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MEMORIES OF MT. ST. HELENS

by

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U.S. Forest Service Lookout on Coldwater Peak

Summers 1943 and 1944

In the spring of 1943 I applied to the U.S. Forest Service for a job as Lookout for the summer, and was lucky enough to be assigned to Coldwater Peak in the Spirit Lake Ranger District of the Columbia National Forest. Jim Landon, the Ranger, had decided he'd rather try women on the lookouts than the 16-18 year old boys who seemed to be the war-time alternatives. (After I met Jim's fine wife and three daughters I figured he must have come to his good decision by way of seeing that the women he knew best were intelligent and competent.)

Coldwater Peak was, hands down, the best Lookout I've ever seen. The 15-foot square cabin was right on the ground -- no separate observation tower. The Peak was almost exactly a mile high from sea level, and right at timberline so that the trees had just naturally stopped growing below it. The country was magnificent. Seven miles as the crow flies due north of Mt. St. Helens, that lovely mountain which has more recently erupted into cataclysmic volcanic action. When I was there the forests stretched around without a blemish -- no scars from old fires or from logging. The Toutle River valley was between me and the mountain, with part of Spirit Lake showing up at the east end of the valley. Right below me to the east, 1½ steep miles down the switch-backing trail, was St. Helens Lake, a lovely stopover for the hikers who wanted to try the trip to the lookout, a total 5½ miles from the Spirit Lake campground. I was the closest Lookout to the Ranger Station and the one most often visited. Due east of Coldwater was snow-covered Mt. Adams, and due north -- though at considerably more distance -- was Mt. Rainier. Before I put

up the simple canvas shelter around the square wooden box that served as out-house for the lookout, I could sit as on a throne and survey an unparalleled vista of wilderness beauty.

As part of the baggage to keep me supplied for my summer vigil I had my portable typewriter carried up on muleback, and over the two summers I was there wrote the pieces that follow.

A POET ON THE PEAK

The words of speech, the dim words of communication, one to another, breaking the stillness of silence, falling across the slow reaching of trees, their speech, the ageless, deathless, silence of rocks -- words, the speech of Man.

Let me come to myself now, living on top of Coldwater Peak, Columbia National Forest, Washington. Living from day to day, carrying water, chopping wood, watching the small wood stove to see that there is enough flame to keep the water boiling around the potatoes. Living, as I say, from day to day, and watching, always watching the country for the danger of smoke. And sometimes, as now, sitting here high in the mountains saying something on this typewriter, speaking words which lie silent on yellow paper. I sometimes sing across the open spaces, too, but it is not the same as this -- it is less precise and more completely part of the setting sun or the rising fog of morning. This is not only the mountains and the place, but I also -- M. Collier, as I sign myself in the Daily Log; M. Collier who has lived in different places at different times, and carries them also with her into this spot.

There is not really much to say. The sun rises, and the sun sets, and the mountains and trees change under the time and weather, and want

for no expression to make them complete and beautiful. I have at times thought that Man's singing and Man's love for the beauty of trees and mountains was important to them, and it may well be so, but at the same time they stand so sure and immovable around us that one feels no lack, and when the spirit wishes to sing praises or invent love songs to the small flowers on the rocks, those praises and love songs take more readily the form of music, a spontaneous singing, than they do the form of words. It is as I am human, as I am Man, that I feel the need to move again the keys of my typewriter. It is the need to express something rather about human existence than simply about the existence of M. Collier, temporary Forest Guard, on the particular lookout of Coldwater Peak. It is the need to say something about a human being travelling over well-loved mountains, and trying to find in them the relationship and the form and the order which ties them to us, which makes of human existence a part of this country, these ridges lying under the sun, rather than some strange thing utterly different, how we have somewhere taken a different turning and made for ourselves a special way of existence, one more troubled, more terribly disquieted, and possibly also more glorious. I do not know about these things. I cannot marshal them in precise orders and meanings, but I am trying to learn, and I shall probably continue also to try to say something about them from time to time.

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The mountain stands still against the sky, letting the sky change around it and the clouds surround. Still it stands, taking the sunshine, holding the snow in winter and watching it go in summer. It changes slow-

ly itself -- the rocks slide and the glaciers wear a path, but mainly it is without movement, yet changes everything around it. Am I the same after watching it, after touching with my eyes its ridges and steep places, feeling its way of being, the lie of its mass? The winds change course, eddying around it; the clouds move around it, leaving it as an island in the sea. Does it not have movement, does it not have activity, standing still against the sky?

