In an orchard, many currents wait for weeks or even months before shifting in a blink. Perhaps long stretches of ruminative boredom and then moments of awe are intertwined as a kind of marriage. As one who preferred mountains and ravines, Todd hoped so. The alternative was a sustained plateau that would resemble the Great Plains or an ocean.

The very thought made Todd realize how long it had been since we'd been out in the high country. Time was running out; soon, in another month or two, the first storms could force retrenchment. He resolved to go, whether I came along or not. Most of our exploration had been in the direction of Mount Rainier, even though Adams was nearer by the crow's flight and was the

great white cone we saw nearly every day. As far as travel time goes, however, Rainier was much closer. Adams could be approached only from the south and west, requiring twice as much driving. This time, however, that wouldn't deter him. He was going. Period.

As usual these days, I resisted.

"That's fine," he said. "I'm going anyway."

As he turned, I argued: "Don't leave me, don't go."

"Well, come along then."

"Give me a reason."

"To keep me company. Or is that too much to ask? I just don't want to sit around this valley another day. I've got to get out."

Along the way, we stopped at a canyon-rim palace built by a railroad baron to honor a minor queen who may have been his lover. The stories varied, which enchanted me almost as much as the Renoirs, Eastern Orthodox icons, and Indian baskets and jewelry themselves. "An eclectic collection," I apprised. "The armor collection is bizarre, but I love the photographs of Queen Maria, especially those sexy costumes."

We continued on through bunchgrass and stubble, then into scrub pine and garry oak, pass cattle ranches and trailer parks, and eventually slipped into unbroken pine. We were low on gasoline but it was too late to

turn around, not if we were to reach campground before dusk. Did we have enough fuel to get out?

"Well, that will be all downhill," I said, even though I was jumping or flying off the handle at every bump.

Todd hoped to camp at timberline, calculated twilight, the gas tank, tires, rocky lane, and the red powder covering car, nearly said the hell with it, let's not pitch tent but head for a motel. Instead, according to plan, we both sleep soundly, having an entire campground to ourselves. Only later did I hear that rattlesnakes thrive in here.

In the morning, hiking at the timberline, we collected elk bones — vertebrae, mostly. As the crown of the great mountain floated six thousand feet above, we heard rumbling icefalls and boulders breaking loose from the glaciers. Echoes glinted off the sun-melt trickle. I gathered sprigs and stones for her textiles. To the south, urging me to trying reaching out to touch its flight, Mount Hood soared into a lens cap cloud. The morning air, an ethereal blue vapor, turned icy mountains into silky threads. What I thought was rock and snow instead revealed nude shimmering before our eyes. Elation glowed. The wonder in my eyes reflects happiness.

We packed up and coasted down off the mountain, our fuel gauge on empty. Finally, we rolled almost silently into a one-pump station at Trout Lake, but the clerk was afraid to fill our Volkswagen. "You sure this is the gas tank? Here, in the trunk?"

Yes, lady, right up front there. Didn't we pop the hood?

"I'll do it!" I kept offering.

"No, no, I can't let you pump gas," the woman repeated, even though I pumped fuel all the time when working with Binnie.

At last, after hearing me explain that the tank's almost empty, the woman agreed to pour fuel as instructed.

Behind us, we caught glimpses of Mount St. Helens.

"She's a lot like you, Lucy," he said. "So pristine and beautiful and shy and perfectly shaped. A pearl of a mountain, yet so hot under that cool exterior."

A pearl, rather than turquoise and silver? Did he really see me at all? Not just clearly, either, I'd settle for a passionate delusion in which I was anything but geology.

Instead, he insisted we could pursue a leisurely route home, starting with a Swiss-style town sitting directly above another at riverside — both of them hunching troll-like under lofty Mount Hood, the one I'd decided was more Erik than Todd. Water from two lakes and the Columbia River reflected at eye level. As we drove along, I told Todd what I wanted for lunch, and it wasn't sandwiches. "Keep driving," I said, "and keep your eyes on the road" as I unzipped him, propped my sunglasses up in my hair, and bent over to begin sucking. I'd seen enough damn scenery.

Todd's first reaction was tension — "What if somebody sees us? A passing trucker? A tractor?" I told him to shut up, sit back, and enjoy the view. Even if it was a rough road and I was biting gingerly. We were both rewarded. I sat up again with a grin and a likely bruise in my right shoulder, thanks to the stick shift.

"Your turn," I said, slipping my jeans and panties down.

"I can't bend over like you did and still drive," he said.

I laughed and took his right hand. "Like this," I said. And he complied, mile after mile.

We bounced past garry oak scattered through highlands before arriving in a vast surf of golden wheat. From Satus Pass, we followed Satus Creek through a cottonwood and sagebrush canyon. Pondering the roadway as a Wagnerian "Ride of the Valkyries," I came for the third time and declared myself sated.

By now I was ready for those sandwiches but we'd passed the last chance for food for the next half-hour.

As my husband wondered what had gotten into me, I wondered if the sustained weariness of this leg might approach a still-invisible Valhalla or even a cowboy-and-Indian ambush as I read aloud the bumper sticker on a passing pickup: "God, guns, and guts made America what it is today." I scoffed. "So Jesus killed the Indians?"

Todd wouldn't accept that possibility for a moment. He didn't care what Mohammed says about swords, either. He'd put his up, and that's where it was staying. Our order, like all transcendental traditions, had suffered too much abuse over the ages. Somebody always wants to persecute a mystic. Authentic prophets must rely on the power of their lives and words, their vision of truth, rather than physical might. "It's an insane world we live in," he told me. "You can't trust any political party that attempts to put a deity on its team."

"So what about military chaplains?"

"Well, if that truck driver had to choose between his guns and God, you'd see where his faith really lies. And it's not in the Cross, if that's any help."

For the remainder of the drive, I reflected on the oneness varied mystics acknowledge, in contrast to ever-sharper divisions laid open by legalists. Oh, yes, sex as a kind of mysticism.

Once again, I was in Jaya's debt.

~*~

At the orchard, when we told Binnie of our camping expedition, he smiled. "I've always wanted to climb to the summit of Adams. I've ascended all the big peaks around here, excepting that one and Rainier. Came real close twice on Rainier, and both times bad weather turned us back."

"Maybe we can do it together," Todd ventured.

"Hope so. That would be lovely."

A week later, I joined him on a trip to the ice caves at the mouth of a Rainier glacier. I nearly froze to death, too, when rain suddenly appeared and blew up under my poncho. When we hiked down through the summer snowstorm, I shivered uncontrollably. Back at the trailhead, sitting in the car and acknowledging symptoms of impending hypothermia, I was grateful Todd had put hot chocolate in the Thermos, possibly saving my life.

"To think, we got stuck in a snowstorm in mid-August," I said. "Who's gonna believe that story back east when we tell 'em?"

"Maybe we shouldn't even try. They'll have enough trouble understanding ice caves or glaciers."

Driving home, I composed a new prayer: "Plant good stock, the best new varieties. Prune and nourish, weed and spray, water and mow. Smudge before dawn in frosty spring, watch for blight, disc, chase gophers, save those roots. If you take care to smell spring blossoms, you'll carry autumn ladders. Rise before dawn each day. All we do is futile without you, Holy One. We do our part, trusting and grateful."

Along the canal bank, I tried without success to count sparrows flying from a single brace of willow shrubs. That night, we slept as peaches and apples fell through night. Above our roof, particulate streaks of fading white nose-dived like blazing swords or dusty globes of blood. When coyotes yodeled, I clung to his

body and our frisky puppy leapt to our bed. When I stepped outside, faraway mountains and streams conjoined as blades of grass at my feet. At last, a nippy turn in the dawn brought color to the red apples, too. Our Tibetan prayer flags braided the wind. This locale weaves dissimilar languages into systems rooted in mysteries, and each living substance is indebted to others. The fragility of this web, once glimpsed, overwhelms with gratitude — one the "guns-and-guts" mentality can wreck in a flash.

Among the pickers Binnie hired was an old man. "He's actually a prospector who holds claims above Bumping Lake. He works as a woodcutter in the fall. Just listen to him praise his chain saw!" The picker left his bicycle back at the employment bureau trailer and bummed a ride out to orchards. "Good worker, too — the tops," Binnie smiled.

~*~

In the thickness of July, I had already noticed pings of autumn, a kind of displaced excitement that also accompanies spring voices that call the indoors out. Spring? Yes, but now also reversing, all too soon to be tugging both within (toward our cabin) and outward (to savor the last precious moments outdoors). This turbulence called up vague bits of memory, jumbled threads, scrambled visions of many locations that run together even when summer appears to stretch on forever.

"That's just because you're new here. Wait a few more years," Fay cautioned.

As we steered into town, arid mountains dropped off into boiling clouds. Detecting a round pink cloud within the rest, I cried out: "IT'S THE MOON!" To the northwest, gunpowder rolled down over distant tree masses. When we swung back toward home, the full moon meandered amid a flock of sheep. Under a conch-pink sky, I asked the meaning of such clouds.

"To project sweet Maya at twilight," Todd replied, reflecting on the interplay of illusion, human desire, perception, and the eternal depth existing only in spirit. There's sweet Maya, and there's heartless Maya, as the Hindus would say.

I tried using olive oil as a bug spray. "My wife, organic farmer," Todd jested while harvesting perfect produce.

I considered the sequence. The peaches, and then apples, on Binnie and Wesley's minds. "Gotta hire more pickers!" they'd say.

In the orchard, the migrants cried out: "TRACK! TOR! TRACK! TOR!" Or even, "BIN!"

And Binnie or Wes yelled back: "OK!" and drove off with an empty plywood bin on the hydraulic lift. When they returned, another one was full.

The first time I noticed how much fruit goes to waste in the orchard, I was appalled. I tried using the rejects. Some were delicious, even as pear pie. Others,

like the rock-hard or water-saturated flesh, deserve to die. I learned.

Eventually, all the bins go to warehouse. Living here was a spiral, a living and fertile conch. Mouse, even snake tracks, write in its dust.

EAST OF THE RAIN

MY INITIAL IMPRESSIONS OF the landscape softened even more once Jaya pointed out the wild horses atop the barren ridge behind the orchard.

"They're so tiny! You need binoculars to really see them."

Slipping from their owners, these bands uphold the freedom of running freely, eluding recapture as best they can.

For all of my own effort to comprehend the spirit of the dominant mountain, I'd come to realize it's simply one of many, each one in its place for many reasons. At the moment, I wished to be one of the wild horses grazing the summit.

I wanted to be one of the wild horses running free.

~*~

Living as close as we were, I was surprised we didn't see more of Jaya and Erik. As I heard at Darshan, though, her career was demanding she be on the road more and more, and Erik was working erratic hours and then spending as much of his free time as possible hiking and camping while the weather cooperated.

We hadn't been the only ones in the circle to follow their example and move to cheaper, admittedly flimsy housing in the orchards. We had something of a colony

up and down our road, centered on Wes and Emma's. But this wasn't the same as when we lived next door and could just drop in on each other. These days we were usually working somewhere or off exploring or, for those who had children, well, it was just a different set of interests I didn't yet deploy.

Our weekly Darshan sessions rotated among the members' houses, so in the summer we tried to schedule these at the smaller places like ours, where everything could be conducted outdoors, in the yard or on a patio. In the winter, we were grateful for those who, like Wes and Emma, had larger houses. We altered our schedule, too, so sometimes we met in the morning rather than evening. Some weeks we didn't meet at all.

I also appreciated Wes and Emma's above-ground circular pool. When we had enough people to run in a circle, we'd create a wave we could ride the next ten minutes. Floating in that vortex, I'd relax. We were all smiles — Wes, Emma, Jaya, Erik, the boys ... depending on who was available.

One afternoon I went down to see if anyone was ready for a plunge. Turned out Jaya was the only one around. Hadn't really seen her in ages, and finding her home early was a real surprise.

"It happens once in a while," she said. "A swim, you say? Sure. And since it's just the two of us, let's forget the swimsuits."

From our time in the Ozarks, I remembered she had a beautiful body. I wondered what else she might

have in mind for today. As we stripped down, I could see nothing had changed. She was still magnificent. I watched her climb the ladder and then followed.

We splashed around and then floated on two air mattresses, where we could talk almost nose to nose. If she suspected anything, I had nowhere to defend myself.

As we chatted, I admitted my frustration with Todd's schedule and how little I was seeing of him these days.

"Erik says the same thing about me," she replied. "Sometimes I think I have a tiger by the tail — the office just keeps getting crazier and crazier, even as we're proving our revolutionary professional theories. I just can't put enough hours in to keep up. And then there's Erik."

She paused, and I braced for the knife.

"Lucy," she said. "Do you ever have any regrets about our little experiments back in the Ozarks?"

This was not the line of argument I was expecting. I had to think hard.

"No," I said finally. "It was all, well, pretty strange, but you taught me a lot about being a woman, and Erik gave me some fresh perspective on my husband. And Todd became a much better lover as a result. But you also know it was getting kind of scary. Who knows where it might have gone, though, if we'd continued."

I'm glad we stopped when we did. But I suppose I should thank you."

It was her turn to think. Our mattresses rotated several times in the sun before she spoke.

"I know that what-ifs aren't very productive when it comes to thinking. What happened cannot be undone, even if we'd like to erase it. I wouldn't undo what you and I shared, Lucy, but you should know it's not something I would have done if things between Erik and me had been on a firmer foundation at the time."

She proceeded to tell me about the artists' model and how humiliated she felt as well as how desperate she was to save her marriage any way she could.

"Erik was a much different creature when we first met. I loved his openness and his innocence. It was so refreshing after the men in my past. And then something happened once we moved away from his hometown. As I said, I feel like I have a tiger by the tail."

After another silence I asked if she had any suntan lotion.

"I think they stashed some down here," she said, reaching toward the pool filter. "Aha! Where do you want it?"

I rolled over and let her fingers work expertly.

"Your turn," and I ran my hands over her brow, cheeks, and chin, neck, breasts, belly, pubis, and legs. I

couldn't understand why Erik would ever turn from that for me instead. She felt heavenly to the touch.

"Lucy?" she said. "I know you're more curious and experimental than your husband, even if you are the kind of girl who'd bake her lover a chocolate cake as an overture rather than a mere token. For all of your wholesome beauty, it's easy to overlook that passionate wild streak you rein in. But I know it's there, and it can be explosive. I also know you want children, and you're feeling thwarted. Erik might say the same and blame me, but he's still acting too much like a child himself. I really want a family, too, Lucy, and I'm feeling frustrated. You understand?"

I told her I did.

"Lucy, just remember, Todd's a good man. Don't lose him. I just get the feeling you're itching for something else, and I want to tell you it's not worth it, OK? Enough of the unrequested advice, then."

We drifted in our rotation.

"This is a good way to get an even tan!" I joked.

Round and round we went.

"Jaya?" I asked. "Erik says you believe in open marriage."

"He WHAT?" she sputtered. "Let me say emphatically I do not, despite our little experiment. Keeping up with one partner is difficult enough."

She mulled some more.

"I suspect he believes in open marriage, though. I can't prove it, but it's just a sense, and if anything's happening, he'd deny it. I asked if you have any regrets, and mine come in wondering if our experiences together may have unleashed a monster. Lucy, I can see why he'd be attracted to you, but he's just getting out of control. I don't know what to do."

And this was the Wise Woman I would have consulted if I'd thought Todd was fooling around! She had me wondering who else might be involved.

"Lucy?" she said at last. "I hate to break this up. It's been lovely. But I have a meeting to get to tonight."

"And it's starting to get chilly," I added. "Let's go."

As I left for my place, I wondered if I should feel guilty when it comes to Jaya's husband. But I didn't. I just didn't want to hurt her or Todd, but that wasn't keeping me from Erik.

These days, something else was, but I couldn't quite put my finger on it.

It's a fine balance, as I reflected on a major dilemma of spiritual practice — purity versus sterility. Like the pool water itself, which can become slimy or too chlorinated. The pursuit of ecstatic bliss can become chaotic, on one side, or too tightly disciplined, on the other. Can you keep your work spotless as well as wild and exciting? Otherwise, if the life goes dead, it takes the rest of existence along down the tubes.

A week later, when it was time to run around inside the pool again, I wondered about another friend's continuing frustration, this time by destroying most of her weaving and then holding a rummage sale in which she didn't even get a full return on her yarn, much less her labor. My issue of perfection contemplated the potential bounty of pure prairie when I was reminded to ABIDE in whatever landscape I've entered.

Every locale has unique currents, just like this pool.

Todd came home from a shopping trip to the lumber yard. The familiar aroma I detected? Burnt cork for a new bulletin board, The smell revived a whole museum of natural history in our kitchen.

That night, Todd pointed a flashlight into the sky with all of the child-mind wonderment of whether somebody on one of those planets would ever see his beam. The last time he'd done this was while sleeping in a trail tent in Ohio with 5,000 other Boy Scouts commemorating an Indian treaty. One, of course, that was quickly broken. Only land and seasons continued in some kind witness.

Birds rode current higher into the air and then soared and circled back.

In Darshan we heard stories about how the barrenness of the desert removed worldly distractions from holy monks and nuns and allowed them the clarity to achieve union with the Divine.

What we didn't hear was about the ways it could backfire — produce the very consequences it intended to avoid.

More and more, I saw Todd turning to hardpan — not even a rock I could cling to, but an impenetrable layer like asphalt pavement a few inches under the surface of the soil.