And I, too, move, and I too change what is around me, each act that has truth and life in it -- even each act which may be ugly and formless -- moving strangely in the pattern of human life, moving outward in echoes which cannot be followed.

* * *

I have a small library here, a little collection of books which is probably about as great a group as there is -- Homer, the poet, the living man, the vital, singing spirit. The wheaten bread of those ancient times becomes a reality, the wine-dark sea moves under the striving oars, the fierce pillage and the weeping anguish all take form and breathe to the spirit. A small faded book that I bought in San Francisco, written in a language Homer did not know, read in a country which Homer did not even try to imagine -- and yet what was written in those distant times is living and true today, is timely in this time of war, is human and both historical and ageless.

The days are not long when it is cloudy
though one might think they would be.
The place is quiet and the wind blows in gusts.
There is no time here when the mist is around us.
Separated by the silent white we sit warm by a wood stove
and watch the grasses blown by wind.

When the sun is bright, when the sun shimmers on the lake below us, when the green trees show their tops clearly in the warm air, the tempo is faster, the blood beats with more vigor. It is great to stand by the chopping block and swing the deep-biting axe into the white wood -- to stop and look out over the country, following the well-known ridges with the eyes.

But now,
in this soft dampness of the mist,
in the quiet of the blowing mist
which brings safety to the summer forests,
one is content to sit quietly in the little house,
watching the grasses in the wind.

The mind of Man, wandering over the earth, caressing the ridges and hollows, travelling the broad ocean and the great plain, leaping from place to place, with more agility than a white goat, with more speed than the speed of the fastest airplane. The mind of Man travels light, as the wind. And does it leave a track? Can it be followed again, can the way be known from one time to another, from one individual to another? Sometimes yes, even often yes, for there are more ways of communication than with words, and sometimes even inadequate words can act as guide for the explorer. And this is the great importance of words, their reason for being: to make clear the paths taken, to mark the journey, to state the way taken and what is seen on the road. And the greatest writing is not only the most precise and exact (I do not mean precise as mathematics is precise, but precise as the sound of weeping or laughter can be precise, as poetry or music is precise); the greatest writing is not only the clearest and fullest to follow, but the travels taken are more wonderful, more far-reaching, more high rising and deep descending, the country is more full and varied. The rocks stand out more clear and craggy. The valleys show the nature of their being. The journey demands the greatest vitality and clear-sightedness, the best trail sense of the traveller.

Travelling with the body today I have covered some five miles, more or less, of steep mountain country, wet with rain -- so completely wet that I was soaked and my boots squished water most of the day. I know, though, just where I have been; the country will remain as it is while I am away from it. It will, of course, change in small ways: the huckleberries will get a little riper, the sun will come out again and

dry things off. But on the whole I will be able to recognize each part of that country as a minor variation of what I have seen today.

I've travelled in the mountains wild
and walked without a trail,
and there are maps for mountain ways --
but not for ways of men.

A doe and fawn will leave their tracks
down to the water's edge,
but where the mind of Man has gone
there are no footprints left.

O maps will show where cities lie
and name the names of streets,
but they'll not show you how to climb
or where the chasms lead.

Clear water, the simplest, the most transparent of all things, and yet who can look into the deep clearness of a pool and say what is the nature of that water? Who can know that clear water completely? Is it not always different in its crystalline clearness, does it not always reflect some new part of the things around it, or does not the new observer always see some different thing in that unfathomable clarity?

This morning, when one of the horse-flies which seem to be around this place most of the time fell on the floor, cold and helpless, waving hirs legs in the air, I could have killed hirm, and would probably have saved myself later buzzings and a few specks on the very important windows, and possibly even a bite (there are no horses here and the flies seem sometimes to get desperate for red meat) -- but I did not step on the fly. I had in fact quite a friendly feeling toward hirm. I rather enjoy the heavy buzzing that goes on around here -- except when it gets too much on a hot, close day -- but in any event I did not feel like killing the little creature, even though s/he is certainly in a number of ways a pest.

But this afternoon, on the lake, there was quite a pleasure in watching a small trout take the fake fly I offered hirm, and in reeling hirm into land. I must confess, though, that after I had hirm on shore and watched hirm struggle briefly before I could strike all life and feeling from hirm with a swift blow on the head, I felt ashamed of myself, and as though my hands were bloody. That swift-moving grace from the deep water reduced to a small body to be cleaned and fried. And we do not really need the food at all. We have drawers full of good, unperishable food. It is not that we are truly living off the country. I went after hirm, you see, I lured hirm with special, prepared lures, and then I took the life from hirm.