That's not what I wanted — for him or for me.

~*~

I had not yet floated the canyon. Small parties take to the river at the far end of its slit. Reclining in large inner tubes, they then ride the current for miles, careful to exit the running water just before it goes over the dam or sucks a careless victim through the siphon that carries irrigation water through the mountain. You must be careful, too, not to step on rattlesnakes that come down for a drink. Like the current in the pool, this must be coordinated. Two cars, at the minimum, one on each end of the run. Or else having a friend to retrieve you.

The invitation came. Todd couldn't get away, but Erik could. As we floated, we waved at cars passing on the twisting two-lane highway. They waved back. I should have worn more than a bikini. I came home rather burned. Still, it was fun.

We waved, too, at friends who came out from back east to visit. Broke out the Dungeness crab and fireworks and promptly filled the sink with wineglasses

and dirty dishes. We popped open the champagne and a gust caught the plastic cork and carried it aloft — all the way over the roof over our head, like a kite.

"Powerful stuff!" I squealed. Our party continued until midnight. Their children, I'd hear later, considered it the highlight of their two-month journey. By the following summer, though, their correspondence will have ceased, and I won't know why. These days, even the closest bonds are conditional. But how about me?

IF ONLY AIR AND WATER

TODD, IN HIS SELF-IMAGE, aspired to be a mountain man, but he was looking more and more like a prospector hoping to strike a claim. One that would make us both rich.

What I saw more and more was a rattlesnake that had once been a buffalo. A rattlesnake seeking its hole in the desert. I didn't want to be THAT hole. A rattlesnake, being irritated by a lot of petite nuisance.

With his scientific bend of mind and no childhood religious background, my husband had absorbed much more of the Darshan discussion than I would have anticipated, but now his work hours had him drifting further and further from its sessions, our only shared social circle. Many Sunday nights he chose to stay home to catch up on business matters he'd brought home.

Which left me more time to talk to Erik.

So, in all fairness, how did I see Erik?

Maybe as very lonely. Or overwhelmed by his unsatisfied desires. Or overshadowed by his wife's presence – or her increasing absence.

I could sympathize.

Erik, though, more than Todd, was the one taking refuge in the mountain forests and streams. He seemed to find something there that I couldn't or wouldn't.

From what I could see, the mountains gave us humans our excuse for living here. The pristine high country. The seemingly endless forests. The snowpack that provided irrigation for the orchards below.

Yes, we lived in one of those irrigated ribbons of green running further and further from the party. Any party I'd want to attend, somewhere in the bejeweled city.

~*~

Erik and I weren't the only ones in the Darshan circle whose college studies had been disrupted in the relocation to the Katonkah Valley. Independently, we all came to the same conclusion — the closest four-year college, at the other end of the canyon, was too far away for daily commuting. Only after I'd registered for classes and found my own housing there did I hear that others had done the same. Jaya said something about maybe combining our households along the lines of the ashram where she'd once lived. We could rent a big house on each end of the canyon and live together as an extended family.

If only Erik weren't part of that mix.

Having spent the summer in the orchard, I now feared if I returned to college, my marriage would break up. Hadn't we decided all that? Todd insisted he could trust me. But what if he couldn't? Did he possess me enough to forbid me to go? Of course not. I needed to do something to keep growing.

The heart of this arrangement would be weekends, when we'd make up for lost time. As it was, with his long hours, this might actually be an improvement.

I had previously viewed roads largely as a scheme of getting from one place to another. In the Far West, especially, they jut from one inhabited spread to the next. At first, many stretches of in-between appear bland, even lifeless. But then perception grows. No matter how much you want to get to the other end, you find subtle gradations and nuance amplifying on every trip.

Eventually, I stopped to explore a tunnel that had been a major hazard on the Canyon Highway until the highway department finally bypassed it. "It must have been only wide enough for one-way traffic at any time," I observed one Sunday afternoon on the drive back to my apartment.

"They used to have traffic lights at each end," Erik replied, repeating a story heard many times.

"Wow, I'm glad we don't have to use it any more. Look at all these huge rocks that have fallen from the ceiling!"

The bypassed asphalt was covered with boulders bigger than our VW Beetle.

It isn't the only tunnel in the canyon. Some, the siphons, carry irrigation water through mountains. Every year somebody rafting the river is swept through one and drowns. In accord with Far West tradition —

and bloated political leverage — the railroad long ago claimed the choicest spots along the narrow river passage. As a consequence, the highway twists a lot. When there's little traffic, this can be a sporty drive.

Our alternate route was longer but faster — miles traded for time. The freeway opened out into marvelous vistas. As we came to know each roadway, we anticipated the coming views.

"Think Mount Stuart will be visible around the next curve?" he'd ask.

"No, it's too cloudy." Then, detecting a solitary crag ripping through a dramatic storm, I'd recant. Sometimes both Rainier and Adams stared like brothers with heads at table level. Watching for cattle and sheep, we viewed foxes and deer.

In winter, freezing rain or drifting snow often forced the state to close the expressway. Even when that highway stayed open, its surface could be treacherous.

Everywhere I turned, once I was out of the orchards and well beyond town, I could see all too clearly, this was the kind of place you could leave somebody to die.

Or be left to die.

The weekly trip often had me thinking about life. What was I supposed to be doing with mine? What was my unique mission? And just how was I wrapped up with Todd and his mission? Was I here simply to offer comfort and support for others? How was a degree going

to further this, anyway? For now, that part was especially unclear.

Taking the freeway, I sometimes thought about the importance of oasis. Not just mirage, either, but the fact that some of the springs and their canopy of palms might be hidden in a pocket below the surrounding surface. You could look right over it if you weren't guided. Was that what Erik was becoming in my life, or me, in his?

I could never live in so confined space as an oasis, no matter how fertile. I needed something bigger. Even the Katonkah Valley was feeling too confining. Todd, on the other hand, found more than enough rocks here to keep him busy. But I wasn't a rock, no matter how hardhearted I might seem to him.

I did feel I was drying up. I looked at some of the old-timers and their leathery faces with the deep wrinkles that mirrored the surrounding hillsides. The impact of the relentless sun and wind. That was for them, not me.

As I watched the solitary heads of cheatgrass bend under the wind, I realized I needed something to cling to. Could view my weekly commute as a holy ritual?

In Darshan that week, Jaya spoke of considering such interactions as ceremonies. "Reflect on the many forms of nourishment and be thankful," she said. "As a grain offering linking 'cereal' and 'sincere,' we contemplate grasses and heads of barley and oats in the wind. As a blood offering, we acknowledge horses, cows,

pigs, deer, elk, moose, as well as the rituals of game and birds: geese, ducks, turkeys, chicken. Eggs. Each bit swirls around the sphere, taking form in thanksgiving. All spiraling in the great orb. You could view milk and beer as grain, too. "

Again, the world is woven of many strands all running back to the Source. "Venerate thoroughly," I jotted in my notes. "Look at the shelf I use as an altar. See coals in the conch. Sun in the window. It's a glowing corded afternoon." You could even wonder about the true role of two solitary trees of small winesap apples amid 2,400 trunks of Bartlett pears, Brazilian prunes, Elberta and Hale peaches, Golden and Red Delicious apples. Binnie has counted them all, nurtured them, pruned them, and sprayed them from first breath of spring through harvest. There was that single cherry tree, too, and the two 'cots beneath our window. "Winesaps for pleasure," I sighed; the rest go to market. "Make silence deep and strong," I vowed: "Endless prayer, endless devotion." I resolved to snip away distractions. Nothing would entrap, not even devotion. Like a tree itself, I'd raise my head and arms proudly. "Like a thunderstorm, loud chanting clears air," I reminded myself at five in the morning. "Nourish a garden, pierce aromas, let everything be pure and sparkling. Miniature lightning. In sun, in renewed moon."

As autumn led toward frost, Todd carried in the last of our tomatoes and peppers and then dug up potatoes and carrots. "You're a lotus-dweller where air and

water touch," I accused him, with false mocking, "an idealistic thinker and emotional dreamer."

As I began reading *The Queen of Spades*, I was glad we wouldn't have to cope with legions of trick-or-treaters. Nobody would find us in that orchard abode.

At last, sunset and sunrise were both obscured by rain. A fog of the self set in on me as well. In autumn mist, the canyon was saturated yellows and browns.

"It's as if the sky holds secrets we ought to know," I asserted.

Geographies everywhere cover mysteries that come to light only after persistent digging. There are many bits we would never guess if we merely drove through.

These days, however, we were for the most merely driving through our own relationship. We had too little time for much of anything, much less for digging into each other's center of emotion. I should have been warned about secrets.

~*~

I stepped outdoors. Geese were walking on my lawn.

The seasons were definitely turning.

BOUNTY

WHEN ERIK'S FELLOW ARTISTS came down from campus for dinner, his little orchard house was quickly hopping. Jaya was a perfect hostess, and he was keeping his distance. My moussaka was a big hit. But when all the beer and wine made me woozy, I stepped outside to clear my head. I felt he was giving me the cold shoulder, and I needed to adjust. Halfway to the canal I noticed a rounded storybook camper parked near the edge of the pear grove. A figure in a folding lawn chair by the door watched the sunset. As I approached, I was greeted: "I'm Walrus, came over to do some pruning." I'd already heard the name mentioned. "I needed to rake in a little cash," the figure explained, motioning for me to stay. So this, I thought, is the mysterious one from the other fringe of the mountains, the one everyone speaks of highly. More than that, we both sensed immediate kinship. Walrus signaled me inside, then sliced banana bread and prepared tea while telling of two weeks he spent alone on the Appalachian Trail when trying to work out a broken loving. "I met an animal every day. One day it was a doe, another day a special bird. I even met a bear face-to-face. It was as if each of them had something very precious to tell me. They were guiding me through this struggle and speaking about their own trials. This happened every day except one. That was the night I bedded down early, fell immediately asleep. But in the middle of the night I felt an evil spirit, a coldness moving my way as if wishing to scare me out into the

laurel where people step off the trail and are never found, according to local folks I talked to later. I bolted upright in my sleeping bag and stared at the spot in darkness. There was no moon that night and I thought I'd lose my mind. I realized it was a contest of wills. I finally shouted 'Go away!' and it retreated. I fell back into an instant deep sleep. Later I read the place is believed to be full of evil spirits."

"Maybe you were finally facing yourself?"

"Maybe. Or maybe something else."

"That, too." I still had much to learn about earth spirits and demons.

"To an anthropologist it's all real," Walrus said before rising to light two coal oil lanterns. When he rejoined me at the trailer's tiny table, he told of five years spent with the legendary Hodads, a hippie cooperative that replanted slopes loggers had clear-cut. "They took their name from the hoes they use to plant seedlings," Walrus explained. "It's backbreaking labor, and they run their business by consensus, using Quaker-style business meetings and rotating their leadership."

Though born in Mississippi, he had a New England accent and a fourth wife. He moved to Oregon as a youth and the trails he repaired during high school vacations have dwindled into gravel roads that now sport-utility vehicles, which in turn desecrate high country meadows and litter each paradise they bounce through. In contrast, he described horse packers as

"great fun." In college he worked with the Forest Service, finally moving up to serve as a lookout. Now, he scoffed, they insist on using aerial fire surveillance. "It's a great mistake," Walrus said, "but they're sold on it. They fly over an area and just two hours later there's a great blaze burning out of control." As for aerial fish stocking in high country ponds and lakes, "You wouldn't think any of them would live. Half of the fingerlings drop in trees; half, on the shore. It makes for some great fishing for the hour-and-a-half the big fish gather to eat them."

Walrus once studied in a Zen temple before connecting with the Sufis, so I asked about the experience. "What I see as Christian salvation equates with the Buddhist kenshaw, a rebirth of spirit," he answered obliquely.

"As we say, all religion is one," I repeated, secretly preferring varieties that bring me back to earth while letting me fly as well.

Walrus shifted on his cushion. "The farmers plan to burn over the hill Wednesday in an effort to control grasshoppers." It was news to me.

"But grasshoppers fly away."

"I know. The neighbors are going to end up frying jackrabbit and driving rattlesnakes into orchards instead." We looked at each other and wondered if mankind would ever wise up. Invited to join our party, Walrus declined: "No, I need to get to bed early. But thanks, maybe next time."

When I reentered the shack, nothing had changed. Nobody missed me the two hours I was out. The next morning, though, Todd was upset. "How could you leave me like that?"

"I didn't mean to be gone that long. It just happened. I met a Walrus in the woods."

Erik's friends woke hung over and asked: when will we learn?

~*~

Right on schedule, ranchers with thirty fire permits burned over the hill right up to the crest, a legal point that kept all within Fire District 5. "We knew we couldn't stop them," the chief told the newspaper, "so we issued permits to keep it under control," meaning, "keep it out of the Moxee Fire District." I considered ancient scriptural injunctions against cooking a lamb in its mother's milk. I was surprised that many spots had been untouched by flames. Black splotches indicated fire; tan splotches, what stayed unburned.

The view reminded me to keep a close eye on anything cooking in the oven.

WITH HARVEST

WITH A WARNING OF the season's first serious frost, Todd harvested potatoes, carrots, squash, tomatoes, lettuce, and parsley, and then cut flowers for his desk and kitchen table before cooking dinner at 10:30 p.m. "Maybe these are just unrecognized fertility rites," he mumbled, before his thoughts leapt to condoms, diaphragms, and insertion tubes. He wished his wife were around more than weekends, but at least I was growing, preparing for her senior-year presentation. Usually he was zombied by the time he escaped the lab. On the other hand, the operation was gaining national recognition. It was just a matter of time before things leveled off and all the improvements being implemented came together. So he hoped.

Gray skies hinted snow was on the way. In the morning, a cape of white stretched down to 3,500 feet elevation on distant western mountains. It was a magic show. On the ridge reaching above our walls, a blue-gray haze obscured the wrinkled tan slope. In the orchard surrounding us, repeating the staggered schedule that brought blossoms and leaves earlier in the year, leaves now dropped on a similar itinerary. Peach trees, the first to shed their foliage, exposed a bewitching grove of stark black limbs against emerald grass and cobalt sky. This light-filled breach was my own private theater or dance hall, all the more eerie and magical when a cloud settles on the orchard and

tunnels seemed to point off in every direction. All too soon browned scales fluttered from the remaining cover — cherries, apricots, pears, plums, apples. At this time of the year, when the dew sparkled, I called the rutted path through the dale my Vale of Many Colored Glasses.

How strenuous the goal of dwelling in your own heart, keeping peace, radiating from that center can be. How difficult also to know your own landscape and resources, and how to "live at home" and not go to town for stimulation. Or was I simply trying to cover too much ground?

As for me, most of the time these days the mountains stood as a barrier between us. There was so much I didn't understand. In this peaceable kingdom, my honey dreams ran mineral green.

Well into *The Possessed*, I looked up. The afternoon sky broke, allowing sunlight to pour through scattering clouds. The riddle of deep blue above us and the autumn air struck a certain chord within, returning to that bittersweet longing I associated with small liberal arts colleges, that all things are possible, good, and sweet, taken slowly with measured strides and a natural stroke. Yet somehow in this falling, something also befits antiquity. A prescience suspends like a single sustained note before dull winds and drizzle lead into snowfall and decay. The classical beauty of logical order resonates as crisply as a baroque concerto. I wanted nothing to interrupt this reverie. But Todd sensed none of it, even when walking along the canal

bank and pointing out the dead skunk. "Its lack of odor hints it may have been poisoned or suffered some interior malfunction," he said. Flies buzzed all about its fat body, including its tiny cat's head with a pointy nose.

"So that's why they call 'em POLECATS!" I laughed. "Will you look at those long digging claws. Those multiple pads, too!"

The hind half of the skunk body is also fat, giving the effect of a mammal wedge.

"To say nothing of my fear, my love, that this critter's only playing possum! Rise up and squirt, Lazarus!"

At a willow break on down the pathway, we scared up swallows — flight after flight, flock after flock. Tried to count them, without luck.

"How do so many all fit into one tiny bush?" I wondered.

"Beats me. I've been pondering that one a lot these days."

For dinner, I served borscht. I was, after all, deep into my Russian period.

BLUE BANDS

ON ONE OF OUR EARLY autumn treks in the high country, Todd told me: "We've discovered a specialized organism that eats only rubber flakes from tires along the roadway. Makes me wonder what will happen if evolution continues and that critter discovers brand-new tires. Will it eat them on the run?"

Even though he intended a mere jest, based on true science, the possibility fascinated me for days. "You old Toad, do think that will really happen?"

"What, Popsie?"

"That something will eat the tires right off our cars overnight. Like, we'll wake up and find them just sitting on the ground."

"Sleepy-bye, baby! 'Night!"

Maybe it was simply a recognition of how vulnerable humanity is in this place, especially. He didn't dare tell me about porcupines and their taste for rubber, either.

A week later, rousing early on his day off, he suggested heading for the mountains. I countered, "Give me a reason." He could say, "For a change of scenery." Or, "To get some exercise." Instead, "We could stop at Willy Dick's for brunch," which enticed me, and an hour later, at the long windows of the mountain lodge, we looked out on a musical trout stream dashing over blue boulders. Sitting within resplendent hemlock

at the base of sheer rock, I admitted the food wasn't bad, either. His eyes brightened. His mouth formed two syllables.

When omelets and blueberry pancakes arrived, his darkness passed completely. "Yummers!"

"Freshen that coffee?"

"Please!"

You can make food an element of ritual. Basic celebration. Awareness of grace.

And so, adequately fed, we continued up the narrow highway and turned off to probe a small cavern. Somewhere ahead, another couple smoked dope. As the trail twisted about, the others come into view and cast suspicious, ominous glances. I had never thought the Peace & Love Revolution would come to this — frightened possessiveness in wide-open countryside. Their spicy smoke, mingling with the piney air, roused memories of other circles, way back when. "Have a toke?" would have been the question. Even so, how much fun did I really have?

Guides disappear, too. Sometimes briefly. Sometimes forever. Sometimes in a puff of smoke.

Jaya could tell about hers.

Now, whatever deep powers she had unleashed in Erik, spirituality was no longer among them. His psychic gift had turned porcine and predatory.

She knew about the first times Erik and I had sex. She was with Todd.

So this was different. We weren't telling anyone.

And next weekend Todd would be down in some mineshaft, while Jaya was away delivering a paper to a conference in Chicago.

~*~

The dun hills of summer turned blue as autumn haze and a sluggish sun formed a procession toward winter. A difference between resignation and acceptance appeared — one, essentially sad; the other delighting in discovery. Both involved losses through change. Wes and Emma danced upon both like a weaving. I wished they could teach me all of their wisdom to date. Instead, they merely introduced me to another trailhead and pointed to where other trails would cross.

In the turning, I was certain all the flies from the mountains were finding their way into my windows to buzz and die. In our living room, Todd opened maps to revisit many places now explored afoot as well as others where we'd not yet tread.

Two days later, so many leaves had fallen he saw the long Cascades Range from our kitchen window for the first time since spring and thought their long gray ridges belonged more to the Appalachians under gunpowder clouds than to the buckskin Western sun. In

contrast, the recording of Tibetan music behind him sounded like high country, any way he revolved.

Despite our weekend treks in the wilderness, I was bound now, closed in, even though we lived in an orchard. We weren't that far from town. At night, the stars looked uncomfortable. I missed the hillbilly array outside our dwelling back in the Ozarks.

At least, here Todd had a small wood stove and firewood to split.

As autumn worked on me, a powerful beauty of golden trees and deepening birch felt especially poignant. Autumn blue. One day I joined Erik for a walk in town, chancing upon quaint streets and architecture we hadn't noticed previously. As clouds moved in and dimmed the brilliant autumn light, he recalled a friend and her psilocybin while watching a girl on a bicycle zip past. Only her hair was in sight — dishwater blonde, the color and length of his first girlfriend's. Ah, memories! What did the guys on this block do for a living, each of them driving shiny new vans — all hours of the day and night?

I was back to waitressing in a very classy joint.

I'd catch the look, the one that came from a salesman or some other solitary male.

They usually tipped well.

I enjoyed the attention and left it at that.

The next weekend, on his second straight day off work, Todd slept until one p.m., had coffee and cookies abed, followed by a glass of sherry and a beer (Rainier was our loyal brew now) and then melted mozzarella on fresh French bread. He went for a walk along the canal bank. Smoked a second pipe of tobacco — an occasional entertainment now. Posited all of China as a brand of Calvinism. Considered an apple tree, too, gone up chimney pipe as smoke. People with pictures of Jesus all over their walls. Elvis on velvet, too. As if it added up.

After driving up the canyon to meet me and finding I'd be working a few extra hours, he figured he might as well go for a long walk. This time, off in the opposite direction from his usual traipse. He walked toward the airport, in fact. Turned left through the town cemetery. Unlike eastern graveyards, this one lacks an ancient core. Down the valley, the pioneer burial ground's south of town. In this land, obituaries frequently identify the deceased as "a pioneer." Most burials, then, had taken place within the memory of the valley's oldest residents. The lanes became an exhibit of Depression Glass. A matched pair of stones: "I'll meet in the morning," his promise, as hers replies, "at the Eastern gate." Interlocking proclamation, having thought things through and agreed to uphold a sense of order, however corny. Another stone announced:

Hear me wife & children dear

I'm not dead but sleeping here

Oh, yeah? Wake up, stupid lout!

A Chinese stone must have given the stonecutter fits, thanks to all those ideographs.

As well as frontier spellings: "Flisha" for "Felicia," for one.

As they say, "Gone but not forgotten."

Once more downtown, viewing the Veterans Day parade, he felt the wind as it stroked the smooth legs of young majorettes and whipped long hair across their faces.

That night I cut a finger on our serrated bread knife.

Come early December, under those distant clouds, heavy rain besotted the early snowpack, which promptly melted and ran off to flood some of the valley. "That's what happens when the logging companies insist on clear-cutting," Binnie shuddered. "If they'd selective cut instead, leaving some cover, there wouldn't be nearly as much runoff. The idiots!"

In the ensuing drought, which hit even harder this year than it had the previous year, ski resorts closed for the season. They had taken enough of a hit last time. Now they were skittish.

Todd ordered more firewood, this time a load of tamarack, "the best." "Maybe we'll hear from you again next year," the woodcutter said, showing up with his son a day late. "Touch of flu," he explained from the

back of a truck that carried several cords at a time. The gorgeous red splits of fuel lived up to promise. Stacked high beside the garden, the aroma of fresh-cut lumber was as sweet as spring.

I thought I was getting the pulse of the place until Binnie remarked, "The low amount of precipitation this year is really worrisome."

"What? We just had a heavy rainfall!"

"That's another reason for worry. The rain wiped out what little snowpack we had and sent it all gushing away. We need that snowpack to trickle out slowly, in late spring and summer, not now, at the beginning of winter."

"Hey, we got through last winter. And you said that one was bad."

"You're forgetting that those reservoirs started off with some water. Right now, they're empty. We have nothing to fall back on."

At the lab, everyone began calculating the possible negative effects on the operation if the valley didn't receive a bountiful winter.

Through the Darshan circle, we accepted an invitation to observe what they called "the robins of Christmas" on the other side of the mountains. Besides, getting away from the confines of the desert felt wonderful. While passing through Seattle, we stopped in a bungalow neighborhood to buy what I wanted most

for Christmas — a four-harness table loom. The legs would come later, when we could afford them.

The cottage, meanwhile, was just as I pictured. The air smelled antiseptic. "And *collect* does not mean *steal*," she laughed, telling me of a neighbor who snickered, "I'm going to collect a little" x, y, or z every time she set out to shoplift.

"Well, maybe it's one way to get by," her husband said. "This berry farming sure isn't paying, not under the arrangement we have here."

I wasn't quite sure how their deal worked, but it did seem our friends were getting the raw end. They put in a lot of work for what amounted to free rent.

"Yeah, especially when we have another mouth to feed," she laughed. Todd and I looked at each other, then at them. Another mouth?

Some people break the news directly. Others, with subtlety.

On the drive home, I pointed to a pontoon plane tied to a dock adjoining a lakefront house. "Do you believe the wealth around here?"

Of course not, not on what we were making — we were nearly as impoverished as them, and Todd thought we couldn't afford a child?

This time we came back through freezing rain that plastered snow to evergreens at higher elevations until petering out as desert rain that didn't add up to diddly.

Todd looked into the mirror. Our AUM emblem ran out the rear window.

Blue hills, pink skies.

Pink hills, blue skies.

Surrounding the valley where we lived. Cresting the last ridge, I looked down to see a panorama of electric lights blinking.

Blinking in this field of karma, the reminder:

Check the tires every morning.

TWILIGHT SMOKE

WHEN DID WE FIRST notice it was now dark when we sat down to dinner? Or how long since we'd listened to the Calgary or San Francisco radio stations — the ones that come in only at night, an AM band phenomenon and our only options for classical music broadcasts here. Overnight, it seemed, we were back in winter, even when the sun still seemed to set in the north. All the leaves aground turned black in a winter-tight grip.

A week before Thanksgiving, the first snow hit the valley, closing the freeway north of town. "I had to drive down the canyon highway," I complained. "Traffic was real heavy, too."

"Should I be clear or be clever?" Todd wondered, addressing the question: "Did Christianity change the Romans, or vice versa?"

"Vestal virgins simply become nuns," I replied.

The Reformation, he concluded, was one more uprising of Germanic tribes against heavy Roman tribute.

"Life's hardly more than getting from peak to peak."

"Most of the time, it seems we're stuck down in the valley."

It was one more unvoiced element of history. Maybe we were entering our own Dark Ages. Strange things were happening. When geese flew south and honked

above the screen door, our puppy went bananas. More than that, though, I was resisting coming home on weekends. I wanted to stay on campus. Work, I said. Todd wanted to visit. I resisted. Our sex life, such as it had become, was pretty conventional. I blamed a yeast infection or endometriosis or simple pain — anything but a headache. Speaking of my friends at school, one name, especially, pained him. I denied it was anything more than friendship, yet Todd felt a gut-level suspicion. Which should you trust? Finally, I announced I was going to British Columbia for the weekend. "You wouldn't be very comfortable with my friends," I said. "You wouldn't be very welcome."

"Is it Erik?" he said bluntly.

"What?"

"You heard me. Is it Erik?"

I could honestly say he wasn't coming. "It's just a bunch of buddies. Some crazy pals. You don't want to stay up all night listening to tipsy girls jabbering. I know you."

He had to admit I was right. Except it wasn't all girlfriends.

The fact was that Erik was rarely home when I called or stopped by, although a few times I thought he was and just didn't answer. I was feeling rejected. I had no idea what was up with him these days. He usually mumbled something about working and working hard, but that just didn't seem to be his nature.

I suspected there was someone else or maybe it was just Jaya.

Just Jaya? Maybe he'd simply wised up.

I wished I could do the same with Todd, but the fire just wasn't there.

A few days later, in the twilight on his drive home from work, a bald eagle sat in a tree by the freeway. Todd pulled over to watch. Shortly after that, not far away, a great blue heron landed in the top of a riverside Douglas fir at dusk.

When I did come home, it seemed to be more for the puppy than for my husband.

"Have you noticed what a fine hunter he's become since we moved to the orchard?" The combination of intelligence and agility served him well, until he caught a bird that had devoured strychnine-tainted seed washed out from a buried trench. The strategy had been to knock off the pocket gophers that can eat an entire apple tree, beginning with the roots. They suck the seedlings in, until only the tips of the tallest branches are left.

Other weekends, I went off with my buddies.

All right. An old friend had moved to Seattle. She asked Todd to come over. The last place he wanted to be this weekend was stuck in the valley. He phoned and went. Welcomed the opportunity to get away. Needed a change. Lately, he'd felt reduced to an emulsion. With her friends, he went crabbing in the dark. Spider crab,

rock crab, Dungeness crab, mostly. First, an auto battery was removed, connected to a headlamp. They shoved off from the dock. Out on the water, one person pointed the light into the depths. Another used a garden rake to sweep the crustaceans into the boat, where the others collected them. You locate crabs most frequently beside decaying starfish. Underwater theater. A tire here, a large rock there. But mostly mud, at least where he looked. Puttering between two islands, her friends point out a seal. "He often follows us when we're fishing. We usually don't see him at night, though. You're lucky." The seal had been a regular over the years, almost a pet, despite all the houses ringing the shore. But where, exactly, did it live on these islands between the neighboring cities of Seattle and Tacoma? Returning to their yard, her friends nodded toward a sailboat they were building. "Its hull's made of poured concrete," they laughed. "Don't worry, we know it will float!"

Around midnight, the two of them left. The ferryman's rudeness was a shock. Evil glances and poor directions, as if you ought to know everything that's needed rather than expect any guidance. Todd nearly yelled, "Look, you buffoon! It's all new to me! Take your big hourly wage and cram it!"

"Give a man a uniform and he thinks he's a general," she grinned.

In a cardboard box behind Todd and Dena, the critters scratched away for the entire drive. Finally, in her kitchen, they slipped them into a boiling pot and

dined by candlelight at 2 a.m. even though Dena had to be at her job in six hours. ("But, oh, not me," Todd smiled, knowing she'd let him sleep as late as he wanted on his day off.

These days, it seemed he was alive only on his days off, even if he spent half of that time sawing Zs. "You need it," she comforted. Sometimes, she possessed an X-ray of his soul, knowing when to nurse and when to push. Sometimes.

It had been so long since they'd been together, and yet she always remained special. She wanted Todd, even when he crumpled, repeatedly, at the crucial moment. "It's all right," she said. "It just shows that you're still confused."

Even so, it was the best loving he'd had in months — something he never thought he'd attempt behind his wife's back, not even when the artists' model back in the Ozarks had so blatantly pursued him.

In the late morning, Dena's roommate stayed home and padded about in a robe. "Why do I meet attractive women only when I'm already involved?" he wondered.

Todd needed to face his feelings. Admit his wife's become more and more a cloud or a fog than a fleshy creature. Todd, of all people, needed an earthy lover more than another spirit. Maybe he should have simply admitted his error in marrying me rather than Dena, who had, to be honest, once or twice turned him down yet stayed in touch. We two were quite different, indeed, but examined closely, her values didn't vary

from his nearly as much as mine did. Some things come clear only over time. As he was discovering in his desert.

In the afternoon, traveling homeward, he spent his last two bucks on a grilled cheese sandwich and a Coke at the Stampede Pass Diner, a 1910 Northern Pacific diner car with dark wood paneling and dark window shades. Obviously, the room was once very classy. Now, with a countertop running down the middle and stools for eaters on one side, there was hardly enough space behind the divider for two fat women, both in their seventies, to work. "Fat is best — heat in the winter, shade in the summer," they'd tell their customers. The car once worked the North Coast Limited Seattle-Chicago run and was one of the few diners in the entire state.

So much for romance.

Yielding to emotions other than pride, he turned off the freeway and stopped at my apartment to see if I was back yet. Nor was I at my studio. All through the canyon, he wished he hadn't given in to those feelings, but when he arrived in the orchard, a note was taped to the kitchen door. We'd simply missed connections. On the phone later, I said the weekend wasn't the same without him. I then spoke of a candy machine in the lounge near her studio: "The crazy thing dispenses money as well as calories, if you know how it's done. An older student saw me there tonight and must have seen my Cheshire Cat grin, too, because he said, 'Oh, damn,

you beat me to it!" Seems everybody's on to that jackpot."

"So why doesn't the vendor repair it? Surely he has some inkling he's not making any money."

"Beats me."

Todd laughed, too, not realizing that as far as life is concerned, I could be a lot like that candy machine — sweetly unprofitable.

Still, as the next day's headline proclaimed: Big Bucks Swing Elections. The details were coming to light.

OFFICIAL WINTER

DISTANT DOGS BARKED all night. At stars or drunken strangers. Or maybe just the tensions running through my emotions and dreams.

When I came home again, there was fresh snow on the ground.

"It's Christmas!" I bubbled three weeks too early while handing Todd a set of photocopies I'd picked up in the college library. Rereading the text a third time, he was comforted to know others shared his latest line of thinking.

That night, in Wes and Emma's basement, Erik delighted in teaching me to jitterbug. On the other hand, Todd just couldn't get the hang of it, no matter how much he tried. Wes and Emma were more than guides, of course. More than neighbors. They were more like family by now.

It was comfortable enough that Jaya could collapse in a beanbag chair in the corner, where she was dozing, no matter the loud dance tunes. She was beat, no doubt about it.

That night, something prompted Todd to improvise a mattress on our living room floor. There, by candlelight, we sipped wine, caressed, and kissed. As we slept, he dreamed of sex with a cheerleader and the freckled twins from high school all at once. For the

moment, he was rooted and flying simultaneously. Attentively, I harvested even his dreaming.

As the sun shot its first rays through the window overhead, I did my part to see that Todd's shaft was also rising and ready to shoot through *my* window. He soon had a dopey smile on his snoozy face, one I couldn't refrain from licking. Actually, I wondered if I could lick it off, like chocolate syrup. Which gave me another idea. I shifted and was about to rise to see what we had in the refrigerator, but he grabbed my waist with both hands and rolled on top of me. It wasn't a bad way to start the day. Not at all.

That silly grin lingered all morning. I knew I had nothing to fear with that cheerleader and the twins. They could all join us under the covers, as far I was concerned, if it could just strengthen what had drawn me to Todd all along. Or if something in the sisterhood could heal the rift in my own desires and ambitions.

Before I returned to school that weekend, more snow fell. The storm scattered flocks of khaki and yellow leaves atop six inches of white powder. In a few more days, its surface turned rough, its bumpy glaze held unanticipated memories, for I had associated shiny surfaces with smoothness. The snowy fields and slopes held only blue for contrast — a cloudless sky, smoky orchards, forests crowning distant ridges of the South Cascades, the shadows themselves — until the sun poured gold into grooved bark and slashes. As if apologizing for the previous winter droughts, another late autumn storm fluffs through the valley,

challenging my Friday afternoon drive home and prompting me to borrow a ski-sled from the locked barn when I found the Binnie and Fay had taken off for the weekend. "Careful, now," Todd coaxed as I entered by the side door.

I screamed as we zoomed through the midnight orchard on broad blades that kept us from sinking in the foot-deep fleece. "Jump off if you're gonna hit a tree!" I squealed as they careened around a natural obstacle course. When we finally rolled over into the cold mush, I laughed wildly: "I'll be damned! The crazy thing's made right here in Katonkah!" Sure enough, examining the sled's label confirmed it was manufactured two blocks from Todd's lab.