How about this thing? Life lives from another life, true. Even the plants, in using up the sunshine and the food resources from the soil, kill other potential plants in a very indirect sort of way. The wild forest animals kill, with blood, rending of teeth and all the rest

of it. "Nature, red in tooth and claw." Suppose we did not eat meat, any of us. How many cattle would we be willing to let live? How many sheep and pigs? Would we not use all the land for raising vegetables? And would we feel any need to support so many cattle as we do now -- and certainly we would be hard put to it to find reason for raising pigs if we could not kill them.

How is it, then, that to take the life of another living thing, by violence, involving pain, and involving also the watching of that pain and of that struggle, is a painful and unpleasant thing even to us who do it? Is it our teachings of love? And if so, may they not be out of harmony with very important facts of life? Or is it some natural, instinctive hatred of seeing pain and violence? I think it must involve some fellow feeling -- some feeling that pain of anything living in a manner like ours is in some measure our pain, and that it is always wrong to cause pain in another.

Dead fly whom I have killed,
with purpose, though without pleasure,
dead creature from God's hand,
your delicate wings are beautiful on my windowsill,
and your small skeleton casts a long shadow
in the evening light.
I pick you up in my hand,
to see more closely the large eyes
and the tan scales.

Horse fly -- name of reproach,
name of pest and foe --
Horse fly, little creature,
I, too, will some day die.

Little ant, on the hairs upon my leg,
little ant,
do you know, little ant,
do you know?

Do you know that I love you,
tickling on my leg,
do you know, little ant,
do you know?

A sea of clouds covers the hills and valleys, leaving nothing but a few small mountain islands. Out to the horizon stretches the amazing, folded whiteness; and near me, at the foot of Coldwater Peak, I see the trees, thick on the hills, with the shadows of moving clouds among them.

The wind on the hill, blowing hard, blowing the bright flag out straight, bending down the grasses along the side of this steep place. The wind blowing, and I with few words and something formless to say. The mountain, the sun, these wooded ridges out to the skyline, this knowledge of the solid, round earth stretching out away from where I am, away from where my consciousness touches it, far away to places I have never been. And in those places, life as real as mine. Other men, living from the center each of hirs own consciousness, moving in hirs circle of daily living, breathing the air far from here. Space solid and actual, not simply stretching out from this place where I am, but lying solid under the sun and wind, and I on one small part of it.

And in places far from here, and in places still near, not separated by oceans, men fight in the war. I shall never, myself, in my own body, lie in a soggy fox-hole, or watch the clouds from a fighting plane, but I have seen Pearl Harbor through the eyes and the bleeding, maddened heart of a young sailor, and have spoken with many, and the war is not apart from me, or wholly unknown. I do not mean the "war effort". I mean the real fact of the war itself: The ugliness and the strife and the agony, the fierce agony not only of personal injury and exhaustion but that agony of sensed futility, of seeing the body of Man tortured and inwardly turning on the sword, diseased and insane, gone mad, utterly and hopelessly wrong, and of standing in the midst of this rioting ruin with useless, strengthless hands, knowing or suspecting that the enemy is not really the enemy, that there is more to it than killing so many Germans, or "Japs," and finding that there is really nothing to do but obey orders, wading deeper into the mess.

OF TIME AND THE MOUNTAINS

The rhythm is slow, as of mountains breathing
Full and deep.
Years and centuries, there is no hurry;
The snows come and the snows melt under the summer sun.
The trees grow higher year by year,
Reaching for some inner goal.
Sure, and free, and without time,
Steady, pulsing, endless, and eternal
These mountains stand around us.

And we, living as each morning's sun moves over the sky,
Thinking of minutes and hours,
Counting by tick of clock,
Still know this endless time,
Still call the mountains brother in their agelong living;

Still call the mountains brother
And brother, too,
The small green leaves that push through snow still clinging
To greet the highland summer sun --
Brief sight of sun and birds and morning dew --
And then lie down again, brown under snow,
To the first storms of winter.

ADDED MEMORIES

As was the way with me in those days -- even more than now -- it was the unconditional within my living that urged me to write it down, but looking back on those two summers, I find there are some conditional things I'd like to record, too. For starters, they did pay me for the "work" of keeping my eyes on that lovely scenery -- $75 per month, of which $5 was supposed to be paid back to the government as rent on the lookout cabin. Jim explained it to us as something to do with insurance or liability or something. Local legend had a story of one young man who had so objected to the idiocy of the rental charge that he had refused to pay it, had set up camp outside the cabin and used the house only for his required observations and for the phone. It must have been the same young Forest Guard -- or one of like style -- who charged any visiting Forestry official for meals they ate with him. Our visiting Regional Officer said he'd been stuck once -- and on top of it, that the guy was really a lousy cook!