Winter came on harder and earlier than usual. When I arrived home the next week — this time for Christmas break — we were hit with another snowfall. The radio the next morning reported the storm's severity: blowing snow and heavy gusts had closed Snoqualmie Pass, the lower, "all-weather" connection to major civilization and the coast. Chinook Pass was, of course, already closed solid, presumably until late spring or early summer.

This range of climatic variations paralleled what I once sought in the lines and chords of music: a voice from beyond, the tracking of some timeless maker of motion. You could even seek a thread to the character of each land you've inhabited and perhaps even each person you've known along the way. Certainly, as Jaya would argue, each true lover is a touchstone to the

universe. Maybe the volatile play of light in a fiery sunset or pristine sunrise is nothing more than Maya's delusion, a trap for the unwary, but a wealth of knowledge lurks even there. I watched the white edge of a cloud outline the crest of the ridge behind our house, like a bit of writing itself. I, too, had been set adrift believing there's a lens through which all other beauty will appear, however briefly and incomprehensibly. If I only had a way to approach this.

That night, Binnie dropped by. "I need some tobacco. Wanna ride along to the reservation smoke shack?" Actually, what he wanted was to surprise me with his newly acquired Mercedes-Benz. It ran like a rhapsody. "Safety was a primary consideration in deciding to buy," he said, going into a list of what would and would not happen in a crash compared to the damage other models could expect.

"Come on, Binnie, 'fess up. That's not the real reason bought it."

"Well, the price was right and it had been owned by an old priest who was the only one to drive it." We both wanted to believe the story, even when Binnie named the father.

Our Christmas was a low-key affair. Todd gave me the loom, as we'd planned. And I gave him the painting, which left him momentarily speechless.

"Lucy, it's — Lucy, it's so much you and so gorgeous. So this is what you and Erik were up to?"

I told him it was.

"Then I owe you a deep apology. I had it so wrong. It's just after what we went through back in the Ozarks, well, nothing was quite the same after. Not between Erik and me, either."

I accepted the apology as best I could, even though he'd been right in regard to his suspicions. As least we had some time together for a change.

New Year's Day began the coldest two weeks in the valley's history. The water line to the shanty froze, and Binnie's efforts to thaw the line proved useless. We carried water from the wash house and took showers in the Binnie and Fay's basement. "We're just like the pioneers," I joked, assuming a trooper pose.

We weren't alone in our affliction. Jaya and Erik and a few others living as we were also suffered without running water.

On my end, it was more than water. As far as Todd was concerned, I'd frozen up, too. And his blowtorch wasn't thawing me. I might as well stay bundled up.

Soon the routine of my weekend commutes resumed. Todd spent far too many hours at the lab and felt trapped in his own routine.

"We haven't been out of this valley in ages," he complained when I walked through the door. "At least, not together. Not since we went to Mount Adams, and that's really part of the valley."

"What do you have in mind? We can't afford to go anywhere."

"I don't care. I'd like to see a foreign film, go to an art museum, hit a couple of real bookstores."

"What about the weather. Didn't they just shut Snoqualmie again?"

"Avalanche, this time. So? Just means the state highway crews are busy. Anyway, while I was waiting for you to get home, the thought struck me: we always go to Seattle. We've never been to Portland, and it's just about the same distance. Besides, Satus Pass is pretty low, and it's further out on the dry side of the mountains, so it's one of the last ones they close. As long as it's open, the rest of the trip should be a cinch. It's simply a matter of following the river gorge a little further than we did when we went to Adams last summer."

"You're just getting shack-wacky."

"Me? I thought you were the one who likes going to big cities and spending money."

"I do," I said, wide-eyed. "Let's go."

We rose early the next morning for our day trip. Instead of snow, rain funneled from the Pacific into the Columbia River gorge made our car buck. Gray clouds bolted to the nearest mountainsides kept us from seeing much of anything except whitecaps on the foaming river. Our one break, in the heart of what should have been tall mountains, was at Multnomah Falls, its white

stream plunging five hundred feet into the void. We barely saw its top.

"Good thing for all the postcards in the gift shop," I said. "Otherwise, we'd never know what it's supposed to look like."

I bought a half-dozen of Mount St. Helens, which had stayed shrouded in clouds.

I enjoyed driving. Didn't complain once I was behind the wheel, even though I'd said, "I don't wanna drive." Even so, Todd enjoyed simply sitting back for the ride while it lasted.

An hour later, we were pressed in by cars and trucks, sirens and freight trains. Observed more people in an hour than he'd seen in the previous month — all dressed stylishly by comparison. The stores had goods I'd never find back home. We broke down and bought a pasta maker, something I insisted I'd always wanted. Lunching on tomatoes and cucumbers in sour cream, French bread, and cold Cornish hen, or even sipping espresso in a piano bar, should not seem extraordinary. But for the two country bumpkins we'd become, it was all wonder. Even the traipse through a museum filled with third-rate European paintings and second-rate Northwest Indian carvings only caused me to degrade my own efforts: "I've done nothing good in two semesters," I complained.

"If it weren't for occasional difficulties, life would be boring," he shrugged, in an attempt at comfort.

His own flashpoint could explode quickly enough. The anger ignited when going to a city. Todd, who always considered himself an urbanite, with his interests in fine arts and economics, instead reacted much as his own father had the few times his family vacation entered a metropolis. Traffic and parking problems, of course. Even so, when he was on a street corner, people would ask him for directions. In a store, they turn to him, thinking he's one of the clerks. That should be a clue to his demeanor. And he's always sorry he can't help them. Maybe the reaction arises from a feeling of poverty: already, fuel, parking, lunch, museum admission, and the pasta maker had devoured most of a week's pay, and we still had a movie, dinner, and who-knows-what-else ahead. And we weren't even planning to stay overnight. No wonder he was hit with despair or depression — a guilt over not being able to provide his wife with a flashy lifestyle. We drove past mansions overlooking lush parks and considered the admission to the zoo before turning back toward downtown, where we finally picked up a half-dozen new books and two bottles of Oregon white wine, and hit an Italian comedy before heading home in the dark.

While we were gone, more snow had hit the valley. Even Satus Pass was treacherous. The orchard had another twelve inches. "I'm sure glad our car can handle this kind of weather," I said as we crept along. According to the radio, conditions would remain slick. A danger of rain, too, with another storm from Hawaii on the heels of this foul weather from the Yukon.

Returning to the rhythm of our orchard living, we carried more buckets to the house and settled in for the night. There was tension we tried to escape. Nobody wanted to discuss it or even knows how. It was a place, too, in Todd's private landscape he'd need to explore, if we could only find a entry. And that was more than an avalanche.

Instead, the next morning I sat and watched clouds on Rattlesnake Ridge. The clear plastic window Todd had created in the now weather-film-enclosed back porch aligned with the crest of the foothill. When the air was mild enough, I'd settle in there to read or take notes, looking up from time to time to view what I also saw as an invisible sign, WATCH OUT FOR SNAKES, whatever kind I'd prefer to consider. Now that I'd stapled rolls of insulation to the ceiling, I found the space comfortable most days, thanks to a portable electric heater, if I also wrapped myself in a blanket.

According to my horoscope, the following weekend was "unfavorable," so I simply hung loose. Walked down the lane for a solitary piece of junk mail in the box. Then I accompanied Todd to a natural food coop he'd found. Came home again and made love — he pinned me against the bedroom doorframe and kissed me passionately, which led me to pulled him down on top of me on the bed — while a persistent drizzle outside turned a foot of snow into slush. An hour before sundown, the sky cleared enough to reveal another gray front crossing into the valley.

"What's happening? Glaze, rot, half-melt, slush, new snow coming. This is crazy!"

Actually, it was a lot like my mood swings. He never knew what to expect.

The next morning it was my turn to feel disoriented as his hand moved along my thigh and I reached out for it to pull it home. It was dreamy, especially as his lips moved down my side and took over. I spread my legs, ran my fingers through his curly hair, and arched my back. I started to say, "Oh, Erik!" but caught myself in time to make it simply, "Oh! Oh!"

I came close to blowing it. And then I came, big time.

I decided I better return the favor.

Here, again, I could compare my two men. One was circumcised, one was natural. One was thicker, and one was longer. Did I like one more than the other? No, the one I liked more was whichever one I had at the moment. Or the person who was wielding it.

Todd filled my mouth and then some. I had to swallow hard. And then I really swallowed. I had tears at the corners of my eyes.

How long could this continue, this duplicity, even when Erik was rarely in the picture anymore?

Something had to change. It really did.

The radio reported Snoqualmie's fourth closing of the season thus far, and we were only halfway into

"official winter." Traditionally, March and April were the heaviest months for snow, at least in the mountains — a stretch we were just entering.

My father shouted on the telephone: "Why don't you raise some marijuana, get some quick cash and buy a house?"

Evelyn: "Yeah, we got a gang here. Jack's out there swinging the lantern."

I wondered. Isn't there an honest way to get rich — fast?

At last, we drove to the mountains and hiked, while I pulled my usual, keeping him from trekking far. On the trip out, when we stopped for blueberry pancakes, a peroxide cut in front of him at the cashier's. "I can't believe this!" I whimpered. "I'm never coming back."

Tipsoo Lake emerged as waterlogged snow, yawning, even when a license plate pulled in: "2 SEXY."

A week later, my clutch gave out. Todd started to say, "Lucy's crotch gave out." That, too.

I held him to a promise to buy fireworks, and then it was too windy to use them after dark. "We don't fit in anywhere," I said.

Red Chinese fireworks. Or Chinese red fireworks? He took me out to hear folksingers instead.

Later, we went out to breakfast, where an older couple who arrived later got seated by the hostess before we did. I hit the ceiling. There were more

explosions: two or three arguments on Saturday — I even threw a box of canning jars across the yard in the afternoon and wondered what was happening to me. When I was incredibly bitchy, should he whack me or ignore me? Anything could mean trouble these days. I was worse than that volcano.

~*~

When I took off with his wilderness-use sunglasses without asking permission, I replied to his objections: "You're not my father. You make me feel like a thing." Then I added: "I don't feel as free or as grown up at home as I do at school."

Lemme sing the blues, he thought.

Erik's latest work explored fresh images: coyote, rabbit, pig, dog, triangles and Xs and circles, all with good composition, a strong sense of color. It all made sense to me. Maybe the only thing that did these days.

All of my upheavals formed a riptide dragging Todd ever farther from Dena. Maybe it was his fate, that she should remain more his guardian angel than his lover. Over the years their timing had always been slightly out of sync, anyway — when he was free, she wasn't, and when she was free, he wasn't. Remarkably, I had no idea how close I'd come to finally losing him. Maybe it was instinct that caused me to come back to our bunkhouse when he was uncharacteristically gone. Maybe it was a fear of losing him.

Dena was right: "It just shows that you're still confused." Actually, Todd was a lot more than a little confused.

Pulling into the orchard, I noticed how spongy the driveway had become. How rutted the grade, too, as the runoff thawed and froze again. The snow rotted, then glazed over, so there were both bare mud and miniature glaciers. The southern exposure of Rattlesnake had pretty much cleared of snow again. I expected another scudded weekend. Despite these signs of warming, the nights remained uncommonly cold. Binnie's diesel Mercedes wouldn't start half the time, and he was also having trouble with the pickup, our water line, and Lord knows what else.

But crab was plentiful. Maybe barely breaking even gave Todd all the more urgency to splurge on a great meal once a week, usually Friday or Saturday night with me.

Monday morning, as I stepped from the back door, a funny looking critter stared back, as if to shout: JACKRABBIT, the first one I'd seen in the orchard. HOO-EE, and I was off to school.

"Soon, very soon, all this will be bird chatter and opening seed," I whispered, grinning.

With decay and rot everywhere in the orchard and with the canal path buried in piles still to be leveled, Todd was unable to walk much all winter — too damn many responsibilities, too. Sometimes the valley was a prison he might escape by digging out. As the ground

thawed, he could spade the garden. Lettuce, eggplant, broccoli were sprouting in kitchen flats, thanks to me.

I handed him a bundle of laundry as I arrived for another weekend.

One Tuesday noon, I unexpectedly came home — depressed. He took me out to lunch, then felt guilty for taking an hour and ten minutes, even though he was working twelve-hour days. "What is your problem?" I asked.

On the night highway, Indian and cowboy drunks speeded by in Lincoln Continentals.

I divulged the latest on Erik, who was jailed for forty-eight hours.

At least he wasn't driving the truck the kid sanded by hand before replacing the transmission and engine, redesigning the interior, painting and waxing the outside, and turning the machine into a boffo rocket.

"He's too cool for his own good," I said.

"Erik? Or the kid?"

"Both."

Cheered by some look or touch, I returned to campus for the rest of the week.

IN COMRADES' HALL

THESE DAYS, I SAW TODD as low tide. He still hadn't caught a fish, though the Old Man speared bullhead and flounder, filling his line while he simply sat.

We went to his place for dinner. I carried my bag. The Old Man asked what we'd like and suggested roast flounder. I slipped leftovers in my bag.

Then we went to Seal's and woke her. "Oh! You've come," she laughed and ordered her oldest daughter to nap, wait, then whacked her with an ancient club.

The kid flopped around a bit and died. Mama Seal dragged the daughter to the basement, singed the girl's hair, skinned her, removed the fat, heated rocks, and made a tureen of soup. I put leftovers on a stick I slipped in my bag.

We went on to visit Heron, but he seemed to sense what we were up to. "Psst!" I whispered to Todd, "I don't see any food," and then smiled and spoke loudly, "How 'bout some tricks!" The old bird took a single salmon egg and heated rocks. Presto! When he raised the lid, the pot was full of caviar.

"Well! That's some kind of bird," I whistled.

Beaver's house was faraway. Holding our noses, we dove five times before finding the underwater door. Inside, we looked around the gloom and saw only sappy

sticks. Beaver scarcely moved. He'd been fishing all night.

"We can't eat saplings," I huffed.

"Close your eyes," which we did, tasting first-class seafood. When we opened our eyes, the plates held only green sprouts, no bones. We shut our eyes again. Salmon. That's Beaver's way, we guessed.

Then in canoes the neighbors come in their turn.

First the Old Man showed up at our door. "Whoa! There's no such thing as a free lunch," Todd whispered. We offered him a poached fish.

"Of course I caught it! What do you think?" he insisted as I remained tearfully beside my stove.

When Mama Seal came, I told Todd not to worry. We summoned our landlord's younger son and kicked him until he expired. We couldn't decide how to cook him, so we plucked his hair and heated rocks. Seal peeked in the kitchen and nearly fainted. "Whew! You should be ashamed of what you've done!" Instead of calling the police, she summoned her children and all five came running, even the one she'd whomped and cooked.

"I restored the child by not cooking her forehead," she admitted.

Hoo-ee! I was so overcome I ran away. Mama Seal found the son's head uncooked, blew on it five times, and plunked it into the circular above-ground

swimming pool. At last, as he walked through the door, Mama Seal stomped out mad as hell just as Heron came over the horizon.

I prepared the vessel using the Old Man's secret recipe for a single salmon egg. But when I raised the lid, there was only a rubber ball. This time, I fainted.

Heron shook his head. "This is awful. Let's start over." He ordered me to clean the pot before he left.

When I came to, the pot was full. Todd started cursing Heron's bad manners so loudly I couldn't tell him the true story.

"Shh! Beaver's waddling in."

I interrupted Todd's tirade, grabbed a knife, dashed out to cut willow and alder sprouts, and wobbled back under a full pack. "I've been fishing and just got back!" I greeted our guest. Beaver closed his eyes and ate. Then ate some more. He asked for thirds. At last he rose and thanked us.

Coyote knocked on the door. "Trick or treat! Ha-ha! Just joking!" Then he stared squarely at us and intoned: "Don't attempt what you can't do. If people have power, they'll be able. If they don't, they'll fail. Look, if you just scout around for danger, you'll have plenty to eat. Remember that, both of you."

At least that's how I saw it.

But Todd kept thinking about blue jays and magpies.

"You really have to stop reading all those ethnology reports," he insisted. "It's warping your vision."

That night, Todd's boss had mechanical trouble and left his car two hundred yards from home. He locked it beside their country road. By morning, the door window was smashed, the door frame itself bent by a crowbar and the interior ransacked for nothing more than an electronic door opener. It would cost a fortune to repair. We could see that in too many ways what had once appeared as our Promised Land held a surprising number of defects as well.

~*~

I dreamed I was digging camas roots for Grandma, even when the old lady wouldn't eat or speak but just sat rocking with her back to the fire, a resentful old bitch.

"I was digging up roots when four girls came and seized me. What else could I do? I decided it might be OK, so I stepped into their long strides and danced round their mountain. They gave me to their little brother, who was kinda cute. Next morning they told me I'd be their slave. Preserve their meat, hanging it to dry. Work their hides in water. I never knew where they went all day. A baby grew in my belly. Thinking of Grandma saddened me. I cried and quarreled until they asked if I'd like to go home. They packed my bags and a picnic. We had come half-way when they placed the little one in my armpit. 'Don't take him off until we get home,' they said. But he cried and cried. When they

turned their backs, I took him down and gave him my breast. Then I saw them coming and, before I could protest, he was theirs again. They skipped around me, slapping me repeatedly, and yanked him away. I sank into the ground.

"When Grandma found me and the child, she noticed dance steps as well. She dug me up and took me home, her little camas root."

Now Todd suspected I'd been reading his ethnology notes on the sly. Inexplicably, I suddenly recalled a great-great-aunt who had been stood up at the altar, remained indoors the ensuing year, then left town forever and kept clear of men. Maybe all that the male connects.

Todd knew one feeling, for sure: he was out of sorts when he wasn't producing. "Building is working, so to speak." Trying to find the connections. Just like a spider, in the air. Or a beaver, in the stream.

So what was he producing with me?

All I could see was friction.

~*~

Once removed from the childhood home, a person will find something missing in all other dwellings. It's nothing to hold against any crossroads, but the girls a boy desired; or the boys who chased skirts as well as baseballs, basketballs, and footballs; the families they knew and will know — multiply whatever dimensions are needed — place the individual fully balanced in

lightness and shadow. Whatever mystique has drawn men to seas or distant warfare is all the more perplexing. Even Eden had its flaws.

Todd remembered soft skin and what could have been if she hadn't spoken a racist thought just then, that cheerleader in his high school. Or another, in another region, married now somewhere not much south of where we now lived. Home? He was just a tired rambler.

So here we were.

Marriage is a place two enter. It's a ground of discovery and more. Together the couple nurtures it according to their abilities.

Wes and Emma understood.

I wish we did.

~*~

A bald eagle that roosted on a branch over the river the entire winter was still there Monday morning. That evening, it was gone, and Todd saw it no more.

This much I could say:

The desert is the epitome of lonely.

Could Todd talk to that eagle? Sit down for a drink? Tell him about me?

I could listen to all those tractors in the distance and want to cry.

COME SPRINGING

EVEN WITH PREMONITIONS of spring all about, the air remained viciously cold. Todd spent most of one evening trying to fix the plastic film encasing the back porch, which shredded in high wind. Then, with Binnie's assistance, he attempted to wrap more heat tape around the frozen pipes under our floor. In addition, it was time to see if the forced bulbs I'd stored in the barn were dead, since I'd done about everything wrong, or if they'd actually bloom.

Even so, except for the frozen water line, spring was coming on too fast for our sensibilities. Despite my dull depression, flocks sang lustily, trees budded, lilacs hinted of lavender, bunchgrass shoots appeared with a red-streaked base.

On Good Friday, a strange sound under the house awakened Todd. Gurgling. Which also proved the line hadn't burst halfway between the pump house and our kitchen. About an hour later, Todd crawled from bed to take his first shower at home in three months. Returned to his blankets with fresh java. Before leaving for the lab, he caught up on some overdue chores — cooking, washing dishes, and scrubbing the floors, before his wife's weekly return.

That weekend, he investigated the ridge behind our orchard one last time before rattlesnakes reclaimed their preserve. This time, he found a cow skull to carry

home. From the crest he couldn't see me in that white pebble just beyond his feet. In a few more hours we'd be sunbathing at its back porch. In the barnyard far below him, I was telling Fay in an annoyed tone, "My old Toad's finding cow skulls in bunchgrass."

The orchard itself hummed with a multitude of bees. From four hives set close to our porch, bees shimmered everywhere as they feathered the emerging blossoms. Again the plentitude of wild asparagus along the irrigation canal amazed us: the more spears we cut, the more we'd get, in ways that exceed tautology: the heads grew back fatter, and cut stems wouldn't go as quickly to seed. We engorged ourselves, wielding the big skillet to caramelize the stalks in butter.

When the cherry blossoms open, apricot petals fall like snow. In one cherry bloom, I saw bees pulsate. Listening closely, I learned what Japanese monkeys have long known — far to the west, "flowers" always express cherry blossoms unless otherwise noted. When most of the apricot petals vanish overnight, reddish balls — throats of each blossom — dominate the limbs. What starts out half-white and half-red becomes almost totally white before russet reasserts itself ever more forcefully. This is how it's been forever.

The puppy awakened Todd at three-thirty. He showered and prepared to study but heard wind machines braying like turboprop airplanes unsuccessfully seeking takeoff. The neighbor's cherry grove was already aglow. Dull orange flames flickered like coals; shadows played within and over expanses of

orchards, resembling forest fires that in daylight appear as smoke rather than flames. As the frost line climbed from the base of the river, our neighbors began firing their pots, too. Todd had never before seen this ritual, although others had tried to explain. When the sun slid into vision, smudge pots no longer glowed, even though they were blazing within. Their steel chimneys instead looked white.

Millions of clusters blossomed on the morning trees. Pears, peaches, a few plum blooms had opened. In white pear flower clusters, there was only a touch of yellow, and none of apricot's deep pink. Peaches are pink and emit the stronger odor. Plums, too, are white. All open when nobody's looking — it's days, in fact, before anyone really notices. We tried the best we could, observing first-hand.

Todd and I squabbled most of the weekend, mostly about money as he tried to determine where it was going. He kept saying we couldn't afford anything. I countered with, "What am I worth to you?" That probably wasn't such a good idea. Even I could see he wasn't getting his money's worth.

We had both tired of our weekly separations, the treadmill, my failure to be exactly where I wanted. We traced the various geographies within our lives. The Pacific Northwest, of course, was the place he had promised to bring me, a promise he'd miraculously kept. Yes, many times I'd rather be living in Seattle or even in a more secluded setting than this one. Something was missing in this expanse: a wider circle

of close friends, for starters. The fellow Darshan mystics here were often older and scattered among other pursuits. Sometimes Jaya was the only one present for worship; at other times, there would be up to forty. Todd yearned for foreign films, opera, chamber music, galleries, and poetry readings. Financially, he was tired of living like a student. Here he was, classified as management and still impoverished. Domestically, he wanted a family, not just a wife — a student wife, at that. In the bigger picture, there were minor accomplishments and major setbacks as he circulated his findings to conferences and journals. Never mind the maps. Did he dare articulate his internal struggles? Instead, he'd insist he was happy. Saturday night, we bedded down at eight after feasting on a beautiful filet of sole served on our own new lettuce. We made love Sunday morning. What more could anyone desire?

As if I didn't already have the list started.

~*~

A week of mountain cold brought delightful, sunny, sweater weather to the valley. Copious clouds played. I went off to Seattle with Erik to pick up weaving supplies. We stayed over and saw a movie.

Todd and I went separate ways all too often.

One weekend I set off to Seattle to be with my friends. Todd headed off to be with his, too. In separate cars. There he was, watching *Doctor Strangelove*, when I trooped in with a dozen artists only I seemed to know.

I'd not yet met the hostess, whose home and television my colleagues and I invaded.

~*~

A week later, recognizing his own restlessness, Todd headed north to Leavenworth, stopping to pick me up. As we drove, I argued with everything — especially when he parked along the creek to explore what turned out to be a series of abandoned gold mines. Beside the roaring water, he put a hand in the muck and came up with sparkles.

"That's not gold!" I scoffed.

"Oh, yeah? Look at the side of that cliff. Would anybody drive a mine in there for any other reason?" We'd already passed an 1880s' town that still earned its livelihood mining gold. Placer claims still abounded, and tailings, too.

As I climbed about on that slope, shale broke off in my hands. Footholds slid away. I photographed three more abandoned mines just upstream, their mouths opening about ten feet above the frothing water. What first attracted my attention, however, turned out to be nothing more than a blackened stump. I'd driven this route three dozen times, but this was the first time I'd stopped. Gold Rush details. As we returned to the car, I spied a weekender in the water itself, a man operating a portable placer separator. Finally, I settled down to the idea that there really are gold flecks in this gorge.

Despite its efforts to cash in on the passing tourists, Leavenworth had enough serious, year-round residents to support a small but intense local art colony, as well as bakeries, bookstores, galleries, a foreign-film theater, and butcher shop, in addition to the usual gift shops, souvenir joints, and restaurants. Trying to choose the right place to dine, we walked the length of the downtown, popping our heads in each restaurant while my nose performed the ultimate test. When I said, "It smells good, real good" — which never led us astray — we settled on authentic German cuisine, dining on a balcony hung with boxes of potted red geraniums. Overlooking the street, I ordered a dish that was accompanied by sauerkraut, something I'd detested since childhood. Yet when Todd insisted, I tasted what was surprisingly sweet and had no horrendous bite at all. The potato salad, too, was nothing like any I'd previously known (and disliked). The entrée was weisswurt — a veal sausage as delicate and white as milk. An imported Dortmunder beer crowned my pleasure. "Aren't you glad we're no longer vegetarians?" he asked between bites of strudel.

Afterward, we came upon an intimate promenade and vest-pocket park along the river. Despite previous visits, we had no reason to suspect this place existed, especially not as the place for our long overdue talk. I wanted to leave him, or find some way of my own. I wasn't not sure what my problem was, other than I was unhappy. "What do want from me?" I kept asking, and when he replied he wanted nothing more than to share

with me, to have me with him in his own struggles and growth as well as mine. What more could I say? Sheepishly, we hugged, both feeling something intangible had been cleansed, and returned downtown, passing a restaurant's side garden arranged for a wedding reception, with ribbons and bows running all over. Then we stopped at a Bavarian bakery for Sunday morning coffee beans and "yummies" back home the next morning and at a basket gallery for bleached leaves and stalks for my latest project.

On the drive back, I paid attention to the Forest Service names: DEER GULCH — COUGAR GULCH — HORSE CANYON — OCHER CANYON. Just like home.

"Here, let me look," he insisted. "Yes, it really is ochre." Or, "You need a horse in that canyon." Or a cougar. Or a buck deer. And he entered. And I moaned, predictably, before sleeping in the next morning.

Sunday, as he returned from asparagus cutting along the canal bank, I greeted him with a cry from the bedroom: "Fay just gave me a bush!" while exposing my own as I squeezed into blue jeans as tight as a denim girdle.

I was going to show him the shrub that needed planting, but he pushed me back down and unpeeled my tight jeans. He knew what he wanted to plant, and his spade went in cleaning.

"When a thing gets too easy, it's time to change," I repeated, quoting my favorite professor. Left foot, right foot. Up, down, up, down. In, out, in, out.

All the time, I thought of the phallic heads of asparagus, even as he came. How fine they are in hollandaise sauce or on toast.

And then I ignored the green stalks he brought home. Said he can't do anything right, he always speaks for me, doesn't love me.

As Todd tried to allay me, the apples bloomed fully. On colorful branches, the king buds opened. Then as all five flowers on each cluster expanded, the orchard hissed with clouds of furious honeybees activating fruit-to-be. I envy the bees their sense of purpose, their skill, their community. Did I need to be tended to by a few bees? Sense their wings and pollen quest on my bush? Feel their sting?

Their white boxes move with the blossoms, wintering in California almond groves and migrating north for fruit, wheat, and alfalfa. I, too, had been restless and was moving in a similar rotation. Orchardists rent the hives for several weeks, hoping their own chemical sprays won't kill the colonies, even though each bee lives only a month and a half anyway. In the lilac bush at the perimeter of our yard, bees swarmed and encamped, hanging together like a living football without a home.

"Me, I think I'd want to be one of the fellers on the outside," I said of their fanning the air while Binnie

phoned the agency for a new box. "How will they lure those bees in? Keep 'em warm and centered?" I wondered. Maybe there were lessons for marriage.

"The bees swarm if their queen dies or is injured, or if there are two queens. The new swarm," Binnie explained, "can freeze to death in the night."

How many thousands of bees are there, anyway, wound as tight as a hairdo? All around the hives, I found dead bees.

"Natural causes," Binnie shrugged.

His older son said, "I saw a bee trapped inside a blossom, so I carefully pried the flower open and saw that the bee was dead. I keep wondering about that."

Once the flatbed took the bees north to interior mountains, Binnie began some really serious spraying, starting with insecticides and followed by bud thinners, mildew controls, drop-stop, and more. On the ridge, grass in the heart of spring appeared lighter than an Englishman's finger. Below the canal, everything grew intensely green.

As Erik also knew, where we were living I needed to be watered and raked more than every weekend. We were managing a few trysts, though nothing like before.

The funny thing is I'm not sure I even liked him.

And now I was asking myself, "Is there somebody else?" When we were together, he was usually distracted. The old fire just wasn't crackling, and we'd

fallen into our own routine. A safe one. I looked around our Darshan circle and saw a few possibilities. There were tons more on campus.

That didn't stop him from bringing me a second cow skull.

"Next time, I want a rack of elk antlers," I said, just to see his reaction.

"Elk? I'd love a set, too."

Up close, this springtime desert was a vast, airy garden, though from a distance it seemed mostly a dusty olive film atop a lavender brown — and even then, only the initiated eye detected any green at all. For that matter, any definable color to speak of. Up close, springtime desert contemplates the heart. Within it, clumps of violet phlox appear as well as tiny yellows atop grassy stems, native sunflowers, seeding grasses, clusters of tiny scarlet explosions — all emerging briefly, once a year, at best. Yet from a distance, all of this could be an overflowing dustbin. But where was I in this landscape? With wildflowers carpeting the roadside, my commute flowed through a pale plum haze that had none of the hardness encountered in the furnace cinders of summer, or the pallid embers of autumn, or the dead darkness of winter. Yes, I looked, but this time, the beauty didn't matter. I kept seeing everything from a distance — especially from my heart.

As far as my actions and words were concerned, nothing added up. Things weren't going all that well for

Todd at the lab or in the field, either. Our high hopes kept crashing into entrenched anxiety.

Hoping that simply being with a few familiar people in a scene he knew would offer some comfort, he climbed Mount Cleman a second time, this time in a drizzle with two of his coworkers and their wives. I chose to stay home. Since his companions didn't shut up the whole time, he observed nothing exceptional except for a rattlesnake with its head shot away. Even so, he wished his own wife had come along.

Afterward, I wondered why he didn't bring me the rattles. So what if I was hard to predict, for sure?

He was the one with a snake. As was Erik. But I was the one making warning noises no one could hear, the one about to lash out with a poisonous bite, the one whose head they could shoot away.

Another weekend, come and gone. Like his wife, who returned to college for the week. Going to bed alone once more, he was forced to admit nobody likes a mystic. Scientists and poets are difficult enough. Prophets can be impossible. Who knows about an anthropologist or headline writer? And exactly what was he these days?

Tense and exhausted, he had my term paper to keyboard before taking the typewriter in for repairs; get that damn flying F nailed down.

At my insistence, he bought a picnic table kit. It was cheap, but he still hated spending money we didn't quite have.

It wasn't as though it was a large house. Instead, it was like a fine Swiss watch that worked because everything was in its assigned place.

Typing my seminar term paper until midnight left him so wound he couldn't sleep. At the lab, Police Woman resigned to join the Marines and he was expected to take up slack: a hiring freeze was in effect.

As for the valley's water outlook, the prognosis was dire. There were predictions of old-fashioned shootouts. Gunslingers and all. You have to understand. The Far West is ultimately a Water Empire built on social distinctions and raw power.

On the hill ranch, Wes shot three rattlesnakes. "Don't tell anybody, or we won't be able to get anyone to work there."

"I thought rattlers don't like orchards."

"When it's so parched, they come down for water."

Todd was constantly interrupted when he tried to concentrate. That night at home, when he opened the pages of *Regarding Wave*, an odor of jasmine incense rolled out. If we could only box the ocean's restless motion, uncapping it at moments like these, we'd be billionaires.

Friday night, I took Todd to a party where my favorite prof was already quoting Jack Daniels. Once more Todd didn't fit in. Or so I said. Should he even try?

Next morning, alone in mountains, he ventured off trail to view a two-hundred-foot waterfall. The roar asked why he'd come and answered the question with another mountain. Todd traveled in ways that left no evidence of his presence. Footsteps in snow will melt. Even his walking was quiet. Here, even as an alien, he could fit.

In the morning, I read aloud: "Tomorrow, favorable, new moon coming up."

I thought we could go panning for gold.

Todd had his own idea of a new moon coming up.

I was agreeable, placed a blanket and pillows on the floor, and went to the bathroom to prepare.

And for once, I felt I was cheating. On myself, as much as anyone.

I wanted to tell someone what had been happening in my life. Jaya was out of the question. Erik was too much a part of the action, and Todd was too much in the dark. Emma and Fay weren't options, either. No wonder I was feeling boxed in. As for a therapist? We were back to money.

The next morning, Todd went out to get a bag of pastry while I made coffee. He had a few holes in the

front of his T-shirt. I hadn't put them there. Wasn't much help in keeping him natty these days, either. When he returned, we ate on the blanket on the floor. With one hand, he swept the crumbs from my chest.

I kept skirting the central issue. Asked what was new with Binnie and Fay, and then Wes and Emma. Had he seen Jaya lately? No, she was really drowning in work. Eventually, he started asking his own questions. My own studies, and then Erik.

I continued: "Erik hates to put faces in his artwork. Says as soon as you put a face in, you've determined the emotion for the rest of the piece."

I doubted that was the real reason he'd been wiping out eyes and mouths. He was bulldozing something that was essentially human.

"He hasn't been present lately when he's been present," Todd said. "If you know what I mean."

Yes, for once my husband saw human action clearly. Not just the landscape and substrata.

And then the drought broke. Just when everything seemed hopeless, snow started falling in earnest. Off in the Cascades, it kept piling up. Enough that with care the entire valley might inch through summer, keeping its orchards intact.

All on one month's snowfall. All as perplexing as the changes between anger and delight. Watch my lovely. His changing play of light and shadow.

Dark clouds in the morning, breakaway steel wool.

I wondered, in the vertical array, where to place him.

~*~

I watched a drizzle bead down a chain because there were no gutters or rainspouts per se in the valley.

"Bring me a lemon with bitters on it," I said while regarding my puppy move in its own shadow.