The first summer, before real fire season while I was still down at the Ranger's office, my sister Jane and her husband John Denton Anderson came to visit. It was his first worthwhile leave since they'd been married and this was part of his meeting the family. Ranger Jim gave them one of the good little tents available for staff-related folks (no charge) and we'd meet each noontime when their late breakfast served as my lunch. One good story which stayed alive at the Ranger Station at least during my stay there was of John coming up one afternoon from the lakeside dock to display a handsome string of fish. Now all old hands at the lake knew that there were swarms of suckers which hung around the dock for what they could pick up, big fish but absolutely worthless,

certainly no good for sport and not even worth eating unless you were starving. But my brother-in-law was really not the city idiot he was pretending to be. For some wild reason there had been a handsome trout come along in the midst of the suckers, and after John had watched the various faces at the office trying to decide whether to guffaw right off or play the game a while, he turned the string of fish so the good trout showed, and then everyone let loose with amazement and delight.

Harry Truman, the old man who stayed with his mountain in such appealing style when Mt. St. Helens erupted, was just Harry Truman (it was even before the President of the same name), a man in early middle-age who rented boats and ran the beer tavern with its juke box and tables, where our trail crew men used to hang out in the evenings. Sometimes they'd walk seven or eight miles on mountain trails from the camp where they'd been sent, and then walk back again the same distance after Truman closed for the night.

My mother came to keep me company one week each summer. The first Time she came I gave her the built-in bunk I used. It was just cross-wise boards with a mattress on top, but I found it quite comfortable, and felt I was offering quite a sacrifice when I took to the straw tick that served as a second bed. After the first night, though, she commented that the bunk sure was hard and thought she'd much prefer the straw tick. So after that, no sacrifice and both of us pleased with our beds.

She carried away from the lookout at least one very special experience. She'd been sitting on the rock promontory that lay almost like the prow of a ship on our peak, at that edge of Coldwater closest to Mt. St. Helens, and she was doing a bit of whistling, as she often

did. She got a response from some birds below, and after some conversational back and forth tidbits, two of the birds came up and settled on her knees for a while! I'd been off on a trail or something and she told me about it when I came back. She still remembered it with pleasure some thirty years later when we were talking in her little apartment at the Sunnyvale retirement residence where she stayed in her eighties. She always did have a special affinity for birds.

When my father came up to the lookout he got mightily to work, helping me with the wood-supply and figuring out most efficient ways to haul the water. In his youth he'd been an old-time Ranger on the McKenzie River, in Oregon with a horse on which he rode every day up a small butte to his observation tower. He was full of good memories and helpful bits of know-how. Our most dramatic moment occurred after he'd been sawing on a felled tree a little way down the hill from the lookout. It was a good, solid tree, something about two feet in diameter, and it gave promise of providing me good wood for the whole summer. He cleared a work area and began sawing the first cut, just the right length to fit our little stove. When he got down to the final cut-through which freed the round from the rest of the trunk, there was only a moment's pause and then the round began to roll -- down the hill, fast. We watched it for a while, bounding up several feet at a time into the air as it hit one bump or another, and then just listened to it continuing on down the hill. It must have gone clear down to the lake! It had started off so fast, and there was after all nothing on it to catch hold of. For all the other rounds Pop carefully tied a rope around the tree before he started sawing, and then we'd haul it up to my chopping block near the cabin.

Really, I guess that hill was pretty steep, though I'd got used to it very quickly. I remember one older woman who'd made the walk to the lookout from the Spirit Lake Ranger Station. She was pretty tired and out of breath and she felt she had to come up the last couple hundred feet virtually on her hands and knees.

After the necessities of life were taken care of, Pop used to spend most of his days down at St. Helens Lake. He'd get his fishing gear together, joke about how he was sacrificing his time slaving to get us some food, and take off down the trail. Pop always was a good fisherman. If anyone was catching fish, he'd get at least one. One time he came back in especially good spirits. He'd discovered when he got to the lake that some other folks had come up from Spirit Lake and were occupying the raft he usually used for his fishing. (Most the fishing lakes in the Cascades have at least one roughly made log raft that some benefactor of later fishermen has made in earlier times and that's just left along the bank, normally tied up for easier re-use.) Anyhow this day Pop had been reduced to fishing directly from the bank, and he caught three or four all right, but it wasn't up to the usual. When he decided to come on home, he stopped to talk to the people on the raft. They hadn't been having very good luck at all, and Pop got involved in a bit of gentle discourse about what kinds of places were best for fish. He even got rash enough to suggest that if he had the raft he'd give a try right over there where those branches went down into the water. Well, they lent him the raft, he poled over where he'd pointed the place out, and hauled in two handsome trout, one after the other! He said that when he poled the raft back, they were almost awestruck. As he said, it isn't

often you can make good on a bet when you call your shots like that, but it does work once in a while and it's a mighty triumphant feeling.