"If you ever fulfill your dream of finding a place and time outside of the system, would you have the self-discipline to set the alarm, meditate, write, and do physical work, too? Rise early and work hard all day?"

I'd never thought that was an issue.

Overnight, the neighbors' cherry crop turned deep red, while in our prayer corner two gardenia blossoms opened.

Thursday evening Binnie greeted Todd: "She picked the cherry tree clean."

"By herself?"

"All by herself." His spunky wife, who had decided to skip classes instead.

As Todd walked through the doorway, a whiff of homemade pizza ripening in the oven turned his head. My surprise. He didn't even wonder what I might want.

Actually, it was pretty simple. Fuck me wildly. Erik's been away, I'm feeling neglected. I wanted proof

of Todd's devotion. My precious husband, as my fallback position!

I wouldn't leave him guessing. We didn't even clean off the dinner table. I took him to the living room, where blankets and pillows were already on the floor. My dress fell away easily enough, and I was wearing nothing under it. I lit candles, turned off the lights, and nestled in. It wasn't exactly Todd I wanted. And it wasn't exactly sex. It was more primitive and exhausting. I wanted proof of something, and I wanted to be punished. But I couldn't tell him any of that. And he wondered why I was crying as I approached climax? I was ready to be pulled inside-out, if he would.

Meanwhile, pears, rosy and smaller than my little finger, grew upside-down until their weight pulled them around to hang fat-end down. This open countryside could be incredibly busy even in the middle of night.

We woke on the floor, and he brought me coffee.

~*~

Along the White Pass highway, while an eldest brother, mother, and pudgy dad changed the flat on their black Mercury, three grade-school boys threw hefty stones from roadside into the river with inordinate violence.

Renouncing any claim to original sin, Erik drove onward, parked the car, hiked cross country and then down an abandoned logging road, past a Jeep with a rifle in the window and its door window unrolled. Sat

by raging waters far off the trail, and then looked up only to see two tan backs a hundred feet away throwing fist-sized rocks, cursing, and splashing in the sunlight. Even so, new larch needles were soft as bunny fur.

I waded in the cold water rather than splashing it on him or asking where he'd been spending all of his time. Instead of asking him who he was with. No, instead I was merely grateful to have a day with him again, before we headed back to our orchards.

Back in Fay's kitchen, I told her the right eye of my new dog had clouded with an infection. I worried, especially since the pregnant canine didn't seem to be growing. I hadn't heard heartbeats when holding the critter to my ear, either.

"Tell her not to fuss, this is fertile ground," Fay counseled.

I gave her the oddest look in reply.

Just as Erik had been doing to me.

His own desire for children was being thwarted by Jaya, for prudent reasons. But what about mine? And how much longer could I wait? For whatever?

~*~

Sometimes Fay's kitties and I would tag along on Todd's evening walk.

Once, I cried out, "Todd! Todd! They got a chipmunk!" Squealing proceeded a flash of ermine. Two

pursuing felines, a mamma kitty and son, hopped through knee-high grass.

"There aren't any chipmunks out here," he reminded me. Run, halt, and then follow, what, a gopher? A squirrel? Whatever, it was hiding in the pear grove. Without breathing, we both froze in place until one tall blade moved out of sync with the wind. Whatever it was scurried across Todd's foot. He jumped, shrieked, and laughed, then froze again. My eyeballs contemplated the jungle aground. I took a step. Todd took a step. I took another and felt whatever it was bolt off across my bare feet and sandals. Whatever it was had been hiding for more than a minute no further than three inches from my toes. I felt its flying feet several seconds before the sensations connected with my logical thinking. So that's what it is? A furry thing like a mink stole? Meanwhile, as a precision team, the cats pursued in a pinching movement until one cornered the critter on a limb.

"Hey!" I cried out. "Gophers don't climb trees!" Our kitten followed the creature clear out to the edge, then promptly retreated in a hissing spat. Leaves rustled with a leap to the next tree, as whatever it was escaped.

Heading back to the house, we pieced together what we could. Agreed on a skinny body and long red tail. Turning to the book, identified a short-tail weasel. "Didn't look like such a short tail to me," I retorted.

"According to this, they kill rabbits and chickens. Cats, too. Maybe that's why ours gave up their pursuit."

Binnie was pleased. "Weasels will go down into gopher holes, root 'em out. Catch mice and rabbits, too. Yeah, that's real good news."

My inventory of wildlife grew while I sang myself, "All around the mulberry bush." But I knew there were still no monkeys in these orchards. Not yet, anyhow. For now, it was mostly monkeyshines.

~*~

We spent a Saturday at home. It was so quiet with the Binnie and Fay gone and the orchard left to rest, we sunbathed naked in the yard while the thermometer extended into the nineties.

I got up to pick tender spring peapods and pluck their umbilical balls, completing another simple rhythm toward summer, while Todd lopped off elm shoots that blocked the garden pathway and branches that shaded the carrots, acts in which he saw himself calling forth sunlight. One simple task led to another. I repainted his improvised prayer flags and pole, so they now looked like Alexander Calder's jetliners — not quite what I envisioned, but bright, nevertheless, and taking flight.

"God, those are garish," he said. "How could you create something so hideous?"

"I didn't hear you offer any assistance. Not with all of your training."

A chill breeze slipped down from the ridge of the wild horses. The flags rippled. Maybe they were braying.

If Todd could only summon some sunlight into our relationship. These days we were separated by more than a canyon, and I was largely a stone wall.

Still, he persisted, taking me the next weekend to Seattle, where, in the middle of yet another fight, we ran into four friends who had just taken part in a 7,000-contestant 10K fun run.

"We're not spending any money," one announced.

"Come on, you can't even park for free," I chided.

"OK, so we spent a dime."

She asked me if I know their friend, Walrus.

"We've met. I really enjoy talking with him."

"Well, they're expecting," she said. "Just got the test results yesterday."

On the drive home, Todd asked, "Who's Walrus?"

I wanted to tell him the tale of Goldilocks and the Three Bears.

Or how, during Erik's party, when he was giving me the cold shoulder, I went for a walk to clear my head a bit. Sober up, actually.

"It's a long story," I said tersely.

That night, rejecting his every caress and kiss, I called Todd weird. It was yet another slap. It had come back to this, so soon after he'd reclaimed more than we realized.

He left the bedroom.

I came after him, this time with my own caresses and demands. "Make love. Now."

He turned to respond, but I turned off again.

NO MORE OF YOU! He wept silently, feeling no companionship. After a whole weekend together, he was willing to throw me out. He'd no loving from me for at least two months and no longer saw any way to save this. I refused to communicate and, Lord knows, he tried.

This time when I said, "I want a divorce," he answered firmly, "OK."

It wasn't what I expected. I started to ask, "Are you sure," but he spoke first. "I guess he'll be very happy to hear this."

My look confirmed everything.

COMMUTING

I HADN'T RECOGNIZED the changes that had come over Todd. He'd become quieter and now sat in meditation and was regular in attending the Darshan circle.

He would have said it was because of Jaya, something she'd said their second night back in the Ozarks, something that clicked so much later.

I thought it was purely spiritual, not knowing how much of it was sexual, as well. Not just tantric, either.

My problem these days was I wasn't quite sure who the other "he" was. Erik would have been the obvious nominee, if he hadn't been so erratic lately. And there were others among my "buddies" I might name, except that they were even less likely partners in the long haul. They just wanted to have fun.

And now I was looking for some kind of routine to cling to. I'd no idea Todd was doing the same.

Every weekday morning, he drove to town — meaning "the lab" or his "paying job." Each morning and evening, the same route in reverse, not as much by choice but by geographic necessity, for the county split into two or three major valleys, depending on how you look at it. The first division, by an anticline desert mountain, created a county with just two points where paved, public roads connected the Upper and Lower Valley. One route wound through the remote pass to my

back. The other cut through Union Gap, where the river cleaved the mountain. In that narrow slash, twin two-lane highways crowded in, one on each side of the river, plus the Northern Pacific railroad and the new freeway, which pressed all three before it crossed the river and promptly squeezed down into two lanes of old highway on my side of the water — a route that worsened the closer it got to Oregon and Idaho.

In the lands of his past, flat countryside is a grid marked by a road every mile. There, anyone can blindly select any number of options to get from Point A to Point B. Here, however, as in many other mountainous areas, roads twist. Often, both ends tie into the same highway. Alternatives are few. Some roads, like ours and the one where we lived in Indiana, even have three ends, all returning to the same highway. Directing around them requires a special set of logistics.

Even when he'd take the same route, the road home differs from the one going in. It's in reverse, of course. In the morning, you're a newborn colt. The trip home originates in a fog, a buzzed-out desire for sanctuary. Curiously, you'll find the road home offers more interest. There's a fuller range of drivers. It's symbolic, perhaps, that the journey begins downtown, then swings onto a freeway passing gravel pits, the city's sewage disposal plant, a small-town motor speedway, a massive truck stop, the mall, the pioneer cemetery, and a pasture of rams, goats, horses, and beef cattle, before following an ice-melt river most of the rest of the way, ending up as an old-fashioned country highway. The

closer he got to home, the freer he felt. Each point along the way would shed another constriction, even in just twelve miles.

As an alternative, he'd occasionally go by way of the pass through the ridge behind our home. Start out by driving in the opposite direction from his destination, then cross Rattlesnake Ridge and drop into the Moxee Basin, an extension of the Upper Valley. From there he could take either of two back roads to the Terrace bridge and enter town where he'd normally leave the freeway. Either way, it was back to the freeway, but the alternative measured thirty-some miles.

He could also leave the freeway at Union Gap, taking the old road into town. That way, however, had stoplights every block or two, to say nothing of the glitzy rats' nests that caused me to threaten divorce when we first came to town. And that route takes twice as much time as the others. Besides, there weren't even many options in town, not with the railroad tracks and freeway severing most streets.

So Todd took the same route day in and day out, checking landmarks as thermometers that conveyed their own secrets.

If he could have taken a route back through the reservation, he would have seen their places resemble ours, except for open doors that animals wandered through. But who's keeping time? Those roads were closed, anyway, for a tribal game reservation. The unwritten message was clear: "Whites, Mexicans, and

Japanese, KEEP OUT!" At the grocery, the Indians appeared so solid next to whites, who would have simply blown away. Maybe it was time for me to return to my own cave.

Beware, though. Todd's commute was also Death Road at night. Rundown cars were bought cheap by illegals would rarely never fixed 'em but drove too fast or just barely poked along, so folks couldn't judge the distance of approaching headlights or their speed. Chicanos? Indios? Anybody got a driver's license?

"Illegal immigrants buy a car without any questions asked," Binnie said. "Not even, 'Ever drive before?' That's why there are a lot of high-speed hit-and-run accidents these days."

They weren't alone. On one son's birthday, the kid unwrapped a portable CB radio. Just what he always wanted. While driving the highway in the dark, he dropped the mic. Reached down to get it. Next thing he knew was the corridor lights as he was wheeled through the hospital.

"Good thing he was driving the Mercedes," Binnie said. "Any other car, he would've been killed."

Binnie, of course, now needed new wheels.

~*~

Another kind of commuting was setting in as Todd headed over the mountains to visit Dena or she rode the bus to see him most weekends.

Near Seattle, as he took her home, they passed the famed Katonkah Fruit Stand, "Canning Headquarters."

"Can't get away from it," she said.

"You don't can," he laughed.

Later, as they rode a ferry, he saw a seal but thought it was a dog's head in the water until a real dog started barking behind him.

Of course, this was accompanied by an underlying anxiety. How did it differ, after all, from the way his weekly routine had been with me? And how long could they sustain it?

~*~

When he returned home, a survey crew was measuring the orchard. "What's up," he asked Binnie.

"Highway Department's considering one of its options for the new freeway down the valley."

"Well, there goes the neighborhood." Todd thought of the noise, auto exhaust, and general disarray.

"Yup, if they decide on this route, there goes the whole damned neighborhood, for sure." All the Darshan buddies. Houses, trees, gophers, and rattlesnakes, too.

The lab sent an investigator out to interview an isolated shepherd atop a sagebrush ridge. "This is where they winter. In the summer, they go up into the high country of the mountains. But the winters down below are much milder."

The young researcher dispatched was offended when the old man blew his nose without a Kleenex or handkerchief. Thought the free-ranger crude, uncouth, as though a guy sixty-five working seven days a week the entire season has time to ride a horse half-a-day to a Laundromat while the sheep go astray. Perhaps the shepherd should get a phone and call the laundry for pickup and delivery?

Maybe I simply envied something in that isolated existence too much. After all, I'd been accused of being a romantic and an airhead, to boot.

Besides, what else could I do?

CELLMATES

TUESDAY, DENA PHONED to say her Trident submarine trial was approaching.

"Just what we need," Todd said. "Now that I'm free, you're becoming a jailbird."

"That's not funny," she said. "Besides, you're definitely not free. You're chained to your job."

They bickered about political involvement. I can't, he insisted, it's a consequence of professional standards.

"They've morally castrated you," she countered.

Instead, he'd write a check when he could.

EXPLOSIONS

DENA AND TWENTY-NINE OTHERS were let off on a technicality. Just don't do it again. Still, he had no idea if she'd actually defy that. For now it bought them more time together.

They never pretended they didn't have our differences. "You believe in the mystical," she explained. "I believe in magic."

Well, as far as he was concerned, she'd always been magical.

On a blistering late spring day, as they splashed around in the circular above-ground pool, Binnie hopped in and announced he'd just bid on a nearby piece of real estate. "I thought you were busy enough with this one."

"Can't let the other one get away," he answered.

A week later, the river raged, wiping out some of the Indian fishing platforms below the dam. Scattered showers produced rainbows three evenings in a row. Fay warned Dena that where people see themselves as friendly, beware: they may be dishonest with themselves. Determine if they're hungry, for some will devour your dreams or spike your children. Jaya's boss had already received several threats on his life. Nobody he told would believe him.

~*~

Late Thursday afternoon, driving homeward through Union Gap, Todd glanced at the irrigation dam in the river. Below, on a tripod platform amid rapids, three Indians wrestled with a fish nearly five feet long.

"Must have been a chinook," a salmon, Binnie said nonchalantly as he reacted to the report.

Todd considered the power such a fish embodies, having survived eleven treacherous turbine dams to get this far and be caught in a dip-net and thrown up on deck. Sex can be a pretty powerful motivator, he reckoned.

So can hunger.

Soon he awakened to uncommon warmth, glare, growling motors, chirping birds, and the hot blinding blast of summer. In his semi-annual sleeping sickness, he can never get enough dreaming.

~*~

Erik suggested a hike near the base of one Cascades pass but warned me to beware of a zillion mining claims. "Get too close and you're likely to get shot," pure and simple. Why hadn't I previously noticed the spikes and ladders so close to the highway? Pika as well as mink and weasel extended their greetings.

I hadn't been to the mountains in ages.

On the drive, the gorge exploded in yellow and purple flowers for a change. Adjusting to monotonous oblivion, I perceived how intense and brief a climax

may be, blazing in a prime that few outsiders would acknowledge. Yet we pulled to the shoulder, parked, and climbed toward a clump of ground-level cacti, the prickly pears Fay had pointed out previously. Their waxy, almost transparent, yellow blossoms were beautiful in a way unlike anything else I knew, yet the needles of their plants could be fatal. As she said, this locality has a rhythm all its own.

For example, she mentioned the worst flooding in the valley's history, which occurred not in March or April, as it commonly would back east, but in June, when heavy high country snowpack melted too quickly under heavy rain. Today irrigation reservoirs and hydropower dams supposedly protect the valley from such consequences but, as she warned, you can never be too sure. These elements, too, appeared in her dancing.

Since leaving Todd, I hadn't seen much of Fay, and I missed her. I was staying largely on campus. I also missed the rhythm of the orchards and surrounding hillsides.

Often, it was just one day after another.

~*~

At the lab, Todd glanced at the clock and stepped out to a circle of co-workers already gathered on the sidewalk. At midmorning, the air began to dim as though preparing to turn liquid. He expected this to be more like clouding over or slipping into twilight. Even so, nothing appeared to change until he felt himself about to faint. Someone handed him a smoked glass to

observe the first sliver bite into the sun's bright orb. He passed the instrument to waiting hands. In a moment, a few stars twinkled. They'd been there all along, just overcome by the brighter light, but the hush was something else. You have no idea how much noise that sun makes, even in an orchard, until the great light goes blotto. In full solar eclipse, as the air chills, wind rises to push forth a sensation of falling. Somewhere down in your body, a preternatural scare stirs up an anxiety that human reason can barely restrain. Forget what science tells us. Siberian shamans know better. Human life's far more precarious than skeptics will admit. There are greater worries, even, than nuclear holocaust. Suddenly, as if reacting to alarm, birds break out in chatter — at first cautiously, with a solo voice, and then boldly in a loud chorus urging light and warmth to return. The moon, coaxed by Orpheus, backed away.

"Did you see the eclipse," everybody asked for a month, as if nobody else had been there.

"Yeah," many answered. "We saw it on television."

Those who stood outdoors encountered something else. The screen can't convey the deep-seated knowledge that even our sun will fail, someday. The mindless screen can't impart the courage that birds exert summoning the great light to return.

I thought about something similar in my own relationships. When Erik and I first became intimate, it was as if he were the moon passing between Todd and

me. It was exotic and breathtaking, but I also felt a chill. And then, as my feelings toward Todd chilled while those toward Erik flared, the situation reversed. One or the other was too often in the way, and there were no songbirds. So now I was left in twilight.