It was a very pleasant way to get to know a little better the man who was my father. Along with other things to while away the time, I'd brought along two briarwood blocks attached to pipestems and they were carved and ready to try out before he left the lookout. We sat and smoked them in the evening, looking out over the country and philosophizing about this and that. I don't remember any of the discussions, but they weren't really meant to be remembered. They were times when you could float out ideas without having to think ahead much whether they had any merit or not. One of you would lay out an idea and you could both chip in on it, worry it around a bit while it still had some sort of juice in it, and then go on to anything else that came up. Mark Twain's talk about the discussions that Huck and Jim held on that raft as they drifted down the Mississippi sound to me like the same sort of companionable being together with words. A very real blessing.

More recently, thinking of Howard Thurman's idea of a climate where persons can trust each other, I've come to see those relaxed conversations as an example of what he meant. Certainly not deep or intense enough to serve as any kind of full example, but nevertheless, I think, related.

There must have been something about life on the lookout that encouraged that kind of relaxed chit-chat, because I had it again in somewhat different form with my other main live-in visitor, Ruth Blandford. Ruth must have been almost 40 years old at that time, but she certainly looked much younger. She had had polio, or cerebral palsy,

or at any rate some crippling disease when she was young and it had left her with hands that shook and a generally jerky way of moving. She was, however, an active member of the Portland hiking club, The Mazamas, and although -- as she told me -- people seemed all the time to be afraid that she was going to fall down beside the trail, she was really quite tough enough for their longest trips.

She was a good companion, mainly I think because she had a real talent for enjoyment and the expression of it. She liked our heavy, restaurant-type mugs and told me how secure they made her feel. They stayed put in her shaky hands, unlike the delicate cups she was sometimes offered when she was out in public. She had always wanted to make a pie herself, altogether with her own hands, and she did that up in our little cabin. Patched up it was, and the crust thick in spots, but truly delicious. We developed, too, an evening ritual of playing card games to determine who was the loser and therefore would have to drag in the straw tick from the woodshed.

But she was also much more than her shaky body and the spirit that accepted it without bitterness. She had gone to Mills College, and with using a typewriter even for exams, had graduated with a full-fledged B.A. degree. She wrote poetry, quite a bit of which had been published. The Christian Science Monitor was the most prestigious journal she had made, but even that normally paid no more than 50¢ per line, so that her verse -- always marvelously concise -- had netted her just $2.50.

It was the area of poetry that provided us with the real backlog of our discussions. She was a lover of Emily Dickinson and felt that

the essence of poetry was very much in the exact precision of words, the comparison of crystallized experience. I, on the other hand, have always had a feel for the extravagant wastefulness of words that people like Shakespeare and Walt Whitman show. They throw the words around as from an endless bounty, and sometimes you get the magical configuration that catches the bird on the wing, so to say. Anyhow, in one form or another, we came back, time and again, to that particular disagreement, sharpening up our own enjoyments of poetry as we read examples back and forth from the stock of books we had, and tried out our own evaluations of them on each other.

As far as personal living went, we didn't ever get intimate, Ruth and I. I suppose that whatever personal intensities she had were in different areas from mine. But we did have honest affection for each other and a good, live working relationship. I remember that she wrote up the lookout experience, and when she came up the second summer she brought along a copy of the magazine that had published it in somewhat shortened form. I've lost that since, but I still have the Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson that she gave me, and when I was going through old letters I found a poem she had derived from her stay on Coldwater Peak. Here it is, along with the setting in her letter:

"Do you remember one day on Coldwater I told you I had dropped my sweater on the ground and right away was shocked to see it lying there? It just didn't belong there. Also, remember how hard I was working on a thought I had on the mind and body? Well the two came together and hit me hard one day I was on the bus on my way to my writing group and here it is. They jumped on me hard. Some

said I had two poems. Some didn't get the idea at all. A few liked it. You can jump on me too if you like. I can take it.

Empty Coat

Greater than the body is the mind.
For of the two it is the mind that leaves
Its vestiges on earth. The coat one wears
Looks strange when it is left upon a trail
As though the body it had warmed were lost
Or had been drowned or eaten by a beast. "