"Bit by bit, a suppliant comes to respect Old Ways in their fullness. The sun, the wind, the river, the endless sand, for starters," as Jaya had said.

But I felt myself totally without direction.

VARIATIONS OF ASCENT AND DESCENT

I ACCEPTED ERIK'S OFFER to take me hiking up the snowfields of Mount Rainier. "I've been to Camp Muir before. I can show you the way," he said.

So we rose before dawn and drove to the trailhead at the Paradise lodge. There we covered our exposed faces, hands, and ears with a white layer of zinc oxide, protection against intensely reflected sun. Then we hefted daypacks and trekked out through pristine spruce-scented air before turning directly up-mountain just past a roaring ice-melt cascade. We wore a style of crushable broad-brimmed hat made popular by a big Seattle outfitter. Erik saluted, "Say, cowboy!" and grinned through Space Age, silvery-mirror goggles. From there on, it's one step after another in a granular freeze as we kicked in fresh steps while leaning on the security of our borrowed ice axes. Buck said nothing about the treacherous glaciers on either side of this long white tongue, crevasses that have swallowed legions of climbers caught ill-prepared for whiteouts that attack rapidly. There's also a danger of avalanches and falling rock. The chilled air echoed with rumbling from above. Now and then, heavily laden overnights, well conditioned climbers with permits and specialized equipment for the summit, passed us. Weary parties also advanced in the opposite direction. Here and there, skiers twisted down the July ramp, finding its mile drop in elevation worth the long climb.

We could have been running around the pool and then floating in its current. Instead, Erik passed the time by talking. "Most Indians around here say they believe in Bigfoot. They all admit to knowing him." Then, as we marched on, he told how some neighbor kids went fishing in a January fog along the river. "None of the Indians will go down there alone. A big dark form came rustling through the brush. The kids shot at it with their .22s. One kid's gun backfired and burned his face. They threw their guns down and ran away. The next day, a farmer found a cow with bullet holes down in a pasture by the river."

I grimaced, unsure quite what to make of the incident.

"Indians won't camp near Satus Pass," Erik continued. "They say Stick People will jab campers in the middle of their sleep."

Stick People?

"Yeah, haven't heard of them? Even in the middle of town, these bastards will your steal your watermelon. I'm told they steal beer, too."

"Tell me more."

"Can't. That's all I know."

"Know anything about the Mice Men?"

"The ones who always finish last?"

"The very ones."

As we climbed, I kept watching vistas of lovely St. Helens, the one the Natives called Loowit. The two names kept rolling over my tongue. One, with its sparkling beginning and ending; the other, with its sensuous birdsong of seduction. Which was I? I no longer felt apple-pie wholesome or all-America fidelity. Certainly not saintly, no, that was for Jaya. Loowit, then, must acknowledge something smoldering under all that whiteness off in that distant bump.

The other distant white bumps were the two rivals for her attention, for my attention, as well, but today my mind's eye returned mostly to myself. Was she really that aloof? And was I?

For now it was simply chug uphill in the snowpack, one foot at a time.

At last, we spotted Camp Muir, two rock bunkhouses where many of the hopefuls sleep before donning their ice crampons hours before dawn and roping up as alpine parties for the exhausting and hazardous mountaineering to the summit and back. The camp resembled photos I'd seen of small Tibetan monasteries. Even so, it took much longer to arrive at Muir itself than I would have thought. At last, in an outcropping at this post stuck in a rocky, barren saddle between Rainier itself and a secondary mountain, itself soaring more than a thousand feet above the shelters, we settled in, unpacked lunch, and rested before turning back. We were at the highest point allowed without special permits and training. I envied those who were going beyond but recognized I was too out of

shape for such a venture. Maybe next year? Get away long enough for the assault? With the temperature a balmy thirty-five, I ventured out on a small table glacier, inching toward three bright tents pitched on the floe. As far as I was concerned, this could have been a camp on the face of the moon. For that matter, many of the climbers did look like spacemen. The view of Earth below was spectacular.

Reluctantly, we started back only to find that descent's more difficult than the ascent. Jolts the body, stresses both knees and ankles. Not yet out of sight of Muir, Erik suggested, "Let's glissade." It's another way of riding the wave. We wrapped our rumps in our ponchos, hoping to stay warm and dry, and use the ice axes as both brakes and rudders. "It's dangerous as hell," he said, "so just don't go smashing into any rock outcroppings." But it's also great fun, sliding nearly two or three miles to the snow line, where we rose with butts frozen and marched the last few miles, facing the stares of incredulous park visitors who stared at our painted faces and pictured Indians or Bigfoot himself.

"We've become Stick People," Erik whispered. "I want a beer when we get back."

"Just don't tell anyone. My ass is in bad enough shape at the moment."

Erik smirked. 'After last night, your ass is definitely in bad shape. Oh, my, but what a finely shaped ass it is."

I had no idea what was ahead of us for the evening.

~*~

Meanwhile, Todd and Dena were dining at Binnie and Fay's and hearing about Indian children at Head Start, ages four and five, who have no "earth consciousness." Fay told of visiting a home in parched dirt. "It was cared for by an arthritic wrinkled grandmother who was unbelievably beautiful until a social worker forced her to be put into a hospital."

"I'd rather die, being here, than be there" in the hospital, the woman had argued.

Another child was sick at home, trapped in what the social worker considered filth. "There was a long blister sore on her lip, and her body was wrapped in a dirty blanket," Fay said, "but when the school doctor was sent out, the family won't let him in. I don't know what eventually happened."

The family ran around in a circle, generating current in its own way.

Walrus was also at the dining table. He'd come to earn extra cash in the orchard. As he passed pieces of orange around the table, he said, "I've been in a home like that. What I remember, though, is the vibe. The place felt really good." He paused, for emphasis. "Good and healthy."

Fay then told of a Canadian Indian who grew up on the Fraiser River. "She's homesick, and they're teaching her children the Katonkah tongue, not their own, not even their own language stock, even though the oldest

child is picking up on it so well everybody keeps saying he's a 'natural.'"

"As if I should be good at German," Walrus added.

Binnie smiled. "That never helped with my German."

He had news of his own for Todd. "I'd have no qualms evicting you if Walrus were to become my farm manager." A year earlier that would have had us wondering if we should start looking to buy a house in town before we got knocked over by a wave. Now Todd was wondering if he could get a job on the other side of the mountains before the wave hit him here.

The Clean Air Authority had its usual proclamation: "Today is a BURN DAY."

Flames and smoke were at the base of our own currents.

Just after dusk, when the kittens relished playing outdoors, there was no way to get them back in.

For Todd, at least, it was hot times once more. Hit the pool and float while arranging the stars, if you can.

SLAKING THROUGH DARKENESS

EVEN WITHOUT any complications, we had our own legal issues to face. Once I made it clear to Todd I wouldn't be coming back, we had a number of details to work through. His job, meanwhile, became increasingly precarious, leaving him less time to look for a new one, much less deal with me.

Early each morning in the week that followed our latest round of discussion, he heard the pickers singing joyously in Spanish from the treetops. He showered, drove off to work, and came back around dusk. But then, once the trees were empty, there was only silence. Unnerving silence.

He escaped from the valley for another weekend in Seattle. In a French restaurant overlooking Elliot Bay, cliffhangers like Dena and Todd observed ferries glide in and out through a sunset veil blocking shipyards south of town. Ordering wine, she was never carded for drinks; he always was.

On my end, Erik got an uneasy feeling from a headline, **THE ELKS WANT YOUR HIDE**. It was a fundraiser for Veterans Administration hospitals, seeking elk skins from hunters.

Erik wasn't making me any promises.

"What if Jaya finds out about us?"

"She'll have my hide. And yours."

And I wouldn't dare tell her for fear of messing up my own divorce proceedings.

Besides, Erik was nearly as adrift as I was. Jaya's workplace, like Todd's, was collapsing, and she was desperately looking to relocate. Erik made it clear to me he'd likely go with her. "One more move, till I get a career going."

He'd been spending more time with me again ever since another couple in the Darshan circle moved away. The husband was one of Jaya's colleagues, and the wife had come from Erik's hometown. But all I had was unfounded suspicions. Even so, I needed attention.

Todd and Erik weren't the only unstable figures in a changing landscape.

Although stick markers for the new highway popped up, none of the neighbors were quite sure where it was going. Heavy bulldozing connoted an interchange where one made little sense, right along the river. The grimy junkman's white cement block house, makeshift chicken and pig coops, towering cottonwoods, marshy cattails and red-wing blackbirds, and stacks of discarded auto and truck tires were shoved aside, turned under, and supplanted by growing mounds of rubble. Only as the old compound was abandoned and torn apart did Todd appreciate a kind of aesthetic in the way an old survivor could eke out an existence from discards. As he drove to work each morning, there were the only redwing blackbirds I'd seen in this valley. They patiently built their nest despite the desolation

swirling about them. Then one day they, too, were bulldozed aside. Already, above all this, a new ranch house was moved in for the construction crew. We were all grateful the engineers rejected the ridge route, which would have wiped out half of Binnie and Wesley's orchards. Instead, following the river, the state was taking out hay and hop fields.

Even so, there were quaking aspen and a ruby sunrise along the river. The orchard filled with pheasants as hunting season drove them down from the ridge and into protected groves.

In Todd's evening walks along the irrigation canal bank in a freezing fog, he frequently smoked a pipe, another violation of his newly embraced spiritual guidelines. Sometimes you just need a break. The lab demands left him less and less time for other pursuits, including Dena. He perceived only bits of other things, too, like the midnight phone call Binnie received about his younger son. Dropping by their house, Todd saw a traffic citation on their table: D.W.I. The kid was under age, too.

Binnie rode by on his ATC, "Seen a little gray puppy?" Theirs had been gone three days, ever since the work crew, deepening the now empty irrigation ditch, dumped mounds on the bank. They made hiking on the pathway too difficult for Todd's after-work stroll there.

Once more, winter hit early and cruelly, and once again the pipes to the shack freeze. This time Binnie

built a fire in the pit beside his house and the flow returned.

When snow melted first from a square near the two apricot trees, they finally determined exactly where the septic tank sat, answering a puzzle that had previously eluded them.

While Todd showered, though, the toilet bowl gurgled: the line was in its semi-annual backup, requiring a dig behind the house once more, hands in ooze as he removed crud and roots from the line. The roots entered through a joint in black pipe with such strength and tenacity that cast iron cannot keep them from liquid nourishment. They would also creep in through a galvanized wrap covering the spot where frustrated plumbers broke stubborn pipe two years before. The problem would worsen and soon there'd be no drainage at all. Before the ground froze tight for the rest of the winter, we ripped roots out and still had no drainage. Binnie ran a plumbers' snake in, determined the distance to remaining obstruction, then rammed in a length of PCV pipe to see if that would push out the blockage. Instead, they heard only discordant rasping. So they measured the distance and dug to discover the top of the tank and a plug atop it, a gray hook where another big root entered. Binnie opened the tank and found one more root clog to punch out with a spud bar.

Joyfully, Todd showered, wondering how long these countryside repairs would last.

Clouds arrived and kept expanding. Much of the week was heavily overcast. Thirty inches of new snow hit the mountain passes. The Horse Heaven Hills and Katonkah Ridge whitened, placing the snow line at 2,500 feet elevation in the valley and a mere thousand at the Cascades. By the time snow covered the orchard, he was so tied up at the lab he barely noticed.

He prayed, "Burn away darkness, LORD," uncertain whether it was a darkness in his spiritual life or just the long nights of winter solstice.

At last, two weeks of bird songs produced thin sprouts. The first signs of spring broke the monotony. Even the puppies sunned six weeks before any of the trees blossomed. When he told Binnie, "Maybe Ground Hog knows something I don't," he then learned how solar seasons run six weeks ahead of the calendar.

"Just consider," Binnie said, "that Midsummer's Night, the longest day of the year, is also the start of summer, as far as the calendar goes. In solar summer, based on the sun rather than the delayed reaction on Earth, this marks the middle of summer. So Ground Hog's Day really comes about the beginning of solar spring, even though as far as most of us are concerned, it's still midwinter."

"Makes sense. So Halloween's the beginning of solar winter."

"You got it."

That night, trying to recapture his own sense of grounding, Todd examined a neighbor's apricot trees. The buds were tiny, tight. A day later, though, they were twice as big with a bit of white just about to push through. Their tiny plated prepared to unlock and push, to explode like popcorn. In slate skies there was faraway rain. A tunnel of light revealed many higher ridges that usually appeared to be one. The scene held continuing revelations. He pondered the universe and wondered how long before mankind clutters everything. He enumerated qualities less substantial than the beautiful thousand-toned clouds obliterating parts of these mountains. "Each time I got to where I wanted to be, I found out that's not the place," he recalled, along with a quote from Lao-Tsu: "The deeper we go within ourselves, the more in touch with everything we become." He unmasked his own essentially human restlessness, at the moment an aspect of being out of touch with everything. Except for a few trips to Seattle to be with Dena, he hadn't been out of the valley for six months. Besides, he was flat broke. The stereo was still kaput. On his rounds, idiosyncratic tiny moss appeared everywhere, another of those austere surprises. In front of the house, elms held red pompons.

Sometimes when you're broke and alone, a splurge provides relief. So he decided to poach a silver-salmon tail in vinegar water. After eight hours in the refrigerator, the fish hadn't thawed sufficiently — and it wound up with one half overcooked, the other half still frozen. Todd put the rest in a casserole dish for the

next night, wondering if Julia Child's recipe might work easier with chinook or king salmon. The skin was supposed to peel right off, but after many attempts, this one scraped off more easily.

A single candle lighted the table.

Eating alone, he faced a need for deep silence these days. Maybe he should even climb the ridge next weekend or drive up to the elk station. Then, as he confided later, he remembered that my car needed new tires. Were the snow tires off yet? He couldn't help worrying about me, despite the legalities that separated us.

Staying home for the weekend, he might fix the stereo, turn more soil in the garden, maybe even read a novel or clean up the prayer corner.

The apricot buds finally popped open. Their petals littered the ground just before their tiny leaves unfurled. Then peaches and cherries flowered; their leaves and apple blossoms followed in sequence. Never had the hills been so vivid — so everybody said. Even the purple vetch along the freeway. In the yard, when tulips, crocus, daffodils, and hyacinth nearly passed, lilacs opened their young grapeshot. Throughout the valley, smudge pots were moved down from encampments beside the canal or in back of sheds.

He awakened to discover there was no water for showering or for coffee. He phoned Binnie, who admitted accidentally breaking the vein to the shanty while installing new irrigation line. Soon, though,

Binnie and the boys wouldn't have to move their irrigation pipes every day. Instead, they'd merely flip a switch and overhead sprinklers would water the trees. Binnie detailed a few drawbacks in overhead watering rather than from under the trees, but didn't mention the biggest advantage.

Todd paused. What was that puppy watching so intently in the lilac bush?

That evening, Fay's kitty was "playing" with another mouse. The following morning, finding bird feathers scattered across the back porch, Todd moved the feeder to a higher branch and trimmed everything.

Two pruners, who said they've "been working with him four years now," came by to see if Binnie needed help.

"You work in town?" they asked. "Hey! Why doncha do something interesting? How about interviewing us? You believe in UFOs? What's happening? Are the illegals a problem here?"

Todd wondered if they were serious or just putting him on. They inhabited a realm of their own.

He didn't hear a speeding car kill two innocents at midnight. Running his road, its lights off, the stolen vehicle never stopped for the blue highway but smashed into an unsuspecting sedan at a hundred miles an hour.

Sunday evening, two pruners who lived in Toppenish knocked at the door and asked: "You like to

prune?" They were trying to line up work for the rest of the week. Todd had no idea where Binnie was.

Crossing a bridge on his drive home, he noticed a stuffed chair in river shallows, waiting for somebody or something. Stick People, maybe? Already, fresh Dairy Queen cups littered the highway. Maybe he didn't fit in. Not that way.

By now, precast concrete beams for bridges on the new freeway jammed the shoulder of his commute. Each beam was trucked in from Seattle on vehicles having eighteen wheels on the tractor end and, on the tail assembly, another eighteen wheels with a cockpit slung between for a second driver, a daredevil held to the tractor by only that beam. Each two-lane span required five to seven of these beams, translating into seventy-two trips, more or less. Binnie said each one weighed 125 tons. Already, he'd seen wreckage of one that got loose and broke up. Thankfully, it's not something I had to do for a living.

~*~

While hunting the last asparagus along the ditch, Todd nearly stepped on a three-foot-long green snake sunning on the cistern. A puppy had come along the other way. The snake, frozen erect, wouldn't move. That puppy walked all around it, even sniffed its tail. Snake! What eerie feelings it leaves behind! I jump at twigs; my intestines twist. This is, after all, rattlesnake country, just above the orchard.

Even so, you should follow them to their hideaway.
Knock at the entrance and enter. But with my many
excuses, I never do.

As for me, mail from my parents stirred a guilty
twinge of eastern ice and snow even while dandelions
shone beside my shoes.

THE VOLCANO

THEY RETURNED TO THE ORCHARD in time to observe more meteor showers — fat brilliant streaks, sometimes long, or sometimes dim and thin. Dena especially delighted in the fast flashes and slow particulate dissolves. A few years earlier, when we stayed up back east for this annual event, clouds moved in, both nights. Here, with clear air, there's no moisture. They were in extra luck, too, for the moon was out of phase, providing a darker than average ceiling. Familiar constellations were enmeshed in a matrix of lesser stars and difficult to pick out.

Since the spring equinox, a handful of Todd's coworkers had kept speaking seriously of ascending St. Helens. He wanted to go with them, but his schedule no longer dovetailed with theirs and excluded him from their circle, even though severe weather every weekend forced them to postpone their adventure and gave hope he might yet join them. Now, seismic tremors and the eruption of a steam vent in the glacial cone caused the authorities to close the mountain. Having anticipated this conquest all winter, they were uncommonly fidgety, speaking of little else than the reopening of its mountain trails.

His trips to the lab took on strange contortions. Below Union Gap, the highway was rerouted onto a packed dirt lane above the old roadway, and then swung under what would become an overpass, rather than the cloverleaf all the neighbors had expected. He

wasn't quite sure whether he was driving to work or making a pretzel. Every week, the detour had a new twist, too.

And then it happened. At least Dena was with him. As they were in town, sitting within the Darshan circle on a clear Sunday morning, everything was obliterated by the darkest squall he'd ever beheld. From this black aerial wall came the first crashing thunder and thick lightning he'd seen in this valley. As the India ink blot raced overhead, street lights flickered on two hours before noon, and stayed on the rest of Black Sunday. Soon, in this intensifying midday dusk, sand began pelting overhead leaves with an eerie drumming. Worship broke up, and they fled home, where she rescued a roast from the oven and a salad from the refrigerator. So much for their highly anticipated celebration of his new legal status. Surrounded by darkness blacker than any night, one more akin to anti-light or anti-gravity than a field of twinkling stars or even midnight cloud cover, she had the little orchard chamber ablaze in candles, flickering oil lamps, and strings of Christmas lights. They dined on what he feared might be their last meal, ever. The outdoor air befogged with dust that blocked even a flashlight beam as he tried to walk to Binnie and Fay's door. Whatever this negativity was, it seemed to suck his eyeballs into his lungs, his tongue into his liver. Its featureless opaque wall stretched all directions, a blank engulfment normally encountered only far within caverns, mineshafts, or occasional nightmares — and

there without this feeling of embalming suffocation and a faint aroma of rotten eggs. This was the seal of the tomb, the undertaker's satin-lined stainless-steel casket encased in concrete vaults and blankets of clay, rock, and roots.

There was good reason to sense panic. A smoldering mountaintop was flying overhead. It could fall, and indeed was falling piecemeal, burying the Katonkah Valley in a half-inch blanket as it shook free, as the glacial princess was torn apart in 100 mile an hour winds from within.

Even on the other end of the canyon, in this blast of 500 Hiroshimas, a mere toddler in volcanic dimensions, I didn't even consider nuclear holocaust. I thought of survival. The radio, full of misinformation, was no help. The only reliable fact so far was that the mountain had blown up, its north face was gone, and flash floods — walls of mud — had devastated routes to the Columbia River and the ocean. The reports didn't add that this could happen with any of the Cascade's great cones, including Rainier, and had indeed done so before the arrival of the white people — the ones the natives called Bostonians. Without ever being in Boston, I was nevertheless a Bostonian to much more ancient eyes. Do not argue, especially when ancient anger erupts in a hot blizzard.

By morning, we were all digging out from inches of gray ash, which still blew, blotting out the sun. For days, nearly everyone wore face masks outdoors. The hospitals freely distributed blue cones to cover nose,

mouth, and chin. Radio and television voices warned of dire consequences for anyone who didn't. At the end of the day, the pores of mine were straight gray. Back on the street, people greeted each other in muffled astronaut voices. One small step for mankind, up from the brink of a moonscape. There was no color in the now drab valley. Days passed before anyone saw either yellow sun or blue sky. The air was close, almost humid, and definitely sweaty rather than its normal Western clear, dry sparkle. The volcano's strange effect on the weather brought rain, which started to blow the volcanic ash. I hoped this was the deep cleansing the land so desperately needed, but the rain itself turned serpentine from dust, which wouldn't move. Instead, the city's sewer lines clogged up, and the sewage treatment plant failed.

The orchard was hit harder than I was. I tried calling Todd, but the lines were jammed.

He was doing fine, thanks to Dena, even when there was grit in their freshly changed sheets, adding to her difficulty sleeping. "OM AH HUM," he chanted, wondering how crickets and birds could survive. The rain continued, often heavy — unusual weather due no doubt to St. Helens. She erupted again after sunset, the third heavy blast in less than a month. This time the fallout hit Oregon. Mixed with rain, the cement mix clogged more sewer lines. "Their turn for some excitement," Dena said.

Here she was, stuck with him in the valley. There was no escape, not until a single route opened to the

south. The Greyhound took her to Portland, and then Seattle — quite a roundabout route.

"God's a Republican," Fay insisted a week later. "This proves it."

"That party affiliation's what a lot of voters around here would like to believe. Boy, won't they be surprised when they find out what it means!"

His job hunt was delayed by more pressing matters. So many birds, insects, dogs, and machines telegraphed their locations as they dug out. Rattlesnake Ridge, under all of this, remained tender-bladed. One by one, bright green shoots appeared. The skilled eye could spot them a quarter-mile away.

The canyon, heavily dusted, was a sandpaper landscape. Wherever the river had worked on boulders and the squared breakdown of the Katonkah rimrock, the outcroppings broke through the volcano's blanket of lint, and the recently imposed net of dismay contrasted starkly with the timeless wrinkling of the desert, a reminder, too, that in some way, all of this geography had been thrust up from the bowels of the Earth. We had yet to determine how fertile this atrocious fallen ceiling might be, once it began to settle in with the older, natural order of biological existence.

A week later, with the first clear view of the Cascades, fresh snow covered Adams all the way down to the timberline. Grit that had painted the southern half of its glacial face had vanished — or at least been covered over.

Sleep was Todd's one cure these days, once he got past the sand pile between the sheets.

He got up about four, let a puppy in and squinted. There was a fire on the horizon. Squinted again. Just a crescent moon. Nothing to worry about.

Next thing we heard was a warning that the moon's gravitational effects on or around Friday the 13th could make St. Helens blow her worst yet. Her tremors were unusual. There were additional fears: Rainier, Baker, and even Hood might join the show. The last time she blew, according to Indian legend, all the rest did, too. Scientists weren't scoffing at these ancient myths anymore. They were seriously respectful.

Leaves thickened into ears, sure signs that summer approached. Small brown specks covered the ground under the apples as dry dead petals fell. Neatly disked, the orchard grass was turned under to rise again. Everything Binnie could make neat for frost protection and aeration, he did, precise as a Zen stone garden.

Downtown, police and game officials shot a black bear in a supermarket. "It was in really bad condition, diseased or something. They think it was bad water." Or maybe, simply hungry. Why else break into a food store?

Or maybe even trying to get away from Todd's new boss.

Heavy morning rain encouraged him to take the longer, backdoor route to work, thus avoiding the

highway construction. Since it took twice as long, it might make him think he was going anywhere but the dreaded lab.

The weather turned exceptionally cold. "Wes lost seventy-five percent of his cherries to frost — wind machine failure," Binnie said. His own cherries were coming on, though very slowly. Todd had the indoor heat on, in June, and the snow level dropped to 3,000 feet.

When Dena returned, she picked cherries on the Hill Ranch, which survived the frost damage, and then cuddled with Todd, making love once more. They had a renewed need to feel security these days. A series of thunderstorms had unnerved her. The cherries, she said, lacked size this year. The cold snap came just as they were ripening and knocked the crown off their price.

Bit by bit, highways and flights reopened the valley to the world. Road work equipment growled below the ranch. The earth movers ran from 5 a.m. to midnight, including the screaming special generators for vapor lamps as crews worked overtime until their funds ran out or the project was completed.

Over lunch, a coworker admitted, "The trouble is, our jobs aren't fun anymore — not for you or for me. Maybe not even for the Big Boy."

Todd woke at four and discovered the electrical power had been dead since 1:04. Since the air was quite windy, he supposed a tree hit the line. Something else

to file under NATURAL PHENOMENA. Later, Fay told him what caused the outage: a beaver felled that tree, zapping most of the nearest town.

Sunday morning, while flute music wafted through his chamber, coffee and pastries entreated Todd. His throat was slightly sore, a common ailment these days. The volcanic ash film coating the car wouldn't wash off, either by hand rubbing or by the commercial wash's super-sprayers.

His Puget Sound interview was postponed. Just as well, since the flu left him exhausted and off-balance. With a clogged head, dizzy, aspirin-addicted, shaky, and weak, he was in no condition to put his best-foot-forward. He needed rest. So he phoned the lab, spent a long morning abed, enjoyed coffee and cookies and tender talk with Dena, then rose to fetch the mail. A letter from Cleveland wanted more details. They'd have him out for an interview.

He celebrated by going to the Sea-Galley for brunch — king crab legs for him, a crab-and-cheese omelet for her. Then it was the grocery and not much else.

Todd dreamed of a big old house and ferry rides, seafood and the Olympic Range, big pay, galleries and a circle of good friends on that side of the mountains. He wondered how much might be a premonition or just mere fantasy. Now that possibility appeared to be playing games with him, while the Midwest beckoned. The air was cold, scudded.

Binnie stopped by to show his new \$200 soil meter for measuring water saturation — "10," he explained, was the highest reading. "What a useful gadget to have around here," he grinned, "especially with the trickle irrigation on the Hill Ranch."

"Yeah, that's why you got it," Todd said, breaking into a smirk. "Binnie, you're still a kid at heart. That toy's for grownups."

"I knew you'd appreciate it."

He watched a TV show about Japanese calligraphy and was intrigued by the mixing of inks and the huge brush strokes they sometimes use — stuff I hadn't realized until he spoke of it to me.

At last, the sun blazed and he uncovered the circular pool. Fay and Binnie joined him, even as their sons avoided the adults. Too bad, kiddies. At least the younger one wasn't in jail anymore; he was over at the twins, plotting more mischief.

On my end, this was the first day in a week I was able to breathe. I blew my nose only once an hour — what relief! Still, I remained listless and uneasy in a no-man's land. I felt nothing personal, nothing revealing, everything was just a surface. I was stuck, in many ways. Wondered if Todd had wound up moving to Puget Sound. Would his parents lend a down payment?

The car sounded strange — the volcano? Or just the weather? When I splurged and bought four audiotapes,

I found the machine had developed a "wobble." If it wasn't one thing, it was another.

My mind, all the same, filled with fantasies and projections, all part of any transition. Everywhere I looked, though, everything seemed to be falling apart. Everybody our age we cared about was bailing out.

After all we'd been through, it would have been nice to get the news straight from Erik. Instead, Todd was the one who told me Jaya had landed a new job and they'd be moving.

Erik didn't even have the courtesy to tell me? He was sticking with Jaya after all? I was devastated, not that he'd made me any promises. Yes, we'd had our ups and downs, But we were supposed to be responsible adults, weren't we? OK, maybe responsible wasn't the best description for Erik, but consenting would do.

Todd, bless him, joined Wes and Emma in helping load the truck.

There was always something noble in Todd's outlook. He tried for so long with me. Where would our lives have headed if Jaya and Erik hadn't interceded? Or if we'd gone somewhere else after the Ozarks rather than come here? Or not had our savings gutted by that stretch of unemployment?

For now, I had no idea where I was headed. More school, probably.

I was at the restaurant when the phone call came. The one from Erik, telling me of the crash. He needed to be comforted. And I took off.

In the orchard, Dena pitted more cherries. Todd sipped a Rainier Beer, then knocked off a pot of espresso. The sun broke through as they both read on a blanket outdoors and nibbled cold chicken teriyaki. Unlike me, she rarely needed more of something: brown rice, potatoes, milk, eggs, a million other essentials, no matter how seldom or often she went to the grocery. Even toilet paper.

But then, once more, she was off.

Adding to the upheaval, at the end of the week Todd's closest colleague tendered his resignation, effective immediately.

Todd needed to get out of town, pronto. He called Dena and told her to stay put – he'd be dashing over to Seattle this time. He intended to stay over for worship. But as soon as he arrived, he and Dena began arguing. She admitted that one of his job possibilities "sounds like the kind of place you could settle down in for ten years, before you 'retire' to concentrate on the D.L.Q. But I don't like the name of the place. If they come through, could we live in a neighboring town?"

How could he possibly respond? Dena was usually so rational and independent, yet till now she had avoided any discussion of moving with him. Something was tipping, but he had no idea which way it would flow.

He still had no plans for vacation. Maybe he'd spend it all camping and climbing in Rainier National Park, almost in his backyard. When the invitation came, he realized he'd spend most of it on job interviews in the Midwest.

I hadn't been able to do much to comfort Erik, either, and it was awkward being around his parents and Jaya's. My flight back had been a sullen confusion, as did the days that followed.

Filled with irritation and the nightmares of my own mortality, I headed for the Oregon coast. I really needed to see the wise Walrus and his wife, anyway. And infant Obie Ken Obie, too.

In the Washington side of the Columbia Gorge, before the Cascade Locks and the Bridge of the Gods, I blasted through six tunnels in as many miles of highway, while the old railroad line perched on trestles along the canyon wall, replaced by a modern river-level road thanks to new earth-moving equipment. The Dalles, if you remember, were the end of the Oregon Trail. From there, the pioneers scattered, many heading into the red-earth Willamette Valley, now boasting grain elevators and churches that make me see a miniature Michigan more than the Far West.

Walrus lived in the Siuslaw Mountains and Valley — "Sigh-oo-slaw" or even "Say-oo-slaw," he told me. These appeared akin to the eastern mountains in size, until the tide pushed in. Walrus pointed out the "Hank Stamperer" home, now abandoned, and I noted it was

on the same side of the river I'd imagined reading the novel. Their freshly oiled road sprayed all over my car ("Will it wash off with detergent?" others had already asked). You encounter damn worries and crows everywhere.

On the slopes I gazed into, the lush tangle of forest and vine maple would make passage impossible. The guys who do "saw-work" were now "sharpening teeth" and "working on chains," meaning chain saws, for income. There were daisies all over the place, up to Chinook Pass, too, as I noticed on the fast dash.

With my own big decision at hand, I wanted Walrus' perspective. Or at least the circle around the dining table.

Somebody said something about a "chain saw band."

Walrus, hard-of-hearing, replied: "Chicken Bow Ranch?" He had a way of providing fresh insight on any topic. Told about hiking through the forest: "It's OK if you find a deer trail, better yet, an elk trail. When you're cutting through the woods, sometimes you have to bend down and look through rabbit runs to see where you're going. It's a whole different world down there." He told me it's the reflective leaves of deciduous trees — **THE DECIDUOUS DIFFERENCE** — that contrast with the western conifers. When he talked about spear-fishing, too, I realized Walrus was really an Indian.

"Nah, they live far back from the road, well into the Siuslaw Mountains."

Next morning, I sank my feet into coastal dunes and inhaled crab-breath in the breeze. The ocean's multiple voices constantly exhale — or is it applause, all of this energy coming out of where and what? Who can doubt the sea lives? I examined jellyfish and feathers at surf's edge. Broken clam shells, razor clams, too, crab legs spread all along the bubbling wet sand. So many intricacies of sand forms here, unlike the log piles of the Washington coastline. Then Walrus said that north of Florence, I'd find cliffs and sea lions, rather than this hot beach that steams while evaporating brine.

"It can be exasperating brine," Walrus said as its white sand blazed against intensely blue sky and bluer sea, so that even the long dune's grasses were brushed white and purple. The distant sweeps of primary color were, in the seashore's strong voice, at once rippled and polished. This was the first time I beheld a vista of what I'd originally expected to find in the Pacific Northwest, far more than where I'd been living.

On the drive home, as always, I was astonished by the sand dunes of the river gorge, the white caps on the Columbia itself, and the merciless wind. There were snapdragons, the foxglove's beautiful purple poisonous horns, and my favorite, sweet peas. In many ways, my own thoughts and emotions were just as choppy and unsettled as this snake-infested river country. Some blossoms, some habitation, great arid spaces, and much storming. Unlike Todd, whose very life is as production-oriented as the orchard, I was neither rooted nor flying.

I still needed to discover so much about the landscape within myself.

From his end, when I got home to the mailbox, he read an intriguing proposal. The plot thickened. A phone call in the morning would settle everything. He vowed that whatever happens, wherever they went, he'd return someday, forever. Or so he told me.

Still, I should have remembered the day after a party, facing dirty dishes. The cleanup that makes you ask if it was worth it.

~*~

At midnight, the fireworks without the boom were pure light. Meteor showers once again. On the ground, pears rotted. They were too big or blemished, anyway, and would have been culls at the packing line.

Crop by crop, plywood bins went to the warehouse, fruit market, and cannery. Each year, it happened all over again — the smudge pots, blossoms, pruners, thinners, rounds of spray.

At the moment, however, peaches and apples filled Binnie's thoughts. More pickers must be hired.

I no longer lived that far from the sunset.

And Dena and Todd were expecting.

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About the Author and More

A veteran of four decades in the newspaper industry, Jnana now lives and works in a former seaport in New Hampshire.

The name Jnana, reflecting his developing gifts of spiritual intellect and discernment, was bestowed while living in a yoga ashram in the Pocono mountains of Pennsylvania. In America, it is usually pronounced "jah-na."

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